

Studies in German Idealism 13

Reinier Munk *Editor*

# Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics

 Springer

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# Studies in German Idealism

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# Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics

 Springer

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# Preface

The essays included in this volume are based on the papers prepared for a conference held in Amsterdam in December 2009 on the theme Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics. The conference was organized as a series of dialogues between specialists in Mendelssohn's thought, and specialists in certain topics that are addressed by Mendelssohn and others in late-seventeenth and eighteenth century thought. To the latter we asked to outline the context of Mendelssohn's views on a certain topic, and Mendelssohn's contribution to the discussions of it. To the former we asked to address a certain theme in Mendelssohn's metaphysics and aesthetics, and to present the theme in its internal argumentative coherence, and its historical context.

The series of dialogues resulted in the present volume which consists of four pairs of essays. The first includes two essays on Mendelssohn's theory of language and writing. The second pair of three essays address a number of topics in Mathematics and philosophy in Mendelssohn. The next eight essays all deal with Metaphysics in a historical context, and the fourth pair of five essays offers a discussion of Mendelssohn's Aesthetics in a historical context. Taken together, the eighteen essays present us a rich picture of Mendelssohn, and one that is complex and full of details regarding the topics under discussion.

I wish to express my thanks and gratitude to the authors who contributed so generously to the conference and the present volume. Thanks are due as well to the Goudekot Center for Jewish Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of VU University, Amsterdam for its support in the organization of the conference and the preparation of this book for publication. A special word of thanks and appreciation are due to my students Egbert de Jong who acted as co-organiser of the conference, and Jacolien Schreuder who generously served as acting editor for this volume.

Reinier Munk



# Contents

## Part I Theory of Language and Writing

- 1 Verbal Disputes in Mendelssohn's *Morgenstunden* ..... 3  
Daniel O. Dahlstrom
- 2 Writing, Dialogue, and Marginal Form:  
Mendelssohn's Style of Intervention ..... 21  
Willi Goetschel

## Part II Mathematics and Philosophy

- 3 Mendelssohn, Wolff, and Bernoulli on Probability ..... 41  
Edith Dudley Sylla
- 4 Mendelssohn on Lambert's *Neues Organon* ..... 65  
Paola Basso
- 5 Mendelssohn's Euclidean Treatise on Equal Temperament ..... 83  
Henk Visser

## Part III Metaphysics in Historical Context

- 6 Moses Mendelssohn on Spinoza ..... 107  
Detlev Pätzold
- 7 Mendelssohn's Concept of the Human Soul in Comparison  
with Those of Georg Friedrich Meier and Kant ..... 131  
Francesco Tomasoni
- 8 Turning the Game Against the Idealist: Mendelssohn's  
Refutation of Idealism in the *Morgenstunden*  
and Kant's Replies ..... 159  
Corey W. Dyck



<b>9</b>	<b>“What Is the Bond?” The Discussion of Mendelssohn and Kant 1785–1787</b> .....	183
	Reinier Munk	
<b>10</b>	<b>Divided by Common Sense: Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Reason and Inferential Justification</b> .....	203
	Paul Franks	
<b>11</b>	<b>The Year 1786 and <i>Die Bestimmung des Menschen</i>, or <i>Popularphilosophie</i> in Crisis</b> .....	217
	George di Giovanni	
<b>12</b>	<b>Mendelssohn Versus Herder on the Vocation of Man</b> .....	235
	Frederick C. Beiser	
<b>13</b>	<b>Free Will and Moral Necessity in Mendelssohn</b> .....	245
	Joachim Leilich	
<b>Part IV Aesthetics in Historical Context</b>		
<b>14</b>	<b>Mendelssohn’s Theory of Mixed Sentiments</b> .....	259
	Paul Guyer	
<b>15</b>	<b>The Eighteenth-Century Rehabilitation of Sensitive Knowledge and the Birth of Aesthetics: Wolff, Baumgarten and Mendelssohn</b> .....	279
	Luigi Cataldi Madonna	
<b>16</b>	<b>Mendelssohn’s Spinozistic Alternative to Baumgarten’s Pietist Project of Aesthetics</b> .....	299
	Ursula Goldenbaum	
<b>17</b>	<b>Mendelssohn’s Response to Burke on the Sublime</b> .....	329
	Aaron Koller	
<b>18</b>	<b>Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast</b> .....	351
	Gideon Freudenthal	
	<b>Index</b> .....	373

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**Part I**  
**Theory of Language and Writing**



# Chapter 1

## Verbal Disputes in Mendelssohn's *Morgenstunden*

Daniel O. Dahlstrom

*Thuet auf Worte Verzicht, und  
Wahrheitsfreund, umarme deinen Bruder!*<sup>1</sup>

Throughout *Morgenstunden* Mendelssohn reveals a tremendous respect for language, both its power and its limitations. When Mendelssohn rejects Helvetius' cognitivist hypothesis (as we might dub it today) that language is a collection of empty, algebraic signs transposed and combined according to rules, he does so because such a hypothesis supposedly cannot explain the emotional and intuitive power of human language. Language moves us and it does so because it engages sentiments that cannot deceive; hence, "our universal notions and the words that represent them, must not consist merely in the knowledge of signs" (42). At the same time, thanks to language's limitations (its inherently limited ability to express philosophical ideas), it has enormous powers of misleading and beguiling. Thus, in Mendelssohn's eyes, linguistic ambiguities are at least partly responsible for the failure, shared by Wolff and Leibniz, to distinguish the different principles underlying the respective aims of knowing and approving. The fact that we tend to use the same words to express our approval of – i.e., to "applaud" (Beifall geben) – the good and the beautiful as well as our recognition of the truth is, as he puts it, "an ambiguity of language" that philosophers must vigilantly attend to (71).

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<sup>1</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes*, vol. 3.2 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann/Holzboog, 1974), 124. Hereafter cited as *JubA* 3.2, followed by a colon and page number. All numbers in parentheses within the body of this paper refer to the page numbers of this *JubA* 3.2. Translations are from *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).

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Yet as misleading as language can be for the philosopher, it is also the philosopher's element. Thus, after characterizing the debate among materialists, idealists, and dualists as a "verbal dispute" (Wortstreit), a feud over words (Wortfehde), Mendelssohn adds that our only recourse in this debate can be closer analysis of the language, since "language is the element in which our abstracted concepts live and breathe" (weben; so much so that abandoning language amounts to surrendering one's spirit).<sup>2</sup> When he turns his attention to Spinozism, Mendelssohn speaks of how inclined he is "to explain all disputes of philosophical schools as mere verbal disputes [bloße Wortstreitigkeiten] or at least to derive them from verbal disputes" (104). Yet he also seems to regard the problem as inevitable, given the fact that these philosophical exchanges take place in a "region of ideas" so far removed from immediate knowledge that we make our thoughts known "only through the silhouette [Schattenriß] of words" and can recognize them "only with the help of this silhouette itself." Indeed, the slightest alteration in a "fundamental term" (Grundwort), he continues, leads to completely opposite consequences so that, should one lose sight of the point of departure, "one no longer disputes about words, but about the most important matters."<sup>3</sup> Though this conclusion points again to a difference between a verbal and a factual or even a principled dispute, Mendelssohn's reference to the importance of one's fundamental terms indicates language's integral role and, indeed, its power not only to mislead but to lead.

We might put Mendelssohn's point here in the form of a paradox (if only as mnemonic device): in one sense, language is powerful because it is weak. That is to say, at least for some reaches of philosophy, language's enormous power to mislead goes hand-in-hand with its feebleness as the conveyor of philosophical thinking. Yet for all its perils, language remains indispensable to the philosopher, the only means at the philosopher's disposal for working through the thicket of confusions produced by language. Indeed, when it comes to principles and disputes over them, we seem to be beholden to language more than we are when it comes to disputes over observable facts. Principled disputes are very much verbal disputes, but not purely verbal disputes as in a non-philosophical context where the difference between words and facts is putatively patent, i.e., not itself in question.

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<sup>2</sup> *JubA* 3.2:61; "Die Sprache ist das Element, in welchem unsre abgesonderten Begriffe leben und weben. Sie können dieses Element zur Veränderung abwechseln, aber verlassen können sie es nicht, ohne Gefahr den Geist aufzugeben."

<sup>3</sup> *JubA* 3.2:104–5; "Wir schweben hier in einer Region von Ideen, die von der unmittelbaren Erkenntniß zu weit entfernt ist; in welcher wir unsere Gedanken bloß durch den Schattenriß der Worte zu erkennen geben; ja bloß durch Hülfe dieser Schattenrisse selbst wieder zu erkennen im Stande sind. Wie leicht ist hier der Irrthum! Wie groß die Gefahr, den Schatten für die Sache zu halten! Sie wissen, wie sehr ich geneigt bin, alle Streitigkeiten der philosophischen Schulen für bloße Wortstreitigkeiten zu erklären, oder doch wenigstens ursprünglich von Wortstreitigkeiten herzuleiten. Verändert die mindeste Kleinigkeit im Schattenriß: sogleich erhält das ganze Bild ein andres Ansehen, eine andre Physiognomie. So auch mit Worten und Begriff. Die kleinste Abweichung in der Bestimmung eines Grundwortes führt am Ende zu ganz entgegengesetzten Folgen, und wenn man den Punkt aus den Augen verloren, von welchem man gemeinschaftlich ausgegangen ist; so streitet man am Ende nicht mehr um Worte, sondern um die wichtigsten Sachen."

In this connection, it is not surprising that Mendelssohn – master translator that he is<sup>4</sup> – recognizes that languages are not all alike and, indeed, that linguistic analysis across languages (setting off an expression in one language against cognates in another language) can be put to the service of refining our concepts. For example, after posing the question what makes one of a pair of contradictory statements actually true, Mendelssohn cites the Epicureans' answer that it is by accident (von Ungefähr), i.e., by chance (Zufall). Mendelssohn relates how he once had a habit of translating every curious or strange word into the Hebrew language he first learned and that he found no Hebrew equivalent for these Epicurean terms. Looking for Hebrew words that, like these terms, signify something independent of human intention or causation, previous translators tried to convey their meaning with words like *destiny*, *providence* that stand for the very opposite of chance.<sup>5</sup> Mendelssohn then notes how the Epicurean answer conflates or passes over a difference that is evident in the German terms, namely, the difference between 'by accident' (lack of intention) and 'by chance' (absence of an efficient cause).<sup>6</sup> These examples further confirm how fundamental linguistic analysis is to Mendelssohn's philosophical method, a linguistic analysis appreciative of the differences in languages and the intimate, historical dependency of the philosopher's own thinking upon language.<sup>7</sup>

In the following paper I examine more closely Mendelssohn's treatment of the linguistic make-up of certain philosophical debates and his tendency to cast some of them as purely verbal disputes. The importance of the issue for Mendelssohn can be gathered from his remark, already cited above, that he is inclined to explain "all philosophical debates as merely verbal disputes or at least to derive them from verbal disputes." Whether he gives in to this inclination or not, in the *Morgenstunden* he does characterize several such debates explicitly as verbal disputes or rooted in such disputes. Sometimes, however, it is also clear that the disputes are not purely verbal, raising the question whether Mendelssohn's characterization of them as

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<sup>4</sup>Mendelssohn translated Plato, Shakespeare, Shaftesbury, Rousseau, among others.

<sup>5</sup>The line of translation is even more complicated since the translators were translating from the Arabic into the Hebrew, having "to dress the Greek concepts in Hebrew words" (*JubA* 3.2:89–90; griechische Begriffe in hebräische Wörter einzukleiden). These translators of Epicurus may have been Rabbi Joseph Albo or Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (see his *Kuzari*).

<sup>6</sup>A similar difference can in fact be found in Aristotle's distinction between *tuche* and *automaton* in *Physics*, Beta, 6, 197a36–197b36.

<sup>7</sup>Somewhat cautiously, Mendelssohn has an interlocutor suggest that the German language or, at least, Lessing's German alone has reached the point "where the language of reason can be combined with the most lively exhibition" (*JubA* 3.2:129). For another example of Mendelssohn's appreciation of language's sometimes confusing fecundity, see his treatment of the opposition of sublimity or loftiness and condescension where the German terms – *Erhaben*, *Herablassung* – drawn from contrasting physical senses can mislead one into thinking that these ethical properties cannot be combined "although the exact opposite is the case" (126–27). On the history of Mendelssohn's explicit treatments of language, see the groundbreaking work of Gideon Freudenthal; see, too, Daniel Dahlstrom, "Maimon and Mendelssohn on Language," in *Integrating Traditions: On Salomon Maimon*, ed. Gideon Freudenthal and Reinier Munk (Amsterdam: Springer, forthcoming).



verbal is a rhetorical smoke-screen of sorts. In any case, since a “verbal dispute” and a “merely verbal dispute” seem to mean different things in different contexts for Mendelssohn, the aim of this paper is to try to become clear about these different senses. I conclude with some summary ruminations about the rhetorical purposes of labeling a dispute “purely verbal.”<sup>8</sup>

## 1 Idealism’s Linguistic Confusions

The context of the first string of references to linguistic difficulties and verbal disputes is Mendelssohn’s treatment of idealism in Chaps. 6 and 7 of *Morgenstunden*. These chapters importantly provide the last elements of his discussion of the sorts of things we need to know before turning to the text’s main task, namely, a scientific treatment of the concept of God. In them, Mendelssohn identifies three linguistic confusions besetting idealism.

### 1.1 *Violating Ordinary Usage*

Mendelssohn introduces the motivation for idealism by noting the distinction yet complementarity of objective and subjective orders of ideas as well as the possibility of the disruption of the soul’s harmony with the world designated by that objective order. Drunkenness, madness, somnambulance, and illusion, among other things, confirm that this possibility is real. This real possibility raises the question of whether we have any assurance of knowing things objectively. To be sure, the more our senses agree regarding an object, the firmer the basis of our conviction that it actually exists. “Still, there remains the doubt that the limited sphere of knowledge on the part of our senses in general might be the source of this common ground and thus occasion illusion. Perhaps the situation in which I find myself is alone responsible for the fact that I see and hear and feel, and thus regard as actual, things that merely transpire in me and have no objective reference outside me” (54).

At this point, Mendelssohn observes that the measure of assurance that we have of that objective reference is proportional to the agreement among humans and the agreement of humans and animals. The greatest assurance would come from evidence that beings higher than us and ultimately the “supreme intellect” also concurred (55). At this juncture Mendelssohn mentions the idealist for the first time, as he notes that establishing God’s existence would be key to refuting the idealist.

By no means a solipsist (“egoist”), the idealist depicted by Mendelssohn agrees with the dualist in admitting the existence of other thinking beings (“spiritual

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<sup>8</sup>The topic is timely since the issue of what might reasonably count as a verbal dispute is itself complex and has recently regained a certain notoriety; see note 25 below.

substances”) as well as the existence of distinct objective and subjective orders of things.<sup>9</sup> Their dispute is over the existence of substances outside them, substances that are “the prototypes [Urbilder] for sensory feelings and thought.” In this connection, Mendelssohn’s idealist raises the question: “But what sort of properties do you attribute to this substance? Are not all sensory properties that you ascribe to them mere modifications of what transpires in you yourself?” The idealist then follows up with a further challenge to the dualist, that of demonstrating that extension and movement, the alleged properties of substances, are something more than sensory concepts, alterations of the power of representation, of which we are conscious. Finally, supposing that those properties can be found somehow among our representational capacities, the idealist asks: “And how are you able to transpose these properties, as it were, from yourself and ascribe them to a prototype that is supposed to be found outside you?”<sup>10</sup>

At this juncture the dualist replies: “If this is the difficulty, then it lies more in the language than in the actual thing itself.” This response, it bears noting, is not a diagnosis of the grounds of the dispute itself. To the contrary, the dualist identifies the linguistic nature of the difficulty and lays it at the feet of the idealist. Still, the response is misleading in another respect. For it is not so much the language itself but a certain misconstrual or misuse of the language that gets the idealist in trouble. For, in the very next sentence, the dualist points to what is meant by saying that a thing is extended, contending that “these words have no other meaning than this: a thing is constituted in such a way that it must be thought as extended . . . It is one and the same, according to the language as well as the concept, to be *A* and be thought as *A*” (57). Here, in contrast to some other instances cited below, Mendelssohn’s dualist is tracing the position of the idealist not so much to an ambiguity inherent in language or in the words as in a failure to understand them, i.e., a failure to attend to what they – both idealist and dualist – say and, indeed, say perfectly well.<sup>11</sup> Or at least the idealist is in the awkward position of using the terms of the debate in a way that flies in the face of the very customary, common sense usage that she must presuppose.

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<sup>9</sup>*JubA* 3.2:55ff. Inasmuch as Mendelssohn attributes the acknowledgement of “spiritual substances” to the idealist, the label does not apply, strictly speaking, to Kant, though Mendelssohn may well have intended the phrase in a loose sense that extends to Kant, since Kant clearly countenances himself as the subject of mental properties and countenances, too, both objective and subjective orders. In any case, Mendelssohn’s idealist is in the somewhat odd position of accepting spiritual substances but contesting material ones.

<sup>10</sup>*JubA* 3.2:57. The idealist’s presentation of his position is tendentious, since no realist could accept the terms of the question, i.e., the notion that the properties of the substances, i.e., the prototypes (Urbilder), are the same as the properties of the mind, i.e., “alterations of the power of representation,” or, in other words, the mental copies (Abbilder) or depictions (Abbildungen), merely transposed to the prototypes.

<sup>11</sup>Echoes of Wittgenstein’s exhortation: “look and see” (schau) how we actually use words in everyday contexts; see, for example, Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), §66, §§109–24, esp. §109: “Die Philosophie ist ein Kampf gegen die Verhexung unsres Verstandes durch die Mittel unserer Sprache”; §116: “Wir führen die Wörter von ihrer metaphysischen, wieder auf ihre alltägliche Verwendung zurück.”

## 1.2 *Using Words Devoid of Meaning*

While the idealist claims that all properties are accidents of the soul, the dualist finds so much agreement among humans and, indeed, humans and animals that he considers himself justified in positing them in something outside him. In other words, for the dualist, the accidents of the soul are depictions, representations of and occasioned by the extension, figure, impenetrability, and so on of the material prototype. In Chap. 7 the idealist tries to turn the tables on the dualist by charging that it is the dualist who is guilty of linguistic confusion. According to the idealist, the dualist confuses or better, conflates, the terms ‘do’ and ‘is’ as though giving an account of the prototype’s efficaciousness suffices to way what it is. Challenging this conflation, the idealist proclaims: “But we want to know what this prototype itself is, not what it brings about” (59).

The dualist replies by charging that, if this is, indeed, the idealist’s concern, then the idealist wants to know something that is not and cannot be an object of knowing.

We stand at the boundary not only of human knowledge, but of all knowledge in general; and we want to go further without knowing where we are headed. If I tell you what a thing does or undergoes, do not ask further what it is. If I tell you what kind of a concept you have to make of a thing, then the further question “What is this thing in and for itself?” is no longer intelligible. And so from this point on philosophers have long tormented themselves with questions that are in principle unanswerable because they consist of empty words that convey no sense (60).

The implication of the opening sentence in this passage is the coincidence of knowing where we are headed and speaking intelligibly about it. More directly, Mendelssohn’s dualist contests the intelligibility of differentiating between asking what something is and asking what it does or undergoes. The words of the former question, separate from the latter, are “empty” and, indeed, fatally empty for philosophers who fall prey to this fundamentally linguistic confusion. Mendelssohn’s dualist thus turns the charge of linguistic confusion back on the idealist. In effect, the dualist charges, the idealist is supposing a distinction without a difference, i.e., the purely verbal distinction between saying what something is and saying what it does.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.3 *The Wall of Mirrors*

In Chap. 10 Mendelssohn again speaks of a linguistic confusion but unlike the two instances just glossed (a and b), he does so in a way that – at least *prima facie* – does not completely absolve the dualist. In the chapter, following the allegorical

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<sup>12</sup>The argument here is woefully incomplete. On the one hand, to be sure, there is a long tradition of equating being with the power of making a difference (Plato); on the other, ordinary usage does on various levels distinguish between being and doing.

dream, Mendelssohn touts the advantages of inferring God's existence from one's own existence over inferring it from the existence of the material, mind-independent world. Though the presumption of this world's existence is overwhelming, the reasons for this presumption cannot rule out the possibility that it "rests upon a limitation of sensory powers common to all human senses, perhaps all animal senses, and thus is mere illusion" (83). Hence, the superiority of a proof from the presumption of one's own existence, a presumption that enjoys the greatest degree of evidence.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, a ready rejoinder by the idealist, one that Mendelssohn has his idealist interlocutor articulate. After stressing that the idealist can countenance a distinction between truth and illusion, "between dreaming and waking, fantasy or fiction and truth," the interlocutor speaking for the idealist adds:

The idealist denies merely the actual existence of an object that is supposed to serve as the prototype for these true depictions and, indeed, for this reason, because this prototype provides him with nothing more to think since he knows no way of making any representations of it beyond the depiction of it that is to be found in his soul. Meanwhile, from this representation of the world on the part of the idealist, everything must follow and be able to be inferred, that, in the opinion of the materialist and the dualist, follows and can be inferred from the actual existence of the object. The object [Objekt] provides the materialist and the dualist with no more predicates than the representation of the world provides the idealist (87–88).

The idealist's argument notably turns here on predication or, more precisely, on the supposed lack of a difference in the predicates assigned by the various epistemological positions to the material world. To predicate 'object,' 'actual existence,' or 'actually existing object' of the representation of the world as the sum of the known, true descriptions of it does not add anything to those descriptions and thus leads to no further inferences than those that the idealist can make. The same holds for 'prototype' (Urbild) as opposed to 'picture' (Bild), 'copy' (Abbild), or 'depiction' (Abbildung) – the other family of terms exploited by Mendelssohn from the outset of *Morgenstunden*. In a word, the word for the original, the prototype, adds nothing.

Mendelssohn lets the idealist press the case even further with the image of a wall of mirrors, each depicting the same item from its vantage point. Taking the mirrors as metaphors for human minds, the idealist contends that there is no way for them to determine whether the item represented is actually on hand or whether the divine artist has placed in each mirror its respective representation of the item.

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<sup>13</sup> *JubA* 3.2:84; "For not even the most adamant doubter will likely be able to dispute that I am myself a mutable entity. If I am myself conscious that alterations proceed in me, then this is subject to no further doubt. With regard to myself, the subjective and the objective coincide, semblance and truth are not separate from one another. What I immediately feel cannot be mere illusion but instead must actually proceed in me and cannot be denied with regard to me myself, even to me as object. Hence, my existence as well as my mutability are beyond any doubt."

Mendelssohn has the idealist (anticipating Carnap) add that inferences from either supposition are the same.<sup>14</sup>

Mendelssohn's response at this point is to charge the disputing mirrors with arguing merely over words but he does not make the charge for the sake of abandoning the philosophical issue and deferring to common sense. As long as the mirrors countenance the same difference between truth and perspective, agreeing on what is constant (the truth) and what is changing (the perspective), further disagreement on their part is "mere grumbling over words" (eine bloße Wortzänkerei). This conclusion would seem to indict the dualist as well as the idealist, given the overriding agreement on the basic difference between truth and perspective, however differently it is couched. But Mendelssohn's subsequent presentation of the matter muddies the waters. On the one hand, seemingly taking back the ground that he has just given, he proceeds to insist that the agreement to this difference entails the affirmation of the existence of the prototype, "as the ground of their agreement." On the other hand, perhaps cognizant that this insistence settles the issue too quickly in the dualist's favor and cognizant, too, that the idealist has a point, Mendelssohn also adds the qualification that there can be no more to the prototype's existence than that agreement about the truth.<sup>15</sup>

Still, even with this last qualification, the charge that parties are grumbling over words appears to be little more than a sleight-of-hand. By no means is Mendelssohn explaining their dispute away as a purely verbal dispute. He employs the charge, not to dismiss the disagreement but to set the mistaken philosophical position straight, to correct or rectify the interpretation. The fact that the dispute thus is not, as Mendelssohn elaborates it, a purely verbal dispute seems to fly in the face of the fear he expresses earlier in *Morgenstunden* (though he cites it as a quotation), namely, "the fear that, in the end, the famous quarrel among materialists, idealists, and dualists would amount to a merely verbal dispute, more of a matter for the linguist than the speculative philosopher" (61).

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<sup>14</sup> *JubA* 3.2:87; "Let these mirrors come to dispute among themselves about whether the item that they represent is actually to be found in the middle of the room or whether the artist who produced that depiction has also laid it in each one of them in keeping with the place where each stands. How will they settle this disagreement among themselves? Considered as mirrors, they can have and respectively attain nothing but the depictions of the item. Will they not be in a position, if they can think rationally, to draw precisely the same inference from their depiction as from the presupposed actual existence of the item? Must it not rather be for them utterly the same thing, the item, of which they can know and experience nothing further, whether it be on hand in the room or not?"

<sup>15</sup> *JubA* 3.2:88; "If these mirrors recognize that truth and perspective are found in their depiction and that the truth repeats itself and remains precisely the same in all, while the perspective, by contrast, is peculiar to each of them, will not further disagreement on their part be a mere grumbling over words? If they concede the agreement in the depictions, what justifies their denial of the prototype, as the ground of their agreement? Or, rather, what more can they still demand from this agreement of the truth, if they should recognize the existence of the prototype?"

## 2 The Arbitrariness of Spinoza's Language: An Impurely Verbal Dispute

Mendelssohn prefaces his treatment of Spinoza's philosophy with the remark, already cited, that he (Mendelssohn) is inclined "to explain all disputes of philosophical schools as mere verbal disputes or at least to derive them from verbal disputes" and with his insistence on the necessity of getting one's "fundamental terms" right (104). In keeping with these prefatory remarks, Mendelssohn proceeds to trace his initial disagreement with Spinoza to a verbal dispute over the meaning of the fundamental term 'substance'. Mendelssohn sketches Spinoza's basic idea that there can be only one substance ("since a substance must obtain on its own, subsisting for itself"), infinite in extension and thought, and he acknowledges the admirable, indeed, unassailable rigor of his derivation of the system from that fundamental idea (*Grundidee*). Given the flawlessness of the derivation, Mendelssohn investigates its basic ideas, framing the investigation precisely as an inquiry into whether his dispute with the Spinozist is purely verbal or not.<sup>16</sup>

Knowingly iterating a reproach made by several critics of Spinoza, Mendelssohn charges that Spinoza defines his fundamental term 'substance' quite arbitrarily. This arbitrariness steers him from the ordinary way of speaking of substances, not as utterly self-sufficient, but as subsisting for themselves and persisting through modifications.

If Spinoza does not want to call these 'substances' on account of their dependence, then he is disputing only in words. If the difference in the actual thing is conceded, then one has to think up another name for the constancy of dependent beings so as not to let a difference (that resides in the actual thing) go unnoticed; and the quarrel is decided (107).

Despite the arbitrariness of Spinoza's use of 'substance', i.e., its departure from ordinary usage (and, we might add, traditional scholastic usage), Mendelssohn strikes a seemingly reconciliatory tone in the last sentence of this passage. He is ready to let Spinoza reserve the term for the unique, infinite being, so long as Spinoza countenances the distinctiveness of what has been traditionally termed 'substance' and accepts a corresponding moniker for them.

In this discussion Mendelssohn is appealing to two different senses of a verbal dispute. On the one hand, by defining 'substance' as he does, Spinoza departs from ordinary usage. So, on a superficial level, one might merely object to this departure, taking ordinary usage as one's baseline and arguing that the term simply does not mean what Spinoza takes it to mean. On the other hand, without denying the force of this objection, Mendelssohn focuses on whether Spinoza in fact countenances what is normally understood by 'finite substance'. If Spinoza does acknowledge their reality as such (even if not in so many words), then the dispute between him and those who affirm a plurality of substances is, indeed, purely verbal.

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<sup>16</sup> *JubA* 3.2:106; "Thus, we have merely to investigate these fundamental ideas and see just how far they differ from our ordinary concepts, either in terms of the actual thing or merely in words."

But Spinoza in fact refuses to acknowledge the sort of independence that calls for affirming the existence of finite substances and, hence, the dispute is not purely verbal. Indeed, the very next criticism that Mendelssohn lodges against Spinoza's philosophy makes evident just how substantive the dispute is. Even if Spinoza's account of extension explains the source of matter in bodies, it fails – Mendelssohn contends – to explain their source of form and motion. Since that source cannot come from the whole (since the whole, on Spinoza's account, is motionless and unformed), the source must be found in the parts and “the parts must have their own existence apart from it [the whole]” (108). “If the parts did not, as Spinoza professes, have their separate existence and were merely alterations or manners of representation of the collective whole [Gesamtmten], then they could not have any other modification than those which flow from the properties of the whole. Whence the form in the parts if the whole provides no source for it?”<sup>17</sup>

When Mendelssohn turns to Spinoza's basic ideas of necessity and freedom, Mendelssohn again faults Spinoza for exploiting ambiguities of these terms. By calling ‘freedom’ only perfectly negative freedom (das System des vollkommenen Gleichgewichts) and then subsuming every motivation, ensuing choice, and result “under the woolly term ‘necessity’” (unter dem vielschichtigen Worte Nothwendigkeit), Spinoza concludes that choice is necessary. But, Mendelssohn charges, Spinoza must concede that ‘freedom’ also signifies acting upon knowledge of good and evil or he is disputing merely in words.<sup>18</sup> As in the criticism of Spinoza's use of ‘substance’, Mendelssohn begins by contending that Spinoza uses a term (‘freedom’) arbitrarily, i.e., in an arbitrarily narrow sense, and then adds that, if he recognizes what is designated by the term in question, the dispute is purely verbal. Once again, however, the dispute is not merely terminological since Spinoza does not countenance a positive sense of freedom and all that it entails (according to Mendelssohn, “the distinction between good and evil, the desirable and undesirable, pleasure and displeasure, and so forth”). Where Mendelssohn sees an ambiguity in the word ‘necessity’ that can be removed by distinguishing physical and ethical necessity, Spinoza sees only a single, supposedly unadulterated necessity. The upshot of these differences is patent: Mendelssohn's dispute with Spinoza does not turn on words alone. Their dispute is what I dub – rather inelegantly, to be sure – “an impurely verbal dispute.”

### 3 Theism and Purified Pantheism: A Purely Verbal Dispute?

But what of the refined Spinozism, the purified pantheism that Mendelssohn takes up in Chaps. 14 and 15? The purified pantheist concedes much of Mendelssohn's argument, most notably, the need to admit “the difference between truth and goodness,

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<sup>17</sup> *JubA* 3.2:108. See, however, the following words that Mendelssohn places in the mouth of the defender of a refined pantheism: “Spinoza also has all motion springing from something similar that he calls ‘will,’ although I do not know how to make his assertion on this point fully clear to myself” (*JubA* 3.2:114).

<sup>18</sup> *JubA* 3.2:109; “Hingegen muß Spinoza aller seiner Gründe ungeachtet dasjenige, was die Deterministen Freyheit nennen, gar wohl zugeben, oder er streitet mit ihnen blos in Worten.”



knowledge and approval” and to ascribe infinite force to the sole necessary being (115). Nevertheless, the purified pantheist sees no reason to admit any objective existence outside the divine intellect.<sup>19</sup> After all, the pantheist asks, insofar as God actually and truthfully thinks things, how can there be anything in the things that is missing from, i.e., independent of the thought of them? In other words, when it comes to the divine mind, “what is thought cannot be distinguished from the actual, true thought and, hence, is fully one with it” and “the thought is an accident of the thinking being and cannot be separated from its substance” (116–17).

Mendelssohn's spokesperson for purified pantheism in this context maintains that, in order to refute this refined Spinozism, “it must be shown that the prototypes [Urbilder] outside God do not have the same predicates as the representations and images [Bilder] of them that are to be found in God” (117). But for theists and pantheists alike, the spokesman contends, “God's thoughts must be true and adequate to the highest degree and, hence, must have all the predicates that pertain to their objects [Vorwürfen]” (117). However, contrary to the purified pantheist's contention, Mendelssohn's theist does not accept an unrestricted identity of these two sorts of predicates. There are predicates pertaining to the prototype as prototype, i.e., the finite thing as such, distinguishing it from an image (representation, depiction) of it and thereby preserving the nature of its relationship to the image. According to Mendelssohn, ‘conscious of one's limited consciousness’ is one such predicate that is not the same for the prototype and an image or representation of it. Some finite substances are conscious of their limited consciousness, but the fact that the infinite intellect represents to itself finite substances with this consciousness of their limited consciousness does not entail that the infinite intellect is conscious of a limited consciousness of itself. Nor, for that matter, does it entail that divine intellect has a limited consciousness since its infinite intellect includes everything of which the finite being is conscious – with the exception of the consciousness of its limited consciousness of itself or, more simply, the consciousness of itself as limited, the consciousness that it is limited.<sup>20</sup>

Mendelssohn seems to recognize that he has not completely made his case here, that some will not be satisfied with his explanation and will continue to ponder why the divine intellect's lack of this predicate (i.e., ‘having consciousness of one's limitation’) does not amount to a limitation. An indication that he recognizes as much

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<sup>19</sup> *JubA* 3.2:116; “Who tells us that we ourselves and the world surrounding us have something more than ideal existence in the divine intellect, something more than God's mere thoughts and modifications of his primal force?”

<sup>20</sup> *JubA* 3.2:118; “Das Bewußtseyn meiner selbst verbunden mit völliger Unkunde alles dessen, so nicht in meinen Denkungskreis fällt, ist der sprechendste Beweis von meiner außergöttlichen Substantialität, von meinem urbildlichen Daseyn.” This subject of this sentence can be read in at least two different ways, depending upon the sense of ‘verbunden.’ In my text, taking ‘verbunden’ as ‘bound up with,’ I read it as ‘consciousness of one's limited consciousness.’ But the subject could also be read as ‘consciousness of oneself combined with lack of information’ or simply as ‘limited consciousness of oneself.’ In that case, the argument would run as follows: the fact that the infinite intellect represents to itself finite substances with limited consciousness of themselves does not entail that the infinite intellect has a limited consciousness of itself. Nor, for that matter, does it entail that divine intellect has a limited consciousness at all since its infinite intellect includes everything of which the finite being is conscious.



can be gathered from the fact that he has Lessing press the issue, as though the points just made are not trenchant, by asking: “Must something still be added to God’s thought, if it is supposed to be actual outside God?” (118). After Mendelssohn recites the mantra that God’s approval of the next best thing to Himself is efficacious, leading Him to produce an objective world, separate from his substance, Lessing remains unsatisfied and asks “But what does God add to His thoughts, to His representations of the best that they also become actual outside Him?” (119). Mendelssohn replies that he has already answered this question as much as he can. To the divine representation of finite minds (leaving aside other sorts of entities), what must be added is their consciousness of themselves, with the lack of information of everything that falls outside their limitations.<sup>21</sup>

Mendelssohn follows with one more argument, aimed specifically at establishing that finite minds (again, not just any entities) have their own substantial existence outside God. The argument, one that supposedly will easily convince the pantheist, is based upon the principle that no entity can actually divest itself or render external to itself (entäußern) any degree of its reality. God no more divests Himself of any degree of His divine reality in thinking of a limited being, Mendelssohn declares, than we divest ourselves of sensory impressions in representing to ourselves what it is like to be blind. The thought of a limited being in God does not attain in Him “any consciousness of its own, torn free, as it were” of the divine reality (120).

However, it is hard to see how this argument is supposed to convince the pantheist, let alone “easily.” Indeed, if one does not already presuppose the independent existence of finite minds (the point at issue), the argument can be read as serving the pantheist’s cause. Thus, the pantheist might well respond: “You’re making my point for me; given the existence of a God infinite in mind and power, in the final analysis there can be no such thing as a finite substance with a consciousness of its own, ‘torn free, as it were’ of God.”

Given the argument’s placement in the text, it is tempting to think that Mendelssohn is fully aware of its tenuousness, perhaps uncomfortable with the fact that it is the best argument that he can muster. In any case, he abruptly turns from this last argument to ponder just how far apart from the purified pantheist he is. For the purified pantheist, (a) the visible world is actually on hand as a thought of God, representing the best combination of multiple finite beings, (b) the human being with its “separate, limited consciousness of itself, fully devoid of any information of what lies outside its limit- edness,” is among these thoughts, and (c) every good that we receive is an effect of the divine will that allows a part of that will to depend upon us. After reconstructing the key elements of purified pantheism in this way, a way that in Mendelssohn’s mind secures religion and morality, he concludes: “Assume all this and I ask: in what now does the system defended by my friend differ from ours?” (123).

The difference turns on a subtlety, consideration of which is fruitless, since it has no practical consequences and rests on a difference in the image or metaphor

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<sup>21</sup> *JubA* 3.2:119; “Zur Vorstellung eines endlichen Geistes in Gott, muß das eigene Bewußtseyn, mit Unkunde alles dessen, was außerhalb seiner Schranken fällt, hinzukommen; so ist der Geist eine außergöttliche Substanz.”

employed to describe God's thoughts of the best connection of contingent things. To make this idea comprehensible, we are forced to have recourse to metaphors. Thus, the difference between the pantheist and the theist amounts to the difference between conceiving God's thoughts as a source that remains a source or as a source that has gushed forth into a stream. The problem, Mendelssohn immediately adds, is keeping a rein on the metaphors since they so easily lend themselves to misunderstandings that extend them beyond their boundaries and lead to "atheism or superstition." Instructively, Mendelssohn does not cite purified pantheism with this metaphorical excess. Yet, in a somewhat surprising turnabout, given his arguments for the system of theism and against the system of purified pantheism in the chapter, he concludes by faulting both systems with misinterpretation of the same metaphor.

The systems still seem to be quite far from one another in their corollaries and yet at bottom it is misinterpretation of the same metaphor that one time transports God all too figuratively into the world, another time transports the world all too figuratively into God. Upright love of the truth immediately leads then back to the point from which one set out, and shows that one has merely become entangled in words. Renounce words, and friend of wisdom, embrace your brother (124)!

Both systems can be traced to respective mis- or, better, over-interpretations of the same metaphor, leading to "overly-subtle speculation" founded on a metaphor and thus, for all practical purposes, a purely verbal dispute.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4 Mendelssohn's Rhetorical Strategy in *Morgenstunden*

If we track Mendelssohn's appeals to verbal ambiguities and verbal disputes through the course of the *Morgenstunden*, we see that the linguistic difficulties identified by him are by no means of one stripe. For the most part, his disputes with idealists and Spinoza are less than purely verbal disputes and the bulk of his argumentation, including the attention paid to ordinary usage and the terms of the arguments, is devoted to propping up dualism and theism respectively. At the same time, the fact that these disputes are not merely over words contrasts sharply with the dispute that turns out to be purely verbal by his own account, namely, the dispute between the theist and the purified pantheist. What underlies this rhetorical strategy? Vindicating Lessing could be one reason for this strategy. To be sure, Mendelssohn takes pains to argue that Lessing, despite being the spokesperson for this refined Spinozism, by no means endorses such a view. However, if one were successful in daubing or even smearing Lessing's name with the colors of this sort of pantheism, the difference between it and a conventional theist position is all but negligible, Mendelssohn

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<sup>22</sup> *JubA* 3.2:133; "I have also shown in the course of my last lecture that purified pantheism could co-exist quite well with the truths of religion and ethics, that the distinction consists merely in an overly-subtle speculation that does not have the slightest influence upon human actions and human happiness, and that the distinction instead leaves in its place everything that can become practical at all and is of any noticeable consequence in the life or even the opinions of human beings."

contends, and certainly no threat to religion and morality. What better way to establish the innocuous, purely verbal dispute between theists and purified pantheists than to present their dispute on the heels of the account of the theist's impurely verbal dispute with Spinoza.

Recall the conditional terms in which the dispute with Spinoza is cast. The dispute is purely verbal only if Spinoza countenances what otherwise goes by the label 'finite substance' and a positive sense of 'freedom'. Mendelssohn's readers will immediately register, as he surely knows they will, that Spinoza does nothing of the kind. So (to iterate the conclusion reached above) this dispute, while perhaps having its origin in different uses of terms, is not strictly a verbal dispute. By contrast, the dispute between the theist and the purified pantheist, as Mendelssohn portrays it, could not be more a matter of words. Despite his patent proclivities for the theist position, Mendelssohn's ultimate, common sense conclusion is that the dispute between theists and purified pantheists, between himself and a position that Lessing would defend (if not adopt<sup>23</sup>), is a purely verbal dispute – more precisely, an idle dispute over the interpretation of the metaphor at the root of both systems.

However, much like the Allegorical Dream, characterizing these disputes as purely verbal raises the question of the extent of Mendelssohn's commitment to dualism and theism. (Insofar as the Allegorical Dream ends with common sense and reason alike besieged by speculation's followers, perhaps Mendelssohn devised the Allegorical Dream, too, as part of an apologetic for what critics take to be Lessing's reformed Spinozism and he calls "purified pantheism.") But it would plainly be overreaching to infer that Mendelssohn is anything but committed to metaphysical dualism and theism, when it comes to the standard alternatives (i.e., idealism and Spinozism, respectively). To be sure, before introducing his allegorical dream, Mendelssohn reminds his readers that metaphysicians do not shy from denying "what sound human understanding would never dream of doubting" (79) and, after mentioning what is denied by idealists, egoists, Spinozists, and sceptics, he expresses his doubt that "any of these absurdities has ever been seriously maintained." This rebuke accords with his suspicion, cited earlier, that "all philosophical debates [are] merely verbal disputes or at least . . . derive . . . from verbal disputes." But the rebuke is directed only at certain kinds of metaphysical speculation and this is hardly surprising since Mendelssohn clearly fancies himself to be a metaphysician (as evidenced by, for example, the opening paragraphs of the Preliminary Knowledge and of Chap. 6). Moreover, the only strictly verbal dispute, i.e., that between the theist and purified pantheist, is a dispute, not between common sense and speculation, but between two systems of metaphysics, albeit arising from different interpretations of a common, root metaphor.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *JubA* 3.2:132–33; "I do not consider it necessary to beg his [Lessing's] spirit for forgiveness for engaging it in defense of pantheism. As I knew him, without being attracted to an error, he could zealously prop even it up if the reasons with which one wanted to contest it were not sufficient."

<sup>24</sup> Or, as Mendelssohn puts it in another context, "a difficulty merely with the words seems to have lurked, hidden and deviously, in the background, a difficulty that we perhaps for now lack (to avail myself of a similar, suspicious expression) the *facility* to discern" (*JubA* 3.2:144).

## 5 Concluding Ruminations

In many cases, we can fairly easily distinguish between factual and verbal disputes. A dispute over Mendelssohn's birthplace is typically a factual dispute, since the meanings of 'Mendelssohn' and 'birthplace' are relatively unambiguous. But it is easy to imagine a verbal dispute over where he grew up, e.g., in Dessau or in Dessau and Berlin, that turns on the different meanings assigned to "grew up."<sup>25</sup> The dispute is purely verbal since there is no disagreement about the facts of the matter, but only about the words used to describe the facts. This sort of dispute is plainly resolvable – albeit it is often easier said than done – by agreeing to use the expression in question for one specific meaning rather than other (i.e., in the present example, reserving the phrase 'grew up' for a person's pre-teens or for a period that includes both childhood and teens). While matters are more complicated in theoretical disputes, the purpose of a commonly accepted scientific language is precisely to minimize verbal disputes and facilitate research into the facts of the matter (physicists' dispute, for example, over whether light should be understood as a wave or a particle is not a verbal dispute<sup>26</sup>). Thus, in everyday life we recognize a rough-and-ready distinction between factual and verbal disputes, and considerable work in science is devoted to minimizing the latter and hopefully ensuring that disputes are genuinely about matters of fact.

Matters are not so straightforward in the case of philosophical disputes, however. Debates between idealists and realists, for example, typically cannot be resolved by pointing to some fact of the matter and they cannot because there is no ready way, independent of the philosophical theory and language, to identify what the fact of the matter is. Since the philosophical issue in question precisely concerns the constitution or conception of facts, words, meanings, and the principles governing the relations among them, some mainline disputes about words are indissociable from comparable disputes about facts and vice versa.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mendelssohn left Dessau for Berlin when he was 14 years old. In the eighteenth century the claim that a dispute in philosophy is purely verbal harkens back to Leibniz, Bayle, and Hume, among others; see, e.g., "Appendix IV. Of some verbal disputes" in David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 312–23. For other classical statements of the issue of verbal disputes in philosophy, see William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian, 1970), esp. pages 41ff.; Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 4 (1950): 20–40, and John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1973), 36–39. In recent years the issue of what constitutes a verbal dispute has regained prominence; see David Chalmers, "Verbal Disputes and Philosophical Progress," *Philpapers: Online Research in Philosophy* (2003); Eli Hirsch, "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10/1 (2005): 69–73, and David Manley, "Verbal Disputes," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8–15.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, P. N. Kaloyerou, "The GRA Beam-Splitter Experiments and Particle-Wave Duality of Light," *Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and Theoretical* 39/37 (2006): 11541–66.

<sup>27</sup> See note 2 above.

For some contemporary thinkers, talk of a purely verbal dispute comes naturally when the issue is metaphysical or epistemological, since these positions, when set off against our workaday uses of language, seem to be little more than dalliances of language on a holiday. From this vantage point, firmly rooted in one's baseline, ordinary use of language and/or the settled language of a science, the charge that a philosophical dispute is purely verbal is little more than a sceptical gesture, a way of expressing doubts that there is any genuine problem at stake, i.e., any issue that we can meaningfully discuss. (A dispute, for example, over whether falling tree limbs make sounds in the absence of anyone or anything to hear them may amount to a debate over the meaning of 'sounds'; disputes over whether an audience is a whole or an aggregate turns on the meanings of the terms designating the alternatives; disputes over the existence or non-existence of non-conceptual contents notoriously feed off different senses of 'content'.) A relentless strategy of resolving metaphysical or epistemological disputes into purely verbal disputes amounts to a way of arguing that both sides of a metaphysical and epistemological debate are victims of linguistic confusions that give way to idle speculations (like an "engine idling"), with no more grounding in the ordinary language of common sense or the commonly accepted, working language of a particular science than is enjoyed by Nordic myths, *Paradise Lost*, or *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. While Mendelssohn's philosophical proclivities ultimately lie elsewhere, he certainly gestures in this same direction when, as we have seen, he muses, dismissively, that all philosophical disputes amount to verbal disputes.

But talk of a verbal dispute can also be used to indicate a genuinely mistaken use of terms, that is to say, a mistaken use of words about a legitimate subject matter, grounded in ordinary usage and common sense. If, for competent, average users of a language, someone makes a claim in a way that violates their normal use of the terms in that language and the contradictory claim does not, then the latter claim enjoys some prima facie evidence. Here the challenge that the parties to the argument are arguing over words cannot be resolved by both parties agreeing to disagree or by deciding on a uniform usage. The decision has already been made and the point of saying that their dispute is over words is precisely to show which party is mistaken. Here, the charge that someone is disputing over words or, equivalently, that their dispute rests upon a misunderstanding of words serves as an argument for the correctness of a certain usage. In this case, if the dispute is over a philosophical claim, the charge that the dispute is purely verbal is tantamount, not to a dismissal of any such claim, but to an argument for the claim that, in the last analysis, can be endorsed by the competent, commonsensical users of ordinary language. Mendelssohn's criticisms of idealism and Spinoza utilize the charge of a verbal dispute to show that the dispute, while not purely verbal, is rooted in the idealist's or the Spinozist's confusion over the ordinary or proper use of the terms they employ. Once this usage is rectified, Mendelssohn seems to think, the proper metaphysical position – reason's reconciliation of common sense and speculation? – becomes evident.

The preceding paragraphs lay out two ways of leveling the charge that a philosophical disagreement is a verbal dispute, one that is dismissive of the dispute altogether, the other that denies the legitimacy of one side of the dispute and does so on

the basis of the supposedly warped language used to articulate that side of the dispute. For convenience's sake, I refer to these charges as "dismissive" and "rectifying" respectively. Whereas the dismissive charge that a dispute is verbal is intended to challenge the dispute's legitimacy altogether, the rectifying charge is intended to expose how one party mis-describes a legitimate issue, articulating it in a philosophically misleading way.

Yet if a philosophical dispute is verbal under either charge, it is not purely verbal in the sense that there is no disagreement over the facts of the matter. To contend that a philosophical dispute is verbal either because it has no foundation in the idiom of common sense or because one side in the last analysis takes flight of that idiom is to grant that the debate is a matter of principle, a dispute not so much about facts as about the principles and the language of the principles governing what are the facts.

In this respect philosophical disputes are more akin to legal or political disputes or disputes over tradition, history, or ideology, where questions of principle mingle with questions of fact. Here, too, determining to what extent the dispute might be purely verbal is arguably more complicated than in the case of science or quotidian life, given the strong possibility that not only the facts but also the principles are unclear or debatable and the language ambiguous. Not surprisingly, in such contexts, casting a dispute as verbal can be a rhetorical device, a negotiator's means of brokering or reconciling opposing parties. The suggestion that a debate is in at least some respects verbal becomes an invitation to the parties to the dispute to reconsider whether their differences amount to differing uses or interpretations of commonly shared terms (including root metaphors), uses or interpretations that leave the underlying principles intact. When Mendelssohn identifies the dispute between the theist and the purified pantheist as a purely verbal dispute, he is neither dismissing the issue in dispute altogether nor attempting to rectify the choice and use of terms by one party to the dispute. Instead he is trying to show that the dispute is less a matter of principle than it is a matter of interpretation, interpretation that entails no difference in principle, i.e., in the truths of religion and morality.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>In Suarez' terms, the difference between theist and purified pantheist is a *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis* and, thus, the source of purely verbal dispute.

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## Chapter 2

# Writing, Dialogue, and Marginal Form: Mendelssohn's Style of Intervention

Willi Goetschel

Mendelssohn has often been described as a popular philosopher with a writing style that is easy to understand, distinguished by clarity, elegance, and eloquence. I have no intention to dispute this view except for the label of popular philosopher, which appears to be a problematic mis-categorization of a philosopher otherwise extolled for his subtle and differentiated argumentation. The question I would like to take as point of departure here is to examine what the perception of the clarity, elegance, and eloquence of his style might have meant to Mendelssohn's contemporaries; for them, not necessarily for us or, for that matter, already for the first and second generation that would succeed. For I think few critics would still be willing to share so enthusiastically the claim that Mendelssohn's style stands out as exemplar of philosophical writing when it comes to style, clarity, and elegance. Of course, he may simply have acquired this title by default for the simple fact that among German eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers there was barely a serious contender for this title. But the eighteenth century was not the present with its academic industry and the republic of letters did not give out praise and prizes to meet quota.

Of course, the suspicion might be expressed that once Mendelssohn was declared a popular champion of the Enlightenment, his writing had to appear in the light of elegance and beauty. For these would simply be the categories under which a popular writer would be read and interpreted; a bit like the definition of the bride who is by definition the most beautiful person, at least in the eyes of the bridegroom and the wedding party. But even here, Mendelssohn begged to differ, as we know from his endearingly open-hearted letter to his future wife where he challenges his future father-in-law's assertion that his daughter is as beautiful as she is virtuous:

I have made in your father's letter a discovery that gives me no small pleasure. The kindly man assures me that his daughter is as beautiful as she is virtuous. What do you think? That

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one can trust the word of an honest man? I heartily laughed about his well-meaning praise. The good Herr Abraham Gugenheim must be aware that philosophers, too, do like something beautiful. I know his Fromet better than he does. She is beautiful, but not so beautiful as she is virtuous; she is not as beautiful as she is sweet.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I argue that the problem of the particularity of Mendelssohn's writing style remains and cannot be explained away easily. To be sure, the perception and reception of Mendelssohn by his contemporary readers might have had a certain impact on how he was viewed and understood. But that cannot be the end of the story. How else could we explain the paradox that a style used to be extolled for its elegance and eloquence that ever since has presented such a challenge in the eyes of the readers of successive generations? Do we have a case here of what Leo Strauss called the phenomenon of persecution and the art of writing? I would argue: not quite. But there is something in Mendelssohn's approach that calls for attention, and I would argue, calls explicitly and in explicit terms for attention. There are too many textual markers and pointers, too many moments where the text stops the reader in the tracks and calls for critical reflection if the reader is to understand not just how Mendelssohn is expressing his philosophic arguments but more – or precisely indistinguishably tied up with this – what exactly he is saying.

I for my part have always found Mendelssohn's writing anything but easy and straightforward and have been intrigued, and occasionally also irritated by the occasionally rather intricately knitted weaves of his writing. The more one reads Mendelssohn the more his texts open up questions. While Mendelssohn is usually read as an author of straightforward texts, his texts resist easy translation. This resistance is integral to his writing and it is by encouraging the reader to work through this resistance, I argue, that Mendelssohn's texts elicit a critical move of rethinking the terms of philosophy in critical fashion. Critical not exactly in the way Kant would define the term but with sufficient affinity that we could nevertheless speak of a certain family resemblance.

I am fully aware that such a claim sounds provocative and seems to run counter to some of the central tenets of Kant scholarship. But I argue that a certain sense of "critical" that Kant cherishes is the closest of the terms available to describe the peculiarities of Mendelssohn's writing style if "critical" is not reduced to the project of a system of transcendental philosophy but the methodically sustained suspense of

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<sup>1</sup>Partial translation by Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 94, and completed by myself. See Mendelssohn's letter of July 28, 1761 to Fromet Gugenheim where he jokes that while Fromet may be beautiful she is not as beautiful as she is virtuous: "Ich habe in Ihres Vaters Schreiben eine Entdeckung gemacht, die mich nicht wenig vergnügt. Der gütige Mann versichert mich, seine Tochter Fromet sey so schön als tugendhaft. Was meinen Sie? Man kann doch einem ehrlichen Mann auf seinem Worte glauben? Ich habe herzlich über seine wohl gemeinte Anpreisung gelacht. Der gute Herr Abraham Gugenheim muß doch wissen, daß die Philosophen auch gerne was Schönes haben. Doch das mag er mich verzeihen. Ich kenne seine Fromet besser als er. Sie ist schön, aber so schön nicht als sie tugendhaft ist, so schön nicht als sie zärtlich ist." Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), vol. 11, 236 ff. Henceforth cited as *JubA* and volume, followed by a colon and page number.

truth claims. In other words, let us suspend or bracket for a moment the traditional distinction of critical and pre-critical, a distinction that renders Mendelssohn's project almost invisible. Ultimately, my paper does not argue for a suspension of the distinction altogether but for an enriched and more differentiated understanding that no longer requires the exclusion of a philosopher like Mendelssohn but is comprehensive enough to include him. That is, at least, how I suggest we understand Kant's critical efforts to critique Mendelssohn, and extensively so in a manner, however, that does not always seem to leave the matter settled unambiguously.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to discuss this now by way of attending to some cases in point that will allow us to observe the way in which Mendelssohn complicates the discourse by positioning something like conceptual road blocks that cause the reader to slow down and register the text's signals that call for caution and alternative ways to address the problems at hand. The examples I would like to discuss in some detail are taken (1) from the preface to the translation of Manasseh Ben Israel's *Vindication of the Jews*, (2) *Jerusalem*, and (3) the essay "On the question: what does 'to enlighten' mean?" But before we look at these instances, I would like to share some general observations concerning Mendelssohn's writing and his view on language, scripture, and interpretation.

## 1 Mendelssohn and the Challenge of Writing Philosophy

As is well known, Mendelssohn entered the scene of writing with his anonymous *Philosophical Dialogues*. After the success of the dialogues, Mendelssohn went on to write on aesthetics and was also one of the chief reviewers on the literary scene. The next step was his rewriting of Plato's *Phaidon*, which was a huge success. *Phaidon* enjoyed fame throughout Europe in numerous translations. This first phase shows us a philosopher who initially struggles to enter the literary scene with his voice intact. It is not just modesty and worry that holds Mendelssohn back initially and leads Lessing to publish the *Philosophical Dialogues* to present Mendelssohn in a surprise act with his first publication. For a Jew, to enter the republic of letters, and as philosopher rather than just a mathematician or scientist represented, at least in Prussia of the eighteenth century, a move defined by apprehension and worry. In professional and cultural terms, Mendelssohn found himself in a precarious position. The genre of the dialogue provided in this situation a good framework to highlight the problems of a philosophical discussion that Mendelssohn sought to expose, address, and if possible 'correct.' The discussion that the dialogues stage concerning Leibniz and Spinoza reflects, of course, much more than the slight rectification the dialogues so cautiously propose. The seemingly modest argument Mendelssohn

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<sup>2</sup>For Kant's concept of critique and the critical and the problem of distinguishing between a pre-critical and a critical phase see Willi Goetschel, *Constituting Critique: Kant's Writing as Critical Praxis* (Durham/London: Duke University Press 1994).

advanced in 1755 has, in fact, had tremendous consequences. The debate concerning the relationship between Leibniz and Spinoza has become a continuing theme ever since. Lessing, Maimon, and the differences between Spinoza and Leibniz research illustrate how sensitive a spot, in the final analysis, the nerve was that Mendelssohn touched in his dialogues. Matthew Stewart's *The Courtier and the Heretic* demonstrates that up to the present the issue continues to remain controversial.<sup>3</sup>

Mendelssohn's dialogues just like Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* aired issues that had no simple yes or no for an answer but argued for a critical reconsideration of the problems they addressed. The dialogues thus literally introduced Mendelssohn's as a distinct voice. But it was one that was marked from the onset as a voice that would not stand out registering a particular view or position but as one that positioned itself in the context of a collaborative effort at exchange and conversation with others. This is a defining feature of Mendelssohn's dialogues. They are anything but didactic but resonate with Hume's sceptical inflections of openness. In a suggestive way, we might even argue that while Hume's dialogues retain a certain pointedness suggesting the author's privileging of some over the other interlocutors, Mendelssohn's remain pointedly dialogical despite the fact that one of the interlocutors stands closer to Mendelssohn's own position.

The writings on aesthetics represent a central aspect in Mendelssohn's thought. Written and published around the same time as the *Philosophical Dialogues*, Mendelssohn's *On Sentiments* is a series of letters. If Mendelssohn was inspired by Shaftesbury's epistolary conversations in *The Moralists*, the epistolary style of writing assumes in Mendelssohn more than simply the role of a literary device. Around the same time, Mendelssohn begins his stint as contributor to the project of literary criticism run by Nicolai and Lessing. In this context, Mendelssohn emerges as the new voice of German literary criticism, the influential contributor to Lessing, and the single most important judge and critic of literary taste. But Mendelssohn was anything but aspiring the authorial role of a literary pope. Nicolai, Lessing, and Mendelssohn launched their project of accompanying literary production with a running commentary in the guise of a correspondence between friends. Composed as correspondence among friends, the authors would describe their response and offer analytic observation to leave the judgement up to the reader. Instead of passing judgements, this new criticism was to provide the philosophic tools to understand, assess, and analyze literature and the arts so as to put the readers in a position to decide for themselves. Taste had become a matter that could no longer be prescribed by cognoscenti but was now up to each reader.

The theoretically innovative conception consisted in turning the audience into active interlocutors, or correspondents who would be drawn into the discussion by being invited to arrive at their own conclusions. This style of literary criticism abandoned the traditional approach of passing judgement and created instead a new form

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<sup>3</sup>Matthew Stewart *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2005). For a discussion of Stewart's book see my review essay "Spinoza and the Claims of Modernity", *Humanities and Social Sciences Online*, September 2009: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15527>.

of epistolary dialogue that entailed a new set of criteria. What would be aesthetically pleasing and therefore aesthetically valuable was no longer rule-derived nor would it be simply empirically observable or verifiable. I would argue that the reason for the celebrated accessibility, ease, and elegance that distinguishes Mendelssohn so uniquely among aesthetic theorists is primarily to be found in his approach to draw the readers into the discussion prompting them to judge for themselves. This is of course what good modern journalism is all about. But Mendelssohn is one of the first who, along with Lessing, has consistently demonstrated this. Naturally, there is more than "just" a writing style that informs this paradigmatic shift at the middle of the eighteenth century. There is a sophisticated aesthetic theory on which this intervention is grounded. As much as we seek to identify sources for this debate in Mendelssohn's contemporaries from Baumgarten to Shaftesbury and others, Mendelssohn represents a unique position. Practicing literary critic, and one of the first modern comparatists in literary criticism, Mendelssohn plays a tremendous role in liberating both the poets and the audience from the hold of a regime of metaphysics that left little room for the arts that would cater to the "sensuous" needs of human nature. And not surprisingly, the difference between Leibniz and Spinoza has here, too, a decisive role to play. If Mendelssohn's refashioning of Plato's *Phaidon* pursued the theme of infinitesimal continuity between body and mind arguing against an abrupt dichotomy between the two, Mendelssohn was pursuing a Leibnizian theme but, it has to be added, with a Spinozist agenda. Through Mendelssohn's aesthetic theory runs a red thread of the concern for the irreducibility of sensibility.

For Mendelssohn, aesthetics presents a discourse that allows him to articulate critical concerns as philosophically legitimate that traditional metaphysical discourse would be ill disposed to accommodate. With his aesthetic writings Mendelssohn created a new form of discourse that was no longer to be separated from traditional metaphysics but engaged it in critical fashion. Not only would the boundaries and the hold of metaphysics be renegotiated to create space for aesthetics as a discourse in its own right but, more importantly, aesthetics provided the entry point to address a whole sleight of problems as philosophically relevant that had been viewed for too long as irrelevant to philosophical attention. Central to this was the notion that the specificity and singularity of the individual would provide its own rules rather than be defined by normative models of subjectivity along Cartesian lines that still resonated enough in Leibniz, Wolff, and others to downplay the role of the individual's singularity and its legitimacy as autonomous subject of self-determination. If Leibniz had been the champion of rethinking individuality, his debts to an incompletely secularized metaphysics remained problematic in the eyes of Mendelssohn as it continued through all its philosophical reiterations to be informed by residues of religious implications, which Mendelssohn was not inclined to share. The British philosophers on the other hand, who had played a crucial role in the development of Mendelssohn, provided a helpful point of departure but lacked a systematically more rigorous interest in addressing the implications of their rethinking the function of aesthetics with regard to metaphysics in general. As far as Mendelssohn is concerned, the implications of his

aesthetic writings can neither be disconnected from his metaphysics nor from his concept of philosophy in general including metaphysics' ramifications for political philosophy. Let us just examine briefly his views on language, writing and scripture to illustrate some of the implications.

## 2 Language, Writing, and Scripture

Around the same time, probably soon after 1756, Mendelssohn discusses in his notes "Über die Sprache" (On Language) the central aspect of language for thought.<sup>4</sup> In agreement with Condillac he states that language is the presupposition for thought that cannot be imagined outside and independent from it: "Language is . . . indispensable for us to think."<sup>5</sup> This is a theme that runs through Mendelssohn's rich body of reviews as well and I just mention a few passages to highlight how this point represents a constant concern:

Without the support of language we humans cannot arrive at any clear knowledge and, consequently, at any use of reason.<sup>6</sup>

This is certainly not a Leibniz-Wolffian outlook. And as to highlight his abstinence from any metaphysical doctrinaire commitment, Mendelssohn reminds his readers in a review:

My temporal happiness depends in no way on the pre-established harmony or on any other philosophical opinion that I could hold it against anybody who objects to it so that because of this I should quibble with him in such a dishonest manner.<sup>7</sup>

And he continues:

I am a stranger at the philosophic fencing academy and very badly trained in its rules. I try hard to grasp someone else's ideas and if I have grasped them I cite them as I understand them. Whether I use the same words he uses or whether I use different ones that seem to me to have the same meaning is of no concern to me. Such dialectic circumspection is necessary whenever one contends in academic fashion to be right in order to claim one's opinion as superior to another's, in sum, as often as one faces an opponent one has to defeat by all means or else has to step down in shame with infamy. I never felt like nor had the opportunity to engage in such a scholarly duel. I read for my pleasure, I tell you what I have read

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<sup>4</sup>This section complements my discussion of Mendelssohn's theoretical position on language examined in Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 160–63.

<sup>5</sup>"Die Sprache ist . . . uns zum Denken unentbehrlich" (*JubA* 6.2:17).

<sup>6</sup>"Ohne Hülfe der Sprache können wir Menschen zu keiner deutlichen Erkenntniß, und folglich zu keinem Gebrauch der Vernunft gelangen" (*Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, LB 210, January 14, 1762; *JubA* 5.1:488).

<sup>7</sup>"Mein zeitliches Glück hängt auch auf keinerley Weise weder von der vorherbestimten Harmonie, noch von irgend einer andern philosophischen Meinung ab, daß ich es jemandem verargen könnte, der Erinnerungen dawider macht, daß ich ihn sogar deswegen auf eine so unredliche Weise chikaniren sollte" (LB 242, July 1, 1762; *JubA* 5.1:538).

for your information and I make objections not in order to be right but in order to learn and to demonstrate to you that I reflect while reading in order to provide the author, if my remarks have any purchase, with the opportunity to set his thoughts in brighter light. These alone are my intentions whenever I write you and I therefore do not submit myself to any rules of the art of disputation.<sup>8</sup>

This is a very different approach to Enlightenment than what the textbooks tell us. I cannot unpack all of the implications of this passage so rich in its hints and allusions. Let us just focus on one issue that speaks directly to the question of language and writing: the question of translation, i.e., is in this context of translating an author's words into one's own. How are we to think Mendelssohn's points together: (1) the constitutive nexus between language and thought and (2) the idea that to understand and clarify thought what is needed is not a terminology but an act of rephrasing, rewording, i.e., translation.

One of the issues that Mendelssohn addresses here is the problem of the institutional context in which philosophy is used to be "practiced," or as Mendelssohn pointedly notes, "exercised." Contrasting the university as fencing academy with the new institution of the public review, Mendelssohn claims the new literary genre of the review as the philosophically more conducive context for philosophy. Free of the constraints of the "art of disputation" and its protocol that concedes only one as potential winner and remains unable to imagine both parties as beneficiaries, Mendelssohn re-imagines the institution of philosophy as a site where literary exchange becomes the new paradigm in the search for truth. Precisely because this project is a literary one, translation assumes critical significance. But the way Mendelssohn understands the way language works, translation is not a process in which a word for word transliteration would be adequate for representing a particular thought or concept. Because of the substitutive glitch that defines the linguistic signs as originally mimetic but also arbitrary, it is only in rephrasing, i.e., in reconstructing meaning again and again that meaning can be communicated.

For Mendelssohn it is thus not so much the ordinary language that poses the problem but the terminologically fixated hold of scholarship: "If I had the task to answer how language can prompt prejudices I would less accuse ordinary language

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<sup>8</sup>"Ich bin auf der philosophischen Fechtschule ein Fremdling, und in den Regeln derselben sehr schlecht unterrichtet. Ich gebe mir Mühe eines andern Gedanken zu begreifen, und wenn ich sie begriffen zu haben glaube; so führe ich dieselbe an, wie ich sie verstehe. Ob ich die nehmlichen Worte anführe, deren sich jener bedient, oder andere an ihre Stelle setze, die mir denselben Sinn zu haben scheinen, darum bekümmere ich mich nicht. Diese dialektische Behutsamkeit ist nöthig, so oft man disputiret, auf Universitätsart, um Recht zu haben, um so seine eigene Meinung über die Meinung eines andern zu erheben, kurz, so oft man einen Gegner hat, den man durchaus besiegen, oder mit Schande zurück treten muß. Ich habe niemals weder Lust noch Gelegenheit gehabt, mich in einen solchen gelehrten Zweykampf einzulassen. Ich lese zu meinem Vergnügen, ich erzehle Ihnen, was ich gelesen, zu Ihrer Nachricht, und mache Einwürfe, nicht um Recht zu haben, sondern um zu lernen, um Ihnen zu zeigen, daß ich mit Nachdenken lese, um dem Verf., wenn meine Erinnerungen einigen Schein haben, Gelegenheit zu geben, seine Gedanken in ein helleres Licht zu setzen. Dieses sind einzig und allein meine Absichten, so oft ich Ihnen schreibe, und daher binde ich mich an keine Regeln der Disputirkunst" (*JubA* 5.1:539–40).

than the language of the scholars.”<sup>9</sup> Two decades later, in the introduction to his translation of *Genesis* (1780) Mendelssohn returns to the problem that languages resist easy fixation of a content that would be easily transferable:

And this way all languages are distinguished by the way of expression and each of them possesses special qualities that another does not have. Consequently, if one translates a text literally and does so word for word a speaker of that language won't understand the text at all. Even if he might grasp the gist he won't experience the agreeable character of the expression and the grace of the original language from which it has been translated.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting critically on the task of the translator as the difficult business of substitutive reconstruction, he notes

that the true translator often has to change, add, omit, and change the order of the text in order to render the intention of the original speaker. Nobody spoils the meaning more and causes more damage than he who preserves the words, who translates word for word even though, on a first glance, he is seemingly the most loyal and most eager worker.<sup>11</sup>

For Mendelssohn the paradox “traduttore traditore” (a translator is a traitor) reflects a problem intrinsic to language itself. To ignore or underestimate its theoretical implications would mean to fall back into conceptual realism, a view, which after Condillac and Mendelssohn's early observations on language represents no longer an option. As he continues concerning the “most loyal and most eager” translator:

Our sages, blessed be their memory, chided such a man in many places as one who reads a verse exactly according to its form by which they meant somebody who preserves the words and translates or explains word for word without any change or rearrangement even in places where the ways of the language [die Wege der Sprache] force him to preserve the accents and to abandon the words. A translator of this kind is called a liar for he gives the appearance of a loyal translator, he does not leave out any word in the sense that he does not translate but lies because this way the content is lost and the intention confounded. Consequently, our rabbis say . . . in the chapter “the man sanctifies [marries]”

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<sup>9</sup>“Wenn ich die Aufgabe zu beantworten hätte, wie die Sprache zu Vorurtheilen Anlaß geben kann; so würde ich die gemeine Sprache vielleicht nicht so viel beschuldigen, als die Sprache der Gelehrten” (LB 22, March 1, 1759; *JubA* 5.1:17).

<sup>10</sup>“Und so unterscheiden sich alle Sprachen in den Wegen des Ausdrucks, und jede von ihnen hat besondere Eigenschaften, die eine andere nicht hat. Deshalb, wenn man einen Text wörtlich, ein Wort nach dem anderen überträgt, versteht ihn der Sprecher jener Sprache überhaupt nicht. Selbst wenn er vielleicht die Hauptabsicht erfaßt, wird er darin nicht die Angenehmheit des Ausdrucks und die Anmut der Anordnung der ursprünglichen Sprache fühlen, aus der sie übersetzt war” (*JubA* 9.1:37).

<sup>11</sup>“daß der wahre Übersetzer oft ändern, zufügen, weglassen und die Ordnung des Textes vertauschen muß, um die Absicht des ursprünglichen Sprechers wiederzugeben. Niemand verdirbt die Bedeutung mehr und stiftet mehr Schaden, als einer der Wörter bewahrt, der wörtlich Wort für Wort übersetzt, auch wenn er auf den ersten Blick, scheinbar, der getreueste und eifrigste Arbeiter ist” (*JubA* 9.1:39).



(Kiddushin 49a), and at the end of Tosefta Megillah: "Who translates a verse according to its form [i.e. mechanically word for word] is an impostor."<sup>12</sup>

For Mendelssohn, then, the linguist and literary aspects of writing play a crucial role. Translation is not triangulated via a meta-language but already a moment internal to language. Unlike Leibniz, Mendelssohn is therefore critical of the notion of a universal language. As a result, the problem of a meta-language is complicated. While Mendelssohn's desire is to clarify concepts he always does so by historically recontextualizing meaning. Wary of the problems of terminology that is for Mendelssohn conducive to hypostasis and reification, ordinary language is not an obstacle but a constitutive moment that informs thought.

Let me conclude this section with a quick reminder that the theory of the particular role of the Biblical mitzvot as the "living script" that Mendelssohn develops later on in *Jerusalem*, illustrates by contrast the systematic coherence of Mendelssohn's rethinking the problem of language. The divine scripture prescribes the mitzvot as a religious institution that realizes meaning through the actions it calls forth in a process that constitutes meaning anew in ever changing contexts and thus preserves its message through ever continuing translation into actions. This model of transmission of a perpetually dynamic concept of language whose inexhaustibility preserves the integrity of the divine word highlights the problem of human language and its limits. Consequently, the scripture of the mitzvot calls for the continual reconstitution of meaning, a perpetual translation into action. While scripture lives through its realization in the mitzvot through which meaning gets continually renewed, human language has to do without the institution of mitzvot as guarantor for the semantic content. Or in other words, the only actions that human scripture produces are interpretations and remain as such again acts of language.<sup>13</sup>

Calling forth interpretation is then how discursive language works. As a result, a critical intervention requires a mode of writing that reflects on the protocol of the discourse and, as it were, opens it up for examination. This, I argue, is what Mendelssohn does in his writings when he challenges the received opinions in subtle but forcefully suggestive manner.

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<sup>12</sup>"Einen solchen rügten unsere Weisen, ihr Andenken sei zum Segen, an vielen Stellen [nämlichen] einen, der den Vers [genau] nach seiner Form auslegt, womit sie jemanden meinen, der die Wörter bewahrt und Wort für Wort übersetzt oder erklärt, ohne irgendeine Veränderung oder Vertauschung, selbst an Stellen, wo die Wege der Sprache ihn zwingen, die Akzente zu bewahren und die Wörter zu verlassen. Und ein Übersetzer dieser Art wird ein Lügner genannt, denn er gibt den Anschein eines getreuen Übersetzers, er läßt kein Wort aus, im Sinne, daß er es nicht übersetzt, doch lügt er, denn hierdurch geht der Inhalt verloren und die Absicht ist verwirrt. So sagen denn auch unsere Rabbinen . . . im Kapitel 'der Mann heiligt [heiratet]' (Kidduschin 49a), und am Ende von Tosefta Megillah: 'Wer einen Vers nach seiner Form [d.h. mechanisch Wort für Wort] übersetzt, ist ein Betrüger'" (*JubA* 9.1:39).

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of Mendelssohn's concept of "living script" see Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 163–66.



### 3 “Indigenous Colonists”

The first example I would like to discuss is taken from Mendelssohn’s introduction to Manasseh Ben Israel’s *Vindication of the Jews*, his first intervention in the public debate concerning Jewish emancipation. Probably eclipsed by the attention that his *Jerusalem* has received (or not), this programmatic articulation of Mendelssohn’s response to the debate on Jewish emancipation has remained oddly disregarded. The only complete translation of the text is from 1827. It was reprinted in 2002.<sup>14</sup> This neglect seems curious given the fact that *Jerusalem* was written as direct response to the challenge that was launched against Mendelssohn’s introduction half a year after it appeared with the publication of an anonymous pamphlet by August Friedrich Cranz, *Das Forschen nach Licht und Recht in einem Schreiben an Moses Mendelssohn auf Veranlassung seiner merkwürdigen Vorrede zu Manasseh Ben Israel*. The argument Mendelssohn advances in *Jerusalem* is thus linked to the introduction to Manasseh Ben Israel’s *Vindication of the Jews*. While Mendelssohn had initially planned the introduction as his one and only public word on the matter, Cranz’ challenge led him to the realization that a more systematic, explicit, and more detailed discussion was required. If the tone of *Jerusalem* seems pointedly calm and restrained, Mendelssohn’s resolutely sovereign stance must be seen in the light of the tendentious and provocative challenge of Cranz’s anonymous pamphlet. Part of Mendelssohn’s response consisted in his insistence on taking the high road of political philosophy. But *Jerusalem* must therefore also be read in the context of the introduction that Mendelssohn had published a year earlier. The impression that *Jerusalem* is an apologetic piece of writing can only be sustained as long as the introduction and the way it advances its arguments remain ignored.

The introduction to Manasseh Ben Israel thus is to be understood as the first installment of a discussion, in which *Jerusalem* represents the second and the Enlightenment essay as a third installment.

In the introduction, Mendelssohn makes a striking use of a phrase that must stop the readers in their tracks and cause to take a break for a moment of reflection. In a critical response to Dohm, Mendelssohn describes the Jews as “indigenous colonists.”<sup>15</sup> But the way in which Mendelssohn makes his point is not to acquiesce to a position of subaltern submission but, on the contrary, to expose the problematic framework of the discourse of political theory that informs the discourse on the legal state of the Jews as “indigenous aliens.” Because of the ambiguous semantics of the term colony at the time and Mendelssohn’s playful use of the concept as a

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<sup>14</sup> *Writings Related to Mendelssohn’s Jerusalem*, vol. 2 of *Moses Mendelssohn: The First English Biography and Translations*, trans. M. Samuel, 2nd ed., (London, 1827; repr. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 80. Samuel however translates the passage: “those native aliens into citizens.” I refer to Samuel’s translation hereafter as to S.

<sup>15</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *JubA* 8:5; S 80. For a detailed discussion of this passage see Willi Goetschel, “State, Power, Sovereignty, and the Outside Within: Voices from the ‘Jewish Colony,’” in *International Relations and Non-Western Thought*, ed. Robbie Shilliam (New York/London: Routledge, 2010), 64–84.

colony at home and the Jew as the stateless resident alien or foreigner without citizenship of the place he calls home, Mendelssohn establishes suggestive associations with the project of colonialism. But Mendelssohn does not so much argue for a particular view but raises a host of questions regarding the problem of how to rethink the state, sovereignty, and citizenship in a manner that responds to the problems of the trope of the "indigenous colonist" critically.

The notion of the indigenous colonist, Mendelssohn's preface to Manasseh Ben Israel's *Vindication of the Jews* reminds its readers, is structurally tied up with the problem of the construction of the nation state and the concept of sovereignty. The problem of citizenship and civil society poses problems that neither the nation state nor the colonial model can resolve on their own. Rather, the two models turn out to be intertwined, each defined by an exclusionary approach to citizenship and civil society. Critical against the conceptual force of the approach these models mandate, Mendelssohn's argument serves as an eloquent reminder that the nation state is based on a concept of national homogeneity that presupposes the colony for internal distinction to stabilize the boundaries of enclosure. The aporetic challenge consists in the problem that any move to self-determination in the framework of national discourse reproduces the inside/outside divide and, as a consequence, links autonomy with a heteronomous moment of arbitrating the exclusion of others. Any state that divides civil society along the lines of class, nation, religion, or any other criteria thus undermines the claim to sovereignty and self-legitimacy as long as it excludes others that it makes part of its sovereign sphere of rule. Emancipation must therefore be understood as a principal demand not of individual constituents of the groups that are excluded but of the state itself in its very own interest.<sup>16</sup>

## 4 Aspects of *Jerusalem*

### 4.1 *Jerusalem*

One of the challenges of *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism* is how to read the book's title, and more precisely, "Jerusalem" as name, trope, and place. In a way, this entire essay could be understood as an attempt to understand how to read "Jerusalem." I have begun this project elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> If a main point that critics hold against Mendelssohn is the way in which his conception of Judaism seems to exclude Messianism, already some minimal attention to the book's title seems to suggest otherwise. Just like a monument, the title stands out in such a peculiar manner, that the question of what it might signal has been overlooked. The analogy to the phenomenon that has us overlook most monuments might be helpful to address

<sup>16</sup>For a foreshadowing of Marx's argument in "On the Jewish Question" in Mendelssohn, see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup>See my *Spinoza's Modernity* and "Mendelssohn and the State," *Modern Language Notes* 122.3 (2007) and "Einstimmigkeit in Differenz: Der Begriff der Aufklärung bei Kant und Mendelssohn," special theme issue on Mendelssohn of *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 2011.

the peculiar features of Mendelssohn's writing style. The linguistic signal is meant to be strong, clear but at the same time necessitating hermeneutic engagement and intrigue. Playing on the overdetermined meaning of Jerusalem and the profound differences in the Christian and Jewish traditions, the book's title reclaims so literally the title to an argument. Mendelssohn signals so much himself with the concluding quote from *Zechariah* 8, 19. Most readers in the eighteenth century would have been familiar with the Biblical text to recall the lines that follow: the prophecy of the universal role of Jerusalem for all human beings on earth (*Zechariah* 8, 20-23). In reclaiming the Biblically ancient title to Jerusalem, Mendelssohn prompts his readers to rethink the role of the Jewish tradition in modernity and particularly with regard to the constitution of the modern liberal state. Yet, he does so in a way that asks the readers to actively and critically engage in the process of reading and interpretation so that they acknowledge the suggestively rich potential of meanings the title announces.

Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* has to be read, in other words, multidirectionally. For it is the concluding quote from *Zechariah* that sends the readers back into the book and invites them to now rethink the book's argument in terms of an argument for a conception of the universal that no longer stands under any imperative to erase the particular. Rather, with the title in place, a title that is a name rather than a word or concept, it becomes possible to read the particular as constitutive for thinking an emancipatory concept of universalism. How Messianically charged this title then ultimately turns out to be requires no further reminder. But this Messianic view is critically devoid of any sort of teleological charged expectations.

Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* reclaims the Messianic moment in the name of a vision of Jewish tradition that – in the wake of centuries of invidious juxtapositions and comparisons – no longer allows that its message be construed in terms of an invidious either/or. Rather, and with a philosophically critical impetus, *Jerusalem* argues that universalism in modernity is only an option if it is conceived as open ended towards the future. Its messianic quality refuses any control or determination by any one particular over another, be it in the disguise of the claim of the universal or an elected particular. Instead, Mendelssohn's concept of universality rests on the vision of the relationship of the particular and the universal in terms of a relationship of continuous reciprocity, or more precisely of the correlative relationship of the two concepts.

Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* does therefore not replace a theologically charged vision with another, or exchange the heavenly for an earthly one, but moves beyond such oppositions to re-imagine an open, dialogic relationship where the universal is no longer predicated by any sort of abstraction from the particular but by its emancipation. In Mendelssohn's view, Athens no longer lurks on the horizon as the other, opposite, or adversary, and vice versa. On Mendelssohn's vantage point, any such juxtaposition is grounded on false premises. Instead of a theory and practice of mutual exclusion his *Jerusalem* – as allegory and title – proposes a more encompassing community of nations and people united alone in a vision of universality they all can claim individually as their own and which they achieve only through mutual recognition of the other constituents of a cosmopolitan universe. Putting *Jerusalem* in the title of his call to rethink the terms of emancipation, Mendelssohn

solicits the reader to participate in the project of re-imagining an alternative kind of universalism that recognizes the particular as the very condition on which an emancipatory concept of universality rests.<sup>18</sup>

## 4.2 Spinoza

A telling example of Mendelssohn's strategic deployment of style as a function of his argument is the peculiar way in which his pointedly post-Hobbesian thought invokes Hobbes to position Spinoza. Three pages into *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn begins a paragraph with the telling opening:

There is, at bottom, a great deal of truth in all of Hobbes's assertions. The absurd consequences to which they lead follow solely from the exaggeration with which he propounded them, whether out of a love of paradox or in compliance with the needs of his time.<sup>19</sup>

This is the section where Mendelssohn introduces Hobbes and Locke to distinguish his own approach critically from theirs. It playfully imitates the style of the "rescue" Mendelssohn had introduced in his vindication of Spinoza that was to inaugurate a genre that would soon become Lessing's favorite stylistic device. But here, the "rescue" serves the purpose of a coy self-referential reminder of that other philosopher whose "errors" were to be so crucial to spur on Leibniz to discover truths he would not have been able to discover without Spinoza's "errors" that, Mendelssohn then reminded his readers, came so indistinguishably close to Leibniz's "discoveries." Mendelssohn continues:

Moreover, in his day the concepts of natural law were, in part, still not sufficiently enlightened. In matters of moral philosophy Hobbes has the same merit as Spinoza has in metaphysics. His ingenious errors have occasioned inquiry.<sup>20</sup>

So now, Hobbes and Spinoza have become parallel cases. The last sentence has an unmistakably self-referential ring. But from this bold comparison, Mendelssohn goes on to make his next move:

The ideas of *right* and *duty*, of *power* and *obligation*, have been better developed; one has learned to distinguish more correctly between physical and moral ability, between might

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<sup>18</sup>This and the preceding paragraph are taken from my essay "Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy," *Bamidbar: Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (2011) where I give a more detailed account on the way in which the title plays off the topos Athens-versus-Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover/London: University Press of New England, 1983), 36. All English translations from *Jerusalem* are taken from this edition and referred to by A followed by the page number. "Im Grunde liegt in allen Behauptungen des Hobbes viel Wahrheit, und die ungereimten Folgen, zu welchen sie führen, fließen blos aus der Uebertreibung, mit welcher er sie, aus Liebe zur Paradoxie, oder den Bedürfnissen seiner Zeiten gemäß, vorgetragen hat" (*JubA* 8:105).

<sup>20</sup>"Zum Theil waren auch die Begriffe des Naturrechts zu seiner Zeit noch nicht aufgeklärt genug, und Hobbes hat das Verdienst um die Moralphilosophie, das Spinoza um die Metaphysik hat. Sein scharfsinniger Irrthum hat Untersuchung veranlassen" (*JubA* 8:105–6; A36).

and right. These distinctions have become so intimately fused with our language that, nowadays, the refutation of Hobbes' system seems to be a matter of common sense, and to be accomplished as it were, by language itself.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Locke will be refused as equally problematic and no further theorists of political philosophy are mentioned. So who exactly would it have been who took on Hobbes, rectified his errors, developed the notions of “*right and duty, power and obligation*” in a way that became common sense? Well, for those readers who are not yet ready for an educated guess, the remainder of the book will answer this question more clearly. At this point, Mendelssohn is not prepared to answer the question except by way of a hint.

My point is not that Mendelssohn knows how to conceal and package his argument, for as a matter of fact, instead of concealing he confronts the reader directly with the decontextualized naming of Spinoza at this point by way of a particular sort of paralipsis. The philosophically critical point consists rather in what this rhetoric maneuver highlights: not that we need to go back to Spinoza to move beyond Hobbes, but that we actually have already done so. Mendelssohn is not so much concerned about justice in terms of merit allocation but in grounding political philosophy in a sound and critically post-Cartesian and post-Hobbesian framework.

### 4.3 *The Theory of Contract*

The third point I would like to raise in the context of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* is his unusual approach to contract. My hunch is that Mendelssohn's alternative take on contract poses a challenge that continues to stay with the reader as sort of a sting or thorn in the sides just strong enough to continue to raise questions but weak enough to force a solution. Technically, this is close to what Kant defines as critical.

Mendelssohn defines contracts as “nothing but the *cession*, by the one party, and the *acceptance*, by the other party, of the right to decide cases of collision involving certain goods which the promising party can spare.”<sup>22</sup> While conventional contract theories define contracts as a formalized account of an exchange of claims, titles, or rights in legal terms, Mendelssohn frames the contract as a transfer or surrender of the right to decide in certain cases of collision to a third party for the purpose of arbitration.

By designing the contract as an transaction of cession and acceptance of a right to decision in such cases rather than a transaction of claims, goods, or titles, Mendelssohn's contract does not entail the surplus of the creation of a third institution

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<sup>21</sup> “Man hat die Ideen von *Recht* und *Pflicht*, *Macht* und *Verbindlichkeit* besser entwickelt; man hat physisches Vermögen von sittlichem Vermögen, Gewalt und Befugniß richtiger unterscheiden gelernt, daß nunmehr die Widerlegung des hobbesischen Systems schon in dem gesunden Menschenverstande, und so zu sagen, in der Sprache zu liegen scheint” (*JubA* 8:106; A36).

<sup>22</sup> “. . . nichts anders, als von der einen Seite die *Ueberlassung* und von der andern Seite, die *Annahme* des Rechts, in Absicht auf gewisse, dem Versprecher entbehrliche Güter, die Collisionsfälle zu entscheiden” (*JubA* 8:123; A54–55).

that resides above the two contracting parties, but strictly limits the contract to a bilateral transaction. This definition precludes the kind of alternatives most contract theories deploy: whether by glossing over the second step they have already tacitly presupposed, or by stipulating it *expressis verbis*. Lacking sufficient grounds, they go on to present the concept of the sovereign as a necessary and logical conclusion. It is not difficult to fill in the blanks to see where Hobbes, Locke, or, for that matter, Rousseau come down on these issues.<sup>23</sup> Suffice it to say that Mendelssohn begs here to differ from all of them and exposes the glitches in their arguments that, in different ways beg – or bag – the question as they operate with notions of sovereignty their theories presuppose rather than account for. More precisely, in the place of theoretical explanation they all offer narratives of legitimation of the installation of sovereignty, a move Mendelssohn's approach renders impossible. Mendelssohn's reserve against contract as the concept to account for the emergence and constitution of civil society is a central point of his critical argument.<sup>24</sup> The one theorist who offers an alternative approach that resonates with Mendelssohn is Spinoza.

## 5 Aufklärung, Bildung, Kultur

As way of conclusion, let us turn to the idiosyncratic use Mendelssohn makes in his Enlightenment essay of the three key terms he relates to each other in a model of dynamic equilibrium. Mendelssohn does so in a way that raises more problems than it offers to resolve. But that, of course, i.e., such an approach is what represents Enlightenment *tout court* or *überhaupt*. Viewing enlightenment as providing answers rather than articulating questions would mean to ignore its project altogether. According to Mendelssohn, Enlightenment is inseparable from education and formation, i.e., *Bildung*. Enlightenment thus does not by itself guarantee *Bildung* but can lead to it only in combination with culture. The irreducibility of one to the other and the dynamically dialectic relationship in which they are to be viewed is a crucial correction to Kant's and other Enlightenment figures' proposal to equate the Enlightenment with political action and ultimately with emancipation. By reclaiming the role of Enlightenment's *theoretical* dimension, Mendelssohn opens the concept to the possibility of critical reflection. Enlightenment is not imagined in terms of the primacy of practical reason as Kant proposes, but as itself a theoretical activity that provides the framework for a discourse that is able to engage with the terms of emancipation and political action critically. As unassuming and subtle as the change in accentuation seems to be as decisive does it turn out to be once emancipation

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<sup>23</sup>This paragraph sums up my discussion in "Mendelssohn and the State," 476–79. I am indebted to David Suchoff for pointing out that Mendelssohn's conception of the contract shares key aspects with the Talmudic tradition.

<sup>24</sup>For a compelling account of Mendelssohn's alternative approach to the social contract via family law see Susan E. Shapiro, "The Status of Women and Jews in Moses Mendelssohn's Social Contract Theory: An Exceptional Case," *German Quarterly* 82.3 (2009).

comes into focus as independent from the claims of Enlightenment. But equally, the concepts of *Bildung* and culture gain a richer, more complex differentiation that reflects them as constitutively intertwined with, but not reducible to, Enlightenment. If Enlightenment and culture lead only in combination to *Bildung*, then *Bildung*, in turn, requires both practice and theory and without one canceling out the other. Mendelssohn's resistance to theorize the Enlightenment in terms of a historical mission turns out to be a critically important move against the instrumentalization of the Enlightenment discourse. Rather than offering clear-cut answers, the text reflects on the transformative features of the movement of Enlightenment that it addresses critically. But that is not Mendelssohn's last word. For Mendelssohn the task of clarifying the terms of Enlightenment continues and it is in subsequent essays where he pursues this task further, addressing Enlightenment as a dynamic, dialogue based, i.e., dialogic affair.<sup>25</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

If Mendelssohn is often read as a popular philosopher of the Enlightenment whose strength consists in application rather than examining and rethinking philosophy in principal terms, I argue such an approach is based on a misreading of Mendelssohn's own argument that forecloses the possibility of appreciating his most original ideas and the very core of the philosophic significance of his critical project. The particular stylistic strategies are an integral and crucial moment in his writing and call for critical attention. In a style that is close to Socrates' form of conversational dialogue albeit significantly different, Mendelssohn motivates the reader to think not simply along and follow the steps but rather to fill in the dots between the hints and arrive at their own conclusions. Prompting his readers to an active dialogue and entitling and empowering them to do so, I argue, is what garnered the praise of his contemporaries. That this feature has been often misunderstood as purely applicative thinking, popular philosophy, or a version of Leibniz-Wolffian thought is one of the ironies that characterize the historiography of philosophy. At the center of every line of Mendelssohn's writing stands the challenge to think otherwise.

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<sup>25</sup>For a detailed discussion of Mendelssohn's distinct conception of Enlightenment and its difference to but and also shared tenets with Kant's see my "Einstimmigkeit in Differenz." See Note 17.



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**Part II**  
**Mathematics and Philosophy**



## Chapter 3

# Mendelssohn, Wolff, and Bernoulli on Probability

Edith Dudley Sylla

In his “On Probability,” Moses Mendelssohn proposed to use a mathematical formulation of the definition of probability, found in the work of Christian Wolff to support the validity of induction (against Hume) and the view that all our actions, even including those supposed to be the result of free will, are predetermined (in agreement with Leibniz). Mendelssohn went into few of the details of mathematical probability as they had been developed by mathematicians like Jacob Bernoulli in the century before he wrote. Particularly as he revised his paper for publication in his *Philosophical Writings*, Mendelssohn made claims, using Wolff’s definition of probability in its mathematical formulation, that were not really consistent with his own more considered views, as expressed, for instance, in his “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences.” Despite the lack of influence of Bernoulli’s mathematics on Mendelssohn, however, Mendelssohn’s more considered views on the proper use of probability in ethical decision making were quite like those of Jacob Bernoulli and might lead to a lack of dogmatism about the ethical correctness of one’s own actions, given that probability is the best that can be hoped for in the actions of everyday life.

From the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century, mathematicians developed the beginnings of modern mathematical probability. The first major subject to be dealt with was the mathematics of games of chance, where the dice or cards used provided the underlying structure for probability calculations. The mathematics itself often took the same forms as problems of commercial arithmetic, to which was added the mathematics of combinations and permutations for more complicated game situations. In *The Art of Conjecturing*, Jacob Bernoulli applied the mathematics found in Christiaan Huygens’ *On Reckoning in Games of Chance* to civil, moral, and economic issues. He also proved what came to be called the weak law of large numbers to show how underlying probabilities could be estimated a

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*posteriori* from often repeated outcomes in similar situations. Abraham De Moivre, soon afterwards, tightened and sharpened the mathematics of distributions of chance outcomes that Bernoulli had begun.<sup>1</sup> Rémond de Montmort published *Essay d'Analyse sur les Jeux de Hazard* in 1708, with a second, expanded edition in 1713. In his *Logica* and in his reviews of the work of Montmort and Bernoulli appearing in the *Acta Eruditorum*, Christian Wolff remarked on the progress made by mathematicians in dealing with probabilistic reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Wolff was probably Mendelssohn's main source for the new ideas about mathematical probability.

As a member of the Society of Literary Friends at Berlin – referred to as a “Scholars’ Coffee House,” – Moses Mendelssohn prepared a talk entitled “Thoughts on Probability,” in which he sought to apply the new fundamentals of mathematical probability. According to one story, Mendelssohn, out of modesty or caution, had someone else read his paper to the meeting, meaning to take credit for it only if it was well received. When the reader came to a zero, he pronounced it “oh,” at which point Mendelssohn spontaneously spoke up to correct him, revealing his authorship.<sup>3</sup> The talk was first published anonymously in 1756 and then again in slightly revised form as part of Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Writings* in 1761, 1771, and 1777.<sup>4</sup> As befits a talk, the paper attempts to make an argument that might interest a scholars’ coffee house, and the published versions are only lightly documented. Mendelssohn writes:

Mathematicians, who expanded the borders of their science more rapidly than philosophers did, have also made great discoveries in the field of probability within the last century. In all types of games of luck, wagers, forms of insurance, lotteries, in some lawsuits, indeed, even in regard to historical believability, they have calculated the probable cases against one

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<sup>1</sup>See Edith Sylla, “Introduction,” in *The Art of Conjecturing together with Letter to a Friend on Sets in Court Tennis* by Jacob Bernoulli (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Christian Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis sive Logica* (1740), part 2, 443: “Quemadmodum Mathematici artem inveniendi veritatem in Mathesi adeoque artis huius partem sibi propriam in Algebra tradunt; ita Logicae probabilitium specimina dedere in sorte ludorum determinanda. Pertinent huc praeter *Hugenii* tractatum de ludo aleae *Jacobi Bernoulli* Ars conjectandi, *Remondi de Monmort* Analysis ludorum a fortuna pendentium, cuius altera editio priori auctior cum epistolis *Joannis & Nicolai Bernoullii* prodiit, atque *Abrahami de Moivre* doctrina sortis, seu Methodus computandi probabilitatem in ludis. Principia, quae de his insunt, generalia suo trademus loco, quando de Logica probabilitium ex instituto agemus.”

<sup>3</sup>See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 76. More detail of alternate versions of the story in Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1969), 209–11.

<sup>4</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohn's Frühschriften*, 212. The 1771 version is translated by Daniel Dahlstrom in Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The paragraph starting “But from what source does God take these reasons . . .” on page 248, and the ending of the essay beginning with “This case should not be confused with the one previously mentioned . . .” on page 249 and continuing to the end, are new in comparison to the 1756 edition, which has a different two paragraphs at the end (Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 1, 164, hereafter cited as *JubA* and volume number, followed by a colon and page number.) I have relied on Dahlstrom's translation except for some slight emendations where I thought they might make the sense clearer.

another and determined the magnitude of expectation or the degree of probability in terms of this calculation. One needs only the names Pascal, Fermat, Huygens, Halley, Craig, Petty, Montmort, Moivre, Bernoulli, and Euler to form a conception of the high worth of their discoveries.<sup>5</sup>

Which, of the several Bernoullis who wrote on probability, did Mendelssohn have in mind here? If he derived his list of significant mathematical probabilists from reading Christian Wolff's *Logica*, he would have seen the names of Jacob Bernoulli, his brother John, and his nephew Nicholas Bernoulli.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he might have seen the names in Wolff's reviews of the works of Montmort and Bernoulli in the *Acta Eruditorum*. In the 1709 *Acta Eruditorum* review of the first edition of Rémond de Montmort's *Essay d'Analyse sur les Jeux de Hazard*, in addition to Huygens, Wolff mentions Fermat, Witt, Hudd, Petty, Halley, and Craig, and notes the fact that Bernoulli's work, of which it gives a brief description, had yet to be published (although Jacob Bernoulli had died in 1705). The 1714 review of *Ars Conjectandi*, after its publication in 1713, summarizes the key points of the book.<sup>7</sup> At some point, Mendelssohn was motivated to buy his own copy of *Ars Conjectandi*, which remained in his library at his death.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere in his essay on probability, Mendelssohn footnotes an article by Nicholas Bernoulli, which he therefore obviously knew.<sup>9</sup> No doubt Mendelssohn's list of mathematical probabilists came from several sources. He was not the only person who referred to 'Bernoulli' as if there were only one mathematician of that name. Although he knew some points from *Ars Conjectandi*, he does not seem to have studied its mathematical details.<sup>10</sup>

Jacob Bernoulli's *The Art of Conjecturing* is a thoroughly mathematical book. Mendelssohn was not confident of his ability to contribute anything new to mathematical probability. He writes:

A philosopher who, in order to fulfill Leibniz's wish, wanted to invent an art of reasoning probabilities [Vernunftkunst des Wahrscheinlichen] would have had to possess the skill of

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<sup>5</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 234. Here, I have revised the translation of the last sentence.

<sup>6</sup>Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis*, 443. See quotation in note 2 above.

<sup>7</sup>Luigi Cataldi Madonna, "Wahrscheinlichkeit und wahrscheinliches Wissen in der Philosophie von Christian Wolff," *Studia Leibnitiana* 19/1 (1987): 8, identifies the 1709 review of Montmort's work and the 1714 review of Bernoulli's *Ars Conjectandi* as having been written by Wolff.

<sup>8</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 214.

<sup>9</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 240; Nicholas Bernoulli, "Specimina artis conjectandi ad quaestiones juris adplicatae," *Acta Eruditorum*, Supplementum, vol. 4 (1711), sec. 4: 159.

<sup>10</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 225, says: "Mendelssohn, dem die algebraische Demonstration des Bernoullischen Theorems in der 'Ars Conjectandi' sicherlich vertraut war, vermeidet es, auf sie einzugehen und gibt statt dessen eine logische Erklärung des von 's Gravesande mitgetheilten Verfahrens." If Mendelssohn had studied Bernoulli's proof of the weak law of large numbers, he might understandably have avoided getting into it in a talk to the club group, but he would surely have said something more nuanced about the relation of the proportions of black and white balls drawn from the urn in relation to the numbers inside at the start.

abstracting the universal from the particular rules that these great mathematicians have given us and then to uncover a greater number of particular rules, as it were, a priori.

I do not trust myself as having either the mathematical insight or the power of invention necessary to undertake this difficult work.<sup>11</sup>

In fact Christian Wolff also does not enter very far at all into the new probability mathematics of the likes of Bernoulli, Montmort, or De Moivre.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Mendelssohn knew about the new work on mathematical probability mainly from reviews and summaries. Even if he had read more works of mathematical probability (had read at least the copy of *Ars Conjectandi* that he owned at the time of his death), the mathematics Mendelssohn goes on to sketch is not the mathematics of probability as developed by Pascal, Fermat, Huygens, the Bernoullis, and De Moivre that is now considered standard. In particular, Mendelssohn pays no attention to anything related to the weak law of large numbers, which was the most important new mathematical result in Bernoulli's *Art of Conjecturing*. In contrast, Leibniz on occasion had bragged in letters that Jacob Bernoulli had pursued the (mathematics of) the art of conjecturing at his urging.<sup>13</sup>

To pursue the development of mathematical probability was not, however, Mendelssohn's goal, but only to apply the agreed upon basic mathematical measure of probability to raise some issues that his colleagues might enjoy thinking about. He thinks he can demonstrate two interesting conclusions on the basis of Christian Wolff's definition of probability:

In the course of investigating the grounds upon which these great [mathematical] minds base their calculations, I have come to some conclusions which can at least provide occasion for further reflection. My principal intention thereby is also to submit an example of the uncommon fruitfulness of the Wolffian definitions to those who doubt the advantages of a systematic mind. One will see in what follows that I have made use of his explanation of the probable and, by means of this explanation, have arrived at consequences to which neither Bernoulli's nor 's Gravesande's definition of probability would have led me as naturally.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 234.

<sup>12</sup>In abstracting for the *Zentralblatt Database* Cataldi Madonna, "Wahrscheinlichkeit und wahrscheinliches Wissen," Ivo Schneider writes, that "Wolff sehr wohl von den Ansätzen der Glücksspiel- und Wahrscheinlichkeitsrechnung seiner Zeit beeinflusst war, dass aber seine Versuche einer Analyse der umgangssprachlich und in der philosophischen Tradition vor allem von Leibniz benutzten Wahrscheinlichkeitsbegriffe mit Hilfe des Prinzips des unzureichenden Grundes schon an den einfachsten Aufgaben der Glücksspielrechnung scheiterten. Von daher erklärt sich das Fehlen jeder Wirkung von Wolff nicht nur auf die Entwicklung der mathematischen Wahrscheinlichkeitstheorie, sondern auch der induktiven Logik." As Cataldi Madonna, in the article in question, points out, Leibniz himself made errors in such basic matters as counting the numbers of different ways of throwing given sums with two dice (Cataldi Madonna, "Wahrscheinlichkeit und wahrscheinliches Wissen", 24–25).

<sup>13</sup>Jacob Bernoulli, introduction to *Art of Conjecturing*, 58–60.

<sup>14</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 235.

Mendelssohn quotes Wolff's definition of probability as saying:

If only some of the reasons for a proposition's truth are given to us and we infer from them a conclusion which is not completely determined by them, then the proposition belongs among the instances of probable knowledge, and we cannot be completely convinced of its correctness.<sup>15</sup>

Suppose, Wolff writes, that among the requirements for growth of a plant are a fertile seed, earth in which the seed is planted, open air, the warmth of the sun, rain, and dew. Then if we know that only some of these factors are present, it will be only probable that the seed will grow. As an example, Wolff says that since we know that there are earth and water (rain and dew) on the moon and also the warmth of the sun, but we do not know if there are seeds present, then the proposition that there are plants on the moon is only probable.<sup>16</sup> A proposition is *more probable* if more of the requisites for the predicate to inhere in the subject are granted.<sup>17</sup>

Why would Mendelssohn have found Wolff's definition of probability more fruitful than 's Gravesande's or Bernoulli's? All three authors give epistemic definitions of probability and say that the degrees of probability will depend upon the evidence in favor of a conclusion. In the *Art of Conjecturing*, Jacob Bernoulli defined probability as degree of certainty, differing from certainty as part differs from whole.<sup>18</sup> "Probabilities are assessed," he said, "according to the *number* together with the *weight* of the *arguments* that in any way prove or indicate that something is, will be, or has been."<sup>19</sup> By weight he means power of persuasion. Mendelssohn might have read these definitions in the copy of *The Art of Conjecturing* that he owned, but he also could have read them in Wolff's detailed review of the book published in the *Acta Eruditorum* in 1714.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, 's Gravesande describes degrees of probability between unknowing and nearly complete conviction.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 235. The Latin of Wolff's *Philosophia Rationalis*, section 578, states, "Si praedicatum subjecto tribuitur ob rationem insufficientem, *propositio dicitur probabilis*. Patet adeo, *in probabili propositione praedicatum subjecto tribui ob quaedam requisita ad veritatem*."

<sup>16</sup>Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis*, sections 573, 578.

<sup>17</sup>Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis*, section 579, "Probabilior igitur est propositio, si subjecto predicatum tribuitur ob plura requisita ad veritatem, quam si tribuitur ob pauciora."

<sup>18</sup>Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 315.

<sup>19</sup>Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 318.

<sup>20</sup>See Cataldi Madonna, "Wahrscheinlichkeit und wahrscheinliches Wissen," 8.

<sup>21</sup>Editors' notes to *JubA* 1:636–37. Wilhelm Jacob 's Gravesande, *Einleitung in die Weltweisheit* (1755), § 587, "Wenn wir eine Erkenntnis von den Dingen ausser uns erlangen sollen, so muss meistens verschiedenes zusammen kommen. Sind nun einige dieser Dinge da, indem andere fehlen, so werden wir nicht völlig überzeugt, dass unser Begriff mit der Sache überein komme, welche er vorstellen soll. Es gibt also verschiedene Stufen, durch welche wir endlich zu dieser Überzeugung gelangen; und es liegt uns ob, zu zeigen, wie diese bestimmen sind. Wir werden sie Grade der Wahrscheinlichkeit oder Probabilität nennen."



The term that Mendelssohn uses for the reasons or requisites for a conclusion is most often “Bewegungsgrund,” or more rarely “Bestimmungsgrund,” which Dahlstrom translates as “compelling reason,” and which I have emended to “motive.”<sup>22</sup> The motives influencing the mind to decide one way or another are seen as analogous to forces acting on a body in a balance pushing it up or down. Jacob Bernoulli, relying on cases in law courts, goes through the rhetorical topics in search of the various kinds of arguments and evidence that might lead one to decide that a person is guilty or not of a crime. One might combine testimony, motives, eye-witness reports, and various kinds of circumstantial evidence, including time, place, bloody weapons, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> He urges that as many relevant arguments as possible be weighed, but he does not imply that there is any way of knowing all relevant arguments.<sup>24</sup>

In one case that Mendelssohn mentions, the motives for accepting a given proposition as true are sometimes simply evidence that an alternative is not true: if we already know that one of four travelers has been killed while passing through a forest, then the survival of Caius, Sempronius, and Maevius (three of the four travelers) would be three pieces of added evidence leading to the conclusion that the person killed was Titius.<sup>25</sup>

While ‘s Gravesande and Bernoulli, as well as Wolff, consider the number and weight of the arguments or evidence for a given conclusion, there is some ambiguity whether one is dealing simply with arguments or also with reality, as in the case of Wolff’s example of the various factors necessary for the growth of plants.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, Wolff’s definition may put a greater emphasis on the ties between subject and predicate in a proposition to be known, in the sense of real-world causality, than do the definitions of ‘s Gravesande and Bernoulli. Moreover, Wolff differs from ‘s Gravesande and Bernoulli in assuming that one can speak of *all* the factors that would necessitate a conclusion.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps one or another of these factors are what made Mendelssohn find Wolff’s definition more congenial or useful.

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<sup>22</sup>For *Bestimmungsgrund*, see “On Evidence in the Metaphysical Sciences,” in Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 288, at the bottom of the page, where Dahlstrom translates “compelling reason.”

<sup>23</sup>See Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 318.

<sup>24</sup>Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 319. He lists as a rule of reasoning “It is not sufficient to weigh one or another argument. Instead we must bring together all arguments that we can come to know and that seem in any way to work toward a proof of the thing.” In urging that more arguments be used, Bernoulli is acknowledging that there is no obvious set of all the relevant arguments.

<sup>25</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 236. Titius, Caius, Sempronius, and Maevius are all names very typically used in examples about law cases.

<sup>26</sup>Wolff’s definition of probability as cited by Mendelssohn is only the first part of Wolff’s treatment of the logic of probability. In a later section (Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis*, section 595), Wolff says that special principles are needed for estimating probability, principles which depend upon ontology and philosophy, and he goes on to discuss how principles of a scientific demonstration might be gained from experience *a posteriori*.

<sup>27</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 221, 239, and elsewhere, refers to Mendelssohn’s use of “Wolff’s Begriff des zureichenden Grundes.” Whether or not sufficient (or conclusive?) grounds are enough to support Mendelssohn’s argument that in the case of God the denominator of the probability fraction will be infinite is still unclear to me. If so, then my discussion, which was written before I saw Altmann’s *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, might be reframed to use this terminology.

In any case, Mendelssohn adopts a concept of probability that depends upon the ratio of the known evidence or arguments in favor of a conclusion to all the evidence that would lead to certainty about that conclusion. Beyond a basic definition of probability with its expression as a ratio, Mendelssohn does not pay attention to the mathematical details of the works on probability by Huygens, Bernoulli, Montmort, or De Moivre, but is much more interested in the philosophical and epistemological treatment of probability to be found in the various works of Wolff.

Mendelssohn lists the conclusions he reaches in his work on probability in the introduction to his *Philosophical Writings*:

In the case of the fourth essay, “On Probability,” I find it necessary to remind readers that my intention has in no way been to elaborate a theory of probability but instead to take the opportunity to shed some light on two important truths on the basis of a few well-known principles of probability. My intention was namely, (1) to defend the correctness of all our experimental inferences against the objections of the English philosopher, David Hume, and (2) to prove the Leibnizian proposition that all voluntary decisions already have their definite certainty in advance.<sup>28</sup>

Besides arguing against Hume’s scepticism, then, Mendelssohn’s aim in his essay on probability was to show that, unless the world is determined, not only could God not have exact knowledge of the future, God could not have even probable knowledge of the future. Since Mendelssohn regards it as implausible that God does not have even probable knowledge of the future, he concludes that the future must be predetermined, including willful decisions:

If, then, one does not want to deny the Supreme Being even a capacity to foresee with probability all our free decisions, then one must allow the free actions a predetermined certainty, on the basis of which they can be identified and known in advance.<sup>29</sup>

## 1 The Nature of Mendelssohn’s Arguments in “On Probability”

### 1.1 The Argument Against Hume’s Scepticism

In this section, I trace Mendelssohn’s use of mathematics to argue for his two conclusions. In the case of Mendelssohn’s arguments against Hume’s scepticism, he is handicapped by his ignorance or neglect of Bernoulli’s proof of the weak law of large numbers or of De Moivre’s improvement upon it. The question is whether one

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<sup>28</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 4.

<sup>29</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 249–50. This passage was not in the 1756 edition, but a similar statement was there: “Es ist also klar, dass man entweder Gott sogar die wahrscheinliche Präscience in Ansehung unsrer freyen Handlungen absprechen, oder den freyen Handlungen eine determinirte Wahrheite zuschreiben muss, dadurch sie vorher gewusst werden können” *JubA* 1:164.

can conclude that there is some sort of causal connection between two events if they have been observed together in many, many cases. In introducing his proof of the weak law of large numbers, Bernoulli had written:

What cannot be ascertained a priori, may at least be found a posteriori from the results many times observed in similar situations, since it should be presumed that something can happen or not happen in the future in as many cases as it was observed to happen or not to happen in similar circumstances in the past . . . This empirical way of determining the number of cases by experiments is neither new nor uncommon . . . Neither should it escape anyone that to judge in this way concerning some future event it would not suffice to take one or another experiment, but a great abundance of experiments would be required, given that even the most foolish person, by some instinct of nature, alone and with no previous instruction (which is truly astonishing), has discovered that the more observations of this sort are made, the less danger there will be of error. But although this is naturally known to everyone, the demonstration by which it can be inferred from the principles of the art [of conjecturing] is hardly known at all, and, accordingly, it is incumbent upon us to expound it here . . . It remains . . . to ask whether, as the number of observations increases, so the probability increases of obtaining the true ratio between the numbers of cases in which some event can happen and not happen, such that this probability may eventually exceed any given degree of certainty.<sup>30</sup>

Bernoulli's proof of the weak law of large numbers demonstrates that there is no limit to the degree of certainty that may be obtained. On the other hand, his proof also spells out the relation between (1) the tightness of the interval within which one would want to know the ratio to be determined; (2) the level of probability or certainty one wants to have; and (3) the number of observations that must be made to assure this level of certainty. (Of course, he begins by assuming that there is a determinate, although unknown, ratio of possible outcomes.)

In contrast to Bernoulli's mathematics, Mendelssohn relies on the support of a discussion by 's Gravesande, where 's Gravesande attempts to deal with the classical case, also used by Bernoulli, of drawing black and white marbles out of an urn (literally, "bowl," but obviously one cannot see the inner contents), where one does not know at the start the numbers of black and white marbles available to be drawn. This involves a so-called "double probability," not only whether a black or white marble will be drawn out, but also what the ratio of the numbers of marbles of the two types within the urn is. As quoted by Mendelssohn, 's Gravesande writes:

We can discover the relation of the one to the others which we seek [e.g. the ratio of black to white marbles], if previously one or several of these marbles have been removed. For the number of all marbles which have been thus removed from the bowl is in proportion to the number of black marbles among them as certainty is to the probability that is being sought. This manner of calculating probability is in fact subject to some small mistakes. But if the number of the marbles which have been taken from the bowl is quite large, then the mistakes in the application should not be considered.<sup>31</sup>

Mendelssohn supports 's Gravesande's argument in the following way:

Just as it is probable that so-and-so will happen when the fewest reasons for it are lacking, so it is probable that so-and-so has happened when the most reasons for it are given.

<sup>30</sup> Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 327–28.

<sup>31</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 238.

If, therefore, one has removed a certain number of marbles, then it is to be supposed that everything ensues according to the proportion of probability and that for which one had the most reasons takes place. It is, therefore, probable that the number of black marbles among those coming out is relative to the number of white ones as the probability that only black ones will come out is to the probability that only white ones will (just as, namely, one had supposed before taking them out) or, as is to be seen from the attached calculation, as the number of all black marbles which are in the bowl is to the number of all white ones in it. The greater the number of marbles removed, the more probable it is that the alleged proportion is correct. For the more marbles that are removed, the more frequently the outcome would have to have been contrary to the probability, if the deviation from the proportion is supposed to constitute a noticeable difference . . . By this means, then, 's Gravesande's proposition is confirmed.<sup>32</sup>

The mathematical probabilists after Bernoulli would not have accepted Mendelssohn's reasoning as valid and in fact when black and white marbles are drawn from an urn, the proportion between white and black already drawn out very frequently diverges more or less from the original ratio of white to black. It is not very helpful to say that if nearly all the marbles are drawn out, the ratio of white to black will approach the original ratio within the urn.

Although Mendelssohn ends his quotation of 's Gravesande at this point, in fact's Gravesande continues making an apparent reference to at least the qualitative features of the law of large numbers, as found in Jacob Bernoulli, De Moivre, and elsewhere:

Car on a démontré mathématiquement, qu'en augmentant le nombre des observations, le danger de se tromper devenoit petit, au point de s'évanouir presque à la fin.

On peut employer avec succès cette méthode, pour déterminer la Probabilité de la vie des Hommes; & avec le secours d'une table, formée sur un grand nombre d'observations, on peut résoudre un grand nombre de questions utiles.

Cette méthode de déterminer la Probabilité, par le moyen d'un certain nombre d'observations, a passé en usage. Mais, comme la plupart des cas ne sont pas marqués exactement, & que les Hommes négligent souvent de considérer distinctement les évènements, qui n'ont pas une relation particulière avec eux, ils déterminent la Probabilité par une estimation grossière: & on appelle prudents ceux, qui, en faisant attention à ce qui doit entrer dans le calcul, s'écartent moins de la vérité que les autres dans des estimations de ce genre.

Et qu'on ne s'étonne pas, que nous rapportions à une proportion déterminée, non seulement les choses qui dépendent d'une cause régulière, mais même celles qui sont entièrement contingentes: car rien n'est irrégulier, ou fortuit, si l'on considère les choses mêmes. Nous appellons irrégulier, ce dont nous n'apercevons pas la régularité, à cause du concours de plusieurs causes différentes, & nous donnons le nom de fortuit, à ce dont nous n'apercevons pas la liaison de dépendance, avec une cause déterminée, quoique cette liaison soit très réelle.

Il arrive très souvent, que la régularité, laquelle, en considérant un petit nombre d'effets, nous échappoit, se déveloit à nos yeux, en augmentant le nombre d'effets que nous faisons entrer dans l'examen.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 239.

<sup>33</sup>'s Gravesande, *Einleitung in die Weltweisheit*, 86–87, §§ 611–12; §§ 616–18.

Just before the passages I have been citing, 's Gravesande stated his definitions, emphasizing that probability has to do with our knowledge of the world, not with the world itself:

Tout ce qui peut contribuer à former une preuve, mais qui seul n'en forme pourtant pas une, fournit un certain degré de Probabilité . . . La Probabilité ne regarde pas les choses mêmes, mais la connoissance que nous en avons; & qu'on peut la considérer comme une quantité, qui va en croissant, depuis le plus petit degré de connoissance, jusque à la persuasion entière. C'est pour cette raison, que nous concevons la Certitude comme un tout, divisible en autant de parties qu'on voudra; & que, pour déterminer la Probabilité, nous devons assigner la raison, qu'il y a entre ce tout, & la partie, qui exprime ce qui nous est connu.<sup>34</sup>

Mendelssohn must have read quite extensively in the work of 's Gravesande, as well as in the work of Wolff. But 's Gravesande's attempt to use the urn model did not appear very successful. Concluding that this approach is weak, Mendelssohn sets it aside to try another. Mendelssohn writes:

Since, however, the probability of the minor premise is very difficult to calculate, [s Gravesande] preferred to avoid looking at the mistakes in the application which would be very small if the number of marbles removed from the bowl is quite large.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, Mendelssohn does not want to follow 's Gravesande in his attempt to prove on the basis of the will of God that there are universal laws of nature.<sup>36</sup> This approach will not be effective against atheists, he argues, so it is better to look for arguments that will be more widely convincing.<sup>37</sup> Here Mendelssohn introduces a formula for probability in cases in which – unlike the case of games of chance – the underlying ratios of possibilities are not known. This is a formula that bears some relation to formulas found in Bayesian approaches, although Thomas Bayes' work had not been published at this time.<sup>38</sup>

Basically, Mendelssohn argues that if two events happen together one time we have no more reason to think that they are causally related than that their concurrence is a coincidence. So the probability that they are causally related is 1:2 or 1/2. But if the two events happen together a second time, then the probability that they are causally related will be 2:3 or 2/3. After beginning from a ratio of 1–2, then, for each further observation, Mendelssohn assumes that 1 should be added to the numerator and 1 to the denominator, so that in general the probability that two events that have been observed together  $n$  times are causally related will be as  $n/(n + 1)$ . As  $n$  becomes larger and larger, the probability will approach 1 or certainty.

<sup>34</sup>'s Gravesande, *Einleitung in die Weltweisheit*, 83–84, §§ 589–91.

<sup>35</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 240.

<sup>36</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 242.

<sup>37</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 242.

<sup>38</sup>See Hans Lausch, "Moses Mendelssohn: 'Wir müssen uns auf Wahrscheinlichkeiten stützen,'" *Acta historica Leopoldina* 27 (1997): 201–13; and Lausch, "'The Ignorant Hold Back their Judgment and Await the Conclusions of the Knowing': Moses Mendelssohn and Other Mathematicians," *Aleph* 2 (2002): 107–9. Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 235, also mentions the relation of Mendelssohn's formula to that of Thomas Bayes.

Here there is little about Mendelssohn's mathematics that is found in works like those of Bernoulli and De Moivre, neither the initial probability ratio, nor the way in which it increases with repeated observations. The one part of his argument that agrees with classical probability is that the probability that two events are causally connected added to the probability that their concomitance is an accident will equal 1 or certainty. Thus, if the probability that events that have been observed together  $n$  times because of a causal connection is  $n/(n+1)$ , then the probability that they have been observed together purely by accident is  $1/(n+1)$ , where  $n/(n+1) + 1/(n+1) = (n+1)/(n+1) = 1$ , and vice versa.<sup>39</sup> Slightly later in his paper, Mendelssohn wrote:

In [the standard] case [previously described], the ratio of probability to certainty was the proportion of a finite magnitude to a finite magnitude. There the probability for and against a matter, taken together, was always equal to certainty and this was a finite magnitude. The hopes of two players, taken together are equal to the bet, just as  $n/(n+1) + 1/(n+1) = 1$ .<sup>40</sup>

In the introduction to his *Doctrine of Chances* (1718), De Moivre similarly wrote:

The Probability of an Event is greater, or less, according to the number of chances by which it may Happen, compar'd with the number of all the chances, by which it may either Happen or Fail.

Thus, If an Event has 3 Chances to Happen, and 2 to Fail; the Probability of its Happening may be estimated to be 3/5, and the Probability of its Failing 2/5.

Therefore, if the Probability of Happening and Failing are added together, the Sum will always be equal to Unity.<sup>41</sup>

Mendelssohn's final assessment of his argument against Hume is that we can trust our experimental inferences taken from many observations:

In general, since we saw that the probability =  $n/(n+1)$ , but that this formula cannot be = 1 unless  $n$  is infinitely large, then the probability also cannot become certainty through the amount of throws unless the number of them is infinite. But this does not prevent probability from having a definite proportion to certainty in each particular case.

Our experimental inferences thus have a secure foundation on which they rest. Through frequently repeated experiences and through the credible witness of others who have had these same experiences, we come closer and closer to mathematical evidence although it is certain that we can never arrive at this evidence itself by means of experience.<sup>42</sup>

Of course knowing that there is a causal connection does not allow the experimenter to be sure what is a cause and what is an effect, or if both phenomena observed are the result of another remote or proximate cause. If one were an occasionalist, everything observed might be the direct result of God's actions. Nevertheless,

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 246.

<sup>40</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 249.

<sup>41</sup>Abraham De Moivre, *Doctrine of Chances* (1718), 1, quoted in Sylla "Introduction", in *Art of Conjecturing* by Bernouilli, 112.

<sup>42</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 245.

Mendelssohn believes he has shown that it can be determined with a high degree of confidence that there is some sort of causal connection.

Did Mendelssohn's use of ratios expressing mathematical probability here add to the power of his argument? Not very much, for two reasons. First of all, he has not considered the mathematical arguments connected to Bernoulli's weak law of large numbers in order to quantify how our confidence in the results of repeated experiments is related to the number of observations made. And second, he seems to pull his formula that the probability is  $n/(n+1)$  out of the air. I have suggested that he begins from the probability of one half after one observation, simply because he is assuming that a causal connection is equally likely and not likely. Thus he says about a person who has observed that he felt dizzy after drinking coffee one time:

The first time this happens to him, he will not even be able to make this probable inference. There could just as well have been some completely different cause from which this dizziness arose and which by mere chance manifested its effect precisely when he drank coffee.<sup>43</sup>

On what basis should one start from a probability of one half that the coffee caused the dizziness rather than starting from some other probability? And when the experience is repeated a second time, why add 1 to the numerator and denominator to get a probable relationship of two thirds? Mendelssohn presents his argument here as purely rational, philosophical, or common sense, but he thought, in fact, that a large part of Judaism is rational, revealed law presupposing a religion of reason.<sup>44</sup> One could find in the Talmud a basis for his intuition that in cases like this, one should suppose a probability of one to one. So in *Kethuboth 15a*, the following question is raised: suppose there are nine shops in which ritually slaughtered meat is sold and one shop in which the meat sold is not ritually slaughtered. And suppose a man bought meat in one of the shops, but does not know which one. Then the text rules that, since the shops are fixed or stationary, and one considers only what to decide about the one shop that was entered (setting aside consideration of the other nine), then the chances that the meat is ritually slaughtered are even or one-to-one and it should be considered prohibited.<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere the Talmud says that if something happens once, it may be a mere coincidence, but if it happens twice, it should be considered significant.<sup>46</sup> If Mendelssohn was conscious that his assumption of a starting point of even probability was similar to cases in the Talmud, he may have presumed that here the Jewish law and common sense are in accord.

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<sup>43</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 243.

<sup>44</sup>See Reinier Munk, "Moses Mendelssohn's Conception of Judaism," in *Studies in Hebrew Language and Jewish Culture*, eds. Martin F. J. Baasten and Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

<sup>45</sup>Nachum L. Rabinovitch, "Studies in the History of Probability and Statistics XXII. Probability in the Talmud," *Biometrika* 56/2 (1969): 438. In a slightly different case, if the meat were found in the street without reference to entering a particular store, then the chances would be 9 to 1 that it was ritually slaughtered.

<sup>46</sup>Rabinovitch, "Probability in the Talmud," 440. Most likely this means it has a probability greater than half.



## 1.2 *The Argument for Determinism*

With regard to the argument that unless the future is determined, God could not have even probable knowledge of the future, again there are some discrepancies between what Mendelssohn argues and what the mathematical probabilists like Bernoulli were doing. Mendelssohn recognizes that the mathematical probabilists such as Bernoulli never suppose that God has probable knowledge. God has certain knowledge of the future, they would suppose, whereas probability only applies to humans who do not have such exact knowledge. Mendelssohn writes:

Up until now we have spoken of a probable knowledge which takes place only in regard to our limited intellect. Along with Bernoulli, 's Gravesande, Wolff, and others, we have pre-supposed a determinate truth about the matter itself. Hence, an infinite intellect, from whom no reasons for its truth could be hidden, will have the most certain knowledge of all possible things, and, as far as this intellect is concerned, there is no probability.<sup>47</sup>

Mendelssohn is not arguing against Bernoulli or the majority of thinkers at this time, however, but against a “libertarian” who asserts that human free will is an exception to determinism and consequently that even God cannot know the future exactly, given that the future is not completely determined.<sup>48</sup>

Among the rare early modern libertarians, there were Molinists among the Catholics and Arminians among the Protestants.<sup>49</sup> While nearly all major early modern philosophers believed both in determinism (including God’s knowledge of the future) and in human free will, and they argued that determinism and free will are compatible, the libertarian followers of Luis Molina and Jacob Arminius believed that for humans to have truly free will they must somehow escape from determinism.<sup>50</sup> Molina, for instance, wrote:

That agent is said to be free, who, all the requisites for acting having been posited, can act or not act, or so perform one action that he is still able to do the contrary.<sup>51</sup>

In criticizing Molina’s view, Leibniz wrote:

This notion of freedom – that is the power of acting or not acting, all the requisites for acting having been posited, and all things being equal both in the object and in the agent, is an impossible chimera, which is contrary to the first principle that I stated.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 247.

<sup>48</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 243, states that in this case Mendelssohn is supporting Leibniz’s determinism, and so he looks for opponents of Leibniz that might be Mendelssohn’s target here, mentioning Crusius, Formey, Merian, and Prémontval. I have not looked for contemporaries of Mendelssohn who might have held the views that Mendelssohn opposes.

<sup>49</sup>Robert Sleight, Jr., Vere Chappell, and Michael Della Rocca, “Determinism and Human Freedom” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1196.

<sup>50</sup>Sleight, “Determinism and Human Freedom,” 1195–96.

<sup>51</sup>Sleight, “Determinism and Human Freedom,” 1258.

<sup>52</sup>Sleight, “Determinism and Human Freedom,” 1258. The quotation comes from Leibniz’s *Conversatio cum Domino Stenonio de libertate* (1677).



Here the principle that Leibniz stated is the principle of sufficient reason, which he holds to be inconsistent with the “indifference of equipoise.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus, in assuming that his listeners or readers would support both determinism (together with God’s foreknowledge) and free will, Mendelssohn was not going out on a limb, since it was very standard to take this “compatibilist” stand, however difficult it might be to argue that the two positions are consistent. Mendelssohn and most or all of his listeners would have agreed on this with Leibniz and Jacob Bernoulli. In the opening sections of Part 6 of *The Art of Conjecturing* Jacob Bernoulli began by taking determinism for granted:

In themselves and objectively, all things under the sun, which are, were, or will be, always have the highest certainty. This is evident concerning past and present things, since, by the very fact that they are or were, these things cannot not exist or not have existed. Nor should there be any doubt about future things, which in like manner, even if not by the necessity of some inevitable fate, nevertheless by divine foreknowledge and predetermination, cannot not be in the future. Unless, indeed, whatever will be will occur with certainty, it is not apparent how the praise of the highest Creator’s omniscience and omnipotence can prevail. Others may dispute how this certainty of future occurrences may coexist with the contingency and freedom of secondary causes; we do not wish to deal with matters extraneous to our goal.<sup>54</sup>

Here Bernoulli brushed aside the controverted issue of how God’s omniscience and human free will could be reconciled, but he assumed that they could be. Bernoulli was a trained Protestant theologian in the tradition of Ulrich Zwingli, but in writing a work applying the mathematics of games and the theory of combinations and permutations to civil, moral, and economic questions, he decided to avoid theological arguments. In contrast, Mendelssohn attempted to apply some of the well-known truths of the new mathematics of probability to reach philosophico-theological conclusions that could be supposed to be universally acceptable among the enlightened beyond the constraints of sect or creed, while at the same time providing occasion for further reflection. What was new and potentially intriguing in Mendelssohn’s argument was that, if all things are not determined, not only could God not have exact knowledge of the future, God could not even have probable future knowledge. And the foundation of his argument was the hypothesis that probability is measured by the proportion of the available arguments in favor of a conclusion to all the arguments both for and against the conclusion, or, alternately, all the arguments that would determine that a given conclusion is true (in this case, the conclusion that a person with free will decides upon a given course of action).

If Mendelssohn was arguing *ad hominem* that a libertarian would not even be able to preserve God’s probable knowledge of the future if the future is not determined, what would be the relevant mathematical formula for God’s putative probable knowledge of the future in a world in which human choices are supposed to be

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<sup>53</sup> Sleight, “Determinism and Human Freedom,” 1259.

<sup>54</sup> Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 315.

an exception to determinism? Mendelssohn's basic formula, which he takes to be common to the mathematicians is:

The probability of a given outcome stands in the same relation to its certainty as the relation of the number of given reasons for its truth to all reasons for its truth taken together.

Now in the case at hand, the number of all the reasons for its truth= $a$ , the number of given reasons for its truth= $b$ .

Thus the probability= $b:a$ .<sup>55</sup>

In his argument against a libertarian view, then, Mendelssohn claims that for the libertarian no group of stated motives for an action is sufficient to force the action of a person with free will, or in other words that  $a$  for them is infinite. But this means that however large  $b$  may be,  $b/a$  will be zero.

Here, then, Mendelssohn comes to his argument about God's knowledge. Experience tells us, Mendelssohn says, that we sometimes have motivating reasons for our actions, but the defenders of free will would say that such motivating reasons do not completely determine our actions, leaving room for freedom.<sup>56</sup> Here Mendelssohn comes to the chief conclusion of his essay toward which the paper has been heading:

If philosophers regard the certain prescience of such things that depend on freedom as utterly impossible, then I maintain that the highest being cannot have even probable knowledge in regard to our future actions. For if God had a probable prescience of our future free actions, then the degree of this probability must have been determined since a quantity cannot be present anywhere without a definite degree if it, as in our case, is supposed to be finite.

If the degree of divine probability is to be definite, then the proportion between the conditions known to him and certainty must be given since, as we have seen above, the degree of probability is to be determined on the basis of this proportion . . .

Now the circumstances in which the free entity finds itself and all the motives and impulses derived from them do not suffice, in the opinion of these philosophers, to establish with certainty which choice the free entity will make. Thus, the degree of probability cannot be determined from the proportion of the positive motives to the positive and negative ones together. On the other hand, these motives still contain some reason why the free entity will determine itself in one way rather than another.<sup>57</sup>

Here, Mendelssohn comes to a mathematics of infinities that would be applicable to God's probable knowledge:

Thus, the more positive or the more negative motives influence our will, the greater is the probability that we will do something or leave something undone. If, accordingly, it were possible that infinitely many motives could influence our will to the best course of action, then they would constitute an infinitely large degree of probability or a certainty since, in

<sup>55</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 238.

<sup>56</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 248. Mendelssohn, *JubA* 1:163. As usual I have modified Dahlstrom's translation of "Bewegungsgründe."

<sup>57</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 248–49. I have changed Dahlstrom's translation of "Bewegungsgründe" from "compelling reasons" to "motives," to avoid the possible misinterpretation that these rational grounds for a conclusion compel assent.

the opinion of these philosophers, the maximum in regard to our free actions is to be sought nowhere else but in infinity. Since only a finite number of motives influences us in each particular case, the probability of divine prescience in each particular case is in proportion to its certainty, as the finite power of the motives which occasion our choice is to an infinite number of them; in other words, the degree of divine prescience = 0.<sup>58</sup>

Here, then, the force of Mendelssohn's argument comes from the possibility that an infinite number of motives would be required to affect a person with free will to compel him to act. He thinks we know on the basis of personal experience that we are sometimes influenced by various motivations to act or not act or even that we are sometimes morally certain.<sup>59</sup> If a finite collection of motives is not to shut off all possibility of a free-will decision, as the libertarians claim, then the denominator of the proportion, representing all the possible motives must be infinite. But then God's possibility of probable knowledge of what we will do would be measured by the proportion of something finite to something infinite, leading to a zero result.

Here Mendelssohn's assumption about God's probable knowledge bears some similarities to an argument made by Bernoulli. The point is that anything quantitative must be exact or determinate. Bernoulli had said that everything that God has done is, *ipso facto*, determinate:

Let me remove a few objections that certain learned men [i.e., Leibniz] have raised. They object first that the ratio of tokens is different from the ratio of diseases or changes in the air: the former have a determinate number, the latter an indeterminate and varying one. I reply to this that both are posited to be equally uncertain and indeterminate with respect to our knowledge. On the other hand, that either is indeterminate in itself and with respect to its nature can no more be conceived by us than it can be conceived that the same thing at the same time is both created and not created by the Author of nature: for whatever God has done, God has, by that very deed, also determined at the same time.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Mendelssohn writes:

For if God had a probable prescience of our future free actions, then the degree of this probability must have been determined since a quantity cannot be present anywhere without a definite degree if it, as in our case, is supposed to be finite. If the degree of divine probability is to be definite, then the proportion between the conditions known to him and certainty must be given since, as we have seen above, the degree of probability is to be determined on the basis of this proportion.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 249. This may be the point at which the original reader of Mendelssohn's essay pronounced zero as "oh," leading to Mendelssohn's spontaneous correction, revealing his authorship. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 76.

<sup>59</sup>The 1756 version of "On Probability" ends with the paragraph-long sentence (replaced by something else in the 1771 edition and possibly also in the 1761 edition, which I have not seen): "Da nun vermöge eben dieser Schlüsse erhellet, dass gar keine moralische Wahrscheinlichkeit vorhanden seyn könnte, wenn unser Will nicht zureichend durch die Bewegungsgründe determiniret werden sollte, weil sich der Grad der Wahrscheinlichkeit zur Gewissheit verhalten würde, wie eine endliche, zu einer unendlichen Grösse, so gebe ich denen Weltweisen, die der gleichgültigen Freyheit zugethan sind, zu bedenken, ob sie auch diese Folge annehmen können, ohne gewissermassen der Erfahrung zu widersprechen?" *JubA* 1:164.

<sup>60</sup>Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 329.

<sup>61</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 248.

Mendelssohn's point is that if God is supposed to have probable knowledge of future actions resulting from free will choices, then God will know the exact numbers and force of arguments for and against taking given actions. But the total of all such arguments in a given case where free will might apply is infinite – or at least that is what Mendelssohn claims that the holders of this view (i.e., the libertarians) maintain. There is no ratio of a finite value to an infinite one, so God will not have even probable knowledge. Alternately, the argument can be stated as follows: since the libertarians say there is an equilibrium of indifference (*aequilibrium indifferentiae*), the proportion of the known motives to all the motives cannot have a finite value. The only way this could happen is for the second term of the proportion to be infinite.

Is Mendelssohn's argument for this conclusion persuasive and does it depend on the mathematical preliminaries earlier in his paper? In a certain sense, it does seem to depend on Wolff's definition of probability, where the denominator of the probability fraction would be all the factors needed to necessitate a conclusion one way or the other, while in Bernoulli's definition one may not know what "all" the factors would be, and one may compare probabilities without knowing an absolute probability.

Of course, the whole "libertarian" scenario goes against what Mendelssohn and Bernoulli both assume, namely that God knows everything, even the future. Does it make sense to allow the libertarians the hypothesis that God may not know the future because the future is, as yet, undetermined? Perhaps what might be said is that even if against one's inclinations one allowed the libertarians their hypothesis, what Mendelssohn shows is that according to the basic Wolffian definition of probability, the libertarians' position is inconsistent. Given their assumptions, God will not have even probable knowledge of the future, which presumably they would not want to accept.

Although Mendelssohn's essay on probability depends more heavily on Christian Wolff's work on logic than on any direct familiarity with recent works on mathematical probability, such as Jacob Bernoulli's *Art of Conjecturing*, both Wolff and Bernoulli treat probability or the art of conjecturing as part of applied or practical philosophy, not theoretical science. Bernoulli's *Art of Conjecturing* contained several practical maxims, reported by Wolff in his 1714 review, concerning decision making under conditions of uncertainty, such as:

1. There is no place for conjectures in matters in which one may reach complete certainty  
...
5. In matters that are uncertain and open to doubt, we should suspend our actions until we learn more. But if the occasion for action brooks no delay, then between two actions we should always choose the one that seems more appropriate, safer, more carefully considered or more probable, even if neither action is such in a positive sense.<sup>62</sup>

As Mendelssohn said at the beginning of his essay, he was not intending to develop a theory of probability, but only to apply some of the more fundamental recent results to attempt to make philosophical points. Just as he wanted to show the

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<sup>62</sup>Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 318–20.

virtues of Christian Wolff's philosophy, Mendelssohn wanted to use generally agreed upon fundamentals of mathematical probability to make progress on philosophical issues. Given that he revised and reprinted his work on probability several times, it is clear that Mendelssohn considered that he had achieved his goal to a significant degree, even though the work was first written with the sort of spirit that one might expect of a paper to be read to a learned coffee house.

Mendelssohn intended that his work on probability be objective and not tied to any particular school or religious belief. Like the Catholics, Calvinists, and followers of Zwingli, he here accepts the idea of God's foreknowledge of future events. Like Jacob Bernoulli, he believed that probable reasoning is central to human concerns, because we can rarely have certainty concerning human and ethical questions. Would he have considered that his "On Probability" contained helpful advice for behavior?

Mendelssohn's prize essay "On Evidence" provides some clues to the answers to such questions, and the revised version of Mendelssohn's essay on probability shows related afterthoughts. In this prize essay, Mendelssohn wrote:

But there is a problem. Is the principle of sufficient reason universal, and does it suffer no exception in regard to the freely willed decisions of rational beings? . . . If . . . a rational being should make a decision for something and . . . make the decision voluntarily, then it must be possible, since a decision is made, for an infinite intellect, by understanding the inner state of the person making the choice, to indicate why that person decided in one way rather than another. – But do our freely willed decisions themselves then have a future certainty [zukünftige Gewissheit]? – Of course, and this is not to be denied. For if they did not *objectively* have their certainty established, then all probability in regard to them would vanish. If there did not lie in the soul of a virtuous person the established certainty that he will not maliciously betray his fatherland, then there would also not be a basis for inferring the like with any probability from his character. What is *subjectively* probable, must have its established certainty *objectively*. Since a variety of things may reasonably be supposed about the character of a human being, our freely willed decisions must have their predetermined certainty [vorher bestimmte Gewissheit]. Consider these three propositions: first, "a stone that is not supported falls to the ground"; second, "I feel what makes an impression on my sense organs"; third, "I will not betray my friend as long as I remain in command of my senses." These three propositions, I say, are full of indisputable certainty since the predicate may be deduced and confidently inferred from the subject under certain conditions. But this confidence itself has a varied nature. For what makes the predicate necessary is either a part of the conditions of the subject, including a living knowledge of good and evil, or it is not. The former is called "moral necessity," the latter "physical necessity." "A stone in the open air falls to the ground" and "a sensation follows an external impression on the sense organs" are propositions that can be proven without presupposing in the subject one kind of knowledge of good and evil or another. Hence, these propositions are physically certain. The proposition, however, "I would not betray my friend" presupposes among the conditions of the subject especially this, that in accord with my pragmatic knowledge of good and evil, I must find it good not to betray my friend, and, hence, this proposition contains a moral certainty or necessity. A self-determination that can be explained by the knowledge of good and evil is *voluntary*, and, if this knowledge is distinct, it is a *freely-willed decision*.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 285–86. The German comes from Moses Mendelssohn, *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften*, neue Auflage (Berlin, 1786), 87.

In the version of Mendelssohn's essay on probability that was published in 1756, and presumably in the version that was read in the scholars' coffee house, Mendelssohn based his *ad hominem* argument against the libertarians on the conditions that would be necessary for God to have probable knowledge about the future, including the actions of individuals with free will. Sometime after 1756, Mendelssohn wrote a new ending to his essay on probability, which included not only God's knowledge of the future, but also our own knowledge of what our friends may do:

Yet why do I elevate myself to the level of divine properties? Common, daily experience places in our hands reasons on the basis of which this proposition can be presented irrefutably. If it is true that one can make a probable inference on the basis of a person's character and what is known about his way of thinking to what he does and does not do, then all voluntary decisions have a predetermined certainty. For what objectively has no definite certainty, can in no way be known. Could Cassius, for example, not be morally certain that his co-conspirator Brutus would not betray him? Unquestionably, since who would fear a vile action coming from a Brutus? We would suppose that Cassius would have been in a position to lay out separately and distinctly all the circumstances which provide Brutus with the motivation to keep the conspiracy a secret as well as those circumstances which could seduce him to betray it. Let us call the former circumstances *a*, the latter *b*. According to the theory of probability outlined above, the proportion of Cassius' moral certainty to mathematical evidence =  $a : a + b$ . For if someone would bet with him that Brutus would betray him, then Cassius' hope =  $a$ , his opponent's =  $b$ , and, thus, the proportion of Cassius' probability to his certainty =  $a : a + b$ , but that of his opponent =  $b : a + b$ . One sees from this that the positive and negative reasons or conditions, taken together, must always constitute certainty. Otherwise the proportion of the given reasons for its truth to all of them taken together, that is to say, the quantity of probability, cannot be determined at all.

I believe, therefore, that I have shown, on the basis of divine properties as well as on the basis of ordinary experience, that each willful decision must have its definite certainty in advance. From this it follows that the soul cannot choose otherwise than according to motives and impulses since the predetermined certainty of future decisions depends upon them. The kind of harmful consequences in regard to freedom and responsibility that trouble people because of this doctrine are mere chimera, the essence of which is due simply and solely to indistinct concepts of freedom.<sup>64</sup>

In Mendelssohn's original conception of the matter, the certainty of God's knowledge was special to God. In his revision, Mendelssohn extends his argument to human probable knowledge about the behavior of other people. Suppose that Cassius had probable knowledge that Brutus would not betray their conspiracy. Then presumably Cassius would have "been in a position to lay out separately and distinctly all the circumstances which provide Brutus with the motivation to keep the conspiracy a secret as well as those circumstances which could seduce him to betray it."<sup>65</sup> This conclusion follows, apparently, from the definition of probable knowledge in terms of a proportion of circumstances or motives. So even if the proportion

<sup>64</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 250. Cf. Leibniz's claim that Molina's argument involved a chimera.

<sup>65</sup> *JubA* 1:515: "Wir wollen setzen, Cassius wäre im Stande gewesen, alle Umstände deutlich auseinander zu setzen . . ."

of the known evidence to all the possible reasons provides only probable knowledge about what another person will do, the person with probable knowledge must know exactly the value of the denominator of the fraction expressing that probable knowledge. But would Cassius really have been able to list these circumstances so separately and distinctly? Surely the answer is that he would not. So while it might follow that for Cassius to have probable knowledge of Brutus' behavior according to the given definition, it must be the case that that behavior is determined, one could respond that, if this is so, then Cassius cannot have probable knowledge of Brutus' future behavior.

Alexander Altmann writes that this revision in Mendelssohn's essay resulted from objections that Franz Aepinus, a member of the scholars' coffee house, made at the time of Mendelssohn's talk.<sup>66</sup> Mendelssohn apparently sent a copy of Aepinus's objections and his own response to Baumgarten and to Lessing asking them to take a position, but Lessing returned the documents saying he didn't really understand either one.<sup>67</sup> From what Altmann reports, Aepinus, an upholder of the *aequilibrium indifferentiae*, might have been the sort of philosopher against whom Mendelssohn was arguing in the first place, except that, as far as I know, Aepinus was not active in this area before his controversy with Mendelssohn.<sup>68</sup>

Mendelssohn's revision and reprinting of his essay on probability notwithstanding, he did not believe that humans could lay out all the circumstances of their lives and situations so clearly and completely. In his prize essay, in the section on ethics, Mendelssohn writes that even though the abstract principles of ethics may be certain, our application of the principles in practical situations can in no way be exact:

If one descends to the derivative laws of nature which prescribe to us what we are to do and leave undone in particular cases, then the degree of certainty gradually decreases in practice and climbs down all stages of probability to doubtfulness. For, in the first place, the makeup of the present case everywhere depends upon experiences which seldom contain enough reasons for the truth of the premises. The moral goodness of an action, the value or lack of value of our actions and omissions, depends not only on countless accompanying circumstances and contingencies but also on consequences and effects of these deeds, which cannot possibly be foreseen with certainty. The slightest unexpected accident can dash all our

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<sup>66</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 247–50.

<sup>67</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 248.

<sup>68</sup>Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 250. This is based on a January 6, 1758 letter of Mendelssohn to Baumgarten: "Aus dem Schreiben an Baumgarten geht weiter hervor, dass Aepinus, um seine Sache nicht gänzlich aufzugeben, sich dazu hatte verleiten lassen, die von Bernoulli und anderen längst ausser Zweifel gesetzte Wahrscheinlichkeitsberechnung anzufechten, was Mendelssohn, wie er sagt, mit Leichtigkeit zurückweisen konnte." The letter is in *JubA* 11:172–74. Because I did not have this volume at hand, I checked the text of the letter in *Moses Mendelssohn's gesammelte Schriften*, Fünfter Band, Leipzig, 1844, 414–18. Hans Lausch spoke on this topic in 1993: "The controversy on probability between Aepinus and Mendelssohn of 1756–1757 – a 'Bayesian' issue?" – a paper delivered at the Third Australian Conference on the History of Mathematics, which I have not seen. Hans Lausch, "Moses Mendelssohn und die zeitgenössische Mathematik," in *Moses Mendelssohn im Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung* (eds. Michael Albrecht and Eva J. Engel, Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 119–35, does not provide any more information about what Aepinus's arguments may have been.



hopes and leave the best intentions with the most damaging effects. One circumstance which we have not noticed – and how seldom are we in a position to weigh all circumstances precisely! – can give a completely different form to the makeup of the present case. Only an all-seeing eye can see the causes, consequences, proportions, and contingencies of an actual event with perfect certainty. In such a case mortals must leave the direction to a mere probability.<sup>69</sup>

I conclude that, although he kept reprinting his essay on probability with its bow to mathematics (even making small changes based on his interchange with Aepinus that actually weakened his philosophical argument), Mendelssohn ultimately found non-mathematical arguments more convincing. His considered view was that in practical situations with their complexities and obscurities, we can almost never find mathematically exact demonstrations, but must be satisfied with probable arguments. Beyond this, reason alone is often insufficient, and sentiment and the development of good habits are necessary to the leading of ethical lives. In his prize essay, with regard to natural theology, Mendelssohn wrote:

Theology is supposed to be not only convincing, but edifying, moving the mind and spurring change in conformity with it. Thus, merely demonstrative grounds of proof are insufficient; instead, the life of knowledge must be inspired by an array of cogent reasons. In this respect practical conviction departs from merely theoretical conviction. . . . Practical conviction . . . demands . . . a living efficacious knowledge, an intense and lively impression on the mind by means of which we are spurred to manage our actions and omissions in keeping with this knowledge. Every probability, every eloquently presented basis of proof contributes something to this life of knowledge, helps increase its energy, as I will elaborate more extensively in the final section.<sup>70</sup>

And with regard to ethics, he said:

We human beings possess, in addition to reason, sense and imagination, inclinations and passions, which are of extreme importance in determining what we do and leave undone. The judgement of our reason does not always concur with the judgement of the lower powers of our soul, and if they contend with each other, then each necessarily weakens the other's influence on the will. The approval of a truth will be practical, then, only if the rational grounds either subdue the lower powers of the soul, or also include them to their advantage . . .

One sees, then, what is involved if the principles of practical ethics are to have the proper effect on what we do and leave undone . . . They must be enlivened by *examples*, supported by the force of *pleasant sentiment*, kept constantly effective by *practice*, and finally transformed into a *proficiency*. Then there emerges the conviction of the heart that is our ultimate and most eminent purpose in ethics. It may be the case that the spirit always sees only probable proofs before it; indeed, it may have never analyzed this probability distinctly and instead merely grasped the probability by virtue of having a sense for the truth. This is not always an obstacle to the life of knowledge. The senses can still be stirred in a lively way, the imagination aroused, and the mind compelled by habit, example, grace, and so on to give the most steadfast and unalterable approval. A sweeter peace of mind and satisfaction springs from this sort of approval than from some cold conviction of spirit.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 302.

<sup>70</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 291–92.

<sup>71</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 304–6.



In writing his talk on probability and its revision, Mendelssohn seems to have been carried away by the momentum of philosophico-mathematical reasoning to make arguments that, in quiet reflection, he would not have found persuasive, let alone mathematically demonstrative. In his January 6, 1758, letter to Baumgarten, Mendelssohn thanked Baumgarten for warning him against an all-too-great propensity to subtlety.<sup>72</sup>

In the end, then, Mendelssohn's practical beliefs about the use of probability in ethical decision making agreed with Jacob Bernoulli's to a greater degree than his "On probability," especially in its revised form, might at first lead one to believe. As Bernoulli wrote in *The Art of Conjecturing*, between alternative possible actions, the ethical person should always choose the action "that seems more appropriate, safer, more carefully considered, or more probable, even if neither action is such in a positive sense," but "in our judgements we should be careful not to attribute more weight to things than they have. Nor should we consider something that is more probable than its alternatives to be absolutely certain, or force it on others . . . Because, however, it is rarely possible to obtain certainty that is complete in every respect, necessity and use ordain that what is only morally certain be taken as absolutely certain."<sup>73</sup> This corresponds to the opening sentence of Mendelssohn's "On Probability":

Among the kinds of knowledge that we have to attain, probability can perhaps be regarded as the most necessary since it is suited to our limited sphere and, in most cases, must take the place of certainty. Its influence on what people do and leave undone and, by means of this, on their happiness has always been so evident to philosophers that they dared to make the foundations of truth totter sooner than the foundations of probability.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Mendelssohn to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, January 6, 1758, *Moses Mendelssohn's gesammelte Schriften*, 5:414: "Ergreife ich die Gelegenheit, Ew. Hoched. zuvörderst für die Gütigkeit zu danken, die Sie gehabt, mir einige meiner Zweifel aufzuklären, mich auch insbesondere vor einer allzu grossen Neigung zu Subtilitäten zu warnen, weil diese zu weit führen können und uns öfters dem Hohngelächter der Welt aussetzen."

<sup>73</sup>Bernoulli, *Art of Conjecturing*, 320–21.

<sup>74</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 233.

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# Chapter 4

## Mendelssohn on Lambert's *Neues Organon*

Paola Basso

### 1 Was Mendelssohn's Prize Essay to Be Either Locked in a Drawer or Even Consumed by the Volcano's Flames?

Mendelssohn, right after reading the *Neues Organon*, confessed to his friend Thomas Abbt: "If I had read Mr. Lambert's *New Organon* a few years before, my prize essay would surely have remained on my desk, or perhaps would otherwise have felt the fury of the volcano."<sup>1</sup>

But why, exactly, would he have left his prize essay on his desk, or, worse, let it be consumed by the volcano's flames? Although its tones are certainly exaggerated, there must be some truth in this quip, for the link between Lambert's *Neues Organon* and the Question of the Berlin Academy for 1763 is supported by Lambert himself, who used to regard his *Neues Organon* as a sort of delayed answer to the Academy. A few months before the award, Lambert, writing to Euler, defined his *Neues Organon* in the following terms: "An extensive work related to the philosophical question that your famous Academy of Berlin is going to award."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 12.1, letter 248 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), *JubA* 12.1:49; this letter can also be found in: Thomas Abbt, *Vermischte Werke* (Berlin, 1772–1781), 2:253. "Hätte ich des Herrn Lambert *Neues Organon* vor einigen Jahren gelesen; so wäre meine Preisschrift sicherlich im Pulte liegen geblieben, oder hätte vielleicht den Zorn des Vulkans empfunden," Mendelssohn to Abbt, July 12, 1764. All translations of Mendelssohn's and Lambert's quotations are mine, unless in the case of Mendelssohn's "On Evidence in Metaphysical Science," quoted from: Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. D. O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 251–306.

<sup>2</sup>Euler, Leonhard and Johann Heinrich Lambert, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Karl Bopp (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1924), 32–33. "Un ouvrage fort long et qui a du rapport avec la question philosophique que Votre Illustre Académie de Berlin ira couronner," Lambert to Euler, March 7, 1763.

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This was not said in a manner of speaking: the *Preisfrage* pervades the *Neues Organon*. In the first place because of the timing: the *Neues Organon* was printed at the beginning of 1764, but was written between October 1762 and November 1763. Thus, it had been started 3 months before the deadline for the *Preisschriften*, when Lambert had lost all hope of finishing his draft for the Academy in time (written in April 1762), and it was completed just 1 year after. In addition to this for its essence: the *Neues Organon* takes shape as an accomplished attempt to turn philosophy into science, not on the basis of a generic formula as in Wolff (“metaphysics as science,” a mere consequence of the use of definitions and demonstrations), but on the basis of a brand-new articulated project to establish four philosophical “sciences”<sup>3</sup> – *Dianoiology*, *Alethiology*, *Semiotics* and *Phenomenology* – as instruments to obtain certainty.

Having established a direct relation between the *Preisschriften* and the *Neues Organon*, can we therefore go on to say that Mendelssohn’s reading of *Neues Organon* is a continuation of his “Über die Evidenz”? The main problem is that, in his review of the *Neues Organon*, published in the “Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek,”<sup>4</sup> there is no explicit mention of this aspect, nor any reference to the *Preisfrage*. However, we can there certainly find many references to the high consideration in which Mendelssohn holds Lambert: “A creative Genius who says to limits: *run-away!* And they run away.”<sup>5</sup>

The aim of my paper is to give an explanation for such a reaction expressed in his letter to Abbt. Even if we cannot find this explanation laid out in the review, we can make use of the several hints within the text to deduce what could be the key contributions to the Berlin question that Mendelssohn drew from the *Neues Organon*.

Another important aspect to examine, in order to establish the retro-impact of the *Neues Organon* on his prize essay, is the similarity in Lambert’s and Mendelssohn’s purposes. Despite their strong friendship, Mendelssohn and Abbt followed different paths<sup>6</sup>; by contrast, there were several philosophical points of contact between Mendelssohn and Lambert, both self-taught men and both of them formed by a Wolffian education although not strict Wolffian followers. First of all, the fact that both believe in a sort of parallelism between science of quality and

<sup>3</sup>Johann Heinrich Lambert, foreword to *Neues Organon, oder Gedanken über die Erforschung und Bezeichnung des Wahren und dessen Unterscheidung vom Irrthum und Schein* (Leipzig, 1764), iii.

<sup>4</sup>Mendelssohn, “Rezension,” of Lambert’s *Neues Organon*, *JubA* 5.2:31–64; Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek (AdB), Bd. 1, 1766, vol. 3, part 1, 1–23; Bd. 2, 1767, vol. 4, part 2, 1–30; here Bd. 1, 14.

<sup>5</sup>“Ein schaffendes Genie, das zu den Grenzen spricht: *entweicht!* Und sie entweichen,” *JubA* 5.2:31.

<sup>6</sup>“Ich merke aber, daß wir ganz verschiedener Meinung seyn werden.” (Abbt to Mendelssohn, November 10, 1762, *JubA* 11:359–61, esp. 360).

science of quantity,<sup>7</sup> which in itself portends an affirmative answer to the Berlin Question. Furthermore, both firmly believe in the possibility, or rather necessity, of rigorous demonstrations in philosophy and of a necessary connection between the “truths.”<sup>8</sup> For both, moreover, there is a privileged role not only for the certainty of geometry, but also for the certainty of logic.<sup>9</sup> This basic agreement confirms that there is no ‘change of course’: Mendelssohn would not have left his text on his desk for the sake of a negative answer, but rather for the sake of an affirmative one, much richer with respect to that, which, in his review, he will call a “fund of sharp observations”<sup>10</sup> in the *Neues Organon*.

But, while so close in their philosophical positions, Mendelssohn and Lambert were very far apart in their respective backgrounds. The one was immersed in a handed-down oral tradition, made of rituals, dialogues, living relationships with his contemporaries and poetry; the other, conversely, a lonely, self-referential reader and graphomane, immersed in the written tradition, populated by algebraic signs and geometrical figures. And the two opposite writing styles are witness to this structural difference. This diversity is the condition for the unexpected impact which reading Lambert made on Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn's essay won, and someone had bet on him before the competition had even begun,<sup>11</sup> so we must further ask ourselves why Mendelssohn could consider to be weak a text that had just been awarded the prize. Mendelssohn, like all of his colleagues of the Preisfrage, was hamstrung by the shortness of the allotted

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<sup>7</sup>Lambert, “Über die Methode,” § 5: “So wie sich die Mathematik mit den Größen beschäftigt, so beschäftigt sich die Weltweisheit überhaupt mit den Beschaffenheiten der Qualitäten der Dinge,” in *Philosophische Schriften*, ed. H. W. Arndt et al., 10 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965–2008), 10.2:499. This fact was crucial both in Mendelssohn's answer (“Die Mathematik ist eine Wissenschaft der Grossen [Quantitatum], und die Weltweisheit überhaupt eine Wissenschaft der Beschaffenheiten [Qualitatum] der Dinge”), and in Lambert's own, never sent, answer (“Ist dieses nur das Schicksal der Philosophie, dieser Wissenschaft, die für Qualitäten tun sollte, was die Meßkunst für die Größe tut?”).

<sup>8</sup>“Zwar bin ich ein großer Verehrer der Demonstrationen in der Metaphysik,” Mendelssohn confesses in his Anhang *Moses Mendelssohn an die Freunde Lessings*, *JubA* 3:197. In his “Über die Evidenz in metaphysische Wissenschaften,” see, particularly: “Zur Gewißheit einer Wahrheit aber wird erfordert, daß man sie durch zusammenhangende Schlüsse bis auf solche Grundsätze zurückführen kann, die ihrer Natur nach ganz unläugbare Grundsätze sind,” *JubA* 2:139.

<sup>9</sup>Lambert, in his draft of the answer: “§ 18, In Beantwortung der Frage, werde ich anfangen anzumerken, daß die Vernunftlehre . . . eben den Ruhm verdiene, den man der Meßkunst gibt,” “Über die Methode,” *Philosophische Schriften*, 10.2:502. For Mendelssohn, see his “Gedanken von der Wahrscheinlichkeit,” *JubA* 1:147–64.

<sup>10</sup>“Rezension,” Bd. 2, 64, “Fond von tief sinnigen Betrachtungen.”

<sup>11</sup>An extraordinary piece of evidence from a contemporary is available. This source, likely even before Mendelssohn sent his paper, writes as follows: “Je me suis mis dans la tête que le juif Moses remportera le prix de l'Académie. Il écrit bien, parle métaphysique assez nettement et comme la possédant, il censure selon mon goût les livres dont il fait l'extrait” (Charles de Durant to Jean Henry Samuel Formey, Brandenburg, December 6, 1761, in *JubA* 22:18–19).

time,<sup>12</sup> so much so that he had to finish his answer during his honeymoon. Just like Kant, who is obliged to give an answer “short and hastily,”<sup>13</sup> and like Lambert, who manages to write only a first draft, Mendelssohn does not have the time to be fully original in each aspect – exactly what Mendelssohn admires in the *Neues Organon*, as expressed in his review: “here we have a huge number of *novelties*.”<sup>14</sup>

As a first explanation of Mendelssohn’s reaction, we have the sentence immediately after that drastic incipit: “Only Lambert investigates the most hidden paths of reason, the most secret approaches to the temple of truth.” The main point here is the new way or, perhaps, the unusual way in which Lambert approaches standard philosophical problems. Lambert is actually seen by Mendelssohn as a true “trailblazer”; this impression – shared by Kant himself (who described Lambert as “the greatest Genius of Germany”<sup>15</sup>) and by other contemporaries – is created by the fact that the self-taught Lambert followed clearly a self-devised path.

Although the “question of certainty” remains fundamentally in the background of his book,<sup>16</sup> Lambert’s explicit verdict on the Berlin Question, already implicit throughout the whole text, can be expressed in the following: “The term *geometric* does not refer itself to the *matter*, but to the *form* and *concatenation* of demonstration, because, beyond geometry, there are other sciences that are capable of *the same certainty* and demonstrations.”<sup>17</sup> Lambert’s own words in this context: “eben solcher Gewißheit und Demonstrationen fähig sind” strongly recall the formulation of the 1761 question: “eben der deutlichen Beweise fähig sind.”

Lambert’s key intuition in this case had to do with asserting the existence of many other a priori sciences modelled on geometry, already thought of as a sort of “regional ontologies”: just as geometry shapes itself around the concept of space, these other a priori sciences will shape themselves around other simple concepts, according to what Lambert wrote to Sulzer on March 1, 1763: “I hope with all my heart that your academic Question will be solved in such a way as to satisfy the most stubborn. It has led me to research many similar subjects and, in particular, to Sciences that can be called a priori in the most rigorous sense. And I think I have

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<sup>12</sup>The allotted time (from June 1761 to December 1762) was very limited with respect to such a demanding question.

<sup>13</sup>Immanuel Kant, “Nachricht von der Einrichtung seiner Vorlesungen,” in *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–), AA 2:308. “Ich habe in einer kurzen und eilfertig abgefaßten Schrift . . .”

<sup>14</sup>Mendelssohn, “Rezension,” Bd. 1, 32. “Da hier ungemein viel Neues vorkommt.”

<sup>15</sup>Kant, AA 10:54. “Das erste Genie in Deutschland,” Kant to Lambert, December 31, 1765.

<sup>16</sup>Lambert, foreword to *Neues Organon*, ii. “Human understanding does not quieten itself with doubts and uncertainties. It is thus natural that it strives for certainty.” (Der Verstand selbst beruhigt sich bei Zweifeln und Ungewißheit nicht. Es ist natürlich, daß er suche, Gewißheit zu finden.) ‘Certainty’ therefore can be seen as the ultimate aim of the whole project of the *Neues Organon*.

<sup>17</sup>Lambert, *Neues Organon*, “Phenomenologie,” § 249.

found that geometry is neither the only one, nor the first.”<sup>18</sup> Lambert will accomplish this project in his *Architectonic*, but, unfortunately, Mendelssohn will not be healthy enough also to read Lambert's second masterwork (and he will explicitly regret that).<sup>19</sup>

Lambert shows, therefore, a very peculiar and convincing new way to answer the Berlin Question: scientific rigour (and therefore certainty) arises not only from demonstrations but also from a peculiar organisation of single disciplines built around a simple concept. Mendelssohn, by reading the *Neues Organon*, understood that Lambert was really opening a new path in metaphysics and, in comparison with this task, his *Preisschrift* suddenly appears very conventional. Enough, for him, to wish he had locked his own paper in a drawer!

We have thus found a plausible solution to the riddle of what could have shaken Mendelssohn. Unfortunately, this explanation cannot be the definitive one, given that, strictly speaking, the theatre of this project of Lambert's, inside the *Neues Organon*, is essentially his *Alethiology*. However, this section could not be the right one, according to what Mendelssohn writes in his charged letter to Abbt: “I liked slightly less only his *Alethiology*.”<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, apart from an overall appreciation for the book and Mendelssohn's insights into Lambert's effort to reorient the *Preisfrage* in a project of foundation of philosophical sciences, we still want to find other individual and specific contributions in Lambert's *Neues Organon* that could have induced in Mendelssohn second thoughts about his own essay.

To accomplish this task, our attention must be threefold and we must look at, first, Mendelssohn's review of *Neues Organon* in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*; second, directly at the *Neues Organon* itself; and, third, at Mendelssohn's prize essay, “*Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften*,” itself, at its interests and omissions. Let us then sift through the clues, starting by turning back to the previously mentioned epistle to Abbt in order to understand where to look (and where not to): “His *Dianoiology* contains the principles of *Erfindungskunst*, his *Phenomenology* fertile concepts for the logic of the probable, and his doctrine of the designation of truth is of equal value. I liked slightly less only his *Alethiology*.”<sup>21</sup>

The same aspects emerge decisively also in Mendelssohn's review, where he first states that Lambert, this new Aristotle, “already has shown to the world his innovativeness in other works, outdistances all of his predecessors with the present

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<sup>18</sup> Lambert, *Der Handschriftlicher Nachlass von Johann Heinrich Lambert* (Basel: Universitätsbibliothek, 1977), L1a 745, 193. “Je souhaite de tout mon coeur, que Votre Question academique soit resolue de manière à satisfaire les plus obstinés. Elle m'a occasioné plusieurs recherches sur des matières analogues, et particulièrement sur les Sciences qu'on peut appeler à priori dans le sens le plus rigoureux. Et je crois avoir trouvé que la geometrie n'est ni la seule ni même la premiere.” Lambert to Sulzer, March 1, 1763.

<sup>19</sup> Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:3.

<sup>20</sup> Mendelssohn to Abbt, July 12, 1764, *JubA* 12.1:49.

<sup>21</sup> *JubA* 12.1:49.



work.” He then goes on to say: “On every occasion, Lambert takes daring steps in the sphere of the art of discovery, deals with the doctrine of designation in its greatest universality, and delves into the doctrine of appearance with such sharpness that, even if he has not exhausted it, we can consider its fundamental principles discovered.”<sup>22</sup>

If we have to rule out *Alethiology*, we could also rule out *Phenomenology*, because the author of the “Gedanken von der Wahrscheinlichkeit” could hardly be found unprepared on the logic of the probable and, moreover, that field would take us, for our present purpose, in the wrong direction: Lambert defines moral certainty as *terminus infinitus*, in explicit contrast to geometric certainty.<sup>23</sup> If we follow what Mendelssohn most admired about the *Neues Organon*, we will certainly identify the most important contributions of the *Neues Organon* to the Berlin Question: in both quoted texts – letter and review – the emphasis falls primarily (“er wagt . . . kühne Schritte”) on the “art of discovery” of *Dianoiology*, and on the “doctrine of the designation of truth” of *Semiotics*.

We are therefore left with the *Lehre von der Bezeichnung* – a prized subject for Mendelssohn, but not really carefully examined in his prize essay, despite Wolff having already linked it to the matter of the *Deutlichkeit*.<sup>24</sup> Wolff also linked it to the *Erfindungskunst* – effectively missing in the prize essay and introduced once by Mendelssohn in this way: “the art of discovery is still completely unformed. In that field we still always see as through a fog.”<sup>25</sup>

This is then another important clue given to us by Mendelssohn: the elements that could have contributed to his general embarrassment about his prize essay, are hidden either in Lambert’s *ars inveniendi* or in Lambert’s *ars characteristica*.

## 2 The Main Road: Ars Characteristica and Graphic Representation

Thanks to Mendelssohn’s fascination for linguistics and related semiotic subjects, we know that a theme particularly appreciated by Mendelssohn is Lambert’s *Semiotics*: his scientific theory of essential signs, including a part of the *Dianoiology*,

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<sup>22</sup>“Er wagt bei allen Gelegenheiten kühne Schritte in das Gebiet der *Erfindungskunst*, handelt die *Lehre von der Bezeichnung* in ihrer größten Allgemeinheit ab; und in die *Lehre vom Schein* dringt er mit solcher Scharfsinnigkeit ein, daß, wenn er sie gleich nicht erschöpft, man die vornehmsten Grundsätze derselben für erfunden halten kann” (“Rezension,” Bd. 1, 32).

<sup>23</sup>Lambert, *Neues Organon*, *Phenomenologie*, § 249, v.

<sup>24</sup>Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, first published Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1720, repr. of Halle, 1751, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1983), § 319.

<sup>25</sup>“Die Erfindungskunst liegt noch völlig unangebaut. In dieser Gegend sehen wir noch immer, wie durch einen Nebel.” *Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, LB 135, Rezension of “Von Herrn Flögels *Einleitung in die Erfindungskunst*” (1760); *JubA* 5.2:309–10.

where he expounds his peculiar figurative manner of reasoning with syllogisms. The *via maestra*, which leads to a “geometrical certainty” in philosophy, represents in fact Lambert’s masterwork, i.e., his project of *ars characteristica* and *ars combinatoria*. As Altmann pointed out, both, Mendelssohn and Lambert, were aware that *Mathesis intensorum*, as “mathematics of intensive quantities,” was just a quantity calculation not a quality calculation. Therefore it becomes crucial to devise a specific art of signs for quality.<sup>26</sup>

In Lambert’s designation, wrong forms of syllogisms are not even suitable for graphic representation and it is enough to skim through the drafted lines to notice incorrect conclusions. From that figurative perspicuity it is possible to admit, against Kant, the equivalence of all four syllogistical figures. By observing the signs, we see what would result by observing the objects: here – in the words of Mendelssohn – is the first step to reduce thinking to “calculations.”<sup>27</sup>

Thanks to Lambert, “the aid of essential signs” seems to be now available in philosophy too, particularly in logic, whereas, in his Preisschrift, Mendelssohn had denounced the lack of essential signs for philosophy and, moreover, he had taken such a lack for granted. If that is not enough to wish to have burned one’s own paper, it is certainly a good reason to leave it on the desk and think it over.

In the same letter where Mendelssohn writes to Abbt – a few months after the prize – that he would not consider himself the winner only because of the Academy award,<sup>28</sup> he in fact manifests the desire to delve further into this issue that he had only touched upon in his prize essay. “I’m longing [sehr begierig] to read Ploucquet’s Calculation for the logical operations. Where can I find it?”<sup>29</sup>; this anxiety to find this book could be reasonably read as awareness that his point about “signs” in philosophy was not definite. The years immediately after his Preisschrift’s reaction and immediately prior to his reading of Lambert, winter 1763/1764, were the years in

<sup>26</sup>Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969), 293.

<sup>27</sup>“Auf eine art von Berechnung reduciren zu können,” Rezension, Bd. 1, 37.

<sup>28</sup>“Glauben Sie aber ja nicht, daß ich mir einbilde, gesiegt zu haben, weil die Academie mir den Preis zuerkannt hat. Ich weiß gar wohl, daß im Kriege nicht selten der schlechtere General den Sieg davon trägt!” (Mendelssohn to Abbt, November 20, 1763). *JubA* 12.1:24–27, quotation 26–27.

<sup>29</sup>“Ploucquets Calcul für die logischen Verrichtungen bin ich sehr begierig zu lesen. Wo findet man diesen?” (*JubA* 12.1:27). Gottfried Ploucquet, *Methodus calculandi in logicis*, Tubingae, 1763, which was also published in 1766, together with a controversy between him and Lambert: *Sammlung der Schriften, welche den logischen Calcul Herrn Prof. Ploucquets betreffen*, Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1766, ed. August Friedrich Bök (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 1970). The review of Ploucquet in LB will have been fundamentally by Abbt’s hand. In his review of *Neues Organon*, Mendelssohn prefers Lambert’s *Calculation* to Ploucquet’s (see Rezension, Bd. 1, 37).

which Lessing debated with his friends about his *Laocoon* and were probably a stimulus for Mendelssohn to re-examine the possibility of semiotics outside the sphere of mathematics.<sup>30</sup>

In his prize essay, the lack of an “essential art of designation” in philosophy was actually the first culprit<sup>31</sup> of the subordination of philosophy to mathematics, in relation to perspicuity and intelligibility (Faßlichkeit): “In this discipline the same certainty reigns as in geometry. Yet the principles of this science cannot be explained as perspicuously.”<sup>32</sup> About “the cause” of this subordination, Mendelssohn has no doubts: “for, in the first place [erstlich], up until now [bis jetzo noch], philosophy has lacked the aid of essential signs. Everything in the language of philosophers remains arbitrary. The words and the connections among them contain nothing that would essentially agree with the nature of thoughts and the connections among them.”<sup>33</sup> All this conspires to give to philosophy “the look of vain verbosity” and, certainly, less immediacy and intelligibility; “in mathematics, however, . . . the order and connections among [signs] agree with the order and connections among thoughts.”<sup>34</sup>

Is this lack of essential signs in philosophy a structural impossibility or only a provisional lack? Altmann, appropriately, stresses the expression: “bis jetzo noch,”<sup>35</sup> which shows Mendelssohn’s possibilistic attitude to this issue.

We know that Mendelssohn was always very involved in linguistic theories and, in the course of 30 years – from the “Sendschreiben” to Lessing (1755, as an appendix to his translation of Rousseau’s *Discourse*<sup>36</sup>) till *Jerusalem* and *Morgenstunden* – we

<sup>30</sup>For the importance of the correspondence between Mendelssohn and Lessing as a source for the *Laocoon*, see H. Blümmer in *Lessings Laocoon*, 2nd ed. (Berlin 1880), 69 ff. The influence must be read reciprocally – “Obgleich Lessing selbst es dezidiert ablehnt, von nicht-künstlerischen Zeichenpraktiken zu handeln, sind seine Reflexionen nicht auf das Gebiet der Künste zu beschränken.” Inge Baxmann, Michael Franz and Wolfgang Schäffner, eds., introduction to *Das Laocoon-Paradigma: Zeichenregime im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2000), x.

<sup>31</sup>Whereas, three years before, Mendelssohn put the blame (of the lower certainty in philosophy) on human understanding, which was “zu eingeschränkt von allen Eigenschaften der Körper zugleich ohne Verwirrung zu philosophieren,” LB 23, March 8, 1759, *JubA* 5.1:18.

<sup>32</sup>Mendelssohn, “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA* 2:280; *Philosophical Writings*, 272–73. This distinction between perspicuous and non-perspicuous is aimed by Mendelssohn against Resewitz’s assumption of mathematics as intuitive; cf. LB 208, *JubA* 5.1:480–85, esp. 481: “man kann viel eher und leichter zur anschauenden Erkenntniß der ersten Wahrheiten der Mathematik, als der Metaphysik gelangen.”

<sup>33</sup>“Denn erstlich fehlet der Weltweisheit bis jetzo noch das Hülfsmittel der wesentlichen Zeichen. Alles ist in der Sprache der Weltweisen noch willkürlich. Die Worte und ihre Verbindungen führen nichts bey sich, das mit der Natur und Verbindung der Gedanken wesentlich übereinkäme,” Mendelssohn, “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA* 2:290; *Philosophical Writings*, 272.

<sup>34</sup>“In der Mathematik aber . . . ihre Ordnung und Verbindung kömmt mit der Ordnung und Verbindung der Gedanken überein,” *JubA* 2:291; *Philosophical Writings*, 273.

<sup>35</sup>Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 292.

<sup>36</sup>In 1756 Mendelssohn had translated J. J. Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754).

find abundant evidence of Mendelssohn's fascination for both language and symbolic knowledge.<sup>37</sup> He entered the scene of the philosophical debate of his time, concerned with the origins of language (also through the mediation of the Berlin Academy, which instituted several prizes for the subject<sup>38</sup>). But we have to underline that Mendelssohn's starting points in his linguistic reflexions were almost opposite to those of Lambert and, unsurprisingly, Mendelssohn, in his Review, will sharply distance himself on two points from Lambert's linguistic theory.<sup>39</sup>

Leibniz certainly laid down an appropriate basis for tackling the problem of the relation between signs, languages and thought: the signs as an aid to thought and not just as an expression of it. In his "Betrachtung über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schöne Künste und Wissenschaften" (1757), Mendelssohn refers to the fundamental division of signs into natural and arbitrary, using this division as an important criterion for distinguishing figurative arts from poetry. In other places, however, Mendelssohn shows less initiative in handling the related issue of "universal language." Precisely Lambert's subject!

In October 1759, by reviewing Sulzer and commenting on the idea of a "philosophical grammar" and "universal language," Mendelssohn promptly corrects Sulzer's misunderstandings thanks to his better understanding of Leibniz's *Algebra situs*, which clearly has to do "not just with an ordinary 'sign language' [Zeichensprache]."<sup>40</sup> But Mendelssohn, too involved in real languages and for the sake of poetical language,<sup>41</sup> lets us catch a glimpse of his sceptical vein faced by such a philosopher's stone.<sup>42</sup> In fact, he comments detachedly, "a universal language ought to exist, but only for scholars [Gelehrten], in the same manner as Analysts have a sort of universal language among them."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See on this theme: Ulrich Ricken, "Mendelssohn und die Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung," in Michael Albrecht and Eva J. Engel, eds., *Moses Mendelssohn im Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 195–242.

<sup>38</sup> Mendelssohn will also review Michaelis' Preisschrift, on the origin of language.

<sup>39</sup> "Man sieht heraus, daß Hr. Lambert die wirklichen Sprachen wie Systeme von Zeichen ansieht, welche von Weltweisen mit Überlegung, Wahl und Absicht erfunden worden sind. Da sie aber, wie wir wissen, mehrentheils ohne Philosophie entstanden, und vom Zufall und Gelegenheit ausgebildet wurden" ("Rezension," Bd. 2, 49). Mendelssohn underlines Lambert's "ungerechtes Urtheil" upon poetry as well (55).

<sup>40</sup> LB 61/62, October 11, 1759, *JubA* 5.1:96.

<sup>41</sup> "Ich weis nicht, ob die schönen Wissenschaften von dieser Vergleichung Vortheil haben würden," *JubA* 5.1:93. Furthermore significant is the critical notation by which a universal language would unavoidably have to give up the gender for inanimate objects, otherwise so important for poets.

<sup>42</sup> Altmann (*Friühschriften*, 293) sees a similarity in Justus' attitude toward Ploucquet: "Von Ploucquet seinen Bemühungen wünschte ich, demahl einst den Nutzen zu erleben. Ich fühle, daß er Wahrheiten vorträgt, aber mein Verstand erreicht den Vortheil der Anwendung noch nicht" (Justus Möser Briefe, Hannover 1939, 172).

<sup>43</sup> "Ich würde mit vielen Worten doch nicht mehr als den *Wolf* ausschreiben. – So viel ist gewiß! Eine allgemeine Sprache hätte es seyn sollen, aber nur für Gelehrten, so wie die Analysten unter sich eine Art von allgemeiner Sprache haben," *JubA* 5.1:95. For Wolff, see *Ontologia*, *GW* 2.3, §§ 964 ff. The same scepticism also by Abbt (see his review of Ploucquet's *Kalcul*).

In his review of Lambert's text, he appears instead to correct his cold reception and comments: "Although this invention doesn't promise a large immediate utility [gleich vor der Hand], it cannot remain indifferent to speculative minds"<sup>44</sup>; it is in fact "the first step to take in view of finding a universal art of designation in order to reduce every philosophical question to a sort of calculation." Probably, Mendelssohn would not be able to go as far as Lambert in thinking a complete theory of essential signs with its structural isomorphism between signs and things, but he was clearly fascinated by it and by Lambert's "systematische Strenge."<sup>45</sup>

In describing Lambert's "perfect scientific language," Mendelssohn noticed "everything, the letters and their order, would be meaningful."<sup>46</sup> His admiration and his rethinking about how his Preisschrift might have turned out differently with this new horizon of an essential semiotics not restricted to mathematics, can be understood in this light. However, there is no evidence of those second thoughts in Mendelssohn's review, quite apart from a generic appreciation of Lambert's figurative representation of syllogisms and theory of signs. Thus, we are authorized to propose another path in order to not reduce human reactions to a single possible explanation – another path, less obvious, but as important for the relation between philosophy and mathematics.

### 3 A Further Path: Not Only Demonstrations

The subject on which Mendelssohn, in his review, dwells upon the most, is Lambert's examination of the problems, which is also the key to Mendelssohn's constant appeal to *Erfindungskunst* in the case of *Dianoiology* and, moreover, where Lambert takes his most "daring steps."

Substantially, more than demonstrability, a distinctive characteristic of science (as opposed to simple empirical knowledge) is for Lambert the perfect mechanism of discovering unknown truths so that, if we are able to follow an apt *Erfindungskunst* also in philosophy, we can reach scientificity. And this was a possible track for an affirmative answer to the Berlin question: "Besides the exactness and reliability of mathematics this abundance of inventions was a main argument for erecting the entire philosophical system on the basis of the 'mathematical' or 'geometrical method'."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>"Rezension," Bd. 1, 37, "Wenn diese Erfindung gleich vor der Hand keinen großen Nutzen verspricht, so kann sie spekulativen Köpfen dennoch nicht gleichgültig sein."

<sup>45</sup>"Rezension," Bd. 1, 39, "Systematische Strenge."

<sup>46</sup>"Rezension," Bd. 2, 48.

<sup>47</sup>This was said in reference to Wolff; see Carolina Torra-Mattenklott, "The Fable as Figure: Christian Wolff's Geometric Fable Theory and Its Creative Reception by Lessing and Herder." *Science in Context* 18, no. 4 (2005): 525–52.

So, by following this thread of the *ars inveniendi*, we can come to the point Mendelssohn has in mind, as he reveals it in his own review<sup>48</sup>: after having praised Lambert's work on the importance of the identical propositions for the *Erfindungskunst*, Mendelssohn goes on as follows: "In the chapter on *problems* Mr. Lambert gets deeper into the art of discovery."<sup>49</sup>

We have now arrived at the core of the *Erfindungskunst* and at the core of an important point of the *Neues Organon*: "Lambert shows which nature the *Data & Requisita* of a problem must have in order to determine each other."<sup>50</sup> What has to be stressed is the exemplary role of mathematics in this context, and it is not by chance that Mendelssohn did not miss this link. Still quoting from Mendelssohn's review: "The origins of those [reflexions] are offered to him by mathematics, in this science each of those methods and *aids* for discovery strikes one most clearly."<sup>51</sup> Mathematics in general is the paradigm but, above all, Euclid's geometry: "The problems' *data* deserve, in logic, a special consideration – Lambert wrote here – just as Euclid had done in geometry."<sup>52</sup>

That the *ars inveniendi* was "to be learned in the schools of the mathematicians" was certainly an ancient *topos*, renewed by Locke,<sup>53</sup> but rarely examined in such detail. We must not forget that, as attested in his letter to Abbt, Mendelssohn reads Lambert's *Neues Organon* at the same time as he is reading the "excellent ideas" included in Leibniz' *Nouveaux Essais*, where the praise of an art of discovery is a rare point on which Theophilus and Philalethes agreed: "I also see plainly why the method we follow in our inquiries into ideas must be modelled on that of the mathematicians, who . . . by gentle degrees, and a continued chain of reasonings, proceed to the *discovery* and *demonstration* of truths that appear at first sight beyond human capacity."<sup>54</sup> Keys of discovery are the "intermediate ideas," essential elements to produce "such wonderful and unexpected discoveries."<sup>55</sup>

Euclid discovered that not only did the *data* have to be abundant, consistent, and sufficient to determine a solution, but that it is also important to consider "the

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<sup>48</sup>"Rezension," Bd. 1, 14–15.

<sup>49</sup>"In dem Hauptstücke von der *Aufgaben* dringt Hr. Lambert *etwas tiefer* in die *Erfindungskunst* ein," "Rezension," Bd. 1, 39.

<sup>50</sup>Mendelssohn, "Rezension," Bd. 1, 39.

<sup>51</sup>"Die Anlässe hierzu gibt ihm die Mathematik an die Hand, in welcher alle diese Methoden und Hilfsmittel der Erfindung am deutlichsten in die Augen fallen," "Rezension," Bd. 1, 39.

<sup>52</sup>Lambert, *Neues Organon*, "Dianoilogie," § 468.

<sup>53</sup>John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *The Works of John Locke* (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1963), bk. 4, ch. 12, § 7: "The true method of advancing knowledge."

<sup>54</sup>G. W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, trans. and ed. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Francis Bennett, as *New Essays on Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>55</sup>Leibniz, *New Essays*, bk. 4, ch. 12, § 7.

dependence of the parts given on those researched” – and especially, “the determination of what is implicit in the *data*.”<sup>56</sup> The work on what Lambert calls the “zugleich mitgegeben” is the very secret of heuristics. Although the work around *Data & Quaesita* is truly heuristic and not deductive, we have to admit that Lambert often puts together deduction and discovery.<sup>57</sup>

Apart from the formal convertibility of theorems and problems<sup>58</sup>, what counts here is the difference in the status between them. “Non opus est ut de problematibus plura dicantur,” cuts off Wolff in his *De Methodo Mathematica Brevis Commentatio*<sup>59</sup> by laying down therefore the basis of a salient omission of the geometrical *problems* in the account of a mathematical method for philosophy, whereas many examples “reveal that problem-solving was the essential part of the geometric enterprise marked off by the works of Euclid, Apollonius, and those in their tradition and that, for them, the compilation of bodies of theorems was an effort ancillary to this activity.”<sup>60</sup>

Implicitly, Mendelssohn seems even to allude to the reducibility of demonstrations to problems, in his summary of Socrates’ famous teaching of geometry from Plato’s *Meno*: “He does not disclose any nominal definition, axiom, or postulate. Instead, by merely questioning [durch blosses *Fragen*] he lets him gradually find out the geometrical principle.”<sup>61</sup> That of *Meno* was a *demonstration*, but Socrates seems to treat it as a *question*, and Mendelssohn comments: “He could have done the same with the whole of mathematics.”<sup>62</sup>

The reference to a sort of “logic” of problems recurs throughout Lambert’s work. “Why is it that, in logic, not as much attention is paid to the problems as is paid to

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<sup>56</sup>Lambert, *Neues Organon*. “Die Abhängigkeit der gegebenen Stücke von den gesuchten” and “die Bestimmung dessen, was mit den Datis zugleich gegeben ist.”

<sup>57</sup>And so the golden rule of deduction (“Si dederis, omnia danda sunt et ultra quam quod crederis”) could be the golden rule of discovery as well. According to this rule, in every science it should “be possible to *find*, starting with the smallest number of given elements, the rest”, Lambert, *Anlage zur Architektonik*, § 15, vols. 3 and 4 of *Philosophische Schriften*. Strictly speaking, it is possible to see the two aspects as the same process: once in one direction, then in the other.

<sup>58</sup>Whereas postulates and axioms are not convertible.

<sup>59</sup>Wolff, *De Methodo Mathematica Brevis Commentatio*, § 48.

<sup>60</sup>Lambert’s presentation of the distinction between problems and theorems follows the general lines of the ancient commentators: “The distinction between problems and theorems is maintained meticulously by the authors of the principal treatises of classical geometry, Euclid, Archimedes, and Apollonius, as well as in the miscellaneous materials preserved by the later commentators, Hero, Pappus, and Eutocius. As a matter of *form*, a problem is cast as an infinitive expression seeking the construction of a geometric term in a specified relation to other given terms. By contrast, a theorem is typically set in the form of a conditional asserting a property of a specified geometric configuration. A point not missed by the ancient commentators is that the theorem refers to a general class of entities (e.g., “any triangle”), whereas the problem usually results in the production of a unique figure.” Wilbur Richard Knorr, *The Ancient Tradition of Geometric Problems* (Boston: Birkhäuser, 1986), 348–49.

<sup>61</sup>Mendelssohn, “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA 2:275; Philosophical Writings*, 258.

<sup>62</sup>Mendelssohn, “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA 2:275; Philosophical Writings*, 258.



the concepts and statements?"<sup>63</sup> he will ask. His answer will be sharp: "Perhaps because, in logic, everything is aimed towards demonstrations and little, if anything, towards discoveries."<sup>64</sup> To Lambert, stressing the "problems" aspect, rather than the "theorems" aspect, means looking at the other side of geometry, incorporating the *ars inveniendi* at the very centre of the *ars deducendi*, thus showing that he can look at the sources of geometric certainty with a 360° perspective, not limiting himself to demonstration.

The polemical question was mainly intended for Wolff, who, to Lambert's eyes, had shown himself unable to fully learn from geometry: "In his work, postulates and problems are almost entirely ignored."<sup>65</sup> But, in this respect, it could also involve Mendelssohn who, in fact, in his Preisschrift, focuses entirely on demonstration, with no mention of discovery, and in his review of the *Neues Organon* struggles to understand the importance of the distinction between "questions [Frage]" (including problems) and "statements [Sätze]" (including theorems).<sup>66</sup> And here we have to interpret *ars inveniendi* fundamentally as the art that concerns the ability to solve complex problems.

Even though, for Wolff, *inventio* was always the secret essence of mathematics (and he attaches much importance to the "capacity to find unknown truths"), the three passwords to his mathematical method – "definitiones accuratas," "demonstrationes exactas" and "ordinem legitimum" – were not concerned with it. And so *inventio*,<sup>67</sup> although still belonging to mathematics, was omitted from the mathematical method.

Here is, finally, another possible origin for Mendelssohn's report to Abbt: at the time of his prize essay he did not fully review the whole range of possibilities of geometry for philosophy! In fact, we find many references to *Erfindungsmitteln* or *Erfindungskunstgriffen* in the first section – i.e., evidence in the first principles of *mathematics* – but none in the second, third and fourth sections – i.e., evidence in the first principles of *metaphysics*, *natural theology* and *ethics*.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>"Warum wandte man nicht eben so viel Sorgfalt auf die Aufgaben als auf Begriffe und Sätze?" L 1a *Fragmente über die Vernunftlehre*, XII *Fragment, Von den Aufgaben*, in Lambert, *Philosophische Schriften*, 6:274.

<sup>64</sup>Lambert, *Philosophische Schriften*, 6:274.

<sup>65</sup>Lambert, *Architektonik*, vols. 3 and 4 of *Philosophische Schriften*, § 12. In fact Wolff had written: "Itaque problema demonstrandum in theorema convertitur" (*De Methodo Mathematica Brevis Commentatio*, § 48), neglecting the essential difference between statements and questions.

<sup>66</sup>See below, the conclusion, and note 15.

<sup>67</sup>Wolff's refrain: "Fertigkeit unbekannte Wahrheit zu erfinden." In the exposition of his mathematical method, Wolff quotes the *inventio* just as a means to discover definitions. Within his very system, he attributes to the *ars inveniendi* a particular place: it does not belong, strictly spoken, to *Logic* but to *Ontology* (for more details see Cornelis-Anthonie van Peursen, "Ars inveniendi im Rahmen der Metaphysik Christian Wolffs: Die Rolle der ars inveniendi," in *Christian Wolff 1679–1754*, ed. Werner Schneiders, 2nd ed. [Hamburg: Meiner, 1986], 67–68, 76–85).

<sup>68</sup>In his Preisschrift he dedicates many pages to discoveries in geometry ("The most necessary and fruitful means of finding something . . . It is known that all discoveries in mathematics depend upon acquaintance with figures or the limits of extension", and so on). I have found nothing about discoveries in philosophy.



Under this point of view, Mendelssohn revealed himself as still being strictly Wolffian, leaning – in the transposition of mathematical method to philosophy – towards theorems and demonstrations, rather than problems and constructions<sup>69</sup>: this is why Mendelssohn laments the lack of clarity in Lambert’s definition of “questions.” Mendelssohn refers to *Postulata* as: *Heischesätze*,<sup>70</sup> despite the fact that Lambert had repeatedly explained that *Postulata* were *Fragen*, not *Sätze*.<sup>71</sup> Not surprisingly, in his *Preisschrift*, Mendelssohn seems to underestimate the differences among those designations: “We arrive at axioms and postulates or theorems and problems, depending upon whether the consequences are immediately or mediately connected with the fundamental idea.”<sup>72</sup>

This is why Mendelssohn does not understand the difference of positions between Lambert and Wolff on this topic, even though Lambert himself had pointed it out: “Hierin gehe ich vom Wolff in Absicht auf die Sache selbst ab.”<sup>73</sup> Mendelssohn quoted this passage,<sup>74</sup> but then he states: “Hr. Lambert geht also in der Sache selbst nicht so sehr von Wolff ab, als er sich vorstellt.”<sup>75</sup>

On the one hand, Mendelssohn’s resistance to fully understand Lambert’s vast work on the “questions” shows us nothing but the true novelty and radicality of Lambert’s research; on the other hand, his persistence in speaking about it shows that he is charmed by it. It is thus surprising to read that precisely Chap. 9 – “On scientific knowledge” – dedicated to laying out the essence of scientific knowledge

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<sup>69</sup>On the contrary, Lambert is very radical in that and he came to recognize that Euclid started his *Elements* with a problem and not with a theorem: “Ich dachte etwann, er werde bei den ersten Lehrsätzen von Vergleichung der Winkel anfangen. Allein, er nimmt Winkel, Seite und Figur auf einmal, und statt eines *Lehrsatzes* fängt er mit einer *Aufgabe* an. Wie, dachte ich, muß nicht die Theorie vorgehen, ehe man zur Ausübung schreitet?” (*Abhandlung vom criterium veritatis*, § 79, in Lambert, *Philosophische Schriften*, 10.2:469).

<sup>70</sup>“Rezension,” Bd. 1, 20.

<sup>71</sup>In his review of the *Neues Organon*, Mendelssohn writes about the third chapter of the “Dianoilogie,” *Von den Urteilen und Fragen*: “Wir haben in dem dritten Hauptstücke, das von den Urteilen und Fragen handelt, keine eigentliche Erklärung, was Hr. Lambert unter Fragen oder Aufgaben (er scheint zwischen Fragen und Aufgaben keinen Unterschied gelten zu lassen, als daß jene auch *Postulata* mit begreifen) versteht, finden können . . . so ist diese Erklärung für’s erste mehr grammatisch als logisch” (“Rezension,” Bd. 1, 7–8). But Lambert was clear: statements have a descriptive character, while questions prescriptive; among those: postulates (Forderungen) have an absolute modal determination – “something *can* always be done in itself”; while problems (Aufgaben) have a deontic determination – “something *must* be done.” If statements say something about the related object, questions relate to the capabilities of the knowing subject.

<sup>72</sup>Mendelssohn, “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA* 2:279; *Philosophical Writings*, 262.

<sup>73</sup>Lambert, foreword to *Neues Organon*. And yet, in a (still unpublished) letter to Sulzer, Lambert reasserted: “I hold that Wolff did not grasp the real difference between axioms and questions; and in his works, I don’t see that he had made use of the latter” (July 24, 1763), in *Der Handschriftlicher Nachlass von Johann Heinrich Lambert* (Basel: Universitätsbibliothek, 1977), L1a 745, 200.

<sup>74</sup>“Rezension,” Bd. 1, 7.

<sup>75</sup>“Rezension,” Bd. 1, 9.

and the chapter primarily involved with the Preisfrage<sup>76</sup> (and, as such, the most apt for answering our own question about the possibility of Mendelssohn's integrations) is the one that appeared to Mendelssohn as the most obscure: "The ninth chapter, on scientific knowledge, appears to me to be elaborated with the least attention. We do not feel ashamed to admit that some places, in spite of every effort, have been left incomprehensible."<sup>77</sup>

## 4 Conclusions

My impression is that Mendelssohn's final scepticism in the face of Lambert's "daring steps" (kühne Schritte) was greater than his fascination. For this reason, no trace of Mendelssohn's very first reaction is left in his official review of the *Neues Organon*: scepticism is slower in coming, but becomes stronger than fascination. Neither Lambert's "perfect theory of signs" for philosophical subjects, nor the urgency of problems in philosophy really convinced Mendelssohn, the winner of the Prize of the Academy for the year 1763.

A few weeks before the publication of the *Neues Organon*, Mendelssohn wrote to his friend Abbt: "Listen to a friend's advice" and between "philosophy of man" (die Philosophie des Menschen) and metaphysics "on the summit of *mathesis*" (über die Anhöhen der Mathesis), choose the former<sup>78</sup> – and he underlines his suggestion with a quote from Pope: "*The proper study of mankind is man.*" Well, Lambert would have certainly chosen the latter!

Mendelssohn senses Lambert's originality and innovativeness, but perhaps is not thoroughly convinced of the applicability of the aprioristic dreams of this visionary. We can therefore conclude by saying that, rather than providing a model of a complete answer, the *Neues Organon* appears to Mendelssohn as a summation of points capable of obscuring his own, more scholastic, answer. This mix of fascination and scepticism is moreover nourished by Mendelssohn's feeling with respect to many passages of *Neues Organon*, which "seem to reveal a fund of sharp observations," which "Mr. Lambert will perhaps better explain to us on another occasion."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>The fact that this chapter is primarily involved with the Preisfrage is confirmed by the internal references to the *Neues Organon*. And, here, Lambert refers to "Dianoilogie," §§ 657–58, 662–63 (i.e., Chap. 9) and "Alethiologie," 128.

<sup>77</sup>"Das neunte Hauptstück, von der wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis, scheint mit der wenigsten Sorgfalt ausgearbeitet zu sein. Wir schämen uns nicht, zu gestehen, daß uns manche Stellen, aller angewandten Mühe ungeachtet, unverständlich geblieben sind." ("Rezension," Bd. 1, 16).

<sup>78</sup>Mendelssohn to Abbt, 9 Hornung (February 9,) 1764, in Abbt's *Vermischte Werke*, vol. 3, 168.

<sup>79</sup>"Was . . . scheint einen Fond von tiefsinnigen Betrachtungen zu verraten, die uns Hr. Lambert vielleicht bei einer andern Gelegenheit deutlicher auseinandersetzt", the refrain of his "Rezension." The conclusion is in the same mood: "Er ist so voll von seinen tiefsinnigen Meditationen, daß er sich begnügt, sie zu Papier gebracht zu haben, ohne darauf zu sehen, ob sie auch für den Leser in das erforderliche Licht gesetzt sind" (*JubA* 5.2:64).

With respect to Mendelssohn's review of the *Neues Organon*, therefore, we have to highlight his great farsightedness in praising Lambert's text despite the notorious Lambertian carelessness<sup>80</sup> for the reader; a carelessness which Lambert himself had conceded at the outset: "I wrote this work first of all for myself." And also, above all, his shrewdness in seeing that the *Erfindungskunst*, Lambert's hidden inspiration, was the real essence of his *Dianoiology* and in recognizing its novelty. It was not obvious. In fact, whereas the forthcoming three parts of the *Neues Organon* – which laid the foundations of three new sciences – were clearly novel, the *Dianoiology*, with the ordinary titles of its sessions, did not appear to herald anything different from ordinary logic. But it was novel, and Mendelssohn saw that. This review of Mendelssohn's, in spite of its appearance, is much more than a simple chapter-by-chapter summary: it is capable of offering the keys to reading Lambert's text.

What Schönfeld writes to distinguish Mendelssohn's and Kant's attitude while facing the Berlin Question is suggestive: "Both recognized the murk of disputes that surrounded metaphysics," but "Mendelssohn defended metaphysics by blaming its readers instead of its writers" while "Kant blamed the writers, not the readers."<sup>81</sup> But, at the very moment in which he reads the *Neues Organon*, Mendelssohn blames only himself, writer and reader together.

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<sup>80</sup>Carelessness that Mendelssohn laments in his "Rezension," particularly at the beginning (see *JubA* 5.2:32–33) and at the end (see *JubA* 5.2:64).

<sup>81</sup>Martin Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 210, 212.

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# Chapter 5

## Mendelssohn's Euclidean Treatise on Equal Temperament

Henk Visser

Moses Mendelssohn, once a member of a “Berlin Circle,” together with distinguished mathematicians such as Euler, was, like him, interested in “mathematical music.”<sup>1</sup> But different from Euler, who was an expert in ‘natural’ tonal relationships, Mendelssohn wrote about an artificial way of solving the problem of intonation for organs, harpsichords and clavichords. He connected prescriptions of the ancient Greek Delian problem (of construing distances with the length of the cubic root of a given length) with the problem of equal temperament tuning. Thereby he gave an original proof for Newton’s prescription.

Mendelssohn’s method was not adopted in practice, for two reasons: the reluctance of musicians to tune their instruments with an equal division of the octave at all, and the alleged practical difficulty of working with a monochord on the basis of Mendelssohn’s approximations.<sup>2</sup> As a result, only the title of Mendelssohn’s article was mentioned in the musico-theoretical literature, without a closer inspection of its content. And his mathematical contribution was ignored by mathematicians who have extensively written on the subject.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Meyer Kayserling, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sein Leben und seine Werke*, 2nd ed, revised and enlarged (Leipzig, 1888), 75.

<sup>2</sup>Johann Carl Fischer, *Geschichte der Physik seit der Wiederherstellung der Künste und Wissenschaften bis auf die neuesten Zeiten. Sechster Band* (Göttingen, 1805), 254.

<sup>3</sup>Alberto Conti, “Aufgaben dritten Grades: Verdoppelung des Würfels, Dreiteilung des Winkels” in Federigo Enriques, *Fragen der Elementargeometrie: Die geometrischen Aufgaben; Ihre Lösung und Lösbarkeit*, transl. and ed. Hermann Fleischer, 189–266 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1907); “Problemi di 3.<sup>o</sup> grado: Duplicazione del cubo – Trisezione dell’ angolo,” in *Questioni riguardanti la geometria elementare*, raccolte e coordinate da Federigo Enriques, 415–70 (Bologna: Ditta Nicola Zanichelli, 1900).

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For a proper appreciation of Mendelssohn’s mathematical talents, an analysis is given of the way he proved Newton’s theorem with Euclidean geometrical means. This requires some geometrical knowledge and familiarity with the algebraic theory of proportions, but I will try to explain Mendelssohn’s proof in a hopefully lucid way.

I will end with a short discussion of the question whether equal temperament tuning is compatible with Mendelssohn’s aesthetics of music. The lecture begins with a short introduction, in which the need of special tuning ways is expounded.

## 1 Introduction

In the course of the eighteenth century, the development of classical music reached a point in which performances on instruments with fixed tones became more and more intolerable. Transitions from one key to another required changes in pitch which organs and harpsichords could not follow. Cavallo confirmed this when he wrote:

When the compositions of old masters are performed in concert, and with the organ or harpsichord tuned in the common manner, the effect is frequently disagreeable. This is particularly the case with the songs of HANDEL, GALLUPPI, LEO, PERGOLESE, and others, who wrote in a great variety of keys, and very often in those, for which the common way of tuning is not at all calculated.<sup>4</sup>

Musical persons can take subtle intonation differences into account when they sing a capella. This holds as well for unison singing as for part-singing. For example, when you and I start singing the following tune – see Example 5.1<sup>5</sup> – we will intonate the first *e*” slightly lower than the second:

A similar effect can be found in the well-known choral melody “Herzliebster Jesu” – also known as “Father, most holy and Suffering Savior” – by Crüger



Example 5.1

<sup>4</sup>Tiberius Cavallo, “Of the temperament of those musical instruments, in which the tones, keys, or frets, are fixed, as in the harpsichord, organ, guitar, &c.,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond.* 78 (January 1788): 253–54.

<sup>5</sup>Adrianus Valerius, *Nederlandsche Gedenckklank* (Haarlem, 1616), 168. The English text is as follows: “We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing; He chastens and hastens His will to make known.”

Vom Him-mel hoch da komm ich her,  
 Vom Him-mel hoch da komm ich her,  
 8 Vom Him-mel hoch da komm ich her,  
 Vom Him-mel hoch da komm ich her,

Example 5.2

(after Schein), which J. S. Bach used twice in a modified form in the St. Matthew Passion and in the St. John's Passion. How this has come about, is a question that we can leave aside.

Suppose further that we have a professional choir at our disposal, and ask the singers to perform the following four-part version of the beginning of another well-known choral, see Example 5.2<sup>6</sup>:

It appears that the altos can intonate the second *d'* in the second bar slightly higher than the preceding *d'* if they feel that the first *d'* must form a pure fifth with the *a'* of the sopranos, and the second *d'* a pure fifth with the *g* of the tenors. In general, experienced singers “can make small tuning adjustments quickly.”<sup>7</sup>

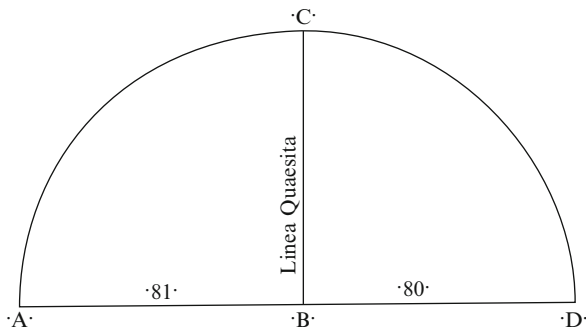
However, when the same musical fragments are played on an organ, harpsichord or clavichord, these different intonations are not possible, given the obvious limitations of these instruments. They have as a rule only one pipe or string available for two different tones with the same name. What must be done when there is only one string available for the two different *d'*'s of Example 5.2? In 1529, the Italian choirmaster Ludovico Fogliano proposed to tune the string with the geometrical mean of the two *d'*'s. The length of the corresponding string can be construed with a geometrical method. Given that the frequency ratio of the lower *d'* and the higher *d'* is 80 : 81, the task is to find the number *x* such that 80 : *x* = *x* : 81. It is Euclid who indicated how its magnitude can be geometrically determined. This is shown in Example 5.3.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Harmonization attributed to Hassler.

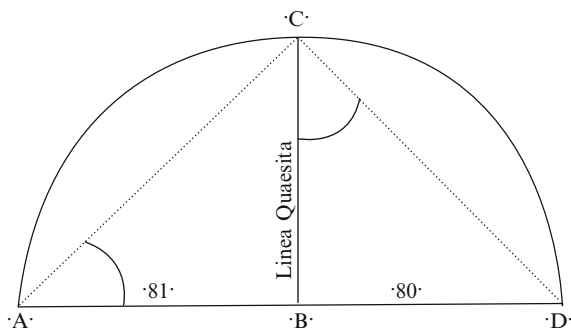
<sup>7</sup>Cathérine Schmidt-Jones, “Tuning Systems,” *Connexions* (March 11, 2011), <http://cnx.org/content/m11639/1.21/>.

<sup>8</sup>Mark Lindley, “Stimmung und Temperatur,” in *Hören, Messen und Rechnen in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 6:142.





**Example 5.3**



**Example 5.4**

It follows from the similarity of the triangles ABC and CBD that  $AB : BC = CB : BD$ . See Example 5.4.

Better known are non-mathematical solutions such as the meantone temperament. In this tuning system, preference is given to pure major thirds at the cost of fifths. Thereby such musical pieces as the preceding examples sound not too bad, although the interval  $d' a'$  of Example 5.2 is smaller than a pure fifth, and the interval  $g d'$  larger than a pure fourth. It follows that composers took into account the sounding results when they wrote explicitly for keyboard instruments with mean tone tuning. However, as soon as there are too many sharps, the results are unbearable.

For this reason, compositions written by composers who wanted to switch from one key to another, no problem for singers, became more and more difficult to perform on keyboard instruments. Therefore musicians tried to find methods in order to solve this problem in the most satisfactory way, not only with regard to the euphony of the results, but also to the feasibility of the tuning in practice.

Or is there a mathematical way of theoretically solving all problems simultaneously, by dividing the octave into 12 equal parts, that is to find 11 mean proportionals

(middelevenredigen) between 1 and 2? This generalization of Fogliano's approach was described by Simon Stevin circa 1595.<sup>9</sup> Thereby the frequency ratio of two successive tones becomes the twelfth root of two. Stevin derived the lengths of the corresponding strings arithmetically. It is clear that the outcomes are only approximations.

The importance of the calculations seems to be that frets can be added to a monochord in the appropriate places in order to make the different pitches audible. The discussion of this practical application will be postponed to Moses Mendelssohn's approach, which will now be considered.

## 2 Mendelssohn's Contribution

It is well-known that Mendelssohn was a serious student of mathematics until 1760.<sup>10</sup> Euclid's *Elements* and Newton's *Principia* are two of the works he thoroughly explored. It was one of the ways he compensated for his lack of a gymnasium education. But different from most abiturients he did not leave it at that. His participation in the Berliner Kreis (Berlin Circle) of mathematicians and other scientists may have stimulated him to present more mathematical work than his treatise on probability. It is also possible that discussions on musico-theoretical subjects instigated by another famous member of the Circle, Euler, gave Mendelssohn the idea of combining the ancient Delian problem of doubling the cube with the question of equal temperament. He worked it out in his "Versuch, eine vollkommen gleichschwebende Temperatur durch die Construction zu finden."<sup>11</sup>

Mendelssohn noticed that the problem of the division of the octave into 12 parts by 11 mean proportionals can be split into three subproblems:

1. the division of the octave into two parts by one proportional;
2. the division of each of these two parts again into two parts by one proportional;
3. the division of each of the resulting four parts into three parts by two proportionals.

The third subproblem is equivalent with the Delian problem: if  $a : x = x : y$  and  $x : y = y : b$ , then  $x^3 = a^2b$  and  $y^3 = ab^2$ .

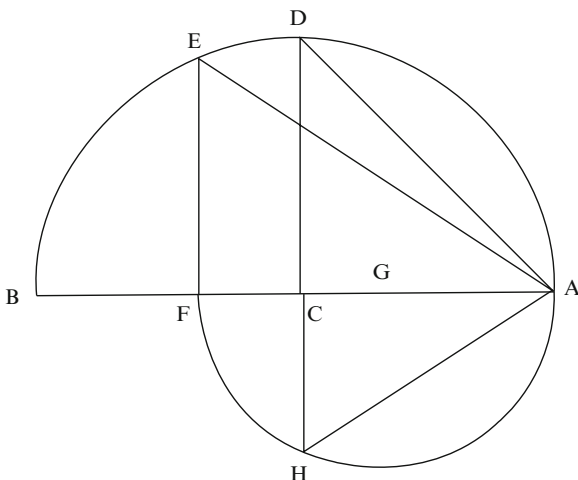
The first two subproblems present no difficulties: a geometrical solution has already been given in Example 5.4, Fogliano's method. Mendelssohn brought his solution of the two problems into one figure. See Example 5.5.<sup>12</sup> I will give it presently without much commentary, because Mendelssohn's approach is in principle the same as Fogliano's.

<sup>9</sup>E. J. Dijksterhuis, *Simon Stevin* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1943), 270–76.

<sup>10</sup>Kayserling, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 75.

<sup>11</sup>*Marpurgs historisch kritische Beiträge*, Band 5, St. 2 (1761), 95–109; Moses Mendelssohn, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1972), 189–99. Hereafter cited as *JubA* 2, followed by a colon and page number.

<sup>12</sup>*JubA* 2:197, corrected.



**Example 5.5**

Mendelssohn postulated that the interval  $c c'$  should be divided into parts in the following way:

$$c \text{ cis } d \text{ dis } e \text{ f } \text{fis} \text{ g } \text{gis} \text{ a } \text{bes} \text{ h } c'$$

With an equal temperament the frequency of the tone *fis* is exactly the geometric mean between the frequencies of  $c$  and  $c'$ :

$$c \text{ cis } d \text{ dis } e \text{ f } \mathbf{fis} \text{ g } \text{gis} \text{ a } \text{bes} \text{ h } c'$$

The same holds for the length of its string and the lengths of the strings of  $c$  and  $c'$ .

This leads to Mendelssohn's solution of the first two subproblems. Unfortunately, his Fig. 1 is misleading, since it looks as if there are two points C. This has been corrected in Example 5.6.

Suppose that the length of a string with height pitch  $c$  is AB, then the length of  $c'$ , an octave higher, is half of it, AC in Mendelssohn's Fig. 1.

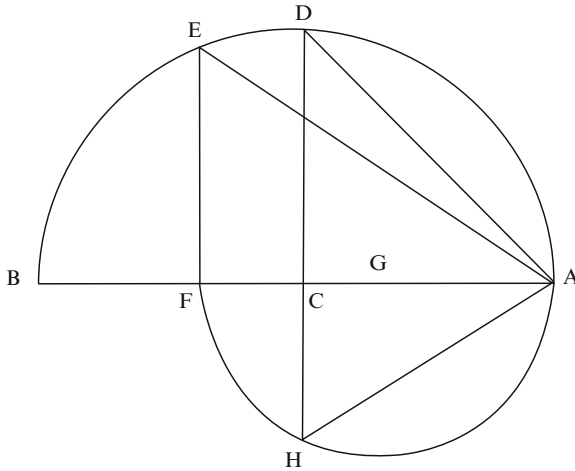
Let CD be the perpendicular of AB, with C the midpoint of AB, and D on the circle described with AB as its diameter. Then  $AB : AD = AD : AC$ , and AD is the length of the string of *fis*.

The frequency of the tone *dis* is exactly the geometric mean between the frequencies of  $c$  and *fis*:

$$c \text{ cis } d \mathbf{dis} \text{ e } \mathbf{fis} \text{ g } \text{gis} \text{ a } \text{bes} \text{ h } c'$$

If we construe F on AB, such that  $AF = AD$ , and make FE the perpendicular of AB, E on the circle, then  $AB : AE = AE : AF$ , and AE is the length of the string of *dis*. Similarly AH becomes the length of the string of *a*, because  $AF : AH = AH : AC$ .

$$c \text{ cis } d \text{ dis } e \text{ f } \mathbf{fis} \text{ g } \text{gis} \text{ a } \text{bes} \text{ h } c'$$



**Example 5.6**

It remains to show that  $AE : AF = AF : AH$ . This can easily be forgotten, but Mendelssohn saw it, and it shows that he was a good mathematician. His proof is ingenious, because it is surprisingly done by reformulating the equations:

$AB : AE = AE : AF$  and  $AF : AH = AH : AC$  respectively as  $AB : AF = AE^2 : AF^2$  and  $AF : AC = AH^2 : AC^2$ . The desired conclusion follows with help of the equation  $AB : AF = AF : AC$ .<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the third subproblem is the crucial step. It asks for two mean proportionals, for example between  $c$  and the new obtained *dis*:

*c cis d dis*

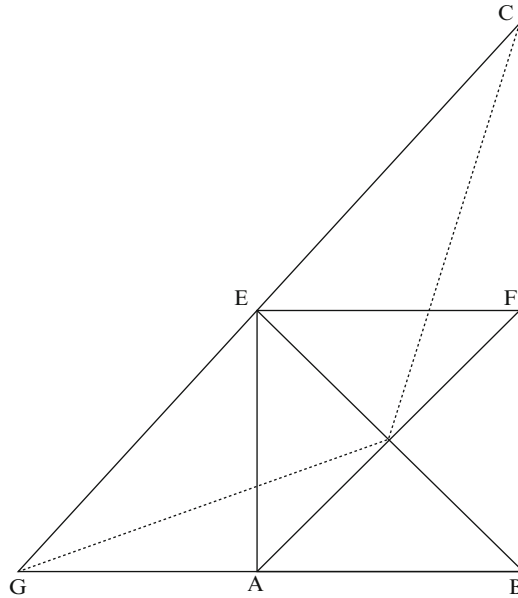
Mendelssohn's view of this problem is remarkable: he regarded it as a relatively simple task, given that so many ancient authors had solved it: "Therefore the real point is the well-known *Delian problem*, which has caused so much stir in Antiquity."<sup>14</sup> He mentions eight Greek scientists, and refers to Eutocius' Commentary on Archimedes for their solutions.<sup>15</sup> So why was it necessary to go deeper into the matter? Mendelssohn gives three arguments:

- (1) Some of the Ancient solutions are based on curves, and therefore not useful for his purpose: to give a practical method for construing the different string lengths of equal temperament;

<sup>13</sup>Perhaps it is easier to write  $AE$  as  $\sqrt{AB \cdot AF}$  and  $AH$  as  $\sqrt{AF \cdot AC}$ . Then  $AE \cdot AH = AF \sqrt{AB \cdot AC}$ . From  $AB \cdot AC = AF^2$  it follows that  $AE \cdot AH = AF^2$ , and therefore  $AE : AF = AF : AH$ .

<sup>14</sup>*JubA* 2:192. "Es kömmt also blos auf das bekannte *problema deliacum* an, das in dem Alterthum so viel Aufsehens gemacht hat."

<sup>15</sup>Ivor Thomas, ed, *Selections Illustrating the History of Greek Mathematics: From Thales to Euclid*, reprint, vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), chapter 9.1.



**Example 5.7**

- (2) There is a better method than the Ancient solutions that use only ruler and compasses, namely Newton’s construction;
- (3) Newton did not prove the correctness of his solution.

Obviously, the third argument formed a challenge for Mendelssohn. Presumably he was the first to do what Newton omitted. But in order to show the contrast with Newton’s method, he presented first the Ancient solution attributed to Heron. See Example 5.7, Mendelssohn’s Fig. 2.

Mendelssohn’s figure shows the construction. See Example 5.8.

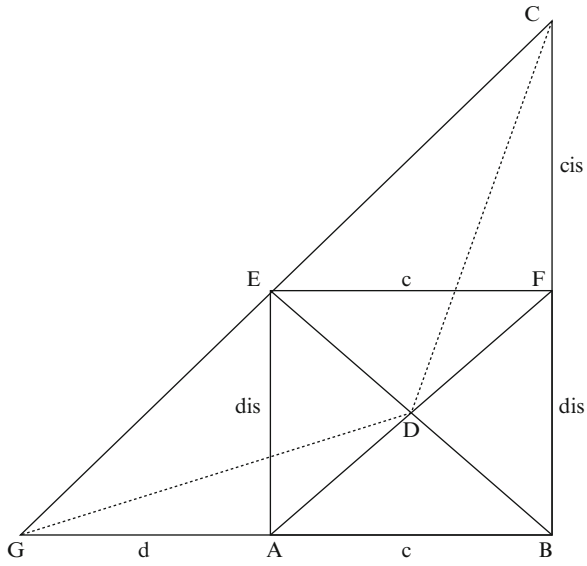
Let AB be the length of  $c$ , and AE that of  $dis$ . D is the intersection of the diagonals of the rectangle ABFE. C lies on the prolongation of BF, and G on the prolongation of BA, such that  $DC = DG$ . The claim is that the length of CF is equal to  $cis$ , and the length of GA equal to  $d$ , and that  $c : cis = cis : d$  and  $cis : d = d : dis$ .

One sees immediately that  $c : cis = d : dis$ , but clearly this is not enough. Fortunately it easily proved that  $c : cis = cis : d$ , or that  $cis : d = d : dis$  by prolonging CD and EA to their intersection H. Then  $HD = CD$ , and the triangle CGH is rectangular in G. Then there are three similar triangles. They give the desired proportions. See Example 5.9.

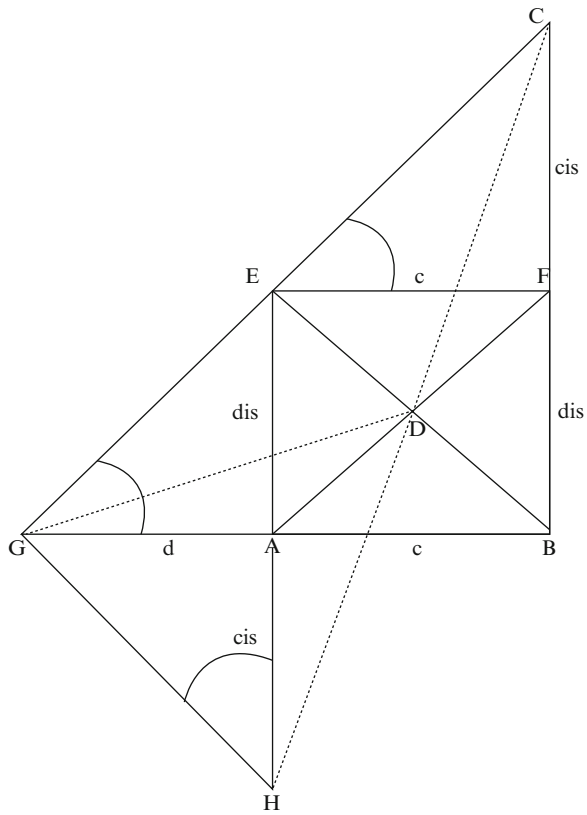
Mendelssohn referred for a proof to Sturm. It seems that he meant Sturm’s account in his edition of the works of Archimedes. But here is Sturm’s method, as it is demonstrated in his *Mathesis Iuvenilis*.<sup>16</sup> He uses a carpenter’s square with one movable leg. See Example 5.10.

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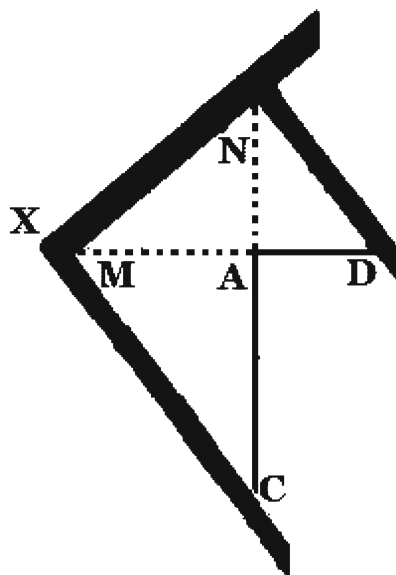
<sup>16</sup>Johann Christoph Sturm, *Mathesis iuvenilis, das ist: Anleitung vor die Jugend zur Mathesin, der erste Theil* (Nürnberg, 1714).



**Example 5.8**



**Example 5.9**

**Example 5.10**

Sturm's figure can easily be fitted into the figure of Example 5.8. The trick is to get a rectangle EGHB such that G lies on the prolongation of BA and H on the prolongation of EA. See Example 5.11.

Mendelssohn could have known this procedure from Eutocius' Commentary. Nevertheless he mentioned only the way to find the place where the place is to be found where  $DC=DG$ . He called this way 'mechanical', because the ruler cannot be surely (sicher) placed.<sup>17</sup> But of course, Sturm's procedure, attributed to Plato, is also mechanical. The same holds for Mendelssohn's prescription, which he preferred because it only requires a ruler with a scale indication. He based it upon a fragment he found in Newton's *Arithmetica universalis*.<sup>18</sup>

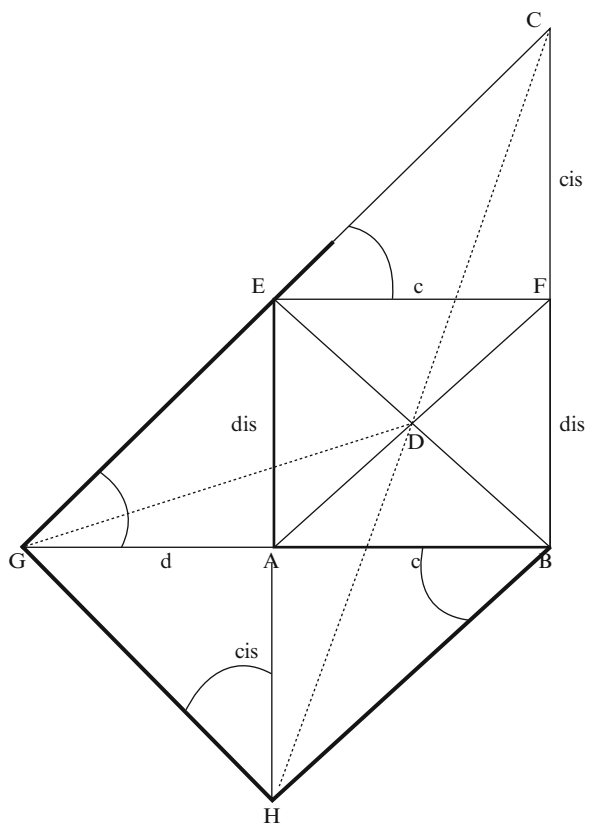
The problem Newton dealt with was to find two mean proportionals  $x$  and  $y$  between two given distances  $a$  and  $b$  in the sense that  $a^2 : x^2 = x : b$  and, apparently also  $a : y = y^2 : b^2$ , the Delian problem. Then we have not only  $a : x = y : b$  but also  $a : x = x : y$  and  $x : y = y : b$  ("Inveniendae sit inter  $a$  &  $b$  duae media proportionales  $x$  &  $y$ . Quoniam sunt  $a, x, y, b$  continue proportionales erit  $a^2$  ad  $x^2$  ut  $x$  ad  $b$ , adeoque  $x^3 = aab$ , seu  $x^3 - a^2b = 0$ "). His figure is reproduced as Example 5.12.

It is supposed that  $KA = a$  and  $C$  divides  $KA$  in two equal parts.  $X$  lies on the circle with midpoint  $K$  and radius  $KC$  such that  $CK = b$ . The lines  $AX$  and  $CX$  are infinitely produced ("infinite productas"), but a line from  $K$  is drawn such that it cuts a line segment  $EY = CA$  ( $= \frac{1}{2}a$ ) from these lines. Then it follows that  $KA, XY, KE$ , and  $CX$

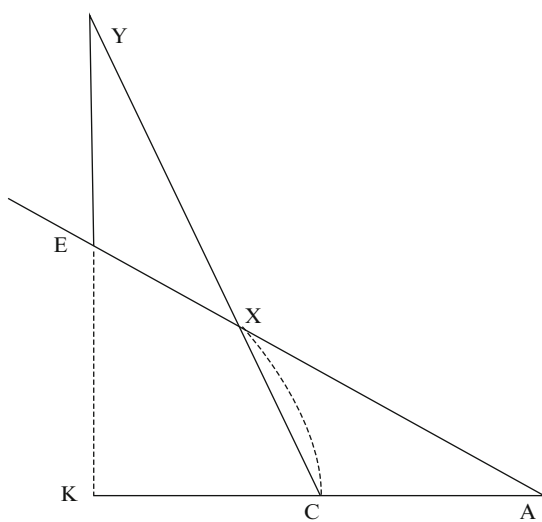
<sup>17</sup> *JubA* 2:193.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac Newton, *Arithmetica Universalis: Sive De Compositione et Resolutione Arithmetica Liber*, 2nd ed. (London, 1722), 303–4.

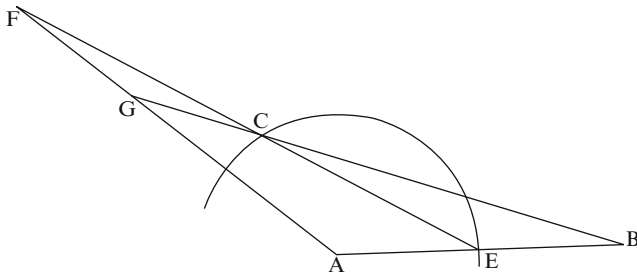
**Example 5.11**



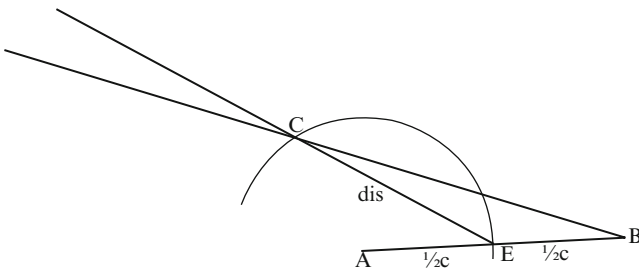
**Example 5.12**







**Example 5.13**



**Example 5.14**

form a progression in the sense that XY and KE are the two mean proportionals between  $a$  and  $b$  (“duae mediae proportionales inter  $a$  &  $b$ ”). The construction is known, least to Newton, who wrote: “Constructio nota est.”<sup>19</sup>

Mendelssohn quoted the last sentence, and he gave the following perspicuous figure (Example 5.13)<sup>20</sup>: It can be described in terms of Mendelssohn’s problem of finding the mean proportional of  $c$  and  $dis$ :

First, three points, A, B, C, and E, are given such that AB represents the length of  $c$ , and EC the length of  $dis$ , whereas E is the midpoint of AB. See Example 5.14.

Then a line through A is drawn, such that it cuts a segment of length  $\frac{1}{2}c$  from the prolongations of BC and EC. The claim is that CF becomes the length of  $c$ , and AG the length of  $d$ . See Example 5.15.

In order to prove this, an auxiliary line must be drawn in order to get similar triangles. There are (at least) two possibilities,

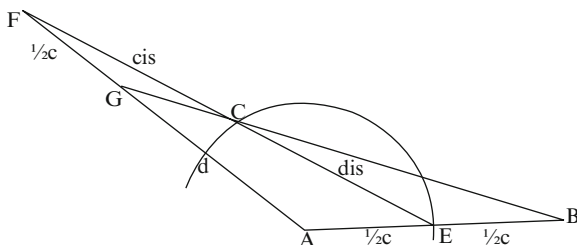
1. a line through F parallel to AB
2. a line through A parallel to EC

The line through F parallel to AB lies at hand, at least for contemporary geometers, see Example 5.16.

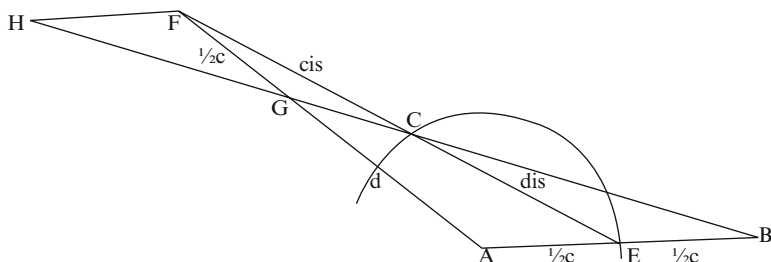
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<sup>19</sup> *JubA* 2:193.

<sup>20</sup> *JubA* 2:197.



Example 5.15



Example 5.16

It is interesting that Mendelssohn draws the line through A parallel to EC. See Example 5.17.

It seems that there is still another possibility, invented by the Dutch geometrician Van Swinden in his *Grondbeginsels der meetkunde*.<sup>21</sup> See Example 5.18.<sup>22</sup>

However, Van Swinden came no further than  $KD : AP = AK : PH$ , which amounts to the same as  $c : cis = d : dis$ . However, from this equation it does not follow that  $c : cis = cis : d$ , as one can see from the following simple arithmetical example:  $1 : 2 = 3 : 6$ , but  $1 : 2 \neq 2 : 3$ .

Van Swinden did not manage to prove ‘the missing link’  $c : cis = cis : d$ .

He fell back on Heron's construction in order to prove this equation.

See Example 5.19.<sup>23</sup>

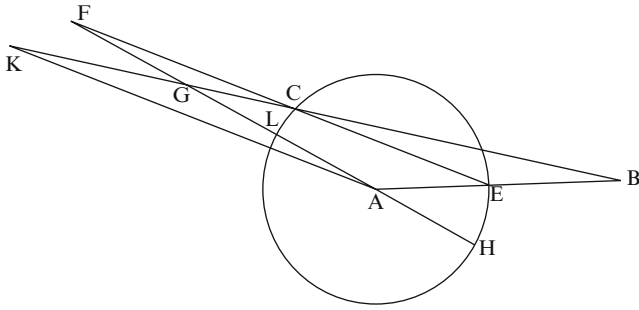
The fact that Mendelssohn did find the complete solution, shows that he was a genuine mathematical talent. It is not easy to prove the complete formula, that is, in musical terms,  $c : cis = cis : d = d : dis$ , and not only  $c : cis = d : dis$ , from Newton's figure. The missing link requires a trick, and it is an open question whether Newton indeed attained the end “in one step,” as Mendelssohn suggested<sup>24</sup>: “Allow me to

<sup>21</sup>J. H. van Swinden, *Grondbeginsels der meetkunde* (Amsterdam, 1790), 104.

<sup>22</sup>Van Swinden, *Grondbeginsels*, tabel 4.

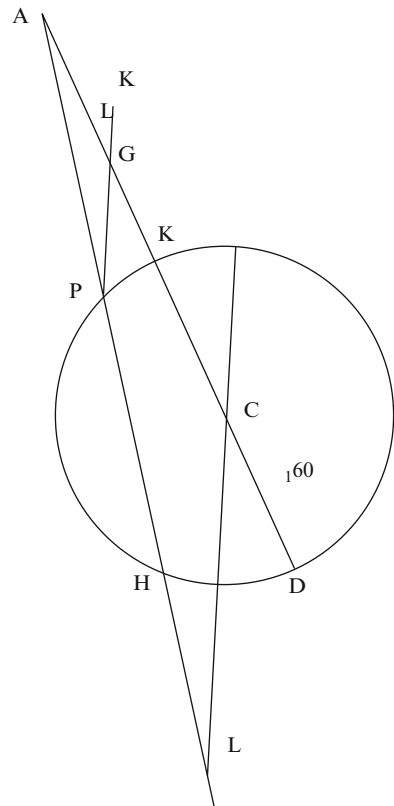
<sup>23</sup>Van Swinden, *Grondbeginsels*, tabel 4.

<sup>24</sup>*JubA* 2:193. “Es sey mir erlaubt, dasjenige zu beweisen, was der *Newton* als bekannt voraussetzt. Große Genies erreichen das Ziel mit einem Schritt, wohin sich gemeine Geister durch eine lange Reihe von Schlüssen müssen leiten lassen.”



**Example 5.17**

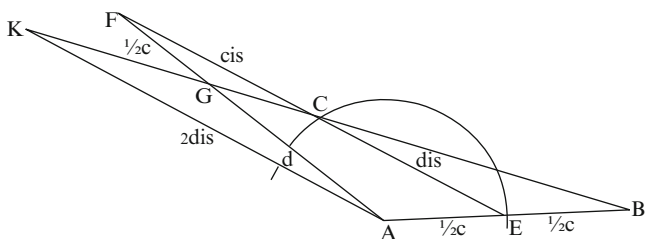
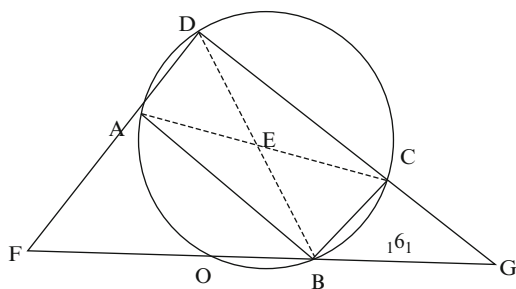
**Example 5.18**



prove what *Newton* presupposes as being well-known. Great geniuses attain the aim in one step, towards common minds must be guided by a long series of deductions.”

Back to Mendelssohn’s proof. What follows is a rational reconstruction. It is easy to see that  $AK = 2 \cdot CE$ , and hence  $AK = 2 \cdot dis$ . See Example 5.20.

**Example 5.19**



**Example 5.20**

Next, it follows from the similarity of the triangles  $FGC$  and  $AGK$ , see Example 5.20, that  $FG : FC = AG : AK$ , hence  $\frac{1}{2}c : cis = d : 2 \cdot dis$ , and therefore

$$c : cis = d : dis$$

So far, so good. But it is not enough, as we have seen. Perhaps the application of a well-known theorem is helpful.

$$FC \cdot FE = FL \cdot FH$$

See Example 5.21.

It is a corollary of Proposition XXXVI of Book III of Euclid’s *Elements*, nowadays known under the name ‘Power of a Point Theorem’. Mendelssohn mentions Proposition XXXVII, but that is incorrect.

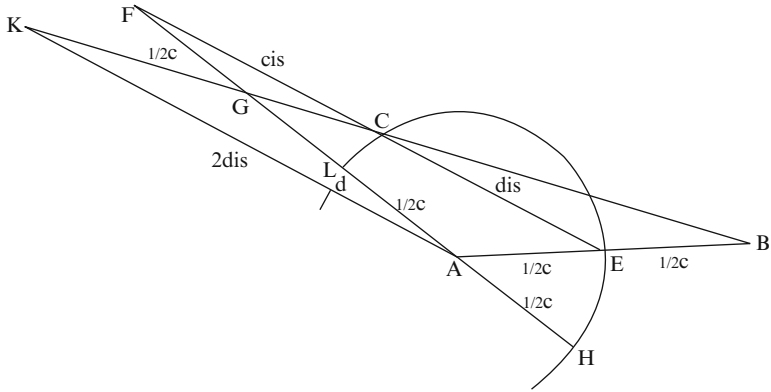
See Example 5.22 for a more perspicuous figure for the conclusion that  $FC \cdot FE = FL \cdot FH$ .

That the length of  $FL$  is  $d$ , is easy to see from Example 5.21. Therefore we have

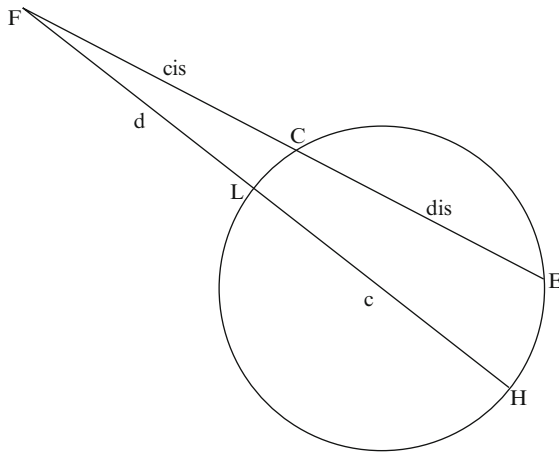
$$cis(cis + dis) = d(d + c)$$

or, if you wish,

$$cis(cis + dis) = d(c + d)$$



**Example 5.21**



**Example 5.22**

Because an equation of the form  $p \cdot q = r \cdot s$  is equivalent with  $s : q = p : r$  for nonzero values, this leads to

$$(c + d) : (cis + dis) = cis : d$$

What worries us are the sums  $(cis + dis)$  and  $(c + d)$ . Fortunately, a theorem about proportions provides us with these sums, because it allows us to draw a suitable conclusion from

$$c : cis = d : dis,$$

namely

$$(c + d) : (cis + dis) = c : cis$$

This is again based on a theorem of Euclid's Elements, namely Proposition XII of Book V. It can easily be proved by an application of the above mentioned equivalence, but a numeric example may be helpful:

$$1 : 2 = 3 : 6 \text{ leads to } (1+3) : (2+6) = 1 : 2$$

Combining the two new results gives

$$c : cis = cis : d$$

Now we have both

$$c : cis = cis : d \text{ and } cis : d = d : dis,$$

or, as is often written:

$$c : cis = cis : d = d : dis$$

Hereby Newton's account is completed. Curiously, as late as 1907 the Italian mathematician Alberto Conti<sup>25</sup> felt urged to reproduce a proof given by Carrara,<sup>26</sup> in which an appeal was made to Ceva's theorem, because Newton "left the proposition without proof" (Newton läßt diese Behauptung ohne Beweis).<sup>27</sup>

With Mendelssohn's proof of the correctness of Newton's prescription, a monochord can be construed in such a way that the frets are just in the places for the tones of the equal temperament of the octave. However, it is the result of a 'mechanical' construction, and this means that one must hope that the concrete outcomes correspond with the abstract desiderata.

That it is possible to achieve good results, using a monochord with a very exact subdivision (un monocorde muni d'un division très-exacte<sup>28</sup>), seems to appear from the following report by Biot of a successful experiment:

Cavallo, exact and ingenious physicist, reports in the Philosophical Transactions, having carefully tuned an ordinary harp on these principles, serving himself with a good monochord, the performance has been found very good in all tones and in all keys.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Alberto Conti, "Aufgaben dritten Grades: Verdoppelung des Würfels, Dreiteilung des Winkels," in Federigo Enriques, *Fragen der Elementargeometrie: Die geometrischen Aufgaben; Ihre Lösung und Lösbarkeit*, transl. and ed. Hermann Fleischer, 189–266 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1907). This is an extended version of Conti, "Problemi di 3.<sup>o</sup> grado: Duplicazione del cubo – Trisezione dell'angolo," in *Questioni riguardanti la geometria elementare*, raccolte e coordinate da Federigo Enriques, 415–70 (Bologna: Ditta Nicola Zanichelli, 1900).

<sup>26</sup> B. Carrara, *Sui tre problemi classici degli antichi in relazione di recenti risultati della scienza*. Cf. *Rivista di Fisica, Matematica e Scienze Naturali* (Pavia, 1902–1903). Quoted in Conti, "Aufgaben dritten Grades," 211 ff.

<sup>27</sup> Conti, "Aufgaben dritten Grades," 211.

<sup>28</sup> J. B. Biot, *Traité de Physique Expérimentale et Mathématique. Tome Second* (Paris, 1816), 70.

<sup>29</sup> Biot, *Traité de Physique*, 71. "Cavallo, physicien exact et ingénieux, rapporte dans les Transactions philosophiques, qu'ayant accordé soigneusement une harpe ordinaire sur ces principes, en se servant d'un bon monochorde, l'exécution s'y est trouvé très-bonne dans tous les tons et dans tous les modes."

Actually, Tiberius Cavallo tuned a harpsichord with the help of a monochord:

In order to hear the effect of the above-mentioned temperament of equal harmony, I had a monochord made in a very accurate manner, and upon it I laid down the divisions for the thirteen notes of an octave properly tempered in the manner explained above. After a great deal of trouble in adjusting the movable fret, correcting the divisions, &c. I at last succeeded so well as to render the divisions exact within at least 300th part of an inch, and every part of the instrument was rendered sufficiently steady and unalterable.

This being done, I had a large harpsichord, with a single unison (in order to judge the better of the effect), tuned very accurately by the help of the monochord. With this instrument, in whatever key the performer played, the harmony was perfectly equal throughout, and the effect was the same as if one played in the key of E natural on a harpsichord tuned in the usual manner.

I shall, therefore, conclude with saying, that when the harpsichord, or organ, &c. is to serve for solo playing, and for a particular sort of music, it is proper to tune in the usual manner, *viz.* so as to give the greatest effect to those concords which occur more frequently in that sort of music; but that when the instrument is to serve for accompanying other instruments or human voices, and especially when modulations and transpositions are to be practised, then it must be tuned according to the temperament of equal harmony, which has been explained in the preceding pages.<sup>30</sup>

Is a monochord easy to work with in musical practice? According to Robert Smith, the well-known eighteenth century scientist, it is:

As the known method of tuning an instrument by the help of a monochord is easier than any other to less skilful ears, and pretty exact too if the *apparatus* to the monochord be well contrived, it may not amiss to shew the manner of dividing it according to any proposed temperament of the scale.<sup>31</sup>

A short, but interesting discussion of this question, has been given by Johann Carl Fischer, in his *Geschichte der Physik*. Fischer mentioned Mendelssohn's contribution with credit:

It has already been brought about in Part IV, page 254, that equal temperament is the way, with which the best possible approximation of perfect consonants is simultaneously achieved. How this equal temperament can geometrically be construed, is demonstrated by Moses Mendelssohn in Marpurg's *Historico-critical Contributions to the Reception of Music*, in the Second Part of the Fifth Volume.<sup>32</sup>

Fischer mentioned the difficulty of constructing a good monochord, but he added another objection:

Without doubt, this equal temperament is how the best possible approximation of perfect consonants is simultaneously achieved. The whole tones proceed all by the ratio of 8909/10000, which differs very few from 8/9; the fifths and fourths deviate only by a

<sup>30</sup>Cavallo, *Of the temperament*, 254.

<sup>31</sup>Robert Smith, *Harmonics; or, The Philosophy of Musical Sounds*, 2nd ed., much improved and augmented (London, 1759), 223.

<sup>32</sup>Fischer, *Geschichte der Physik*, 563. "Es ist schon im Th. IV, S. 254, angeführt worden, daß die gleichschwebende Temperatur diejenige ist, bey welcher die möglichste Annäherung an die Reinigkeit für alle Consonanzen zugleich erhalten wird. Wie diese gleichschwebende Temperatur geometrisch construirt werden könne, hat Moses Mendelssohn in Marpurg's historisch-kritischen Beyträgen zur Aufnahme der Musik, im 2ten Stücke des 5ten Bandes, gezeigt."

twelfth, and the thirds by a third of a comma, which is equal to the difference of the larger and the smaller whole tone ( $8/9 : 9/10 = 80/81$ ), what is regarded as the largest deviation of the perfect consonance that is still tolerable for the ear. Nevertheless musicians have found this great difficulty with equal temperament that the tuning is only possible with an precisely divided monochord; in addition they have found it also a disadvantage that all fundamental tones become completely the same. Thereby the valuable advantages would be lost which one could otherwise draw out of the manifold of the characters of the different keys, which no sensitive composer would readily to abandon.<sup>33</sup>

Sir James Jeans remarked in his well-known book *Science & Music*,<sup>34</sup> that already Robert Smith, “writing in 1759, described equal temperament as ‘that inharmonious system of 12 hemitones, which produces a harmony extremely coarse and disagreeable.’”<sup>35</sup>

The quotation is not quite correct, as can be seen from the following fragment,<sup>36</sup> taken from the second edition of *Harmonics*, but the idea is clear: skilled musicians of that time, like Robert Smith himself – he played the harpsichord and gave lessons – did not accept equal temperament:

Now for want of another sound to terminate each diesis in the scale, it is necessary in the tuning to diminish the diesis till one sound may serve tolerably for the other, and thus to approach towards that inharmonious system of 12 hemitones, till the harmony of the scale becomes very coarse before the false consonances are barely tolerable . . .

In the first edition Smith wrote that “*Euler (b)* and others disapprove of incommensurable vibrations as impracticable and inharmonious.” He quoted from *Euler's Tentamen novae Theoriae musicae*, cap. ix. sect. 17, Petropoli, 1739, in the footnote, indicated by *b*.<sup>37</sup>

It was pointed out in the “Introduction” that the performance of eighteenth century compositions on organs and harpsichords with the then usual tuning, became more and more difficult. Now we see that the radical solution with equal temperament also met with opposition.

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<sup>33</sup>Fischer, *Geschichte der Physik*, 254. “Diese gleichschwebende Temperatur ist nun ohne allem Zweifel diejenige, bei welcher die möglichste Annäherung an die Reinigkeit für alle Consonanzen zugleich erhalten wird. Die ganzen Töne schreiten sämtlich durch das Verhältniß 8909/10000 fort, welches von 8/9 sehr wenig abweicht; die Quinten und Quarten weichen nur um den zwölften, und die Terzen um die dritten Theil eines Comma ab, welches dem Unterschiede des größern und kleinern Tons ( $8/9 : 9/10 = 80/81$ ) gleich ist, und für die größte dem Gehör erträgliche Abweichung von der Reinigkeit angenommen wird. Gleichwohl haben die Tonkünstler bey der gleichschwebenden Temperatur diese große Schwierigkeit gefunden, daß die Stimmung nicht anders, als nach einem genau eingetheilten Monochord möglich ist; überdem haben sie auch dieß als ein Nachtheil angeführt, daß in der gleichschwebenden Temperatur alle Grundtöne einander völlig gleich werden, wodurch die schätzbaren Vortheile verloren giengen, welche man sonst aus der Mannichfaltigkeit des Charakters der Tonleitern von verschiedenen Grundtönen ziehe, und welche kein Tonsetzer von Gefühl gern aufopfern werde.”

<sup>34</sup>Sir James Jeans, *Science and Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937).

<sup>35</sup>Sir James Jeans, *Science and Music*, 185.

<sup>36</sup>Smith, *Harmonics*, 167.

<sup>37</sup>Smith, *Harmonics*, 124–25.



### 3 Mendelssohn's Rudimentary Aesthetics of Music

Mendelssohn did not have an elaborated aesthetics of music, but some of his remarks on music seem to run counter to his advice on tuning instruments in equal temperament. We saw that Euler definitely preferred harmonic musical intervals, and Mendelssohn paid attention to harmonic proportions of vibrations in *Anmerkung 1* of the letters *Über die Empfindungen*. It seems that Mendelssohn saw a direct connection of harmonic vibrations and the movements inside the ear. In the *Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen* he stipulates that composers must embellish the tones of nature (Töne der Natur). Again he remarks that these natural signs produce effects on the organs of hearing. He distinguishes melody and harmony in this respect.

However, the tone relations of equal temperament have nothing 'natural,' with the exception of octaves. Therefore it is difficult to imagine that Mendelssohn would have incorporated equal temperament in an elaborated aesthetical theory of music. It is also difficult to imagine that Mendelssohn would have been a proponent of equal temperament tuning if he had heard its sounding results. It is more plausible to assume that he would be "shocked by the wide thirds."<sup>38</sup> But this is, of course, speculation. We simply don't know if Mendelssohn tuned a harpsichord at all according to his own prescription. His teacher Kirnberger was certainly not a proponent of equal temperament.

Negative appreciations of equally tempered instruments persisted throughout the nineteenth century. A serious French author saw such damaging effects on singers who get accustomed to studying at the piano, that he wanted to ban all tempered instruments from singing schools.<sup>39</sup> Obviously he had read Helmholtz: "The singer, who practises with the help of a tempered instrument, has no principle at all, with which he can surely and precisely measure the pitch of his voice."<sup>40</sup>

It is well-known that Helmholtz "was greatly impressed by the use of the Tonic Sol-fa method of instruction in England, and convinced that choirs trained by this method sang true intervals when unaccompanied."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Approximately the tempered third is higher than the true by the interval 126:125. See Baron John William Strutt Rayleigh, *The Theory of Sound*. 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1926), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Auguste Langel, *De stem, het oor en de muziek* (Gouda: G. B. van Goor Zonen, n.d.), 146.

<sup>40</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, *Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik*, 4th rev. ed. (Braunschweig 1877), 527. "Der Sänger, welcher sich an einem temperirten Instrumente einübt, hat gar kein Princip, nach welchem er die Tonhöhe seiner Stimme sicher und genauer abmessen könnte."

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Wood, *The Physics of Music*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1947), 194. The remark is based on Helmholtz's own report: Helmholtz, *Lehre von den Tonempfindungen*, 666.



Example 5.23

This means that the melody of Example 5.1 should be practiced in the indicated way. See Example 5.23:

What about Mendelssohn's hearing qualities? Could he hear the difference between the  $e$ 's of this melody? Or was he more a mathematician than a musician? Kayserling's commentary seems to confirm the latter view:

Without being capable to play an instrument in the true sense of the word, or to rightly hit the tones in singing, he could easily calculate all musical proportions, the transpositions of chords, the different tone combinations etc.<sup>42</sup>

That Mendelssohn was a good mathematician is already obvious from his Euclidean treatise on equal temperament.

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<sup>42</sup>Kayserling, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 77; 2nd ed. 64–65. "Ohne ein Instrument im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes spielen, oder die Töne im Singen treffen zu können, war er im Stande, alle Verhältnisse in der Musik, die Versetzungen der Accorde, die verschiedenen Combinationen der Töne u.s.w. leicht auszurechnen."

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**Part III**  
**Metaphysics in Historical Context**



# Chapter 6

## Moses Mendelssohn on Spinoza

Detlev Pätzold

### 1 Introduction

Two philosophical events spoil Moses Mendelssohn's last years and the second of these is supposed to have even caused his death.<sup>1</sup> The first shock for him was the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, because Mendelssohn considered its author to be the "all-quashing"<sup>2</sup> of all the matter he had regarded highly in metaphysics. The second shock he suffered was from Jacobi's reporting, that his best old friend Lessing professedly had become a Spinozist. From Mendelssohn's point of view both events oddly enough must have been interwoven. As an ardent follower of Leibniz' philosophy and no less of Christian Wolff's he was faced with

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This text is a translation and adaptation of the original German manuscript.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Michael Schulz (Oldenburg) who did the translation and took care of the English version. I am also very grateful to my learned colleague Reinier Munk (Amsterdam) who translated the quotations from Mendelssohn's *Brief an Lessing* and from his work *An die Freunde Lessings* into the English.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. frequently Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 592, 609, 702–4.

<sup>2</sup>In *Morgenstunden* (1785), Mendelssohn points out he had not sufficiently studied the metaphysical works of Kant ("des alles zermalmenden Kants"; Moses Mendelssohn, vol. 3.2 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1974], 3; hereafter cited as *JubA*) and others, like Lambert, Tetens, and Platner, in their original form. But this has to be doubted; cf. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 673–75. His comment on the state of his own knowledge as that of 1775, refers to his acceptance but not his study of the developments in recent philosophy. At that time he had felt urged to turn away from those developments. And despite of this, in a letter to Kant he writes of all his best efforts to fully comprehend Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781) at the date of April 10, 1783.

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the fact that the latter, who had refuted Spinoza in detail,<sup>3</sup> now was refuted himself by Kant's new transcendental idealism. Of course this does not mean that Kant was a Spinozist; exactly the opposite is true. Mendelssohn was aware of it, and he even did not lose hope, that Kant would "hopefully build up again with the same spirit with which he has torn down."<sup>4</sup> However, that his good old fellow Lessing was accused of Spinozism by Jacobi, was indeed the most severe shock in Mendelssohn's philosophical life. He therefore must have been very disappointed not to have Kant's full support in this conflict with Jacobi. Neither did Kant answer Mendelssohn's literal cry for help, which he had sent in his letter from October 16, 1785, nor did he respond to the enclosed copy of Mendelssohn's freshly published *Morgenstunden*. Only after Mendelssohn's death Kant publicized his short, but well-balanced view on the Jacobi-Mendelssohn controversy in his 1786 essay "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?"<sup>5</sup>

During the last years of his life Mendelssohn's view of Spinoza was strongly influenced, not to say contaminated, by the quarrel with Jacobi about Lessing's supposed Spinozism, which Jacobi took for granted from his conversations with Lessing in the year 1780. For Jacobi it was a scandal he decided to be made known initially via his letters to Elise Reimarus (for the first time in his letter from August 4, 1783). Mendelssohn responded to it with two different kinds of publication. Firstly in his *Morgenstunden*, without mentioning his opponent Jacobi; secondly in the so-called second part of the *Morgenstunden*, in his *An die Freunde Lessings* (1786), which forms the retaliation to Jacobi's malignant report *Über die Lehre des Spinoza. In Briefen an Moses Mendelssohn*, published in 1785. The whole affair grew rather complex as it increased gradually from 1783 on because more and more of the notables were involved in this conflict. In order to mention just the most famous of these: next to Elise Reimarus it was her brother Johann Albert Heinrich Reimarus, then Herder, Hamann, Lavater, Hemsterhuis, Goethe and finally even Kant.

All the facts have been described often and in detail, although they have sometimes been judged controversially.<sup>6</sup> I personally do not intend to add some other new

<sup>3</sup>Cf. *Herrn Christian Wolfs Widerlegung der B.v.S. Sittenlehre aus dem andern Theile seiner natürlichen Gottesgelahrtheit genommen* (1744), in: Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke, Materialien und Dokumente*, vol. 15, ed. Jean École et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1981), part 3, 3–128.

<sup>4</sup>JubA 3.2: 5. Moses Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), xx.

<sup>5</sup>Immanuel Kant, "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?" in *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–), 131–47. Hereafter cited as AA and volume, followed by colon and page number.

<sup>6</sup>Some examples from the last four decades are: Alexander Altmann, "Lessing und Jacobi: Das Gespräch über den Spinozismus," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung. Studien zur Metaphysik und politischen Theorie Moses Mendelssohns* (Stuttgart etc.: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982); Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 593–744; Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 44–126; David Bell, *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe* (London: University of London, 1984); Kurt Christ, *Jacobi und Mendelssohn: eine Analyse des Spinozastreits* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1988); Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 170–80; Rüdiger Otto, *Studien zur Spinozarezeption in Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1994), 173–298; Detlev Pätzold, *Spinoza, Aufklärung, Idealismus: die Substanz der Moderne*, 2nd ed. (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2002), 80–113.

detail to the puzzle at this point. Quite the contrary, my methodological approach will be a deliberate abstraction from it. This can be achieved by two steps. First I will take a closer look at the picture that Mendelssohn gave of Spinoza and his style of reasoning in his early period, i.e., in his *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755) and in his important letter to Lessing from May, 1763 – thus a long time before the *casus belli* came to light. Second I intend to give an account of Mendelssohn's late view on Spinoza, too, keeping it as unflawed as possible. This implies concentrating on his published texts exclusively, i.e., on selected parts from his *Morgenstunden* and *An die Freunde Lessings*. Reasons for my selection will be given later at the appropriate place. From a methodological point of view such an approach seems to be rather unusual, because it results in an intentional de-contextualization. The goal of this approach of close readings of the main text sources, though, is to get a fresh, if not a completely new view on Mendelssohn's 'Spinoza' and on his way of thinking with potential alterations between 1755 and 1785–1786. At least an unbiased view might thus be achieved. Undoubtedly all the previous research into the context of Mendelssohn's thinking has enriched our knowledge to a large extent. But at the same time it is my impression that exactly because of this brightly illuminated background the original character of Mendelssohn himself is at risk of disappearing from stage. By way of compensation it could be useful, to put the spot again on Mendelssohn himself. For this reason I will make use of a radicalised version of the old motto: 'back to the *author's published* sources.' Isn't it true, that to Mendelssohn – as to any author – the writings he decided to publish must have been very important? In his published writings we find the most brilliant literary expression of his thinking including his philosophically reflected emotional attitude. At least as long as freedom of thought and speech is guaranteed this is true as a general rule. And to a certain extent this freedom was indeed granted during the time of German Enlightenment of the second half of the eighteenth century. Mendelssohn himself contributed to it more than any other of his contemporaries, which is a well-known fact.

Two further decisions have to be made within my method of de-contextualization. The persons concerned are, according to Mendelssohn, the two genuine philosophical heroes of Enlightenment: Leibniz and Lessing. In order to begin with the latter: it is impossible to analyse Mendelssohn's image of Spinoza without mentioning Lessing. This applies to the early *Philosophische Gespräche*, because Lessing was involved in their genesis, their publication and their reviewing; and *a fortiori* it applies to the late writings, in which Lessing himself and his alleged Spinozism was the bone of contention. For Mendelssohn undoubtedly Leibniz had always been the point of reference within modern philosophy. As early as in *Philosophische Gespräche* Leibniz' philosophy has the function of a yardstick for the rescue (a so-called "Ehrenrettung") of Spinoza; and Mendelssohn's late writing *Sache Gottes oder die gerettete Vorsehung* (1784) is still composed out of Leibnizian spirit, except for its criticism of Christianity including Leibniz' own. So, if a closer look at Mendelssohn's view on Spinoza should be taken it should therefore be done so against the background of his Leibnizianism. Unfortunately this is prone to exceed the limits of my present text, but at least I can refer to an outstanding Mendelssohn



scholar who already worked on the topic: Alexander Altmann in his essay “Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza.”<sup>7</sup>

Another difficulty is to be found in the question whether it is really Spinoza who is referred to when Mendelssohn speaks of ‘Spinozism’ or ‘Spinozist.’ Unfortunately this question is not only a philological one, and if at all, an answer can be given only in rare instances, I am afraid. Unquestionable, however, is the fact that Mendelssohn was very well acquainted with Spinoza’s writings, even in his early period. The *Verzeichniß der auserlesenen Büchersammlung des seeligen Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, from 1786, is not complete, because some very important books, we have no record of, were stored in his office.<sup>8</sup> However, in the *Verzeichniß* of those books he had kept at home in his library there are listed the first edition of Spinoza’s early writing: *Des Cartes Principia Philosophiae more geometrico demonstratae per de Spinoza, Amstelodami 1663*,<sup>9</sup> and furthermore the first edition of *Baruch de Spinoza opera posthuma, 1677*,<sup>10</sup> containing all the other unpublished writings including the *Ethics* and the *Letters* (as known so far). Thus of all of Spinoza’s known writings only the *Tractatus theologico politicus, 1670* is missing. Perhaps Mendelssohn kept this ‘dangerous’ book at a safe place in his office. Be that as it may, in his library at home also the most important critics of Spinoza are to be found, as there are: Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique critique, 1702*<sup>11</sup> (possibly the translation of Gottsched from 1744<sup>12</sup> too), Wachter, *Der Spinozismus im Judenthumb widerleget von Wachter, Amsterdam 1699*<sup>13</sup> and *Elucidarius Cabalisticus sive reconditae Hebraeorum Philosophiae brevis recensio Epitomatore Wachtero, Romae 1706*<sup>14</sup>, Wolff, *Theologia naturalis P 1, 2, o.J.*,<sup>15</sup> and, of course, Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza, Breslau 1785*.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Alexander Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*. The frame of reference here is restricted to *Gespräche* and the later correspondence with Lessing on the topic from 1763, though.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. the postscript to the reprint from *Verzeichniß der auserlesenen Büchersammlung des seeligen Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, ed. Hermann Meyer (Berlin: F. A. Brockhaus, 1926), 2: “Die vorstehenden Blätter erhalten in getreuer Reproduktion das Verzeichnis der Bücher, die Moses Mendelssohn hinterlassen hat. Aus den Erzählungen seiner Freunde kennen wir die als Studierzimmer eingerichtete Mansarde, in der der größte Teil dieser Bibliothek aufgestellt war, während einige besonders erlesene Werke in seinem Kantor zwischen Warenproben und Kassenbüchern ihren Platz gefunden hatten; aber leider ist uns über Verbleib und Schicksal der Sammlung nichts bekannt geworden.”

<sup>9</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 16, no. 253.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 17, no. 282.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 3, nos. 43–45.

<sup>12</sup>As can be concluded from the quotations in *Gespräche*, according to Altmann, “Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” 34n32. See note 7 above.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 44, no. 500.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 52, no. 651.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 7, nos. 7–8.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 38, no. 336.

## 2 *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755/1771)

It has always been puzzling that Mendelssohn tries to rescue Spinoza as a philosopher in his first book, which was initially published anonymously and which – as it seems – was mainly composed in order to defend the philosophy of Leibniz and its Wolffian school from the attacks of the Berlin Academy (under Maupertuis) which had lasted for years since 1641.<sup>17</sup> It adds to the amazement that Mendelssohn's main argument employed for this rescue, i.e., that the Leibnizian idea of pre-established harmony can be traced back to Spinoza, had already been used earlier (by Joachim Lange in *Causa Dei*, Halle, 1723) for the purpose of accusing Leibniz and Wolff of furtive Spinozism – Mendelssohn probably knew about this – and it seemed to be by no means a useful argument in defence of Leibniz and Wolff.<sup>18</sup> Therefore it is an ingenious move of Mendelssohn to introduce his main argument as a novelty in the dialogical form of his *Gespräche* through the fictitious figure of *Neophil*, thus ignoring the old controversy.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore he wisely covers himself against possible objections by outlining Bayle as an example of an extremely meticulous critic: “[Neophil] who has often made crimes out of smaller historical inaccuracies.”<sup>20</sup>

My explanation for all this, runs as follows: both Mendelssohn and Lessing (the latter in his 1755 review of *Philosophische Gespräche*) dissociate themselves quite intentionally from the heavy ideological rows staged earlier by Lange and later by the Berlin Academy about the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy, and they decide to consider the matter simply as a historical question concerning the development of philosophy. This view can be supported by the fact that Mendelssohn maintained his position<sup>21</sup> even after Lessing had – several years later, after his own more intensive studies of Spinoza's philosophy – let him know that he was not quite content any longer with Mendelssohn's developmental thesis from *Philosophische Gespräche*.<sup>22</sup> But even though, Mendelssohn still presented his view without essential revision in

<sup>17</sup>The same line of argumentation is already employed in Mendelssohn's and Lessing's first common writing *Pope ein Metaphysiker* (1755); cf. Pätzold, *Spinoza, Aufklärung, Idealismus*, 90–92.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Fritz Bamberger, introduction to *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsgausgabe*, by Moses Mendelssohn (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), *JubA* 1:xxi–xxiii; Altmann, “Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” 35–36. A documentation of the controversy can be found in Mendelssohn's library: *Ausführlicher Entwurf einer vollständigen Historie der wolfischen Philosophie herausgegeben von Ludovici. Leipzig 1738*; cf. *Verzeichniß*, 34, no. 286.

<sup>19</sup>Only a few years after Mendelssohn's death the controversy was revived in the context of Heinrich Heydenreich's defence of Jacobi's position against Mendelssohn in *Natur und Gott nach Spinoza* (1789); cf. Altmann, “Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” 44–46.

<sup>20</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 97; *JubA* 1:4, 338. The second page of *JubA* 1 refers to (almost) identical phrases in the later edition (1771).

<sup>21</sup>For Mendelssohn's undated letter to Lessing see *JubA* 12.1:9–14.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. his letter to Mendelssohn from April 17, 1763; *JubA* 12.1:5–8.

the 1761 and 1771 editions of *Philosophische Gespräche*.<sup>23</sup> Above all both of them have a common interest in an adequate placing of Spinoza within the history of philosophy, at first they agree, later they differ; but this little dissent is by no means a dramatic one because it never was considered a question of principle. The confession to Leibniz is unbroken and the *rescue* of Spinoza – not more, but also not less than that – remains a civil obligation. Until the early 1780s the whole matter was not of greater importance – at least not to Mendelssohn; he was only interested in a historical rehabilitation of Spinoza, and he never accepted his philosophy as such. It could well be, however, that Lessing over the years inclined more towards Spinoza than Mendelssohn did, whose philosophical creed had always been based on Leibniz. This will be a topic as soon as we are going to deal with Mendelssohn's last writings.

Let us now take a closer look at his reasoning in the *first* part of his *Philosophische Gespräche*.<sup>24</sup> Mendelssohn's rescue of Spinoza is characterized by a strategy introducing the thesis that not Leibniz had been the inventor of the pre-established harmony between body and soul, but Spinoza was to be credited for this. His conclusion concerning this matter is not that Leibniz must have been a furtive Spinozist. Quite the contrary: (as an inversion of Lange's argument) it is rather Spinoza – though still not mentioned explicitly – who is characterized as a pre-Leibnizian: “[Philopon] who was a Leibnizian on this point before Leibniz.”<sup>25</sup> This phrase is not an accidental remark or an isolated ‘slip of the tongue,’ because Mendelssohn does not refrain from an anachronistic argumentation equating Spinoza's hint at our incomplete knowledge of the bodily capacities (*Ethica* 3, prop. 2, schol.) with Leibniz' notion of this<sup>26</sup>:

[Neophil] Indeed, Spinoza even avails himself of all the evasions of the Leibnizians. He appeals, like them, to our ignorance about the inner structure of our body and finally to the fact that no one has yet demonstrated the impossibility of such a machine that could produce, in a mechanical manner, all the actions to which this or that individual body is determined.<sup>27</sup>

In this matter it is not the decisive question if Mendelssohn refers correctly to Leibniz' specific reasons for his notion of pre-established harmony – as given in his

<sup>23</sup>The thesis Mendelssohn presents in 1755 is rather developmental than doctrinary. This has been pointed out earlier (cf. Pätzold, *Spinoza, Aufklärung, Idealismus*, 28 [1995: 44]). Another affirmation can be seen in the fact that Mendelssohn did not revise his view, despite Lessing's modified opinion on this issue.

<sup>24</sup>Most of the extensions and specifications Mendelssohn introduces in the later editions refer to his presentation of Leibniz' philosophy. Those of relevance and referring to Spinoza will be considered at the end of each section respectively.

<sup>25</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 100; *JubA* 1:7, 341.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. G.W. Leibniz, *Eclaircissement des difficultés que Monsieur Bayle a trouvées dans Le Systeme Nouveau de L'Union de L'Ame et de Corps* (1696), in *Kleine Schriften zur Metaphysik*, ed. H. H. Holz et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959–1992), 252–70. *Addition* (1696), *ibid.*, 271–318, could also be considered.

<sup>27</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 102; *JubA* 1:9, 343.

*Système Nouveau* (1695) and in the response to the objections of his critics, among them Pierre Bayle's criticism in the article *Rorarius* of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1695–1697), a criticism of which Mendelssohn knew very well.<sup>28</sup> The crucial point to me is the fact that Mendelssohn describes Spinoza's position in a very detailed manner. Not only the *locus classicus* for the relation between body and soul is referred to, i.e., *Ethica* 2, prop. 7 ("The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things"), but he also quotes extensively from the *scholium* to *Ethica* 2, prop. 2 and furthermore prop. 3.<sup>29</sup> It is already in his early period that Mendelssohn appears to be an expert in the *Ethica*, especially in its theory of man which Spinoza had elaborated in part three following. In contrast to this many scholars before and after Mendelssohn, who concentrated mainly on the first and second metaphysical and epistemological part of the *Ethica*.

Despite Mendelssohn's detailed acquaintance with the original texts there can of course be doubts with regard to his interpretations. Alexander Altmann made some very critical remarks.<sup>30</sup> I myself, however, believe to have good reason for taking a favorable view of Mendelssohn's interpretation, not least because the whole question about the special relationship between body and soul ("spirit" [*mens*] – as it reads in Spinoza) still is a matter of controversy – even in current Spinoza-studies. The reason for this lies in an ambiguity to occur if fragments of text from different parts of the *Ethica* are separated and rejoined in different combinations. In short, two conflicting views occur: an identicalistic versus a parallelistic reading of the body-soul relation.

By the first one body and soul are looked at as identical (*idem sunt*) because eventually they merely represent two perspectives of one and the same "thing" (*res*). Supporters of this interpretation tend to use the metaphor of the two different sides of a coin. In Spinoza the crucial passage, based on *Ethica* 2 prop. 7 and prop. 13, reads: "that is (by prop. 13, part 2) the mind and the body are one and the same individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought [thinking] and now under the attribute of extension" (*Ethica* 2, prop. 21, schol.). The choice of words demands attention here. Spinoza speaks about thinking and extension as "attributes," i.e., they are looked at from the viewpoint of the divine substance, because only the qualities of this substance are called attributes. That is why the corresponding passage in *Ethica* 2, prop. 7, schol., again refers to the divine substance: "and consequently the thinking substance and extended substance is one and the same substance, which is understood now under this and now under that attribute"; otherwise Spinoza would not have chosen the word "substance" here at all. Identity therefore, is only ascribed to divine substance, or rather it is the specific point of view as seen from substance as such. This is in accordance with *Ethica* 1,

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 103; *JubA* 1:10, 345; *Verzeichniß*, 3, nos. 43–45.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 100–101, 103; *JubA* 1:7, 342; 8, 343; 10, 345.

<sup>30</sup> See his conclusion in Altmann, "Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza," 48. Here he agrees with the later interpretations of Lessing, Jacobi, and Heydenreich and writes about Mendelssohn: "Mendelssohn's thesis has, therefore, no *locus standi*."

prop. 13 and prop. 12: “An absolutely infinite substance is indivisible,” and: “No attribute of a substance can truly be conceived from which it would follow that substance can be divided.”

The human body and its soul however, are finite “modes” (*modi*) of the infinite divine substance, and about this we can learn from the follow-up of the passage *Ethica* II, prop. 7, schol. as just quoted: “So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode is one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways.” Here it is only asserted that body and soul belong to one and the same human individual, or rather that there is no dualism between human bodies on the one hand and human souls on the other. That however does not amount to their identity *as such*, but they remain two *distinguishable* modifications of one and the same individual.

Mendelssohn, though, does not deal with these passages from *Ethica*, which as a result of inaccurate reading might suggest an identicalistic interpretation; he chooses those parts of the text which enable the alternative, parallelistic interpretation, according to which body and soul are not identical but remain distinguishable, because of their parallel or simultaneous acting (“*simul sunt*,” as it reads in Spinoza). With some significance for this reading Mendelssohn initially quotes the proposition 2 from the third part of *Ethica*: “[Neophil] Listen to a passage that I took such notice of that I should be able to translate it from memory. ‘The body cannot determine the soul to think, and the soul cannot determine the body either to move or to be at rest or to anything else (if something else is possible)’.”<sup>31</sup> He then unfortunately passes over Spinoza’s *demonstratio* and the first part of the added *scholium*, which refers back to the already cited schol. to prop. 7 of the second part. This will be quoted here in full length, because some insight into the complex relationship between Spinoza’s concept of God, his attributes and their modifications in human beings thus is provided:

... and in absolute terms, whatever arises in a body must have arisen from God in so far as he is considered as affected by some mode of extension, and not in so far as he is considered as affected by some mode of thinking (again by prop. 6, part 2). That is, it cannot arise from the mind, which (by prop. 11, part 2) is a mode of thinking; which was the second thing to be proved. Therefore, the body cannot determine the mind, etc. QED.

#### *Scholium*

This is understood more clearly from what was said in the Scholium of prop. 7, part 2: namely, that the mind and the body is one and the same thing which is conceived now under the attribute of thought [thinking] and now under the attribute of extension. From this it comes about that the order, i.e. the interconnection, of things is one, whether Nature is conceived under this or that attribute, and consequently that the order of the actions and passions of our body is simultaneous [simul] in nature with the order of the actions and passions of the mind. This is also evident from the way in which we have demonstrated prop. 12, part 2 (*Ethica* 3, prop. 2, dem., schol.).

Mendelssohn however quotes those passages of the text describing bodily capacities that are independent from influence of the soul; e.g., the passage in which assumptions about the influence of the soul are rejected, because even the bodily

<sup>31</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 100; *JubA* 1:7, 342.

capacities have to be considered as quite unknown, yet: “[Neophil] But no one has yet determined what the body can do; that is to say, no one has yet learned from experience what the body is disposed to do by virtue of the laws of motion (insofar as they are regarded as corporeal) and what it must be determined by the soul to do.”<sup>32</sup> Undoubtedly Mendelssohn favors the parallelistic reading (and I think rightly so),<sup>33</sup> although he does not take account of its original foundation within the specific Spinozian concept of God. This might be related to the fact that Mendelssohn – as Bayle before – could not agree with Spinoza’s idea of infinite extension as a divine attribute, which becomes clear only in the *second* part of *Philosophische Gespräche*.<sup>34</sup>

A different question, though, is if Mendelssohn’s partial equation of Spinozian parallelism with Leibnizian pre-established harmony is truly adequate. As mentioned before, this can hardly be discussed here; it would lead too far into the maze of the Leibnizian world. Instead emphasis has to be put on Mendelssohn’s support of his thesis with further textual evidence, on which he relies with the mentioned prop. 7 of the second part and with another fragment of Spinoza’s epistemology that can be found in prop. 3 of the third part. He firstly refers to the latter, giving *Philopon* opportunity for an objection and then tries to rebut it by the former. It is in prop. 3 that Spinoza hints at the epistemological difference between the *imaginatio*, which only gives rise to inadequate ideas, and the *ratio*, which provides for adequate ideas. In the context of his theory of the emotions this means that the former lead to passions because an imagination is nothing but a passive representation of the body (*idea corporis*), whereas the latter are actions (Mendelssohn calls them “Wirkungen”) of the reason, because the *ratio* reflects on the ideas of imagination (as *idea ideae*). “[Neophil] ‘The actions of the soul spring from adequate concepts (*ideis adaequatis*) and the passions from inadequate concepts’.”<sup>35</sup> Here Mendelssohn intends to underscore that actions of the soul have nothing to do with the body, because they are established on the meta-level of the *ratio*. *Philopon*, the fictitious dialogue partner, is provided with two further targets, though. First the occasionalistic solution, according to which interaction between soul and body is supposed to be controlled by constant divine intervention, a ‘solution’ that is definitely rejected by *Neophil*. Ironically enough this is done with reference to Spinoza’s refutation of human free

<sup>32</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 100–101; *JubA* 1:7–8, 342; cf. *Ethica* 3, prop. 2, schol.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Detlev Pätzold, “Spinoza’s lof van het lichaam,” in *Spinoza: zijn boeken en zijn denken*, ed. Alex C. Klugkist and Jacob van Sluis (Voorschoten: Uitgeverij Spinozahuis, 2010), 63–66.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 107; *JubA* 1:15, 350: “For example, the concept Spinoza appears to make for himself of extension was contested by Bayle with sound reasons, and he showed adequately that extension could not possibly be regarded as an infinite property of God.” This issue has already been discussed with some controversy at quite an early stage in Leibniz’ correspondence with Clarke by reason of Newton’s remark, that the absolute infinite space could as well be seen as the “Sensorium of God”; cf. Henry G. Alexander, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence: together with Extracts from Newton’s Principia and Opticks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998).

<sup>35</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 101; *JubA* 1:8, 342; cf. *Ethica* 3, prop. 3.

will, which normally was thought of as something being separable from human *ratio*.<sup>36</sup> Second an objection given by *Philopon* stating that Spinoza had elaborately commented on bodily mechanisms, but remained silent about the mechanism of the soul. *Neophil*'s answer is simply a twofold reference to prop. 7 of the second part of *Ethica*:

[Neophil] I content myself for the present with showing you what Spinoza maintained about the succession of our thoughts. In the seventh proposition of the second part of his *Ethics* he says: 'The order and the connection of concepts is one and the same with the order and connection of things.'<sup>37</sup>

This is certainly not a sufficient answer. But Mendelssohn aims at another, more important matter, which affects the whole Spinozistic system, more precisely its refinement. The importance derives from Mendelssohn's declared ambition to reconcile "many of Spinoza's views . . . with true philosophy and even with religion"<sup>38</sup> by means of exactly this refinement. He aims at a transformation of all that, what Spinoza thought to be description of the real, existing world, into a Leibnizian theory of "possible worlds," i.e., into the description of the condition of a possible world in the mind of God, before the creation of the actually existing world. This is a topic considered in the *second* part of *Philosophische Gespräche* and not due to be discussed yet.

Rather the two more extensive additions in the *first* part of the later editions of *Philosophische Gespräche* have to be taken into account. *Philopon* expresses criticism of Spinoza's alleged silence about his concept of the human soul here, and this criticism is intensified in pinpointing the question, how Spinoza could explain the passive mental states of the soul (the "passions" of the soul) without any reference to bodily states. Since those would have to be derived from inadequate concepts, i.e., the passions of the soul itself, this would lead to inconsistencies.<sup>39</sup> The answer given by *Neophil* remains the same: the reference to Spinoza's parallelism (*Ethica* 2, prop. 7) as a prototype of pre-established harmony. The second addition, expressed through *Neophil*, offers an even stronger and more general defence of Spinoza:

[Neophil] Spinoza has not come to his important doctrine through what is false and absurd in his system, but rather through that in it which is true. There has never yet been a system that could have consisted of purely false principles, and one can say of the Spinozistic system in particular that the most erroneous propositions of it are not so much false as they are incomplete.<sup>40</sup>

In the *second* part of *Philosophische Gespräche* Mendelssohn initially presents his developmental rehabilitation of Spinoza, based on his thesis that Spinoza was the

<sup>36</sup>Cf. *Dialogues*, 101–2; *JubA* 1:9, 343.

<sup>37</sup>*JubA* 1:10. In the 1771 edition it reads: "I content myself for the present with showing you that Spinoza must very well have thought of the difficulty that you touched on. The experience that the succession of our thoughts is interrupted by sensuous sentiments is too common for a philosopher to have been able to overlook it. In the seventh . . ." *Dialogues*, 103; *JubA* 1:345.

<sup>38</sup>*Dialogues*, 103; cf. *JubA* 1:10, 344. Only the 1755 edition has "even."

<sup>39</sup>Cf. *Dialogues*, 102; *JubA* 1:344.

<sup>40</sup>*Dialogues*, 103; *JubA* 1:345–46.



predecessor in the Leibnizian notion of pre-established harmony. As already stated by Alexander Altmann,<sup>41</sup> this is done in a truly dramatic manner, depicting Spinoza as the tragic hero in a Greek tragedy:

[Neophil] Before the transition from the Cartesian to the Leibnizian philosophy could occur, it was necessary for someone to take the plunge into the monstrous abyss lying between them. This unhappy lot fell to Spinoza. How his fate is to be pitied! He was a sacrifice for the human intellect, but one that deserves to be decorated with flowers. Without him, philosophy would never have been able to extend its borders so far.<sup>42</sup>

For Mendelssohn however, this does not imply a direct reversion to Spinoza's philosophy as such. He assumed Leibniz to have evidently and undoubtedly reached further stages than Spinoza himself had managed to achieve, and he saw Wolff as the one who later definitely refuted Spinoza in a fair and objective manner avoiding the ordinary polemic reasoning: "[Neophil] He [Wolff] shows the strongest side of it [Spinozism], and, precisely by this means, he has discovered its weakness better than anyone else. Anyone who has read his refutation attentively, will certainly never again be tempted to agree with Spinoza."<sup>43</sup> Obviously Mendelssohn's philosophical creed is not based on Spinoza's philosophy. He consequently picks up on Wolff's argumentation in his first and important criticism: "[Neophil] He proves that Spinoza believed that an infinite perfection could, as it were, be composed of an infinite amount of finite perfections."<sup>44</sup> This indeed refers to a delicate point in Spinoza's effort to facilitate the transition from the divine infinitive substance to their finite modifications. It is by no means accidental that a barrage of concepts is introduced by Spinoza to achieve this goal. The divine substance is described as absolutely infinite (*absolute infinitum*), it is supposed to hold an infinite number of attributes, each and every of those being infinite themselves as, e.g., infinite thinking and infinite extension. These attributes are infinite, however, only within their own individual sphere (*infinitum in suo genere*). Accordingly this also applies to the finite things derived from those attributes, as for instance the human spirit and body: these are finite, again within their own sphere (*finitum in suo genere*) meaning they lack the ability of affecting one another. But Spinoza also introduces infinite modes lying in between the infinite attributes and their finite modes. These infinite modes represent the never-ending process of generating finite things out of their divine cause.<sup>45</sup> This eventually seems to be a little too much even for the smarter part of his gentle readers. Obviously Wolff and Mendelssohn therefore rather preferred the simplistic dogma of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), according to which there is by definition not any given proportion of the infinite to the finite. What is more, Mendelssohn – as mentioned previously – follows Bayle in his criticism of Spinoza's claim that

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Altmann, "Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza," 29.

<sup>42</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 106; *JubA* 1:14, 349.

<sup>43</sup>*Dialogues*, 107; *JubA* 1:15, 350.

<sup>44</sup>*Dialogues*, 108; *JubA* 1:16, 351.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. *Ethica* 1, def. 6; *ibid.*, 2, prop. 1, 2.; *ibid.*, 1, def. 2; *ibid.*, 1, prop. 23; *ibid.*, 1, prop. 16.



infinite extension must be one of the divine attributes.<sup>46</sup> Spinoza himself was well aware of the difficulties concerning his concept of infinite extension. He considers it in detail in the scholium to prop. 15, and states that the indivisibility of this attribute cannot be conceived by the *imaginatio*, but only by the *intellectus*:

So if we pay attention to quantity as it is in the imagination – which we do often and with ease – it will be found to be finite, divisible, and composed of parts. But if we pay attention to it as it is in the intellect, and conceive it in so far it is substance – which is done with great difficulty – then, as we have already demonstrated sufficiently, it will be found to be infinite, unique, and indivisible (*Ethica* 1, prop. 15, schol.).

Be that as it may, as indicated before these are two crucial points, which lead Mendelssohn to his refinement of the entire Spinozistic system. In his words:

[Neophil] Now Spinoza remained at that first stage of existence. He believed that a world never became actual outside God and all visible things were, up to this hour, to be found in the divine intellect alone. What, then, the Leibnizians maintained about the plan of the world as that plan existed in the divine mind *antecedenter ad decretum* is what Spinoza believed it possible to maintain about the visible world.<sup>47</sup>

This is a strange interpretation, indeed, with no support in Spinoza's texts<sup>48</sup> nor is there any hint for a proper understanding of his view. Does it imply that Spinoza's system, understood as a possible world existing in the divine mind, in fact will be transformed into the real, existing world? But this is the assumption Mendelssohn evidently tends to object to. Thus one interpretation only remains: it does not represent the Leibnizian "best of all possible worlds" and consequently could not have been realized at all. There are good reasons for this view: The stringent determinism of the Spinozistic system ("Things could not have been produced by God in any other way, or in any other order, than that in which they were produced," *Ethica* 1, prop. 33) and, as a consequence, the provoking statement of a lack of free will ("From this it follows, first, that God does not operate by means of freedom of will," *Ethica* 1, prop. 32, coroll. 1). Is Mendelssohn's refinement then in true support of Spinozism? According to him it had not been Spinoza, after all, who provided for the best system, but the credit is due to Leibniz. Here the refinement and sophistication in Mendelssohn's strategy are clearly evident. His latter claim is consistent with his former developmental thesis of Spinoza's system being a crucial step towards true philosophy. What is more, this strategy enables Mendelssohn not only to give credit to Spinoza's philosophy, but also to find room for criticism on a number of crucial

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Pierre Bayle, *Historisches und Critisches Wörterbuch. Nach der neuesten Auflage von 1740 ins Deutsche übersetzt; auch mit einer Vorrede und verschiedenen Anmerkungen versehen von Johann Christoph Gottsched, vierter und letzter Theil O – Z. Leipzig 1744*, originally published 1695–1697, repr. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), 4:268–69. For Mendelssohn see note 34 above.

<sup>47</sup>*JubA* 1:17. A part of this passage is changed in the 1771 edition: ". . . and all visible things were not subsisting for themselves, up to this hour, outside God, but instead were still and always to be found in the divine intellect alone," Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 108; *JubA* 1:352.

<sup>48</sup>Neither *Ethica* 1, prop. 15, which only claims the causal dependence of the "modi" on the divine substance (this is the meaning of "*in esse*"!), nor the mentioning of "*causa immanens*" in prop. 18 can be of any support for this assumption. Many of Spinoza's remarks, though, give evidence of the very antithesis; e.g., *Ethica* 1, prop. 16, 25, 28, 29, 33.

ideas. Finally a third point of criticism is added towards the end of the *second* part of *Philosophische Gespräche*. Spinoza's theory is criticized for reducing the concept of freedom to an *aequilibrium indifferentia* and

[Neophil] hence, he considered this *aequilibrium* impossible and denied every intelligent entity freedom. Leibniz has fortunately dispelled this error and demonstrated irrefutably that genuine freedom consists in a choice of the best, and that compelling reasons can determine the choice and cancel mere chance but never bring about a necessity.<sup>49</sup>

Taking the acceptance of Spinoza's concept of freedom for granted Mendelssohn regards that position as consistent, but he, Mendelssohn, of course is by no means willing to do so.

The later editions of this *second part* of *Philosophische Gespräche* do not contain major changes as far as Spinoza and his theories are concerned. There are some rearrangements in the sequence of textfragments referring to Mendelssohn's thesis of the possible world existing in the divine mind. And a number of changes in concepts and terminology are applied. Spinoza's system is now characterized as a representation of an "idealistic world" and the metaphor of "prototype and copy" is employed in order to explain why Spinoza could not – as Leibniz did – qualify the human soul as an independent (substantial) force:

[Neophil] Since, however, Spinoza did not countenance the actual emergence of a replica but instead allowed for the archetype alone, he could of course have a concept of harmony without inferring from it that the soul has a power of subsisting for itself. There you see how insufficient harmony alone would have been to disabuse him of his error.<sup>50</sup>

There are no new reflections on Spinoza in the *third part* of *Philosophische Gespräche*, but Wolff's well-known criticism of Spinoza's efforts for a smooth transition from the finite to the infinite is repeated. The later editions allow for an only marginal account of this.<sup>51</sup> The *fourth part* of *Philosophische Gespräche* need not be addressed here; it does not refer to Spinoza. One general aspect, though, calls for attention: Mendelssohn's alterations in the later editions mostly are amendments of his view of Leibniz' philosophy, not of Spinoza's.

And finally, there is another aspect, which might – despite its importance – be taken for mere supposition. A reader of *Philosophische Gespräche* might easily feel that Mendelssohn not only intended a *philosophical* rescue of Spinoza, but also his rehabilitation with respect to Judaism. Two passages in support of this assumption. The latter of these passages is to be found in the *first part* as well. Here Mendelssohn indirectly refers to Spinoza's religious descent addressing the context of his role in the history of philosophy: "[Neophil] Let us always acknowledge that even someone other than a German, I add further, someone other than a Christian, namely, Spinoza, has participated immensely in the work of bettering philosophy."<sup>52</sup> Later, describing the

<sup>49</sup>Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 110–11; *JubA* 1:19, 354–55. The 1771 edition has "indifference" instead of "*aequilibrium*."

<sup>50</sup>*Dialogues*, 110; *JubA* 1:354.

<sup>51</sup>Cf. *JubA* 1:26–27, 363.

<sup>52</sup>*Dialogues*, 106; *JubA* 1:14, 349.

conditions under which “[Neophil] Spinoza’s system can exist with reason and religion,”<sup>53</sup> Mendelssohn probably used the word “religion” instead of “Christianity” quite intentionally, as to include the Jewish religion. From that point of view Spinoza’s banishment from the Jewish community in those days can be seen as a rash and unreasonable decision.<sup>54</sup>

Taking all this into account it can well be stated that in his *Philosophische Gespräche* Mendelssohn offers quite a benevolent interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy. And no major changes of this have to be noted for the later editions. His parallelistic reading of the Spinozistic solution of the mind-body problem is certainly convincing and he maintains his view, even when his friend Lessing shifts to an identicalistic interpretation in 1763. This may not give any reason for surprise, though, because Mendelssohn was bound to keep up the parallelistic interpretation according to which Spinoza was the forerunner of Leibniz’ doctrine of pre-established harmony. His rescue of Spinoza and his historical classification of Spinoza’s theory as the crucial transition from Descartes’ to Leibniz’ philosophy depend on this view. Spinoza’s philosophy, however, is not his favoured one. Mendelssohn criticizes this philosophy for at least three aspects. First, he regards Spinoza’s promotion of infinite extension to one of the divine attributes as a monstrosity – as Bayle had done before. Second, he is convinced – as was Wolff – that Spinoza had failed to introduce a smooth transition from the finite modes to the infinite attributes of the divine substance. He offers a ‘solution’ of the problem in presenting a refined version of Spinoza’s system seen as a presentation of a possible world in the divine mind, i.e., not of the real world. Doing so Mendelssohn takes quite a risk of being accused of acosmism – Spinoza in fact himself was criticized by Maimon and later by Hegel for the same reasons. Third, Mendelssohn cannot accept – as Leibniz could not – Spinoza’s determinism along with his reduction of the free will to an *aequilibrium indifferentia*.

### 3 Mendelssohn’s Letter to Lessing from 1763

In May 1763 Mendelssohn defends his thesis about Spinoza as the forerunner of pre-established harmony against Lessing’s new (identicalistic) interpretation in an undated letter to Lessing. The new interpretation according to which the assumption

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<sup>53</sup> *Dialogues*, 108; *JubA* 1:17, 352; cf. *Dialogues*, 103; *JubA* 1:10, 344: “[Neophil] many of Spinoza’s views can coexist with true philosophy and (even) with religion.”

<sup>54</sup> In his last writing, *An die Freunde Lessings*, Mendelssohn is completely clear about Spinoza’s philosophy of religion, i.e., “daß Spinoza, seiner spekulativen Lehre ungeachtet, ein orthodoxer Jude hätte bleiben können, wenn er nicht in andern Schriften das ächte Judenthum bestritten, und sich dadurch dem Gesetze entzogen hätte. Die Lehre des Spinoza kömmt dem Judenthume offenbar weit näher, als die orthodoxe Lehre der Christen,” *JubA* 3.2:188. Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico politicus* Mendelssohn obviously hints at, was published not before 1670, though; many years after his banishment from the Jewish community.

of such a harmony would be superfluous in Spinoza's system raised his objections. In his defence Mendelssohn on the one hand goes into an even closer reading of Spinoza's *Ethica* than he had done earlier. On the other hand he aims to verify his thesis even against the most liberal interpretation of the text. His approach is laudable, but his aim bears a somewhat finalistic tendency.

As for the approach Mendelssohn now refers to those textfragments which support the parallelistic reading, and had not yet been mentioned in his *Philosophische Gespräche*. This certainly adds to everybody's satisfaction. The textfragments are about Spinoza's specific monism of the sole substance, a monism, however, including different divine attributes, so that the parallelism of thinking and extension is established on the level of the divine attributes already and can easily be transmitted to the level of the finite modes, i.e., the human mind and body. Mendelssohn particularly deals with prop. 6 and prop. 7, as well as with prop. 20 and prop. 21 of the second part of the *Ethica*, which have been quoted previously to some extent. His interpretation seems to be absolutely flawless to me and deserves to be quoted in full:

Spinoza claims that body and soul are different modifications of one and the same substance. But we should understand that he connects with the word 'substance' an entirely different idea from what we ordinarily connect with it, since for him the necessary substance is also the only substance. However, Spinoza by no means denies that extension and thought are two different attributes, and that every attribute must be capable of being understood for itself, without involving the concept of another attribute. (P.2. prop. 6.) It follows, and I think that Spinoza explicitly claims this somewhere, that no motion can be understood by thought, and in turn no thought by motion, but concepts follow from concepts, and motions from motions, but in such a way that they harmonize, that is, in Spinoza's language, that concepts always express precisely the same *per modum cogitationis* what motions express *per modum extensionis*.

So when Spinoza takes both body and soul to be the same substance, the same individual, yet he does not take them to be the same thing, but, as we said, to be entirely different attributes, between which nonetheless a harmony takes place.<sup>55</sup>

As for the aim of his reply, though, we have to face a second and indeed delicate point of his letter. Mendelssohn – after a further, rather detailed analysis of textfragments from prop. 21 and prop. 20 – quite unexpectedly allows for almost unlimited freedom of interpretation and states:

In general, I think, what matters here is not this or that expression that Spinoza used, nor whether he admitted more than one substance or not. The principle question is whether Spinoza taught the following propositions, in which lies, I believe, the essence of harmony.<sup>56</sup>

But it is not any well considered form of interpretation he would accept. Mendelssohn regards a number of basic sentences in Spinoza's text as giving the preconditions for interpretation. They *in fact* contain the doctrine of pre-established

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<sup>55</sup> *JubA* 12.1:11–12.

<sup>56</sup> *JubA* 12.1:12.

harmony and apply to a supporter of monism (Spinoza) as well as to a supporter of pluralism of substance(s) (Leibniz). All of the four basic sentences which Mendelssohn establishes refer to the parallelism between thoughts and motions of extended bodies. In short these are: (1) that both are distinct; (2) that thinking in no way can be the efficient cause of the alterations of extended bodies and vice versa; (3) that a thought always emerges from another thought, and a motion always from another motion; (4) that the chain of thoughts and the chain of motions are always in harmony.<sup>57</sup> For Mendelssohn evidence is found in prop. 7 from the second part of the *Ethica*, which he accurately translates as: “the order and connection of concepts [*idearum*] is one and the same with the order and connection of things.”<sup>58</sup> He is convinced that all the terms of this sentence hold the same meaning in Leibniz’ theory, and therefore he considers it to contain the doctrine of pre-established harmony: “The meaning of the proposition is entirely Leibnizian.”<sup>59</sup> Mendelssohn admits that Leibniz employs a different way of reasoning, but he only vaguely hints at the fact that in Spinoza this proposition is based on the unity of the sole substance (i.e., monism). As soon, however, as this proposition is established, Spinoza’s monism can be abstracted from – according to Mendelssohn. He thus considers the proposition to be an axiom, or in plain words: Spinoza’s reasoning is indifferent to him. Instead he presents a short exposition of Leibniz’ pre-established harmony as a substitute for Spinoza’s complex reasoning. In Mendelssohn’s line of argument this is attached to prop. 13 from the second part of the *Ethica* according to which the real object of the existing idea in the human mind is nothing but a body or a mode of extension. In his letter Lessing had referred to the same passage and as a reply Mendelssohn simply stresses his view that “Leibniz does not seem to be far removed from these ideas.”<sup>60</sup>

The only conclusion that can be drawn from this short correspondence is that in 1763 Mendelssohn still maintains the essence of his and Lessing’s earlier position. He discusses the topic with him in a perfectly unprejudiced manner and without any resentment to Lessing, who obviously had dropped their original and commonly shared interpretation. The truth and honesty of their friendship, though, is reflected in exactly these two letters.

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. *JubA* 12.1:12.

<sup>58</sup>*JubA* 12.1:13.

<sup>59</sup>*JubA* 12.1:13.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. *JubA* 12.1:8, 13. Mendelssohn tries to bridge the gap between Spinoza and Leibniz in the following way: “Da nun die Seele [according to Leibniz] sich die Welt, (alle Veränderungen, die in den einfachen Dingen [simple substances or monads] vorgehen,) nach der Lage ihres Körpers in derselben vorstellt, (das heißt beym Spinoza, da der Körper das Objekt der Seele ist,) und da der Körper selbst nichts anders ist, als der Inbegriff der Veränderungen, die in gewissen einfachen Dingen vorgehen, und die ich als Erscheinungen wahrnehme; so muß freylich die Reihe der Erscheinungen mit der Reihe der Realitäten, das heißt die Bewegungen des Leibes mit den Begriffen der Seele harmoniren. –” (*JubA* 12.1:14). See Altmann’s criticism in: Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” 44.

## 4 *Morgenstunden* and *An die Freunde Lessings*

The emergence of an entirely new problem for Mendelssohn marks the year 1783. Jacobi denounces Lessing to be a secretive Spinozist and Mendelssohn is obliged to alter his prior rescue of Spinoza into a rescue of Lessing. Details and background of the controversy between Mendelssohn and Jacobi are very well documented for the years 1783–1785 through the leading biography of Mendelssohn.<sup>61</sup> So, let me directly refer to the question whether there are significant changes in Mendelssohn's image of Spinoza in his last two publicized texts.

### 4.1 *Morgenstunden*

In an overall perspective *Morgenstunden* can be seen as Mendelssohn's ambitious attempt to explain his essential metaphysical assumptions as well as the epistemological-methodological evidence that has to be considered in this context. He presents his attempt knowing that his recourse on the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition is seen as reasoning against the trend: "I know that my philosophy is not the philosophy of the times."<sup>62</sup> No evidence is given if and that the transcendental idealism of Kant might indicate a truly hopeful and fresh start for Mendelssohn. Amidst this dilemma he is additionally confronted with Jacobi's "metaphysical excesses concerning Spinoza," as Goethe named it. For Mendelssohn this is only a sub-issue of his problems, but, even so, in *Morgenstunden* he tries to settle it according to the terms of his deceased friend Lessing, and almost like in a philosophical last will and testament.<sup>63</sup> In Chaps. 13–15 he applies the following strategy: initially Spinozism is criticised, then a purified version is introduced, and finally proof is given for compatibility of Lessing's views with this new version. The culmination of this strategy can be found in Chap. 15. Here Mendelssohn stages 'Freund D.', a fictitious opponent, (i.e., Elise Reimarus' brother, Dr. Johann Albert Hinrich Reimarus) and makes him present the freshly publicized manuscript from Lessing's legacy (*Das Christentum der Vernunft* [ca.1753]), like the proverbial rabbit out of a hat; all this in order to defend his interpretation of Lessing from his Chap. 14. But it is Chap. 13 that is of truly high significance for the topic dealt with in the present text, i.e., Mendelssohn's image of Spinoza. Roughly speaking what Mendelssohn had previously balanced in a single overall account he now splits into two separate scores. In his previous texts on Spinoza he presented a mixed bag of criticism and caring refinement.

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 603–712, 729–53. Leo Strauss pioneered in this field, but on many a detail he took a view that differed from Altmann's later accounts; cf. Strauss, "Einleitung zu *Morgenstunden* und *An die Freunde Lessings*," *JubA* 3.2:vii–cx.

<sup>62</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, xx; *JubA* 3.2:4.

<sup>63</sup>For further details see Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 170–80.

Now, in his Chaps. 14 and 15, all the benevolent aspects are positively accounted for with Lessing's version of Spinozism. Constituents of this "purified Spinozism" (geläuterter Spinozismus) are the prior assumption that Spinoza's system could be taken for a possible world in the mind of God, and a modified concept of freedom that alleviates determinism admitting decisions of free will in the sense of what is morally good.<sup>64</sup>

But let us focus on Chap. 13 now, which is of high significance for Mendelssohn's image of Spinoza. His new strategy threatened to turn this section into a kind of bad bank contaminated with all the toxic assets. Mendelssohn probably did not know of such foul trickery of today, but it is hard to believe, however, that exactly this chapter was given the number 'thirteen' by mere chance. Still, the situation is not quite as grim as it might seem, even at this point of alarming difficulties. First of all Mendelssohn constantly refers to alternate terms like "Spinoza," "the Spinozist," "Spinozists," "supporters of Spinoza" as to blur the focus of criticism aimed at the master himself. This form of argumentative conduct had been employed earlier, but mostly by those opposing Spinoza. Secondly Mendelssohn adds a few suggestions how to mend some fences between them.

The first point of controversy is what is alleged to be holism (Alleinheitslehre) associated with the Spinozists. This holism can, of course, not be found as such in Spinoza; it rather refers to the key word *Hen kai Pan* from the conversation with Lessing and reported by Jacobi, whereas the genuine origin is to be found in Wachter's *Der Spinozismus im Judenthumb*.<sup>65</sup> This is a puzzling fact since in exactly this account an image of the construction of Spinoza's system is presented in full accuracy: the one, infinite substance, its finite (nonsubstantial) modifications as the individual thoughts and bodies, and eventually the infinite attributes thinking and extension as their divine equivalents, which they originate from. But despite all this the conclusion runs:

and this is his: One is All; or rather he [the Spinozist] says: the entire sum-total of infinitely many finite bodies and of infinitely many thoughts make up *One* unique infinite *All*, infinite in extension and infinite in thinking: *All is One*.<sup>66</sup>

It is not very difficult to see what is missing here in the account of the construction of Spinoza's system and what might mislead into a hypostatization of holism not covered by Spinoza's texts: the parallelism of the attributes and their modes (*modi*), which enables the differentiation between things and thus in Spinoza warrants both the complexity of the concept of God and the complexity of the concept of the world. Mendelssohn, though, presents a different suggestion for correcting the defects of his reduced identistic interpretation. His new move can be seen against the background of his discomfort, which he had already felt with the previously supported parallelistic interpretation. This discomfort is caused by the fact that for

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 83–84, 88–89; *JubA* 3.2: 115–16, 122–24.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Verzeichniß*, 38, no. 336 and 44, no. 500.

<sup>66</sup> Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 76; *JubA* 3.2:106.



Spinoza the finite things, although distinguishable, were only *modi* of the divine substance. This is why Mendelssohn now criticizes the monism of substance explicitly and introduces (from a Cartesian perspective) two forms of substantiality, the divine form and the form of the finite things.

Yet we distinguish *the self-sufficient* from *something subsisting for itself*. The self-sufficient is independent and requires no other being for its existence. This being is thus infinite and necessary; but what subsists for itself can be dependent in its existence and can nevertheless be on hand as a being separate from the infinite. That is to say, beings can be thought that do not subsist merely as modifications of another being, but instead have their own constancy and are themselves modified. We think we can legitimately ascribe a substantiality of this second type also to contingent finite beings. We can very well let everything stand that Spinoza thus derived with geometrical acuteness from his definition of substance, but it holds only for the self-sufficient being, to whom alone infinity in power and necessary independent being pertains, and it holds no way for all things that subsist for themselves.<sup>67</sup>

The motive for his criticism aiming even at Spinoza himself in this instance can be found in Mendelssohn's conviction of the right to exist and of the dignity of the concrete finite things, which – philosophically speaking – cannot be denied a certain form of substantiality. At this point he once again proves to be a supporter of Leibniz.

His criticism, though, brought forward against Spinoza's concept of extension and that of thinking itself seems to be a point of even more importance for Mendelssohn: "The following remark penetrates somewhat deeper into the thing and attacks not only the proofs but also the very doctrine of Spinoza."<sup>68</sup> As for Mendelssohn there is not sufficient explanation for the movement of extended bodies exclusively in the concept of extension. The same deficiency he sees in the explanation of all mental motivation based exclusively on Spinoza's concept of thinking. Relating to the first point Mendelssohn could well have referred to the careful criticism of Graf Tschirnhaus, which the earl had mentioned in two letters to Spinoza at the time.<sup>69</sup> Relating to the second point it seems as if Mendelssohn had entirely forgotten what he knew in quite some detail about Spinoza's doctrine of affections from part three to five of the *Ethica*. He writes with some reproach:

He [Spinoza] has provided simply for the material of thought and assigned to it a source in the properties of the infinite. Truth and untruth find their origin for him in the properties of the simple substance. But where do goodness and perfection, pleasure and displeasure, pain and gratification, in general where does all that come from that belongs, according to our concepts, to the faculty of approving or desire?<sup>70</sup>

As for the lingual side of things we would rather prefer to invert the terminology here and call "the formal" what Mendelssohn in this passage calls "the material"

<sup>67</sup>*Morning Hours*, 77; *JubA* 3.2:106–7.

<sup>68</sup>*Morning Hours*, 77; *JubA* 3.2:107.

<sup>69</sup>These are letters (on *Opera posthuma* and known to Mendelssohn) from Tschirnhaus of May 2, 1676 and of June 23, 1676, as well as Spinoza's replies of May 5, 1676 and of July 15, 1676, which might well have been disappointing; for further details see Pätzold, *Spinoza, Aufklärung, Idealismus*, 69–70.

<sup>70</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 78; *JubA* 3.2:108.



(das Materiale des Denkens) and vice versa. However, he demands Spinoza to include “the formal” (as used in Mendelssohn’s terminology) into his considerations, which for Mendelssohn is the faculty of desire and the quest for what is morally good. According to him the first allows space for the free will as scope of action and the latter allows the moral decision against what is bad and in favor of what is good. Taking this for granted Mendelssohn presumes even Spinoza would have to admit:

that the formal aspect of thinking is to be distinguished from the material aspect of the same, that the property of thinking does not necessarily include the property of approving, that *good* and *evil*, as well as the inclination towards the former and the disinclination from the latter, must have another source than truth and untruth.<sup>71</sup>

The differentiation demanded in this context between the physical (preferably epistemological) necessity and the moral necessity undoubtedly shares common grounds with Leibnizian concepts in quite a few respects: the so-called realm of the efficient cause versus the realm of the final cause, i.e., the physical realm of nature and the moral realm of grace respectively.<sup>72</sup>

A third point of criticism of Spinoza presented in Chap. 13 is a well known one. The problem of Spinoza’s concept of infinity has been presented and considered repeatedly, and Mendelssohn discusses it with reference to Wolff’s critique in his *Theologia naturalis Pars II*. It is the differentiation between the extension and the intension of the infinite that bears importance for Mendelssohn. Interestingly enough he associates intensional infinity – though absent in Spinoza’s texts – with the concept of an infinite force. Later this is determined to be the crucial point in Herder’s improvement of the Spinozistian system.<sup>73</sup> In his concluding words Mendelssohn strikes a conciliatory note, but the precondition is that Spinoza would have acknowledged these three points of criticism – a step he thinks Spinoza undoubtedly would have taken – and would have accepted the necessary changes,

since it is certain that this man [Spinoza] who had dedicated his life uniquely and alone to the truth would not oppose it out of obstinacy or vanity. We could embrace him and still proceed for a long stretch together. Yes, if Spinoza conceded all this to us we would be almost at our goal already.<sup>74</sup>

However, there must be reason for this word “almost” (beynahe). Could there be another additional reservation which might be found in his final text?

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<sup>71</sup> *Morning Hours*, 79; *JubA* 3.2:109.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. the short version in *Monadology* §§ 87–90, in G.W. Leibniz, *Kleine Schriften zur Metaphysik*, 478–83.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 79–81; *JubA* 3.2:112–13; for Herder see: Detlev Pätzold, “*Deus sive Natura*. J.G. Herder’s romanticised reading of Spinoza,” in *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, ed. K. van Berkel and A. Vanderjagt, (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 162–66.

<sup>74</sup> Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 81; *JubA* 3.2:113.

## 4.2 *An die Freunde Lessings*

In his introductory sentences of this text, Mendelssohn reveals retrospectively but with all clarity what his intentions were in his *Morgenstunden* lectures on Spinozism. First of all he aims at “to explain as soon as possible my ideas about Spinozism, about what is harmful and harmless in this system.”<sup>75</sup> But in the long run – as has been explained here – it is not Spinoza himself he focusses on, but rather a purified version of Spinozism which he could smoothly and easily associate with Lessing. And this is also why he is able to claim and write:

As long as people did not yet accuse my friend [Lessing] of being a secret blasphemer, and therefore also a hypocrite, I was fairly indifferent to the report that Lessing was a Spinozist. I knew that there is also a reformed Spinozism, which is very well compatible with everything that religion and ethics have in practical terms, as I have shown at length in the *Morgenstunden*.<sup>76</sup>

The atmosphere, however, had changed dramatically with Jacobi’s publication of *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*. Mendelssohn mentions this fact with all severity at the beginning of the quotation given above.

Nonetheless the following remarks will *not* deal with any of Mendelssohn’s comments on Jacobi’s image of Spinoza or what Jacobi felt to be Spinozism. It is more than evident that Mendelssohn regarded Jacobi not to be on a par with him as for the knowledge of Spinoza, and in his reliable rhetorical manner he continues to emphasize that Jacobi’s explanations are cloudy and entirely incomprehensible.<sup>77</sup> Only a few relevant passages referring directly to *Spinoza himself* will be focussed on here. They are exclusively taken from the text *An die Freunde Lessings* and specifically from the passage into which Mendelssohn inserts the *Erinnerungen* he had sent to Jacobi on August 1, 1784, and which he thus made public for the first time. As for chronological order this passage should have been dealt with prior to *Morgenstunden*, but there are two reasons why this paragraph as his final word on Spinoza indeed deserves to be placed at the end. The first is that Mendelssohn himself integrates it with his last script. And the second is that his legitimate anger about Jacobi’s unexpected and unfair publication of the whole affair is of no relevance, yet. At this point of time Mendelssohn still rather aims at the author in question (Spinoza) than at the censor and his detrimental intentions (Jacobi).<sup>78</sup>

The remarks *ad Spinozam* to be found here seem to be more of criticism than of compliment. This is understandably so, because from summer 1783 on the major priority is no longer attached to the rescue of Spinoza but rather to the rescue of his

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<sup>75</sup> *JubA* 3.2:186.

<sup>76</sup> *JubA* 3.2:188.

<sup>77</sup> The best example of his rhetorical brilliance is: *JubA* 3.2:209.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. the chivalrous note in his accompanying letter to Jacobi of August 1, 1784: *JubA* 13:216–17.

friend Lessing – as mentioned previously. Thus his main thesis claiming Spinoza to be the true inventor of pre-established harmony is no longer given any importance now. Mendelssohn rather focusses on two fields of problems again: the problems related to the concept of the infinite and the question of a possible world in the mind of God on the one hand, and the problems concerning determinism and freedom on the other. These are by no means new issues, but the possible shifts and changes against the background of Mendelssohn's previous image of Spinoza (1755–1771) demand some attention here.

It seems as if his attempt to amend Spinoza's system with the help of his thesis, which interprets this system merely as a description of a possible world in the mind of God, is now doomed to fail on the basis of his concept of infinity and finity. A transition from the intensive infinite to the extensive finity is hard enough in itself whereas the reverse procedure is utterly impossible.<sup>79</sup> In reference to his thesis this implies: neither the extra-divine reality of finite things nor their representation in thought within the infinite divine thinking can be explained sufficiently.

The same problem that Spinoza finds in having the finite really exist outside of God, the same problem, I say, he will find again when he transfers it into the divine being, and views it as a thought of God. . . . The first cause has thoughts, but no mind. It has thoughts; for thoughts, according to Spinoza, are a principal property of the only true substance. Nevertheless, it does not have particular thoughts, but only the general primary stuff of these. What generality can be understood without the particular?<sup>80</sup>

But all of this is taken into consideration by Mendelssohn against the background of Jacobi's ridiculous ideas which regard the Spinozistic substance to be an entirely amorphous and "primary stuff" (Urstoff).<sup>81</sup> For this reason he later refers to this question again – in some different context and with a different assessment.

Furthermore: up till now I always believed, that according to Spinoza only the single infinite has a true substantiality; but the manifold finite is merely a modification or thought of the infinite. . . . Finally, can there not also be a mind that imagines extension and motion as merely possible when in reality, too, they are non-existent? In accordance with Spinoza, who takes extension to be a property of the single infinite substance, this must be all the more the case.<sup>82</sup>

It obviously seems to make sense for Mendelssohn to apply the thesis of a possible world in the mind of God to Spinoza's system. But there is an issue which he pinpoints and which remains to be very critical indeed: how to apply the thesis successfully without a *principium individuationis* within the originally indivisible

<sup>79</sup>Cf. the reference to Wolff: *JubA* 3.2:206–7.

<sup>80</sup>*JubA* 3.2:200–201.

<sup>81</sup>Cf. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza, in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, in *Schriften zum Spinozastreit*, vol. 1.1 of *Werke*, ed. Klaus Hammacher and Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), 20.

<sup>82</sup>*JubA* 3.2:204–6.

attribute of infinite thinking or of infinite extension respectively? Unfortunately a solution can only be achieved by urging Spinoza's system – and Spinoza himself – to be associated with acosmism again.

The problem of determinism and freedom, though, remains. A description of Spinoza's determinism is given by Mendelssohn in accordance with a set of propositions from the first part of *Ethica*:

According to Spinoza's ideas, everything that happens in the visible world is of the strictest necessity, because it is based thus and not otherwise in the divine Being and in the possible modifications of his properties. That which does not really happen is not possible, not thinkable for him.<sup>83</sup>

In order to reach dry land – i.e., the concepts of freedom and morality – Mendelssohn tries to bridge the gap between Spinoza and Leibniz, and in the quotation given a first bridge-head can be found. "Possible modifications" (mögliche Modifikationen) are mentioned quite intentionally in his text, although it is undoubtedly known to him that according to Spinoza a sequence that is not entirely determined is impossible in itself. So the first step should be, that "[Spinoza] could have reconciled himself with the determinists on the concept of freedom." This implies: if a number of possibilities can be taken for granted (Leibniz) the choice of the best world according to the "system of *perfectissimi*" (System des *perfectissimi*) is to be considered imperative (Spinoza).<sup>84</sup> The second step then should consist of the following conclusion: on the basis of the given number of possibilities (mögliche Modifikationen) and on the basis of the principle of choice of the best this principle outrules moral indifference: "that therefore the most perfect cause must take pleasure in the good, displeasure in evil, that is, must do so intentionally, and if it operates, must operate intentionally. Here, once again, is the place where the philosopher of the school [of Leibniz-Wolff] meets the Spinozist, and where they embrace like brothers."<sup>85</sup>

In conclusion: Until the end Mendelssohn makes quite an effort to consider and interpret Spinoza's philosophy benevolently and to make amendments in the spirit of Leibniz wherever he regards them to be necessary. His hopes, though, – as mentioned in *Morgenstunden* – Spinoza would have approved of those amendments, can hardly be regarded realistic. It is not known in detail what was discussed during Leibniz' visit at Spinoza's in autumn 1676 between the two of them (issues from part one and two of the *Ethica* manuscript definitely were a topic). But obviously they could not agree, as can undoubtedly be taken from Leibniz' critical and fairly immediate commentary on the *Ethica*. This commentary was not published before of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, though. But that is a different story.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *JubA* 3.2:202. Cf. *Ethica* 1, prop. 21, 22, 23, 29; and above all axioma 3.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. *JubA* 3.2:202.

<sup>85</sup> *JubA* 3.2:204.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Pätzold, *Spinoza, Aufklärung, Idealismus*, 37–57.

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# Chapter 7

## Mendelssohn's Concept of the Human Soul in Comparison with Those of Georg Friedrich Meier and Kant

Francesco Tomasoni

### 1 Kant's Critique of Mendelssohn's Proof: The Paralogism of Reason

With regard to the immortality of the soul, as for many other questions, Kant appears to be both the point of arrival and, at the same time, a turning point in the reflection that had engaged modern thought, in particular concerning the concept of the spirit and of spirits. In this connection he had an exchange with Mendelssohn: indeed, in the second edition of *Critique of pure reason* (1787), he even confuted Mendelssohn's argument about the simplicity of the soul. Whereas Kant's explicit mention shows his esteem for the Jewish philosopher,<sup>1</sup> his criticism exposes a divergence that had begun much earlier. After the first edition of *Critique of pure reason* was published, Kant had tried to induce Mendelssohn to review his work, also involving his disciple the physician Marcus Herz as an intermediary. Mendelssohn had sheltered behind the pretext of his poor health, which had become more serious with age.<sup>2</sup> However, in his later work *Morning hours* he indirectly criticised Kant's concept of "thing in itself," and defined Kant as "all-grinding" (der alles zermalmende), alluding to the destructive results of his criticism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kant called him "this acute philosopher." *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. W. Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1956), B 413, p. 350. Hereafter cited as *KrV*. Translations are from *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 372.

<sup>2</sup>Mendelssohn to Kant, April 10, 1783. Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe*, vol. 10 (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–), 308. Hereafter cited as *AA* and volume number, followed by a colon and page number.

<sup>3</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, vol. 3.2 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 1974), 3. Hereafter cited as *JubA* and volume number, followed by a colon and page number.

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However, some differences can already be recognised 30 years earlier in their works on the theme proposed by the Berlin Academy of Science, regarding the evidence of metaphysical truths versus that of mathematical truths. Both men had stressed the difficulty of the former, but Mendelssohn had been more positive. The greater evidence of mathematics was due to its more abstract nature and to its more limited sphere. Vice versa metaphysics, having to do with the real, was faced with a task that was much more complex and, in a certain sense, never-ending. However, it was able to reach a series of consistent statements. In moral reflection it was possible to derive unquestionable principles, even if their application to individual cases was still surrounded by uncertainty. Kant on the contrary had insisted on the limits of metaphysical argumentation, which started from undemonstrated premises and reached conclusions that were always provisional. These limits were even more evident in the field of morality, where the goals appeared to escape from rational concatenation.<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, the split between the two had become more accentuated. In 1766, Kant published *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, which somewhat embarrassed Mendelssohn: although Kant had quoted the argument for the simplicity of the soul, which was to play a significant role in *Phädon*, he had also been subtly ironic about “those who dream of reason,” who venture into speculations on the relationship between spirits that go well beyond experience.<sup>5</sup> On one hand, he believed that thought originated from a simple, rational substance, from the ego that was the foundation of unity; on the other hand he implied that the description of spirits responded more to imagination and hope than to criteria of the intellect.<sup>6</sup> While it is easy to glimpse behind his allusions an intent to distance himself from the suggestions of Cambridge Platonism, with regard to which even Newton had not remained indifferent,<sup>7</sup> metaphysics itself had been called into question, although Kant declared he was in love with it.<sup>8</sup> The shadow of Emanuel Swedenborg, with his flights of thought beyond the realm of experience, was projected onto metaphysical speculations. How can we speak of spiritual sensations? How can we think that the present and the future are a single piece?<sup>9</sup>

Whereas Mendelssohn had expressed his reservations about Kant’s ironical tone, Kant had replied by reducing his own role to that of a “catharticon,” employed for purification from false certainties. Vice versa, it would be up to “geniuses” like Mendelssohn to start a “new age.”<sup>10</sup> Among arguments worth going into in greater

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<sup>4</sup>May I refer the reader to my “Mendelssohn and Kant: a singular alliance in the name of reason,” *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004): 273–86.

<sup>5</sup>AA 2:342, 350.

<sup>6</sup>AA 2:322, 334–35, 350–52, 356.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. the mention of Newton, AA 2:335; for the presence of the soul in all the body, a thesis insistently sustained by the Platonists against Descartes, see AA 2:325.

<sup>8</sup>AA 2:367.

<sup>9</sup>AA 2:339, 336.

<sup>10</sup>Kant to Mendelssohn, April 8, 1766, AA 10:70.



depth, Kant indicated the relationship between the soul and the body, and also its presence in the world and its possibility to receive and to act. In this connection, while he rejected the plausibility of a deductive argument, he stated that one must always go back to experience. However, he also expressed the doubt that reason could comprehend birth, life and death.<sup>11</sup>

The following year Mendelssohn published *Phädon: On the immortality of the soul* (1767), updating Plato's language and arguments to the mentality of the time. The work enjoyed great success not only in Germany but throughout Europe; within a few years it was republished several times and translated into many languages.<sup>12</sup> It was read by the great of the Romantic age and of idealism, and new editions continued to be produced up until the early twentieth century. Dilthey called it "a classic of rational psychology."<sup>13</sup> In the preface, alongside Plato, Mendelssohn lists as his precursors Plotinus, Descartes, Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten and Reimarus.

The emblematic value that *Phädon* possessed explains why Kant targeted this work in the context of his critique of rational psychology. At the centre of his attention lay the presumed simplicity of the soul that, not having parts one outside another, could not be disintegrated like the body. The only possible end would be total annihilation, which is the transition from being to nothing. However, this hypothesis would naturally be impossible.<sup>14</sup> Kant observed that Mendelssohn had been right to exclude extension for the soul; however he had not thought of "intensive quantity," that is of the fact that a reality could have different degrees within itself, so that the lower degrees were contained in the higher degrees. In this case, by a "gradual loss" (Nachlassung, remissio) of its powers, by "elanguescence" (Elanguessenz) the soul could be changed into nothing. To demonstrate his reasoning, Kant put forth the fact that "even consciousness" always had a degree and that this could be continually decreased.<sup>15</sup>

The transition from increasingly small degrees to nothing appeared to Kant to be imaginable. One might respond that the difficulty of the logical passage from something to nothing still remains. And indeed even Leibniz, who had theorised the indiscernible and the infinitely small, had sustained that the soul was immortal, on the basis of the continuity of nature, and that also in the next world it would avail itself of a body, even if a rarefied one, but in some way connected to this one.<sup>16</sup> It is

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<sup>11</sup>AA 10:70–72.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 149; Dominique Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn: La naissance du Judaïsme moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 212, 496, 529.

<sup>13</sup>Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 9th ed., vol. 1, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990), 13. See also vol. 3, *Friedrich der Grosse und die deutsche Aufklärung*, 154–56.

<sup>14</sup>KrV, B 413–14, p. 350.

<sup>15</sup>KrV, B 414–15, p. 351; transl. cit., 373.

<sup>16</sup>Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais*, series 6, vol. 6 of *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 212, also 58–59.



also surprising that Kant attributes a certain degree to consciousness. Shouldn't it rather be the inner sense that has it? Certainly for him the inner sense is necessarily connected to consciousness, since there is no synthetic judgement without a sensible intuition. Similarly, though with a reductive expression, Kant was to say that every affirmation of existence or persistence of the soul implicates the inner sense, but that this disappears with death.<sup>17</sup>

Kant's confutation is part of his treatment of the paralogism of reason, which in the second edition is reduced to one alone what were initially four. Here the argument of the simplicity of the soul was examined in the second paralogism, relating to quality, and was defined as "the Achilles of all the dialectic arguments of the pure doctrine of the soul" since "it appears to resist the most penetrating tests and the severest suspicions of investigation."<sup>18</sup> At the foundation of this, indeed, was the transcendental apperception whereby the "I think" is the unifying function of all the representations.<sup>19</sup> However, we cannot ignore the ambiguity of the expression that Kant used.<sup>20</sup> As we know, the Homeric hero had a weak point, and it was fatal to him. Even the presumed simplicity of the soul resists only in appearance, since it falls into a paralogism, into a deceitful reasoning (Trugschluss), which attributes to the soul, as the substance underlying the phenomena of the inner sense, that which belongs to the "I think."

In truth, through the four paralogisms of the first edition, he rejects the arbitrary identification of subject and substance, thinker and thought, knowledge and existence. The subject "I," being determinant with regard to its properties, appears to put into effect the essence of substance, which is never the "determination of another thing," whereas it determines its accidents according to a relation that cannot be inverted, and motivates the "absolute" term in the first paralogism.<sup>21</sup>

However, the ego as subject is not as such "an entity that exists" in itself, as is clarified in the second edition, in which it is stated that the *Dasein*, an independent existence, is surreptitiously added to the ego.<sup>22</sup> The ego is a function of knowledge

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<sup>17</sup>For this interpretation in reply to the objection of Vieillard-Baron, which recalled Hegel's criticism, see Heiner F. Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts: Systematische und entwicklungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995), 368–70.

<sup>18</sup>*KrV*, A 351, p. 364; transl. cit., 335.

<sup>19</sup>*KrV*, A 354–55, pp. 365–66; transl. cit., 336.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 316.

<sup>21</sup>*KrV*, A 348, p. 362; transl. cit., 333, p. 362; transl. cit., 333. According to Karl Ameriks, "The Paralogisms of Pure Reason in the First Edition," in *Immanuel Kant. Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Georg Mohr and Marcus Willaschek (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1998), 375, Kant's criticism became "more aggressive" in the last two paralogisms, whereas substantiality and simplicity were not false, but only undemonstrable.

<sup>22</sup>*KrV*, B 407, 410, pp. 346, 348; transl. cit., 368–69, 370–71. On the novelty represented by the more synthetic treatment in the second edition, see Dieter Sturma, "Die Paralogismen der reinen Vernunft in der zweiten Auflage," in Mohr and Willaschek, *Immanuel Kant. Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 406, which stresses the analogy with the ontological argument for the existence of God.

or a formal condition of knowing, but as such it is not an existing substance. Furthermore, again in the second edition, the source of the misunderstanding is located in the immediate identification between the ego as subject and the ego as object,<sup>23</sup> between the function of transcendental apperception and the object of the inner sense and of the intellect, conditioned by time and by the categories.<sup>24</sup> The multiple aspects in which the misunderstanding and the sophistic reasoning come about are linked to the concept of the soul, that substance mistaken for the transcendental ego. In truth, like anything in itself, it cannot be known, nor can it therefore be declared immortal.

Over and above the fact that Mendelssohn contested Kant's idea of the thing in itself, the net separation between thinking ego and thought ego raised the problem of self-awareness, as the development of post-Kantian philosophy was to show. It meant, a disavowal by Kant himself of the position he had embraced in his pre-critical period, when through the ego he had seen "meine Substantialität" in the soul.<sup>25</sup>

Whereas at that point he had still accepted a fundamental affirmation of rational psychology, he now separates the cogito from the soul. However, he still attributes a function to rational psychology not as "doctrine," but rather as "discipline" that, by keeping us away both from materialism and from unfounded and visionary spiritualism,<sup>26</sup> on one hand makes the limits of our knowledge clear to us, and on the other hand induces us to entrust ourselves to practical reason whereby the "need to accept a future life" presents itself.<sup>27</sup> The interest for the practical sphere, evident in the second edition of *Critique of pure reason*,<sup>28</sup> leads Kant to downsize theoretical proof in favor of practical proof, which maintains its value in its utility for man, despite the objections of the abstract intellect.<sup>29</sup>

With regard to his appreciation of practical value, his link with Mendelssohn is essential. However, a comparison with the Jewish philosopher is also important in a more careful examination of Kant's theoretical positions. In this connection, though, a sizeable role was also played by Georg Friedrich Meier in his early writings, with regard to the immortality of the soul.

<sup>23</sup> *KrV*, B 407, 410, pp. 346, 348; transl. cit., 368-69, 370-71. On the insuperable difference between self-awareness in its transcendental function and self-knowledge, necessarily conditioned by empirical forms, see Sturm, "Paralogismen in der zweiten Auflage," 393-94, 400-7.

<sup>24</sup> Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 291, 305-6. According to Ameriks, "Paralogisms in First Edition," 377, 381-82, Kant rejects the mixture that rational psychology had created between the ego and sensible qualities, as likewise the vision of substance in the empirical sense.

<sup>25</sup> AA 28:265, already 225; AA 25.1:10. For this self-criticism, Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 309-10; Sergio Landucci, *La mente in Cartesio* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002), 222-23.

<sup>26</sup> *KrV*, B 421, pp. 354-55; transl. cit., 377.

<sup>27</sup> *KrV*, B 423, p. 356; transl. cit., 378.

<sup>28</sup> Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 292-93.

<sup>29</sup> *KrV*, B 423-25, pp. 356-57; transl. cit., 378-79.

## 2 Meier's Oscillation Concerning the Immortality of the Soul

As Hinske has stressed, the concept of paralogism, as likewise other terms of logic, reached Kant from Georg Friedrich Meier, whose *Auszug der Vernunftlehre* (1752, 2nd ed. 1760) he had used for almost the entirety of his long teaching career as a text for logic lessons.<sup>30</sup> Meier had abandoned the dry handbooks of logic, attempting a purification and an improvement of reasoning that would benefit virtue, the heart and freedom. His commitment in favor of more enlightened approaches was directed towards this moral high-ground.<sup>31</sup> He had shown that prejudice insinuates itself into reasoning, making ideas appear sound that are not, and making one subject to one's own passions.<sup>32</sup> From this, paralogisms, sophistic or deceptive reasoning (*Betrugschlüsse*) arise. It was a frequent occurrence that a term in the two premises of the syllogism recurred with different content, for example narrower and wider, so as to lead to a *quaternity* of concepts.<sup>33</sup> This is the sophism that Kant, as we have seen, detects in Mendelssohn and in the paralogisms of reasoning. It is significant that, among concrete examples of deceptive reasoning, Meier included that of the immortality of the soul. In his view, one could say with certainty, thanks to its representative activity that the soul was spiritual, thus not made up of parts one exterior to another, but from this one could only exclude its natural, spontaneous disintegration, not its annihilation by the absolute being.<sup>34</sup> There was a net difference between incorruptibility and immortality. Could the soul not maintain a shadowy survival without individuality, memories, personality? Thus those who took incorruptibility to be identical with immortality produced a false syllogism.

In truth, as a young man Meier had treated the argument with an approach that was at the very least audacious, and one that had cast his career into jeopardy.

<sup>30</sup>Norbert Hinske, *Zwischen Aufklärung und Vernunftkritik: Studien zum Kantschen Logikcorpus* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998), 28.

<sup>31</sup>Georg Friedrich Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 3 vols, repr., with an appendix by Günter Schenk (Halle: Hallescher Verlag, 1997), vol. 1, "Einleitung," §§ 17–22, pp. 27–30; Meier, *Metaphysik*, 2nd ed., repr., vol. 108, bk.1–4, of Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke: Materialien und Documente*, ed. J. École et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 2007), bk. 3, § 478, p. 16; cf. Schenk, appendix and afterword to Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 843, 847, 849, 905.

<sup>32</sup>Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, vol.1, § 202, pp. 240–47; Meier, *Metaphysik*, bk.1, §§ 2–5, pp. 4–8; Meier, *Metaphysik* bk. 3, § 548, pp. 116–19; Hinske, *Zwischen Aufklärung und Vernunftkritik*, 23–25. For Meier's criticism of prejudice, see Meier, *Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts*, 1766, critical edition, ed. Heinrich P. Delfosse, Norbert Hinske and Paola Rumore (Pisa: Edizione ETS; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2005); and Paola Rumore, "Un wolffiano diffidente: Georg Friedrich Meier e la sua dottrina dei pregiudizi," introduction to *Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts*, by Georg Friedrich Meier, v-xxxvi.

<sup>33</sup>Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 2, §§ 432–38, pp. 504–8, esp. § 435, pp. 506–7.

<sup>34</sup>"So wollen manche die Unsterblichkeit der Seele beweisen, und sie schliessen: was unkörperlich ist, kann nicht durch die Verwesung sterben. Aus diesem Vernunftschlusse folgt nichts weiter, als daß die Seele nicht durch die Verwesung sterben könne," Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 2, § 437, p. 507.

In *Gedancken von dem Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode* (1746), he had dedicated considerable space to doubts and had not hesitated to contest the “prejudices” that were imbibed in the cradle. He had associated himself with Descartes, but also with Christian Wolff and Thomasius, in denouncing the subjection to authority and to the supremacy of passions that lead the intellect into hasty agreement.<sup>35</sup> Behind the idea that prejudices took root in early education, it was also possible to glimpse the radical criticism of prejudices that John Toland had made in *Letters to Serena*.<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly Meier had continually declared his own faithfulness to the Scriptures, but he had also contested those who subjected reason to a sort of “bombardment” of proofs in favor of the immortality of the soul, in an attempt to conceal the weaknesses of their arguments, and going beyond the limits of human knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

He also made reference to Pierre Bayle: he defended the utility of “particular” doubts, in pointing to the important function of the Holy Scriptures, which compensated for the “gaps in reason.”<sup>38</sup> According to a Fideist interpretation that enjoyed success in Germany until Jacobi, Meier had judged Bayle’s criticism of rational proofs as a means to induce one to take shelter behind the “canons” of faith.<sup>39</sup> In particular, he had cited the entry “Pomponace” in *The historical and critical dictionary* precisely in connection with the immortality of the soul. While not supporting the marked contrast established there between reason and faith, and though denouncing some conceptual misunderstandings, for example with regard to the concept of infinity, Meier showed himself to be sensitive to Bayle’s objections and derived several points from that highly suspect entry in the *Dictionary*.

Thus on one hand he took support from Descartes against the destructive results of criticism, while on the other hand he raised doubts concerning Descartes’ demonstration of the immortality of the soul. From one and the same entry he took both Arnauld’s praise, according to which Descartes was a man wanted by “Providence” to defeat the libertines with his proof of the immortality of the soul,<sup>40</sup> and Bayle’s doubts whereby thought was a very fragile foundation. When it had ceased, a “true death” of the soul would supervene.<sup>41</sup> For Meier, too, the steps in the argument did not lead to a necessary conclusion<sup>42</sup>: he whose handbook was to provide the logic

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<sup>35</sup>Meier, “Vorrede,” in *Gedancken von dem Zustande der Seele*, (Halle, 1746), [un-numbered pages] pp. iii, x; 1. Abschnitt, §1, 2, 7, pp. 1, 5, 18; Schenk, appendix to Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 844–45. For the link with Descartes, see Meier, *Beyträge*, 108–10; for the link with Wolff and Thomasius, see Rumore, introduction to Meier, *Beyträge*, ix–xx.

<sup>36</sup>John Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964), 1–7.

<sup>37</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 2, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, “Vorrede,” vii; 1. Abschnitt, § 8, pp. 19–20.

<sup>39</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 5, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup>Pierre Bayle, “Pomponace,” in *Dictionaire historique et critique*, 5th ed., vol. 3 (Amsterdam, 1740), 777–83, Rem. G, 3:782.

<sup>41</sup>Bayle, “Pomponace,” in *Dictionaire*, Rem. G, 3:781.

<sup>42</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 2. Abschnitt, § 16, pp. 35–36.

text for university teaching, here insisted on the need not to draw hasty conclusions of which one is certain through other ways,<sup>43</sup> and not to take terms ambivalently. He accepts that the simplicity of thought gives rise to the spirituality and incorruptibility of the soul, but not to its immortality, a clarification that again brought him back to the entry “Pomponace.”<sup>44</sup>

Meier’s rational analysis of the properties of the soul was combined with a review of his relationship with faith. In this connection he returned to what was apparently a paradoxical observation of Bayle’s: Descartes’ works had been placed on the Index, whereas those of Gassendi had been spared, although he had done his utmost to destroy Descartes’ proof of the immortality of the soul. He denounced the danger that could come to the faith from the presumption that the immortality of the soul were one of its essential and necessary prerogatives. This would nullify the distinction between the contingent and the eternal. While for Bayle it was rationally “evident” that whatever has a beginning must end,<sup>45</sup> Meier also admitted the possibility of death as an absolute distinction between mankind and God<sup>46</sup>: the constant motif running through his text was thus the contingency of the human soul.

In any case its immortality was not essentially linked to the existence of God and did not concern the core of religion.<sup>47</sup> Thus the libertines deceived themselves when they celebrated the small victory obtained on this conviction, which was only an external appendix.<sup>48</sup> Meier also drastically downsized the claimed support for morality given by the prospect of a life beyond this world; in this he followed Bayle who, citing Pietro Pomponazzi, had held that virtue would be maintained as such, indeed would have been “the most perfect” without the attraction of rewards beyond the grave. This idea agreed well with the hypothesis of the virtuous atheist.<sup>49</sup> In this text, without going so far as Bayle, Meier recognises that there are “sufficient reasons for virtue and good habits” even without the prospect of immortality, and that whatever is “excellent” is worthwhile in itself, whereas vice is “repugnant in itself.”<sup>50</sup> Alongside this idea, which leads him to deny that heaven or hell can appear to the reason as reward or punishment,<sup>51</sup> Meier puts forth an opinion that again brings him close to Bayle. Since only a “philosophical head” could grasp the foundations of virtue, while others were drawn by vices regardless of their beliefs,<sup>52</sup> to cast doubt on the immortality of the soul had no practical effect. Rather an equilibrium imposed itself naturally. Vices could not exercise an unbridled sway over everyone, since if

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<sup>43</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 2, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 2. Abschnitt, § 16, pp. 35–36.

<sup>45</sup>Bayle, “Pomponace,” in *Dictionaire*, Rem. E and G, 3:780–81.

<sup>46</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 3. Abschnitt, §§ 28, 32, pp. 57–58, 65.

<sup>47</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 14, p. 30.

<sup>48</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 10, p. 24.

<sup>49</sup>Bayle, “Pomponace,” in *Dictionaire*, Rem. H, 3:782.

<sup>50</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 13, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 5. Abschnitt, § 79, p. 163.

<sup>52</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 13, p. 28.

so they would end up by destroying themselves. Not all men could be thieves, spendthrifts, avid. Lastly, the supremacy of passions paradoxically also brought with it the stubborn maintenance of their "received opinions," of "prejudices," without allowing themselves to be detached from theoretical confutations.<sup>53</sup>

Having laid these foundations, Meier admits the simplicity, and thus the incorruptibility, of the soul, but energetically sustains its possible annihilation by God due to its contingency, over which no moral argument could prevail. Leibniz's conception that this is the "best world" among possible worlds does not authorise us to conclude that God wants the soul to survive. Men could not "embrace the entirety of the best world," since it is true that many actual phenomena appear to them to be incompatible with his idea. Nothing remained to them except to do as Job did and cover their mouths with their hands.<sup>54</sup> At most they could rely on probable reasons<sup>55</sup> and affirm the immortality of the soul not in an absolute manner, but rather only hypothetically, as something that depends on Divine disposition.

Other arguments were even weaker. The desire for immortality, which seemed to be an instinct (Trieb) inherent in human nature, could have been inculcated by education and habit. Furthermore, not all instincts were destined to be fulfilled. The fear of death also depended on prejudice, although in reality death involved relaxation, attenuation of pain, progressive loss of awareness similar to sleep. Nor was the universal consensus among different peoples over their belief in a life beyond this world decisive, since it could be the fruit of a universal error, as had come about with the Tolemaic vision of the universe. Wisdom should not be evaluated in proportion to the number of votes, indeed it was a rare commodity. Lastly, apparitions of the dead, used by the Cambridge Platonists, held no value as proof, since they only concerned visionaries and there was no surety that they were actually of the dead.<sup>56</sup>

Having contested the absolute or mathematical certainty of the proofs of the immortality of the soul, Meier recognised that they possessed a strong probability, and ventured into various conjectures that appear significant for his very conception of the soul. The Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition had, against Descartes, stressed the presence in the consciousness of confused and unaware representations. Meier thus reserved a prominent part for sleep in the next life, not even excluding eternal sleep or a vegetative life.<sup>57</sup> Although this hypothesis appeared improbable to him, he did find it probable that, also in the next life, sleep and waking would alternate so that sensation was always lively. Even the damned would be subject to this so as to always have alert sensations and feel actual pain.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 1. Abschnitt, § 13, pp. 30–31.

<sup>54</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 3. Abschnitt, §§ 27, 32, 35, pp. 57–58, 65, 71–72.

<sup>55</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 3. Abschnitt, § 34, p. 69.

<sup>56</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 3. Abschnitt, §§ 41–43, pp. 83–89.

<sup>57</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 2. Abschnitt, § 21, p. 43; 4. Abschnitt, § 60, p. 131.

<sup>58</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, § 61, p. 133–34.

The joint presence of confused and clear representations leads Meier to attribute to the soul not only spirituality, but also sensibility and memory. Only under these conditions would souls be able to receive rewards and punishments in the next life.<sup>59</sup> They also maintained free judgement, being capable of changing their state. Thus whereas Meier had contested the reliability of the proofs brought by the Cambridge Platonists in favor of the existence of the soul, in his description of the heavenly state he appears to refer to them.

The Cambridge Platonists had sustained that after death the soul would avail itself of a vehicle appropriate for it.<sup>60</sup> Meier, also based on Leibniz' principle of continuity,<sup>61</sup> hypothesised that immediately after death the soul receives "a new body," that is like the "quintessence" of the previous body and contains its "fundamental elements," the "prima semina," free of the "rough, visible" parts.<sup>62</sup> Thus death would not be a breaking off, rather a "transfer from one abode to another." On receiving a new place, the body would provide a "new viewpoint" and "new sensations." After having fallen asleep in death, the soul would reawaken to new perceptions and representations, to a new spectacle.<sup>63</sup>

This continuity between the earthly state and that of the next life, illustrated according to natural metamorphoses,<sup>64</sup> lead Meier to make some surprising statements that distanced him from the traditional view. If an infant who had had only a few or obscure representations died, also in the next life it would have a reduced use of the intellect.<sup>65</sup> This reduction could however also strike the elderly if their souls had regressed to an infantile state, although nothing certain could be said in this connection.<sup>66</sup>

The same thing held for the characteristics of the new body. While it was probable that the blessed had a more perfect body to experience fuller delight, for the damned the question was more difficult. On one hand imperfection might be a consequence of their punishment; on the other hand their suffering would be greater if they had more refined sensitivity.<sup>67</sup> In this connection, though, Meier removed the absolute character of the distinction between the blessed and the damned, since in the next life, as in this one, there would be no men who were entirely good or entirely bad, entirely happy or entirely unhappy.<sup>68</sup> Neither heaven nor hell were definitive situations,

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<sup>59</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 2. Abschnitt, §§ 17, 21, 26, pp. 37, 43, 49.

<sup>60</sup>Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul*, 2nd ed, ed. Alexander Jacob (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 137, 158–63, 177, 194.

<sup>61</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 3. Abschnitt, §§ 41–43, 107, 158–159, 166.

<sup>62</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, §§ 48, 51, pp. 98–99, 106; 5. Abschnitt, §§ 75–76, pp. 158–59.

<sup>63</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, §§ 49, 52, 53, pp. 101, 102, 109, 111–13.

<sup>64</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, § 54, 55, pp. 116–20.

<sup>65</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, § 68, p. 149.

<sup>66</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, § 69, p. 150.

<sup>67</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 5. Abschnitt, § 85, pp. 173–74.

<sup>68</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 5. Abschnitt, §§ 73, 75, 76, 77, 81, pp. 154, 158–60, 167.



indeed in themselves they were not a reward or a punishment, because in that case good or bad actions would no longer be possible. On the contrary, the blessed and the damned could perform bad or good actions, respectively, the former worsening their condition, the latter improving it. Here Origenism, already present in Henry More, emerges again, but with some particular features. Not only could one not demonstrate through reason the eternal nature of hell, but hell, being a contingent reality, could disappear. As it was possible to escape from hell, likewise heaven, too, appeared not to be definitive.<sup>69</sup>

The possibility of the opposite state of affairs, connected to the contingent, lead Meier to exclude uninterrupted progress towards the better in the next life, and to hypothesise the possibility of a fall. Whereas he dropped the idea of an ultimate reward in the next life, Meier affirmed that every free action was immediately “rewarded or punished” already “in this world.”<sup>70</sup> And indeed, if we look closely, two worlds did not really exist at all, but only one, that of the contingent, of which both this life and the next were part.<sup>71</sup> Thus the soul was protagonist of a cosmic event, connected to the essential core of its body in a continual alternation of perfecting and falling, awareness and sleep.

Meier repeated that these were conjectures, since the divine will was unknowable. However, on one hand he proposed representations of the next life that were hard to reconcile with Christian beliefs, and on the other hand he contested the absolute rational certainty of the immortality of the soul, sustaining that the transcendent nature of God lead us to reject all anthropocentrism. The perfection of the universe might perhaps require the annihilation of the soul.<sup>72</sup>

Harsh criticism did not take long to arrive and Meier was forced to respond quickly. In his text *Vertheidigung seiner Gedancken vom Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode* (1748) all reference to Bayle had disappeared and he tried to show that the positions he had taken could be reconciled with the Scriptures and with ecclesiastic doctrine. He had denied the “mathematical,” “apodeictic” or absolutely “complete” certainty of the immortality of the soul, not the “moral” certainty, highly “probable,” which provided sufficient reasons for religion and for virtue.<sup>73</sup> However, he repeated that this was not the only foundation for religion and virtue. In particular virtue was, in itself, something “excellent” and every action was necessarily connected with its natural consequences, depending on its goodness or badness. Experience could absolutely not show that in this life such a link was missing, and that compensation was needed in the next world. Not even in the case of sudden death occurring during

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<sup>69</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 5. Abschnitt, § 82, p. 168.

<sup>70</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 5. Abschnitt, § 90, pp. 183–84.

<sup>71</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 4. Abschnitt, § 66, p. 146.

<sup>72</sup>Meier, *Gedancken*, 5. Abschnitt, § 88, p. 179.

<sup>73</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung seiner Gedancken vom Zustande der Seele nach den Tode* (Halle, 1748), 12–13, 35–36, 37–38, 43, 85, 97, 102, 104, 118, 121, 124, 144, 148–49.



a good action could it be said that the reward was missing.<sup>74</sup> The importance of this problem with regard to Kant's reflection, but also that of Mendelssohn, is hard to exaggerate. On one hand emerges the problem of evil in the world, on the other hand Meier commits himself to finding some solution to it already in this life, affirming the autonomous value of the moral world and of the earthly dimension. Remorse or tranquillity of the conscience also serves for this purpose.<sup>75</sup> With regard to religion, he again insists on the contingency of the soul, which might be annihilated by God, and that cannot claim to be forever indispensable in the best of all possible worlds.<sup>76</sup>

From the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy, in the particular aesthetic-psychological accentuation given it by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten,<sup>77</sup> Meier took the confused representations and sensibility as the essential characteristics of the human soul,<sup>78</sup> while he ruled out the idea that the soul thought all the time and right from the womb. From experience one could rather sustain an alternation of more and less conscious states and the joint presence of clear and confused representations. These latter corresponded to the sensibility that does not necessarily depend on the link with the body. If a direct influence between the body and the soul was excluded, sensibility had its original roots in the soul itself, which was at one and the same time "sensible" and "spiritual." In consequence it could have maintained its sensible life even "outside of the body."<sup>79</sup>

In this perspective, the decrease of psychic power was related to the soul itself by a hypothesis that appears to anticipate Kant's objection to Mendelssohn. Returning to the elderly, Meier clarified that the soul, even if it could not disintegrate into its constituent parts, could progressively decrease in the degree of its power.<sup>80</sup>

Meier sought in this defence to avert the suspicion of his inclining towards libertinism, but at the same time he continued to cast doubt upon conceptual schemes. Even the link between spiritualism and the immortality of the soul was not absolutely indispensable. Most Church Fathers had embraced materialism and at the same time had sustained a life after this one.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>74</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung*, 19–20, 26, 28, 100–101, 124, 125, 127–29.

<sup>75</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung*, 19–20, 125, 100–101.

<sup>76</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung*, 70, 72, 74–76, 79, 82, 87–94, 95, 102.

<sup>77</sup>Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, "Vorrede zur dritten Auflage," in *Die Vorreden zur Metaphysik*, ed. Ursula Niggli (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1999), 53–54; Ursula Niggli, introduction to Baumgarten, *Vorreden*, lxx–lxxvi. For the relation of sensibility and the soul in Wolff, see Manuela Mei, "Sensazioni e 'ideae sensuales' nella filosofia di Christian Wolff," in *Christian Wolff tra psicologia empirica e psicologia razionale*, ed. Fernando Luigi Marcolungo (Hildesheim: Olms, 2007), 108–12.

<sup>78</sup>Cf. Meier, *Metaphysik*, 3, §§ 486, 494, 525, pp. 27, 38, 84–85. For the insistence on the obscure but live foundations of the soul in Baumgarten and Meier, see Clemens Schwaiger, "Das Problem des Handelns wider besseres Wissen bei Wolff, Baumgarten und Meier," in Marcolungo, *Christian Wolff*, 171–75.

<sup>79</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung*, 53–54, 56, 59, 61–62, 68, 70, 79–80.

<sup>80</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung*, 60, 65–66.

<sup>81</sup>Meier, *Vertheidigung*, 142–44.

Meier's positions on the immortality of the soul, having at least given ample space to adverse objections, risked compromising his academic career.<sup>82</sup> Protected by influential men, he was pushed to clarify his thought. In the end he himself presented a proof of the immortality of the soul starting from Leibniz's idea of the best of all possible worlds. This was a rectification: whereas initially he had excluded full, mathematical, apodeictic certainty, he now affirmed that something similar could be reached thanks to the entire concatenation of the arguments.<sup>83</sup>

Setting his reflections in a cemetery, Meier observed the circulation of matter, from plants, water, and animals to the human body. As here nature acted with parsimony, collecting up waste material and using it again for "a 1,000 other bodies," in a more noble field it was inconceivable that it would behave like a wasteful housewife. In that case death would be "the greater evil." Man, created for love by a God who was infinitely benign, could not think of his annihilation without falling into depression.<sup>84</sup> The conviction of immortality was the foundation for all "skill and wisdom," it stimulated man to pursue "very distant" goals in a horizon open to infinity and made death appear like a mere bagatelle; however, the lack of such a conviction reduced man to the level of an insect, making him incapable of surpassing himself and of "thinking big." If the heart took part in this discourse, reason nourished doubts.<sup>85</sup>

Meier confessed that he himself had felt doubts and that for this he had been attacked by the dogmatics in their zeal to "make others into heretics," using an expression already employed by Christian Thomasius in his writings in favor of tolerance.<sup>86</sup> He now distanced himself from his previous doubts, attributing them to the attraction of novelty and to confusion and error. Although those doubts in themselves did not completely weaken the foundations, one frequently lost the necessary moderation and failed to choose the intermediate path between absolute mathematical certainty and rejection, as he had intended to suggest.<sup>87</sup> Whereas in mathematics the contrary was impossible, in reality it was possible; divine omnipotence could have created a different world.<sup>88</sup> From this viewpoint, the soul remained a contingent being and its annihilation by God was possible.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Schenk, appendix to Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 888–89; Riccardo Pozzo, *Georg Friedrich Meiers "Vernunftlehre": Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 82–83.

<sup>83</sup>Meier, *Beweis daß die menschliche Seele ewig lebt*, 2nd ed. (Halle, 1754), 64.

<sup>84</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 2, 4–5, 7–12.

<sup>85</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 14–15, 17–19.

<sup>86</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 20. For the ascendancy of the expression "Kettermacher," see Christian Thomasius, *Abhandlung vom Recht Evangelischer Fürsten gegen die Ketzer*, in vol. 23 of *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Werner Schneiders, repr. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1993–), 313, 315–319.

<sup>87</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 22–24, 27–28, 31–34, 36–37.

<sup>88</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 42–44, 46, 48–50.

<sup>89</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 54–55, 59–60.

However, once the divine choice for the best of all possible worlds was established, it was necessary to examine whether the framework of this world required the immortality of the soul. Certainly the finite mind could not clearly embrace all beings, and in this Meier related his discourse to what he had sustained much more strongly in his *Gedancken*. However, he now added that we could grasp the general rule, the overall plan, and see whether the death of the soul represented an intolerable exception. Thus its survival would have signified the “maximum hypothetical necessity.”<sup>90</sup>

Once the glory of God was established as the purpose of this world, Meier saw this glory not only in the perfection of its components, but also in its recognition by rational creatures. No part of the world, however minimum, could exist that was not represented, at least obscurely, by the spirits. On the other hand, each of them represented the world to itself in its own way, according to its particular conformation and its particular place, characteristics that could not be superimposed over or exchanged for those of the others. Thus in conformity with the pre-established harmony, the same number of spirits existed as there were parts in the world. If there were more parts than spirits, some of the former would not be represented by the latter, and that ran contrary to divine wisdom, which would, so as to say, have designed a building with a splendid facade set close up against a mountain and thus invisible. Vice-versa, if there were more spirits, some of them would be useless, which made no sense. Hence the application to the question in point: the annihilation of a spirit would have led to the disappearance of the representation of one part of the world, and that contradicted the principle of the best possible world. Thus, based on divine wisdom and goodness and on their immutable decree, the eternal life of each single spirit was necessary.<sup>91</sup>

Meier’s self-criticism seems clear. Whereas previously the principle of the best possible world had appeared a fragile foundation for the demonstration of the immortality of the soul, it now became determinant, thanks to the pre-established harmony to which his maestro and friend Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten assigned a very important role.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 57–58, 81, 88, 97.

<sup>91</sup>Meier, *Beweis*, 85, 89, 91–94, 97–100.

<sup>92</sup>Cf. Niggli, introduction to Baumgarten, *Vorreden*, lxxvii, lxxii–lxxiii. This change can be felt strongly in the comparison between the positions sustained in *Vertheidigung* and in *Beweis*. There (i.e., 93, 97, 102) wisdom and divine justice could not support an apodeictic demonstration, whereas here (98) they are brought in as foundations. What Meier was to write in *Metaphysik*, part 4, § 991, p. 321, in connection with the doctrine of the best world should also be noted: “even if it were an error, it would nevertheless be an error which for us men would be so useful, pleasant and consoling, that we should use everything possible to not recognize it as an error.”

### 3 Mendelssohn: Incorruptibility and Simplicity Under the Perspective of Personal Identity

In Meier's early writings and in his insistence on human contingency<sup>93</sup> it is easy to see the roots of the doubts that were to reappear in Kant, whereas his *Beweis* contains motifs later to be found in Mendelssohn, such as the theme of pre-established harmony and the need for a being that represents the world in its significance. Right to the end Mendelssohn stressed that thought required a thinker as its ontological condition, and that a thing unknowable in itself could have no sense.<sup>94</sup> But then he had paid great attention to Meier's reflections: in 1758 he reviewed Meier's *Auszug aus den Anfangsgründen aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*,<sup>95</sup> stressing the link between Meier and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and pointing up the importance of studying the soul's "inferior" or "sensible" powers, in view of their improvement.<sup>96</sup> This was not the only time that Mendelssohn spurred the two philosophers to complete the development of their aesthetic principles, taking into account the complexity of the manifestations of art and of the human mind,<sup>97</sup> and nor had he lost the opportunity to point out the interest Meier had shown in empirical psychology: he had drawn attention to Meier's text *Versuch einer Erklärung des Nachtwandelns*, stressing that the author had used somnambulism to illustrate the anomaly of two powers of the soul, imagination and perception. He could have continued his analysis by comparing this phenomenon with madness, where the power of the imagination was much greater.<sup>98</sup> Mendelssohn grasped a motif that was important for Meier himself, who had shown in his writings the close link between power and representation, and who, in desire or in aversion, had seen at work the "vis repraesentativa" as a tendency and motion towards the object.<sup>99</sup>

So if the – albeit differing – powers of the soul could be related to its representative capacity, Mendelssohn could exploit this point to recover the simplicity of the soul through its ideal nature. This is what emerges from Mendelssohn's interpretation of Plato's *Phaedo*. Whereas in the original work the principle of the simplicity of the

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<sup>93</sup>Among other points Meier had explained the limit of human intellect, knowledge and virtue referring to the intensive magnitude, that is, to the fact that they always had a degree. Likewise while on one hand the human soul, being immortal, had infinite survival, on the other hand, being in any case a duration in time, it was of necessity circumscribed at any point in time, cf. Meier, *Metaphysik*, bk. 1, §§ 189–91, pp. 306–12.

<sup>94</sup>*JubA* 3.2:110–12, 128, 141–42, 145.

<sup>95</sup>Meier, *Auszug* (Halle, 1757). Mendelssohn, review in *Die Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, III, 1, 1758, 130–38; now in: *JubA* 4:196–201.

<sup>96</sup>*JubA* 4:197, 199, 200.

<sup>97</sup>*JubA* 4:197–99 and *JubA* 4:263–75, esp. 273–74.

<sup>98</sup>*Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, April 16, 1760, *JubA* 5.1:184–85.

<sup>99</sup>Pozzo, *Meiers "Vernunftlehre,"* 151. For the attention that Mendelssohn paid to Meier's doctrine of prejudices, see Rumore, introduction to Meier, *Beyträge*, xxvii–xxx.

soul was present,<sup>100</sup> but not especially emphasised, in Mendelssohn it became central and was presented as the point of arrival of modern reflection.

Among thinkers who were of especial significance in Mendelssohn's preparation of *Phädon* we should remember the theologian Johann Joachim Spalding who, in his highly successful booklet *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1748), had projected man's destination towards infinite progress that essentially included the immortality of the soul. This he affirmed on the basis of two needs: on one hand the injustice on earth and the need for it to be overcome; on the other hand the infinitely progressive nature of the soul, never satisfied with anything.<sup>101</sup> These were the two premises that, as we have seen, Meier had thrown into doubt in his first work, published that same year. Spalding came back to this point, extending his discourse starting from the seventh edition, which came out in 1763.<sup>102</sup> Man's expectations projected him beyond the grave: this corresponded to the Christian message and at the same time to "purest reason."<sup>103</sup> During the same period, Thomas Abbt (1738–1766) and Mendelssohn concentrated on the themes that Spalding had proposed. For the former, inclined to doubts,<sup>104</sup> Spalding's arguments were not convincing: the desire to overturn the situation in the next life provided no guarantees, and Divine dispositions were wrapped in mystery; divine providence could not be conditioned to the human point of view. Furthermore, many phenomena existed that contradicted the prospect of man's constant progress. Only a very small minority of sages were spurred on by the desire for ceaseless learning, whereas the overwhelming majority of men's lives were limited to the daily round, and they were unaware of calls to perfect themselves. And how are we to explain the death of infants, even before they have had the chance to appreciate their own faculties?<sup>105</sup>

Mendelssohn on the contrary defended Spalding's position and mentioned his first daughter, Sarah, who though she had died at 11 months had not lived in vain, had already made "surprising progress" and had become "the germ of a rational creature."<sup>106</sup> Abbt's doubts and Mendelssohn's reply to them appeared in June and in July 1764, in *Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend* entitled "Doubts" and "Oracles."<sup>107</sup> Not long afterwards, in 1766, Abbt died and Mendelssohn dedicated

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<sup>100</sup> *Phaedo*, 78b–84b.

<sup>101</sup> Johann Joachim Spalding, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, critical ed., vol. 1, bk. 1, ed. Albrecht Beutel et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 166–73.

<sup>102</sup> Spalding, *Bestimmung*, 173–75, 278–95.

<sup>103</sup> Spalding, *Bestimmung*, 294–95, in the addition: "Die menschlichen Erwartungen."

<sup>104</sup> In 1763 both Abbt and Meier wrote biographies of Baumgarten. The former pointed up Baumgarten's early doubts about his father's sermons, cf. Niggli, introduction to Baumgarten, *Vorreden*, xviii.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. introduction by Leo Strauß, to *JubA* 3.1:xvi–xvii.

<sup>106</sup> *JubA* 12.1:43; Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 98; Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 198–200. Sarah was born on May 29, 1763, and died on April 15, 1764.

<sup>107</sup> "Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen" and "Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend," *JubA* 5.1:619–29 and 630–37; for the history and meaning of these two essays, see Eva J. Engel, *JubA* 5.3a:445–54.

his *Phädon* to him, in recognition of his merit for having spurred him to return to a task he had begun long before but put to one side. After this discussion he had become convinced of the peculiar nature of the soul, as the original principle of an infinite representative activity.

*Phädon*, in which the arguments of Plato's work and the themes of modern philosophy are blended into an original synthesis, is dedicated to that activity. It has often been stressed that the heart of Platonic argumentation consists in the divinity of the soul, related to the world of ideas and capable of elevating itself to an understanding of them.<sup>108</sup> In the wake of Spalding, such an elevation now appears like infinite progress in the communion with God. The death of the soul appears inconceivable because not only does it contradict that essential tendency, but it also interrupts the continuity that reigns in the universe, a theme that characterises the first part of the work, but also its conclusion.

In the first dialogue, Mendelssohn takes up Plato's argument of the opposites, whereby any change originates from its opposite. Thus death derives from life and life derives from death. A ceaseless cycle dominated the becoming, determining the path of souls from the next life to this life.<sup>109</sup> This idea was easily reconciled with the mythological representations of metempsychosis and with the thesis of reminiscence. However, it could raise various doubts. In particular, the inclusion of the soul in the perennial cycle appeared to contrast with the desire for a better life, expressed by Socrates in his final invitation to take a cockerel to the god of healing, Esculapius.<sup>110</sup> In the wake of the historical tradition represented by Jacob Brucker (1696–1770),<sup>111</sup> Mendelssohn abandoned the cyclic and mythological vision, and likewise the premise of the personal pre-existence of the soul, and brought Plato's argument closer to the principle of the continuity of nature, following the conception of Leibniz and of Ruggero Giuseppe Boscovich (1711–1787).<sup>112</sup> In the material world, death was the disintegration of a body into its component parts that, in their turn, went to make up other bodies.<sup>113</sup> And in the spiritual world? As we have seen, this contrast had

<sup>108</sup>Reginald Hackforth in *Plato's Phaedo*, trans., with an intr. and comm., R. Hackforth, repr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 163–64.

<sup>109</sup>*Phaedo*, 72a, 72c.

<sup>110</sup>For this difficulty in Plato, see David Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 39–43, 57; Lloyd P. Gerson, *Knowing Persons: A Study in Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 64.

<sup>111</sup>May I refer readers to my introduction to *Moses Mendelssohn. Fedone: Sull'immortalità dell'anima*, ed. Tomasoni (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2009), 16–19.

<sup>112</sup>Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 153; Altmann, *Die trostvolle Aufklärung: Studien zur Metaphysik und politischen Theorie Moses Mendelssohn* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982), 94; Hans Lausch, "Mendelssohn und die zeitgenössische Mathematik," in Michael Albrecht and Eva J. Engel, *Moses Mendelssohn im Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 131–32.

<sup>113</sup>*Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, JubA 3.1:67.

already been pointed out by Meier at the beginning of his *Beweis*, and Spalding, too, had contrasted the order of the physical world with the apparent disorder of the moral world.<sup>114</sup> Could one imagine a death of the soul at which its elements would become detached and would go into making up other souls? No, one could not. The representations, the ideas, the desires of the ego were inalienable from it. They belonged to it and to it alone. Thus its death would not represent a disintegration, but an absolute passage from being to nothing, something that of course was inconceivable.<sup>115</sup> As we know, though, Meier had sustained the possibility of annihilation by God, and this as the essential condition to establish the nature of the contingent. In *Beweis*, though, he had ruled out that such a possibility could come about in this world, in the best of all possible worlds, thanks to God's wisdom and goodness. Mendelssohn, too, recognised this possibility theoretically, but ruled it out on the basis of divine goodness.<sup>116</sup>

Having established all of this, the destination of the soul may now be outlined. If its essence consisted of activity, its representations were much more than the accidents of a substance. Through them the soul was elevated towards that perfection, whose image was inherent in it as the face of the beloved is inherent in the heart of the lover. Following an idea present in Leibniz, Mendelssohn reinterpreted Plato's theme of reminiscence as an impulse induced by the image of the divine, that stimulated man to "know the painter."<sup>117</sup>

This elevation attenuated the Platonic features of detachment from the body, accentuating the Enlightenment characteristics of progress; and the relationship with matter became central in the second dialogue, through comparison with the objections of Plato's character Simmias. The soul could be compared to the melody of a lyre or to the health of a body: when one disappeared, so did the other.<sup>118</sup> The objection, already present in Plato's dialogue and widespread in his school, as the young works of Aristotle show, became current again in the eighteenth century through the materialistic philosophies, and through clandestine texts that had presented the soul as epiphenomenon of the body.<sup>119</sup> However, the hypothesis that God could have created thinking matter was formulated not only by Locke, but also by

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<sup>114</sup>Spalding, *Bestimmung*, 134–39, 168–69.

<sup>115</sup>*JubA* 3.1:70, 72–73.

<sup>116</sup>*JubA* 3.1:114–16. This position was criticised in an anonymous text by a Christian theologian entitled "*Anti Phädon*" (1771), mentioned by Günter Gawlick. It condemned the presumption of placing oneself at the divine level, a criticism already present in Meier's early works; see Günter Gawlick, "Ein vergessener 'Anti Phädon' aus dem Jahr 1771," in Albrecht and Engel, *Spannungsfeld*, 77.

<sup>117</sup>*JubA* 3.1:53.

<sup>118</sup>*JubA* 3.1:81–82.

<sup>119</sup>Gianni Paganini, *Introduzione alle filosofie clandestine* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008), 71, 82.



the Lutheran theologians such as Johann Franz Budde, who had extensively dealt with atheism and had enjoyed great success in Germany.<sup>120</sup>

To this objection, Mendelssohn replied by stressing that matter as exterior multiplicity required an essentially different organising principle. For material multiplicity to appear as harmonious, proportioned, regular, the intervention of the thinking being was needed; thanks to the unity inherent in that being, it could both compare and understand. Without it the nightingale's song would be no more harmonious than the croaking of the night-jar.<sup>121</sup> In Leibnizian-Wolffian terms, Mendelssohn defines this principle of unity as representative power, substance, soul.<sup>122</sup> However, his insistence on the representative activity as such cannot be ignored: the soul is described more in ideal and personal terms than in biological-vitalistic terms.

This is even clearer in the third dialogue, which decisively leaves the Platonic model behind, concentrating on precisely what that immortality is in which man is interested: not an inert, shadowy existence, as Meier had hypothesised, along with Leibniz and with Wolff, according to whom the representative power could have very different degrees of awareness. According to the author of *Theodicy* (§ 89) also animals' souls were incorruptible, but not having "inner reflective feeling" they had no consciousness, nor a permanent individuality. Along similar lines, Wolff had distinguished between incorruptibility, shared by animals' souls, and personal immortality, reserved for man alone.<sup>123</sup> Kant was to spend some time on the theme of individuality or personality in the third paralogism.

On this question Mendelssohn first and foremost traced a distinction between the material world, swept up in a continuous current that allowed no perfection to persist, and the sphere of beings that feel and think, that are "the live part of creation," that enjoy a "perfection existing in itself." They are beings that in themselves are simple. Since they are provided with sensibility and thought, even animals' souls are incorruptible. However, only human souls are entitled to individual survival, corresponding to their restlessness, their tension towards infinite progress. In this view, a sort of hierarchy may be glimpsed. Inanimate things exist for animals, but the human being brings to term "the final goal" of creation.<sup>124</sup> In him as a moral

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<sup>120</sup>This hypothesis, put forth by John Locke (*Essay on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], 540–41), was used in the materialistic sense by Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), cf. his "Materialism," in *Writings on Philosophy, Science and Politics*, ed. John A. Passmore (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 115. However, it was also admitted by theologians such as Johann Franz Budde, who in this connection was accused by Christian Wolff in his *Schutzschriften gegen Johann Franz Budde*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1.18, critical ed., with intr., notes and index by Jean École (Hildesheim: Olms, 1980), 38, 59. Of the two, Mendelssohn was on Wolff's side, as may also be understood from these passages. He himself was criticised, though, in *Anti Phädon* for having wanted to establish, with the limited natural reason, the combinations that the "omnipotent" could or could not do, see Gawlick, "Ein vergessener 'Anti Phädon,'" 80.

<sup>121</sup>*JubA* 3.1:90, 92.

<sup>122</sup>*JubA* 3.1:96–97.

<sup>123</sup>Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 17–20.

<sup>124</sup>*JubA* 3.1:108–10, 114.



being Mendelssohn sees the culmination of universal finalism, anticipating the perspective of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. The order of the physical world is a prelude to the higher order of virtue, according to the vision already theorised by Spalding concerning man's destination. But it is only valid if man does not cease to exist with death. Otherwise, virtue, the heroic gesture, justice would have no meaning. Ideals and trust in providence would fall and there would be a war of everyone against everyone, as in Hobbes' state of nature.<sup>125</sup> On the contrary, in Mendelssohn's view, the absurdity of this consequence showed the falsity of the premises; the supreme good required some prospect after this life, an immortality in which the person continued to exist and was either rewarded or punished.

Mendelssohn soon had to reply to accusations that he had fallen into a vicious circle: he had invoked the immortality of the soul to save moral duties, but in their turn they had had to be justified. In this connection he affirmed that he had taken as his premise "the obligation of social life" based on metaphysical principles whose demonstration was outside the scope of the text. He quoted Baumgarten and Reimarus, stressing the priority of the all, that is, of the social framework, over the individual. However, the individual could recognise the obligation only if his horizon was not circumscribed to this life.<sup>126</sup>

The priority of personal activity over biological activity in the definition of the soul emerges from another objection, to which Mendelssohn replied starting from the second edition of *Phädon*. Having explained the soul as the faculty of feeling, thinking and willing, had he not perhaps limited the value of his argument to "the soul as soul" neglecting the soul "as substance," that is as "power capable of moving the body"?<sup>127</sup> The distinction appears in some ways to anticipate Kant's criticism. Mendelssohn replied that his aim had not been to limit the fundamental power of the soul to spiritual activity, but rather to avoid interweaving the question of immortality with other problems.<sup>128</sup> Among these was clearly that of the relationship with the body, to which Kant had already drawn attention and that had engaged modern philosophy after Descartes. In the Appendix to the third edition, Mendelssohn added that he had not wanted to decide whether after death the soul remained "completely without a body."<sup>129</sup> As we have seen, Meier had ventured into various conjectures that Mendelssohn explicitly avoided. However, the fact that he had attributed sensibility to the soul caused Herder to raise the objection that it was hard to imagine sensibility's remaining after the disappearance of the body. Mendelssohn replied

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<sup>125</sup>For the effectiveness of this moral argument, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 156. For the preparation to Kant's vision, see Altmann, *Trostvolle Aufklärung*, 26–27.

<sup>126</sup>*Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, "Anhang zur 2. Auflage" (1768) and "Anhang zur 3. Auflage," *JubA* 3.1:155–57.

<sup>127</sup>*JubA* 3.1:133, 146.

<sup>128</sup>*JubA* 3.1:133.

<sup>129</sup>*JubA* 3.1:146.

that it appeared monstrous to him to separate the spirit from the sensible,<sup>130</sup> following a conception rooted in the Wolffian-Leibnizian tradition, but peculiar in its accentuation of personal individuality. In this connection, he adhered to the idea of continuous progress in the contemplation of divine works.<sup>131</sup> This reinterpretation of biological terms in a personal vein is also clear in Mendelssohn's reading of the passage from Plotinus, which he cited starting from the appendix of the second edition. Where Plotinus had spoken of life that could not be fragmented, Mendelssohn modified the sense, rather referring to thought, or better to "inner consciousness."<sup>132</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion: The Influence of Mendelssohn's Concept of the Soul

His demonstration on one hand enables us to trace a continuity with Meier's *Beweis*, while on the other hand it provides a link with the argument used by Kant in *Critique of Practical Reason*. Certainly, the foundation of morality and the idea of the supreme good are clearly separated in this latter work. However, over and above the common conviction concerning earthly injustice and dissatisfaction,<sup>133</sup> in both texts we find the idea that the need for infinite progress requires "an existence of infinite duration" and "a personality of the same rational being."<sup>134</sup> In practical terms, the transition from the need for ceaseless progress to the affirmation of individual survival is still legitimate, and in this, *Phädon* had great importance.

The insistence on the personal identity of the ego appears to have played an important role in the maturing of Kant's criticism. In the lessons of metaphysics taken down by Herder during his years studying under Kant (1762–1764) the echo of Meier's doubts and considerations is clear. Kant's mention of somnambulism and of deep sleep<sup>135</sup> recalls the problems of the absence of awareness that Meier had raised. Although those phenomena demonstrate an unconscious activity of the soul, in the wake of the Wolffian school<sup>136</sup> Kant stresses that it is consciousness itself that

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<sup>130</sup>See Herder's letters of the second half of April and Mendelssohn's of May 2, 1769, in *JubA* 2.1:175, 182–84.

<sup>131</sup>*JubA* 3.1:123. This vision of the next life dedicated to contemplation was criticised in the *Anti-Phädon* as being too intellectual and too distant from man's desires, as well as from Christianity, which exalted love and, on the basis of revelation, offered the prospect of the resurrection of bodies. See Gawlick, "Vergessener 'Anti-Phädon'," 78–83.

<sup>132</sup>*Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, Anhang zur 2. Auflage, *JubA* 3.1:137.

<sup>133</sup>*JubA* 3.1:120.

<sup>134</sup>Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, AA 5:122.

<sup>135</sup>AA 28:113, 106.

<sup>136</sup>Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 17–21.

is the property of the human soul that distinguishes it from the animal soul, which is “simple power” and “immaterial.”<sup>137</sup> In this sense, for him too, as later for Mendelssohn, immortality without consciousness would have no meaning for men, since “not to think is death and chaos.”<sup>138</sup> In agreement with Meier’s *Beweis* and with what Mendelssohn was to sustain in his third dialogue of *Phädon*, Kant placed human souls in the centre of the universe. Their annihilation would involve an incomprehensible interruption and everything would lose its unity.<sup>139</sup> Despite this, many reservations were expressed; first, these concerned the relationship between soul and body. On one hand the body appears indispensable for thought and, significantly, he makes the comparison with musical notes, which require instruments.<sup>140</sup> On the other hand, bodies with their sensibility are often an impediment, so that a liberation from them might enable us to presume an increase in spiritual activities.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, the continual changing of our body already in this life may suggest that physical identity is only maintained through the permanence of a bodily scheme,<sup>142</sup> according to a conception of the Cambridge Platonists that we also found in Meier. Apart from the uncertainty on this point, Kant recognises as the fruit of “prejudice” the demonstration of the soul “from its nature,” re-evoking an expression of Meier’s, but he also denies the validity of an argument based on divine knowledge or justice.<sup>143</sup> In contrast with Spalding and in agreement with the objections that were to be raised by Abbt, Kant shows that in nature many plans are not developed, intellectual perfection does not necessarily lead to happiness, and not all men live “as men,” free of the burden of the senses.<sup>144</sup> Again with Meier, Kant hypothesises that the virtuous or the sinful are rewarded or punished “already here in their own mind.”<sup>145</sup> Last, no objective value can be set upon human desire, which is always insatiable.<sup>146</sup>

In those lessons, Kant also hinted at Swedenborg and at his tales about spirits. Although there were many untenable affirmations, not all could be dismissed and rejected out of hand because it was difficult to establish what was impossible for the soul.<sup>147</sup> Its persistence as a simple substance, as the ego, was stressed in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. However, this ego, as “my substantiality,” as the “most perfect singular,” as the “ultimate subject” to which we attributed “all predicates,” took on a much more marked significance starting from 1772.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>AA 28:115–17.

<sup>138</sup>AA 28:107.

<sup>139</sup>AA 28:108.

<sup>140</sup>AA 28:106.

<sup>141</sup>AA 28:107.

<sup>142</sup>AA 28:114.

<sup>143</sup>AA 28:107, 109–10.

<sup>144</sup>AA 28:109, 114–15.

<sup>145</sup>AA 28:110–11.

<sup>146</sup>AA 28:109.

<sup>147</sup>AA 28:113–14.

<sup>148</sup>AA 25.1:10, 13 (Collins); see also 244–45 (Parow).

In this connection, as Klemme has shown,<sup>149</sup> Mendelssohn plays an important role through the intermediation of Marcus Herz (1747–1803), a young Jew born in Berlin in a poor family, who had been able to enrol in the Faculty of Medicine at Königsberg thanks to financial support from Moses Friedländer and his friendship with the latter's son, David. There, under the university regulations in force at the time, he also had to study humanistic subjects, including philosophy, and had followed Kant with enthusiasm.<sup>150</sup> Kant showed his esteem for his student by choosing Herz as Respondent for his Dissertation of 1770. That same year, for financial reasons, Herz had had to interrupt his studies and, returning to Berlin, had taken a copy of the Dissertation as a gift from Kant to Mendelssohn. He remained with the latter in conversation for more than 4 h. As is known, Mendelssohn put forth objections to Kant's conception of time. On one hand, he observed that time could not merely be subjective, since it characterised the finite spirits; these were not only subjects, but also objects of representation by God and by the spirits. On the other hand, time was not essential to the formulation of the logical principle of identity, for which the identity of the subject sufficed.<sup>151</sup>

Between Kant's a priori forms and Mendelssohn's identity of the unifying subject, Herz glimpsed the possibility of a reconciliation that would lead to a further development of the ideas of both men. His text *Betrachtungen aus der spekulativen Weltweisheit*, about which he told Kant in his letter of July 9, 1771, saying that he had expounded "a proof of the existence of the soul, that is possibly worthy of your attention"<sup>152</sup> is based on that intuition. If through its a priori forms the soul ordered objects in contemporaneity or in succession, that was due to its peculiar way of operating as a subject. "In every relationship one must therefore necessarily presuppose a subject that compares these objects one with another [miteinander vergleicht] and, from the diversity that it grasps in their operations, can actually obtain a simple result [ein einfaches Resultat]."<sup>153</sup> The terms of this line of argument recall those of Mendelssohn word for word. Already, to explain complex ideas, Locke had referred to the comparison made by the mind between simple ideas<sup>154</sup> and Meier had explained that comparison (Vergleichung) on the basis of needs.<sup>155</sup> Mendelssohn had insisted on the essential condition of the singularity and simplicity of the ego, and this was the principle Herz exploited, affirming in the first part of his text that

<sup>149</sup>Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 56, 73–75.

<sup>150</sup>Christoph Maria Leder, *Die Grenzgänge des Marcus Herz: Beruf, Haltung und Identität eines jüdischen Arztes gegen Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Waxmann 2007), 13.

<sup>151</sup>Mendelssohn to Kant, December 25, 1770, AA 10:114–16.

<sup>152</sup>AA 10:126.

<sup>153</sup>Marcus Herz, *Betrachtungen aus der spekulativen Weltweisheit*, rev. ed., intr. and notes Elfriede Conrad, Heinrich P. Delfosse, and Birgit Nehren (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), 36–37.

<sup>154</sup>See Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 60–61. Meier, too, referred to the comparison (Vergleichung) made in judgements based on daily needs.

<sup>155</sup>Pozzo, *Meiers "Vernunftlehre,"* 257, and Pozzo, "La logica di Wolff e la nascita della logica delle facoltà," in Marcolungo, *Christian Wolff*, 51.

without unifying forms of the soul the world would be a disintegrated multiplicity.<sup>156</sup> Simmias' argument, extensively developed by Mendelssohn in the second dialogue of his *Phädon*, also returns in Herz's text and is turned against "a Voltaire" or "Lametrie." Without the comparison made by the soul, it would not be possible to perceive the delight of a rose. This comparison does not grasp only the consonance of external perceptions, but also that of inner states.<sup>157</sup> In this context, Herz had proclaimed "Kant and Moses" as his maestros,<sup>158</sup> but had also expressed the conviction of making a contribution of his own. He had, indeed, devoted himself to applying his discourse to sentiment and to aesthetics,<sup>159</sup> and it was undoubtedly Mendelssohn that stimulated him to move in this direction.

Convinced of the fact that Kant's conception gave greater plausibility to Mendelssohn's argument, Herz spoke in the context of "immortal soul in me, the only thing capable of establishing a comparison between my two states."<sup>160</sup> He also defined space and time as the "realities grounded in the essence of the soul."<sup>161</sup> Thus it might be concluded that the unifying principle for him was at one and the same time cognitive subject and substance.

The young medical student, who was only to graduate in 1774 and who thereafter passionately dedicated himself to his profession, maintained his adherence to Kant's thought and tried to make it better known, persuaded of his own good fortune in having met Kant during his formative years.<sup>162</sup> With his *Betrachtungen* he had, however, made an important point of contact with his maestro's evolution, and Kant's *Lessons* on metaphysics, 1772–1773, are proof of this, as are also various of his reflections of the same period.<sup>163</sup> While these express the coincidence between subject and substance, following a conception that, 9 years later in *Critique of Pure Reason* he was to accuse of paralogism, we must not forget that even later, in 1775–1776, he was to attribute substantiality to the ego, identifying it with the soul.<sup>164</sup>

It is in any case significant that the accent he had placed on the unifying action of the ego is accompanied during the same years by his deduction of the categories and by his theorisation of transcendental apperception.<sup>165</sup> In this way, knowing is

<sup>156</sup> Herz, *Betrachtungen*, 14–16, 43–44.

<sup>157</sup> Herz, *Betrachtungen*, 79.

<sup>158</sup> Herz, *Betrachtungen*, 79.

<sup>159</sup> Letter dated July 9, 1771: "eine Ausschweifung zu der Natur des Schönen," AA 10:126.

<sup>160</sup> Herz, *Betrachtungen*, 79.

<sup>161</sup> Herz, *Betrachtungen*, 36.

<sup>162</sup> Leder, *Grenzgänge des Marcus Herz*, 13, 210–11.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 59, 70–72.

<sup>164</sup> AA 25.1:473 (Friedländer).

<sup>165</sup> Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, 66–75, also attributes to Herz and, indirectly, to Mendelssohn, the merit of having spurred Kant to reflect on the principle of cause in relation to Hume's criticism. On the implication of unity in the German term "einfach" and on the fact that Kant did not deny the need for it, but only the possibility of demonstrating it, see Ameriks, "Paralogisms in First Edition," 383–84.

shown to be a process and, over and above the cognitive content, it is also shown to be an act open to morality, according to the hint contained in the criticism of the paralogism in the second edition. Not only Kant's results in the moral field, but also the route he took towards his theory of knowledge was not distant from the reflections of the philosopher from Berlin on the simplicity of the ego.

On the other hand, his separation between thinking ego and thought ego did not fail to arouse doubts and to pose new problems in the conception of self-awareness, as Johann Benjamin Erhard, Reinhold and Fichte were to show in relation to self-awareness and to freedom.<sup>166</sup> That mixture between rational psychology and empirical psychology that had characterised Wolff, Baumgarten and Meier and that, as we have seen, Kant had criticised, also concealed a vigorous valorisation of sensibility, the need for which was also to be felt later. Thus Mendelssohn's *Phädon*, with its particular conception of the soul, was to continue to arouse interest in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>166</sup>Dieter Henrich, *Grundlegung aus dem Ich: Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte des Idealismus. Tübingen-Jena (1790–1794)* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 1385–90.

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## Chapter 8

# Turning the Game Against the Idealist: Mendelssohn's Refutation of Idealism in the *Morgenstunden* and Kant's Replies

Corey W. Dyck

It is well known that, from late 1770 onwards, Mendelssohn suffered from a nervous debility that prevented him from engaging with the speculative subtleties of the most recent philosophical systems. Among the first reports of this complaint is in a letter containing a reply to Kant's *Inaugural Dissertation*<sup>1</sup> where Mendelssohn writes that "my nervous infirmities make it impossible for me of late to give as much effort of thought to a speculative work of this stature as it deserves."<sup>2</sup> Later, and more famously, Mendelssohn would claim in the Preface to *Morgenstunden* that,

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<sup>1</sup>All references to Mendelssohn's works are to the *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–). Hereafter cited as *JubA* and volume number, followed by a colon and page number. Translations from the essay "On Evidence in the Metaphysical Sciences" are taken from *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and those from *Morgenstunden* are taken from *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011). Translations from Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [*KrV*] are taken from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Translations of other citations from Kant's works, published or otherwise, are taken from the Cambridge edition of Kant's works, including *Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770* (for the *Inaugural Dissertation*), ed. and trans. D. Walford and R. Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *Correspondence*, ed. and trans. A. Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). All other translations of Kant are my own. Citations from the *KrV* refer to the pagination in the first "A" edition and, where appropriate, to the second, "B" edition. All other citations to Kant's works refer to the volume and page number in the so-called "Akademie Ausgabe" of his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–, cited as *AA*).

<sup>2</sup>*AA* 10:113: "ob ich gleich seit Jahr und Tag, wegen meines sehr geschwächten Nervensystems, kaum im Stande bin, etwas spekulatives von diesem Werthe, mit gehöriger Anstrengung durch zu denken."

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due to his ailment, he has had to content himself with only second-hand accounts of the works of various authors: as he puts it, “I am acquainted with the writings of great men who have distinguished themselves in metaphysics during [the past 12–15 years], the works of Lambert, Tetens, Plattner and even the all-quashing Kant, only from insufficient reports of my friends and from learned reviews that are rarely more instructive.”<sup>3</sup> While the effects of this debility can hardly be doubted,<sup>4</sup> there are some indications that in spite of it Mendelssohn had attempted to come to grips with the metaphysical texts of his most illustrious contemporaries, and with Kant’s in particular. So, in a letter he wrote to Kant in 1783, he claims that “your *Critique of Pure Reason* is also a criterion of health for me. Whenever I flatter myself that my strength has increased I dare to take up this nerve-juice consuming book, and I am not entirely without hope that I shall still be able to think my way through it in this life.”<sup>5</sup> Without recommending the use of one’s grasp of the first *Critique* as a criterion of good health (since that would imply that we are all ailing), Mendelssohn’s letter makes clear that his familiarity with Kant’s text was not entirely second-hand, and indeed that he made a serious, if not sustained, effort to understand it.

In fact, there is good reason to think that Mendelssohn was rather familiar with some of the key claims of Kant’s first *Critique* (*KrV*) and that parts of *Morgenstunden* were intended as a direct attack on Kantianism, as Altmann and others have noted<sup>6</sup>; as far as I can tell, however, this criticism has yet to be considered in the appropriate context or presented in all of its systematic detail. In what follows, I will show that far from being an isolated assault, Mendelssohn’s attack in the *Morgenstunden* is a continuation and development of his earlier criticism of Kant’s idealism as presented in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. In the first section I will briefly present Mendelssohn’s initial criticism of Kant’s doctrine of the subjectivity of time as elaborated in the *Dissertation*, along with Kant’s (eventual) reply in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the *KrV*. In the second section I turn to the *Morgenstunden* where Mendelssohn begins by challenging Kant’s distinction between transcendental and empirical idealism and then returns to his previous criticisms of Kant, developing

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<sup>3</sup>JubA 3.2:3: “Ich kenne daher die Schriften der großen Männer, die sich unterdessen in der Methaphysik hervorgethan, die Werke *Lamberts*, *Tetens*, *Platnners* und selbst des alles zermalmenden *Kants*, nur aus unzulänglichen Berichten meiner Freunde oder aus gelehrten Anzeigen, die selten viel belehrender sind.”

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 268.

<sup>5</sup>AA 10:308: “Ihre Kritik der reinen Vernunft ist für mich auch ein Kriterium der Gesundheit. So oft ich mich schmeichele, an Kräften zugenommen zu haben, wage ich mich an dieses Nervensaftverzehrende Werk, und ich bin nicht ganz ohne Hoffnung, es in diesem Leben noch ganz durchdenken zu können.”

<sup>6</sup>See Benno Erdmann, *Kant’s Criticismism in der ersten und in der zweiten Auflage der “Kritik der reinen Vernunft”*: Eine historische Untersuchung (Hildesheim: Verlag Dr. H. A. Gerstenberg, 1973), 118–21; Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 677; Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 105–7; and Francesco Tomasoni, “Kant and Mendelssohn: A Singular Alliance in the Name of Reason,” *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004): 267–94, esp. 268, 289–90.

them considerably in an ambitious attempt “to refute the project of the idealists” (*JubA* 3.2:55; *das Vorhaben der Idealisten zu widerlegen*). Finally, in the third section, I show that Mendelssohn's objection was more influential on Kant than has previously been suspected; not only did Kant respond to it in a brief review and a set of remarks published along with a disciple's examination of Mendelssohn's text but, as I will suggest, Kant's Refutation of Idealism is intended (at least in part) to undermine the Cartesian starting-point Mendelssohn had presumed throughout his campaign against Kantian idealism.

## 1 Mendelssohn's Criticism of the “Dissertation” and Kant's Critical Reply

Kant's treatise “On the form and principles of the sensible and intelligible world,” or the *Inaugural Dissertation*, of 1770, introduces a number of key claims that will later figure in the Critical doctrine of sensibility, including the thesis that time (along with space) is a subjective form rather than something pertaining to things in themselves and that, consequently, all objects in time (and space) have a merely ideal existence. Kant argues for the subjectivity of time by showing that conceiving time as an object or as a determination of an object (whether an accident or relation) cannot account for the character of the representation of time that we have, namely, that it is a pure intuition. Given this, Kant contends that time must be subjective, that is, “the subjective condition which is necessary, in virtue of the nature of the human mind, for the co-ordinating of all sensible things in accordance with a fixed law.”<sup>7</sup> That time is subjective in this way implies that objects, insofar as they have a temporal form, cannot be ascribed an existence independent of the subject but are only “clothed with a certain *aspect*, in accordance with stable and innate laws” (*secundum stabiles et innatas leges speciem quandam induant*) that have their origin in the subject (*AA* 2:393). Moreover, it is precisely because time has as its basis a stable law within the subject that putative cognitions of objects in it can be taken as “in the highest degree true” despite the fact that they “do not express the internal and absolute quality of objects” (*AA* 2:397; *neque internam et absolutam obiectorum qualitatem expriment*). Yet, as Kant makes clear, none of this is to deny that something exists independent of the subject and stands in certain relations which only appear to us as in time; rather,

the *form* of the same representation is undoubtedly evidence of a certain reference or relation in what is sensed, though properly speaking it is not an outline or any kind of schema of the object, but only a certain law, which is inherent in the mind and by means of which it co-ordinates for itself that which is sensed from the presence of the object.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>*AA* 2:400: “sed subiectiva condicio per naturam mentis humanae necessaria, quaelibet sensibilia certa lege sibi coordinandi.”

<sup>8</sup>*AA* 2:393: “ita etiam eiusdem repraesentationis *forma* testatur utique quendam sensorum respectum aut relationem, verum proprie non est adumbratio aut schema quoddam obiecti, sed nonnisi lex quaedam menti insita, sensa ab obiecti praesentia orta sibimet coordinandi.”

Kant does not take his idealistic conclusions, then, to be incompatible with the claim that objects exist in a manner distinct from how they are represented by the subject. Indeed, in the *Dissertation*, Kant goes further than this and allows for the cognition of objects, and their relations, taken in this way through the (real) use of the understanding. In accordance with this use, concepts are employed that “are given by the very nature of the understanding” (AA 2:394; *dantur per ipsam naturam intellectus*), rather than by way of sensibility.

Kant sent his *Dissertation* to a number of philosophers, including J. H. Lambert, Johann Georg Sulzer, and Mendelssohn, each of whom replied with criticisms. Significantly, in spite of philosophical differences among them, the respondents unanimously rejected Kant’s argument for the subjectivity of time and each for similar reasons. Lambert, who was the first to respond in a letter of October 13, 1770, puts the objection in the following way:

The trouble seems to lie only in the fact that one must simply think time and duration and not define them. All changes are bound to time and are inconceivable without time. *If changes are real, then time is real*, whatever it may be. *If time is unreal, then no change can be real*. I think, though, that even an idealist must grant at least that changes really exist and occur in his representations, for example, their beginning and ending. Thus time cannot be regarded as something *unreal*.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Lambert argues that the idealist, even of the Kantian stripe, must concede the reality of changes among a subject’s own representations since, for all such representations, the subject can identify a determinate beginning and ending in time. Thus time, at least, must be admitted to be real in the case of the representing subject, whatever its status might be with regard to the objects that are represented as in time. Mendelssohn, in his response in a letter of December 25, 1770, levels the same essential objection but draws the key contrast more sharply:

For several reasons I cannot convince myself that time is something merely subjective. Succession is to be sure at least a necessary condition of the representations of finite minds. But finite minds are not only subjects; they are also objects of representations, both those of God and those of their fellow minds. Consequently succession is to be regarded as something objective.<sup>10</sup>

As Mendelssohn counters, we might convince ourselves that time is subjective if we limited our consideration to the perspective of the representing subject since, from

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<sup>9</sup>AA 10:107: “Es scheint nur daran zu liegen, daß man Zeit und Dauer nicht *definieren* sondern schlechthin nur denken muß. Alle Veränderungen sind an die Zeit gebunden und laßen sich ohne Zeit nicht gedenken. Sind die Veränderungen *real* so ist die Zeit *real*, was sie auch immer seyn mag. Ist die Zeit nicht *real* so ist auch keine Veränderung *real*. Es dünkt mich aber doch, daß auch selbst ein *Idealiste* wenigstens in seinen Vorstellungen Veränderungen, wie Anfangen und Aufhören derselben zugeben muß, das wirklich vorgeht und *existirt*. Und damit kann die Zeit nicht als etwas nicht *reales* angesehen werden.”

<sup>10</sup>AA 10:115: “Daß die Zeit etwas bloß Subjektives seyn sollte, kan ich mich aus mehrern Gründen nicht bereden. Die Succession ist doch wenigstens eine nothwendige Bedingung der Vorstellungen endlicher Geister. Nun sind die endlichen Geister nicht nur Subjekte, sondern auch Objekte der Vorstellungen, so wohl Gottes, als ihrer Mitgeister. Mithin ist die Folge auf einander, auch als etwas objektives anzusehen.”

that perspective, there is no basis for determining whether the temporal order of our representations is grounded in their objects or in ourselves. Nonetheless, the claim that time is subjective cannot be sustained when we consider the representing subject as itself an object of representation on the part of other minds. This is because, considered from the perspective of such minds, including God's, the representing subject does not merely represent objects successively but is also itself the subject of successive representations; thus, the representing subject must be recognized as itself changing with respect to these representations.

Despite the obvious continuity between Lambert's and Mendelssohn's criticism, we might note a couple of differences in emphasis that will become important in what follows. First, Mendelssohn stresses that whatever uncertainty the subject might have regarding the reality of time as it applies to its own representations can be resolved through a comparison of one's own perspective with those of other finite minds and with the way in which objects (in this case, the representing subject) would be exhibited to God. This is to presume, of course, that there is sufficient agreement between the ways in which the subject is exhibited to other minds, both finite and infinite, to make such a comparison possible. This is not unambiguously the case with Lambert who, while he sees no reason to hold with Kant that time "is only a helpful device for human representations" (AA 10:107; *nur ein Hilfsmittel zum Behuf der menschlichen Vorstellungen sey*), would nonetheless likely dismiss the question of how such things might be exhibited to God as "impervious to clarification" (AA 10:108; *was nicht klar gemacht werden kann*). Second, where Lambert is content to assert the reality of time in the alterations of the subject without taking further issue with those who "want to regard time and space as mere pictures and appearances" insofar as it applies to objects in the world (AA 10:108), Mendelssohn takes the reality of time in the case of the subject of changing representations to support its reality with respect to the objects of those representations: as he writes, "since we have to grant the reality of succession in a representing creature and in its alterations, why not also in the sensible object, the model and prototype of representations in the world?"<sup>11</sup>

Kant had no choice but to take seriously this uniform opposition to his claim that time is subjective. In the letter to Herz of February 12, 1772, he confesses that this objection "has made me reflect considerably" (AA 10:132) and he formulates an initial response though, because it is not clear whether this was ever communicated to Mendelssohn (or Lambert), I will not take it up here.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Kant evidently continued to reflect on the objection, as he would return to it in the *KrV* in the

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<sup>11</sup>AA 10:115: "Da wir übrigens in den vorstellenden Wesen und ihren Veränderungen eine Folge zugeben müssen, warum nicht auch in dem sinnlichen Objekte, Muster und Vorbild der Vorstellungen, in der Welt?"

<sup>12</sup>Indeed, it is highly unlikely that Herz, a physician, would have passed along Kant's criticism to Mendelssohn on account of the latter's nervous condition (cf. Herz's letter to Kant of July 9, 1771 [AA 10:126–27]). For a thorough discussion of the first response contained in Kant's letter to Herz, see Lorne Falkenstein, *Kant's Intuitionism: A Commentary on the Transcendental Aesthetic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 338–45.

Elucidation that follows the discussion of time in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. After presenting his summation of the argument, he responds to the insinuation that the subjectivity of time implies the unreality of the representing subject:

There is no difficulty in answering. I admit the entire argument. Time is certainly something real, namely the real form of inner intuition. It therefore has subjective reality in regard to inner experience, i.e., I really have the representation of time and of my determinations in it. It is therefore to be regarded really not as object but as the way of representing myself as object.<sup>13</sup>

Where Kant had previously taken the reality of time and objects in it to consist in the fact that “something real corresponds to the appearance” (cf. *AA* 10:134), he now explicitly denies that his subjectivity thesis in any way implies the unreality of the object of inner experience considered merely as appearance. As Kant has claimed, time is empirically real inasmuch as it has “objective validity in regard to all objects that may ever be given to our senses” (A35/B52; objektive Gültigkeit in Ansehung aller Gegenstände, die jemals unsern Sinnen gegeben werden mögen); consequently, the subject that is represented as an object in time is as real as any object that is represented in accordance with the forms of sensibility. This response, relying as it does on common forms of human sensibility, might seem to take Kant in the direction of Mendelssohn’s contention that the objectivity of time is ultimately founded in some broad agreement among finite (and infinite) minds in their representations of the changes in a given subject. Yet Kant, invoking the transcendental ideality of time, denies that this follows:

But if I or another being could intuit myself without this condition of sensibility, then these very determinations, which we now represent to ourselves as alterations, would yield us a cognition in which the representation of time and thus also of alteration would not occur at all. Its empirical reality therefore remains as a condition of all our experiences. Only absolute reality cannot be granted to it according to what has been adduced above.<sup>14</sup>

Kant maintains that, for a being like God, who lacks a faculty of sensible intuition, or for a finite mind with a different form of sensible intuition, a finite thinking subject taken as an object will not be represented as changing in time; thus, there is no need to admit the transcendental reality of time with respect to the representing subject. Kant thus seeks to avoid the problem articulated by Lambert and Mendelssohn by applying the distinction between two ways in which an object

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<sup>13</sup>*KrV*, A37/B53-54: “Die Beantwortung hat keine Schwierigkeit. Ich gebe das ganze Argument zu. Die Zeit ist allerdings etwas Wirkliches, nämlich die wirkliche Form der innern Anschauung. Sie hat also subjective Realität in Ansehung der innern Erfahrung, d.i. ich habe wirklich die Vorstellung von der Zeit und meinen Bestimmungen in ihr. Sie ist also wirklich, nicht als Object, sondern als die Vorstellungsart meiner selbst als Objects anzusehen.”

<sup>14</sup>*KrV*, A37/B54: “Wenn aber ich selbst oder ein ander Wesen mich ohne diese Bedingung der Sinnlichkeit anschauen könnte, so würden eben dieselben Bestimmungen, die wir uns jetzt als Veränderungen vorstellen, eine Erkenntniß geben, in welcher die Vorstellung der Zeit, mithin auch der Veränderung gar nicht vorkäme. Es bleibt also ihre empirische Realität als Bedingung aller unsrer Erfahrungen. Nur die absolute Realität kann ihr nach dem oben Angeführten nicht zugestanden werden.”

might be considered, either as it is in itself or as an appearance, not only to the objects of our representations but to the subject and its representations as well. Once this is admitted then, according to Kant, there is no difficulty in upholding the (empirical) reality of the subject and its representations considered as appearances in time, but denying that time pertains to the subject and its representations considered as they are in themselves.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 Mendelssohn's Refutation of the Idealist in *Morgenstunden*

Even if his ill-health did not permit him to work his way through the entire *KrV*, Mendelssohn's attention would certainly have been drawn to Kant's reply in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* which is, as far as we know, the only reply to Mendelssohn's original criticism (of 10 years previous) communicated to him. Moreover, of any section in the *KrV*, the *Aesthetic* would have cost Mendelssohn the least effort to comprehend, seeing as he was already familiar enough with the doctrine of sensibility as presented in the *Dissertation*. In fact, as I will argue in this section, not only was Mendelssohn familiar with Kant's response, but the key argument in the first part of *Morgenstunden* aims at nothing less than a full refutation of the pretensions of idealism, including that elaborated in the *KrV*. Accordingly, Mendelssohn begins by challenging Kant's distinction between transcendental idealism and the empirical variety by arguing that the Kantian, no less than the naïve empirical idealist, remains committed to the falsity of our cognitions of external things. With this result in hand, Mendelssohn turns to refining his original criticisms of Kant's idealism and then offers a new challenge to the coherence of the specifically Kantian posit of a cognitively inaccessible transcendental object.

Mendelssohn's critical discussion of idealism occurs, for the most part, in lectures 6 and 7 of *Morgenstunden* and it begins, innocuously enough, with a comparison of dualism and idealism. In lecture 6, Mendelssohn enumerates at least four propositions which the dualist and the idealist both accept. First, the idealist agrees with the dualist that "the thoughts that come about in him, as alterations of himself, have an ideal existence of their own" (die Gedanken, die in ihm vorgehen, als Abänderungen seiner selbst, ihr ideales Daseyn haben) from which follows, second, "that he himself, as the subject of these alterations, is actually on hand" (*JubA* 3.2:55; daß er selbst, als die Subject dieser Abänderungen, wirklich vorhanden sey). Third, insofar as the idealist is not an egoist admitting only the existence of a single thinking substance, namely himself (a position Mendelssohn dismisses as absurd<sup>16</sup>), then he agrees with the dualist who accepts the actual existence of thinking beings, limited like himself, but distinct from him (*JubA* 3.2:55–56). Fourth, and finally, the idealist

<sup>15</sup>For more details on Kant's Critical response, see Falkenstein, *Kant's Intuitionism*, 348–52.

<sup>16</sup>See *JubA* 3.2:102–3.



no less than the dualist distinguishes two series of things, or representations, within the totality of his own cognition: the subjective which is truly only in him, and the objective “that is common to all thinking beings according to their standpoint and viewpoint” (*JubA* 3.2:56; die allen denkenden Wesen nach ihrem Standorte und Gesichtspunkte gemeinschaftlich ist). The subjective series is ordered in accordance with the “law of wit, of imagination, or of reason” (nach dem Gesetze des Witzes, der Einbildungskraft oder der Vernunft) inasmuch as representations follow one another on the basis of having been perceived previously at the same time or of containing the same marks, whereas the objective series of representations is ordered according to laws of nature or causal connection (cf. *JubA* 3.2:46).

Significantly, for Mendelssohn the difference between the dualist and idealist does not necessarily lie in the fact that the former admits a world of objects external to us corresponding to our representations whereas the latter denies this. Instead, the dualist and idealist part company when it comes to the *truth* of our representations of objects as, for instance, extended. The key question, then, is whether “these characteristics also assert the truth?” (*JubA* 3.2:56; sagen diese Merkmale auch die Wahrheit aus?), and the dualist takes our representations of things as extended to contain truth, whereas the idealist dismisses such representations as false and illusory:

Outside us, are there actually sensory objects that contain the reason why, in a waking state, we think the series of objective concepts so and not otherwise? The full repertoire of our objective ideas also contains life-less substances, corporeal entities, that exhibit themselves as something to be found outside us. Is this exhibition of them also true for itself? “No!” answers the idealist, “it is the short-sightedness of our sensory knowledge that we think so; it is a sensory illusion, the ground of which is to be found in our incapability.”<sup>17</sup>

As explained earlier in *Morgenstunden*, a representation contains truth only insofar as that representation has its ground in a positive power of thinking in the soul rather than mere incapacity (cf. *JubA* 3.2:34). Thus, the dualist will uphold the truth of our representations of objects as extended because he will take the ground for our representation of objects in that way to lie in a positive power of thinking in accordance with which the soul represents something to itself that is not merely a function of its perspective or limitation.<sup>18</sup> Mendelssohn’s idealist, on the other hand,

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<sup>17</sup>*JubA* 3.2:56: “Giebt es wirklich außer uns sinnliche Gegenstände, die den Grund enthalten, warum wir uns im wachenden Zustande die Reihe der objectiven Begriffe so und nicht anders denken? Der Inbegriff unsrer objectiven Ideen enthält auch leblose Substanzen, körperliche Wesen, die sich uns als außer uns befindlich darstellen. Hat diese Darstellung auch Wahrheit für sich? Nein! antwortet der Idealist, es ist Kurzsichtigkeit unsrer sinnlichen Erkenntniß, daß wir so denken; es ist Sinnentäuschung, davon der Grund in unserm Unvermögen anzutreffen ist.”

<sup>18</sup>*JubA* 3.2:56–57: “Meanwhile, not everything in the manifold depictions of [corporeal substances] is perspective; not everything is the outcome of our limitedness and our confined viewpoint . . . He [the dualist] believes rather that much in the senses follows from his soul’s positive power of thinking and thus is the truth.” (Indessen sey in den mannichfaltigen Abbildungen derselben nicht alles Perspective; nicht alles Folge unsrer Eingeschränktheit . . . Er glaubt vielmehr, vieles in denselben folge aus der positiven Denkkraft seiner Seele, und sey also Wahrheit.)

will deny the truth of all representations of objects as extended because he will claim that such a representation of the object is wholly a function of the soul's incapacity, whether or not there actually is an object independent of us. Mendelssohn's purpose in thus re-drawing the lines separating the dualist from the idealist is clearly to undermine Kant's attempted distinction of transcendental from empirical idealism. For Kant, our representations of objects as extended have no ground in those objects considered as they are in themselves, since space cannot be taken to pertain to things considered in that way; rather, the form of these representations, as an *a priori* form of sensibility, has its seat in the subject. Given that these forms do not themselves have any ground in objects, representations of objects in accordance with them cannot be taken to proceed from a positive power of thinking but must be grounded merely in the soul's incapacity, in its inability to cognize things as they are in themselves; thus, according to Mendelssohn, the Kantian idealist, just like the garden-variety empirical idealist, must ultimately dismiss sensory representations as false and illusory.<sup>19</sup>

Having denied any significant difference between transcendental and empirical idealism, Mendelssohn now sets out to "refute the project of the idealists" in the second half of lecture 6 of *Morgenstunden*. And while Mendelssohn's criticism, unsurprisingly given its primary target, revisits the points originally raised against Kant in the letter of late 1770, he now presents these in a more systematic form with considerable refinement and added detail. Mendelssohn's first objection to Kant had turned on the fact that the subjectivity of time cannot be maintained when finite minds are considered as "objects of representations both those of God and those of their fellow minds." In *Morgenstunden*, Mendelssohn will advance a similar line of argument, this time focusing on the way in which the comparison of a given subject's representations with the representations of other finite minds and God's can serve to counter any lack of assurance on the part of the subject regarding the truth of those representations. Mendelssohn admits in *Morgenstunden* just as he had in the letter to Kant of 1770 that, from the point of view of the subject, the question of idealism cannot be settled; instead, traction is only gained on the idealist once the agreement between my representations and those of other representing minds is taken into account. Given this agreement, along with the unlikelihood that such agreement would have its ground in the incapacity of the subject rather than in a common external object, we can infer the existence of objects outside of us by means of an induction:

The more, however, that fellow human beings agree with me in finding these things to be so, the greater becomes the certainty that the ground of my belief is not to be found in my particular situation. It must lie either in the positive power of thinking and thus be a true exhibition [of something] or in the common limitations of all human knowledge. The probability of the latter case decreases if I become convinced that even animals know

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<sup>19</sup>Contrast Lewis White Beck (*Early German Philosophy: Kant and his Predecessors* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1969], 337–39) and Beiser (*Fate of Reason*, 105–6), both of whom take Mendelssohn simply to misunderstand Kant's idealism as Berkeleyian.

things in this way and not otherwise . . . If we could be convinced that even beings of a higher order than ourselves think the things in this way and not otherwise . . . then the certainty with which we know the existence of things outside us would increase to the highest degree of evidence.<sup>20</sup>

Mendelssohn recognizes that such an induction could hardly satisfy the idealist so long as it remains incomplete. It will not suffice simply to note an agreement among the representations of human, animal, and even higher finite minds, but this agreement must be shown to obtain for all thinking beings, *including* God. What must be demonstrated, then, is not simply that God exists, but also that the way in which objects must be exhibited to God agrees with the way in which they are represented to us, not insofar as God represents such objects spatially (because according to Mendelssohn that is not the case<sup>21</sup>), but insofar as God's exhibitions can be shown to differ only in that they are perfectly distinct whereas our representations are for the most part confused. Having shown all this, we can be fully secure in the inference to the existence of some object existing independently of us as the grounds of our representations since it will then be made by means of a *complete* induction:

If we shall have convinced ourselves of the existence of the supreme being and its properties, then a way will also present itself of making for ourselves some concept of the infinity of the supreme being's knowledge and from this truth, along with several others, perhaps in a scientific, demonstrative manner, of refuting the pretensions of the idealists and of proving irrefutably the actual existence of a sensory world outside us.<sup>22</sup>

Completing the induction in this way would show that some aspect of our representations of objects, namely, that aspect of our representation that differs from God's cognition only in being confused and limited in perspective, must have its ground in objects that are independent of us. It would follow that that aspect of our representation must proceed from a positive power of thinking in the soul, rather than mere limitation, and therefore be true. When the induction is completed, then, the idealist pretension that all such representations are false would be refuted.

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<sup>20</sup>*JubA* 3.2:54–55: “Je mehr Menschen aber mit mir übereinstimmen, diese Dinge so zu finden, desto größer wird die Gewißheit, daß der Grund meines Glaubens nicht in meiner besondern Lage anzutreffen sey. Er muß entweder in der positiven Denkkraft liegen, und also wahre Darstellung seyn; oder in den gemeinschaftlichen Schranken aller menschlichen Erkenntniß. Die Wahrscheinlichkeit des letzten Falles nimmt ab, wenn ich überführt werde, daß auch Thiere die Dinge so und nicht anders erkennen . . . Könnten wir überführt werden daß auch höhere Wesen als wir . . . so und nicht anders denken; so würde die Gewißheit, mit welcher wir das Daseyn der Dinge ausser uns erkennen, bis zur höchsten Evidenz heranwachsen.”

<sup>21</sup>See, for instance, *JubA* 1:311; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 291.

<sup>22</sup>*JubA* 3.2:55: “Wenn wir uns vom Daseyn eines höchsten Wesens und von seinen Eigenschaften überzeugt haben werden; so wird sich ein Weg zeigen, uns auch einigen Begriff von der Unendlichkeit seiner Erkenntniß zu machen; und von dieser mit mehrerer Wahrheit, vielleicht auf eine wissenschaftliche demonstrative Art, das Vorgeben der Idealisten zu widerlegen, und das wirkliche Daseyn einer sinnlichen Welt außer uns unumstößlich zu beweisen.”

Mendelssohn thus lays out in lecture 6 of *Morgenstunden* what exactly is needed in order to refute the idealist project, but he does not immediately supply the promised argument. Indeed, Mendelssohn only completes his refutation in lecture 16, in the new argument for God's existence on the basis of the limits of our self-knowledge, though this argument's connection to the earlier refutation has been overlooked.<sup>23</sup> Mendelssohn begins his proof by setting out from the perception that "I am not merely what I distinctly know of myself or, what amounts to the same, there is more to my existence than I might consciously observe of myself."<sup>24</sup> What Mendelssohn intends by this principle is not simply that the I, the "subject of thoughts" is not known completely since I am not always conscious of it, but also that the entire content of the representations that are attributed to this subject, including the content of my representations of objects, is not distinctly cognized by me since in every case these representations are limited by my unique perspective on them. This principle, Mendelssohn claims, is no less evident than my feeling of my own existence inasmuch as it cannot possibly be the result of any sensory deception nor of an incomplete induction. In addition to this principle, Mendelssohn provides another that concerns the modalities of thought: "Now I maintain not only that everything possible must be thought to be possible by some thinking being, but also that everything actual must be thought to be actual by some thinking being."<sup>25</sup> Against the charge that the latter principle in particular moves from what can be the case to what is actually the case in inferring from the (apparently unobjectionable) claim that any actuality is necessarily thinkable to the claim that an actuality is necessarily *thought*, Mendelssohn argues that the fact that something is thinkable presupposes that that thing is actually thought. As he writes, "what is actually on hand still lies at bottom in every case and the possibility ascribed to it is the thought that under different circumstances the present make-up would be modified in another way,"<sup>26</sup> which is to say generally that possibility presupposes actuality, and so that what is necessarily thinkable must also actually be thought. Whatever the cogency of this reasoning, Mendelssohn holds that once these principles are conceded, not only does the existence of a supreme intellect follow, but it also follows that this intellect must be conceived as distinctly exhibiting to

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<sup>23</sup>In fact, the argument is intended to reply to Lessing who would admit "a God outside the world but deny a world outside of God" (*JubA* 3.2:116). See "Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott" in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessings sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, 14:292–93 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968); Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 692–93.

<sup>24</sup>*JubA* 3.2:141: "Ich bin nich blos das, was ich von mir deutlich erkenne, oder, welches eben so viel ist: Zu meinem Daseyn gehört mehr, als ich mit Bewußtseyn von mir einsehe."

<sup>25</sup>*JubA* 3.2:142: "Nun behaupte ich, nicht nur alles mögliche müße als möglich, sondern auch alles Wirkliche müße als wirklich, von irgend einem denkenden Wesen gedacht werden."

<sup>26</sup>*JubA* 3.2:144–45: "Immer noch liegt bey dergleichen Behauptung das wirklich Vorhandne zum Grunde, und die ihm zugeschriebene Möglichkeit ist der Gedanke, daß unter andern Umständen die gegenwärtige Beschaffenheit desselben anders modificirt seyn würde."

itself “everything that pertains to my existence,” that is, the complete content of my representations without any of the distortions wrought by my own limitations.<sup>27</sup> In this way, this new “scientific proof for God’s existence” also demonstrates that the same substances that I cognize only imperfectly must be exhibited to God, albeit as *prototypes*, or originals, without limitation to a particular perspective and without any attendant confusion (cf. *JubA* 3.2:88). This proof thus completes the induction on the basis of which we can infer from the agreement among the representations of *all* thinking beings to some ground in a common object for that agreement and, therefore, to the source of our representations of that object in a positive power for thinking.<sup>28</sup>

This first, longer argument against the idealist, then, develops one line of criticism already introduced in Mendelssohn’s letter to Kant of 1770. A second, shorter argument presented at the conclusion of lecture 6 develops another point Mendelssohn had brought up in that letter: the claim that once the reality of time is granted with respect to the representation, its reality for “the model and prototype of representations in the world” also follows. In *Morgenstunden*, this objection is tabled in response to the idealist’s assertion that even if the desired agreement among thinking beings in their representations of objects as extended and mobile could be demonstrated, the existence of such an extended, mobile substance would not follow:

“But what sort of properties,” asks the idealist, “do you attribute to this substance? Are not all sensory properties that you ascribe to it mere modifications of what transpires in you yourself? You say, for example, that matter is extended and moveable. But are extension and movement something more than sensory concepts, alterations of your power of

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<sup>27</sup> *JubA* 3.2:142–43: “If these propositions are allowed, then it obviously follows that an entity must be on hand which represents to itself in the most distinct, purest, and most thoroughgoing manner everything that pertains to my existence. No limited knowledge would contain everything that pertains to my actual existence. A contingent being’s consciousness and distinct discernment, indeed, that of all contingent beings altogether, do not reach as far as the existence of a single speck of the sun . . . There must, therefore, be *one* thinking being, *one* intellect that thinks in the most perfect way the sum-total of all possibilities [i.e., all that is thinkable] as possible and the sum-total of all actualities [i.e., all that is actually thought] as actual.” (Werden diese Sätze eingeräumt, so folget auf eine handgreifliche Weise, daß ein Wesen vorhanden seyn müsse, welches alles, was zu meinem Daseyn gehöret, auf das allerdeutlichste, reinste und ausführlichste sich vorstellt. Jede eingeschränkte Erkenntniß würde nicht alles enthalten, was zu meinem wirklichen Daseyn gehört. Das Bewußtseyn und die deutliche Einsicht eines zufälligen Wesens, ja aller zufälligen Wesen zusammen genommen, reichert nicht so weit, als das Daseyn eines einzigen Sonnenstäubleins . . . Es muß also ein denkendes Wesen, einen Verstand geben, der den Inbegriff aller Möglichkeiten, als möglich, den Inbegriff aller Wirklichkeiten, als wirklich auf das vollkommenste denket.)

<sup>28</sup> *JubA* 3.2:55: “If we could be persuaded that the supreme intellect exhibited to itself the things outside us to itself as actual objects, then our assurance of their existence would have attained the highest degree of evidence and there would be no further increase that it might undergo.” (Wenn wir überführt seyn könnten, daß der allerhöchste Verstand sich die Dinge außer uns, als wirkliche Objecte darstellte; so würde unsre Versicherung von ihrem Daseyn den höchsten Grad der Evidenz erlangt haben, und keinen fernern Zuwachs mehr leiden.)

representation, of which you are conscious? And how are you able to transpose these properties, as it were, from yourself and ascribe them to a prototype that is supposed to be found outside you?"<sup>29</sup>

This is an important criticism, since it challenges the relevance of Mendelssohn's (at this point) promised argument to the idealist position it is intended to refute: even if it can be shown that the objects that we represent as spatial are exhibited to God as actually existing, the most that this can demonstrate is that the objects we *think* as, for instance, extended and moveable exist without requiring any further attribution of extension and moveability to some substance. Mendelssohn dismisses this objection, however, claiming that the idealist is making far too much of a merely linguistic distinction:

"If this is the difficulty," the dualist replies, "then it lies more in the language than in the thing itself. If we say, a thing is extended, is moveable, then these words have no other meaning than this: a thing is constituted in such a way that it must be thought as extended and moveable. It is one and the same, according to language as well as the concept, to be A and be thought of as A."<sup>30</sup>

While perhaps misleadingly presented, Mendelssohn's claim here does not amount to the naïve idealistic identification of the being of an object with its being thought; rather, his claim is that the fact that we necessarily think an object as extended implies that there must be something (i.e., some feature or property) in the object in virtue of which we are necessitated to think it in this way. This point becomes clearer in the lines which immediately follow the previous passage: "if we say that matter is extended, is moveable, is impenetrable, we are of course saying nothing more than *that there are prototypes outside us* that exhibit themselves as extended, moveable, and impenetrable, and exhibit themselves as such in each thinking being" (my emphasis).<sup>31</sup> That some feature *in the prototype* serves as the ground for our representations of objects as extended implies that these representations are capable of some degree of truth since in that case our representations do not proceed wholly from our limitation but are, at least in part, a function of a positive power for thinking in the soul which it would therefore have

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<sup>29</sup> *JubA* 3.2:57: "Was für Eigenschaften aber, fragt jener, legt ihr dieser Substanz bey? Sind nicht alle sinnlichen Eigenschaften, die ihr derselben zuschreibt, bloße Modificationen, die in euch selbst vorgehn? Ihr sagt, z.B. die Materie sey ausgedehnt und beweglich. Sind aber Ausdehnung und Bewegung etwas mehr, als sinnliche Begriffe, Abänderungen eurer Vorstellungskraft, deren ihr euch bewußt seyd; und wie könnt ihr diese gleichsam aus euch hinaustragen, und einem Urbilde zuschreiben, das außer euch befindlich seyn soll?"

<sup>30</sup> *JubA* 3.2:57: "Wenn diese die Schwierigkeit ist, erwidert der Dualist, so liegt sie mehr in die Sprache, als in der Sache selbst. Wenn wir sagen, ein Ding sey ausgedehnt, sey beweglich; so haben diese Worte keine andre Bedeutung, als diese: ein Ding sey von der Beschaffenheit, daß es als ausgedehnt und beweglich gedacht werden müsse. A seyn, und als A gedacht werden, ist der Sprache, so wie dem Begriffe nach, ebendasselbe."

<sup>31</sup> *JubA* 3.2:57: "Wenn wir also sagen: die Materie sey ausgedehnt, sey beweglich, sey undurchdringlich; so sagen wir freylich weiter nichts, als: es gebe Urbilder ausser uns, die sich in jedem denkenden Wesen als ausgedehnt, beweglich und undurchdringlich darstellen."

in common with God.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, it makes no difference, as far as refuting the idealist is concerned, whether an object is extended or is only constituted in a way that it is (necessarily) thought as such by all finite thinking beings since either way some feature in the object itself serves as the ground of (the truth of) our representations.

In addition to refining his previous objections to the idealism of the *Dissertation*, Mendelssohn offers a new criticism in lecture 7, which specifically addresses Kant's idealism as elaborated in the *KrV*. As Mendelssohn writes:

Recently, an adherent of the spiritual system with whom I engaged in debate about this matter said: "Is it not rather you yourself [i.e., the dualist] who occasions this linguistic confusion and seeks to entangle us in it? All of the properties ascribed by you to this prototype are, by your own admission, mere accidents of the soul. We want to know, however, what this prototype itself is, not what it might do."<sup>33</sup>

Here the transcendental idealist responds in kind to the dualist's accusation of a linguistic confusion by pointing out that the dualist mistakes the analysis of the effects of an object on the soul for the investigation of what that object, the prototype for our representations, might be considered in itself, where the idealist claims that this latter issue is in fact left untouched by the dualist. Of course, the transcendental idealist will not maintain that we can know anything about the thing considered in itself, since such a thing must lie outside the boundaries of our experience, but will nonetheless defend the posit of the thing in itself and even make a limited use of it as a boundary concept (cf. A255/B310-11). Against this challenge, Mendelssohn charges the Kantian idealist with attempting to introduce a transcendental distinction, that is, one between appearances and things in themselves, when no such distinction is warranted. Where the Kantian spots a distinct limitation of *our* capacity in our inability to cognize the thing in itself, Mendelssohn discerns a limitation that holds for any cognizing being in general and which thus has none of the profound epistemological implications Kant seems to think it does:

Friend, I answered, if you are serious on this point, then it seems to me that you demand to know something that is in no way an object of knowledge. We stand at the boundary not only of human knowledge, but of all knowledge in general; and we want to go further

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<sup>32</sup>See *JubA* 3.2:87–88: "If it is conceded that truth is to be encountered in the [representation], truth that, with the perspectival aspect discounted, repeats itself in each subject, then it is a consequence of the power of representation and must exhibit itself in the supreme being, if there is such, in the purest light and without any admixture of perspective. If, however, this is so, then so too is the proposition: 'there exists, objectively and actually, such a prototype,' the purest and most undeniable truth." (Wenn zugegeben wird, daß in dem Gemählde Wahrheit anzutreffen, die sich, das Perspectivische abgerechnet, in jedem Subjecte wiederholt, so ist es eine Folge ihrer Vorstellungskraft, und muß sich in dem allerhöchsten Wesen, wenn es ein solches giebt, in dem reinsten Lichte und ohne Zumischung des Perspectiven, darstellen. Ist aber dieses; so ist auch der Satz: es existirt ein solches Urbild objectiv wirklich, die reinste und unläugbarste Wahrheit.)

<sup>33</sup>*JubA* 3.2:59: "Seyd ihr es nicht vielmehr selbst, sprach letzthin ein Anhänger des geistigen Systems, mit dem ich mich hierüber in Streit einließ: Seid ihr es nicht vielmehr selbst, der diese Verwirrung in der Sprache veranlaßt, und uns darin zu verwickeln sucht? Alle Eigenschaften, die ihr diesem Urbilde zuschreibt, sind, eurem eignen Geständnisse nach, bloße Accidenzen der Seele. Wir wollen ja aber wissen, was dieses Urbild selber sey, nicht was es würke."



without knowing where we are headed. If I tell you what a thing does or undergoes, do not ask further what it is. If I tell you what kind of a concept you have to make of a thing, then the further question "What is this thing in and for itself?" is no longer intelligible.<sup>34</sup>

Mendelssohn's claim here that the thing in itself is no object of knowledge at all is not limited in its scope to finite thinking beings but applies to God as well. This is not to say, however, that God's cognition is limited in the same way that ours is; as Mendelssohn explains to the Kantian idealist, in asking about the constitution of the thing in itself, "you are inquiring about a concept that is actually no concept and therefore something contradictory." (*JubA* 3.2:60–61; *Ihr forschet nach einem Begriffe, der eigentlich kein Begriff, und also etwas Widersprechendes seyn soll.*) Thus, Mendelssohn's point is that the Kantian contention that we lack cognition of the thing in itself implies no limits whatsoever to our, or any being's, cognition since any claim of knowledge about it on the part of any being would be incoherent. This counterargument is made rather clearer in the consideration of the semantics of questions in the Remarks and Additions appended to the *Morgenstunden*. There, Mendelssohn claims, a question is only permissible in any field of investigation when an answer to that question is possible: "All questions must be answerable, they must contain incomplete sentences that can be transformed into a complete, intelligible and thinkable sentence through some possible answer."<sup>35</sup> Mendelssohn goes on to apply this general, proto-verificationist principle to the Kantian idealist's question regarding the properties of the thing in itself:

*What are things in and for themselves, outside of all sensations, representations, and concepts?* This question belongs, as I believe, to the class of unanswerable questions. The incomplete proposition that it contains is: – *Things outside of all sensations, representations, and concepts are in and for themselves = X*. If the question is to be valid, this sentence must be made more complete, the unknown in it, must be capable of being transformed into something known, the X into A . . . Suppose therefore: *Things outside of all sensations, representations, and concepts are = A*. Now, in such a case, A obviously does not provide any more to think than X does . . . Thus, the sentence that is passed off as incomplete cannot be made complete through any possible answer. The question is in and for itself unanswerable.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *JubA* 3.2:59–60: "Freund, antwortete ich, wenn dieses euer Ernst ist; so dünkt mich ihr verlangt etwas zu wissen, das schlechterdings kein Gegenstand des Wissens ist. Wir stehen an der Gränze, nicht nur der menschlichen Erkenntniß, sondern aller Erkenntniß überhaupt; und wollen noch weiter hinaus, ohne zu wissen, wohin. Wenn ich euch sage, was ein Ding wücket oder leidet; so fraget weiter nicht, was es ist. Wenn ich euch sage, was ihr euch von einem Dinge für einen Begriff zu machen habet; so hat die fernere Frage, was dieses Ding an und für sich selbst sey? weiter keinen Verstand."

<sup>35</sup> *JubA* 3.2:170: "Alle Fragen müssen beantwortlich seyn; müssen unvollständige Sätze enthalten, die durch eine mögliche Antwort in vollständige, verständliche und denkbare Sätze verwandelt werden können."

<sup>36</sup> *JubA* 3.2:170–71: "*Was sind die Dinge an und für sich, außer allen Empfindungen, Vorstellungen und Begriffen?* Diese Frage gehört, wie ich glaube, zu der Klasse der unbeantwortlichen Fragen. Der unvollständige Satz, den sie enthält ist: – *Die Dinge ausserhalb aller Empfindungen, Vorstellungen und Begriffe sind an und für sich = X*. Dieser Satz muß, wenn die Frage gelten soll, sich vollständiger machen, das Unbekannte in demselben muß sich in etwas Bekanntes, das X in



The question posed by the idealist, then, cannot be answered as any possible answer would only end up ascribing to it the type of properties that are denied of it in advance; thus, it follows that not even God could claim to know the thing in itself. Without the posit of the thing in itself, there is no longer any reason to take our representations of objects to be due solely to the limitations imposed by our sensibility and so Kant's transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves collapses. Contrary, then, to what we might expect from someone who professed all but a passing familiarity with the latest philosophical ideas, Mendelssohn had refined his original criticisms of Kant's idealism, and even formulated a novel challenge to the very foundations of the more sophisticated doctrine elaborated in the *KrV*.<sup>37</sup>

### 3 Kant's Replies to Mendelssohn

These developments in Mendelssohn's criticism were not lost on Kant, although it would seem that he did not animadvert to them immediately. Mendelssohn sent Kant a copy of *Morgenstunden* along with a letter dated October 16, 1785 in which he praises the tolerant spirit of Kant's Critical philosophy, in that it permits "everyone to have and to express opinions that differ from your own," after asserting "that our basic principles do not coincide" (AA 10:413). Evidently, Kant was unsettled enough by this mere suggestion of a new Mendelssohnian criticism (perhaps recalling how long it had taken to craft a satisfactory reply to the previous one) that he very quickly "resolved to refute Mendelssohn," as Hamann first reports in a portion of a letter to Jacobi with a date of October 28, 1785.<sup>38</sup> Kant soon changed his mind, however, and it is not unlikely that a letter from C. G. Schütz dated November 13, 1785 had something to do with it. In the letter, Schütz draws Kant's attention to the self-deprecating passage in the Preface of *Morgenstunden* and hastily concludes that "no new arguments against the *Critique* will show up in his book" (AA 10:423). Whatever the cause, Kant quickly abandoned his previous

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A verwandeln lassen . . . Setzet also: *Die Dinge ausserhalb aller Empfindungen, Vorstellungen und Begriffe sind* = A. Nun giebt A in diesem Falle offenbar nicht mehr zu denken, als X . . . Der für unvollständig ausgegebene Satz kan also durch keine mögliche Antwort vollständig gemacht werden. Die Frage ist an und für sich selbst unbeantwortlich."

<sup>37</sup>Accordingly, C.G. Schütz, in a review of Mendelssohn's text (see below), asserts that Mendelssohn's claim that he was unable to come to terms with Kant's *KrV* because of a nervous debility might be taken as a piece of Socratic irony, were the effects of this debility not so well known: on this see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 675; and Erdmann, *Kant's Criticism*, 122. Regarding Mendelssohn's familiarity with Kant's *KrV*, see also *JubA* 3.2:210 where Mendelssohn corrects Jacobi's misinterpretation of Kant's account of consciousness (I am grateful to Anne Pollok for this reference).

<sup>38</sup>Hamann, *Briefwechsel* (ed. A. Henkel. Frankfurt: Insel-Verlag, 1975), 6:107. This resolution is repeated in a letter to Herder of November 9, 1785 (6:127). See also Biester's letter to Kant of November 8, 1785 (AA 10:417). Indeed, that Kant was expected to refute Mendelssohn's proof for the existence of God was even printed in the *Gothaishe gelehrte Zeitungen* in January of 1786 (cf. AA 10:437).

plan of a full rebuttal, as reported by Hamann in a letter to Jacobi of November 28, 1785.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Kant appears to have sent a couple of paragraphs of comments in reply to Schütz which, along with Schütz's own review, were subsequently published in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* in the January issue of 1786, the month of Mendelssohn's death. In those paragraphs, Kant focuses on Mendelssohn's proof for the existence of God in lecture 16, at the root of which Kant discerns the pernicious influence of transcendental illusion. Referring to Mendelssohn's claim that "something is *conceivable* only if it is *actually conceived*," or as Mendelssohn also puts it, that "without a *concept* no *object* really exists," (AA 10:428 – Kant's emphases),<sup>40</sup> Kant argues that, lacking the benefit of a critique of reason, Mendelssohn is doomed to conflate the distinct senses in which this latter principle can be taken. It can be taken, namely, either as expressing "merely subjective conditions of [reason's] employment" (blos subjectiven Bedingungen ihres Gebrauchs), that is, a need of reason, or as expressing subjective conditions "by means of which something valid about objects is indicated" (AA 10:428 – my initial emphasis; dadurch etwas vom Objecte gültiges angezeigt wird). Insofar as Mendelssohn's principle is taken to apply to sensible intuitions, then the claim that no object can be taken to exist without a concept (i.e., a pure concept of the understanding) can be admitted. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn seeks to apply this claim beyond the bounds of our experience and in so doing he is misled by that transcendental illusion in accordance with which merely subjective conditions are mistaken for conditions of objects (cf. A396), a criticism that Kant will also level against Mendelssohn in his essay "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" of the following year.<sup>41</sup> According to Kant's verdict, then, Mendelssohn's text is a "masterpiece of the deception of reason" but one that "provides us with the most splendid occasion and at the same time challenge to subject our faculty of pure reason to a total critique" (AA 10:428). In any case, no mention is made of Mendelssohn's criticisms of Kant's idealism: as Hamann reports in a letter to Jacobi of December 14, 1785, Kant had at this point determined that "the Morgenstunden do not actually concern him directly, as he had initially thought."<sup>42</sup>

Kant did not long overlook Mendelssohn's criticism, however. In a letter of March 26, 1786, Ludwig Heinrich Jakob wrote Kant to announce his own intentions to write a rebuttal of the *Morgenstunden* owing to the fact that it "is thought to have dealt a serious blow to the Kantian critique" (AA 10:436; als ob durch diese Schrift der Kantschen Krit. ein nicht geringer Stos versetzt wär). Jakob finds this hard to fathom, given Mendelssohn's professed unfamiliarity with Kant's thought, but even so he suspects one passage in particular to be "intended as an arrow aimed against your *Critique*," and he directs Kant to the passage in lecture 7 in which Mendelssohn

<sup>39</sup>Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 6:152.

<sup>40</sup>See *JubA* 3.2:145: "ohne Begriff [ist] kein Gegenstand wirklich vorhanden."

<sup>41</sup>As Erdmann has noted (*Kant's Criticism*, 145n), this criticism is found almost word-for-word in the later essay, see in particular AA 8:138n. Erdmann was the first to attribute these comments to Kant; see *Kant's Criticism*, 144–46.

<sup>42</sup>Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 6:181.

accuses the Kantian idealist of holding out the possibility of knowing “something [i.e., the thing in itself] that is absolutely not an object of knowledge” (AA 10:437). In his reply of May 26, 1786, Kant denies the rumours that he is still planning a refutation of the *Morgenstunden*, and encourages Jakob to pen his own, but having now had his attention drawn to Mendelssohn’s new criticism, he offers to contribute “a sufficient rebuke” (eine hinreichende Zurechtweisung) of Mendelssohn to Jakob’s analysis (AA 10:450). Kant’s essay, dated August 4, 1786, was included after the Preface of Jakob’s *Prüfung des Mendelssohnschen Morgenstunden* and in it Kant defends the posit of something standing outside of experience about which we can know nothing from Mendelssohn’s charge that any question regarding “what this thing is in and for itself” would be nonsensical. Kant begins by asserting that a survey of our sensible cognition reveals that it never penetrates to the internal properties of objects but is limited to relations. Our knowledge of, for instance, corporeal nature is limited to cognition of space, which is merely the condition of external relations; to cognition of objects in space; and to cognition of motion and moving force, which simply involve changes in external relations. Given that our cognition falls well short of a cognition of the internal properties of things, that is, of things as they are independent of any such relations, Kant claims that the question as to what these objects might be considered in that way is at least a reasonable one (AA 8:153). Anticipating the challenge on the part of Mendelssohn’s defenders to provide some criterion for distinguishing between putative properties of things in themselves and those of appearances, Kant remarks that such a criterion is readily available and, indeed, already surreptitiously employed by Mendelssohn and others in arriving at the concept of God:

You think in [God] unadulterated *true* reality, that is something that is not merely opposed to negations (as one commonly takes it), but also and primarily to realities in *appearance* (*realitas Phaenomenon*), such as all must be that are given to us through the senses and are called *realitas apparens* . . . . Now reduce all these realities (understanding, will, blessedness, power) in terms of their degree, they will always remain the same as far as their type (quality) is concerned, and in this way you will have properties of things in themselves that you can also apply to other things outside of God.<sup>43</sup>

To Mendelssohn’s criticism of his transcendental idealism in *Morgenstunden*, then, Kant counters that the question as to the nature of the thing in itself is perfectly sensible, even if we must admit that it cannot be answered; moreover, one means for distinguishing between the properties of things in themselves and of appearances is already presupposed, in some form, by Mendelssohn.

Kant is certainly correct in claiming that Mendelssohn himself makes use of some criterion for distinguishing sensible realities from those that belong to God.

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<sup>43</sup>AA 8:154: “Ihr denkt euch in ihm [Gott] lauter wahre Realität, d.i. etwas, das nicht bloß (wie man gemeiniglich dafür hält) den Negationen entgegen gesetzt wird, sondern auch und vornehmlich den Realitäten in der Erscheinung (*realitas Phaenomenon*), dergleichen alle sind, die uns durch Sinne gegeben werden müssen und eben darum *realitas apparens* . . . genannt werden. Nun vermindert alle diese Realitäten (Verstand, Wille, Seligkeit, Macht etc.) dem Grade nach, so bleiben sie doch der Art (Qualität) nach immer dieselben, so habt ihr Eigenschaften der Dinge an sich selbst, die ihr auch auf andere Dinge außer Gott anwenden könnt.”

For instance, in the prize essay "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," Mendelssohn had done just this even though he does not put it in precisely the same terms as Kant:

Of the properties of things outside us, we never know with convincing certainty whether they are realities or mere appearances and, at bottom, depend upon negations; indeed, in the case of some of them, we have reason to believe that they are mere appearances. Thus, we can ascribe none of these properties to the Supreme Being and must absolutely deny him some of them. Belonging to the latter group are all *qualitates sensibiles* that we have reason to believe are not to be found outside us as they seem to us thanks to our sensuous, limited knowledge and that, therefore, are not realities.<sup>44</sup>

While admitting this, however, Mendelssohn need not accept Kant's inference that he is thereby also committed to holding the question regarding the constitution of things in themselves to be a meaningful one. The reason for this is the very one suggested by Kant himself in his rebuke, namely, that "if we were *acquainted* with the effects of things that could in fact be properties of a thing in itself, then we would not be permitted to ask further what the thing might yet be outside of these properties" (my emphasis).<sup>45</sup> As Mendelssohn had claimed in "On Evidence," we can gain cognition of the properties of things in themselves through a direct acquaintance with the *soul's* capacities, where the concepts thus acquired are subsequently applied to such objects, and in particular to God:

But what then are the properties of things, of which we are able to say with certainty that they are actual realities? None other than our soul's capacities. Our cognitive faculty, for example, cannot possibly be an appearance. For an appearance is nothing other than a concept, the constitution of which must in part be explained by the ineptitude of our knowledge . . . Thus we can rightly ascribe to the Supreme Being all our cognitive capacities, if we abstract from the deficiencies and imperfections that cling to them, and we can revere in him unfathomable reason, wisdom, justice, benevolence, and mercy.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>JubA 1:309: "Wir wissen von den Eigenschaften der Dinge ausser uns niemals mit überzeugender Gewißheit, ob sie Realitäten, oder blossе Erscheinungen sind, und im Grunde sich auf Negationen stützen, ja von einigen haben wir Grund zu glauben, daß es blossе Erscheinungen sind. Daher können wir keine von diesen Eigenschaften dem allerhöchsten Wesen zuschreiben, und einige müssen wir ihm schlechterdings absprechen. Von der letzten Gattung sind alle Qualitates sensibiles, von welchen wir mit Grunde glauben, daß sie ausser uns nicht so anzutreffen sind, wie sie uns, vermöge unserer sinnlichen eingeschränkten Erkenntnis scheinen, und also keine Realitäten sind" (see Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 290).

<sup>45</sup>AA 8:154: "Freilich, wenn wir Wirkungen eines Dinges kennten, die in der That Eigenschaften eines Dinges an sich selbst sein können, so dürften wir nicht ferner fragen, was das Ding noch außer diesen Eigenschaften an sich sei; denn es ist alsdann gerade das, was durch jene Eigenschaften gegeben ist."

<sup>46</sup>JubA 1:310–11: "Aber welches sind denn die Eigenschaften der Dinge, von welchen wir mit Gewißheit sagen können, daß sie wirkliche Realitäten sind? keine andere als die Fähigkeiten unserer Seele. Unser Erkenntnisvermögen z. B. kann unmöglich eine Erscheinung seyn. Denn eine Erscheinung ist nichts anders, als ein Begriff, dessen Beschaffenheit zum Theil aus dem Unvermögen unserer Erkenntnis erklärt werden muß . . . Daher können wir dem allerhöchsten Wesen alle unsere Erkenntnisvermögen, wenn wir von den Mängeln und Unvollkommenheiten abstrahiren, die ihnen ankleben, mit Rechte zuschreiben, und also in ihm die unergründliche Vernunft, Weisheit, Gerechtigkeit, Gültigkeit und Barmherzigkeit verehren" (see Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 290–91).

So, even though Mendelssohn employs a distinction between types of realities, as Kant had pointed out, because he takes the soul's own capacities as properties of things in themselves, he can claim that we can know such objects in this way even while we cannot claim to know their properties by means of the outer senses. Consequently, any inquiry into the constitution of the thing in itself that gives rise to our representations of these properties can, according to Kant's own lights, be justifiably dismissed as pointless. Yet, as should be clear, Mendelssohn's account relies wholly on the assumption that the cognition we have of the soul amounts to a cognition of a thing in itself, which assumption, insofar as it was thought to be threatened by the subjectivity of time, was just the original bone of contention between Mendelssohn and Kant. Disappointingly, it would seem that the philosophical dispute between the two has simply come full circle since its beginnings in 1770.

Perhaps realising this, Kant would make one final attempt in the second edition of the *KrV* to address what he took to be the root of Mendelssohn's hostility towards transcendental idealism. Already in the first edition of that text, in his eventual reply to the objections of Mendelssohn and Lambert, Kant had offered an explanation for the uniform philosophical resistance to his idealistic conclusion in the *Dissertation*. As Kant noted, his doctrine does not observe any distinction in the ontological status of time and space, nor of their respective objects; rather time and space only pertain to objects considered as mere appearances, and as such both must be denied of objects insofar as they are considered as they are in themselves (cf. A38/B55). The epistemological consequence of this ontological equivalence, as far as Mendelssohn and Lambert were concerned, was that the existence of the objects of inner experience, the thinking subject and its states, could no longer be known immediately but their existence (as things in themselves) could at best only be inferred, like the existence of objects of outer experience, from their appearances. This result, however, contradicts the Cartesian presumption that Mendelssohn and Lambert share, namely, that the reality of the objects of inner experience, as opposed to those of outer experience, is immediately known. Indeed, this is something Kant had already recognized in his letter to Herz in 1772 when he wonders why none of his critics have raised a parallel challenge concerning the objects of outer sense (cf. AA 10:134), but in the first edition of the *KrV* Kant continued to discern this Cartesian presupposition lurking behind these criticisms:

They did not expect to be able to demonstrate the absolute reality of space apodictically, since they were confronted by idealism, according to which the reality of outer objects is not capable of any strict proof; on the contrary, the reality of the objects of our inner sense (of myself and my state) is immediately clear through consciousness. The former could have been mere illusion, but the latter, according to their opinion, is undeniably something real.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>*KrV* A38/B55: "Die Ursache aber, weswegen dieser Einwurf so einstimmig gemacht wird und zwar von denen, die gleichwohl gegen die Lehre von der Idealität des Raumes nichts Einleuchtendes einzuwenden wissen, ist diese. Die absolute Realität des Raumes hofften sie nicht apodiktisch darthun zu können, weil ihnen der Idealismus entgegensteht, nach welchem die Wirklichkeit äußerer Gegenstände keines strengen Beweises fähig ist: dagegen die des Gegenstandes unserer innern Sinnen (meiner selbst und meines Zustandes) unmittelbar durchs Bewußtsein klar ist. Jene konnten ein bloßer Schein sein, dieser aber ist ihrer Meinung nach unleugbar etwas Wirkliches."

It is certainly the case that this Cartesian presumption lurks behind Lambert's and Mendelssohn's objections to Kant's *Dissertation*. This is most clearly evident in Lambert's assertion that "even an idealist must grant at least that changes really exist and occur in his representations" (AA 10:107). While Mendelssohn does not provide an explicit endorsement of this claim in his letter to Kant, the earlier essay "On Evidence" leaves little doubt that he accepts it: "The skeptic can, indeed, generally be in doubt whether the things outside us are as we represent them to be . . . There is no doubt, however, that we represent them."<sup>48</sup> Unsurprisingly, Mendelssohn continued to adopt this Cartesian starting point in *Morgenstunden*. Already in the first lecture, he writes:

My thoughts and representations are the first things of whose actuality I am convinced. I ascribe an ideal actuality to them insofar as they dwell inwardly in me and are perceived by me as alterations in my faculty of thinking. Each alteration presupposes something that is altered. I myself, then, the subject of this alteration, have an actuality that is not merely ideal but real.<sup>49</sup>

Even so, what is important to note here is not only Mendelssohn's continued acceptance of this Cartesian presupposition after Kant had called attention to it, but also the particular way in which he persists in making use of it. As had been the case in the original objections to the *Dissertation*, our inner experience is not construed in terms of the perception of a given thought, but in terms of the experience of an alteration in our thoughts where the self is taken to be that which is altered: "Where there are alterations, there must also be a subject on hand that undergoes alteration. I think, therefore I am."<sup>50</sup>

While Kant had made note of this Cartesian presupposition on the part of his opponents in the first edition of the *KrV*, he did not take issue directly with it then. Rather, in the fourth Paralogism of the first edition of the *KrV*, he had contented himself with showing that, while the immediacy of inner experience might follow naturally for the transcendental realist, the transcendental idealist is not similarly committed to it but can uphold the immediacy of both inner and outer experience and thereby avoid certain sceptical problems (cf. A375-6). Now recognizing the need for a more offensive strategy as he worked on the second edition of the *KrV* through the second half of 1786, and with his previous diagnosis of the root of the uniform opposition to his idealism in mind, it is not unlikely that Kant intended his own Refutation of Idealism, at least in part, to target the basis for Mendelssohn's

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<sup>48</sup> *JubA* 1:309: "Ueberhaupt kann der Sceptiker wohl in Zweifel seyn, ob die Dinge ausser uns so sind, wie wir uns dieselben vorstellen . . . Daß wir sie uns aber vorstellen . . . , darin findet kein Zweifel statt" (see Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 289).

<sup>49</sup> *JubA* 3.2:14: "Das erste, von dessen Wirklichkeit ich überführt bin, sind meine Gedanken und Vorstellungen. Ich schreibe ihnen eine ideale Wirklichkeit zu, in so weit sie meinem Innern beywohnen, und als Abänderungen meines Denkvermögens von mir wahrgenommen werden. Jede Abänderung setzt etwas zum voraus, das abgeändert wird. Ich selbst also, das Subject dieser Abänderung, habe eine Wirklichkeit, die nicht bloß ideal sondern real ist."

<sup>50</sup> *JubA* 3.2:43: "Wo Abänderungen sind, da muß auch ein Subject vorhanden seyn, das Abänderung leidet. Ich denke; also bin ich."

(and Lambert's) objections.<sup>51</sup> In his Refutation, Kant sets out to refute specifically "the *problematic* idealism of Descartes, who declares only one empirical assertion, namely *I am*, to be indubitable" (B274), though he notes that this form of idealism does not imply anything regarding the status of outer experience other than "our incapacity for proving an existence outside of us from our own by means of immediate experience" (B275). Evidently working from Mendelssohn's (and Lambert's) conception of inner experience as the experience of an alteration, or succession, of thinking states, Kant notes that something permanent is required in order to determine the temporal order of these states in accordance with the principle of the First Analogy (and, indeed, Mendelssohn concedes as much when he claims that alteration implies something that is altered). Kant proceeds to show that, in light of the doctrine of apperception presented in the Deduction, this persistent thing cannot be the *I think*, nor could it be an enduring inner intuition since that would merely beg the question as to the grounds of its determination in time; Kant thus concludes that "the consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me" (B276). Applied against Mendelssohn, the Refutation shows that his root concern about transcendental idealism, its alleged demotion of inner experience and its objects to the same illusory status as outer experience, is unfounded relying as it does upon an ultimately untenable conception of inner experience. So, having identified this unexpected idealist commitment (of a problematic sort) at the heart of Mendelssohn's attempted refutation of transcendental idealism, and having shown that this idealism is itself subject to refutation, Kant boasts that "the game that idealism plays has with greater justice been turned against it" (B276).

This overlooked Mendelssohnian component of the background for Kant's Refutation of Idealism<sup>52</sup> is rather significant in its implications for our understanding of Kant's argument. It has been assumed throughout the extensive commentary on the argument that Kant's target in the Refutation is the Cartesian external-world sceptic and that the argument is intended to answer the challenge originally posed by the Garve-Feder review, namely, to distinguish transcendental idealism from the empirical variety.<sup>53</sup> This is, no doubt, correct as far as it goes, and indeed we have even seen that in the *Morgenstunden* Mendelssohn begins by posing a similar, if

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, Caranti draws a similar connection between Kant's Refutation of Idealism and Lambert's original criticism of his *Dissertation*. As Caranti writes, referring to Lambert's claim that the idealist must at least admit the reality of alteration in the representing subject: "Perhaps this remark was Kant's inspiration for the Refutation" (*Kant and The Scandal of Philosophy: The Kantian Critique of Cartesian Scepticism* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007], 132). While the Refutation applies equally to Lambert's and Mendelssohn's original objections, I take it that the later and more sophisticated challenge in *Morgenstunden* is the likelier "inspiration."

<sup>52</sup> Contrast, for instance, Heidemann, *Kant und das Problem des metaphysischen Idealismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 46n78.

<sup>53</sup> See Heidemann, *Kant und das Problem*, 87–94.



more sophisticated, challenge to Kant.<sup>54</sup> Even so, it should be clear that the Refutation does not have to do *solely* with the mythical Cartesian external-world sceptic, but also targets the all-too real Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysician, like Mendelssohn, who would set out from the assumption of the priority of inner experience. Moreover, while Kant's Refutation does function to distinguish transcendental from empirical idealism, the above suggests that it only does so in the service of its overarching aim to remove one particularly stubborn obstacle to the acceptance of transcendental idealism, the presumed immediacy of inner experience,<sup>55</sup> and that this should be the Refutation's primary dialectical concern may explain why there is no mention of this doctrine among the premises.<sup>56</sup> Yet, without pursuing these narrowly Kantian issues any further, what should be clear from the foregoing is that Mendelssohn's criticism of Kant's idealism in *Morgenstunden* is much more rigorous, and proved far more influential, than has previously been thought. Instead of amounting to a last-gasp, stand-alone objection on the part of a cantankerous dogmatist (as Mendelssohn himself might like us to believe it is), Mendelssohn's objections to Kantian idealism develop criticisms already tabled in his first encounter with Kant's doctrine of sensibility, and include a further challenge that evidences an understanding of Kant's increasingly sophisticated efforts to distinguish his position from a naïve sort of idealism. Kant himself, while initially dismissive of Mendelssohn's objections, was eventually persuaded of their significance, and even paid them a fitting tribute in devoting a new argument in the second edition of the *KrV* to refuting their presumed epistemological foundations. Without doubt, then, Mendelssohn profited from what he had read of the latest metaphysical ideas, little though that might have been; but neither can it be doubted that philosophers from Kant onwards have profited from reading, and contending with, Mendelssohn.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Indeed, Mendelssohn was familiar with the notorious Garve-Feder review: in a letter to Elise Reimarus he writes, "Der Auszug, welchen Hr. Garve hat in der Bibliothek setzen lassen, ist mir zwar deutlich; allein Andere sagen, Garve habe ihn nicht recht gefaßt" (*JubA* 13:169).

<sup>55</sup>While the same obstacle crops up in the Garve-Feder review, in its charge that Kant's idealism "denies the rights of inner sensation," this is apparently only because Kant claims "that the concepts of substance and actuality belong to outer sensation alone" (*Kant's Early Critics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 58).

<sup>56</sup>For a reading of the Transcendental Deduction that comes to a complementary conclusion regarding its anti-sceptical intentions, see Corey W. Dyck, "Kant's Transcendental Deduction and the Ghosts of Descartes and Hume," *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 19 (2011): 473–96.

<sup>57</sup>I am grateful to Dietmar Heidemann for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.



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# Chapter 9

## “What Is the Bond?” The Discussion of Mendelssohn and Kant 1785–1787

Reinier Munk

Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant were involved in a discussion that covered several fields of study, including the philosophy of mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, and religion. The discussion started in 1766 with the exchange of letters following the publication of their prize essays in 1764, and continued until 1786–1787, i.e., the years in which Mendelssohn died (1786), and Kant published his replies to Mendelssohn’s *Morgenstunden* (1786, 1787). Their writings exemplify that both men held one another in high esteem. Kant greatly valued Mendelssohn’s opinions. He praised Mendelssohn’s thoroughness and acumen and his enviably lucid style of writing. In the early years of their discussions, already, Kant refers to their unanimous way of thinking,<sup>1</sup> and honours Mendelssohn by calling him a genius, and the one of whom it can be expected that he will open – together with Kant himself, if possible – a new epoch in the science of metaphysics; the epoch in which the dogmatic dress of metaphysics will be put aside.<sup>2</sup> Mendelssohn likewise commends

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References to the works of Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant are based on the following editions: Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–, Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), hereafter cited as *JubA*. Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–), hereafter cited as *AA*. *JubA* and *AA* are followed by the volume number, a colon and the page number. I would like to thank Fred Beiser, Daniel Dahlstrom, Robert Gibbs, Paul Guyer, Detlev Pätzold, Andrea Poma, Edith Sylla and Francesco Tomasoni for their comments on an earlier draft of the present text.

<sup>1</sup>Kant to Mendelssohn, February 7, 1766, *AA* 10:64.

<sup>2</sup>Kant to Mendelssohn, April 8, 1766, *AA* 10:67. Apart from calling him a genius, Kant lauded Mendelssohn as being one of “our great analysts” just as well. See Kant’s letter to Marcus Herz, November 24, 1776, *AA* 10:184.

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Kant highly for his sharp analyses and critiques, as well as his openness of mind. In the Preface to the *Morgenstunden*, for instance, only one name is mentioned to represent the man who will give philosophy a new swing and new vitality to counteract the proneness to materialism and enthusiasm in contemporary philosophy, and that is Kant's.

The common view among historians of philosophy of Mendelssohn's metaphysics if compared with Kant's is, that Mendelssohn is a representative of the 'old' school of metaphysics as expounded, apart from Mendelssohn himself, by Wolff, Baumgarten, Lambert, Tetens, among others. As an old school metaphysician he is overshadowed in his late days by Kant's 'new,' critical thought. And one of the results of the critical turn in metaphysics is, according to that common view, again, that Mendelssohn's thought was outdated at the end of his life, already. This view is adequate to the extent that it reflects the effective role attributed to Mendelssohn in the history of philosophy. The view is adequate just as well in that it reflects the image that Mendelssohn (intentionally?) created of himself in the last 16 years of his correspondence with Kant. I am referring to Mendelssohn presenting himself in reply to both Kant's dissertation and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as the man who was unable, due to failing strength or a nervous debility, to keep up with the debates and new developments in metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> Whatever Mendelssohn's reasons may have been for presenting himself this way, I tend to agree with Schütz and Altmann's evaluation saying, the phrasing is an expression of the modesty with which Mendelssohn presented himself. This presentation did Mendelssohn credit, "but is also misleading if taken at face value."<sup>4</sup>

Due to these constrains, if not for other reasons, Mendelssohn was slow in his response to Kant's request of May 1, 1781, presented to him by their mutual friend Marcus Herz, for a discussion of his *Critique*.<sup>5</sup> It took Mendelssohn almost 2 years to respond to Kant's request. The response is his letter of April 10, 1783,<sup>6</sup> where Mendelssohn writes Kant that he is eager to read the *Critique*, and that he turns to it whenever he finds the strength for it. In this way, Mendelssohn adds somewhat ironically, the *Critique of Pure Reason* serves as a criterion of health just as well, and he still intends and hopes to finish his analysis of the book during his lifetime.

Mendelssohn thus creates the image of himself as a man staying in the back, who is facing difficulties, due to failing strength, to catch up with Kant and to continue their discussions. Mendelssohn did contribute to the initiative of presenting Kant a

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<sup>3</sup>Mendelssohn to Kant, December 25, 1770, *JubA* 12.1:241–45, esp. 241–42. Mendelssohn to Kant, April 10, 1783, *JubA* 13:99–100.

<sup>4</sup>See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 673; see also 266–68; and 675, Schütz's remark *ad rem*.

<sup>5</sup>Kant to Herz, May 1, 1781, *AA* 10:249–50.

<sup>6</sup>Mendelssohn to Kant, April 10, 1783, *JubA* 13:99–100: "Ihre Kritik der reinen Vernunft ist für mich auch ein Kriterium der Gesundheit. So oft ich mich schmeichele, an Kräften zugenommen zu haben, wage ich mich an dieses nervensaftverzehrende Werk, und ich bin nicht ganz ohne Hoffnung, es in diesem Leben noch ganz durchdenken zu können," 100.

medal as a token of honour and appreciation for his *Critique* – the symbol and the circumscription on the medal were Mendelssohn’s.<sup>7</sup> Yet, a discussion of the *Critique* is “nerve racking,” and Mendelssohn had to face his failing strength. The introductory remarks to the *Morgenstunden* (1785) likewise present us the author as a man still devoted to philosophy, his faithful companion, and his sole consolation amidst all that is repugnant in life. But a man who realizes himself, just as well, that his thoughts are not up to contemporary philosophy, as he is not able anymore to keep up with the developments in philosophy as articulated by Lambert, Tetens, Plattner, and Kant since circa 1775.<sup>8</sup> This self created image of the man who does not keep up with the developments and especially the critical turn in metaphysics is confirmed, again, in the letter covering the copy of the *Morgenstunden*, which Mendelssohn sent to Kant. According to that letter, the unanimity in their ways of thinking, which brought them together some 20 years earlier, is *passé* now that both hold different views on the principles of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> This observation is itself already an indication that Mendelssohn’s self-image is not simply to be taken at face value.

Kant for his part had high expectations of his discussion with Mendelssohn, both in the early years and later on. He was eager to hear the latter’s judgement of the *Critique*. To Kant, Mendelssohn was the most important of all the people who could explain this theory to the world. It was on Mendelssohn, Tetens and Herz that Kant “counted most.” He was therefore “very uncomfortable” when he was informed by Herz that Mendelssohn had put the book aside.<sup>10</sup> And when Mendelssohn informed Kant, almost 2 years later,<sup>11</sup> that his answer to the first *Critique* remained forthcoming, Kant expressed his disappointment rather unequivocally to Mendelssohn, in his letter of August 16, 1783.<sup>12</sup> That same letter, then, includes Kant’s request to Mendelssohn, again, to reflect if not on the entire work, then at least on three central themes in it. The themes mark the turn towards a critical way of thinking, and are

<sup>7</sup>Kant to Schultz, March 4, 1784, AA 10:346.

<sup>8</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:3. Note the difference in the year that is indicated by Mendelssohn, if compared with that in his letter to Kant of December 25, 1770, referred to above.

<sup>9</sup>“... so weiss ich doch, dass wir in Grundsätzen nicht übereinkommen,” Mendelssohn to Kant, October 16, 1785, *JubA* 13:312–13, esp. 312.

<sup>10</sup>Kant to Herz, May 11, 1781, AA 10:252–53 (my translation). The date of this letter indicates that it was already 10 days after Kant asked Herz to bring a copy of the book to Mendelssohn that Herz informed Kant, saying, Mendelssohn had put the book aside: “Dass Herr Mendelssohn mein Buch zur Seite gelegt habe, ist mir sehr unangenehm, aber ich hoffe, dass es nicht auf immer geschehen seyn werde. Er ist unter Allen, die die Welt in diesem Punkte aufklären könnten, der wichtigste Mann, und auf Ihn, Herrn Tetens und Sie, mein Werthester, habe ich unter allen am meisten gerechnet.” In retrospect, Herz’s response to Kant about Mendelssohn putting the book aside may be evaluated as a somewhat premature remark. Even for Kant’s contemporaries, it does not seem too far-fetched to say that they might need a little more than 10 days to read and understand the *Critique*, their familiarity with the current debates in metaphysics notwithstanding.

<sup>11</sup>See his letter of April 10, 1783, quoted above.

<sup>12</sup>AA 10:322–26.

specified as: (1) the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements; the possibility of synthetic judgements a priori; and the question whether Mendelssohn agrees with Kant's claim saying that the synthetic judgement a priori is a precondition for metaphysics; (2) the question whether Kant is right with his claim, saying that a priori judgements entail the formal conditions of the possibility of experience (inner or outer), only; and (3) the question whether Kant is right in his conclusion, saying that speculative knowledge a priori is confined to the possibility of the experience of an object, at the exclusion of the *Ding an sich*. The latter is presupposed, and necessarily so, even though we cannot obtain knowledge from it.

Apart from his words of praise and high expectations of Mendelssohn, Kant criticised the Socrates of Berlin in the final stage of their discussions just as well. The first edition of the *Critique* (1781) includes the well known critique of the proofs of the existence of God, to which Mendelssohn replied in the *Morgenstunden*. The second edition of Kant's *Critique* (1787) presents us his critique of Mendelssohn's views of space and time more extensively, as well as his critique of Mendelssohn's theory of the immortality of the soul. In addition to this critique, Kant lauded the *Morgenstunden* as an excellent work, and one that "will prove of considerable value for the critique of human reason,"<sup>13</sup> albeit that this value is specified in that same letter by saying the book is "a masterpiece of the self-deception of our reason," and "the last testament of a dogmatizing metaphysics," instead of a critique of it, as Kant would rather have it. This critique of Kant may have given rise to the impression that Mendelssohn did not come up to Kant's hopes and expectations of him as the genius who would present a new and non-dogmatic metaphysics.

The correspondence of the two, and Kant's critical appraisal of the *Morgenstunden*, contributed to the common view of the position of Mendelssohn and Kant in the history of philosophy, indeed. The question remains, nevertheless, whether the common view is accurate to the sources in this final stage of their discussion. There are reasons to doubt its accuracy, since it fails as a presentation of Mendelssohn's thought. And it fails just as well in presenting the details of their discussions during the years 1785–1787. For in the end Mendelssohn did write a response to the questions of Kant; the *Morgenstunden* (1785) entails his reply to parts of the *Critique*, and includes an answer to the questions raised by Kant. Moreover, the answer presents us Mendelssohn as a non-dogmatic thinker. And Kant, for his part, subsequently addressed some of the topics that were discussed in the *Morgenstunden*. These responses include the essay "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" (1786); next, his "Einige Bemerkungen," in Jakob's critique of the *Morgenstunden* (1786)<sup>14</sup>; and then, thirdly, the discussion of space and time, and the refutation of idealism, in the second edition of the *Critique* (1787). In my analysis, their ongoing discussion during the years 1785–1787 offers us reasons, indeed, to adjust the common view of the position of Mendelssohn vis-à-vis Kant.

<sup>13</sup>Kant to Schütz, end of November 1785, AA 10:405–6 (my translation).

<sup>14</sup>"Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" AA 8:131–47. "Einige Bemerkungen zu Ludwig Heinrich Jakob's Prüfung der Mendelssohn'schen Morgenstunden," AA 8:49–55.

The present article aims to contribute to this new view of Mendelssohn. It intends to offer an analysis of the problem that is at the core of the *Morgenstunden*, viz., our knowledge of (the actuality of) what is outside of us, and the status of actuality in the system of knowledge. It is the problem of how to pass from the realm of thought into the realm of actual things; how to distinguish appearance (*Erscheinung*) from illusion (*Schein*); and how to connect that which is possible in thought to that which is (taken to be) actual outside of us. The problem is phrased by Mendelssohn as a question, saying: “What is the bond which connects concept with existence [*Daseyn*], actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] with possibility? Should we, [like the geometrician,] trust the testimony of our senses, or is there another way of passing into the sphere of actual things?”<sup>15</sup>

The opening chapter of the *Morgenstunden* places us immediately *in medias res*, in that it takes off with a discussion of its core problem, viz. the relation between thoughts and their objects (10). To Mendelssohn the relation of thoughts and objects cannot be presented in terms of the correspondence or *adaequatio* (*die Uebereinstimmung*) of signs and the things that are signed at, for this explanation suffers from the shortcoming that there is no criterion for determining the distinction between the prototype (*das Urbild*), and its reproduction (*das Nachbild*). From the side of the prototype no characteristics are provided for recognizing the truth, i.e., the correspondence between the prototype and its reproduction. The objects of thought can be judged on account of our thoughts only. Thus we find Mendelssohn articulating a critical view with respect to the question that is under discussion in the opening paragraphs of the *Morgenstunden*, already.

Mendelssohn subsequently states that even though we are unable to distinguish between the prototype and the reproductions of thoughts, there still is the possibility to compare words and thoughts – thereby shifting the problem of the *adaequatio* to the realm of language, viz., the relation between words and their related objects – and to determine the extent to which words and thoughts correspond to one another (11, 61). With respect to thoughts Mendelssohn subsequently maintains that thoughts can be considered from two different sides, as they concern the thinkable and the not thinkable, or the actual and the not actual (11). Thoughts insofar as they are thinkable or not thinkable can be divided into concepts, judgements, and inferences. “Concepts are true if they contain characteristics that do not cancel one another and can be thought at the same time”; “judgements are true if they assert of the concepts of the subjects no characteristics other than those that find place in those concepts”; and, finally, “rational inferences are grounded upon a correct analysis of concepts” (11). This is to say that insofar as our thoughts or our knowledge concern that which is thinkable or not thinkable, as in mathematics and logic, their truth and certainty is based on the principles of identity and non-contradiction, which carry the highest degree of evidence. Knowledge of this kind is a consequence of the correct use of reason. And “truths belonging to this genus have the common characteristic that

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<sup>15</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:77. Translations of the *Morgenstunden* are taken (with changes) from *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011). References to the page number(s) of the *JubA*-edition of the *Morgenstunden* are included between brackets, e.g., (10), in the main text, unless indicated otherwise.

they are necessary and immutable, and thus independent of time” (13). Necessary and immutable as these truths are in or for themselves, however, the question under discussion aims at knowledge that is supposed to be not just a mental image or representation (eine Vorstellung), but a presentation of actuality, and of what-there-is (eine Darstellung) (39). The principle of non-contradiction, however, cannot serve as the source of the actual since not everything that does not contradict itself and thus is thinkable has, for that reason, a well-founded claim to actuality. We have to look for another basic principle that might provide the boundary-line between the actual and that which is not actual; a principle that will provide this line with the same precision with which the principle of (non-)contradiction distinguishes that which can be thought from that which cannot be thought (13).

Mendelssohn discusses three ways to answer the question of how concepts can be taken as a presentation of what-there-is (die Darstellung), and thereby offer the principle that provides the boundary line between thoughts and (their) actuality (77–78). The first relies on the testimony of the external senses, on account of which the sensory world is taken to be real. It has to articulate the grounds on account of which these testimonies can be judged as reliable. The second relies on the truth of one’s own existence, on account of the testimony of the inner sense, and subsequently infers to the reality of the outer world. The third is offered by the concept of the necessary and most perfect being. We will analyse each of these three ways, and will start with the first.

The first way to answer the question under discussion relies on the testimony of the external senses. The sensory world is taken to be actual on account of what is perceived from outside. Pure concepts can be applied to existing things on condition of their actuality only (76). One of the shortcomings of pure mathematics, its certainty and reliability notwithstanding, is that it leads no further than to connections and separations of pure concepts. If practical use is to be made of these propositions, “the geometrician will have to convince himself, through sensory knowledge, of the actual existence of his subject in order to state its predicate with certainty. And the certainty of the applied knowledge has no longer purely rational evidence, but is mixed with the reliability of sensory knowledge, the evidence of which is of a different nature if compared with the evidence of pure reason” (77). This was argued convincingly by Mendelssohn already in the prize essay of 1763, and is presented in the *Morgenstunden*, again. The certainty of applied knowledge is no longer purely rational evidence, but is mixed with the reliability of the sensory knowledge. And the evidence of sensory knowledge is of a different nature if compared with the evidence of pure reason. The difference is not to say that sensory knowledge is inferior in reliability (Zuverlässigkeit) if compared with pure speculative knowledge. It is not, according to Mendelssohn, on account of probability calculations.<sup>16</sup> To Mendelssohn it is on account of the nature of things and the nature of thought, that is, on account of the laws of thought that we meet truth with approval, and give preference to the probable over the improbable (12–13). It is in conflict

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<sup>16</sup>See Edith Dudley Sylla, “Mendelssohn, Wolff, and Bernoulli on Probability,” in the present volume.



with these laws just as well to attribute the agreements in (repeated) sense perceptions to pure chance (27). That which is probable with respect to the agreement in repeated sense perceptions is accounted by calculations, instead. Calculations make knowledge as derived from sensory perceptions almost as certain as the knowledge of pure geometry (26). This high degree of certainty notwithstanding, the evidence of knowledge based on sense perceptions is of a lower level if compared with that of pure reason. Furthermore, probability calculations cannot address the question of the transition from the realm of ideal beings to the realm of realities. The testimony of the external senses therefore fails to answer the question under discussion.

Mendelssohn's second way to answer the question of "What is the bond?" is based on "the incontrovertible truth" of one's existence, on account of the testimony of the inner sense. We are dealing here with Mendelssohn's version of Descartes' *sum res cogitans*-argument (13–14, 43–44). Mendelssohn's line of reasoning starts with saying, man is himself the source of the actuality of his thoughts. "The first thing the actuality of which I am convinced are my thoughts and ideas. I attribute to them an ideal actuality, inasmuch as they are present to my inner self, and perceived by me as alterations of my intellect." Man must therefore start from himself if he wants to give account of what he knows of the actuality of things and thoughts. Next, thoughts can be taken as alterations of my intellect. An alteration, however, presupposes something that is altered. This is to say that "I myself, the subject of this alteration, have an actuality which is not just ideal but real. I am not just modification but the modified thing itself, too; not just thoughts but also a thinking being whose state is altered by thoughts and ideas." We are dealing here with "the source of a twofold existence, or actuality, viz., the actuality of ideas and the actuality of the thing that has ideas; alterations, and the object of the alterations; and of both we believe to be at least sufficiently convinced. Just as I myself am not merely a changing thought but a thinking being that has continuance, so it can also be thought of various ideas that they are not just ideas in us or alterations of our intellect, but also belong to external things distinct from us, as their object" (14).

This is to say that the 'I think' is the source of a twofold actuality. First, there is the ideal actuality of the ideas, which are presented as modifications (*Abänderungen*) of my thought. Second, each modification presupposes something that is modified, and is attributed with continuity. The continuity is an indication of the actuality of the ideas 'for themselves,' their objective actuality. Ideas are 'ideas in us,' and they 'belong to' external things that are distinct from us, as their objects, just as well. The second actuality is implied in the continuity of the ideas, which is their being in time.<sup>17</sup> Yet, even with respect to the second actuality the question remains, so Mendelssohn, how we can be sure or convinced (*wie werden wir überführt*) that the things outside of us, which are attributed with continuity, are more than just thoughts in us, and have actual existence, indeed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Here we find Mendelssohn articulating an initial impetus towards an ontology of ideas that reminds us of Descartes, as well as earlier sources. Cf Theo Kobusch, *Sein und Sprache* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 135–36, 214–34.

<sup>18</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:14–15, cf. 44–45, 57–60.



The ground for the second actuality, and the link between the two actualities of ‘I think’ is offered either by way of deductive reasoning, in Mendelssohn’s terms, “the positive power of thinking,” or, again, by probability calculations. It may be noted, in passing, that the ways in which the perceptions of inner sense can be grounded are not different, according to Mendelssohn, from those through which perceptions of the outer sense can be offered their grounds. And of these two, the grounds that are offered by deductive reasoning are preferred over those offered by probability calculations, because the former are beyond all doubts if performed correctly. Therefore, if knowledge of what is actual is a consequence of our power of thinking, its truth is not to be doubted (55). And taking into consideration that reason and the power of thinking are to Mendelssohn synonymous to the supreme intellect, Mendelssohn can thus be quoted as saying, “if we could be persuaded that the supreme intellect constituted to itself the things outside of us as actual objects, then our assurance of their existence [Daseyn] would have attained the highest degree of evidence.” And we can be persuaded of the supreme intellect’s constitution – to itself – of the things outside of us as actual objects if we can be sure of the existence (Daseyn) of the highest being. Once the existence of the highest being will have been demonstrated, “then a way will present itself . . . of refuting the pretensions of the idealists and of proving irrefutably the actual existence [Daseyn] of a sensory world outside us” (55). This is to say that the bond between the two parts of the twofold actuality and the ground for the objective actuality of the ideas is the actuality of the necessary and most perfect being. The pretensions of the idealist to which Mendelssohn refers are their denying the actuality of things outside of the thinking subject, and their qualification of the actuality of these things as an illusion, *eine Sinnentäuschung*.

Mendelssohn’s statement of the objective actuality of that which is outside of us is one of the topics in the ongoing discussion with Kant. The topic was addressed by Mendelssohn in the prize essay, already, and is raised, again, in his letter to Kant of December 25, 1770, which he wrote in response to *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* (1770). In that letter, Mendelssohn articulates his objection against Kant’s statement, according to which time is of a subjective nature only, by drawing attention to the notion of continuity. Continuity is to Mendelssohn a characteristic feature of ideas and their changes in time, as well as of the objects of the senses. This observation makes him to conclude that space and time have to be conceived as something subjective as well as objective. It is this position of Mendelssohn regarding the continuity of (changing) ideas, and the subjective and objective character of space and time, that we find articulated again in the *Morgenstunden*.

Before we will move on with a discussion of Mendelssohn’s third way, let us turn the focus to Kant’s reply to Mendelssohn’s second way of answering the question that is under discussion. Kant can be taken to respond to Mendelssohn’s second way of tying the possible and the real in the *Morgenstunden* in two of the addenda that were included in the second edition of the *Critique*. The first addendum I am referring to, on ‘I think,’ is included in the discussion of the paralogisms of pure reason.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *KrV*, B 422–23.

To Kant, Mendelssohn’s *cogito*-argument is a default, since the ‘I think’ is an empirical proposition, which already contains the proposition ‘I exist.’ The awareness ‘I exist’ expresses an indeterminate empirical intuition or perception, that is indicated in the proposition ‘I think.’ This is to say that to Kant the proposition ‘I exist’ is presupposed in ‘I think’ instead of being inferred from it, and that the experience ‘I think’ consequently bears no metaphysical information about the nature of the I, and cannot be considered to prove the bond between the possible and the real. Mendelssohn, however, was not persuaded by this critique, for he does not share Kant’s understanding of existence as an indeterminate empirical intuition of perception only, as will be discussed below. Kant’s “Refutation of Idealism” in the second edition (1787) of the *Critique* can be taken as Kant’s second and partially approving response to Mendelssohn’s second way of binding the possible and the real in the *Morgenstunden*. The point of the Refutation is that we have experience of outer things and not merely imagination of them since inner experience in general is possible only through outer experience in general.<sup>20</sup> This is to say that the reality of that which is outside is a precondition for the inner experience. And that conclusion corresponds with Mendelssohn’s exposition of the reality of that which is outside of us, as will be discussed below.

The proof of the existence of the necessary and most perfect being is Mendelssohn’s third way to answer the question of the bond between the possible and the actual. Mendelssohn agrees with Kant’s claim saying that existence, in the sense in which Kant takes outer things to exist, is not a predicate of something. He can likewise be quoted as saying, “not everything that does not contradict itself and thus can be thought can therefore legitimately claim actuality.”<sup>21</sup> The point of difference between Mendelssohn and Kant with respect to the existence of the most perfect being is that to Kant the claim that existence is not a predicate of something is valid with respect to things the existence of which is dependent on some kind of empirical observation. Mendelssohn subscribes to the claim insofar as it applies to contingent beings. The claim does not hold, however, with respect to the existence of the necessary and most perfect being. The existence of this being is incompatible with the existence of contingent beings because of the qualifier ‘necessary.’ With respect to the necessary

<sup>20</sup> *KrV* B xxxix-xli, and B 274–79. Cf. Benno Erdmann, *Kant’s Criticismus in der ersten und in der zweiten Auflage der Kritik der reinen Vernunft. Eine historische Untersuchung* (Leipzig, 1878). Erdmann (118) is among the first (if not the first) who made the observation that Kant’s “Refutation of Idealism” in the second edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* is or can be taken as a reply to the refutation of idealism in the *Morgenstunden* - just as the *Morgenstunden* is a response to the first edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Dietman H. Heidemann, *Kant und das Problem des metaphysischen Idealismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 46n78, likewise relates Kant’s “Refutation of Idealism” to the *Morgenstunden*, even though, so Heidemann, Kant’s line of argumentation in the “Refutation” bears no explicit information about an influence of the *Morgenstunden*. For an analysis of Mendelssohn’s and Kant’s refutations of idealism, and a critique of Heidemann’s views *ad rem* see the contribution by Corey Dyck in the present volume. Dyck and I concluded to the relevance of the *Morgenstunden* for Kant’s Refutation of Idealism independent of one another. The articles were written independent of one another just as well.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:13.

being, and this being only, the statement applies that one cannot separate existence from the idea of that being without annihilating the idea itself. We must think the concept and the thing, or abandon the concept itself.<sup>22</sup> Mendelssohn's point is that Kant fails to consider, first of all, the difference in the meaning of existence vis-à-vis contingent beings on the one hand, and the necessary being on the other; second, he fails to consider that the concept of the necessary and most perfect being is denied by denying its existence, which is an inner contradiction. In line with Descartes' fifth Meditation albeit in an implicit way Mendelssohn argues that we are not free to deny the existence of the necessary and most perfect being since the existence of this being is implied in its concept on formal grounds. The properties of possible and actual correlate with one another in the concept of this being and are mutually inseparable. Hence the existence of the highest being is inferred on formal grounds.

At this point of our analysis it is fitting, by way of excursus, to introduce an essay which Mendelssohn wrote in (probably) May 1778, under the title: "The existence of God demonstrated a priori" ("Das Daseyn Gottes a priori erwiesen"). The essay is written in relation to Mendelssohn's correspondence with Allard Hulshoff, a minister in Amsterdam who had sent Mendelssohn an essay of his on the topic. Mendelssohn's essay offers a short, clear and lucid *exposé* of his lines of argumentation for the ontological proof.<sup>23</sup>

Mendelssohn's first line of argumentation is related to the notion of the necessary being. The argument can be paraphrased as: Assuming the necessary being has no existence outside my mind, and further assuming that every truth must be thinkable, the proposition 'the necessary being does not exist in actuality' ('das Notwendige Wesen ist nicht wirklich vorhanden') must be capable of being subjectively thought. Yet this proposition is unthinkable, for its subject flatly contradicts its predicate. Hence the proposition cannot be objectively true, and the necessary being must have actuality.<sup>24</sup>

The second line of argumentation applies to the most perfect being. According to this argumentation: "The most perfect being is unthinkable without objective existence. For at least some of its determinations are infinite and of the highest degree, and as such cannot coexist with any deficiency. Lacking reality is a deficiency, and is therefore incompatible with a being of the utmost perfection. Since, however, the most perfect being is a *thinkable* concept, the proposition 'the most perfect being does not exist' cannot be objectively true. Its opposite must be true: the most perfect being exists."<sup>25</sup> The pivotal point in Mendelssohn's argument is, indeed, the claim

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<sup>22</sup> *JubA* 3.2:152–53.

<sup>23</sup> Mendelssohn, "Beilage" zum Schreiben an J.D. Schumann, J.B. Basedow und M. Herz, Anfang (?) Mai, 1778, *JubA* 12.2:117–19. See also Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 323–27; Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God" (1975), in Alexander Altmann, *Die trostvolle Aufklärung* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1981), 135–51, esp. 146–51.

<sup>24</sup> *JubA* 12.2:117 as paraphrased by Altmann in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 147.

<sup>25</sup> *JubA* 12.2:117–18 in the translation of Altmann, *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 147.

that “exist – thinkable, or true” is the logical opposite of “not exist – not thinkable, or not true”. Following on the second line of argumentation, Mendelssohn adds the interesting remark: “I made no assumption to the effect that existence was either a reality or a perfection. I take it, no one will deny that it is a *determinatio positiva* or, since words are not the main thing [da es auf Worte nicht ankömt], that it can be transformed into a *predicatum ponens*.”<sup>26</sup> The existence of the most perfect being is a positive determination, and a conclusion based on formal grounds. As such it cannot be taken as reflecting some kind of dogmatic reasoning. The existence of the necessary and most perfect being as presented in the essay is not to be interpreted as if existence is a reality or a perfection. It is a conclusion on formal grounds, instead. And this conclusion is to be distinguished from Wolff’s, according to whom the existence (of this being) is a *complementum possibilitatis* (in the *Ontologia*),<sup>27</sup> or the fulfilment of the possible (in the *Deutsche Metaphysik*).<sup>28</sup>

Mendelssohn continues the essay with saying the argument infers objective actuality from the connection of concepts. And against the argument that this procedure is fallacious, as ideal things can only be inferred from *idealía*, and *realía* from *realía*, he maintains that:

... the transition from the imagined [bildlichen] world to the real [sachliche] is not wholly impossible. In particular, the following propositions cannot be denied: 1. what is incapable of being thought as an idea [idealiter] does not exist in reality [realiter] either; 2. if the statement A is B is *idealiter* unthinkable, it is *realiter* untrue; 3. if the statement A is not B is *idealiter* unthinkable, the statement A is B is also objectively true. [One objects, however:] Still, in the final resort we infer existence of God merely from our ability to think certain attributes as coexisting without any contradiction. How absurd! I reply: we infer the existence of God from the fact that otherwise truth would be at the same time untruth, and contradiction would be at the same time no contradiction. What sort of absurdity does one find here?

And to the objection that from these conclusions follows ideal existence only, and not real and objective existence, Mendelssohn places the observation, in line with the second way of argumentation as presented above, saying:

One has to differentiate between *existentiam idealem et subjectivam*. The mere concept which is being thought has *existentiam idealem*. The object of this concept outside the thinking being has *existentiam realem et objectivam*. However, when the concept is being thought as objectively existent, it attains to an *existentiam realem subjectivam*. No inference can be drawn from imagined existence [bildlichen Daseyn] to real existence [das Sachliche]. However, a great deal can be inferred from subjective existence concerning objective existence, as mentioned above.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *JubA* 12.2:118 in the translation of Altmann, *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 148, with changes.

<sup>27</sup> Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia*, § 174. See Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962–), Volume II.3, *ad loc.*, henceforth cited as *GW*, followed by volume number.

<sup>28</sup> Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* *GW* I.2.1, § 14; according to § 572 to become actual is equivalent to being grounded in the connections of things, which amounts to the present world.

<sup>29</sup> *JubA* 12.2:119 in the translation of Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 326–27.

The great deal is, again, that existence, i.e., objective actuality, can be inferred from ideal actuality. Since the proposition ‘the most perfect being does not exist’ cannot be true objectively, therefore its opposite must be true. And the opposite of ‘not exist – not thinkable, or not true’ is taken to be, again, ‘exist – thinkable, or true.’

Now that we have reached the conclusion that existence is inseparable from the concept of the necessary and most perfect being, we subsequently have to address two questions. First of all, there is the question of how to relate the existence of the necessary and most perfect being to the reality of the outside world. The link between these two is offered by conceiving the reality of the outside world as the best possible world. At this point in his argumentation Mendelssohn introduces the well known theory of Leibniz.<sup>30</sup> And best possible is taken by Mendelssohn to include both possible and real, on account of, again, the property of perfection. Second, there is the question of the meaning of existence in this context. Existence, or *Daseyn*, is defined in the *Morgenstunden*, to start with, as *blos ein gemeinschaftliches Wort für Würken und Leiden*, just a common term for *actio* and *passio*, that is, to cause and to be caused, or to act and to be acted upon.<sup>31</sup> The word *würken* here has the connotation of to work, to act, to bring about. Existence is thus taken to correspond to the capacity of *actio* and *passio*. This definition of existence is in line with the one we find in, e.g., Wolff, Baumgarten, and Bilfinger.<sup>32</sup> There is, however, more to existence than just a common term. Mendelssohn can also be quoted as saying, the knowledge or awareness of one’s existence is derived from one’s knowing oneself as acting or being acted upon: “Ich würke oder leide, also bin ich wirklich vorhanden.”<sup>33</sup> This is to say, first of all, that existence, or being-there, *Daseyn*, is specified as being on hand as an acting cause, “wirklich vorhanden seyn.” And following on this specification, second, being-there is taken as the ability of *würken*, to act, in its active and passive form as *actio* and *passio*. The word *wirklich* is taken here in its proper meaning of *wirkend*, acting. In the *Phaedon*, Mendelssohn can likewise be quoted as saying, “the word being actual, with which one refers to existence [Daseyn], is to be understood, and not without grounds, as saying: all that is there has to be active, i.e., has to do something.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:101–2.

<sup>31</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:44. The existence of the Highest Being could subsequently be defined as *reine Wirklichkeit*, pure act, or actuality proper.

<sup>32</sup>Christian Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 11th ed. (1751), *GW* I.2.1, §§ 104–05 (*Leiden*), §120 (*Würken*). See also Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia* (1736), *GW* II.3, § 174: Dicitur existentia etiam *Actualitas*; § 175: *Ens quod existit, dicitur ens actuale, vel etiam ens actu*; § 713 (*actio*), § 714 (*passio*). Furthermore, see Alexander Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, 4th ed. (1757), § 210 (*actio & passio*). Georg B. Bilfinger, *Dilucidationes philosophicae*, editio nova (1768), § 270, 387 (*actio & passio*).

<sup>33</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:44; cf. Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, *GW* I.2.1, §§ 5–8.

<sup>34</sup>“Das Wort wirklich seyn, wodurch man das Daseyn andeutet, giebt nicht ohne Grund zu verstehen, dass alles, was da ist, auch wirklich seyn, d.i. etwas thun müsse,” Anhang zur 3. Auflage des Phädon (1769), *JubA* 3.1:144 (my translation).

Furthermore, existence as being on hand, or *vorhanden seyn*, has the general meaning of *Dass-Seyn*, being proper, and is to be distinguished from *Soseyn*, *Wasseyn*, or *die Beschaffenheit*. This is to say that existence – and this meaning of existence applies to both the contingent being and the necessary being – is conceived by Mendelssohn as being in action, *würklich* or *würkend vorhanden seyn*, and is not to be confused with an indeterminate empirical intuition of perception, as Kant has it. To Mendelssohn, *existentia = Daseyn = actualitas = Wirklichkeit = wirklich vorhanden seyn = to act and to be acted upon*.

The conclusion of Mendelssohn’s third way of answering the question of how to bind the possible and the actual is subsequently, that the perfection of the necessary and most perfect being serves this purpose. Hence it is in this last, third way that Mendelssohn finds a solution to the problem. And the pivotal point in his argumentation is, again, that the property of perfection – which is taken to include the existence of the perfect being – is attributed to the necessary being by way of consistent reasoning; the reason (*Grund*) for the existence of this being, and this being only, is that it is thinkable, and that its non-being cannot be thought and is therefore untrue (cf. 97, 103).

Now that the bond between the possible and the actual, or that which is outside of us, has been established, the question of our knowledge of that which is outside of us still waits for an answer. Against the idealist Mendelssohn argues, in line with his exposition in the prize essay,<sup>35</sup> that the depiction of physical and spiritual beings does not reflect our perspectives and limited points of view only. Instead, the depiction (*Abbild*) somehow mirrors the prototype (*Urbild*) just as well – “for a concept cannot be formed from a mere negation.”<sup>36</sup> This is to say that the prototype invokes the perception, viz., the depiction of something, including its extension, motion, form, etc. That is, the prototype is and can be known to the extent that we know its properties. Knowledge of the prototype is bound to the confines of our understanding. The prototype (*Urbild*) serves as the example (*Vorbild*) for the depiction (*Abbild*) of reality, albeit that the example is bound to what is known of the prototype in the depiction. In sum we can be convinced of the reality of the outside world and have knowledge of it to the extent that the depiction presents us properties of the prototype, but we do not and cannot know the latter as it is, bound as we are to the confines of our knowledge (59–61). The correlation between depiction, example and prototype is exemplified by Mendelssohn with the simile of a room in which the walls are all covered with mirrors, and the mirrors depict an item that is repeated in each mirror from its position. The simile is presented in a dialogue of Mendelssohn (the I) with the idealist, in which the latter can be quoted as saying:

“... Imagine a room, the walls of which are all adorned with mirrors, and a depiction of an item that is repeated in each mirror from its position. Let these mirrors come to dispute among themselves about whether the item that they represent is actually to be found in

<sup>35</sup>Cf “Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften” (1764), *JubA* 2:267–330, esp. 310–11.

<sup>36</sup>“Über die Evidenz,” *JubA* 2:311; cf. *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:97, 112.

the middle of the room or whether the artist who produced that depiction has also laid it in each one of them in keeping with the place where each stands. How will they settle this disagreement among themselves? Considered as mirrors, they can have and respectively attain nothing but the depictions of the item. Will they not be in a position, if they can think rationally, to draw precisely the same inference from their depiction as from the presupposed actual existence of the item? Must it not rather be for them utterly the same thing, the item, of which they can know and experience nothing further, whether it be on hand in the room or not?" Good, I said, now let me continue the simile. If these mirrors recognize that truth and perspective are found in their depiction and that the truth repeats itself and remains precisely the same in all, while the perspective, by contrast, is peculiar to each of them, will not further disagreement on their part be a mere grumbling over words? If they concede the agreement in the depictions, what justifies their denial of the prototype, as the ground of their agreement? Or, rather, what more can they still demand from this agreement of the truth, if they should recognize the existence of the prototype?

Had my friend only recognized the axioms that I gave you a few days ago to consider, then I would have pressed him even further. I would have said: If it is conceded that truth is to be encountered in the portrait, truth that, with the perspectival aspect discounted, repeats itself in each subject, then it is a consequence of the power of representation and must exhibit itself in the supreme being, if there is such, in the purest light and without any admixture of perspective. If, however, this is so, then so, too, is the proposition: 'there exists, objectively and actually, such a prototype,' the purest and most undeniable truth (87–88).

The depiction by the mirrors is an indication that there is both 'truth and perspective' in that which is depicted. 'Truth' is taken here as that which repeats itself in each of the depictions. On account of that which repeats itself in each of these, we are entitled to conclude to the presence of something, a prototype, that is depicted by the mirrors from different perspectives, albeit that the prototype as it is in itself cannot be known, and we know it to the extent that we know its depictions. Kant, for his part, would agree with the view of Mendelssohn and his critique of the idealist's position, as can be concluded from his Refutation of Idealism in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. And he supports just as well Mendelssohn's claim that it is logically consistent to conclude to the existence of the necessary and most perfect being, albeit that this existence is a logical one that cannot be supported by empirical observation, and therefore is to be conceived as an hypothesis.<sup>37</sup> The apparent point of difference between Kant and Mendelssohn with respect to the necessary and most perfect being is the difference in the meaning they attribute to the notion of existence. Mendelssohn considers it justified to infer to the objective actuality of the necessary and most perfect being, whereas Kant maintains that existence cannot be inferred as it is bound to empirical intuition or perception. This claim of Kant's is criticized by Mendelssohn again,

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<sup>37</sup> *KrVB* 797–810. "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" AA 8:141. See also Kant's "Vorlesungen über Metaphysik, Metaphysik L<sub>1</sub>," AA 28: 311–12.



according to whom the existence of the necessary being is not to be and cannot be taken – by reason of its being necessary – in terms of empirical intuition or perception, as *sachlich*. The objective actuality of this idea is a *determinatio positiva*, and a *predicatum ponens* instead. We thus find Mendelssohn articulating a critical and non-dogmatic stand regarding both topics under discussion - the reality of that which is outside of us, and the existence of the necessary and most perfect being.

Furthermore, and by way of concluding this part of our analysis, we can make the observation that Mendelssohn did indeed offer an answer to the three questions Kant articulated in his letter to Mendelssohn of August 1783. The questions can be summarized as: (1) whether synthetic judgements a priori are a precondition for metaphysics, indeed; (2) whether an a priori judgement entails the formal conditions of a possible experience (inner or outer) only; and (3) whether speculative knowledge a priori is confined to the possibility of the experience of an object, albeit with the restriction that the realm of possible experience does not include all things in themselves, and may presuppose other objects as necessary, even though it would not be possible for us to know even the tiniest part of these. The answer to these questions includes, first of all, that Mendelssohn does not disagree with Kant's statement that synthetic judgements a priori are a precondition for metaphysics. Second, Mendelssohn agrees with Kant's saying that a priori judgements are a condition of a possible experience (inner or outer), as an object can be real if it conforms to its concept, only. Finally, Mendelssohn's views on the thing-in-itself, and the relation between depiction, example, and prototype, as discussed above, offer us an indication that he would not disagree with the third point of Kant either.

The exposition in the *Morgenstunden* of the ways in which the possible and the actual can be bound to one another includes another topic in the Mendelssohn-Kant discussion that is relevant here. I am referring to their discussion of the nature of reason, reason's needs, and the relation of reason and sound human understanding. This discussion is rather crucial for our understanding of Mendelssohn's thought in general and his discussion with Kant in particular. Sound human understanding serves as the overall term in Mendelssohn's writings and includes related terminology, such as *Gemeinsinn*, *gemeiner (Menschen-) Verstand*, *natürlicher Menschenverstand*, *bon sens*, and common sense, just as well. To Mendelssohn, sound human understanding is related to sense perceptions and presupposes operations of reason, which precede this understanding. Sound human understanding and reason, however, are "at bottom one and the same, and that what happens thanks to reason in the course of thinking must precede in sensory knowledge in the course of sense perceptions." The difference between the two is related to promptness and reflection, that is, immediacy and mediation. In the example of Mendelssohn, sound human understanding takes hasty steps and hurries forward, unconcerned about going astray, or stumbling and falling down; whereas reason totters that same route carefully and deliberately – tapping around with a staff, as it were, before it dares to take a step – and



is most concerned not to stumble and to fall down, or to go astray.<sup>38</sup> This is to say that reason's insights, or "that what happens thanks to reason in the course of thinking" is preceded by and therefore bound to "sensory knowledge in the course of sense perceptions."

By way of illustrating Mendelssohn's views on the relation between reason and sound human understanding I will quote a passage from the *Morgenstunden*, albeit a rather long one. The passage starts with the reality of the outside world, and continues with pointed statements on philosophers who according to Mendelssohn deny that reality – including the metaphysician, the idealist, the egoist, the Spinozist, and the sceptic. All these denials are to Mendelssohn just an attempt "to test reason, whether it keeps in step with common sense" – since that is what reason does and has to do. The passage reads as follows:

That there is a real sensory world outside of us; that not everything stays the same in this world, but is subject to change; that we are thinking beings who change continually and do not always stay the same: who would have ever seriously doubted this, have doubted this more than the existence of a triangle or a sphere which the practical geometrician assumes? Therefore, if it can be determined that without the existence of an unchangeable being no changeable being can be thought, the existence of an unchangeable being has been incontrovertibly demonstrated, and the entire speculative part of the theory can be confidently applied to the same [being].

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<sup>38</sup>*Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:33–34; cf. 50. See also Mendelssohn's letter to Winkopp of March 24, 1780, *JubA* 12.2:184–85. For Mendelssohn's use of *bon sens*, see, e.g., *JubA* 2:325; *JubA* 3.2:202–3; *JubA* 5.1:77. I take Mendelssohn's *bon sens* as a hint to the opening line of the first chapter of Descartes' *Discours de la Methode*. Mendelssohn's views of the relation between *Gemeinsinn*, *bon sens*, and reason show differences in nuances and details if compared with those of Johann Nicolaus Tetens, in the latter's *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung*, Bd. 1 (Leipzig 1777), 571–72, *passim*. Leo Strauss' interpretation (in his introduction of 1937 to the *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2, especially lxviii–lxix) of the relation between sound human understanding and reason in the *Morgenstunden* and Tetens' *Versuche* – "die insuffiziente Vernunft hat sich dem gesunden Menschenverstand zu unterwerfen, ohne dessen Leitung sie notwendig irrt; der gesunde Menschenverstand der Einfältigen ist die Autorität für die Vernunft" – reflects elements of Mendelssohn's Allegory of the Swiss Alps, and his letter to Winkopp. However, it cannot be considered an adequate and reliable presentation of Mendelssohn's and Tetens' views under discussion, as a comparison with, e.g., *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:33–34, 81–82, and *Versuche*, 573–74, 583, 584, easily demonstrates. Furthermore, Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768–1800* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 103–40, 238–49, points to the link of Tetens' (and Johann August Eberhard's, among others) views on the relation between sound human understanding and reason with Reid's. In that context Kuehn mentions Mendelssohn in passing (103–5). In response to Kuehn's remarks on Mendelssohn, the observation can be made that Mendelssohn's positive evaluation of Reid's arguments against Berkeley (as articulated in his "Die Bildsäule" [1784], *JubA* 6.1, esp. 84), that is quoted by Kuehn, is not to be taken as an indication that Mendelssohn shared Reid's views of common sense, for that would be a fallacy. The meaning and the function of sound human understanding in Mendelssohn is rather different from the meaning and function of common sense in Reid, instead. Fritz Pinkuss articulated this observation already, in his "Moses Mendelssohns Verhältnis zur englischen Philosophie," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 42 (1929): 449–89, esp. 453–56.

Meanwhile you know that these assumptions themselves, no matter how undeniable they may seem, are not admitted by all philosophers. The metaphysicians do not hesitate to deny things which common sense would never think of doubting. The idealist denies the real existence of a material world. The egoist, if there ever were one, denies the existence of all substances outside himself; and the Spinozist says: he himself is not a being that exists by himself, but a mere thought in God. Finally, the sceptic finds all of this uncertain and subject to doubt. I cannot believe that any of these absurdities has ever been seriously asserted. It seems that people have merely wanted to try and test reason, whether it keeps in step with sound human understanding; whether it can incontrovertibly demonstrate, according to the laws of thought, all that which sound human understanding, so to speak as immediate knowledge, considers to be a foregone conclusion. People have merely wanted to call into question the scientific nature of knowledge, in order to shame the dogmatic, who credits his theories with the highest obviousness of pure rational knowledge. Whenever reason remains so far behind common sense, or even strays from it, and is in danger of getting on the wrong track, the philosopher himself will not trust his reason and contradict common sense; but will, instead, impose silence on it [reason], if his effort does not succeed in guiding it [reason] back to the trodden path, and in reaching sound human understanding. Let us therefore try to see how far we can help reason and can supply, on reliable grounds, what still seems to be lacking here (79–80).

To Mendelssohn, reason is in need of a guide; it has to “keep in step” with *bon sens*, sound human understanding. This is to say that the reflections and expositions of reason are (to be) reverted to commonly held perceptions and pre-reflective insights in the process of generating knowledge. Mendelssohn’s statement that reason’s insights have to be reverted to commonly held perceptions and pre-reflective insights is to be understood as saying, pure reason is in need of a guide, and sound human understanding serves as such. Sound human understanding can serve as reason’s guide because its pre-reflected judgements are confirmed by the reflected judgements of reason. Reason’s need for a guide is not related to some kind of insufficiency of reason, or a preference of Mendelssohn’s for immediate insight over reflected and mediated knowledge. Reason is in need of a guide in order to prevent it from running wild and getting lost in unbridled speculation when it has to serve the purpose of offering reliable knowledge of what is actual (*würklich*), and what is conducive (*nützlich*). The parallel of Kant’s bounds of pure reason with Mendelssohn’s is rather obvious, indeed.

Mendelssohn’s exposition of reason’s orientations towards sound human understanding led Kant to a reflection on the needs of reason in “Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?” Kant confirms, with Mendelssohn, that pure reason is in need of a guide in the construction of knowledge. And this guidance is offered by “outer experience,” as referred to above, and by the hypothesis of pure reason if that outer experience is lacking. To Kant, orienting oneself in reason has the meaning of: to orient oneself with the assistance of a subjective principle, if an objective principle is not available.<sup>39</sup> And this subjective principle, means, or ground (the terms are Kant’s)

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<sup>39</sup>“Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?” AA 8:136, Anmerkung: “sich bei der Unzulänglichkeit der objektiven Principien der Vernunft im Fürwahrhalten nach einem subjektiven Princip derselben bestimmen.”

is the feeling of reason's own needs, "das Gefühl des der Vernunft eigenen Bedürfnisses." The terminology of Kant in this context is somewhat remarkable, indeed. The use of 'feeling' and 'subjective' remind us of Jacobi's. The words can easily be taken as a hint towards a psychological interpretation of reason, whereas the point under discussion is primarily a formal-systematic one that is part of the exposition of the laws and systematic nature of reason. The use of terms notwithstanding, the point of Kant's discussion of reason's guide is not different from the one in the teleology of reason at the end of the First Critique.<sup>40</sup> "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" addresses two claims which are rather crucial to Kant. One is the claim that reason is to be guided by reason alone in the process of self-orientation. This claim reflects both Kant's own views and, so Kant, is a correct phrasing of what Mendelssohn had in mind in his exposition of thought's orientation vis-à-vis itself. The other is his observation that a necessary presupposition is to be distinguished from and cannot be equalled to knowledge. The claim of the existence of the necessary and most perfect being is to Kant an example of the presupposition he refers to. To Mendelssohn, the existence of this being is not a presupposition but an inference, instead.

Furthermore, with respect to Kant's characterization of "orienting oneself in reason" as "to orient oneself with the assistance of a subjective principle, if an objective principle is not available," Mendelssohn would object that there is no need for a subjective principle of reason with respect to the objective actuality of the necessary and most perfect being. Mendelssohn's formal argument *ad rem* serves just as well as an implicit critique of Kant's transposition of the idea of the highest being to the domain of practical reason. In addition, Kant's discussion in this essay serves the purpose of offering a critique of dogmatic reasoning in the realm of *metaphysica specialis*. And with respect to this purpose Kant finds Mendelssohn on his side, and especially so in their discussions with Jacobi. Kant's qualification in "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" of a certain way of thinking as "dogmatic" applies to the one called "the opponent," and that opponent is Jacobi, indeed.<sup>41</sup> With respect to Mendelssohn's alleged dogmatic reasoning, Kant makes the observation that Mendelssohn's scholastic methodology aimed, indeed, to be guided by reason alone, and to refrain from dogmatism: "I admit that the discipline of the scholastic methodology (e.g. the Wolffian, which Mendelssohn recommended for this reason) can indeed hold back this mischief [of dogmatism, *rm*] for a long time, since all concepts must be determined through definitions and all steps must be justified through principles; but that will by no means wholly get rid of it. For with what right will anyone prohibit reason – once it has, by his own admission, achieved success in this field – from going still farther in it? And where then is the boundary at which it must stop?"<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *KrV*, A 797–819, esp. 818–19.

<sup>41</sup> "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" AA 8:138.

<sup>42</sup> "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?" AA 8:138, in the translation of: Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

The risk of dogmatism is that of reason’s unbridled speculation. Kant apparently failed to see, or so it seems, that reason is self-critical in the *Morgenstunden*; it bridles and ‘prohibits itself from going still farther’ by the judgements of sound human understanding in the construction of true knowledge. He failed to see that the risk of dogmatism, which Mendelssohn avoided meticulously vis-à-vis the actuality of that which is outside of us (as Kant had recognized), was avoided just as well with respect to the objective actuality of the most perfect being.

Finally, Kant’s rather brief Preface to the monograph of Ludwig Heinrich Jakob on the *Morgenstunden* is, again, a plea for the self-critique of reason as presented in the first *Critique*.<sup>43</sup> Reason’s unbridled speculations can be precluded by binding them to the bounds of senseperceptions. And in the context of a discussion of these bounds Kant articulated what at first sight appears to be a critical remark of the *Morgenstunden*. According to Kant, Mendelssohn makes use of two tricks (*Kunststücke*) in the *Morgenstunden*, in order to be exempted from the tedious task of the self critique of reason. The first is to characterize a controversy in metaphysics as a verbal dispute, and a feud over words.<sup>44</sup> The second is to stop reason from a critical self reflection at a certain level of the investigation (which is not yet the highest one), under the guise of the laws of understanding. The latter trick is used, according to Kant, in Mendelssohn’s discussion of the thing in itself. To Mendelssohn, the question of the thing in and for itself cannot be answered because the thing in and for itself is in no way an object of knowledge. Mendelssohn is subsequently quoted by Kant as saying: “If I tell you what a thing does or undergoes, do not ask further what it is. If I tell you what kind of a concept you have to make of a thing, then the further question ‘What is this thing in and for itself?’ is no longer intelligible.”<sup>45</sup> To Kant this statement of Mendelssohn is problematic, as the thing in itself can be specified as something in space, and in motion. And this indicates that the question “What is this thing in and for itself?” is a meaningful one, instead. Kant subsequently points out that Mendelssohn addressed this question even himself, in his discussions of the necessary and most perfect being. Hence Kant’s conclusion that Mendelssohn did not intend to say what the sentence quoted above tells us. The irony in these lines of Kant’s is, that what Kant presented initially as a trick of Mendelssohn’s turns out to be not a trick but a feud over words instead, albeit that this feud is now articulated by Kant. This feud, however, takes the sting out of the other ‘trick’ of Mendelssohn, the one that was mentioned first by Kant.

If this analysis of Mendelssohn’s discussions of the nature of thought, and the way to bind that which is possible in thought to that which is actual outside of us is correct, there is reason indeed to adjust the common view among historians of philosophy with respect to Mendelssohn’s views under discussion, as these were articulated in the last years of his debate with Kant.

<sup>43</sup>Kant, “Einige Bemerkungen zu Ludwig Heinrich Jakob’s Prüfung der Mendelssohn’schen *Morgenstunden*”, AA 8:149–55.

<sup>44</sup>For an analysis of this topos in Mendelssohn, see the contribution of Daniel Dahlstrom in the present volume.

<sup>45</sup>Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:60, as cited by Kant, AA 8:153.

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## Chapter 10

# Divided by Common Sense: Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Reason and Inferential Justification

Paul Franks

The Spinozism controversy remains one of the formative disputes of late modernity. It has decisively shaped both the development of post-Kantian philosophy in general and the development of Jewish philosophy in particular. Yet Mendelssohn and Jacobi, its principal protagonists, talk almost entirely past one another. Mendelssohn readily confesses that he does not understand Jacobi. Meanwhile, Jacobi could hardly be accused of attempting a sympathetic interpretation of Mendelssohn. He treats Spinoza and Lessing with great respect, but Mendelssohn – along with the Berlin Enlightenment, with which he is so closely associated – is the main target of his attack and the object of his condescension.

This failure to communicate is in part a product of two very different approaches to philosophical debate. Mendelssohn tends to be conciliatory. This is partly because of his metaphysical views, partly because of his personality, and – no doubt – partly because of his precarious position as a tolerated Jew. In contrast, Jacobi takes a polarizing approach, pushing debates to the brink of an either-or decision. This difference in approach, combined with the fact that much of the debate is about the interpretation of both Spinoza and Lessing – who are both notoriously difficult to understand, albeit in very different ways – makes it very hard to assess the relationship between Mendelssohn's and Jacobi's own positions.

Here I want to contribute to such an assessment by examining the place where their positions can seem closest: their critical relations to rationalist metaphysics, and their appropriations of Scottish common sense philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Frederick Beiser writes: "Mendelssohn thinks that speculation stands in the same critical relation to common sense as reason does to faith. Even the extension of Mendelssohn's 'common sense' and Jacobi's 'faith' is the same. Both terms are used in a broad sense, so

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<sup>1</sup>I hope in the future also to explore in this light Kant's contribution to the Spinozism controversy, along with the account of *sensus communis* developed in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.

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that they refer to all the fundamental beliefs of morality, religion and everyday life.”<sup>2</sup> And Manfred Kuehn points out that both draw on the Scottish philosophers, the implications of whose appeal to common sense was a significant topic of discussion in Germany in the 1770s and beyond.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Beiser goes on, in the passage just quoted, to say that Mendelssohn and Jacobi “part company ... over whether the conflict between philosophy and ordinary belief is resolvable.” I will argue, however, that they part company *earlier* than this, in the way they frame that conflict. In fact, the proximity between their views is merely apparent. While Mendelssohn’s conception of common sense is far more central to his philosophy than is usually appreciated, that conception remains squarely within the rationalist tradition that it mitigates. Jacobi, however, radicalizes the common sense critique in a way that moves decisively beyond rationalism.

## 1

Mendelssohn admits that, due to his incapacity, his sense of philosophical debates and issues has not been able to progress beyond approximately 1775.<sup>4</sup> This is usually quoted as proof that Mendelssohn has not been able to study Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and to assimilate the way in which it reframes the fundamental questions of philosophy. But Mendelssohn’s incapacity might also be cited as proof that his mind remains occupied with issues about the Scottish appeal to common sense that generated much thought in the 1770s and 1780s on the part of fellow neo-Wolffians such as Eberhard. Indeed, Mendelssohn engaged with these issues early. He had read Thomas Reid’s 1764 *Inquiry* in French translation by 1770, when he asked Nicolai to obtain for him an English original.<sup>5</sup> In 1774, he recommended the *Inquiry* to a young man as part of a basic reading course in philosophy, specifically as a critique of Condillac’s sensationalism.<sup>6</sup> In 1780, he discussed, in a letter to a Benedictine monk, the proper attitude towards conflicts between philosophy and

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 99.

<sup>3</sup>See Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987), 113–18 on Mendelssohn; 143–46, 162–66 on Jacobi. The case for Jacobi’s dependence on Reid was first made by Günther Baum, *Vernunft und Erkenntnis: Die Philosophie F. H. Jacobis* (Bonn: H. Bouvier, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, in *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 3.2 (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 1974), 5. Hereafter cited as *JubA* and volume number, followed by a colon and page number.

<sup>5</sup>See Kuehn, 103, citing Mendelssohn, *Neuerschlossene Briefe Moses Mendelssohns an Friedrich Nicolai* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1973), 32.

<sup>6</sup>Mendelssohn, *JubA* 3.1:305. On the importance of Reid’s rejection of the view, held by both Berkeley and Hume, that our ideas of body are ideas of sensation and not of reflection, see Keith DeRose, “Reid’s Anti-Sensationalism and his Realism,” *Philosophical Review*, 98:3 (July 1989), 313–48.



common sense.<sup>7</sup> And in 1784, he appealed, once again in a critique of Condillac, to “Beatty, Reid, and the other friends of Common sense [Gemeinsinn].”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, Mendelssohn’s best-known remarks about common sense are from two of the central texts of the Spinozism controversy: *Morning Hours* and *To the Friends of Lessing*. However, if these remarks are not to mislead us, they should be read, I believe, in the context of much earlier comments, *prior* to his engagement with Reid.

In Chapter 10 of *Morning Hours*, Mendelssohn reports his allegorical dream of being led through the Alps by two guides – a strong and robust Swiss rustic, representing common sense, and a gaunt and morbid angel, representing contemplation – and of being abandoned at a crossroads when the two guides took different paths. Famously, he wrote:

Whenever my speculation seems to lead me too far from the main street of common sense, I stand still and seek to orient myself. I look back to the point from which I started out and try to compare my two guides. Experience has taught me that in most cases common sense tends to be right and reason must speak very decisively for speculation if I am to leave common sense and follow speculation. Indeed, to convince me that common sense’s insistence is merely uninstructed stubbornness, reason must place plainly before my eyes how common sense managed to depart from the truth and land on an errant path.<sup>9</sup>

Conflicts between speculation and common sense are envisaged, and speculation is given the burden of proof. But what is the common sense to which Mendelssohn appeals?

Common sense may be understood as *common* in at least two different ways: (A1) as synthesizing into a common form or medium information pertaining to distinct faculties, and/or (A2) as instantiated in every normally functioning human and as the basis of communication and argumentation. And common sense may be understood as *sense* in at least two different ways: (B1) as a faculty for the phenomenologically immediate reception of an object, hence as perceptual or quasi-perceptual; and/or (B2) as yielding deliverances that are epistemologically immediate or justified independently of any inference.

Let us grant that Mendelssohn conceives common sense as common primarily in way (A1). The Swiss rustic represents that which all normally functioning humans have in common, independent of their level of intellectual sophistication. The crucial question is how Mendelssohn conceives common sense as sense. Does he understand common sense as phenomenologically immediate, or as epistemologically immediate, or both?

Mendelssohn gives an account of *bon sens* at the end of his 1764 prize essay:

*Conscience* and a good *sense for the truth (bon sens)*, if I may be permitted this expression, must represent the place of reason in most situations, if the opportunity is not to elude us before we seize it. Conscience is a proficiency at correctly distinguishing good from evil by

<sup>7</sup>Mendelssohn to Winkopp, March 24, 1780, *JubA* 12.2:184–85.

<sup>8</sup>“Die Bildsäule,” *JubA* 6.1:67–87, esp. 84.

<sup>9</sup>*JubA* 3.2:82. Translations of *Morgenstunden* are from *Morning Hours*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).



means of indistinct inferences, and the sense for the truth is a proficiency in distinguishing truth from falsehood by similar means. They are in their sphere what taste is in the domain of the beautiful and the ugly. A refined taste in no time finds what sluggish criticism only gradually casts light upon. Just as quickly, conscience decides and the sense for truth judges what reason does not reduce to distinct inferences without tedious reflection.<sup>10</sup>

Here Mendelssohn characterizes common sense as immediate only in a phenomenological sense. Considered epistemologically, the deliverances of common sense are mediated, because common sense is a faculty for drawing inferences. Phenomenological immediacy results here only from the fact that the inferences are *indistinct*. We do not notice that we are making them.

If Mendelssohn's conception of common sense in the 1780s is identical with his conception of *bon sens* in the 1760s – and I can find no reason why it should not be – then any resemblance to Reid's notion of common sense is merely superficial. Thus I cannot agree with Kuehn that “it is difficult to say in what way Mendelssohn's theory is different to Reid's,” and that the difference between them is one of emphasis.<sup>11</sup> For it is essential to Mendelssohn's account that the *judgements* of common sense are *inferential*. But it is essential to Reid's account that the *judgements* of common sense are immediate or *non-inferential*: “We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident, the second is to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province of common sense; and therefore it coincides with reason in its whole extent, and is only another name for one branch or one degree of reason.”<sup>12</sup> Like Mendelssohn, Reid thinks of common sense and contemplation or speculation as functions of one and the same faculty of reason. Like Mendelssohn, he also conceives common sense as a faculty of *judgement*. But unlike Mendelssohn, he thinks of common sense as a faculty for judging what is *self-evident*. Since the self-evident does not depend evidentially on anything other than itself, the *judgements* of common sense are non-inferential.

Mendelssohn's prize essay predates the publication – and obviously, then, Mendelssohn's reading – of Reid's *Inquiry*. As Altmann points out, the seeds of his account of proficiencies in *judgement* are to be found in an unpublished manuscript entitled “Affinity of the Beautiful and the Good” (ca. 1758).<sup>13</sup> So Mendelssohn's views on this topic had been brewing for a long time, and predate his reading of Reid.

Indeed, Mendelssohn's account remains firmly within the Cartesian tradition to which Reid objected. At the beginning of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes speaks of “*bon sens* or reason,” which he identifies as “the power of judging well and distinguishing what is true from what is false.”<sup>14</sup> And in his second *Meditation*, Descartes argues that, when I take myself to be directly perceiving familiar, everyday objects, such as pieces of wax or human beings, by means of the external sense or the *sensus*

<sup>10</sup> *JubA* 2:325.

<sup>11</sup> Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense*, 116n42.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1785), 6, ii, 433.

<sup>13</sup> “Verwandschaft des Schönen und Guten,” *JubA* 2:179–85. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 659–60.

<sup>14</sup> René Descartes, *Oeuvres* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1908–1957), 6:1–2.

*communis* – which he glosses as the imagination, in other words, as the sense that synthesizes the deliverances of all the sense modalities, hence as common in sense (A1) – I am in fact judging that these objects are present. In other words, what I actually perceive are ideas of sensible qualities, and I *infer* that these qualities are not only instantiated outside my mind, but also constitute objects with certain natures.<sup>15</sup> These inferences, however, are so habitual that I easily mistake them for perceptions, and it is only with great difficulty that I can render them distinct by separating what is immediately perceived from what is inferred. Habit gives indistinct inferences the quality of phenomenological immediacy, which we ordinarily conflate with epistemological immediacy. For Descartes, then, as for Mendelssohn, the *judgements* of common sense are indistinct inferences.<sup>16</sup>

Once again, this is very different from Reid's conception of common sense. Indeed, Descartes' conception, like much else in his philosophy, depends on the view that whatever we immediately perceive is an idea in the mind. This is just the view that Reid saw as responsible for the immaterialism of Berkeley and the scepticism of Hume, and the view against which Reid mounted some of his most pressing attacks. But here Mendelssohn seems to have sided with Descartes against Reid. Certainly, he cites Reid and other Scots against Condillac's sensationalism, which he sees as equivalent in its epistemology, though not in its materialist ontology, to Berkeley's idealism. But Mendelssohn does not take the further step, taken by Reid, of arguing for direct realism. Instead, Mendelssohn cites Reid – in his 1784 critique of Condillac, *The Statue* – in support of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, without ever pointing out that Reid had revised this distinction so that it no longer depended on the Cartesian view that what we perceive by means of the senses are *ideas* of these two kinds of quality.<sup>17</sup>

In the prize essay, Mendelssohn openly professes his continued allegiance to the rational metaphysics founded by Descartes. In the *Meditations*, Descartes had promised to prove two results by means of reason alone: the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. And, in the prize essay, Mendelssohn affirms that metaphysicians possess only two demonstrations that pass from possibility to actuality: namely, the demonstrations of just these two results, both pioneered by Descartes, if subsequently improved by others. However, Mendelssohn is far less optimistic than Descartes and his other predecessors about the prospect of increasing the number of such demonstrations, and this is exactly why *bon sens* turns out, in his view, to be so important.

The first principles of metaphysics are ideas of qualities that may be clearly and distinctly perceived, just as Descartes contended. So long as metaphysics restricts

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<sup>15</sup>Descartes, *Oeuvres*, 7:32.

<sup>16</sup>However, it is not at all clear to me that Descartes would identify *bon sens* with *sensus communis* that is common in sense (A2). I suspect that, by *bon sens* or reason in a philosophical as opposed to common usage, Descartes means the power of judging in accordance with clearly and distinctly perceived ideas. In principle, every human being has this power, but only a few overcome the dependence on authority and on the senses that is natural to humans during their immaturity.

<sup>17</sup>Mendelssohn accepts that there are some non-representational *Darstellungen*, but he sees this as an adjustment, not as an abandonment, of representationalism. See *JubA* 1:337.

itself to the analysis of these ideas, it is no less demonstrative and no less certain than geometry, which consists – according to Mendelssohn – in the analysis of the idea of extension. However, metaphysics lacks one of the main advantages of mathematics. It lacks “essential signs,” or signs “that would essentially agree with the nature of thoughts and the connections among them.”<sup>18</sup> It lacks, in short a perspicuous notation that enables calculative or automatic reckoning. Instead, the metaphysician must employ arbitrary signs, by which one may easily be led astray. The only way to avoid the play of “empty signs” is to return, with each step forward, to the first principles that one clearly and distinctly perceives, and to improve the definitions of one’s terms. But this means, in turn, that philosophers cannot be satisfied with commonly accepted definitions, and that – unlike mathematicians – they must constantly rethink what their predecessors and contemporaries have done. No wonder, then, that consensus in metaphysics is so very rare.<sup>19</sup>

Another reason why distinct inferences or demonstrations are few and far between in metaphysics is that metaphysics must justify what mathematics can afford to take for granted: the transition from possibility to actuality. Mendelssohn holds that mathematics involves the analysis of ideas, and hence deals with mere possibilities. But he also thinks that it is invulnerable to scepticism, because its empirical application requires nothing more than the fact that we have certain constancies in our ideas to which mathematical ideas apply. These constancies are, in fact, readily available, and the mathematician need not assume or justify the claim that they correspond to anything beyond our ideas. There is one analogue to this situation in metaphysics. Application of the idea of an immortal soul is accomplished by means of an inner sentiment that “I think,” which Mendelssohn appears to regard as empirically given to inner sense.<sup>20</sup> However, this is the only such given. Application of the idea of a necessary being cannot be accomplished in this way, but requires a demonstration composed of distinct inferences, which Mendelssohn takes to be achieved by means of the ontological argument.

Mendelssohn appears to be notably pessimistic about the prospect of a demonstrative science of the foundations of physics, or of ontology. In fact, he remarks that, “what the senses perceive of external things is dubious,” so he presumably does not accept Descartes’ argument from the benevolence of God to the trustworthiness of sensible ideas, and so to the actuality of external things.<sup>21</sup> Here, and perhaps also in the transition from the benevolence of God to

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<sup>18</sup> *JubA* 2:290.

<sup>19</sup> Note that Mendelssohn, following a Leibnizian tradition, would have been deeply sympathetic to Frege’s project of developing a *Begriffsschrift* or perspicuous notation for inference. The passage cited from the prize essay is perhaps on Kant’s mind when, in the B edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bvii, he writes that the need to constantly return to the beginning is a sign that a discipline is not yet a science. For discussion of Mendelssohn’s prize essay as the exemplary presentation of rationalism to which Kant’s critical philosophy is responding, see Paul Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17–59.

<sup>20</sup> *JubA* 2:294.

<sup>21</sup> *JubA* 2:294.

the application of the idea of providence to perceived events, we have nothing better to rely on than indistinct inferences. So it is too with the transition from the basic moral principle of perfection to its application to actual situations, or with the application of the idea of beauty. We can achieve clear and distinct perceptions of the first principles, and we can achieve a modest but important demonstrative knowledge of their relations and consequences. Beyond this modest domain, however, we must fall back on the proficiency to judge by means of indistinct inferences.

These proficiencies – which I am identifying with what Mendelssohn later calls common sense – have three advantages over the distinct inference on which an uncompromising rationalism would insist. First, they are available when distinct inferences are not yet available, or when distinct inferences are never going to be available. Second, when they are available, they are far quicker than distinct inferences. It would have been wrong to wait for the ontological argument to be formulated before affirming the existence of God, and it would be wrong now for an individual to wait until he or she grasps the argument. Moreover, if someone were to wait for distinct inference from the idea of perfection to some actual practical *judgement*, then they would never act at all. Third, “the influence [of indistinct inferences] upon the capacity of desire is nonetheless far more passionate and intense than that of the most distinct rational inferences which, without perfected habit, convince but do not stir, instruct but do not move the mind.”<sup>22</sup>

Proficiencies in *judgement*, then, including *bon sens*, are important precisely because rationalist metaphysics is an extremely limited science. Common sense marks the limit of rationalism. But common sense is itself a form of reasoning, notwithstanding the fact that we are so used to it that we mistake it for immediate *judgement*. Moreover, we have *become* used to it. The principles of common sense “have been incorporated through our temperament by constant practice and, as it were, transformed into our sweat and blood.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to (1) practice, Mendelssohn notes that conscience may be strengthened through (2) the accumulation of compelling reasons, (3) beauty and grace, and (4) the transformation of rational grounds into sensuous concepts by means of history and fables.

This passage could serve as the focal point for an interpretation of Mendelssohn’s entire corpus. Thus Mendelssohn’s work on aesthetics may be seen as thematizing taste, his work on ethics may be seen as thematizing conscience, and his work on natural religion may be seen as thematizing *bon sens* – all within a rationalism that, however mitigated it may be, remains firmly rooted in the work of Descartes, Leibniz and Wolff. In each case, what is at stake is a proficiency at making distinctions – or judging – by means of indistinct inferences. This is of crucial importance, because – as we will see shortly – distinct inferences are often either unavailable or would take more time than is practicable. At the same time, natural religion, it can be argued, is nothing but the *judgements* made by the sense for truth in the area of theology.

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<sup>22</sup> *JubA* 2:325.

<sup>23</sup> *JubA* 2:325.

One could easily find here, it seems to me, a schema for understanding Mendelssohn's portrayal of Judaism in *Jerusalem*. The practices and historical beliefs that constitute Judaism transform natural religion – common sense in the domain of theology – into the “sweat and blood” of the Jewish people. This is what Mendelssohn means when, in *To the Friends of Lessing*, he glosses in the following way his statement in *Jerusalem* that Judaism is not a revealed religion but rather a revealed law:

[Judaism] consists exclusively of revealed laws of worship and presumes a natural and reasonable conviction as to religious truths, without which no divine law can be established. But when I speak of reasonable conviction and insist on making it an incontestable premise within Judaism, I am not speaking of the metaphysical argumentation we usually carry out in books; nor am I speaking of scholastic demonstrations that withstand every test to which the subtlest of doubts may subject them; but I speak of the statements and *judgements* of a simple, sound human understanding which looks things directly in the eye and reflects upon them calmly . . . Doubts can be raised against my arguments, errors of inference pointed out, yet will my conviction remain unshakable.<sup>24</sup>

Judaism is distinctive among religions for its reinforcement of common sense, and for its refusal – in its “original” form, at any rate – to insist on any belief that goes against common sense, which includes idolatry but also the dogmas of Christianity and of kabbalah. As a matter of fortunate fact, the best philosophical reflection, so Mendelssohn believes, is in accord with common sense and hence with Judaism. But, if fault were found with rationalism, or with Mendelssohn's own understanding of Judaism's relation to philosophy, then Mendelssohn would – in the spirit of his Alpine allegory – trust his common sense conviction in Judaism.

Mendelssohn's appeal to common sense thus mitigates the rationalist tradition. But it also remains firmly within that tradition. Although Mendelssohn certainly read and appreciated Reid, he had worked out the main elements of his account of common sense before Reid's *Inquiry* was published. He appreciated Reid's criticism of the emphasis placed on ideas of sensation by Berkeley, Hume and Condillac. But he never adopted the direct realism – the criticism of the emphasis placed on ideas as immediate objects of perception – that constituted Reid's most important and radical departure from the Cartesian tradition.

## 2

Jacobi's relation to Reid is very different from Mendelssohn's. He rarely uses the terms “*Gemeinsinn*” or “*bon sens*,” and seems to avoid acknowledging his debt to Reid.<sup>25</sup> He is perhaps most clearly Reidian in the argument against sensationalism given in Letter xv of his novel, *Allwill*, an argument with which, as we have seen,

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<sup>24</sup> *JubA* 3.2:197.

<sup>25</sup> See Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense*, 144, on Jacobi's explicit but retrospective acknowledgment of Reid, and 163n66, on the deletion of Reid's name from published versions of Hamann's letters to Jacobi. Jacobi's main, public acknowledgment of Reid's significance occurs in the novel *Woldemar*. See Jacobi, *Werke* (Leipzig, 1812–1825), 2:170.

Mendelssohn would have sympathized.<sup>26</sup> Also deeply indebted to Reid, however is his conception of a “natural faith” whereby all normally functioning humans possess beliefs that cannot and need not be justified philosophically. However, unlike Mendelssohn, Jacobi follows Reid in rejecting, not only sensationalism, but representationalism as such.

Jacobi writes in his Spinoza letters:

How can we strive for certainty unless we are already acquainted with certainty in advance, and how can we be acquainted with it except through something that we can already discern with certainty? This leads to the concept of an immediate certainty, which not only needs no proof, but excludes all proofs absolutely, and is simply and solely *the representation itself agreeing with the thing being represented* . . . Through faith we know that we have a body, and that there are other bodies and other thinking beings outside us. A veritable and wondrous revelation! For in fact we only sense our body, as constituted in this way or that; but in thus feeling it, we become aware not only of its alterations, but of something else as well, totally different from it, which is neither mere sensation nor thought; we become aware of *other actual things*, and, of that with the very same certainty with which we become aware of ourselves, for without the *Thou*, the *I* is impossible.<sup>27</sup>

This passage suggests that, while awareness of other bodies and other minds is mediated – i.e., facilitated – by sensation, the certainty of this awareness is nevertheless immediate, not only phenomenologically or in way B1, but also epistemically or in way B2. This is why it needs no proof.

But this passage is unclear. First, it is unclear how one can be non-inferentially conscious of a representation’s agreement with what it represents. Does consciousness of agreement between two items not involve comparison and *judgement*? Second, it is unclear how one can arrive, by means of a sensation that is only of one’s body, at an epistemically immediate awareness of something other than one’s body. Third, even if immediate awareness of “the Thou” needs no proof, why does it exclude all proofs absolutely? Finally, talk of “faith” in “revelation” is hardly informative, and the opposition between faith and reason makes Jacobi sound like the irrationalist for which he is frequently taken.<sup>28</sup>

Jacobi rectifies these problems in his later writings. First, he clarifies in his 1785 *David Hume on Faith* that his realism is direct, so that non-inferential awareness of external objects does not involve the comparison of representation and represented, because it is not representational at all:

I experience that I am, and that there is something outside me, in one and the same indivisible moment; and at that moment my soul is no more passive with respect to the object than it is towards itself. There is no representation, no inference, that mediates this twofold revelation.

<sup>26</sup>Jacobi, *Werke*, 1:125–39.

<sup>27</sup>Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau, 1785), 162–63; trans. George di Giovanni in Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 230–31 (henceforth *MPW*).

<sup>28</sup>Among those who misread Jacobi in this way are Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–), AA 8:143–44, against which Jacobi protested in correspondence, and, more recently, Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 83, who speaks of Jacobi’s “irrational faith.”

There is nothing *in the soul* that *enters* between the perceptions of the actuality outside it and the actuality in it. There are no representations yet; they make their appearance only later on in reflection, as shadows of the things that were formerly *present*. And, we can always refer them back to the real from which they were taken, and which they *presuppose*, indeed, we must refer them back to it every time we want to know whether they are true.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, only reflective consciousness is representational, while perceptual consciousness is direct or presentational.

Second, the idea of an epistemically immediate awareness that is nevertheless causally mediated by sensation recalls the way in which visual perception is non-inferential, notwithstanding its mediation by retinal images – or, more generally, the way in which sense perception is non-inferential, notwithstanding its mediation by neural stimulation. In *David Hume on Faith*, Jacobi takes up this analogy, when he disputes the commonplace figuration of reason, not only as a light but, more recently, as a torch: “*My own reason* is an eye and no torch. And unless I am much deceived, we have always meant the power of seeing by the word ‘light,’ at least when we still had only a light in our reason.”<sup>30</sup> However, this leads to a further problem, since, in the Preface to the same work, Jacobi insists on the distinction between faith, which he construes as “knowledge through sensation,” and reason, which “is the mere faculty of perceiving relations clearly, i.e.,... the power of *formulating the principle of identity and of judging in conformity to it*.”<sup>31</sup> How can reason be both this mere faculty of judging identities and differences, and “an eye”?

The ambiguity is resolved in Jacobi’s 1815 revised edition of *David Hume on Faith*, and in his Preface to it, which also serves as the Preface to his collected works. For the old distinction between merely formal reason and faith in actuality, Jacobi now substitutes a distinction between *understanding* – which is a faculty, mistakenly called reason, for reflection on identities and differences in what is given by means of sensation – and genuine *reason*, which is perceptual: “we call the organ with which we are aware of the supersensible, *reason*, just as we call what we see with, our *eyes*.”<sup>32</sup> And Jacobi now clarifies that reason does not yield “knowledge through sensation,” but rather knowledge through non-sensible intuition: “Just as there is an intuition of the senses, an *intuition* through the *sense*, so there is also a rational intuition through *reason*.”<sup>33</sup> In the first edition, Jacobi already seeks to dispel the impression that the faith of which he spoke was *Christian* faith, by appealing to the use of the word by Hume, whose reputation for impiety is well-established.<sup>34</sup> Now, Jacobi explains that what he has in mind is not faith as opposed to reason, but rather “the reason that does not interpret but reveals immediately, or the *natural*

<sup>29</sup>Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben, oder: Idealismus und Realismus*. (Breslau, 1787), 64; *MPW*, 277.

<sup>30</sup>Jacobi, *David Hume*, 179; *MPW*, 320.

<sup>31</sup>Jacobi, *David Hume*, v; *MPW*, 256.

<sup>32</sup>Jacobi, *Werke* 2:9; *MPW*, 540.

<sup>33</sup>Jacobi, *Werke*, 2:59; *MPW*, 563.

<sup>34</sup>Jacobi, *David Hume*, 34–35; *MPW*, 268–69.



*faith of reason.*<sup>35</sup> Like all perceptual organs, genuine reason is a source of knowledge only when it is trusted.

This also explains why, in the passage from the *Letters on Spinoza's Doctrine* cited above, Jacobi says that the immediate certainty that constitutes faith, in his sense of the word, not only needs no proof, but also excludes all proofs absolutely. Among other things, faith can be maintained, threatened and deepened, but it can also be lost. As soon as one finds oneself in need of proof – thus, as soon as one seeks to supply oneself with proof – faith is lost. Consequently, the very attempt to provide inferential justification for what should be immediately certain – say, the truth-revealing power of one's senses or of one's reason – always comes too late. In Jacobi's late thinking, it is not only because, as he argues in the 1780s and 1790s, the optimal form of inferential justification is the form of Spinoza's system, in which the infinite, first principle is immanent within the totality of finite things – so that the first principle is nothing without the totality, while finite things are nothing without the first principle – that the rigorous pursuit of rationalist philosophy leads inexorably to nihilism.<sup>36</sup> It is also because the substitution of inferential justification for the immediate certainty of reason shows that faith has already been lost. “Ever since Aristotle the growing tendency among the schools has always been to subordinate immediate of knowledge to mediated cognition.”<sup>37</sup> This sad story reaches its culmination with the development of modern natural science and of the idealisms and Spinozisms that seek to underwrite it, but it has ancient roots. Instead, Jacobi professes himself “in favour of the genuine un-emasculated, teaching of old Plato,”<sup>38</sup> who foresaw the doctrine of the One and All as “the only one valid for an understanding turned towards the world of the senses alone,” and who also saw that the untruth of that doctrine “is seen only by means of a higher faculty of cognition, an eye only created for the intuition of the supersensible towards which it is unmovably turned.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Jacobi, *Werke*, 2:37; *MPW*, 553.

<sup>36</sup>See Franks, “All or Nothing: Systematicity and Nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold, and Maimon,” in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); “Ancient Skepticism, Modern Nihilism, and Naturalism in Hegel's Early Jena Writings,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>37</sup>Jacobi, *Werke*, 2:11; *MPW*, 541. “Ever since Aristotle,” because Aristotle invented logic as the study of the form of reflection in abstraction from the matter of cognition. In an adjacent footnote, Jacobi approvingly cites J. F. Fries, Hegel's nemesis, with whom he has formed an alliance. See Franks, “Serpentine Naturalism and Protean Nihilism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter and Michael Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 253–56. Jacobi also follows Fries – as well as Reid on common sense – in maintaining that reason's cognitions are *judgements*. “For we do commonly say also of the eye, the ear, the taste of the tongue, that they make *judgements*, indeed, that they discriminate, although we all know that the perceiving sense only reveals, whereas *judgements* belong to the reflective understanding.” See Jacobi, *Werke*, 2:109–10; *MPW*, 584.

<sup>38</sup>Jacobi, *Werke*, 2:39; *MPW*, 549n.

<sup>39</sup>Jacobi, *Werke*, 2:75; *MPW*, 568–69. Jacobi goes on to cite Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, 518c.



### 3

The similarity between Mendelssohn and Jacobi with which I began – their shared dependence on Reid’s philosophy of common sense – is, in the end, merely apparent. Mendelssohn is less dependent than he seems, while Jacobi is more dependent than he admits.

To be sure, both portray a conflict between common sense and philosophical speculation, and both ascribe a certain primacy to common sense. But it is not only in their *resolutions* of the conflict that they differ. It is also in their understanding of the *terms* of the conflict. For Jacobi, the conflict is between intuitive, non-inferential reason and inferential understanding. For Mendelssohn, however, the conflict is between two modes of inferential reasoning: the indistinct and the distinct. Mendelssohn is a proud and loyal, if pessimistic, heir to modern rationalism, while Jacobi sees it as the culmination of a story whose origins lie in antiquity. Jacobi would regard what Mendelssohn calls common sense as yet another inheritance of the post-Aristotelian substitution of inferential understanding for intuitive reason, albeit one that fails to achieve the rigour and clarity of Spinoza’s or Fichte’s systems. In turn, Mendelssohn would regard Jacobi’s Platonic intuitionism as a betrayal of philosophy’s quest for clear and distinct perceptions of ideas and for distinct inferences that yield demonstrative certainty – a betrayal that risks lapsing into a mystification that is opposed to the deepest values of the Enlightenment.

Although the similarity between Mendelssohn and Jacobi has turned out to be merely apparent, comparison with respect to Scottish common sense philosophy has nonetheless been useful. It has shown just how wide the gulf is between the two main protagonists of the Spinozism controversy.<sup>40</sup>

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# Chapter 11

## The Year 1786 and *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, or *Popularphilosophie* in Crisis

George di Giovanni

“The vocation of humankind” was a common theme of discussion for *Popularphilosophie* during the second half of the eighteenth century. It was introduced in 1748 by J. J. Spalding with a tract entitled *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, and it ran its course in the decades that followed until it reached a conclusion, but also a new start, in 1800, with a tract by Fichte with the same title. The conceptual distance traversed by the German Enlightenment in this half century can be measured by the difference in the humanism espoused by the two tracts. In this paper I first describe *Popularphilosophie*, I then comment on Mendelssohn’s contribution to the discussion in his exchange with Thomas Abbt. Finally I argue that Jacobi’s dispute with Mendelssohn in 1785 raised the issue of the possibility of true human agency – it thereby cast doubts on the ease with which the *Popularphilosophen*, Mendelssohn foremost among them, were given to shift from *Bestimmung* as “determination of nature” to *Bestimmung* as “personal call,” or from the metaphysical concept of “*Plan der Natur*” to the religious trope of “*Vorsehung*,” or Providence. The road to Fichte’s tract was thus laid open.

### 1 1786: A Historical Panorama

By all accounts, the year 1786 was a turning point for *Popularphilosophie*,<sup>1</sup> that widespread philosophical movement of the late *Aufklärung*. In retrospect, a coincidence of events made the year iconic for the intellectual upheaval that the German

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<sup>1</sup>I keep the term in German because the connotations associated with the English “popular” would fail to do justice, and might even misconstrue, the very specific philosophical phenomenon that the German term designates. There was nothing “popularizing” in a vulgar sense about *Popularphilosophie*. The latter was a philosophical movement based on the premise, typical of the Enlightenment, that reason is a faculty inherent to all human beings and that its truths are therefore

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Enlightenment was to undergo in its concluding years. 1786 saw the death of Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing's friend who the year before had published *Morgenstunden*, arguably the most elegant exposition on classical Lockean and Wolffian principles of *Popularphilosophie*.<sup>2</sup> The year immediately after saw the publication of Adam Weishaupt's *Ueber Materialismus und Idealismus*.<sup>3</sup> This too was an exposition of *Popularphilosophie*, certainly not as elegant as Mendelssohn's but conceptually a lot more interesting. It was conducted on lines completely different from Mendelssohn's and exposed the materialism lurking in the naturalism of *Popularphilosophie*. More *au courant* than Mendelssohn, Weishaupt also advanced a conception of "experiential *a priori*" that arguably was a viable alternative to Kant's. Because of his perceived materialism (and for other more personal reasons), Weishaupt was not a much quoted author in the Germany of the day. However, he was not for that any the less notorious. He was the founder of the *Illuminati*, the society that secretly promoted from within the Masonry (itself a secret society) a radical program of social reform.

1786 also saw Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi corresponding with Hamann on the public display of mourning that the Berliners (as Hamann called those wrong-headed promoters of Enlightenment reason) were bestowing on the Jew Moses.<sup>4</sup> Jacobi had been the instigator of the recent dispute with Mendelssohn on the meaning of Spinoza. Many believed that the bitterness of the dispute had been the immediate cause of Mendelssohn's demise. The circumstances that had led up to the dispute, and the interests that motivated all those who were caught up in it, were complex, and, fortunately, in no need of rehearsing here. One thing, however, is clear. In the course of the dispute Jacobi had succeeded in bringing Spinoza to the centre of the philosophical discussion of the day. In this way he, like Weishaupt, had brought to light the materialism that was implicit in *Popularphilosophie*. But he had done it with intentions completely different from Weishaupt's, namely, in order to unmask what Jacobi believed to be the anti-humanism implicit in the rationalism on which the whole Berlin Enlightenment movement was based. In Jacobi's view, Spinoza's pantheism was the only consistent, and honestly self-conscious, upshot of this rationalism.

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irresistible once clearly and distinctly perceived. It was therefore morally incumbent on philosophy to reach out to the people at large in order to promote reason and social order universally. Philosophy had to have a pedagogical dimension. The best example of a *Popularphilosoph* whose activities extended well into the nineteenth century was Karl Leonhard Reinhold.

<sup>2</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden, oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes*, Erster Theil (Berlin, 1785). Also: *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 3.2 (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1974). I shall cite Mendelssohn according to the *Jubiläumsausgabe*, as *JubA* and volume, followed by a colon and page number.

<sup>3</sup>"*Idealismus*" must be understood here in its pre-critical meaning, i.e., in a purely psychological sense.

<sup>4</sup>Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Arthur Henkel, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden/Frankfurt: Insel-Verlag, 1955–1979). The relevant letters are to be found in vol. 6, dated from January 1786. Hamann felt pangs of remorse upon Mendelssohn's death because he had failed to reassert his friendship with the man despite his hostility to his thought. Yet he thought that Jacobi's main fault had been to presume truth in a Jew. See letter no. 939.

Finally, in 1786 Karl Leonhard Reinhold began to publish in the *Teutscher Merkur* the first series of his influential Kantian Letters, in which he presented Kant as alone capable of reconciling Mendelssohn's reason with Jacobi's faith. He thereby initiated a process of adapting *Popularphilosophie* to Kant's Critique of Reason and, by implication, also the Critique of Reason to *Popularphilosophie*.<sup>5</sup> Reinhold certainly knew of Weishaupt. He had been an active member of the *Illuminati* even when still a priest in Vienna and very likely the uncovering and official proscription in 1785 of the society in both Austria and Bavaria had precipitated his flight to Protestant Germany. As one recent commentator has put it, in 1786 Reinhold was replacing Weishaupt with Kant as the Messiah of Enlightenment Reason.<sup>6</sup> Of course, neither Jacobi nor Reinhold could have known at the time that others, notably Fichte, would accept Jacobi's diagnosis of Spinoza's relation to the Enlightenment but instead of rejecting Spinoza's system would take it as the basis for a completely new conception of reason. Despite Reinhold's efforts at domesticating the Critique of Reason for popular diffusion, it was Spinoza who was to dominate the subsequent reception of Kant. As of 1786, the chain of events had thus already been set in motion that would culminate in 1800 with the publication of Fichte's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, or *The Vocation of Humankind*.

The mention of this tract is significant. The title deliberately harked back to another tract, by the same title, that the Lutheran theologian Johann Joachim Spalding had published in 1748, and had subsequently repeatedly re-published in revised editions, each time adapting it to the most recent intellectual trends. The tract had occasioned a wide exchange of opinions on the theme of the vocation of humankind that long captured the interest of the *Popularphilosophen*. All the luminaries of the day participated in the discussion. In the case of Mendelssohn, the contribution took the shape of an exchange of letters with his young friend Thomas Abbt that finally led, in 1784, to the publication of two brief pieces, one by Abbt that expressed doubts about the nature, if any, of a human vocation, and the other by Mendelssohn in the form of an "Oracle" rebutting precisely such doubts.<sup>7</sup> I shall come to these writings. The point now is that, looking back at Fichte's tract with that of Spalding in mind, one can see from the gulf that separated the humanism of the two works how 1786 had marked indeed a turning point in *Popularphilosophie*. After the Spinoza dispute (der Spinozastreit), and once Spinoza had been dragged

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<sup>5</sup>This must be qualified. According to Hinske, the Jena theologians had already begun the process. But Reinhold began doing it in a way that caught universal attention. Cf. Norbert Hinske, "Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft und der Freiraum des Glaubens. Zur Kantinterpretation des Jenaer Frühkantianismus," vol. 14 of *Jenaer philosophische Vorträge und Studien*, ed. W. Hogrebe (Erlangen/Jena: Palm and Enke, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Martin Bondeli, "Einleitung," in *Gesammelte Schriften: Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*, by Karl Leonhard Reinhold, ed. Martin Bondeli (Basel: Schwabe, 2007), 2.1:xxxvii.

<sup>7</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, part 19, letter 287: "Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen," 8–40; "Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend," 41–60. See *JubA* 6.1:7–25. I regret that these two pieces were not included in Dahlstrom's translation into English of Mendelssohn's writings.

into the reception of Kant's Critique, it was simply no longer possible to engage in a discussion about the vocation of humankind with the kind of natural innocence that had been possible for Spalding. Whether one accepted Mendelssohn's opinion that Spinoza's pantheism, if duly amended, would logically lead to Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony,<sup>8</sup> or, on the contrary, Jacobi's argument that it was Leibniz's theory that, stripped of its many ambiguities, led to Spinoza's pantheism, in either case the metaphysics that lay at the basis of both Leibniz's and Spinoza's systems, and was at the heart of *Popularphilosophie*, had come into question. The issue was whether this metaphysics was capable of supporting the personalist values that also belonged to the heritage of *Popularphilosophie*, or, more precisely, whether it was capable of supporting the idea of a human vocation that would be more than just the product of natural determinacy. Quite apart from later developments, and abstracting from Jacobi's own intentions in the whole affair, the fact is that the dispute had succeeded in publicizing the internal inconsistencies of *Popularphilosophie*. As of 1786, *Popularphilosophie* was in crisis. Had the dispute occurred in less troublesome circumstances, without personal prejudices and the general nastiness of human nature clouding the issues, Mendelssohn might have recognized that he had himself good reasons to raise doubts about any naturally pre-determined human vocation. But the doubts would have been of quite a different kind than Abbt's.

This is the point that I want to develop – not the Spinoza dispute itself, even though I shall have to return to it at the end. First, I must consider *Popularphilosophie* itself. I have already alluded to its internal inconsistencies. The vision of reality that it offered, however, had its strengths, and these were formidable enough to entice the minds of many, Mendelssohn foremost among them. The question I turn to first is, what were these strengths?

## 2 *Popularphilosophie*

In an important 1994 article that explored affinities of thought between Mendelssohn and Kant already noted by Alexander Altmann,<sup>9</sup> Norbert Hinske called attention to several instances of how Kant's language was influenced by Mendelssohn's. Even more important, he documented evidence showing that the Abbt/Mendelssohn exchange was instrumental to the historical turn that Kant eventually gave to his anthropology. With his usual scholarly rigour, Hinske did not claim for this evidence

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<sup>8</sup>Mendelssohn thought that Leibniz owed a conceptual debt to Spinoza. Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755), Erstes Gespräch, *JubA* 1:12; Zweites Gespräch, *JubA* 1:14–15.

<sup>9</sup>Norbert Hinske, "Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit," vol. 19 of *Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), 135–56. Hinske cites Alexander Altmann, *Prinzipien politischer Theorie bei Mendelssohn und Kant*, vol. 9 of *Trierer Universitätsreden* (Trier: NCO Verlag, 1981).

strict demonstrative force.<sup>10</sup> But the evidence is convincing nonetheless, and the claim is of conceptual as well as historical importance. I shall return to it. More to the point at the moment is that, in thus working out these lines of connection between Mendelssohn and Kant, Hinske also provided compelling evidence of how much Spalding's tract influenced the late *Aufklärung*. Spalding made ample business of his little work, re-publishing it to the end of the century. From the first edition, however, he had already raised the three questions that the critical Kant was later to pose – namely, “What can I know?” “What must I believe?” “What may I hope for?” – and had even answered them, in effect at least, as Kant later did.<sup>11</sup> He had done so, moreover, in a spirit that was typical of the Enlightenment, namely, as one intent on securing for himself a “system of life by which he could abide for all times,” thus resolving once and for all doubts that otherwise plagued his mind. He intended to do this, in a manner reminiscent of Descartes, first by setting aside all prejudices, and then by basing his judgements exclusively on what he could accept as undeniably true on the strength of observation and on inferences necessarily drawn from the latter.<sup>12</sup>

Spalding was speaking for *der Mensch* in general. What is striking about this *Mensch*, is that he does not appear worried, as a traditional Christian would, about his standing before God; is not concerned about giving thanks to his creator; or, for that matter, whether by his conduct he proclaims the glory of the creator's works. He is concerned, first and foremost, with his own peace of mind – with some assurance that, with the right attitude and the right conduct, he can count on at least a modicum of happiness. He is also confident that, through reflection and observation, he will find evidence of a universal order of things that will provide him with precisely this assurance. It is this confidence that makes Spalding's musings different from the reflections of classical pagan authors on the nature of happiness. The latter did not see themselves as part of a grand intelligent plan. They saw themselves as mere accidents (at times the mere playthings of the gods) in a cosmos which, although constantly re-assembling itself in order to retain internal harmony whenever the latter was disturbed for whatever reason, did not do so according to a foreordained plan that encompassed its every individual part. Spalding's universe was governed by precisely such a plan.

The conceptual basis for this belief was the metaphysics of Leibniz (at least as popularized by Wolff) and the psychology of Locke. I deliberately juxtapose the

<sup>10</sup>Hinske, “Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit,” 148.

<sup>11</sup>I have treated this theme in my *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7–10.

<sup>12</sup>“Having suffered long enough the plague of an unstable mind, one troubled by opposing impressions, he [i.e., the writer] had resolved in earnest and with equanimity to examine what he should be, starting from the beginning. He had resolved not to accept anything as true, or reject anything as prejudice, which would not appear as such by this rigid new test; to collect and join together all that he found in this way undeniable, and to draw from it the necessary consequences . . . ; thus to establish for himself a secure system of life by which he could abide for all times.” I am citing from a later by later but still pre-Critique version of Johann Joachim Spalding's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Leipzig, 1774), 3. All translations are my own, unless otherwise mentioned.



two. The view that the rationalism of the one and the empiricism of the other stood opposed, and that, historically, their conflict gave rise to Hume's scepticism, was a piece of propaganda on behalf of the alleged therapeutic virtues of critical philosophy for which Reinhold was mainly responsible<sup>13</sup> – though not without strong hints from Kant.<sup>14</sup> For one thing, though Hume's scepticism routinely came in for discussion in the literature of the day, epistemological scepticism itself was not perceived as a serious problem in the Germany of the *Aufklärung* – at least, not as anything that the Leibniz/Locke combination could not cope with.<sup>15</sup> Mendelssohn's attitude in this respect was more typical. "Thanks be to those trusty guides," he once had occasion to exclaim, "who have led me back to true knowledge and to virtue. To you, Locke and Wolff! To you, immortal Leibniz! I erect an eternal monument in my heart. Without you I would have been lost forever."<sup>16</sup> Obviously, Mendelssohn did not see any conflict of immortals there. On the contrary, the *Popularphilosophen* had been singularly successful in construing the "reason" of the rationalists as an extension of the "feeling" of the empiricists, and, at the same time, in integrating the latter into an otherwise reason-dominated construal of experience. This synthesis of rationalism and empiricism is precisely what made their philosophical position both accessible and attractive to the public at large.

We clearly see this synthesis at work in Mendelssohn's letters, *On Sentiments*, where feeling is taken to be a physiologically pre-programmed representation of the state of the body that substitutes for the representation that the intellect would otherwise provide conceptually. As contrasted with this intellect's representation, which would be clear and distinct, feeling is obscure. Yet its contribution is necessary to the economy of experience, because, for one thing, a complete conceptual analysis of the body's organism would exceed the power of the intellect, and, for another, were the intellect capable of such a complete analysis, the labour required for the task would pre-empt the possibility of the immediate gratification ("Begeisterung") which, as a matter of fact, accompanies the natural feeling of organic perfection. For the work of the intellect to yield this sensuous gratification, its analytically attained concepts must first be made to collapse into the confused representations that are typical of

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<sup>13</sup> Among many possible texts, cf. Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Über das Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* (Jena, 1784), 44–47. (Translated as "The Foundation of Philosophical Knowledge," in *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, trans. with critical notes and introductory studies by George di Giovanni and H.S. Harris [Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2000], 56–57.)

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, vol. 4 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe*, A edition (1781) (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1911), Ax.

<sup>15</sup> The threat of metaphysical scepticism came after Kant, from Salomon Maimon, and was occasioned by Kant himself.

<sup>16</sup> "Dank sey jenen getreuen Wegweisen, die mich zur wahren Erkenntniß und zur Tugend zurück geführt haben. Euch Locke und Wolf! Dir unsterblicher Leibniz! stifte ich ein ewiges Denkmahl in meinem Herzen. Ohne eure Hülfe wäre ich auf ewig verlohren," Moses Mendelssohn, *Über die Empfindungen* (1755 edition), *JubA* 1:64. In context, one should add Lord Shaftesbury to the list of immortals.

feeling. It is in this way, inasmuch as in the course of experience, the intellect relaxes its otherwise reflective but necessarily incomplete representation of objects, thus *fusing together* the representation's many details into the complete but *con-fused* apprehension of feeling, that, according to Mendelssohn, the aesthetic realm of the beautiful arises. In the overall system of experience, feeling is both the organic precursor of reason and its collaborator.<sup>17</sup> Mendelssohn saw no problem in wedding Shaftesbury's theory of sentiments to Wolff's psychology.

But it is at yet another level – more metaphysical than psychological – that *Popularphilosophie* wonderfully succeeded in synthesizing empiricism and rationalism. For this I have to return to Weishaupt and his already mentioned 1787 treatise.<sup>18</sup> This treatise consists essentially of an exercise in worlds-modeling. Weishaupt begins by defining an object of experience as the product of a compact struck between the energy of a mind and the energy impinging upon the latter from things outside it. Then, taking as his starting point the various worlds of objects that the five human senses construct, each in virtue of its specific energy (for instance, the visual world and the aural world), Weishaupt proceeds to envisage a whole series of other possible worlds, each as would appear to a mind endowed with two or more of the senses that we know. The series can be expanded with reference to other possible senses that we do not know about but which can conceivably exist, all of them in a variety of combinations. Add to these possible sense-worlds such other worlds as would appear to minds whose senses are modified by reason, or to minds endowed with reason alone, and the series can be made to extend *in infinitum*.<sup>19</sup>

This is by itself an already interesting conceptual construction. Weishaupt's next step is however even more interesting. On that construction, by running across all the envisaged possible worlds, starting from the ones for which immediate empirical evidence is available,<sup>20</sup> one should *ex hypothesi* be able to identify elements that are common and necessary to all, since without them each would not be a world.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. Mendelssohn, *Über die Empfindungen*, Briefe 4-5. Also, *Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen*, which were added by Mendelssohn to the 1761 edition, and quoted here according to the 1771 edition, *JubA* 1:392–94.

<sup>18</sup>I have treated this theme extensively in *Freedom and Religion*, 44–49. Occasionally I follow this earlier treatment *verbatim*.

<sup>19</sup>Adam Weishaupt, *Ueber Materialismus und Idealismus* (Nürnberg, 1787), 94ff, 185 ff. It is interesting to note that Weishaupt denies the validity of the notion of a gradation of perfections, or of classes of beings of different perfections. He takes the very idea of a class to be a function of our ignorance. Perfection is always individual. It is to be measured within a given world on terms specific to just that world. All concepts ought eventually to refer to individuals (see 153–57, 159).

<sup>20</sup>The belief that, on the basis of experience, one can infer the possibilities of other future worlds, was an Enlightenment scientific commonplace. See, for instance, Charles Bonnet's *La Palingénésie philosophique, ou Idées sur l'état passé et sur l'état futur des êtres vivants* (Amsterdam, 1769). Peculiar to Weishaupt is that he denies that the transition from world to world entails a gradation of perfections, and that he applies this principle also to the varieties of moral systems found in human history (204ff).

<sup>21</sup>Weishaupt, *Ueber Materialismus*, 175 ff.

These elements would thus constitute a necessity that is at once empirical (since derived from observation of experience), yet *a priori* (because, once recognized, it is recognized as necessary). This result had the far-reaching implication that, on its basis, any absolute distinction in experience between truths of reason and truths of fact disappeared. Weishaupt repeatedly expanded on this consequence in his many subsequent works,<sup>22</sup> arguing against Descartes that there is continuity between sensation and conceptualization, and, against Locke, that the concept is autonomous despite its continuity with sensation, for it is governed by requirements that are specific to it. It is possible, therefore, to justify *theoretically* the belief in the truth of empirical representations that all men share *in fact*. As Weishaupt says, “The ground of my representations . . . lies in the position that the soul holds at different times among the other parts of the world; in the differing self-manifesting influence that the objects with which the soul coexists exercise according to that position.”<sup>23</sup> Each side, i.e., the soul and the objects, must express the other. Any other assumption leads to theoretical as well as practical absurdities.

As I have already suggested, this theory of factual necessity was Weishaupt’s answer to Kant’s recent notion of an *a priori* of experience. But it also addressed itself, past Kant, to the metaphysics of Leibniz/Wolff. The latter, too, recognized the presence in experience of an ineliminable moment of facticity. But it explained it as the consequence of the distance that supposedly separated “the best of all possible worlds” from “all possible worlds” – a distance that had to be bridged by God’s choice. Weishaupt now explained it on the basis of the difference that separates the world generated by our set of organs and such other worlds as are the results of the compact that other sets of organs establish with their immediate environments. *For us*, this world is the one from which every analysis of experience must begin. This is a *de facto* necessity, but one for which an explanation can always be given on the assumption of some other set of organs. That there is necessity, therefore, is guaranteed – without the necessity, however, ever being absolute, and yet not any the less ineluctable for that. All this demonstrated, of course, the conceptual resourcefulness of *Popularphilosophie*. The immediate net result, however, was that in Weishaupt’s system the world lost the moral aura that it had in the system of Leibniz/Wolff. Weishaupt had rid it of the intentional lines that pervaded the latter by showing how its presumed harmony could be attained on purely mechanistic causal relations. The

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<sup>22</sup>For instance, in Adam Weishaupt, *Ueber die Gründe und Gewisheit [sic] der Menschlichen Erkenntniß: Zur Prüfung der Kantischen Critik der reinen Vernunft* (Nürnberg, 1788), §46, 208; and also repeatedly in his voluminous *Ueber Wahrheit und sittliche Vollkommenheit* (Regensburg, part 1, 1793; part 2, 1794; part 3, 1797). This last part includes a very interesting appendix, “Concerning the Origin of the Doctrine of Ideas” (“Über den Ursprung der Lehre von der Ideen”) in which Weishaupt insists that all knowledge is of individuals, and that all philosophical errors can be traced to the beliefs in “universal ideas.”

<sup>23</sup>“Der Grund meiner Vorstellungen liegt sodann in der jedesmaligen lage der Seele unter den übrigen Theilen der Welt, in der nach dieser sich verschiedentlich äussernden Einwirkung der Gegestände, mit welchen sie coexistirt,” §39, 162.

naturalism of *Popularphilosophie* could easily turn into materialism, and this is what made the metaphysical issue of a vocation of humankind – of a *Bestimmung* that, in keeping with the ambiguity inherent in the German word, is at once “determination” and “call” – problematic.

### 3 Abbt’s “Doubts” and Mendelssohn’s “Oracle”

According to Altmann,<sup>24</sup> the summary of the Abbt/Mendelssohn exchange was deliberately intended by the authors to recall Pierre Bayle’s attack on rational theology and Leibniz’s reply to it in his *Essais de Théodicée* – witness Abbt’s conjuration at the beginning of his presentation of the spirit of Bayle, and Mendelssohn invoking the witness of Leibniz while pretending to speak in the name of the “blue-eyed” daughter of Jupiter.<sup>25</sup> Spalding’s thesis, as stated and defended by Mendelssohn, is this: “The true vocation of man here below – such as fool and wise alike, albeit in unequal measure, fulfill – is therefore the *cultivation in accordance with divine aims of the faculties of the soul*, for it is to this that all man’s actions on earth are directed.”<sup>26</sup> Hinske, in view of his intention to document Mendelssohn’s influence on Kant, concentrates in his article on one specific bone of contention between the two friends, namely, whether the reality of this supposed vocation, as so defined in terms of the realization of God-appointed human faculties, can be gathered from the current state of human affairs. Abbt’s doubt is summed up in the question: “If it is the case that all that can be developed must, up to a certain degree, be developed, why is it that on earth so many 1,000 capacities never come to be developed to the measure here possible?”<sup>27</sup> As for Spalding’s further claim that, if to the observation of things as they are now one adds the consideration that this present life is intended as a preparation and test of one yet to come, then everything falls clearly into place, Abbt offers the tart retort: “Especially in view of the large number of children who are born only to die soon after? It is astonishing how one could talk oneself into believing that sense can be made of their premature death on the ground that this life is only a testing ground while, on the contrary, it is precisely this premature death that makes nonsense of this life as only a testing

<sup>24</sup>Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 132.

<sup>25</sup>*JubA* 6.1: 10, 21.

<sup>26</sup>“Die *eigentliche* Bestimmung des Menschen hienieden, die der Thor und der Weise, aber in ungleichem Masse, erfüllen ist also die *Ausbildung der Seelenfähigkeiten nach göttlichen Absichten*; denn hierauf zielen alle seine Verrichtungen auf Erden,” *JubA* 6.1:20.

<sup>27</sup>“Wenn alles, was entwickelt werden kann, bis auf einem gewissen Grad entwickelt werden muß: woher rührt es, daß so viele tausend Fähigkeiten hier auf der Erde nicht einmal zu dem mäßigen hier möglichen Grade der Entwicklung kommen?” *JubA* 6.1:17.

ground.”<sup>28</sup> Mendelssohn’s replies to these challenges of Abbt are, for their part, just as reassuring as the challenges are discomfiting. Who is to say that what *appears* to us as a stunted development of the human faculties is not, in the greater order of things, the right degree of development required for precisely that order? How can one judge what is *here* possible while ignoring intentions that transcend this “here”?<sup>29</sup> Does the death of infants subvert the idea that this life is a preparation for another? The fact is that no human life, however brief, does not already constitute a cultivation, however inchoate, of the powers of the soul. Infants do not die “without some accomplishment of their souls.”<sup>30</sup>

It was this opposition of views, which, Hinske believes, would have assumed in Kant’s mind the shape of an antinomy. Both sides of the opposition could be argued for. On the one hand, one can argue that there is evidence that man’s call here on earth is to develop the natural powers of his soul. On the other hand, that there is no such evidence can also be argued for. This is the antinomy that Kant resolved by claiming that the perfection to which individuals are called is only to be achieved, and only in due time, by the human species as a whole. Perfection, as a determination (*Bestimmung*) to which everyone is called (*Bestimmung* as *Anruf*), belongs exclusively to the species. Here is where Kant gave to his anthropology its at the time unprecedented historical dimension.

As we shall see, Mendelssohn did not approve of this move by Kant.<sup>31</sup> But the point now is that, to the extent that Kant had indeed formulated an antinomy in his mind and the Abbt/Mendelssohn exchange had been the inspiration for it, he had seriously misread Abbt.<sup>32</sup> Spalding had raised the issue of a vocation of humankind in order to ascertain whether it was possible to gather sufficient evidence from the world at large in order to rest assured that, if one just acted rightly, one would eventually attain perfection and enjoy the happiness consequent upon it. The issue was one of conduct, of ascertaining the norm of the behaviour by which the human being must abide in order to find his pre-appointed place within the overall order of things – it being assumed as indubitable that there is such an order. Abbt himself clearly stated the issue in the motto prefixed to his tract. “*Quid sumus? Et quidnam victuri gignimur?*” (What are we? And what do we ever give birth to if we happen to prevail?) His many sceptical doubts were raised for the most part as *ad hoc* replies to Spalding’s individual optimistic claims. His main argument, however, was that,

<sup>28</sup>“Vorzüglich in Absicht auf die grosse Anzahl derer bald nach der Geburt wieder sterbenden Kinder? Es ist erstaunend, wie man sich hat bereden können, dieser frühzeitige Tod werde daraus begreiflich, weil dieses Leben nur ein Stand der Prüfung sey; da doch aus demselben gerade unbegreiflich wird, wie dieses Leben ein Stand der Prüfung syen könne,” *JubA* 6.1:16–17.

<sup>29</sup>“... Mit Vernachlässigung weit wichtiger Absichten? Getrauen Sie sich hierauf zu antworten?” *JubA* 6.1:24.

<sup>30</sup>“... ohne irgend eine Fertigkeit ihrer Seele ausgebildet zu haben,” *JubA* 6.1:24.

<sup>31</sup>See note 43 below.

<sup>32</sup>Hinske, for his part, admits that his presentation of Abbt’s position is deliberately truncated (Norbert Hinske, “Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit,” 142).

inasmuch as the assumed overall order in fact exists (and apparently Abbt himself did not doubt the fact), to look for a norm of conduct specific to humankind, i.e., to look for a specifically human vocation, is futile, because any evidence that we might believe to have gathered in its support would be overruled by virtue of requirements dictated by the greater order of things, or, if not overruled, certainly absorbed into the latter. For a specifically human vocation, therefore, one would have to rely on a divine revelation that exceeds the scope of reason alone. As Abbt says:

One must once again distinguish the *vocation* that *humankind* has *in common* with all the other beings of this cosmos [i.e., *Bestimmung* as “determination”] from the vocation [i.e., *Bestimmung* as “vocation”] that belong to it as a *particular species of being*, at a *particular place*. One cannot derive the latter from the former, and *it alone* uncovers for us the Godhead’s secret regarding humankind. It appears that a revelation, and a revelation alone, can instruct us on the matter.<sup>33</sup>

Kant’s antinomy, in other words, did not address itself to Abbt’s doubts at all, for its resolution, by appealing to the perfection of the human species in general (presumably as part of the *Weltgebäude*) begged the question which, at least for Abbt, was at issue in his exchange with Mendelssohn, namely, the vocation of individual men here and now, “an einer *besondern Stelle*.”

Abbt had actually already made his point, artistically and all the more effectively for that, at the beginning of his tract, in the form of a parable of the human situation, which Altmann rightly describes as Kafkaesque.<sup>34</sup> A prince had brought regiments of soldiers from a distant land, but for purposes known by nobody, officers and soldiers alike. The progress of the March was slow and came to a halt when, for reasons also unknown, secret orders were issued to encamp until further notice. With the suspension of any immediate mandate for action, the soldiers gave themselves to all forms of conduct, some of which contravened army ethos. Individuals, moreover, were known suddenly to disappear. Where they went and why, perhaps on secret orders from the prince, nobody knew. To be sure, some claimed to know, but their credibility, because of the way they otherwise comported themselves, was seriously in doubt. As for the officers, since they did not know for what purposes they were in charge, and, moreover, since they were sensitive to the possibility that the conduct of individual soldiers, though unruly by accepted army protocols, might well be in tune with the prince’s still unknown ulterior motives and might well have been sanctioned by him, were at a loss as to what extent to enforce army discipline. I need not dwell on the details of the parable. Its point is clear. To the extent that we consider ourselves as acting out a part in a grand play of which, however, we do not know the script, there is no telling whether what appears to us as a norm for sorting out right from wrong, good from evil, sense from nonsense, is, according to the grander order of things as scripted in the play, completely subverted

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<sup>33</sup>“Man unterscheidet doch einmal die *Bestimmung des Menschen*, die er mit allen andern Dingen dieses Weltgebäudes *gemeinschaftlich* hat von derjenigen, die ihm als einer *besondern Gattung von Wesen*, an einer *besondern Stelle*, *eigen* ist. Aus der ersten läßt sich die letztere nicht schließen, und *diese allein* entdeckt uns die Geheimnisse der Gottheit über ihn. Eine Offenbarung, scheint es, kann einzig und allein uns darüber belehren,” *JubA* 6.1:15.

<sup>34</sup>Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 134.

precisely as norm. As Abbt puts it, who is to say whether a Domitian, an Attila, a Borgia or a Caligula, are happy or unhappy? Who is to say whether what appears to me to be unhappiness is in fact self-incurred punishment?<sup>35</sup> Better to assume, in order to avoid the doubts agonizing officers and soldiers alike in Abbt's parable, that there is no scripted play at all. At least one can then concentrate on what makes sense or nonsense in the here and now, according to norms only relevant to precisely this here and now. As Abbt says, adding to this here and now the hope of a future existence does not help, for there is no guarantee that the predicaments that trouble us in the present existence would not equally trouble us in the hoped for extended one.<sup>36</sup>

One cannot altogether blame Kant for having missed Abbt's point. Mendelssohn had missed it too. His response to the agony of the protagonists of Abbt's parable was that they should have been able to recognize from the tasks to which they were daily called to perform what their prince had in store for them.<sup>37</sup> These tasks had an end and a perfection of their own, from which the further ends for which they were the means could have been inferred – all of them, means and ends, subordinated to the unity of divine purpose. “In the divine order, *the unity of the final end* rules. All subordinated ends are at the same time means; all means are at the same time final ends. Think not that this life is merely preparation, the future life merely final end. Both are means, both are final ends. God's purposes, and the alterations of each and every substance, proceed with equal steps to immensity.”<sup>38</sup> To be sure, one can also argue that, since order does not countenance the presence of anything out of joint within it (*etwas verrückt*), and since it is assumed that order prevails, there should not be any question of development. If this is the argument, then Mendelssohn's reply is that development consists precisely in recognizing that what *appeared* (*schien*) to be out of joint, *was* (*war*) in fact not so. “Nothing goes fruitless. Not what is evil, and would the good be without fruit?”<sup>39</sup>

This is how immersed Mendelssohn was in the metaphysics of Leibniz/Wolff – so immersed as not to see that, if in this world the “out of joint [*verrückt*]” only appears to be so, that it is not out of joint *in fact*, then the contrary might very well also be the case. Who is to say that whatever order we deem to hold in our immediate life-context is not *in fact* only an imagined order – that, *in fact*, chaos ultimately prevails? Inasmuch as one cannot identify ends which, albeit limited in their scope, are nonetheless *absolute* ends, i.e., such as cannot be subordinated to any further purpose and on which, therefore, one can securely anchor the meaning of one's life – as long, in other words, as

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<sup>35</sup>Cf. *JubA* 6.1:17.

<sup>36</sup>*JubA* 6.1:15.

<sup>37</sup>*JubA* 6.1:19.

<sup>38</sup>“In der göttlichen Ordnung herrscht *Einheit des Endzwecks*. Alles untergeordnete Endzwecke sind zugleich Mittel; alle Mittel sind zugleich Endzwecke. Denke nicht, dieses Leben sey bloß Vorbereitung, das künftige bloß Endzweck. Beyde sind Mittel, beyde sind Endzwecke. Mit gleichen Schritten gehen die Absichten Gottes und die Veränderungen einer jeden Substanz ins Unermeßliche fort,” *JubA* 6.1:21.

<sup>39</sup>“Nichts ist ohne Frucht verlohren. Das Böse nicht, und das Gut sollte es seyn?” *JubA* 6.1:22.



everything acquires meaning only in virtue of everything else – then the possibility of distinguishing between appearance and reality, between means and end, right and wrong, is undermined. This was precisely the point of Abbt’s parable. What gave to the situation in which soldiers and officers alike found themselves in the Prince’s army its Kafkaesque quality was not the lack of immediately perceived ends. As the parable goes, as soon as the advance came to a standstill, individuals immediately set out doing their own thing. It was rather the belief on the part of everyone concerned that there was an overarching purpose transcending their perceived ends that put into question the validity of such ends as *in fact* ends – the belief, in other words, that they were acting out an already scripted action. The situation was especially difficult for the officers when it was their turn to punish perceived transgressors, that is, when the distinction between right and wrong – when what constituted *evil*, in other words – was the issue.

Altmann, the sympathetic biographer of Mendelssohn, says that it was not “Mendelssohn[’s] wish to justify evil by declaring its conformity to God’s purposes. The problem of evil is submerged in the recognition of the great harmony in which everything is either created or admitted as contributing to the perfection of the whole.”<sup>40</sup> To deny evil certainly was not Mendelssohn’s wish. But the vagueness of the metaphor to which Altmann is forced in order to make his point betrays the fragility of Mendelssohn’s position. What does it mean to “submerge” evil into a greater order, yet not deny it as “evil”? Easier to stay with Weishaupt’s system where each world attained its norm of perfection, and of the lack thereof, on the basis of the compact established within it between a set of organs and their environs – where, more accurately, the world itself was generated by precisely this compact. The norm governing it might have been specific to it alone and in this sense, therefore, relative to it. *For it*, however, i.e., as long as one restricted one’s knowledge to it alone, it was absolute. But, as we have already noted, this “relative absoluteness,” paradoxical as it was, was achieved by Weishaupt by emptying the universe of intentions that would run across it, so to speak, holding it together *a priori*. Not that Weishaupt denied a universal order of things. The point, rather, is that his materialism made such an order the result of a mechanical coincidence of worlds. An individual agent caught up in these worlds, therefore, would at least be able to gauge the relative value of his actions by the consequences immediately flowing from them. At *that* particular point of the confluence, but there alone, that was all that counted.

But no matter: the common belief was in a necessary order of things naturally determined and, whether the necessity was mechanically generated *a posteriori* (as *per* Weishaupt) or teleologically motivated *a priori* (as *per* Leibniz/Wolff), inasmuch as an agent’s actions fell within this greater order, the relation of the actions to the agent – ultimately, the agent’s self-identity precisely as agent – came into question. This was precisely the problem confronting officers and soldiers in Abbt’s parable. Note that the problem was not one of lack of knowledge, as Abbt himself thought. This only showed how much Abbt himself, no less than Mendelssohn, was bound to the conceptual habits

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<sup>40</sup>Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 135.



of *Popularphilosophie*. The problem was rather one of too much knowledge, for it was to the extent that one knew, or at least believed, that his or her actions were controlled by intentions or had consequences that transcended them that doubts as to *what* one was *actually* doing, and *why*, arose. Had one known, as if *sub specie aeternitatis*, the whole order of things, then one would have no alternative but to see oneself simply submerged into it – his or her agency merely a way of being, a mode or a mere appearance, of the whole. But how did this view square with the personalist values that were also very much part of the ethos of *Popularphilosophie*, the products of its religious heritage?

In his “Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend,” Mendelssohn had portrayed himself as speaking through the mouth of the cerulean-eyed daughter of Jupiter, Leibniz’s spirit the witness to her utterances. But there was also another character in fact present on the scene and interfering with the proceedings, his interference all the more disturbing as his presence was unnoticed. This was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,<sup>41</sup> he who had called his people to a special vocation and, as most people believed in the Germany of Mendelssohn, had of late also extended this call to humankind in general. This call addressed itself to irreducibly responsible agents and thereby established the possibility of sin, that is, of an evil that was both personal and irreducible. The personal values that motivated much of the Enlightenment were motivated by precisely this call. It was not clear, however, whether, within the context of the metaphysics of *Popularphilosophie*, the requirements of personal responsibility and personal evil that the values presupposed could be saved. This was the problem. The *Popularphilosophen*, Mendelssohn foremost among them, were given to obfuscate the issue by routinely sliding in their pronouncements from *Vorsehung*, with all the religious notes that “providence” brings into play, to *Plan der Natur*, as if they two amounted to the same thing while in fact they did not. In brief, the problem was one of agency, of the possibility of irreducible individual responsibility. The paradox of *Popularphilosophie* was that it held on to religiously inspired personalist values while at the same time professing a metaphysics incompatible with them. This was the paradox, and it was bound to break out in the open, as in fact it did at the time of the Spinoza Dispute.

#### 4 Mendelssohn’s Reservations and the Crisis of *Popularphilosophie*

I am back at the Spinoza Dispute, but not without first noting that there had been occasions when Mendelssohn himself had felt the need to qualify his adherence to the commonly accepted belief in universal order. Kant’s reaction to his dispute with Abbt was a case in point. It found expression in the 1784 essay, “Idea for a Universal

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<sup>41</sup>In the course of his epistolary exchange with Abbt, Mendelssohn wrote to his friend: “Mit dem Kaltsinne eines deutschen Metaphysikers hülle ich mich in meinen kahlen Mantel, und sage wie Pangloß: *Diese Welt ist die Beste!*” – this in the very letter which he abruptly broke off with: “Jedoch der Sabbath gehet an! Leben sie wohl, mein bester Freund!” (Mendelssohn to Abbt, July 20, 1764, see *JubA* 12.1:53). “Pangloss” and “Sabbath” seem to be a paradoxical juxtaposition.

History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” where Kant, among other claims, had advanced the hypothesis that it is possible on the whole to look at the history of the human species as the fulfillment of “a hidden plan of nature” (ein verborgenes Plan der Natur), devised to bring about the perfect political constitution required for the realization of all the natural predispositions of the species itself, not of the individuals of the species.<sup>42</sup> Now, at a meeting of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* dedicated to a discussion on the theme of “the best state constitution,”<sup>43</sup> Mendelssohn, while not referring in his *votum* to Kant by name, agreed nonetheless with one thesis advanced in “Idee,” namely that man needs adversities, even evil, in order to be spurred on to use and develop his faculties.<sup>44</sup> He distanced himself from Kant’s essay, however, on two other crucial and closely related issues. First, against Kant’s idea of a perfect political constitution to which the history of the whole human species is allegedly directed, Mendelssohn argued that there cannot be just one single perfect constitution. On the contrary, there must be many, where “perfect” is defined by how well a constitution is suited to meet the circumstances that individual humans must confront because of their particular historical situation. Second, Mendelssohn argues that men have potentials that belong to them precisely as individuals. It is possible, therefore, that they will go on realizing such potentials as individuals even though the constitution under which they live has attained its limits and their society has come to a political standstill or has even begun to regress. This must be the case because, according to Mendelssohn, the perfection of human beings as individuals is the determining goal of the perfection of society, and not the other way around. In other words, inasmuch as there is a secret plan of nature promoting perfection, the promoted perfection must be, first and foremost, that of individuals. Here is the relevant text:

Everything rests on the big question: *what is the vocation of man, and what is he to do here on earth?* – If his vocation is the progression to a higher perfection, then man is end, society means. Men will need various kinds of social ties for their advancement . . . *The final end is not the advancement of society but of men* . . . The progression of men can well coexist with the *standstill* or even the *regression* of humanity even though at the same time necessarily bound to either.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*. The essay was published in the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift* (November 1784), 385–411. See *Zweiter Satz*, 389; *Vierter Satz*, 392.

<sup>43</sup>“Über die beste Staatsverfassung,” *JubA* 6.1:145–48. See also Altmann’s notes in *JubA* 6.1, esp. on xxxii and 253, and, also relevant, xxvi–xxix. Altmann does not give a date for the meeting. Mendelssohn’s position as expressed in this *votum* was nothing new. It is typical of Mendelssohn’s political theory, as Altmann rightly points out in his notes.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Kant, *Idee*, *Vierter Satz*, 392–94. This is a thesis that is internally fraught, of course, with serious conceptual and moral difficulties.

<sup>45</sup>“Alles beruht auf der großen Frage: *was ist die Bestimmung des Menschen, und was soll er hier auf Erden?* – Ist seine Bestimmung Fortgang zu höherer Vollkommenheit, so ist der Mensch Zweck, die Gesellschaft Mittel. Die Menschen werden verschiedene Arten von gesellschaftlicher Verbindung zu ihrem Fortgang brauchen . . . *Der Endzweck ist nicht Fortgang der Gesellschaft, sondern der Menschen*. . . . *Fortgang der Menschen kann mit Stillestand oder auch Rückfall der Menschheit gar wohl bestehen ja zuweilen nothwendig verbunden seyn*,” *JubA* 6.1:140.

Mendelssohn had made the same point, in even stronger language, in a communication with August Hennings of 1782, with reference to his just published comments on his correspondence with Abbt.<sup>46</sup> “Nature’s end is not the perfection of the human species. No! [It is] the perfection of man, of the individual!”<sup>47</sup> He had also made a very similar one when objecting to his friend Lessing’s idea of history as an education of humankind in general, rather than of individual men.<sup>48</sup>

Hinske comments *en passant* that Mendelssohn conceived the vocation of humankind according to traditional eschatology. Perhaps he did.<sup>49</sup> But here is precisely where the problem lay. How did that eschatology square with the metaphysics of the cerulean-eyed daughter of Jupiter of which Mendelssohn was otherwise the champion? The problem, as we have just suggested, was one of agency – of the possibility of truly individualized and, therefore, responsible action. Not that this was a problem original with *Popularphilosophie*. In one way or other, it had nagged Christian theologians from the beginning. But it had become especially acute with *Popularphilosophie* because the reason that the latter professed was allegedly “pure,” and it therefore precluded the options that the theologians always had of falling back on religious imagery. Here is where Jacobi’s dispute with Mendelssohn becomes important, because, for all his faults (and by all accounts they were many), Jacobi’s merit was to raise the problem precisely as one of agency and as specifically caused by the reason of the Enlightenment. As Jacobi had said to Lessing, with words with which he then confronted Mendelssohn, on Spinoza’s position,

the only function that the faculty of thought has in the whole of nature is that of observer; its proper business is to accompany the mechanism of the efficient causes. The conversation that we are now having together is only an affair of our bodies; and the whole content of the conversation, analyzed into its elements, is extension, movement, degree of velocity, together with their concepts, and the concepts of these concepts. The inventor of the clock did not ultimately invent it; he only witnessed its coming to be out of blindly self-developing forces. So too Raphael, when he sketched the School of Athens, and Lessing, when he composed his *Nathan*. The same goes for all philosophizing, arts, forms of governance, sea and land wars – in brief, for everything possible.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Altmann refers to this letter (*JubA* 6.1:242) and also to the relevant passages in Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* (*JubA* 8). Mendelssohn’s recently published work is *Moses Mendelssohn’s Anmerkungen zu Abbt’s freundschaftlicher Correspondenz* (Berlin etc., 1782).

<sup>47</sup>“Nicht die Vervollkommnung des Menschengeschlechts ist Absicht der Natur. Nein! die Vervollkommnung des Menschen, des Individui.” Mendelssohn to August Hennings, June 25, 1782. *JubA* 13:65.

<sup>48</sup>Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, *JubA* 8:162.

<sup>49</sup>This is a surprising statement on the part of Hinske. Inasmuch as Christian eschatological imagery might have been still at work in the background of the philosophical idea of a final consummation of all things in perfection that Altmann attributes to Leibniz and Wolff, and to Mendelssohn as well, this would only show how much the philosophers of the age had simply lost the meaning of that imagery. In Christian belief, the effect of the expected final judgement (*Urteil*, *krisis*) would have been to part the wicked from the good – in other words, not to absorb evil into a greater universal perfection but to finally make it visible, to eternally confirm it precisely as evil.

<sup>50</sup>“Wenn es lauter wirkende und keine Endursachen giebt, so hat das denkende Vermögen in der ganzen Natur bloß das Zusehen; sein einziges Geschäft ist, den Mechanismus der wirkenden Kräfte

Jacobi admired Spinoza precisely because he, more than any other philosopher, had had the courage to bring the principle on which classical metaphysics was based to its ultimate conclusion – namely, that nothing genuinely new, i.e., nothing for which one could truly claim responsibility, was possible: “What distinguishes Spinoza’s philosophy from all the other, what constitutes its soul, is that it maintains and applies with the strictest rigour the well known principle, *gigni de nihilo nihil, in nihilum nil potest reverti*.”<sup>51</sup> In these passages, incidentally, Jacobi was contrasting mechanic or exclusively efficient causality with final causality. But the “finality” that he had in mind was that of the intentionality that directs self-motivated actions. It had nothing to do with Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, which, as a matter of fact, Jacobi thought logically led to what he called Spinoza’s fatalism.<sup>52</sup>

To Jacobi’s pious disquisitions that only served to cloud the issue and poison the tenor of the dispute, Mendelssohn replied:

I shall pass over too the noble retreat under the banner of faith which you propose for your own part. It is totally in the spirit of your religion, which imposes upon you the duty to suppress doubt through faith. . . . My religion knows no duty to resolve doubts of this kind otherwise than through reason; it commands no faith in eternal truths. I have one more ground, therefore, to seek *conviction*.<sup>53</sup>

That was up to Mendelssohn to judge. The point at issue, however, was whether the reason specific to the Enlightenment, not reason in general, was one that could resolve the doubts that Jacobi – no longer Abbt – was raising. Once these doubts had come on the scene, the road lay open to Fichte’s *Bestimmung des Menschen*. As of 1786, *Popularphilosophie* was in crisis.

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zu begleiten. Die Unterredung, die wir gegenwärtig miteinander haben, ist nur ein Anliegen unserer Leiber; und der ganze Inhalt dieser Unterredung, in seine Elemente aufgelöst: Ausdehnung, Bewegung, Grade der Geschwindigkeit, nebst den Begriffen davon, und den Begriffen von diesen Begriffen. Der Erfinder der Uhr erfand sich im Grunde nicht; er sah nur ihrer Entstehung aus blindlings sich entwickelnden Kräften zu. Eben so Raphael, da er die Schule von Athen entwarf; und Lessing, da er seinen Nathan dichtete. Dasselbe gilt von allen Philosophen, Künsten, Regierungsformen, Kriegen zu Wasser und zu Lande: kurz, von allem Möglichen,” Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau, 1785), 18–19. For the translation, see *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel ‘Allwill’*, trans. George di Giovanni (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 1994), 189.

<sup>51</sup>Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, 59.

<sup>52</sup>Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, 24.

<sup>53</sup>“So lasse ich auch den ehrlichen Rückzug unter die Fahne des Glaubens, den Sie von ihrer Seite in Volschlag bringen, an seinen Ort gestellt seyn. Er ist völlig in dem Geiste Ihrer Religion, die Ihnen die Pflicht auflegt, die Zweifel durch den Glauben niederzuschlagen. . . . Meine Religion kennt keine Pflicht, dergleichen Zweifel anders als durch Vernunftgründe zu heben, befiehlt keinem Glauben an ewigen Wahrheiten. Ich habe also einen Grund mehr, *Überzeugung* zu suchen,” Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, 161–62.

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# Chapter 12

## Mendelssohn Versus Herder on the Vocation of Man

Frederick C. Beiser

### 1 Unsettled Questions

Undoubtedly, one of the most interesting philosophical exchanges of Mendelssohn's entire career was his brief correspondence with Johann Gottfried Herder in 1769. The exchange was very rich and deep in content; but unfortunately it was also very short-lived, amounting to little more than one exchange of letters. Herder first wrote Mendelssohn in April 1769 with his objections to Mendelssohn's recently published *Phädon*; Mendelssohn duly replied in May 1769; and Herder then responded to Mendelssohn's reply in December 1769.<sup>1</sup> With that, however, the exchange came to an abrupt end. Mendelssohn, caught in the midst of his dispute with Lavater, did not have the time or energy to respond to Herder's last letter. He took Herder's objections so seriously, however, that he planned to revise the third part of *Phädon* to take account of them; but nothing ever came of that, probably because of Mendelssohn's illness. All that ever came of Mendelssohn's attempt to reply to Herder's second letter are a few scattered remarks to Abbt's correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

The brevity of the Herder-Mendelssohn exchange is an enormous pity because it concerned the most important and interesting of all philosophical questions. Nothing less was at stake than that grand old question of the purpose and value of life itself, or, to use the then favorite term for it, "the vocation of man" (*die Bestimmung des Menschen*). For this reason the exchange between Herder and Mendelssohn still remains of interest today.

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<sup>1</sup>For Herder's letters, see Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe. Gesamtausgabe: 1763–1803*, ed. Wilhelm Dobbek and Günter Arnold (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1977), 1:137–43, 177–81. And for Mendelssohn's letter, see *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976), 12.1:182–87. Hereafter cited as *JubA*.

<sup>2</sup>See Mendelssohn's "Anmerkungen zu Abbt's freundschaftlicher Correspondenz," Anmerkung S, *JubA* 6.1:48–50.

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The 1769 Herder-Mendelssohn correspondence was the continuation of a discussion that Mendelssohn had a few years earlier with Thomas Abbt about the latest edition of J. J. Spalding's famous book *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.<sup>3</sup> In the *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, Abbt and Mendelssohn squared off regarding the merits of Spalding's book, with Mendelssohn attempting to defend Spalding's views against Abbt's scepticism.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Pierre Bayle, Abbt had doubted whether the vocation of man can be known in this life. In a famous metaphor he likened life to a military campaign where everyone embarked on a long March but no one knew its purpose; it was utterly mysterious why one was called to serve or why one would now and then disappear. Abbt thus challenged Mendelssohn's more confident rationalist view that the vocation of man consists in the perfection of our powers according to a divine plan that is clearly perceptible to reason.<sup>5</sup>

In his correspondence with Herder, Mendelssohn found himself again defending Spalding, though now against a very different opponent than Abbt. Although Herder, like Mendelssohn, was a great admirer of Abbt, he did not simply assume the mantle of their now lost common friend. (Abbt died in 1766 at the age of 28.) Herder too challenged Mendelssohn's rationalism, the powers of reason to determine the vocation of man, but he did so on very different grounds than Abbt.

Because of their intrinsic interest, and because of their great importance for Mendelssohn's and Herder's intellectual development, Mendelssohn's exchanges with Herder and Abbt have been heavily discussed in secondary literature. Perhaps the most lucid discussion appears in Alexander Altmann's magisterial biography of Mendelssohn, which covers the exchanges with Abbt and Herder in great detail and with great insight.<sup>6</sup> More recently, these exchanges have captured the interest of Herder scholars. Marion Heinz and Jack Zammito, in their work on the philosophy of the young Herder, have also treated these exchanges in illuminating and instructive ways.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Johann J. Spalding, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Greifswald, 1748). This book went through 13 editions, the later ones sometimes greatly expanding on the earlier ones. The Mendelssohn/Abbt correspondence centers around the 1761 edition. For a modern edition, see *Die Bestimmung des Menschen, Die Erstausgabe von 1748 und die letzte Auflage von 1794*, ed. Wolfgang Erich Müller (Waltrop: Spenner, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See Abbt, "Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen," *Litteraturbrief* June 21, 1764, in *JubA* 5.1:619–29; and Mendelssohn "Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend," in *JubA* 5.1:630–37. For commentary, see *JubA* 5.3a:445–54.

<sup>5</sup> For a helpful account of the Abbt-Mendelssohn exchanges, see Stefan Lorenz, "Skeptizismus und natürliche Religion: Thomas Abbt und Moses Mendelssohn in ihrer Debatte über Johann Joachim Spaldings *Bestimmung des Menschen*," in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, ed. Michael Albrecht, Eva Engel and Norbert Hinske (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), 113–34.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 130–40, 167–79.

<sup>7</sup> See Marion Heinz, "Historismus oder Metaphysik? Zu Herders Bückeburger Geschichtsphilosophie," in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. Martin Bollacher (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1994), 75–85; and John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, & The Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 165–71.



Besides their recent work there is also Rudolf Haym's classic biography, *Herder, nach seinem Leben und seinen Werk*, which discussed in depth Herder's relationship with Mendelssohn.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the very good work already done, it seems to me that there is still much to do. This is because the 1769 Herder-Mendelssohn exchange raises challenging questions for Mendelssohn scholarship. As far as I can see, these questions have either not been posed at all or still lack a convincing answer. There are two basic problems.

One is to explain precisely what is at dispute between Mendelssohn and Herder. This is no easy task partly because they agree about so much, and partly because the abrupt end of the correspondence left many issues hanging in the air. It is left to the historian, then, to locate and reconstruct the basic point at dispute between Herder and Mendelssohn. Not all past attempts to do this have been successful, either because they fail to specify precisely how Mendelssohn and Herder differ, or because they assume apparent differences are real and ultimate ones.

The other basic problem concerns Mendelssohn's striking disavowal in his May 2 letter that he never intended to espouse the disembodied existence of the soul. In his first letter Herder had criticized Mendelssohn's theory in the *Phädon* that the soul is an immaterial body that exists independent of the body in the afterlife. Herder argued that he could not conceive the soul as an immaterial being, as a completely disembodied being, one existing without the sensibility and desires that come with the human body. In his reply Mendelssohn bluntly states that he agrees entirely with Herder about the impossibility of a disembodied soul, and he now regrets that he ever seemed to countenance the existence of such a soul in his *Phädon*. He even confesses that he is very disappointed in himself for saying the very opposite of what he meant. He then asks Herder to strike everything from the *Phädon* that talks about the future of the soul apart from the body. This passage from Mendelssohn's letter to Herder is astonishing. There is no more puzzling and striking passage in all of Mendelssohn's writings. For here Mendelssohn appears to disown completely a doctrine that he had once passionately defended. Why? Was Mendelssohn only defending an exoteric doctrine in the *Phädon*, as Altmann suggests? Or was he changing his views, renouncing one position and now affirming another? So we now confront two more questions. First, why did Mendelssohn disown this doctrine? And, second, was he consistent in doing so?

In what follows I will address both these problems. For reasons of time and space I will not attempt to provide anything like a narrative of the correspondence, a task already well executed by Altmann. I will attempt instead to answer the questions more directly, supplying only as much background information as necessary to answer each question directly. And here I have to make some disclaimers. I do not pretend to answer these questions completely or definitively. My aim is more to confuse than to clarify things. Muddying the waters does not appear to be the

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<sup>8</sup> See Rudolf Haym, *Herder* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1958), 1:140–44, 318–20; 2:178, 189, 317, 745.



most respectable of philosophical or scholarly intentions. But it seems to me that the contemporary philosophers overestimate the value of clarity and underestimate that of confusion. For there are two kinds of clarity: superficial and deep. And the only way to get to deeper clarity is to confuse *superficial* clarity. So please bear with me as I splash about in my mudpuddle. Eventually, perhaps, greater clarity will come out of it.

## 2 The Main Sticking Point

Let me tackle the first question first: namely, what was the chief point at issue between Mendelssohn and Herder? To locate it, we must first take account of the great amount of agreement between them. The extent of their agreement is indeed so great that it is hard to find any point of disagreement at all. In fact, Mendelssohn himself was puzzled why Herder had taken such passionate issue with him. In his May 2 letter Mendelssohn began by reassuring Herder that their beliefs are not far apart at all, that they agree about basic principles, and that it is only a matter of getting clear about them to agree about their consequences. Mendelssohn was not fooling himself for the sake of politeness. Their agreements cover the following basic points. (1) Herder and Mendelssohn both believe in the immortality of the soul. Herder told Mendelssohn that he accepted his proofs for immortality in the *Phädon*. (2) Both Mendelssohn and Herder agree that the purpose of life, or the vocation of man, is to perfect our faculties and that we should do so according to the plan of providence. Both think that God has placed us here on earth to develop our powers, and that we should develop them into an organized and harmonious whole. (3) Although Herder had criticized Mendelssohn's doctrine of the disembodied existence of the soul, Mendelssohn had disavowed that doctrine and insisted that he agreed wholeheartedly with Herder that the soul has to be embodied. He even went on to sketch a metaphysical demonstration of why the soul must be embodied (viz., that the soul must be somewhere, and that to perceive things it has to have senses). (4) Given that the soul has to be embodied, Mendelssohn accepts Herder's doctrine of palingenesis, i.e., that in the afterlife the body is regenerated. (5) Mendelssohn declares that he agrees with Herder that human perfection involves the development of our sensibility, and that its perfection is indeed the very crown of human self-realization.

Given all these points of agreement, where, if anywhere, lay the point of their disagreement? In his May letter Mendelssohn locates one place. Herder had stated in his first letter that the vocation of man is to make ourselves more perfect in *this* life, and that we cannot prepare ourselves now for the next life, about which we know so little. Firmly and bluntly Mendelssohn stated that he disagreed with this view in every respect. He argued the following against Herder: that limiting perfection to this world contradicts the concept of perfection; and that it contradicts the general order of nature to think that the perfection of our powers comes to an end in this life. Why would nature have us perfect ourselves only to destroy the

perfection we achieve? Our reason shows us that the harmonic development of our powers is the highest end of life, and that we have no reason to limit this value to this life alone. Mendelssohn thought, perfectly reasonably, that Herder would have to agree with him. For Herder too had admitted that the soul is immortal, and that it continues to have the same physical material in the next life. What, then, is there to limit the doctrine of perfection to this life alone? Mendelssohn then went on to endorse Herder's favorite doctrine of palingenesis. So on the sole point Herder and Mendelssohn seem to disagree there is reason to think that they really ought to agree, i.e., that Herder would agree with Mendelssohn if he only thought through the implications of his principles. We are then left wondering, as Mendelssohn was, what all the fuss was about?

So now you can see one reason why the Herder-Mendelssohn correspondence is so puzzling. There really seems to be no real point at issue between the two philosophers – or at least none if only Herder were not such a hothead and if he only admitted the full implications of his principles. Let me now increase the confusion by explaining why some of the interpretations of the dispute between Herder and Mendelssohn do not really work. Rather than getting beyond the points of agreement to the deeper disagreement, they take superficial disagreements as basic. This is the case with Marion Heinz's interpretation. According to her account, the basic disagreement between Mendelssohn and Herder concerns their differing conceptions of human nature. These conceptions seem to be completely antithetical: Herder insists upon the primacy of the sensual side of the soul, making rationality a function of sensibility, whereas Mendelssohn stresses the primacy of its rational side, making sensibility a function of rationality. Herder's greater emphasis upon sensibility means that the soul is bound to the physical world, so that the vocation of man is in this life. Heinz is certainly correct that Herder and Mendelssohn have conflicting views about human nature. Yet it is not clear that this matters so much in the case of their dispute about the vocation of man. In formulating her account of the dispute Heinz seems to forget that Mendelssohn agrees with Herder that the soul does have an embodied existence, and that he too holds that the vocation of man is to develop our sensuality. Indeed, Mendelssohn stresses that, no less than Herder, he regards the development of our sensibility as the very crown of our perfection.

Closer to the mark, I believe, is the interpretation of Alexander Altmann. On his view, the ultimate point of disagreement between Herder and Mendelssohn lies in their contrasting attitudes about the end of life: Herder affirms that the purpose of life is only in the here and now, whereas Mendelssohn thinks that it lies in preparing ourselves for the life beyond this one. The clash between Mendelssohn and Herder therefore seems to be between a strictly immanent versus a transcendent conception of the purpose of life. As Altmann puts it: "The ultimate issue between Mendelssohn and Herder was not, therefore, the question of palingenesis but of transcendent purposes versus immanent ones."<sup>9</sup> Though Altmann is on to something important and has nearly got it right, his formulation of the basic difference is still not entirely

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<sup>9</sup> Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 174.

accurate. There are two problems with it. First, Mendelssohn did not think that the purpose of life is essentially transcendent. He distanced himself from the classic medieval view that the highest good is eternal salvation, and that this life is only a pilgrimage on our way to the next life. In his “Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend,” his response to Abbt, Mendelssohn is careful to say that life in this world is not only a means, a mere preparation for the next life, but that it is also an end in itself.<sup>10</sup> Second, Altmann ignores Mendelssohn’s view that, if he were only consistent and drew the implications of his principles, Herder would agree with him in thinking that the purpose of this life – the perfection of our faculties according to providence – should exist in the next world as much as in this world. As Altmann leaves it, we have no reason for thinking that his formulation for the difference between Mendelssohn and Herder is only an apparent or pseudo-difference. Once again, we have not got beyond the points of agreement.

To understand the deeper differences between Herder and Mendelssohn, it is necessary to take a closer look at Herder’s second letter to Mendelssohn, that which he wrote in December 1769 in response to Mendelssohn’s first letter to him. Here Herder is still keen to achieve complete agreement with Mendelssohn, but he has also discovered another formulation for the deeper differences between them. It now becomes perfectly clear why Herder thinks that the vocation of man has to be limited to this world alone, and why the ideal of human perfection cannot be extended beyond this life to the next world to come. Herder’s reasoning for this point is of the greatest philosophical and historical interest. He makes the following basic point: that our human capacities have their meaning, purpose and function only as a response to specific situations and circumstances in this life; if we abstract them from these situations or circumstances, they lose all their meaning and purpose. My power to think, for example, arises from my learning a specific language, and that language arises from how people from my culture have responded to the specific circumstances of their environment and nature. It makes no sense at all to abstract such powers or capacities from their specific environments. If we attempt to do this, we are guilty of hypostasis: treating a relation as if it were a self-sufficient thing. Herder implies that Mendelssohn is guilty of just this fallacy when he assumes that the faculties we have in this life are transferrable or extendable to another life. We have no knowledge of the specific circumstances of the next life, and so we do not know what specific powers we will develop there. Hence all the powers that we perfect in this life cannot be extended to the next life, and so we must accept that the ethics of perfection applies to this life alone. Even though our present body survives this life according to the doctrine of palingenesis, we have no reason to assume that in the next life this body will have or develop the same capacities.

When we take this argument into account, it is easy to see the basic difference between Herder and Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn affirms and Herder denies that the ethics of perfection, insofar as it involves specific duties about which faculties we

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<sup>10</sup>Mendelssohn, “Orakel,” *JubA* 5.1:632.

are to develop, is extendible to the next life. Herder insists that the purpose of this life is *entirely* immanent, that nothing we do here can count as a preparation for the next life. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, thinks that the purpose of life is not only immanent but also transcendent, that we can prepare ourselves for the next life by developing our powers here and now, because the next life will be nothing more than a continuation of the development of the powers we have had in this life.

Altmann finds in the dispute between Herder and Mendelssohn a clash between enlightenment and the *Sturm und Drang*. He suggests that Hamann, the father of the *Sturm und Drang*, is the impetus behind Herder's first letter to Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn, however, was not fully aware of this deeper conflict, Altmann contends, because he had underestimated "the depth of the cleavage separating him from the new trend that Herder represented."<sup>11</sup> Yet Altmann has simplified matters here, primarily Herder's own intellectual development, because in 1769 Herder was still as much a fervant *Aufklärer* as Mendelssohn. The conversion to religious enthusiasm, the renunciation of his earlier "freethinking libertinism," and the complete embrace of Hamann, would come only in 1774 during Herder's stay in *Bueckeburg*. The conflict between Herder and Mendelssohn is less a conflict between *Aufklärung* and *Sturm und Drang* than one between *Aufklärung* and Herder's budding historicism. Herder's insistence that the purpose of life lies in the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves anticipates his later famous demand in his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* that we treat each nation and epoch as an end in itself, "having the center of its happiness within itself." And Herder's thesis that human powers must be embodied in a specific time and place is the very essence of the historicist's principle of individuality, the claim that all human powers are historically limited in time and place. Together, both points mean that the ends of human life are intelligible only within history itself, within the parameters of space and time, which govern all human activities. Mendelssohn, unlike Herder, still held to a much more abstract conception of human nature, one which saw humanity as essentially the same, not only among all the epochs and cultures of this life but also for the new epoch in the life to come. So, ultimately, the conflict between Herder and Mendelssohn was a clash between enlightenment and historicism, and as such it anticipates a dispute that will become much more vital and fundamental in the decades and century to come.

### 3 Mendelssohn's Disavowal

So much for the first question. Now let me turn, very quickly and briefly, to the second one, which is even more puzzling. That question, it will be recalled, goes roughly as follows: Why did Mendelssohn so quickly disavow the doctrine of disembodied spiritual existence, which he had affirmed in the first dialogue of his

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<sup>11</sup> Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 172.

*Phädon*? Mendelssohn himself seems to supply us with a convincing explanation in the preface to his work. For here he tells us that in the first dialogue he was only closely following his Platonic model, viz., Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, and he strongly suggests that it does not represent his own views. "The long and strident declamations against the human body and its needs," Mendelssohn writes, should be tempered somewhat "according to our better concepts of the value of this divine creation." No wonder, then, Mendelssohn told Herder simply to strike these passages from the beginning of his dialogue. They were not his real views but Plato's and he lost nothing by disavowing them.

But this simple explanation does not really work. The problem goes much deeper. For much of Mendelssohn's argument in *Phädon* is a defense of mind-body dualism. That the mind and the body are logically distinct from one another is both the intention and implication of the second dialogue. Here Mendelssohn argues that soul and body are distinct because the soul is a simple or indivisible substance while the body is composite and divisible. The appendix to the second edition is very clear and explicit in affirming Descartes mental-physical dualism, and here Mendelssohn tells us that his aim was to strengthen it by an older argument from Plotinus's *Enneads*.<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is perfectly possible to combine mental-physical dualism with an insistence that the mind must be embodied in some physical substance or corporeal form. This is indeed the position of Descartes in the sixth of his *Meditations* when he argues that, though mind and body are *logically* distinct from one another, they are still *factually* intimately connected with one another. Though this intermediate position seems to resolve the apparent contradiction, the problem still goes deeper. For Mendelssohn does not take this intermediate position in his May 1769 letter to Herder. There he argues against dualism on *conceptual* or *logical* grounds: that it is *necessary* for a mind to exist somewhere, and for it to have perceptions, so it must exist in some body with sense organs.<sup>13</sup> This makes it not only factually but logically impossible for the mind to be disembodied, flatly contrary to the second dialogue of *Phädon*.

So we are left with the question: Was Mendelssohn really a dualist? If we take his letter to Herder seriously, we have to answer this question in the negative. But what should we believe? The defense of dualism in the *Phädon*? Or the avowal of monism in the letter to Herder? Would the real Herr Mendelssohn please stand up?

For Alexander Altmann, there was little question about who was the real Mendelssohn. He was more the author of the letter to Herder, less the author of the *Phädon*, for in the letter Mendelssohn was espousing "the *esoteric* Leibnizian doctrine" that every monad has a body belonging to it and which functions as its sensorium.<sup>14</sup> The *exoteric* Leibniz, it seems, though Altmann is not quite that explicit, is

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<sup>12</sup> *JubA* 3.1:136–37.

<sup>13</sup> Mendelssohn makes the same argument in his "Abhandlung von der Unkörperlichkeit der menschlichen Seele," *JubA* 3.1:187.

<sup>14</sup> Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 172.

the founder of the pre-established harmony, according to which the mind and body are distinct substances that do not interact with one another. But Altmann has not really solved the problem but only created another one. For we now seem to have an esoteric and an exoteric Mendelssohn on our hands, just as we once had an esoteric and exoteric Leibniz. The problem is then how these two personae interact with one another. Making such a distinction has proven problematic for Leibniz scholarship, and it threatens to be the same for Mendelssohn scholarship. The distinction between an esoteric monistic and an exoteric dualistic Mendelssohn founders on the hard fact that in some of his more technical works written after *Phädon* Mendelssohn continued to defend a dualistic position.<sup>15</sup> And, in any case, Mendelssohn regarded the *Phädon* as an exoteric work solely in its manner of exposition but not in its manner of demonstration, which was meant to reflect the most rigorous arguments of the Leibnizian-Wolffian system.

We still have not gotten any closer, then, to a solution of the problem. The mystery has only deepened because Mendelssohn seems to be as much a dualist as a monist, and there is no easy way to escape the conflict by appealing to an exoteric/esoteric distinction. After searching far and wide for a reconciliation of these views, I have given up. It now seems to me that there is no easy solution to the problem and that it actually reflects a deeper tension or ambivalence in Mendelssohn's own thinking. There was always a tension of this kind in Leibniz, who held both that monads must be embodied and that they are independent mental substances. But Mendelssohn's ambivalence was reflecting more than this Leibnizian tension. For, I would suggest, there was another deeper *ethical* ambivalence within him that kept pushing him in opposite directions. On the one hand, there was the German humanist tradition, which saw the development of all human powers, not least sensibility, as the end of life. According to this tradition, we should strive to achieve a harmony between the intellectual and sensible, and the sensible is no less important to our self-realization than the intellectual. In many of his writings Mendelssohn had defended this tradition, and he was strongly committed to it. On the other hand, however, Mendelssohn was still attracted and influenced by an older medieval tradition, which regarded the purpose of life not as the self-realization of our characteristic human powers but as the contemplation and imitation of God. If the purpose of life is to contemplate and imitate God, then we need to cultivate our more spiritual and intellectual powers, and we need to learn how to not only control but to despise the flesh. God, after all, is a purely spiritual and intellectual substance, and we become like him only by disowning our physical existence. This doctrine comes clearly to the fore in Mendelssohn's "Orakel," where he reaffirms the old medieval ethic of the imitation of God; and it seems that he never really renounced it, at least not when he was writing his *Phädon*. The more gnostic passages in Plato's *Phaedo* appealed more to Mendelssohn than he ever wanted to admit. So, in sum, the metaphysical ambivalence between monism and dualism reflects a deeper ethical ambivalence in Mendelssohn, a tension between

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<sup>15</sup> See esp. "Die Seele," *JubA* 3.1:203–13.

a modern humanist ethic, which pushed him toward monism, and a medieval gnostic or ascetic ethic, which moved him toward dualism.

So I have come to a somewhat unsatisfying conclusion. I leave you with a fundamental tension in Mendelssohn's thinking, a tension for which I cannot offer any explanation except by referring to a deeper one. I warned you that I would muddy the waters. I would be grateful if someone could help me from drowning in them.

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# Chapter 13

## Free Will and Moral Necessity in Mendelssohn

Joachim Leilich

In the recent debates on free will one distinguishes between compatibilism and incompatibilism. Compatibilists think that there is no contradiction between determinism and free will, which means that we can consider the statements “All action is determined” and “We have a free will” as being both together true. All incompatibilists share the opinion, that there is a contradiction between determinism and free will, and that therefore a determinist must refuse free will or a believer in free will must refuse determinism. That’s why incompatibilism comes in two opposite versions: Determinism or Libertarianism (as the incompatibilistic believe in free will is called nowadays). The term ‘determinism’ was not used before the nineteenth century, but as we can expect, the notion of necessity played an important role in the discussions, and it was not unusual to speak of ‘necessitarians’ to indicate the determinist’s point of view.<sup>1</sup> Determinists think that our actions are made necessary by past circumstances, and that we could not have acted otherwise. By consequence most determinists have problems with the ideas of responsibility, morality or actorship. Libertarians by contrast deny all determination of action by past circumstances.

The problem for believers in free will is, of course, that the idea of necessitation of action is quite convincing. Hobbes insisted, that there is a connection between the idea of cause, sufficiency and necessity, which is described very clearly by Harris:

For a cause of an event is by definition something sufficient to explain why the event took place when and where it did; and what is sufficient to explain an event is by definition something that necessitates that event; since if it were still possible for the event not to take place, it would be clear that the claim to sufficiency was not true.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See James A. Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity: The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 8.

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If we let aside considerations about indeterminism in microphysics or eventually chaos theory, such a view is still widely accepted, and rightly so. But widely accepted it is only if it is applied to events in mind-free nature. If it comes to intentional action, there is discussion whether human action is necessitated by sufficient causes. In action we have the possibility of choice, between alternative possibilities or between acting and omission. Choice is normally motivated. The question now is what the relation between motives and choice consists in. Bishop Bramhall, as interpreted by Hobbes, wanted that the choice was motivated, and that the motives were sufficient to explain the choice. But Bramhall also defended the view that the choice might not have been made. Such a position is not at all uncommon. Imagine you have the choice, whether you will work on an important paper or to go to the cinema. There will be reasons for both alternatives. Let us suppose you decided, as honest workaholics always do, to work on your paper, because you found the reasons to work on your paper more convincing. If action is motivated at all, these motives explain your choice. Nevertheless people often think that they could have chosen otherwise. The phrase "I could have done otherwise" is ambiguous. You can mean by it: "I could have gone to the movies, if I would have had other motives or reasons, which would have changed the course of my deliberation." If you had for example promised your wife to be free this evening and you were convinced that your paper would nevertheless be finished without a delay, even if you wouldn't work on it this evening, then surely, you could have done otherwise. But with the phrase "I could have done otherwise" you can mean something much more problematic. You could mean: "Even if my motives would incline me to work on my paper, I could have gone to the movies." In the first case changing my decision or action is only possible, if there is a change in my beliefs or motives. In the second case, motives or reasons never necessitate a choice or action because I could have acted otherwise, even without a change in my beliefs or motives.

It is this second view which provoked sharp protests from the side of Hobbes who found this position non-sensical and contradictory, because Bramhall wanted both, that the motives explain the action, but that this action, notwithstanding the motives, wasn't necessary.

Exactly at this place enters the idea of moral necessity in the discussion, an idea that Hobbes refused. The considerations which lead Bramhall to such an idea are quite understandable and Hobbes' judgement that such an idea is nonsense is quite harsh. The idea behind the concept of a moral necessity is founded on the consideration, that there is an important difference between ordinary physical causation and rationally motivated action. The basic idea is, that reasons don't necessitate in the same manner action as causes necessitate events.

Astonishingly the notion of 'moral necessity' is totally absent in philosophical dictionaries, even in the most ambitious ones, like Ritter's *Historisches Wörterbuch*. This is strange, because the notion of moral necessity is not at all unusual in the history of philosophy. The term is, as is already clear, used by Bramhall, and goes back to the school of Suarez. It played the same role as in

Bramhall in the thought of Samuel Clarke. Here is a very nice example how Clarke brings to bear ‘moral necessity’:

The Necessity, therefore, by which the power of acting follows the judgement of understanding, is only a moral necessity; that is, no necessity at all, in the sense wherein the opposers of liberty understand necessity.<sup>3</sup>

As the readers of Leibniz know, ‘moral necessity’ is in Leibniz contrasted with metaphysical and physical necessity. But we come across ‘moral necessity’ also in the work of Mendelssohn. In the fourth part of his “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” Mendelssohn discusses the principles of morals:

A being endowed with freedom can choose what pleases him from various objects or representations of objects. The basis of this satisfaction is the perfection, beauty and order that he perceives in the preferred object. By “perfection” I understand also the utility and sensuous pleasure that the object promises us since both belong to the perfections of our intrinsic or extrinsic condition. The contemplation of perfection, beauty, and order affords us pleasure, the contemplation of imperfection, ugliness, and disorder affords us displeasure. Hence, order, beauty, and perfection can yield compelling reasons by which a free being is determined in his choice. These compelling reasons do not impose any physical coercion on a free being because the latter chooses in terms of what he finds satisfying and on the basis of inner energy. At the same time, however, they bring with them a moral necessity by virtue of which it becomes impossible for the free spirit to find satisfaction in imperfections, in the ugly, and disorderly.<sup>4</sup>

This view is without any doubt strongly influenced by Leibniz and Wolff, if not simply identical with the Leibniz-Wolff view on this matter, the view that,

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<sup>3</sup>Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, cited from Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 50.

<sup>4</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 297. “Ein Wesen, das mit Freiheit begabt ist, kann aus verschiedenen Gegenständen (oder Vorstellungen der Gegenstände) wählen was ihm gefällt. Der Grund dieses Wohlgefallens ist die Vollkommenheit, Schönheit und Ordnung, die es in dem vorzuziehenden Gegenstände wahrnimmt, oder wahrzunehmen glaubt. Unter der Vollkommenheit begreife ich auch den Nutzen und das sinnliche Vergnügen, das uns der Gegenstand verspricht, denn beides gehöret zu den Vollkommenheiten unseres inneren oder äußern Zustandes. Die Betrachtung der Vollkommenheiten, Schönheit und Ordnung gewähret uns Lust, der Unvollkommenheit, Hässlichkeit und Unordnung aber Unlust; daher können Ordnung, Schönheit und . . . Vollkommenheit . . . Bewegungsgründe abgeben, dadurch ein freies Wesen in seiner Wahl bestimmt wird. Diese Bewegungsgründe legen dem freien Wesen keinen physischen Zwang auf, denn es wählet nach Wohlgefallen und aus innerer Wirksamkeit? Indessen aber führen sie eine moralische Notwendigkeit mit sich, vermöge welcher es dem freien Geiste unmöglich fällt, an den Unvollkommenheiten, dem Hässlichen und Unordentlichen Wohlgefallen zu finden,” *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1763), in vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), 267–330 (quotation from 317–18), hereafter cited as *JubA* followed by volume number, colon and page number. Recently reprinted in *Metaphysische Schriften*, ed. Wolfgang Vogt (Hamburg: Meiner, 2008), 76–77, hereafter cited as *MS*, followed by page number.

according to Jerome Schneewind, was the dominant academic orthodoxy until the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> As we see in Mendelssohn's text, the Leibniz-Wolff view is articulated in terms of perfection and imperfection. What is the relation between (im)perfection and the will? When we contemplate (or think we contemplate) perfection – or beauty and order, as Mendelssohn adds – we feel pleasure. Because representations (*Vorstellungen*) can be more or less clear and distinct, it is possible that we are mistaken and consider something as perfect if in fact it is not the case. The effect – the feeling of pleasure – remains the same. Indistinct representations give rise to sensuous desire. The soul, according to Wolff, is necessarily inclined toward whatever pleasure represents to it as good. Schneewind summarizes this Leibniz-Wolff view as follows:

Our essential striving toward perfection or good in general constitutes our will. . . . A representation of something as perfect is simply a representation that inclines us toward it. Will differs from desire only because in willing we compare amounts of perfection presented by different ideas and move toward the greatest. What finally moves our will is our reason for acting, and Wolff [and Mendelssohn] follows Leibniz in stressing that the will has no power of choice in the absence of a reason or motive [*Bewegungsgrund*]. . . . we never choose what seems to us the worse in preference to what seems the better, though, again, we may not be aware of the sensuous desires influencing us.<sup>6</sup>

In order to discuss the question what kind of necessity 'moral necessity' is (Clarke wrote that it was no necessity at all), we best have a look at Leibniz, which means that we have to enter one of the two famous labyrinths, in which human reasoning gets entangled.<sup>7</sup> In Leibniz we find 'absolute necessity' (also called 'metaphysical,' 'geometrical' or 'logical' necessity). This kind of necessity plays according to Leibniz no role in free action, which is free from coercion and from 'true' necessity.<sup>8</sup> God's creation of the best of all possible worlds was such a free action and it was not necessitated by absolute necessity. Nevertheless in the act of creation God was moved by 'moral necessity,' God's perfection makes it impossible for him to choose a lesser good, the created world must be the best of all possible worlds. In Leibniz the notion of moral necessity enters in connection with God choosing out of the possible worlds the one he will create. Once this divine decision is made, we are confronted with a world which is governed by physical laws. Here we find a third kind of necessity, 'physical' or 'hypothetical' necessity. Some authors (perhaps even Leibniz himself) sometimes confuse

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<sup>5</sup>See Jerome B. Schneewind, "The Active Powers," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 560.

<sup>6</sup>Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 562–63.

<sup>7</sup>In his *Theodicy* Leibniz mentions two labyrinths, which cause confusion; one is the problem of continuity and indivisibility, the other the 'great question' of freedom and necessity. See: G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Marsden Farrer (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 53.

<sup>8</sup>See: Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 61.

‘moral’ with ‘hypothetical’ necessity,<sup>9</sup> but Leibniz is quite clear and convincing about the relation:

This fitness of things [i.e., harmony] has also its rules and reasons, but it is the free choice of God, and not a geometrical necessity, which causes preference for what is fitting and brings it into existence. Thus one may say that physical necessity is founded on moral necessity, that is, on the wise ones choice . . .<sup>10</sup>

Of course, ‘moral necessity’ is here used in connection with God’s choices, but it can be used (and is in fact used by Leibniz and Wolff) also in connection with humans. Moral necessity is brought into play, when insight into better or worse enters reasoning, which is the case in all intentional action.

This is clear in the following reflection from Mendelssohn’s “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences”:

Consider these three propositions: first, “a stone that is not supported falls to the ground”; second, “I feel what makes an impression on my sense organs”; third, “I will not betray my friend as long as I remain in command of my senses.” These three propositions, I say, are full of indisputable certainty since the predicate may be deduced and confidently inferred from the subject under certain conditions. But this confidence itself has a varied nature. For what makes the predicate necessary is either a part of the condition of the subject, including a living knowledge of good and evil, or it is not. The former is called “moral necessity,” the latter “physical necessity.” “A stone in the open air falls to the ground” and “a sensation follows an external impression on the sense organs” are propositions that can be proven without presupposing in the subject one kind of knowledge of good and evil or another. Hence, these propositions are physically certain. The proposition, however, “I would not betray my friend” presupposes among the conditions of the subject especially this, that in accord with my pragmatic knowledge of good and evil, I must find it good not to betray my friend, and, hence, this proposition contains a moral certainty or necessity. A self-determination that can be explained by the knowledge of good and evil is voluntary, and, if this knowledge is distinct, it is a free willed decision.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>See for example Hans Poser in “Leibniz’ dreifaches Freiheitsproblem,” in *Hat der Mensch einen freien Willen? Die Antworten der großen Philosophen*, ed. Uwe an der Heiden and Helmut Schneider (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 2007), 160.

<sup>10</sup>Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 74.

<sup>11</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 286. “Diese drei Sätze, (1) ein Stein, der nicht unterstützt wird, fällt zu Boden; (2) was einen Eindruck in die Gliedmassen meiner Sinne macht, das empfinde ich; (3) ich werde meinen Freund, solange mir meine Sinne bleiben, nicht verraten, diese drei Sätze sage ich, sind alle von unstreitiger Gewissheit, denn aus dem Subjekt lässt sich unter gewissen Bedingungen das Prädikat folgern, und mit Zuverlässigkeit schließen. Aber diese Zuverlässigkeit selbst ist von verschiedener Natur. Denn entweder gehört zu den Bedingungen des Subjekts, die das Prädikat notwendig machen, auch eine lebendige Erkenntnis des Guten und des Bösen, oder nicht. Jene wird die moralische Notwendigkeit diese aber die physikalische Notwendigkeit genannt. Dass ein Stein in freier Luft zu Boden falle, . . . diese Sätze lassen sich beweisen, ohne in dem Subjekt eine oder die andere Erkenntnis des Guten und des Bösen vorauszusetzen, daher sind sie physikalisch gewiss. Dass ich aber meinen Freund nicht verraten würde, dieses setzt unter den Bedingungen des Subjekts vornehmlich dieses voraus, dass ich es nach meiner pragmatischen Erkenntnis vom Guten und Bösen notwendig gut finden muss, meinen Freund nicht zu verraten, und also enthält dieser Satz eine moralische Gewissheit oder Notwendigkeit. Eine Selbstbestimmung, die sich aus der Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen erklären lässt, ist eine willkürliche, und wenn diese Erkenntnis deutlich ist, eine freiwillige Entschliebung,” *JubA* 2:305–6; *MS* 63.

In which way are subject and predicate connected? The connection can consist by absolute (metaphysical) necessity, as it is the case with some geometrical properties, for example that the sum of the angles in a triangle amounts to  $180^\circ$ . The connection can consist by physical or hypothetical necessity, for example in the case of stones falling downward. It wouldn't be a logical contradiction, if someone would state that unsupported stones don't fall down. Here the connection depends on God's choice when he created the universe with its physical laws. Last but not least, the connection can depend on moral necessity. Friendship and the impossibility of betrayal are connected in such a way. Neither are they connected law like, nor are they connected logically, but they are connected, because the knowledge of good and evil makes it impossible to behave in another way. In the same way as God is not constrained by physical necessity, but is constrained by metaphysical necessity, human actors are not constrained by physical necessity. They are free in the same sense as God when he acts. Both desire the good, but in humans, misconceiving what is good is not unusual, as we know. (Of course there remain some important differences. Human beings are in all respects less perfect and therefore they don't always choose the best, but only what seems best to them. And, more important, God's will wasn't constrained by physical laws, because they did not yet exist when he created the universe. Human beings in striving for perfection have to take into consideration physical facts.)

How to understand the distinction between "voluntary" (willkürlich) and "free willed" (freiwillig)? "Willkürlich" means in Mendelssohn's time not more than voluntary; it doesn't have the meaning of arbitrariness, which it has in German today. But "freiwillig" is often also translated as "voluntary." Of course, one can make a difference between "will" and "free will." If we act, we have a will, which guides our behaviour. So we can't act without a will, but if there wouldn't be a difference between "will" and "free will" all actions would be free. But one could for example say, that someone who is a slave of his passions, like smokers, drug addicts or lovers, have the will to reach their goals, but that their will isn't free. But nothing in the text indicates, that Mendelssohn intends this kind of difference, because he speaks in both cases of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Knowledge of good and evil, he says, results always in a will, but only if this knowledge is distinct, there is a free will. There are according to this view surely gradations of knowledge, but only if the knowledge has a certain high grade of quality (clear and distinct), the will is free.

One of the famous Leibnizian principles, shared by Wolff and Mendelssohn, is the principle of sufficient reason (Prinzip des zureichenden Grundes). The German "Grund" fluctuates in its meaning between cause and reason, *causa* and *ratio*. This undecidedness supports a style of reasoning which never makes a clear separation between reasons for belief and causes for events. In view of action the situation becomes still more difficult, because we act on the basis of reasons. But actions are not beliefs but events. Therefore we cannot avoid the discussion whether we must understand reasons for actions (Mendelssohn's "Bewegungsgründe") in a causal manner.

But the principle of sufficient reason seems to be a danger for free will, no matter whether we read "reason" (Grund) as cause or as reason. In his essay "On

Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” Mendelssohn discusses the question, whether there is a contradiction between belief in sufficient reason and belief in free will:

Is this principle of sufficient reason universal, and does it suffer no exception in regard to the freely willed decisions of rational beings? – I want to contrast this question with another one: in the case of the freely willed decisions of rational beings, is it possible for something to be true and yet absolutely incomprehensible?<sup>12</sup>

The announced argument seems to have the following indirect form: Suppose free decisions are an exception to the principle of sufficient reason. If this would be the case than something could be true but totally incomprehensible. This last case is unimaginable. Therefore free decisions can’t be an exception to the principle of sufficient reason.

A little bit earlier in his “On Evidence,” Mendelssohn had stated:

It is absolutely impossible that a determination should be true and incomprehensible. It must be possible to discuss a true proposition on the basis of either the essence or the conditions of the subject. If neither can happen, then the proposition is indeterminate. It is, therefore, absolutely impossible and contradictory that something should be able to be determined without sufficient reason.<sup>13</sup>

There is in general a quite natural connection between comprehension and sufficient reason. When in 2009 an airplane disappeared between London and Rio de Janeiro this event must have had a cause, whether we know it or not. As long as we don’t know the cause, we don’t understand why it happened. If there wouldn’t be a sufficient reason for the event, such an event would be incomprehensible in principle. If airplanes would crash without a reason, or if under identical conditions some airplanes would crash and others not, then we could never explain and understand why it happened. Explaining is a form of understanding where we come to the insight that given certain conditions an event was inevitable. If the (presumed) cause or reason doesn’t make the event necessary (inevitable), then the event remains unexplained and uncomprehended. Therefore the principle of sufficient reason is the presupposition of all explanation and understanding of events. But the principle doesn’t only have this cognitive function (in enabling explanation and understanding why something happened), it determines the events, something happened because certain conditions were the case.

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<sup>12</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 285. “Ist dieser Satz des zureichenden Grundes allgemein, und leidet er in Ansehung der freiwilligen Entschlüssen vernünftiger Wesen keine Ausnahme? – Dieser Frage will ich eine andere entgegensetzen; kann in Ansehung der freiwilligen Entschlüssen vernünftiger Wesen etwas wahr und dennoch schlechterdings unbegreiflich sein?” *JubA* 2:304–5; *MS* 62.

<sup>13</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 285. “Es ist schlechterdings unmöglich, dass eine Bestimmung wahr und unbegreiflich sein sollte. Ein Satz, der wahr ist, muss sich entweder aus dem Wesen oder aus den Bedingungen des Subjekts erörtern lassen. Wenn beides nicht geschehen kann; so ist der Satz unbestimmt. Es ist also schlechterdings unmöglich und widersprechend, dass etwas ohne zureichenden Grund sollte bestimmt sein können,” *JubA* 2:304; *MS* 61.

(Therefore discussion is sometimes in terms of epistemic certainty, sometimes in terms of causal necessity.)

But if this is impossible [i.e., that something is true, but incomprehensible], then all the powers of the mind cannot verify something that is incomprehensible; they cannot determine something when not even an infinite intellect would be able to indicate why it is determined in one way rather than another. If, therefore, a rational being should make a decision for something and, of course, make the decision voluntary, than it must be possible, since a decision is made, for an infinite intellect, by understanding the inner state of the person making the choice, to indicate why that person decided in one way rather than another. – But do our freely willed decisions themselves have a certain future? Of course, . . .<sup>14</sup>

It will help to understand this point of view if we look at the dispute between libertarian thinkers and determinists. From a libertarian point of view human decisions and actions are never determined by such ‘inner conditions’ mentioned by Mendelssohn (where under “inner conditions” we can understand motives, desires, beliefs, etc.). “No matter how strong the motive to act in a certain way, there is always the possibility of choosing to act in a different way. No normal, healthy human agent can ever truly claim that he has to choose as he does. In the case of any choice in the past, it was possible for the agent to have chosen differently.”<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean? It means, that it is impossible, even for an infinite mind, to know which decision someone will take, even if one knows all his inner conditions. From the libertarian point of view “free decision” makes an exception to the principle of sufficient reason and decisions don’t have a “future certainty” which would follow from the agent’s motivational states. Libertarians must therefore believe in what is called today *agent-causality*, which means that agents can initiate unconditioned actions like an unmoved mover (to use Roderick Chisholm’s happy comparison). Confronted with the intuitive plausibility of the principle of sufficient reason, one could ask what the libertarian’s reasons for his point of view are.

We must distinguish between the conceptual question what ‘free will’ means, and the factual question, whether we have a free will. Libertarian thinkers share the opinion, that the principle of sufficient reason isn’t universally valid. If human decision and action would have a sufficient reason, it would be impossible to act otherwise even under unchanged conditions. Once one thinks that free will presupposes such a principle of alternative possibilities, and once one thinks that we do have free will, one must refuse the principle of sufficient reason. Saying that one could have acted otherwise under unchanged conditions, amounts to the negation of the principle of sufficient reason. The libertarian’s main reason to refute sufficient reasons

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<sup>14</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 285. “Ist aber dieses unmöglich, so können auch alle Geisterkräfte nichts wahrnehmen, das unbegreiflich ist, nichts bestimmen, davon nicht wenigstens ein unendlicher Verstand Grund anzeigen könnte, warum es vielmehr so, als anders bestimmt ist. Wenn sich also ein vernünftiges Wesen wozu entschließen, und zwar freiwillig entschließen soll, so muss, indem es sich entschließt, ein unendlicher Verstand aus seinem inneren Zustand erklären können, warum es sich vielmehr so als anders entschließt. Also haben unsere freiwillige Entschlüsse selbst ihre zukünftige Gewissheit? – Allerdings . . .” *JubA* 2:305; *MS* 62.

<sup>15</sup>Harris’ characterization of the libertarian point of view in his *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 6.



for action is the idea that a free will presupposes alternative possibilities. This is a conceptual decision. Having a free will means having alternative possibilities to act. The determinists share with the libertarians the concept of free will. Free will has for both the same meaning. But the determinist denies, what the libertarian affirms: that we have the power to act otherwise.

Mendelssohn, as is clear from his text, is neither a libertarian nor a hard determinist. But he has another concept of free will than the libertarian or determinist. Against the libertarian he defends the principle of sufficient reason, but he doesn't follow the radical determinist that this makes free will impossible. The existence of sufficient reasons and free will can be reconciled. By consequence we have to sacrifice the principle of alternative possibilities. We can act free even if our action is determined by sufficient reasons. Believing in free will, as does Mendelssohn, and believing in sufficient reason, as does Mendelssohn, means that he has to be a compatibilist: there is no contradiction between free will and determinism. What makes a will free isn't a presumed indeterminism, but the manner in which our will is determined. If our will is determined by moral necessity, which means by our insight into what is good or bad for us, then we are free.

From Mendelssohn's point of view, "inner states" determine the decision. Given those inner states (beliefs, motives) there remain no longer alternative possibilities for action. Given the states, the decision has a "certain future," which means that it is certain how the person will decide. Here Mendelssohn's reasoning is in agreement with the so-called logical-connection argument, which was propagated in the neo-Wittgensteinian action theory. From this point of view, there is no empirical connection between a person's beliefs and motives on the one hand, and his decisions and actions on the other. It is not a causal empirical hypothesis that a person who wants to arrive in Paris by train before the evening, and who thinks that she must take the train at four o'clock, will decide to take this train. Each other decision would be contradictory, because another decision would mean that the person changed its beliefs or motives. Given the "inner state" the future decision is certain.

The link between the inner states, which are sufficient reasons for decision, and the question whether a decision is comprehensible, becomes more clear, if we ask what would be the case, if such inner states wouldn't be sufficient, as the libertarians think. Libertarians want to guarantee the freedom of the will, by making decisions independent of motives and beliefs. Only the independence from motives (*Bewegungsgründe*) and beliefs makes the actor free. But a person's decisions and actions would become totally irrational or capricious if people wouldn't decide and act in accordance with their motives and beliefs. Their will wouldn't become more free, if it wouldn't be guided by the actor's reasons. Such an indifferent will would be without any orientation and unpredictable. No knowledge about a person's motives and beliefs would help to predict decision or action. But no doubt, we often have good reasons to suppose, what someone will do, if we know his "character."

In his "On Evidence," Mendelssohn repeats a probabilistic version of the argument, that it must be possible to predict action on the basis of "inner states" or



“character.” Mendelssohn had already defended such a probabilistic argument in his “Gedanken von der Wahrscheinlichkeit”:

But do our freely willed decisions themselves have a certain future? Of course, and this is not to be denied. For if they did not objectively have their certainty established, then all probability in regard to them would vanish. If there did not lie in the soul of a virtuous person the established certainty that he will not maliciously betray his fatherland, then there would also not be a basis for inferring the like with any probability from his character. What is subjectively probable, must have its established certainty objectively. Since a variety of things may reasonably be supposed about the character of a human being, our freely willed decisions must have their predetermined certainty.<sup>16</sup>

The form of the argument is quite clear, and the form is valid. If we have complaints, we have to doubt the premises: objective certainty is a necessary condition of subjective probability. We can predict future decisions/behaviour with subjective probability. Therefore it is certain in advance how someone will decide.<sup>17</sup>

A philosopher, like Mendelssohn, who has a firm believe in the principle of sufficient reason, must choose a compatibilistic position, if he wants to defend the possibility of free will. Compatibilists must argue, that the freedom of the will is guaranteed, not by the absence of determination, but by the kind of determination. The idea of a moral necessity, which is different from physical necessity, is charged with the burden to be a kind of determination, which nevertheless guarantees the freedom of the will. The expression ‘moral necessity’ disappeared today from the agenda, but not the strategy of compatibilism. Even if Mendelssohn’s thought is articulated in the style of the Leibniz-Wolff orthodoxy, its basic ideas are not at all out of fashion today.

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<sup>16</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 286. “Also haben unsere freiwillige Entschließungen selbst ihre zukünftige Gewissheit? – Allerdings, und dieses ist nicht zu leugnen; denn wenn sie nicht objektiv ihre ausgemachte Gewissheit hätten, so würde auch alle Wahrscheinlichkeit in Ansehung derselben verschwinden. Wenn in der Seele eines tugendhaften nicht die ausgemachte Gewissheit läge, dass er sein Vaterland nicht verraten wird, so wäre solches auch mit keinem Grunde der Wahrscheinlichkeit aus seinem Charakter zu schließen. Was subjektive wahrscheinlich ist, muss objektive seine ausgemachte Gewissheit haben. Da sich also aus dem Charakter eines Menschen verschiedenes mit Grunde vermuten lässt, so müssen unsere freiwillige Entschließungen allerdings ihre vorher bestimmte Gewissheit haben,” *JubA* 2:305–6; *MS* 62.

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion of Mendelssohn’s views on probability, also in connection with the problem of free will, see the contribution of Edith Dudley Sylla in the present volume.

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**Part IV**  
**Aesthetics in Historical Context**



# Chapter 14

## Mendelssohn's Theory of Mixed Sentiments

Paul Guyer

### 1 Introduction

In aesthetics, Moses Mendelssohn is famous for his theory of “mixed sentiments,” his solution to the “paradox of tragedy” discussed for decades after Jean-Baptiste Du Bos pithily stated that “the arts of poetry and painting are never more applauded, than when they are most successful in moving us to pity.”<sup>1</sup> It may seem that Mendelssohn’s theory of mixed sentiments is simply that since we can have different responses to the object or content of a representation and to the representation itself, those responses can diverge, thus a painful response to a represented object can be combined with a pleasurable response to the representation of it, with that combined response being a mix of pain and pleasure but on balance pleasurable in case the pleasure at the representation in some way outweighs the pain at the represented content, indeed in that case the pleasure at the representation may even be enhanced by the displeasure at its content – “If a few bitter drops are mixed into the honey-sweet bowl of pleasure, they enhance the taste of the pleasure and double its sweetness.”<sup>2</sup> It may also seem as if Mendelssohn arrives at the conceptual framework for his theory of mixed sentiments simply by combining the accounts of beauty that he found in the works of Christian Wolff and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the former having defined beauty as perfection sensuously cognized, thus as perfection in the object of sensory cognition, and

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* (1719), trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols. (London, 1748), 1:1.

<sup>2</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments* (1761 version), translated in Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75. I will depart from generally very reliable Dahlstrom’s translation only where I find it misleading, in which case I will use as my text Mendelssohn, *Ästhetische Schriften*, ed. Anne Pollok (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2006).

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the latter as the perfection of sensuous cognition, thus as the perfection of a sensory representation of an object. This impression can be given by Mendelssohn's 1757 essay "Considerations on the Sources and Connections of the Fine Arts and Sciences," renamed in his 1761 *Philosophical Writings* "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences" and commonly known by the latter title.<sup>3</sup> Here Mendelssohn first introduces the Wolffian definition of beauty when he says that "If the knowledge of . . . perfection is sensuous, then it is called 'beauty'" (Wolff had defined pleasure as "nothing other than an intuition of perfection"),<sup>4</sup> and goes on to give a Wolffian catalogue of the kinds of perfections that may be cognized by means of the senses:

From this it follows that everything capable of being represented to the senses as a perfection could also present an object of beauty.<sup>5</sup> Belonging here are all the perfections of external forms, that is, the lines, surfaces, and bodies and their movements and changes; the harmony of the multiple sounds and colors, the order in the parts of a whole, their similarity, variety, and harmony; their transposition and transformation into other forms; all the capabilities of our soul, all the skills of our body. Even the perfection of our external state (under which honor, comfort, and riches are to be understood) cannot be excepted from this if they are fit to be represented in a way that is apparent to the senses.<sup>6</sup>

(The division of "perfections" or goods into those of the soul, the body, and external condition has a particularly Wolffian ring to it, those being the three categories of good in Wolff's perfectionist ethics.)<sup>7</sup> But then Mendelssohn tacitly switches to Baumgarten's definition of beauty,<sup>8</sup> saying that "we have now found the universal means of pleasing our soul, namely the *sensuously perfect representation*" – this unmistakably echoes Baumgarten's definition of poetry in his 1735 *Philosophical Mediations concerning some Matters pertaining to Poetry* as "sensuously perfect discourse" (*oratio sensitiva perfecta*),<sup>9</sup> and then his generalization of this definition

<sup>3</sup>The essay was originally published as "Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften," in the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* I (Leipzig, 1757): 231–68, then revised and reprinted as "Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften" in Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Schriften* (Berlin, 1761). See *Ästhetische Schriften*, 330.

<sup>4</sup>Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, new edition (Halle, 1751), §404; reprinted in Wolff, *Metaphisica tedesca*, ed. Raffaele Ciafardone (Milan: Bompiani, 2003), 344.

<sup>5</sup>In the 1757 version, this sentence reads: "Thus every perfection that is capable of being intuitively or sensuously represented can present an object of beauty"; see Moses Mendelssohn, *Ausgewählte Werke: Studienausgabe*, ed. Christoph Schulte, Andreas Kennecke, and Gra yna Jurewicz, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), 1:175.

<sup>6</sup>Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 172.

<sup>7</sup>See Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1733; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>Anne Pollok notes that Mendelssohn's position even in the letters *On Sentiments* is "not to be interpreted as unambiguously Wolffian"; see her *Facette des Menschen: Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2010), 169.

<sup>9</sup>See Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus/Philosophische Betrachtungen über einige Bedingungen des Gedichtes*, ed. Heinz Paetzold (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983), §9, 10–11.

of poetry into a definition of beauty as “the perfection of sensuous cognition as such” (*perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis*), in his 1750 *Aesthetica*.<sup>10</sup> In the second version of his essay, Mendelssohn simply combines both the Wolffian and Baumgartian definitions, stating that “the essence of the fine arts and sciences consists in an *artistic sensuously perfect representation* or a *perfection represented through art*,”<sup>11</sup> and then uses his combination of them<sup>12</sup> to infer the premise of the theory of mixed sentiments: “This representation by art can be sensuously perfect even if, in nature, the object of the representation is neither good nor beautiful.”<sup>13</sup>

But matters are more complicated than this straightforward analysis suggests. On the one hand, although Mendelssohn could well have had both Wolff's and Baumgarten's formulas clearly in mind, he did not in fact have to add Wolff to Baumgarten in order to create conceptual space for mixed sentiments; in spite of his simple definition of beauty, which suggests that it concerns solely the character of an artistic representation, Baumgarten's detailed theory of beauty clearly distinguishes the aesthetic impact of represented content from the aesthetic impact of its representation, and indeed Baumgarten himself clearly regards the ability of his theory to open space for the beautiful representations of ugly things and thus for a complex aesthetic response as one of its chief merits: “Ugly things [*turpia*] can as such be beautifully thought and more beautiful things can be thought in an ugly way.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Mendelssohn's own theory of mixed sentiments is considerably more complex than the simple framework thus far expounded would suggest, and not all of the room for the mixture of sentiments in response to works of art is created by the straightforward distinction between represented object and representation of it. The task of this paper will thus be first to suggest the complexity of Baumgarten's own theory of artistic representation, and then to expose the even greater complexity of Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments to show how he goes beyond what is already a complex theory in Baumgarten.

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<sup>10</sup>Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, ed. Dagmar Mirbach, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007), vol.1, §14, 20–21.

<sup>11</sup>In the first version, this statement had read “*The essence of the fine arts and sciences consists in the sensuous expression of perfection*,” Mendelssohn, *Ausgewählte Werke*, 1:175. At this point, then, the first version is more purely Baumgartian than the second.

<sup>12</sup>I thus disagree with Alexander Altmann's assessment that Mendelssohn preferred a simpler, purely Wolffian formulation by Meier to Baumgarten's “less clear formulations” that stress both the “metaphysical side of the imitation of the world-whole” and the “particular form of thinking” in aesthetic representation; see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1969), 111–12; on my account, Meier accepted the complexity of Baumgarten's account even if he adopted a simpler definition of beauty, and Mendelssohn built upon the complexity of Baumgarten's position, as fully understood in practice by Meier.

<sup>13</sup>Mendelssohn, “Main Principles,” *Philosophical Writings*, 172–73. I have translated *künstlich* as “artistic” rather than as “artful” as Dahlstrom does, because in ordinary English the latter connotes something cunning or deceitful, which Mendelssohn certainly does not intend to suggest here.

<sup>14</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §18. Baumgarten's word *turpia* clearly connotes both physical and moral ugliness, that which is disgusting to the physical senses and that which is shameful to the moral sense.



## 2 Baumgarten's Own Theory of Complex Art

Had Baumgarten lived to complete the *Aesthetica*, it would be obvious that his theory of art was actually a theory of multiple perfections in both the represented content and the manner of artistic representation. This is clear from his initial division of “the beauty of sensitive cognition . . . in general” into the three dimensions of “beauty of things [or “subjects”] and thoughts” (*pulcritudo rerum et cogitationum*), the “beauty of order and disposition,” and “the beauty of designation, that is of expression and manner of speech” (*dictio et eloquutio*)<sup>15</sup> – while the former, which is the subject of the at least partially completed first part of Baumgarten’s work, the “Heuristics,” seems to concern only represented content, the latter two, which were to be covered in the unwritten “methodology” and “semiotics,”<sup>16</sup> would clearly have concerned the manner of representation. And Baumgarten clearly intended the distinction between the perfection of subject-matter on the one hand and of representation on the other to create the room for a theory of complex responses to complex works of art: it is in the course of expounding the three dimensions of sensuous perfection that Baumgarten draws the conclusion that “ugly things can be beautifully thought and more beautiful things thought in an ugly way” that has already been quoted. But Baumgarten’s recognition of the complexity of works of art and thus of at least room for complex responses to them goes even deeper than this, for even his conception of the beauty of subject-matter as presented in the “Heuristics” is complex and includes features some of which are indeed perfections of represented objects but others of which are perfections of representation.

Baumgarten did not live to complete even the first part of the *Aesthetica*, and in fact what he did complete breaks off just before his introduction of that perfection of ‘things and thoughts’ that is most obviously a perfection of sensuous representation rather than of represented content, namely *vita cognitionis aestheticae* or the “life of aesthetic cognition.” But Baumgarten’s loyal disciple Georg Friedrich Meier did complete all three parts of a German exposition of Baumgarten’s plan, one that he claimed was based almost entirely on Baumgarten’s lectures, namely his *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* (“Foundations of all the Fine Sciences”) of 1748–1754, and he did reach the category of life of aesthetic cognition. From his exposition of this perfection, we can see that what Baumgarten had in mind under this term, included in his table of contents but never reached, is nothing less than a perfection of representation that turns the audience for an artwork back to its content. Since Meier’s thought was uniformly accepted by contemporaries as a faithful rendition of that of his teacher and friend Baumgarten, it is safe to say that Mendelssohn would have taken Meier’s exposition of the life of aesthetic cognition as an authentic part of the Baumgartian theory. So let us now look at the contents of Baumgarten’s “Heuristics” as completed by Meier.

<sup>15</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§18–20.

<sup>16</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §13.

In Baumgarten's plan, the perfections of "things and thoughts" are "aesthetic wealth" (*ubertas*), "magnitude" (*magnitudo*), "truth" (*veritas*), "light" (*lux*), "certitude" (*certitudo*), and the "life of aesthetic cognition" (*vita cognitionis aestheticae*); the completed work however stops short before the last of these planned sections. In Meier's version of Baumgartian aesthetics, as expounded in his large *Anfangsgründe* and in a briefer *Betrachtungen über den ersten Grundsatz aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* ("Considerations on the first principle of all the fine arts and sciences") published in 1757 (the same year as Mendelssohn's "Main Principles"), Baumgarten's category of aesthetic "light" becomes the "liveliness and brilliance of cognition" (*Lebhaftigkeit und Glanz*), and the category of "life," while remaining the same in the *Anfangsgründe*, is tellingly replaced by that of "the touching" (*das Rührende*) in the *Betrachtungen*.<sup>17</sup> That gives us the key to what was meant by the category of "the life of aesthetic cognition," and – contrary to the usual caricature of the rationalist aesthetics of Baumgarten and Meier – places the ultimate emphasis of their analysis of beauty on the emotional impact of a work of art upon its audience.<sup>18</sup> But before we examine that category more closely, let us take a look at several of the others.

By the first category, "aesthetic wealth," Baumgarten means the "copiousness, abundance, multitudinous, treasures, and resources" (*copia, abundantia, multitudo, divitiae, opes*) of material that a work of art presents for sensitive cognition.<sup>19</sup> This might sound as if it concerns solely the content of works of art, a requirement that a work of art gives its audience "much to think about beautifully." But Baumgarten quickly makes it clear that the category of wealth comprises both richness in content and in manner of presentation:

AESTHETIC WEALTH is further either OBJECTIVE (the wealth of objects, of material), insofar as in the objects and what is to be thought itself there lies the foremost reason why the powers of the human genius [*ingenii*] can paint richly, or SUBJECTIVE (the wealth of the genius and the person), the natural possibility and the resources of certain people by means of which . . . a certain object can be richly represented [*ubertim representandi*].<sup>20</sup>

Baumgarten continues the discussion under the rubrics of "wealth of material" (119–29), which clearly concerns content, "topics" (130–41) and "enriching arguments" (142–48), which both concern the ways in which ideas are presented rather than the complexity of the ideas themselves, and then "the wealth of genius" (149–57; *ubertas ingenii*), which concerns the sufficiency of the powers of the mind of the artist to "conceive the given material richly relative to the occasion, the time, and the place" (150), or to invent appropriate ways of presenting his material. The first of these clearly concerns "objective wealth" and the latter "subjective wealth,"

<sup>17</sup>Georg Friedrich Meier, *Betrachtungen über den ersten Grundsatz aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (Halle, 1757), §22, reprinted in Georg Friedrich Meier, *Frühe Schriften zur ästhetischen Erziehung der Deutschen*, ed. Hans-Joachim Kertscher and Günter Schenk, 3 vols. (Halle: Hallescher Verlag, 2002), 3:192.

<sup>18</sup>See also Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 114.

<sup>19</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §115.

<sup>20</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §118.

that is, the former is the requirement that works of art represent sufficiently diverse or complex objects to hold our interest and the latter, as Baumgarten's word *representare* makes obvious, the requirement that they represent their content in sufficiently diverse or complex ways to hold our interest. Finally, Baumgarten concludes his discussion of "wealth" with sections on "absolute" and "relative brevity" (158–76), which argue that the artist should present the "copious and rich forests" of his subject with "only so much" means as are necessary to "make something complete with regard to the purpose that has been chosen" (158), in other words he argues that the richness of represented content must be balanced with economy in representational means. This makes clear that his notion of the "perfection of sensuous cognition" comprises "perfection" on the sides of both content and representation from the outset of his analysis, although to be sure in the section on wealth he seems to contemplate the possibility of only so to speak quantitative tension between content and representation – potential tension between richness of content and economy in representation – and not emotional or affective tension, as in the case of mixed sentiments toward the beautiful representation of something ugly or hateful.

Baumgarten's second category is "aesthetic magnitude." This is essentially his term for the sublime, and he begins his discussion with a Latin translation from Longinus, "That is truly great which always returns to our thought and consideration, which hardly and not even hardly can be banned from our soul, but which is continuously, firmly, and indelibly retained in our memory" (177). Here it sounds as if "aesthetic magnitude" concerns primarily content, "sublime things" (179; *sublimia*), and his further division of the subject into "natural" and "moral" aesthetic magnitude – which clearly anticipates Kant's later distinction between the "mathematical" and the "dynamical" sublime – also seems to concern primarily the content of art:

AESTHETIC MAGNITUDE, absolute as well as relative, is further either NATURAL, which pertains to that which is not closely connected with freedom, or MORAL, which is to be attributed to things and thoughts insofar as they are more closely connected with freedom.

Natural magnitude seems to be that which is vast or great in nature, and moral magnitude seems to concern the greatness of human actors and their intentions, thus both seem to concern greatness or sublimity in what is represented by art. But here too Baumgarten also has in mind greatness in the manner of artistic representation as well as greatness in content. Thus the passage just quoted continues to say that "if the themes that are to be found within the aesthetic horizon are richly thought, and you know how to use topics and enriching arguments, then these will also have magnitude" (181), that is, the artistic representation as well as the content will have magnitude. Indeed, the section on aesthetic magnitude began with the suggestion that magnitude is to be found in both represented content and representation – "under this name we comprehend (1) the weight and gravity of the objects, (2) the weight and gravity of the thoughts proportionate to them, and (3) the fecundity of both together" (177) – and it then goes on, as in the previous discussion of wealth, to use the contrast between 'objective' and 'subjective' in order to make

explicit that magnitude or sublimity can be found in represented content as well as in the representation of it. Baumgarten writes:

Finally AESTHETIC MAGNITUDE and hence also AESTHETIC DIGNITY . . . is either OBJECTIVE (of the objects, of the material), insofar as the foremost reason why they are to be painted with a proportionate magnitude and dignity by a beautiful genius and a beautiful heart lies in the objects and the things to be thought in connection with them, or SUBJECTIVE (of the person), concerning the natural possibilities and resources of a certain person . . . to set a given subject before our eyes with magnitude and dignity, insofar as he can do this and it is appropriate (189).

Once again, Baumgarten's conception of the perfection of sensuous cognition clearly comprises perfections on the side of both represented content and its representation, in this case sublimity of content and sublimity in the manner of representation – his illustration of the category of magnitude with passages from the *Aeneid* and *Eclogues* of Virgil makes that clear. Of course, this is a central theme of (pseudo-) Longinus's *On the Sublime*, so it is only to be expected in a discussion that begins with a quotation from that source.

Baumgarten's category of "aesthetic truth" is the requirement of *possibility* – physical and moral – in objects depicted (424–34) so that they may produce a sense of *probability* in the audience for art, "that degree of truth which, if it does not rise to complete certainty, nevertheless may contain nothing of noticeable falsehood" (483). This category thus clearly straddles the boundary between content and representation; it places certain constraints on the permissible content of art in order to ensure that the representation of the content can have a desired effect on the audience, an effect of acceptance of the content of the work even in the absence of 'logical' truth or truth proper, an effect that is in turn necessary for the emotional impact of the work. The German translator of Baumgarten's work indicates this by translating his Latin terms *probabilia* and *improbabilia* as "believable" (glaubhafte) and "unbelievable things" (485; ungläubhafte Dinge). Baumgarten's next category of "aesthetic light," by contrast, would seem to concern solely the way in which things are represented, and thus to be the first of his categories to concern solely perfection on the side of sensuous representation rather than perfection in what is sensuously represented. But even here Baumgarten stresses that "light" can be achieved by the choice of objects to be represented as well as by the manner of representing them strictly understood. He writes:

He who in thinking strives for a truer beauty and truer elegance must, in the fourth place, strive diligently for LIGHT, for the clarity and comprehensibility of all of his thoughts, but for AESTHETIC light . . . Quintilian, who recommends comprehensibility as one of the foremost virtues of eloquence . . . thus distinguishes entirely correctly between *comprehensibility in words* . . . and the *comprehensibility of things*, by means of which objects for a graceful reflection should be *accessible* and *lucid even to those who listen and attend only negligently* (614).

Aesthetic light or comprehensibility is to be achieved by the appropriate choice of distinctive objects for artistic representation as well as by the lucid presentation of them; once again the perfection of sensuous cognition comprises perfection both on the side of the represented content of art and on the side of the manner of artistic representation.

Finally, Baumgarten discusses the category of “aesthetic certitude,” which in contrast to “aesthetic truth” concerns the persuasiveness with which content is presented rather than the truth or probability of the content itself – the topics under “aesthetic certitude” include “illustrative arguments,” “comparisons,” “antithesis,” “tropes” or figures of speech, “persuasion,” “evidence,” “confirmation,” and even “blame” or criticism (*reprehensio*).<sup>21</sup> Baumgarten’s “Heuristic,” and with that the whole of his *Aesthetica* as far as it was actually completed, thus comes to its end with his accounts of the subjective rather than objective categories of “aesthetic light” and “aesthetic certitude.” So even to judge just from what Baumgarten himself left behind we would have to infer that his conception of the perfection of sensuous cognition is always a complex conception recognizing perfections on the side of both content and representation. When we turn to Meier’s continuation of Baumgarten’s plan and his own discussion of the category of aesthetic “life,” we find a category that concerns primarily the emotional effect of art – as noted, in Meier’s 1757 short presentation of his theory, the category of “life” is replaced with that of “the touching” – but nevertheless he still notices that the desired emotional impact of art can be achieved both by the proper choice of objects as well as by the proper manner of representing them. Thus in this case to the perfection of sensuous cognition really comprises perfection on the side of both objects and representations.

That Baumgarten’s categories of the perfections of sensuous cognition typically include perfections of both represented objects and their representations rather than opposing the latter to the former is suggested by the fact that his disciple Meier could use Wolff’s formula rather than Baumgarten’s while expounding Baumgarten’s categories; he begins the *First Principles* thus: “That the beautiful in general is a perfection insofar as it is indistinctly or sensuously cognized is now so well established among all thorough connoisseurs of beauty that it seems unnecessary to provide an extended proof thereof.”<sup>22</sup> After what is in spite of this a fairly extensive discussion of this definition of beauty, Meier offers a preliminary discussion of the “chief perfections” of sensuous cognition, starting with wealth, magnitude, clarity (Baumgarten’s *lux*, later in Meier’s more detailed exposition “liveliness”), and certainty. He then comes to “the final chief perfection of cognition . . . its life”: “A cognition is *living*,” he explains, “if through the intuition of a perfection or imperfection it causes gratification or vexation, desire or aversion.” Insofar as it is a sensuous cognition or cognition by means of the senses that has such an effect, then it has “aesthetic life of cognition” (*vita cognitionis aesthetica*). Such a cognition “fills the entire mind” because it occupies the “power of desire” as well as the “power of cognition”; it thus “inflames the spirits of life” and “takes possession of the heart” and for that reason Meier holds “the aesthetic life of cognition to be the greatest beauty of thoughts.” To convey the importance of the category of aesthetic life, Meier illustrates this claim

<sup>21</sup> See Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, 2:v–vi.

<sup>22</sup> Georg Friedrich Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Halle, 1754), §23.

with an extract from a poem by Albrecht von Haller, which concludes with the lines: "Certainly Heaven cannot enlarge the happiness/Of he who loves his condition and never wishes to improve it"; as the complete engagement of the two basic powers of the human mind, the power of cognition and the power of desire, aesthetic life is the perfection that completes all the other forms of beauty.<sup>23</sup>

The 100 or more pages of Meier's extended discussion of the aesthetic life of cognition begins by reiterating the preeminence of this perfection over all the other perfections comprising beauty, a preeminence based on the fact that "touching" works of art "fully move" (§179, 425) us because by "representing future good or evil" as things that can be "preserved" or "hindered" they "cause a sensory gratification or a sensory vexation *or both at the same time*."<sup>24</sup> The last remark would seem to prepare the way for a theory of mixed sentiments, but Meier does not take up that suggestion. Instead, what he emphasizes is that although the depiction of the sorts of objects that naturally produce an emotional response – "a beauty" or "an ugliness" or "hatefulness" – is a necessary condition for aesthetic life, it is not sufficient; what is further necessary to produce this effect is that the content of the work of art *be presented* in such a way that attention is focused on it for maximal emotional impact: "Whoever would think in a touching way must (1) do everything by means of which attention will be drawn entirely or preeminently to the object itself" (§181, 427). "The object must either be really sensed [würcklich empfinde] or by means of the imagination made present to the mind"; "attention must be entirely occupied with the object itself, so that one does not have time to think of anything else by means of which the intuition of the object itself might be hindered" (§181, 428), and in particular "everything must be avoided by means of which the contemplation of the object could be diverted to the contemplation of the signs and images [Zeichen und Bilder] in which the object is enveloped"; the presentation of the object must not be "symbolic" but must instead be concrete (§181, 429). Neither Baumgarten nor Meier are ordinarily thought of as prophets of the impending *Sturm und Drang* movement in literature, but the category of aesthetic life is clearly meant to argue against symbolic or allegorical poetry in favor of poetry with immediate emotional impact, paradoxically to be realized by modes of representation that draw attention away from themselves as representation to their objects. This rather subtle conception of the paramount aesthetic perfection could not be achieved unless both the sensuous cognition of perfection and the perfection of sensuous cognition were understood to be combined in beauty, no matter which formulation is chosen as its capsule definition.

As already noted, Meier did not immediately exploit the possibility of mixed emotions implicit in his remark that a representation with aesthetic life can cause gratification or vexation or both at the same time. Instead, he went on to emphasize that in order to have aesthetic life a representation must be concrete rather than symbolic and thereby draw attention away from itself to its object, which is so to

<sup>23</sup>Meier, *Anfangsgründe*, vol. 1, §35.

<sup>24</sup>Meier, *Anfangsgründe*, §180, p. 426; emphasis added.

speak the primary locus of emotional impact. In the paragraph following the one just quoted, he might seem to suggest the possibility of mixed sentiments by stating that “if one would be aesthetically moving [aesthetisch rühren], then one must see to it that the thoughts [that is, the artistic representation] always please and cause a gratification, be the object constituted as it may” (§182, 430). That certainly allows for the artistic representation of ugly or hateful objects, but in fact what Meier seems to have in mind is that our response to such objects can be made entirely pleasant by the quality of their artistic representation: “Now since the intuition of a beauty causes a sensuous gratification, one who thinks beautifully must expound thoughts that please even if he would produce aversions and paint objects worthy of aversion, thus he must always please” (§182, 432). He comes close to allowing that the response to a work of art may be emotionally mixed, but in the end seems to conclude that it must be entirely pleasurable even if the object that is depicted is in some way hateful. Thus, both Baumgarten and Meier recognize that beauty in representational art – the only type of art they consider, focused as they are on poetry and paying no attention to music – is complex, that our response to it is a combination of our response to the represented object and to the character of the representation as well, and they thus create space for a theory of mixed sentiments, but they do not really exploit that space. That development was left to Mendelssohn, so let us now turn at last to him.

### 3 Mendelssohn’s Complex Theory of Mixed Sentiments

One of the claims I began with, was that Mendelssohn did not have to synthesize the Wolffian and Baumgartian definitions of beauty in order to make room for his theory of mixed sentiments, because Baumgarten’s own exposition of his theory of beauty as the perfection of sensuous cognition recognized the contributions of both the represented object and the manner of its representation to beauty – and thus room for tension between these factors, even though, as we have now seen, neither Baumgarten nor his follower Meier seem to have occupied this space, thus leaving that for Mendelssohn. We will see shortly how Mendelssohn not only occupied this conceptual space but also made the relations between content and representation even more complex than his predecessors had done. The other claim I made, however, was that not all of Mendelssohn’s theory of mixed sentiments depends upon his understanding of the relation between content and representation. In fact, he also recognizes the complexity of our response to the object of art alone.

This is in fact the chief form of the theory of mixed sentiments that is found in the work that first established Mendelssohn’s reputation, the 1755 letters *On Sentiments*. Mendelssohn’s solution to the paradox of tragedy in this work is that our response to the artistic representation of tragic events is not simply displeasure, but sympathy, which is itself a mixed sentiment comprised of displeasure at the tragic events that befall the subject or subjects of the tragedy but also the pleasant



feeling of sympathy or compassion for the subjects, a feeling that outweighs the displeasure at the tragic events themselves but by no means entirely eliminates it, instead leaving it as the “few bitter drops” that “are mixed into the honey-sweet bowl of pleasure,” enhancing the “taste of the pleasure” and thereby increasing its sweetness without eliminating the bitterness.<sup>25</sup> Mendelssohn expounds this view in the conclusion to the letters. Here he argues against Du Bos, who in his view had incorrectly lumped together our pleasures in all sorts of diversions and amusements, by distinguishing our admiration for the performances of tumblers and sword dancers, “in which sympathy has no part” but is instead based solely on “the skillfulness of the actions of the persons or animals involved,” from our pleasure in tragedies, which “is governed by the measure of the sympathy that they arouse in us.”<sup>26</sup> Our pleasure in tragedies cannot simply be assimilated to our pleasure in these other sorts of amusements because in those cases our pleasure is admiration for skill, something entirely positive or perfect as far as it goes, whereas in tragedies “ill-fated occurrences,” which is to say imperfections, are necessary to our pleasure, but “the imperfect, considered as imperfection, cannot possibly be gratifying.”<sup>27</sup> Mendelssohn does not discuss the kind of solution to Du Bos's paradox that David Hume, for example, was shortly to offer, that is, the theory that what we admire in a tragedy is the form of the artistic representation and especially its success in imitation, and that the energy of what would have been our aversion to tragic content entirely passes over into and augments our pleasure at these other aspects.<sup>28</sup> Instead, Mendelssohn maintains that in tragedies “sympathy is the soul of our pleasure,” and that “sympathy is the only unpleasant sentiment that we find alluring,” more precisely that sympathy is “itself a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant sentiments,” the “love for an object combined with the conception of a misfortune that befalls it.” This love in turn “rests upon perfections and must afford us gratification, and the conception of an undeserved misfortune renders the innocent object of our love all the more precious and elevates the value of its merits.” Mendelssohn's premise that imperfection as such cannot be gratifying is satisfied here by the supposition that

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<sup>25</sup>Frederick Beiser suggests that Mendelssohn's explanation of our pleasure in tragedy by the mixed nature of pity (as he translates *Mitleid*) is confined to the original 1755 edition of the letters *On Sentiment*, and is then replaced in the 1761 edition by the theory of mixed sentiments (see Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 206–17). But in the 1761 edition, Mendelssohn retains the analysis of the mixed emotion of sympathy in the letters and, as we will see, adds the contrast between object and representation to *expand* his account of mixed sentiments. Altmann notes the importance of sympathy for Mendelssohn's theory of the mixed sentiments in the 1755 letters *On Sentiment* (Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 133), and then adds that although Mendelssohn treats mixed sentiments from a “fundamentally new standpoint” in the *Rhapsody*, “he strives to maintain the older doctrine as far as possible” (134) and “in no way takes back what was said in the *Letters*” (136). This seems to me the correct assessment of the relation between the two treatments.

<sup>26</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 72.

<sup>27</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 73.

<sup>28</sup>See David Hume, “Of Tragedy” (1757), in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 216–25; esp. 219–21.



our response to a tragedy is primarily sympathy for the victim of the tragedy, or love, which is a response to a perfection and itself of course a perfection in the one who feels it, heightened by our regret for the misfortunes of the object of our love: “The love rests upon perfections and must afford us gratification, and the conception of an undeserved misfortune renders the innocent object of our love all the more precious and elevates the value of its merits.” This analysis applies in real life – “Indeed, we never feel in its full measure the sweetness of friendship until a misfortune befalls our friend and he deserves our sympathy”<sup>29</sup> – and it applies in the same way in the case of the artistic representation of misfortune to a deserving soul. This mixed yet predominantly pleasurable response of sympathy is thus not a response to the representation as such but rather to what is represented, although to be sure in the case in which the degree of misfortune represented would be unbearable “in nature” and thus overwhelm the pleasure of sympathy “the recollection that it is nothing but an artistic deception lessens our pain to some extent and leaves only as much of it as is necessary to lend our love the proper fullness.”<sup>30</sup> But this concession, in the closing words of *On Sentiments*, does not make the artistic representation itself a positive source of pleasure in the mixed sentiment of it; sympathy rather treats awareness of the artistic representation more like an enabling condition for the operation of sympathy. Mendelssohn’s basic idea here remains that sympathy toward the object represented by a tragedy is itself a mixed sentiment, thus that the content of the work of art alone can produce mixed sentiments.

However, in the “Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences,” first published in 1757 under its previous title (thus published the same year as Hume’s essay “Of Tragedy”) and in the *Rhapsody or additions to the letters on sentiments*, added to his 1761 *Philosophical Writings*, Mendelssohn makes it clear that our response to the artistic representation as such can add to our response to the content of such representation to produce mixed sentiments, and indeed makes it clear that the factors involved in our response to works of art are even more complex than Baumgarten and Meier recognized, thus that the room for mixed sentiments is even greater than their theory allowed. Although the “Main Principles” was originally published 4 years prior to the *Philosophical Writings* with the new *Rhapsody*, Mendelssohn both revised it for the republication and placed it after rather than before the *Rhapsody* in the volume. In light of these circumstances, it will make sense to treat these two texts together rather than separately. When we do, a complex theory of the aesthetic effects of both artistic content and artistic representation emerges.

Mendelssohn’s theory begins with a contrast between real objects and their representations in the minds of viewers, not with the contrast between objects and artistic representations of them. Thus he begins the *Rhapsody* with the examples of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and of battlefields, and observes that even though we of course prefer that bad fortune should not occur, “once the evil has occurred . . .

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<sup>29</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 74.

<sup>30</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 75.

then we are powerfully attracted to the representation of it and long to acquire that representation," because

each individual representation stands in a twofold relation, on one side to the matter as its object, of which it is a picture or a copy, and on the other to the soul, or the thinking subject, of which it constitutes a determination. As a determination of the soul many a representation can have something agreeable about it, although as a picture of the object it is accompanied by disapprobation and a feeling of repulsion. We must therefore take care not to mix these two relations, the objective and subjective, or confuse them with one another.<sup>31</sup>

Here Mendelssohn is not talking about an artistic representation of the destruction wrought by the earthquake or battle, such as a poem or a painting of it, but of mental representation itself, and arguing that this can be agreeable even when its object is not. This is because the act of representation itself is an "affirmative predicate of the thinking entity" and thus "must have something about it that we like." In particular, Mendelssohn, here clearly echoing Meier, argues that "a picture within us . . . engages the soul's capacity of knowing and desiring"; his theory is then that the mental activity of representing any object is a satisfying exercise of our capacities for cognition, and that *either* approving or disapproving of an object can be a satisfying exercise of our capacity for desire or conation. Thus, "we cannot perceive a good object without approving it, without feeling inside a certain enjoyment of it, nor can we perceive an evil action without disapproving of the action itself and being disgusted by it," but nevertheless "the cognition of an evil action and the disapprobation of it are affirmative features of the soul, expressions of the mental powers of knowing and desiring, and elements of perfection which, in this connection must necessarily arouse pleasure and gratification."<sup>32</sup> Of course, our displeasure at the object itself is not completely effaced by our pleasure in the activity of representing it and our so to speak second-order pleasure at our own disapprobation of it, so "the imperfect, evil, and deficient always arouse a mixed feeling that is composed of an element of dissatisfaction with the object and satisfaction with the representation of it." Thus the possibility of mixed sentiments arises from the difference between object and representation as well as from the previously observed mixed character of the specific sentiment of sympathy.

As already noted, Mendelssohn's claim that we can have a negative response to the object of a representation while having a positive response to the representation itself is a general claim about mental representation, not a claim about artistic representation. But he next argues that artistic representation can be a way of enabling us to enjoy the mental representation of something unpleasant by making us aware of the difference between the mental representation of an object and the object itself, something that we might otherwise, indeed perhaps ordinarily overlook. In a passage that could have been included in Edward Bullough's famous paper on "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art" a century

<sup>31</sup>Mendelssohn, *Rhapsody or Additions to the Letters on Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 131–32; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 143.

<sup>32</sup>Mendelssohn, *Rhapsody, Philosophical Writings*, 133–34; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 145.

and a half later,<sup>33</sup> Mendelssohn argues that a certain amount of detachment from an unpleasant object is a necessary condition for our being able to enjoy the representation of it and thus for having a mixed but overall pleasurable experience of it:

Considered as a whole, such a representation will be agreeable or disagreeable depending upon whether the relation to the object or to oneself is weightier, becomes the dominant relation, and obscures or even suppresses the other. If the object gets too close to us, if we regard it as part of us or even as ourselves, then what is agreeable in the representation completely disappears, and the relation to the subject immediately becomes an unpleasant relation to oneself since here subject and object as it were collapse into one another: hence the representation will have nothing agreeable about it, but will simply be painful.<sup>34</sup>

Mendelssohn then argues that *artistic* representations, as “imitations,” are a good way to maintain the necessary degree of detachment for the enjoyment of mixed sentiments because while putting objects before us vividly enough for our capacities for knowing and desiring to become engaged, they also bring to mind the difference between object and representation precisely because we are aware that they are imitations. Sometimes we can separate “the relation to oneself from the relation to the object” by mere power of thought, but

another means of rendering the most terrible occurrences agreeable to tender minds is the imitation by art, on the stage, on canvas, and in marble, since an inner consciousness that we have before our eyes an imitation and not truth moderates the strength of the objective abhorrence and as it were elevates the subjective side of the representation. It is true that the soul’s powers of sensuous cognition and desire are deceived by art and the imagination is so carried away that we sometimes forget all signs of imitation, and fancy that we are seeing genuine nature. But this magic lasts only so long as is necessary to give our concept of the object the requisite life and fire. For our greatest satisfaction, we have accustomed ourselves to divert our attention from everything that could disturb the deception and to direct it only to that which sustains it. But as soon as the relation to the object begins to become disagreeable, then a thousand factors strike our eye to remind us that we are seeing a mere imitation. Added to this is the fact that the manifold beauties with which art adorns the representation strengthen the agreeable sentiment and help moderate the disagreeable relation to the object.<sup>35</sup>

There is a great deal going on in this passage. First, using the word “life” (Leben) in what seems like a clear allusion to Baumgarten’s and Meier’s concept of the “life of aesthetic cognition,” Mendelssohn supposes that a certain initial moment of deception by an artistic imitation is necessary to trigger our emotional involvement with the work and its object at all. But then he argues that our awareness that the work of art is merely an imitation, which is inevitably triggered by our awareness that the media of art – stage, canvas, marble – are not so to speak the media of real life, is necessary for us to maintain the proper detachment from the represented object and our natural emotional response to that which are requisite for our enjoyment of the

<sup>33</sup>Edward Bullough, “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Æsthetic Principle,” *British Journal of Psychology* V (1912): 87–118, reprinted in Bullough, *Æsthetics: Lectures and Essays*, ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 91–130.

<sup>34</sup>Mendelssohn, *Rhapsody, Philosophical Writings*, 134; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 145–46.

<sup>35</sup>Mendelssohn, *Rhapsody, Philosophical Writings*, 138; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 150.

activities of representing and judging, which are in turn necessary to turn a disagreeable response to a real object into a mixed but predominantly agreeable response to our own representation of it.<sup>36</sup> Thus, artistic representation serves as the means to the enjoyment of the mind's own representational activity. I emphasize the instrumental role of artistic imitation on Mendelssohn's account because this is a difference from the standard account of imitation as an intrinsic perfection of art, enjoyed for its own sake rather than as the means to the enjoyment of another mental state like that of mixed sentiments, that we find in for example Wolff or Francis Hutcheson.<sup>37</sup> However, the instrumental role of imitation for the enjoyment of mixed sentiments does not preclude our immediate enjoyment of other aspects or beauties of works of art, as the final sentence of our passage suggests; thus our pleasure in the formal and material aspects of works of art can add to our overall enjoyment of them, and thereby contribute further to the mixed sentiments that we can have in response to the artistic representation of a tragic or otherwise unfortunate subject.

Mendelssohn also emphasizes the contributions of the manifold beauties of the artistic representation to mixed sentiments in his discussion of this topic in the "Main Principles," but there also explicitly affirms the more traditional view that a good imitation is a perfection enjoyed in its own right as well as his own view that our awareness that a work of art is an imitation is an enabling condition for the detachment, or even better the subtle combination of deception and detachment, that is itself a necessary condition for mixed sentiments. He alludes to his account of the role of imitation in the *Rhapsody* when he says that "it was further shown there that through the artistic representation what is disagreeable in the object is moderated and what is agreeable in it as it were elevated" because many "attendant circumstances . . . remind us in good time that we do not see nature itself."<sup>38</sup> But he then

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<sup>36</sup>In recent aesthetics, Richard Wollheim argued that "twofoldness" or awareness of both the medium and what it represents and expresses *at the same time* is a characteristic feature of aesthetic experience. Wollheim developed this thesis particularly with reference to his favorite art of painting, but Mendelssohn's example shows that it applies to other arts, such as drama, as well. See Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 21.

<sup>37</sup>Wolff offers imitation as his first illustration of the pleasure in the sensuous perception of perfection: "If I see a painting that is similar to the object that it is to represent, and consider its similarity, then I have a pleasure therein. Now the perfection of a painting consists in the similarity. For a painting is nothing other than the representation of a certain object on a tablet or flat surface; so everything in it is harmonious" – the criterion of perfection – "when nothing can be discerned in it that one does not also perceive in the object itself" (Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken über Gott, der Welt, und der Seele des Menschen*, § 404, 344). Hutcheson treats "Imitation of some Original" as an instance of the general source of beauty, uniformity amidst variety, because such imitation is "a Conformity, or a kind of Unity between the Original and the Copy" (Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, First Treatise, section 4, §1; in the edition by Wolfgang Leidhold [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004], 42.). In both cases, the supposition is that the relation in which imitation consists is enjoyed in its own right, as a perfection, not that it is the means to the enjoyment of a further mental state like that of Mendelssohn's mixed sentiments.

<sup>38</sup>Mendelssohn, "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences," *Philosophical Writings*, 173; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 193.

accompanies this account of the role of imitation that points forward to Bullough's conception of aesthetic distance with a look back to Wolff's account of imitation as a perfection in its own right, one our enjoyment of which can thus be directly added to our sentiment in response to the object rather than being merely an instrument for our reflection on our own mental representation and the attendant enjoyment of that. Thus he writes that "all the parts of a correct imitation harmonize with the common final purpose of faithfully representing a certain archetype; hence every imitation in and for itself already brings with it the concept of a perfection, and if our senses can perceive the similarity, then it is capable of arousing an agreeable sentiment."<sup>39</sup> Thus Mendelssohn has now recognized three distinct sources that can contribute to mixed sentiments: our response to "nature" or the represented object itself; our response to our own mental representation of it, our separate attention to which may be facilitated by our awareness of an artistic representation; and our response to imitation as a perfection of art in its own right, along with other, unspecified beauties of works of art. Here we may think of Mendelssohn as working within the framework of the basic contrast between "objective" and "subjective" categories of beauty established by Baumgarten, but as having inserted into this two-part model the further category of mental representation itself, and of then having recognized that the imitative character of artistic representation is a means to the sufficiently detached enjoyment of our own mental representation as well as an object of our enjoyment in its own right, thus that both of these kinds of enjoyment can combine with our response to the represented object itself.

But Mendelssohn's account of the multiple sources of mixed sentiments does not stop there. In what is no doubt a nod to the eighteenth-century emphasis on artistic genius, incorporated even into Baumgarten's treatise as the concept of aesthetic *ingenium*, Mendelssohn adds our admiration of the artist's skill to our already complex enjoyment of the imitations that such skill produces:

Added to this in the imitations of art is the artist's perfection that we perceive<sup>40</sup> in them; for all works of art are visible imprints of the abilities of the artist, which, so to speak, offer his entire soul for our intuitive cognition. This perfection of the spirit arouses an uncommonly greater gratification than the mere similarity because it is worthier and far more complex than that.<sup>41</sup>

Mendelssohn illustrates this point by saying that "we find more to admire in a rose painted by Huysum than in a river's reflected image of this queen of the flowers"; we find more to admire in human skill than in the accuracy of a reflection considered by itself. Of course, in a theological mood we can consider anything in nature a far greater work of art than any human work, produced by a far greater artist than any human artist, and from this point of view "the gratification that we take in the beauties of nature itself is inflamed to the point of ecstasy by the reference to the infinite

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<sup>39</sup>Mendelssohn, "Main Principles," *Philosophical Writings*, 174; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 194.

<sup>40</sup>In the first version of the essay Mendelssohn wrote "admire" (*bewundern*) rather than "perceive" (*wahrnehmen*). The other change in the second version of this paragraph is the insertion of the comment that the abilities of the artist "offer his entire soul for our intuitive cognition."

<sup>41</sup>Mendelssohn, "Main Principles," *Philosophical Writings*, 174; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 195.

perfection of the master who produced them." But whatever our own theological predilections, we do not have to follow Mendelssohn here, because now he is not talking about our mixed sentiments in response to works of human art.<sup>42</sup>

One more source of pleasure in Mendelssohn's account of our complex response to art that should be mentioned, however, is his emphasis on the physiological dimension of the reception of art, his theory that the perception of art is an "affirmative predicate" of the *soul* but also of the *body*. Mendelssohn already emphasized this aspect of the perception of art in the letters *On Sentiments* before returning to it on the *Rhapsody*, so it cannot be considered only a response to Edmund Burke's 1757 *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, which had such a large impact on Mendelssohn when it came out.<sup>43</sup> In the sixth letter in *On Sentiments*, Mendelssohn merely distinguishes "pure pleasure" as "delight that arises in the soul in the act of intuitively knowing the completeness of some perfection" from what "transpires meanwhile in the body."<sup>44</sup> He returns to the bodily dimension of pleasure in the tenth through twelfth letters, however, and there ultimately argues that art draws upon bodily as well as mental response as a source of pleasure.<sup>45</sup> In the tenth letter, he uses the pleasurable awareness of one's own bodily state as an illustration of the conception of pleasure as the indistinct perception of perfection: in such a state, the soul "will become aware of what condition is more comfortable for its true spouse, its body". "But the soul will never be able to oversee distinctly and lucidly the astonishing intermingling of vessels and their diverse tensions," so "it will feel an improvement, a transition to a perfection, but it will grasp only in an obscure way how this improvement arose"; thus it will "arrive at an *indistinct but lively representation of the perfection of its body*, ground enough for explaining the origin of a gratification on our theory."<sup>46</sup> Here pleasure in our bodily condition is just an example of pleasure as clear but indistinct perception of

<sup>42</sup>Mendelssohn, "Main Principles," *Philosophical Writings*, 174–75; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 195.

<sup>43</sup>Ursula Goldenbaum has argued for the importance of Spinoza's "doctrine of affects" in the genesis of Mendelssohn's theory of the bodily effect of aesthetic perception; see for example "Mendelssohns Einsteig in die schönen Wissenschaften: Zu einer ästhetischen Rezeption Spinozas," in *Philosophie und die Belles-Lettres*, eds. Martin Fontius and Werner Schneiders (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1997), 71–76. Spinoza may well be considered a source for Mendelssohn's emphasis on the bodily as well as intellectual aspect of aesthetic response. But as Anne Pollok has noted, Spinoza's conception of the mind-body relation is that of a "parallelism," whereas, as we will see, Mendelssohn proposes a genuine interaction between them, alien to all the heirs of Descartes, even Spinoza; see Pollok, *Facetten des Menschen*, 159. As Pollok further puts it, Mendelssohn attempts to move beyond "a manner of argumentation deriving solely from the rationalist tradition through an integration of corporeal and emotional needs [toward] a more complete image of *human gratification*," 172.

<sup>44</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments*, *Philosophical Writings*, 29.

<sup>45</sup>Alexander Altmann argued that Mendelssohn graded the cognitive and bodily aspects of pleasure on a scale of degree of pleasure (see Altmann, *Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 107). I will ignore that refinement here.

<sup>46</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments*, *Philosophical Writings*, 47. In the 1761 edition, the words "indistinct but lively" (undeutliche aber lebhafte) replaced the first edition's word "obscure" (*Ästhetische Schriften*, 47; dunkele).

a perfection. In the eleventh letter, however, Mendelssohn lists the “improved state of our bodily condition” as one of the three sources of pleasure on which the fine arts draw along with “beauty” and “intellectual perfection,” that is, the perfections of artistic representations and the perfections of represented content: “How the muses must rejuvenate us, they who draw upon diverse sources in full measure and pour them over us in pleasant combination.”<sup>47</sup> Here Mendelssohn’s suggestion seems to be that the formal characteristics of a work of art, for example “simple proportions within oscillations,” have an immediate beneficial effect on the body that directly contributes to our overall favorable response to an object, and thus can add pleasure to our response to an object even if our direct response to the object would not be pleasurable; the bodily response to art thus is a further source of mixed sentiments. In the twelfth letter, finally, Mendelssohn stresses that the sensuous representation of a perfection actually improves the condition of the body and is not just the perception of the improved condition of the body. Thus the pleasures of representation as a mental state and those of the body reinforce one another<sup>48</sup>: “If now it is further true that each sensuous rapture [*Wollust*], each improved state of our bodily condition, fills the soul with the sensuous representation of a perfection, then every sensuous representation must also in turn bring with it some well-being of the body, a kind of sensuous rapture.”<sup>49</sup> And he reiterates this point in the *Rhapsody*: “Harmonious sentiments in the soul correspond to harmonious movements in the limbs and the senses. In a state of sensuous rapture, the entire neural structure is set in motion, and since this is the case, the entire basis of the soul, the entire system of sentiments and obscure feelings, must be moved and put into a harmonious play.”<sup>50</sup> This last remark is notable, because this is the first time that Mendelssohn introduces the word “play” into his account of aesthetic response, thus pointing the way toward Kant. But in striking difference from Kant, he does so in the course of emphasizing the bodily as well as mental impact of art, not limiting himself to the free play of cognitive faculties alone.

In sum, then, Mendelssohn develops the contrast between “objective” and “subjective” perfections that he found in Baumgarten into his theory of mixed sentiments, a phenomenon for which Baumgarten made room but did not explicitly recognize, but he considerably amplifies it along the way. First, he notices that our response to tragic objects, sympathy, is itself a mixed sentiment even before we take into account the mixture that can be caused by the beautiful representation of unpleasant objects. Second, he makes the first source of pleasure beyond our response to the object our response to our own mental state of representation as an “affirmative predicate” of the soul, or more precisely to our own mental states of

<sup>47</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 48.

<sup>48</sup>Pollok describes Mendelssohn’s overall conception of aesthetic response as a *dynamisches Zusammenspiel* between mere gratification, including its bodily aspects, and intelligible perfection (*Facetten des Menschen*, 177).

<sup>49</sup>Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments, Philosophical Writings*, 53.

<sup>50</sup>Mendelssohn, *Rhapsody, Philosophical Writings*, 140; *Ästhetische Schriften*, 152–53.



cognizing and desiring as affirmative predicates of the soul. He then introduces imitative works of art as means to achieving the distance between object and mental representation that we need to enjoy the latter, which seems to be a genuine innovation on his part, as well as recognizing that imitation is a perfection that can be enjoyed in its own right along with the other perfections of art. Fourth, he adds that we can admire the human skill manifested in a work of art as well as enjoying the work itself. And fifth, he stresses the pleasure that we can take in the effect of art on our own bodies as well as on our minds. Mendelssohn thus analyzes a multitude of ways in which art can offer pleasures to compensate for our itself mixed response to tragic or otherwise disagreeable contents, although the sheer fact that there are multiple sources of pleasure in art beside its content does not guarantee that our pleasure in a work of art will always outweigh any element of displeasure in our response to its content – for that, proper distance to that content must be possible, and the quality of the work of art will be one factor in making that distance possible, but only one – our own cultivation and refinement may be necessary as well. This complex account of the multiple sources of aesthetic response to art may well be a more subtle account than had been achieved in aesthetic theory prior to Mendelssohn or has been achieved since.

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## Chapter 15

# The Eighteenth-Century Rehabilitation of Sensitive Knowledge and the Birth of Aesthetics: Wolff, Baumgarten and Mendelssohn

Luigi Cataldi Madonna

The seventeenth century practically annulled the cognitive value of sensitive knowledge. It could not have been otherwise: its results seemed to contrast markedly with new philosophical-scientific thought. Only intellectual knowledge freed from the fallacies of sense perception seemed to make access to reality possible and so mental experience banished sensitive experience from the realm of science. *Oculus mentis* obscured *oculus corporis*. Descartes' *cogito* – a paradigm for this conception – was reached by disposing of sensitive knowledge and insisted on intellectual knowledge as the only way of determining the true structure of reality.

In seventeenth- to eighteenth-century rationally oriented philosophy – from Descartes to Lambert<sup>1</sup> – sensation could at best function as an “occasion,” serving as the fuse that ignites intellectual knowledge, yet has no power to determine its formation. Christian Thomasius, an outstanding German Enlightenment “empiricist” – also held that ideas could only be occasioned by the senses: “durch die Sensionem gleichsam nur aufgeweckt.”<sup>2</sup> The term “occasion” became a technical term used to indicate the psychic origin of ideas, but not their basis.

Given this context, John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* undoubtedly represented a break with this tradition of thought and stimulated it to

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References to the works of Christian Wolff and Moses Mendelssohn are based on the following editions: Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962–), henceforth *GW*; Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–, Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), henceforth *JubA*.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. my book *La filosofia della probabilità. Dalla Logique di Port-Royal a Kant* (Roma: Cadmo, 1988), 103–4.

<sup>2</sup>C. Thomasius, *Einleitung zur Vernunftlehre* (Halle, 1691; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 10, § 64. This conception alone shows that Thomasius's “empiricism” has been overestimated by historiography.

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rethink its ideas concerning nature and the function of sensitive knowledge. The concept that Leibniz clarifies in his imaginary dialogue with Locke in *Nouveaux Essais* is already a significant example of this change in direction. Sensations continue to function prevalently as a stimulus, but Leibniz holds that they play an indispensable role in the construction of thoughts. He makes a clear distinction between ideas and thoughts: the idea is the ontological object, while a thought is a real act – inseparable from sensation – by means of which one represents this object to oneself. Each thought corresponds “*toujours à quelque sensation,*” and in fact “*nous ne sommes jamais sans pensées, et aussi jamais sans sensation.*”<sup>3</sup> Thinking an idea can occur only with the contribution of sensibility. In other words Leibniz distinguishes between context of discovery and context of justification: thoughts without sensations do not exist, but they cannot justify the validity of ideas. However, *Nouveaux Essais* was not published until 1765 and cannot have influenced this process of rehabilitation.

Nevertheless it is precisely Leibniz’s example that counsels against exaggerating Locke’s role in this matter: it is merely a successful graft on a young but fully developed plant. The rehabilitation of sensitive knowledge is an outgrowth of the new paradigm that was in the process of formation and cannot be attributed to the work of any individual philosopher. Before Locke, the debate on the nature of ideas that took place around the second half of the seventeenth century produced a change in perspective: there was a shift from a perspective oriented more in the metaphysical-epistemological direction to one oriented more in the methodological-functionalistic sense, which – mindful of the difficulty involved in resolving the problem of the origin of ideas<sup>4</sup> – aimed primarily to formulate a critical theory of experience. Knowledge of their origin became progressively less interesting, while attention was focused on the problem of how they function. For Christian Wolff, knowledge of the way ideas function and combine with one another does not require knowledge of their origin, just as knowledge of the structure of the hand does not help to understand how it works: “*Es dienet auch nicht die Entscheidung dieser Frage [i.e., the origin of concepts] zu unserem gegenwärtigen Vorhaben. Denn wir können die Begriffe der äusserlichen Dinge erlangen, und daraus von ihnen sicher urtheilen, wenn wir gleich nicht wissen, wo sie herkommen: gleichwie wir die Hand zu allerhand Verrichtungen gebrauchen können, ob wir gleich nicht wissen, wie sie von innen beschaffen ist, und die zu ihnen erforderete Bewegungen hervorbringen kann.*”<sup>5</sup> The German Enlightenment perhaps better represents the change taking place in the conception of sensitive knowledge than concurrent enlightenment movements do. Considering the examples of Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Moses Mendelssohn, we witness a gradual, but radical rehabilitation of sensitive

<sup>3</sup>G.W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais*, in *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin, 1875–1890, repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1978), vol. 5, bk. 2, ch. 1, § 23, 108.

<sup>4</sup>“*La question célèbre, si toutes nos idées viennent des nos sens, est difficile à résoudre,*” wrote Edme Mariotte in *Essai de Logique* (1678), in *Oeuvres de Mr. Mariotte*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1717), 694.

<sup>5</sup>Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes und ihrem richtigen Gebrauch im Erkenntnis der Wahrheit*, GW 1.1, ch. 1, § 6.

knowledge, which each of these authors promoted with many reciprocal affinities and important individual contributions.

This rehabilitation is evidence of the gradual transition from the platonizing conception of seventeenth-century science to a form of critical Aristotelism, more sensitive than scholastic Aristotelism to the real needs of science and closer to the new image of the world. It is based primarily on four points: (1) Sensibility is needed for the production and formation of concepts; this and only this can furnish material – albeit roughly worked – to the workshop of the intellect. (2) Sensibility is the only way we have to ascertain our existence and that of the external world. (3) Sensitive knowledge is autonomous and is the equal of rational knowledge. (4) Beauty is the exclusive domain of sensitive knowledge, the only form of knowledge capable of grasping the metaphysical truth of singulars, a truth that is denied to intellectual knowledge. The rehabilitation of sensitive knowledge was therefore propaedeutic to the birth of modern aesthetics. In the next three sections, devoted in successive order to these three authors, we will attempt to explore in greater detail the four aspects that were the basis of this rehabilitation process.

## 1 Christian Wolff

One of the distinctive traits of the philosophy of Christian Wolff – who thanks to Kant became the dogmatic rationalist par excellence – is the radical nature of its empiricist theses. Many of Wolff's ideas are assimilable to those of John Locke, although empiricism would be a restrictive characterization for both. In a letter to Leibniz written in 1705, Wolff lists Locke as one of the sources of his *philosophia rationalis* and references to Locke often appear at crucial points in his work.<sup>6</sup> But – similarly to Leibniz – his debt to Locke should not make us forget the endogenous nature of the Wolffian conception of sensitive knowledge, which, as we will see, is organic to his metaphysics and epistemology.

According to Wolff, there are two kinds of perceptions: those produced by something outside us (“*ausser uns*”) on our sense organs – more correctly called sensations – and those which are instead produced by something “*in uns*,” i.e., by changes of our internal sense.<sup>7</sup> Although he recognizes that sensations derive from modifications produced by external objects on our sense organs, Wolff does not attribute them only to the body. For a sensation to be produced two things are needed: (1) a modification of our sense organs, and (2) consciousness of the cause of this modification.

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<sup>6</sup>On this question, see D. Poggi, “L'Essay di John Locke e la *Psychologia empirica* di Christian Wolff,” in *Christian Wolff tra psicologia empirica e psicologia razionale*, 2007 edition, ed. F. L. Marcolungo (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962–); *GW* 3.106:63–94.

<sup>7</sup>*Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, *GW* 1.2, § 220. On the problem of sensations in Wolff, see M. Mei, “Sensazioni e *ideae sensuales* nella filosofia di Christian Wolff,” in Marcolungo, *Christian Wolff tra psicologia empirica e psicologia razionale*, *GW* 3.106:95–112.

Wolff also calls them “die Gedancken der Seele.”<sup>8</sup> Sensations, belonging to the force represented by the soul, are not only passions but also, and primarily, “Thaten der Seele” that are harmonized with the body.<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation of sensations as actions constitutes an important reorientation of Lockean empiricism, and brings together in an original way questions raised by Locke with questions that were raised by Leibniz – especially ones related to the activity of monads. It is consistent with Wolff’s conception of the faculties, which are not distinguished on the basis of their passive or spontaneous nature (as was later done by Kant in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*) but are understood in terms of a gradual scale that goes from the obscure to the distinct,<sup>10</sup> whose opposite limits always express a more or less accentuated degree of passivity and of spontaneity. The brain is represented as a “Werckstat,” a workshop for processing empirical material.<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, raw material, yet it always possesses some degree – no matter how minimal and confused – of elaboration. In forming its concepts, the intellect can make use of only two providers: *oculus corporis* and *oculus mentis*<sup>12</sup> – the eye of external and the eye of internal sense.<sup>13</sup> There is no other way of obtaining the material for Wolffian conceptuality. Contents always derive from experience,<sup>14</sup> reason concerns only the possible connections between these contents: “*Ratio est facultas nexum veritatum universalium intuenti seu perspicendi.*”<sup>15</sup>

For Wolff pure sensations and experiences do not exist because both are always the result of hypothetical interpretations: “Was die Erfahrung zeigt, ist unstreitig: die Erklärung wie dasselbe zugehet, ist eine *Hypothesis.*”<sup>16</sup> Just as we can establish the partial spontaneity of sensations, we also re-establish a certain passivity in the status of reason when it performs its fundamental task of intuiting the nexus between truths.

Wolff saw the sensations as the *primum* of cognitive activity:

So werden wir finden, daß nicht allein alle Einbildungen, sondern auch die allgemeinen Begriffe von den Empfindungen ihren Ursprung nehmen. Da nun die Empfindungen zu der anschauenden Erkänntniß gehören; so nimmet alles unser Nachdencken von der anschauenden Erkänntniß ihren Anfang. Ehe wir demnach auf eine Sache zu dencken gebracht werden, müssen wir einen Grund davon in unsern Empfindungen finden: und dieses findet man auch in allen geometrischen Beweisen, da man jederzeit aus dem Anschauen der Figuren etwas annimmet, welches zum Anfang der Gedancken dienet.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 222.

<sup>9</sup> GW 1.2, § 818.

<sup>10</sup> GW 1.2, §§ 278–79.

<sup>11</sup> *Physiologie*, GW 1.8, § 165.

<sup>12</sup> *Philosophia rationalis sive Logica*, GW 2.2–3, § 146.

<sup>13</sup> GW 2.2–3, §§ 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> “In philosophia itaque principia ab experientia derivando, quae demonstrantur experimentis ac observationibus confirmanda & cognitioni mathematicae una opera danda est,” *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*, GW 2.1.1, § 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 483.

<sup>16</sup> *Anmerkungen über die vernünfftigen Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.3, § 168.

<sup>17</sup> *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 846.

Therefore sensations are no longer an occasion but instead become the “Gründe” of thought. Intuitive knowledge, which comprises sensitive knowledge, constitutes the starting point and the precondition for thought, even in the case of geometric proofs. For the same reason, the formation of any sort of judgement of reflection (“Nach-Urtheil”) must always have a basis in an intuitive judgement, which precisely for this reason Wolff also calls “Grund-Urtheil.”<sup>18</sup>

No knowledge is possible unless we start from external sensations and/or internal ones; and these always represent states of individual things. It is not possible for a human being to know without using our senses; it is not possible to have an intellectual intuition, in other words one exempt from all sensation and/or imagination. Our intellect is as limited with regard to its objects – possible things – as it is with regard to the way these are represented.<sup>19</sup> Pure intellect is an attribute only of God, who has no body and is therefore without imagination and sensation.<sup>20</sup>

The question of sensibility demonstrates Wolffian philosophy’s strong realistic leanings. It is defined as “*facultas percipiendi objecta externa mutationem organisi sensoris qua talibus inducentis, convenienter mutazioni in organo facta.*”<sup>21</sup> It is from these alterations that sensations ensue,<sup>22</sup> and Wolff sees them as a particular type of ideas – sensual ideas that represent the real state of the world<sup>23</sup>: “*ideae rerum materialium praesentium.*”<sup>24</sup> But there is more to the field of intuitive knowledge than sensations. Images<sup>25</sup> and the visions of the intellect (internal perceptions produced by changes of soul) also belong to it. Intuitive knowledge only concerns singulars, while to know universals our intellect *always* has recourse to symbolic knowledge.

The referentiality of sensations is guaranteed by necessity and involuntariness. When we activate any one of our sense organs – provided, of course, that it is healthy – we cannot voluntarily escape from the sensations ensue: “*id patet unicuique ab obviam quoque momento experientiam attendenti.*”<sup>26</sup> There is nothing in them that we can change, sensations must be accepted willy-nilly: “*sondern wir müssen sie annehmen, wie sie kommen,*”<sup>27</sup> and sensations are necessary “*sowohl in Ansehung ihres*

<sup>18</sup>“Von dem [iudicio] *intuitivo* machet man allzeit den Anfang im *raisoniren*,” *Anmerkungen über die vernünftigen Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.3, § 94.

<sup>19</sup>*Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 279.

<sup>20</sup>*Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, §§ 963–65.

<sup>21</sup>*Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 67.

<sup>22</sup>*Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 528.

<sup>23</sup>GW 1.2, § 823.

<sup>24</sup>*Anmerkungen über die vernünftigen Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.3, § 65; see also *Vernünftige Gedanken von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes*, ch. 1, § 2.

<sup>25</sup>“*Cognitio intuitiva ad sensus restringitur et imaginandi facultatem, quae a sensu pendet,*” *Theologia naturalis*, 1, GW 2.7.1, § 1095; “*cognitio nostra intuitiva ob arctos facultatis sentiendi ac inde pendentis facultatis imaginandi . . . limites arctissimis & ipsa limitibus constringuntur,*” *Theologia naturalis*, GW 2.7.2, § 134.

<sup>26</sup>*Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 79.

<sup>27</sup>*Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 225.

Daseyns, als in Ansehung ihrer Beschaffenheit.”<sup>28</sup> Our need to experience sensations depends on the existence of an external reality that is imposed upon us against our will and which we are unable to escape, except by impeding the changes taking place in our sense organs, “wir müssen hindern, daß dasjenige, welches sie verursacht [the changes], die Gliedmassen der Sinnen nicht berührt.”<sup>29</sup> Thus to avoid seeing things we do not want to, we must close our eyes or glance in another direction; to avoid hearing noises we must cover our ears, etcetera.

Sensitive knowledge also helps to produce propositions that are useful for demonstrations. By radically modifying the traditional concept of demonstration, Wolff accepts as a premise even empirical propositions that are “indubitatae,”<sup>30</sup> and these – obviously – are at least in part based on sensations. In this way, since every scientific concept is based on demonstration, sensitive knowledge becomes a fully-fledged part of the epistemology of the sciences. After the exile it had initially been condemned to by modern thought, it is finally ransomed and its usefulness and indispensability in scientific research is decreed.

The Wolffian rehabilitation of sensations does not stop at the epistemological level and instead also involves the metaphysical plane, the sphere of our existence in the external world. In the first section of *Deutsche Metaphysik*, we read:

Wir sind uns unserer und anderer Dinge bewusst, daran kan niemand zweifeln, der nicht seiner Sinnen völlig beraubt ist; und wer es leugnen wolte, derjenige würde mit dem Munde anders vorgeben, als bey sich befindet, könnte auch bald überführet werden, daß sein Vorgeben ungereimet sey. Denn, wie wollte er mir etwas leugnen, oder in Zweifel ziehen, wenn er sich nicht seiner und anderer Dinge bewusst wäre? Wer sich nun aber dessen, was er leugnet, oder in Zweifel ziehet, bewusst ist, derselbige ist. Und demnach ist klar, dass wir sind.<sup>31</sup>

For the sake of clarity, we will separate the passage into its most important theses:

- (T1) no-one can doubt our own existence, nor that of other things;
- (T2) this impossibility is determined by the correct functioning of sensibility;
- (T3) doubt entails knowledge of one’s own existence and of the existence of other things: “Nos esse nostri conscios ipsa dubitatione confirmatur.”<sup>32</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Descartes and Locke, Wolff sees consciousness/knowledge of one’s own existence as the beginning of the cognitive process and, in more general terms, of philosophizing. But his insistence on ‘we’ rather than on the Cartesian ‘I’ is an indication of the collective rather than the solipsistic nature of cognitive achievement. In addition – far more clearly than Descartes did – with T2, Wolff emphasizes the empiric nature of this beginning: at least minimal functioning of our five senses is a *conditio sine qua non* for knowledge of one’s own existence. Only their total obscuration could lead to doubt in the matter. Knowledge of our

<sup>28</sup> GW 1.2, § 226.

<sup>29</sup> GW 1.2, § 228.

<sup>30</sup> *Philosophia rationalis*, GW 2.2–3, § 498.

<sup>31</sup> *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 12.

own existence and that of an independent reality can be acquired only through experience: “Nos esse nostri rerumque aliarum extra nos constitutarum conscios quovis momento experimur. Non opus est nisi attenzione ad perceptiones nostras, ut ea de re certa simus.”<sup>33</sup> And for Wolff experience is neither more nor less than being attentive to our perceptions,<sup>34</sup> both external and internal.

True to his realism, Wolff defends the thesis (T4) that the existence of an external reality is the “Principium cognoscendi” of one’s own existence: “Qui sui aliarumque rerum actu conscius est, ille etiam actu est sive existit.”<sup>35</sup> Consciousness of something must inevitably produce consciousness of not being the same thing we are conscious of: “Wir erkennen . . . daß ich, der ich mir eines Dinges bewusst bin, nicht dasjenige Ding bin, dessen ich mir bewusst bin.”<sup>36</sup> For Wolff, therefore, knowledge of one’s own existence is not the fruit of reasoning but rather of the internally experienced distinction<sup>37</sup> between interior perceptions and sensations. This distinction therefore also contributes to determining personal identity.

A good example of the role Wolff attributed to sensitive knowledge and experience is his formulation of the Principle of Contradiction, which, although it owes much to Leibnizian and Lockean conceptions, moves away from them. In § 27 of the *Ontologia*, Wolff bases this principle on a specific mental experience, which can be understood as a psychological version of the *cogito*<sup>38</sup>: “Eam experimur mentis nostrae naturam, ut, dum ea judicat aliquid esse, simul judicare nequat, idem non esse.” For Wolff this mental experience represents the first, fundamental activity of the soul: “experientia, ad quam hic provocamus, obvia est, ut alia magis obvia censeretur nequeat: ea enim presto est, quamdiu mens sui sibi conscia.” It is precisely this mental experience that accompanies each of our perceptions (external or internal) and is the basis of our consciousness of the impossibility of perceiving a state of things differently from the way in which it is perceived. It allows us to identify perceptual content and it is precisely from this identification that knowledge originates. The identification of the contents of consciousness is made possible by the union between the flux determined by the coexistence and alternation of sensations

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<sup>33</sup>*Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 11; see also *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 45.

<sup>34</sup>“*Experiri* dicimur, quicquid ad perceptiones nostras attentim cognoscimus. Ipsa vero horum cognitio, quae sola attentione ad perceptiones nostras patet, *experientia* vocatur,” *Philosophia rationalis*, GW 2.2–3, § 664.

<sup>35</sup>*Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 13.

<sup>36</sup>*Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, GW 1.2, § 197.

<sup>37</sup>*Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 79.

<sup>38</sup>In this case Wolff is not very distant from Descartes and the Cartesian tradition that identified the *cogito* with inner experience. Descartes himself sometimes uses the terms “*experientia*” or “*experimentum mentis*” to refer to the *cogito* and to intuition; see H. W. Arndt, *Methodo scientifica pertractatum: Mos geometricus und Kalkülbegriff in der philosophischen Theorienbildung des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), 61. For example, Tschirnhaus saw the *cogito* as the first “*experientia evidentissima*,” E. W. von Tschirnhaus, *Medicina mentis, sive artis inveniendi praecepta generalia* (Lipsiae, 1695 edition; first published 1687), 291.



and mental experience based on the impossibility of conceiving perceived content differently. This union allows us to produce interruptions in the flux of consciousness and to determine segments by identifying and clarifying their contours.

Wolff's perspective is not psychologistic. The Principle of Contradiction is the ontological basis of mental experience, which in turn is the basis of epistemics. Wolffian "psychologism" serves merely to indicate the need to consider psychological processes in order to explain the achievement of cognitive tasks and guarantees a singular relationship with reality. While ontology is concerned with being in general terms, psychology ensures that this will be connected with the particular and with experience, which for Wolff represents the only possible beginning of any form of consciousness (empirical or rational). His point of departure is always the singular.<sup>39</sup> The symbolization of the singular instead begins later, with the free exercise of the imagination controlled and guided by the intellect.

Wolff's intention is clear and is in keeping with developments in his times: restoring epistemological and metaphysical dignity to sensitive knowledge, previously held to be overly compromised with the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic view of the world. In short, what was involved was purging sensitive knowledge of the theoretical conditionings of the past to be able to allow it access to the new paradigm that was in the process of being defined. Wolff was fully aware that pure observations do not exist. Observations must always be theoretically oriented: we need to know what we are seeking, "ehe die Observationen angestellt werden."<sup>40</sup> To be truly effective, an observation must already entail some form of theorization. Wolff saw this as the existence of a sort of virtuous circularity between observations and theory:

Exemplo Astronomorum docemur, quantum observationibus debeat theoria & quantum vicissim observationes debeant theoria, observationibus theoriam & theoria vicissim observationes continuo perficientibus. Quae ab eo, qui omnis theoriae ignarus est, nec multo facultatum cognoscendi usu pollet, ex observationibus eruuntur, nonnisi obvia sunt ac plerumque non satis determinata. Nisi praesupponi possit aliqua theoria, non multum progredi datur; quo vero illa fuerit amplior magisque exasciata, eo etiam plura observationi patent.<sup>41</sup>

Sensitive knowledge is thereby legitimized as scientific because at this point it has become critical knowledge, far different from the ingenuousness that had characterized previous conceptions.

## 2 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten

Baumgarten, like Wolff, considers sensibility an essential part of the cognitive act and concept formation. It is a *conditio sine qua non* for the exercise of the higher faculties.<sup>42</sup> Sensations are non-distinct representations<sup>43</sup> of the state of physical

<sup>39</sup> *Philosophia rationalis*, GW 2.2–3, § 665.

<sup>40</sup> *Anfangsgründe aller mathematischen Wissenschaften*, vol. 3, GW 1.14:1287.

<sup>41</sup> *De Experientia morali*, in *Horae subsecivae Marburgenses*, vol. 3, GW 2.34:688.

<sup>42</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt, 1750; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), § 41.

<sup>43</sup> Baumgarten *Metaphysica* (Halle, 1779; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963), § 521.

world<sup>44</sup>: “sunt repraesentationes singularum mundi partium sibi simultaneorum, minus vel magis distinctae, confusae, vel obscurae, prout obiecta earum se ad corpus humanum habent.”<sup>45</sup> Their referential nature is reasserted: they are the sole guarantee of the existence of an external reality. For Baumgarten, too, there are no other possible entryways for existing reality.

In the *Prolegomena* to his *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten – in response to imaginary objections – listed a series of reasons why a rehabilitation of sensitive knowledge was necessary. Let us look at some of them. To the fifth objection on his list, that sensitive knowledge concerns confusion and therefore generates errors, Baumgarten responds that despite this it is an indispensable condition for being able to discover the truth. All knowledge is necessarily mixed with some confusion. There can be no obscure representation that does not express at least a minimal degree of knowledge and there can be no distinct representation that does not contain some amount of confusion.<sup>46</sup> It is not possible to leap from obscurity to distinctness: “ex nocte per auroram meridies.”<sup>47</sup> The state of the soul continuously oscillates between a “regnum tenebrarum,” in which obscure representations dominate, and a “regnum lucis” where it is clear representations that do.<sup>48</sup> A clear demarcation between the two realms is impossible. Even obscure representations are forms of knowledge and taken together constitute the “fundus animae.”<sup>49</sup>

In his reply to the sixth objection, the primacy of distinct knowledge is in no way called into question. Baumgarten argues, however, that because of the limits of our intellect, only in very few cases can it be reached<sup>50</sup>; in other cases – the majority – distinctness functions merely as a regulative aim. In any case, being heedful of sensitive knowledge does not mean that distinct knowledge is neglected. The tenth objection exemplifies his contemporaries’ diffidence concerning sensitive knowledge: “facultates inferiores . . . debellandae potius sunt.” Baumgarten’s reply is significant: what the lower faculties require is “imperium” rather than “tyrannis” and to govern them what is needed is a science that disciplines their functioning and is capable of directing them towards knowledge of truth, i.e., towards aesthetics.<sup>51</sup>

But Baumgarten takes yet another important step towards rehabilitating sensitive knowledge. Tradition had distinguished between the higher cognitive faculties, deputed to distinct notions, and the lower cognitive faculties, deputed to clear and confused notions; and sensibility had been relegated to the latter category. The validity of this distinction, whose roots are in the scholastic-Aristotelian tradition, had already been criticized by Wolff, who probably continued to use it merely to respect *usus loquendi*, “pars enim facultatis cognoscendi inferior & superior

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<sup>44</sup> Baumgarten *Metaphysica*, § 534.

<sup>45</sup> Baumgarten *Metaphysica*, § 752.

<sup>46</sup> Baumgarten *Metaphysica*, § 544.

<sup>47</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 7.

<sup>48</sup> Baumgarten *Metaphysica*, § 518.

<sup>49</sup> Baumgarten *Metaphysica*, § 511.

<sup>50</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 8.

<sup>51</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 12.

terminus philosophicus est, cui nulla inest veritas.”<sup>52</sup> Traces of this distinction have remained in Baumgarten, who from time to time uses expressions such as “inferior gnoseology” to refer to sensibility. But in Baumgarten sensitive knowledge not only loses its status of “inferiority,” it also acquires a definite *autonomy* of its own, certified precisely by the conception of an aesthetics understood as “scientia cognitionis sensitivae.”<sup>53</sup> Baumgarten understands sensitive knowledge to be the entire class of confused representations, i.e., all those that are below the threshold of distinctness.<sup>54</sup>

Baumgarten presents aesthetics as an autonomous science, equal in importance to logic, a younger, but not a humbler sister. Aesthetics is not merely assigned the task of furnishing raw, or crudely formulated material, that rational knowledge must refine; it also, and primarily, represents a particular type of knowledge, capable of functioning even without the involvement of its “big sister” – “bigger” in terms of age rather than of importance.<sup>55</sup> Its autonomy and independence are guaranteed by the ends that it must pursue. The aim of aesthetics “est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae” and this perfection is the “pulchritudo”<sup>56</sup> that Baumgarten – in an explicit reference to Shaftesbury’s maxim – sees as coinciding with truth.<sup>57</sup> The universal beauty of sensitive knowledge concerns only the phenomonic plane – in fact in its perfection it coincides with the phenomenon itself<sup>58</sup> – and can be divided into three types: (1) The beauty of things and thoughts, i.e., their “consensus . . . inter se ad unum,” regardless of their order and their signs.<sup>59</sup> (2) The beauty of the order between thoughts and between thoughts and things.<sup>60</sup> (3) The beauty of signification, which concerns articulation – or when something can be seen – gestuality.<sup>61</sup> The perfection of sensitive knowledge also depends on fundamental identifying characteristics derived from traditional rhetoric, such as richness, grandeur and dignity.<sup>62</sup> Its beauty and the elegance of aesthetic objects are composite, universal perfections.<sup>63</sup> The conceptual triad – *unum, verum, bonum* – of western metaphysics was definitively

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<sup>52</sup>C. Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, § 55. On Wolff’s respect for *usus loquendi*, see footnote 119.

<sup>53</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 1. Baumgarten also uses the following synonymic expressions to define aesthetics: “logica facultatis cognoscitivae inferioris”; “philosophia gratiarum et musarum”; “gnoseologia inferior”; “ars pulcre cogitandi”; “theoria liberalium artium”; “ars analogi rationis.” See also *Metaphysica*, § 533.

<sup>54</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 17.

<sup>55</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 13.

<sup>56</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 14.

<sup>57</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 556.

<sup>58</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 18.

<sup>59</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 18.

<sup>60</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 19.

<sup>61</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 20.

<sup>62</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§ 22, 440.

<sup>63</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 24.

amplified to include *pulchrum*. Although he was not alone, Baumgarten made a decisive contribution so that this could occur.

In addition to insisting that aesthetics was autonomous, Baumgarten set in motion a rapid process of rehabilitation of sensitive knowledge at the metaphysical level. He seems to be using aesthetics to attempt to resolve the dilemma of Leibnizian metaphysics. Leibniz based his metaphysics on a completely determined individual, but precisely because of its “omnimoda determinatio,” this individual cannot be understood by the general laws of the intellect, thus making the formation of its *notio completa* impossible. The action of the intellect – circumscribed in the dimension of general understanding – is incapable of extending to knowledge of the singular, of the completely determined individual, and is therefore inadequate – incapable of reaching metaphysics’ principal goal.

Let us see how Baumgarten sought to solve the dilemma. In his *Metaphysica*, of 1739, the problem of the completely determined being does not play a prominent role. Baumgarten’s perspective is still in line with Wolff’s and the being is identified with what is possible: “omne ens est possibile.”<sup>64</sup> Baumgarten sees metaphysical (or real, or material) truth as a being’s concordance with universal cognitive principles.<sup>65</sup> If the being’s attributes conform to these principles, then truth is transcendental. As every being conforms to the Principle of Contradiction and the Principle of Sufficient Reason, every being possesses a transcendental truth.<sup>66</sup>

In these terms (i.e., understanding the being as possible), the dilemma does not arise, although this entails the loss of the need for concreteness in metaphysics, which Leibniz insisted upon. But 11 years later, in *Aesthetica* (1750), the situation is significantly different, in part thanks to the increased presence of Leibnizian metaphysics. The question of the completely determined being (already present both in Wolff’s<sup>67</sup> and in Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics*) becomes central in *Aesthetica*, and once more plays the fundamental role Leibniz had conferred on it. A completely determined being is a singular being, an individual; if instead it is incompletely determined, it is a universal being.<sup>68</sup> The more determined the being is (i.e., the more numerous are its determinations, connected by a large number of strong laws), the greater its truth will be.<sup>69</sup> The singular has a metaphysical advantage over the universal, which can be “in solis individuis in concreto repraesentabile.”<sup>70</sup> According to Baumgarten the object of singular truth possesses greater metaphysical truth than the object of general truth; and this is valid not only for sensitive knowledge, but for all knowledge.<sup>71</sup> Despite its undisputed primacy, intellectual

<sup>64</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§ 61, 63.

<sup>65</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 92.

<sup>66</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§ 89–90.

<sup>67</sup> See esp. the chapter “De ente singulari & universali” in Wolff’s *Ontologia* (sec. 1, ch. 2).

<sup>68</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 148.

<sup>69</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 184; *Aesthetica*, § 440.

<sup>70</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 150.

<sup>71</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 440.

knowledge cannot – by definition – refer to the singular, while sensitive knowledge has an advantage precisely because it has to do with singulars. Therefore Baumgarten’s wager in *Aesthetica* becomes seeing whether sensitive knowledge, i.e., the analogue of reason, can succeed where reason has failed, determining whether it is capable of recognizing the individual who possesses the most metaphysical truth. Aesthetics is deputed to pursue a quite precise objective: knowledge of the singular, the foundation on which the entire edifice of aesthetics rests. It therefore concerns all the sciences that have to do with individuals.

Baumgarten distinguishes between objective metaphysical (also called material) truth, concerned with the extent to which objects conform to universal principles, and a subjective (also called logical or mental) truth, which is concerned with the representation of objective truths in the soul and expresses the correspondence between mental representations and objects. Subjective truth is divided into two types: logical truth, which concerns the intellect and the class of distinct representations, of which we will only ever know an infinitesimally small (“infinite parva”<sup>72</sup>) part, and aesthetic truth, which concerns the analogue of reason and the class of confused representations.<sup>73</sup> Logical truth and aesthetic truth are representations of the same state of things, but from different points of view. Truth is always one and neither of the two viewpoints can contradict the other. In other words, there can be nothing that is aesthetically true but logically false, and vice versa.<sup>74</sup>

To be able to express this double nature of truth, Baumgarten coined the notion of aesthetological truth, which concerns both universals and individuals and ideas. Logical truth is “generalis,” while aesthetic truth is “singularis.”<sup>75</sup> The goal of rational knowledge is logical truth, sensitive knowledge is instead concerned with the aesthetic truth of the phenomonic world. And beauty is nothing but the perfection of phenomena, determined according to the logical-ontological and rhetorical characteristics mentioned previously. Aesthetological truth represents the meeting point between the states of individual things and the symbolic-legislative power of the intellect. Insisting on the autonomy of aesthetics, Baumgarten adds that in accurately representing its parts, aesthetic truth can “saepe dare veritatem totius logicam” if it provides a complete, exhaustive enumeration of the parts, even though the primary goal of aesthetics is not the search for intellectual truth.<sup>76</sup> Think, Baumgarten says, of a solar eclipse seen by a physicist, an astronomer, a shepherd and an artist. They all would see the same thing, but from different points of view, and it were inevitable that each of them would omit something true that there would be in the others’ points of view.<sup>77</sup> One of Baumgarten’s objectives is to promote the

<sup>72</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 557.

<sup>73</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§ 423–424

<sup>74</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 427.

<sup>75</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 440.

<sup>76</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 428. However, the impossibility of attaining complete induction was clear to Baumgarten: “inductio completa nunquam haberi potest” (§ 73).

<sup>77</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 429.

elaboration of a science capable both of recognizing individual states and being able to interpret them nomologically. In any case, the aesthetic philosopher, like the historian, need not be interested in truths that are so small that they are below the threshold of sensibility.<sup>78</sup>

The aesthetological truth of singulars is the perception of “maximae . . . veritatis metaphysicae.”<sup>79</sup> It is therefore as true and as determined as is possible. It is precisely individuals that procure “perfectionem materialem . . . maximam” for perception.<sup>80</sup> The higher the degree of generalization, the greater will be the decrease in the amount of truth represented. Aesthetic knowledge is therefore far more adequate than rational knowledge for understanding the completely determined beings that are the basis of metaphysics. This is a significant step. The primacy attributed to rational knowledge in the field of metaphysics, both traditionally and by Baumgarten himself,<sup>81</sup> is now clearly being shared with sensitive knowledge, the only knowledge capable of mentally grasping individuals or the states of singular things.<sup>82</sup>

The perfection of aesthetological truth is composed of a formal perfection, which must be sought by the intellect, and a material perfection, pursued by the analogue of reason. It is the duty of sensitive knowledge to complete and add the concreteness of the states of individual things, “veritas materialiter perfecta,” to the concepts of reason.<sup>83</sup> In short the privilege of producing the material needed for conceptuality belongs to sensitive knowledge and to it alone. The two types of perfection – material and formal – are not accumulable, but instead combine in inverse degrees. An increase in formal perfection corresponds to a loss of material perfection – “quid enim est abstractio, si iactura non est?” Baumgarten asks. In order to extract a sphere from a block of marble, much material must be sacrificed.<sup>84</sup> In other words, if there is an increase in abstraction, there is a loss of concreteness, and vice versa.<sup>85</sup> This distinction between formal and material perfection, recalls the Kantian distinction between aesthetics and analytics, but with one substantial difference. In Baumgarten sensitive knowledge is not only passive, is also the fruit of the soul’s activity<sup>86</sup>: the acquisition of material truth is an action/passion.<sup>87</sup> Every real substance is active-receptive<sup>88</sup> and the same holds for the degrees of our knowledge. While for Kant a clear demarcation between receptivity and spontaneity in knowledge is possible, for Baumgarten it is not.

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<sup>78</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 430.

<sup>79</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 441.

<sup>80</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 559.

<sup>81</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 235.

<sup>82</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 544.

<sup>83</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 562.

<sup>84</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 560.

<sup>85</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 558.

<sup>86</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 534.

<sup>87</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, § 216.

<sup>88</sup> Schweitzer writes, that for Baumgarten the notion of “sinnlichen Erkenntnis” clearly has a “gleichzeitig rezeptive und produktive Bedeutung”; introduction to A.G. Baumgarten, *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, ed. R. Schweitzer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), ix.

As Baumgarten himself points out, this is an innovative conception: few dogmatists would concede that confused sensitive perceptions, despite their nature, can actually achieve “complete . . . certitude”<sup>89</sup> and that even the analogue of reason is capable of knowing aesthetic truth in a complete way, i.e., with complete certainty and conviction.<sup>90</sup> In Wolff the reappraisal of sensitive knowledge occurs within a unitary conception of knowledge that recognizes its indispensable and productive function. With Baumgarten inferior gnoseology becomes the subject of a special, appropriate science – aesthetics – and thereby acquires an autonomy of its own, subjects of its own (singulars and beauty), and a dignity that makes it the equal of superior gnoseology.

### 3 Moses Mendelssohn

In Baumgarten, aesthetics as the science of sensitive knowledge and aesthetics as the science of beauty are two conceptions that remain closely related and are not easily distinguishable. The continuous intersecting of the two perspectives is not involuntary. For Baumgarten aesthetics generally has a very broad meaning and concerns the theoretical bases of all possible forms of production.<sup>91</sup> The beauty of sensitive knowledge and the beauty of its objects are still interpreted on the basis of prevalently logico-ontological criteria. This is also true for the characteristics, inherited from rhetoric, which were used to determine beauty. Essentially, it is the distinction that continues to be the most important cognitive objective.

Mendelssohn’s theoretical framework is the same as Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s. As in Baumgarten, the presence of Leibniz, based on direct knowledge of the text, is more noticeable. Mendelssohn completed the process Baumgarten had begun, consolidating the idea that phenomonic beauty is the exclusive domain of aesthetic indagation. Among the most significant variations in his program, two merit particular attention. (1) The epistemic success of sensibility is prevalently connected to the reliability of incomplete induction. Believing that he can sidestep Hume’s problem, Mendelssohn applies the principles of the new theories of probability to incomplete induction: “Ofters ist die Wahrscheinlichkeit auch der Weg, dadurch man zur untrüglichen Gewißheit gelangt.”<sup>92</sup> “Die Wahrscheinlichkeit [kann] . . . Gewißheit werden,”<sup>93</sup> but for this to occur, the series of experiences must be

<sup>89</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 480. Certainty is “coscientia veritatis,” *Metaphysica*, § 531.

<sup>90</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 481. “Certitudo sensitiva est persuasio”; intellectual certitude is “convinctio,” *Metaphysica*, § 531.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Schweitzer, introduction to Baumgarten, *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, xx.

<sup>92</sup> “Gedanken von der Wahrscheinlichkeit,” *JubA* 1:156.

<sup>93</sup> “Ueber die Wahrscheinlichkeit,” *JubA* 1:509. This is a more extended version of the “Gedanken” included in the *Philosophische Schriften*.



“unendlich.”<sup>94</sup> Probability continues to have a determinate relationship with certainty and to increase or decrease in degree according to the number of cases observed. If the number is “sehr groß,” phenomenonic evidence is nearly indistinguishable from “der vollkommen Evidenz”<sup>95</sup> and produces a “völlige Überzeugung.”<sup>96</sup> In reality it is not clear whether Mendelssohn believes that certainty can actually be reached using a probabilistic approach. Despite his admission that the series of certainties needs to be “unendlich groß,”<sup>97</sup> he seems to believe in this possibility, based on an erroneous interpretation of Jakob Bernoulli’s theorem, now known as the Law of Large Numbers.<sup>98</sup> One thing is certain: according to Mendelssohn, maximum probability approaches certainty asymptotically until it finally becomes indistinguishable from it. (2) In Mendelssohn there is greater consideration of the affective and volitional dimension in which aesthetic production and its cognitive reproduction develop. The feelings of pleasure that are the basis of aesthetic fruition are a “Keim” of desires. Even though they are not yet desires, pleasure and displeasure constitute the “*Billigungsvermögen*” that makes it possible for us to pass from the sphere of knowledge to the sphere of desire; the distinction between the two is barely perceptible.<sup>99</sup> Baumgarten had also noted the importance of the appetitive faculty for aesthetics,<sup>100</sup> but Mendelssohn insists more on the relationship between beauty, the affections and volition: the “klaren Begriffe der Schönheit” act strongly on the appetitive faculties.<sup>101</sup> He believes that the ultimate purpose of the fine arts is to please. We will now look at his conception in greater detail.

In Mendelssohn’s view sensitive knowledge consists not only in perception via the external senses but in general in perceiving “von einem Gegenstande eine große Menge von Merkmalen auf einmal” without being able to distinguish them distinctly.<sup>102</sup> Sensation is a representation of the phenomenonic composite in the soul, which is a simple substance<sup>103</sup> and represents multiplicity in unity: a thesis that echoes the Wolffian conception of ideas as copies of composite things in simple ones.<sup>104</sup> Sensitive knowledge coincides with intuitive knowledge, which comprehends the perception of both the external and internal senses and produces

<sup>94</sup>“Gedanken von der Wahrscheinlichkeit,” *JubA* 1:160.

<sup>95</sup>*Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:25.

<sup>96</sup>*JubA* 3.2:21.

<sup>97</sup>“Ueber die Wahrscheinlichkeit,” *JubA* 1:509.

<sup>98</sup>Cf. the chapter on Mendelssohn in my book *La filosofia della probabilità del pensiero moderno*, 181–97.

<sup>99</sup>*Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:62.

<sup>100</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§ 44–45.

<sup>101</sup>“Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften,” *JubA* 1:430.

<sup>102</sup>*JubA* 1:430.

<sup>103</sup>“Die Seele,” *JubA* 3.1:205.

<sup>104</sup>For Wolff mental images – like every other mental representation – are “*repraesentationes compositi in simpliciter*” and have the same value as ideas. See Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis*, *GW* 2.2–3, § 83; see also *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und Seele des Menschen*, *GW* 1.2, § 750.



“die höchste Ueberzeugung.”<sup>105</sup> External sense and internal sense are the only two ways of arriving at reality.<sup>106</sup>

In Mendelssohn, too, sensibility is what guarantees existence. Sensations are copies of things, “die ausser uns wirklich vorhanden sind,” arranged in their real order.<sup>107</sup> The sense organs are the only means the soul has of knowing the body, and therefore the world.<sup>108</sup> Only by relying on the evidence of the senses can it be assumed that there is “eine äussere, sinnliche Welt als wirklich”.<sup>109</sup> Mendelssohn speaks of two kinds of reality: “Vorstellungen” and “des vorstellenden Dinges.”<sup>110</sup> Of course reality is subject to the laws of what is thinkable and it is precisely for this reason that the principles and products of unaided reason can be applied to it. Even a geometrician must base his work on sensitive knowledge of a real existence to be able to predict something about it with certainty. Sensitive evidence differs from rational evidence, but in no way is it inferior to it.<sup>111</sup> The forms of knowledge can be divided in three classes: (1) sensitive knowledge, which constitutes immediate knowledge of our changes; (2) knowledge of the thinkable (rational knowledge), which via the correct use of the intellect is inferred “aus jener unmittelbaren Erkenntniß”; and (3) knowledge of the reality that exists outside ourselves,<sup>112</sup> i.e., natural knowledge.<sup>113</sup>

Therefore each type of knowledge – more or less directly – has to do with sensibility, which is thus an indispensable condition for all science: in every science, including mathematics, there is no possible way to demonstrate that beings exist, except by using the senses.<sup>114</sup> The only exception is metaphysics, where in the demonstration of the existence of God, the inference of the possible must be accepted as real. Contingents can be thought irrespectively of their reality, but God cannot: His thought necessarily implies His existence.<sup>115</sup> In no other case can it legitimately be inferred that “vom Begriff auf Wirklichkeit”<sup>116</sup>: the “reine Vernunftkenntniß” of what exists is excluded.<sup>117</sup> But if metaphysics can do without the evidence of the external senses, it cannot renounce the internal senses upon which the entire philosophical system must rest, without recourse to any other sense evidence.

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<sup>105</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:39.

<sup>106</sup> “Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften,” *JubA* 2:295.

<sup>107</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:53.

<sup>108</sup> “Die Seele,” *JubA* 3.1:228.

<sup>109</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:77.

<sup>110</sup> *JubA* 3.2:14.

<sup>111</sup> *JubA* 3.2:77.

<sup>112</sup> *JubA* 3.2:28.

<sup>113</sup> *JubA* 3.2:39.

<sup>114</sup> “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA* 2:285.

<sup>115</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:78–79. Mendelssohn admits, however, that there are still many who doubt the reliability of the a priori demonstration of the existence of God.

<sup>116</sup> *JubA* 3.2:78.

<sup>117</sup> *JubA* 3.2:22.

The “I think” enjoys a privileged status because it is not a simple phenomenon, but a true reality, while all other sciences – including the mathematical sciences – deal only with phenomena.<sup>118</sup> Mendelssohn holds that the scholastic conception of existence (shared by Wolff) as the complement of essence is unsatisfactory. For him existence “ist keine bloße Eigenschaft, kein Zusatz, keine Ergänzung, sie ist vielmehr die Position aller Eigenschaften und Merkmale des Dinges, ohne welche jene bloße abgesonderte Begriffe bleiben,”<sup>119</sup> a thesis which seems to have been influenced by the Kantian conception of existence expounded in the *Beweisgrund*.

The reliability of sensitive knowledge depends largely on cooperation and accord between the senses. The higher the number of senses that contribute to knowledge of an object, the more sure we can be of its real existence.<sup>120</sup> Given this, the reality of all concomitant phenomena can be inferred with certainty from the reality of one phenomenon. This certainty (which is not logical and mathematical) is produced by incomplete induction based on the principles of the new calculus of probabilities.<sup>121</sup> If sensitive knowledge is not considered to be “*Darstellung*” – because only in this case could illusions and errors occur – but is instead seen as “*Vorstellung*,” it can then reach “den höchsten Grad der Augenscheinlichkeit.”<sup>122</sup> But in no way should this lead us to think that Mendelssohn admits the possibility of pure sensation. Sensations are always “mit mancherley Seelenverrichtungen vermischt” – usually attributed to reason – and operate without our being aware of it.<sup>123</sup>

Mendelssohn takes up Baumgarten’s claim that sensitive knowledge is autonomous: its cognitive elaboration is sufficient and “bedarf weder der Vernunft noch des Verstandes.”<sup>124</sup> Its range of action concerns the whole of clear, but confused knowledge: the field delimited by distinctness and obscurity.<sup>125</sup> Its certainty cannot be changed by recourse to the superior faculties<sup>126</sup> and “erstreckt sich auf das Gebiet der Schönheit und der sittlichen Empfindungen.”<sup>127</sup> Beauty consists in sen-

<sup>118</sup> “Über die Evidenz,” *JubA* 2:295.

<sup>119</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:152. This conception seems to be in explicit contrast with Wolff’s. It is not. For Wolff, too, existence is not a predicate of a being, but derives from its position in the spatio-temporal order. On this question, see my article *L’ontologia sperimentale di Christian Wolff*, in the acts of the international conference “Nascita e trasformazioni dell’ontologia (secoli XVI–XX),” Bari 15–17 May 2008, *Quaestio* 9 (2009). Mendelssohn’s failure to understand the Wolffian conception, occurred because Wolff normally sought to deviate as little as possible from traditional terminology. This sound habit, which betrays his refractoriness towards creating breaks in the evolution of philosophical thought, has however been the prevalent cause of his historiographic misfortunes as it often hid the innovative character of his ideas.

<sup>120</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:15, 22.

<sup>121</sup> *JubA* 3.2:16–17.

<sup>122</sup> *JubA* 3.2:39.

<sup>123</sup> *JubA* 3.2:33.

<sup>124</sup> *JubA* 3.2:39.

<sup>125</sup> “Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze,” *JubA* 1:430.

<sup>126</sup> *Morgenstunden*, *JubA* 3.2:30.

<sup>127</sup> *JubA* 3.2:40.

sitive knowledge of a perfection.<sup>128</sup> In other words, everything represented by the senses as a perfection can be an object of beauty, and this also holds true for phenomenonic perfections. Mendelssohn sees the “*sinnlich vollkommene Vorstellung*” as a means that procures pleasure for the soul and the foundation on which the arts and sciences are based. In fact their essence consists precisely in the “*künstlichen sinnlich-vollkommenen Vorstellung*” or in a “*durch die Kunst vorgestellten sinnlichen Vollkommenheit*.”<sup>129</sup>

Beauty is “*die eigenmächtige Beherrscherinn aller unserer Empfindungen*”<sup>130</sup> – and therefore exclusively the subject of inferior gnosology. Other possibilities or superior degrees of knowledge for gaining access to the dimension of beauty do not exist and as such, it is one of the three sources of pleasure, together with perfection and sensuous desire.<sup>131</sup> All objects of pleasure can be seen in terms of beauty.<sup>132</sup> The essence of beauty is synthesis from multiplicity: “*Die Unterscheidungszeichen der Schönheit sind Mannigfaltigkeit und Einheit*,” and multiplicity when limited by unity is easily accessible to the senses.<sup>133</sup> Beautiful objects “*müssen eine Ordnung . . . darbieten*,” because it is order that makes possible the senses’ representations of multiplicity.<sup>134</sup> Although they are very closely related, Mendelssohn warns that beauty and perfection should not be confused.<sup>135</sup> Perfection is an ontological concept, while beauty is an epistemic concept based on a clear but confused representation of perfection.<sup>136</sup> Perfection is an attribute of beautiful objects, but has to be accessible to the senses.<sup>137</sup> Only exterior forms are endowed with sensuous beauty, while perfection also concerns things that are outside the domain of the senses.

With Mendelssohn, the rehabilitation of sensitive knowledge was consolidated and spread to a wider public. It was attentive to and sought to satisfy the demands that were emerging in the course of new empirical disciplines; and it contributed to the reorientation of older ones, such as physics and astronomy. But shortly afterwards, with the emergence of criticism, it came to a standstill. The interpretation of sensibility as an exclusively passive faculty governed by a priori pure forms of space and time once more confined it in a secondary role where its function was merely to transmit unformed material to the intellect. Its autonomy was denied: intuitions are blind without concepts. The strong leanings towards realism that had underpinned

<sup>128</sup> “*Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindung der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*,” *JubA* 1:170; “*Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze*,” *JubA* 1:430.

<sup>129</sup> “*Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze*,” *JubA* 1:431; “*Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindung*,” *JubA* 1:170.

<sup>130</sup> “*Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindung*,” *JubA* 1:167.

<sup>131</sup> *Über die Empfindungen*, *JubA* 1:85.

<sup>132</sup> *JubA* 1:58.

<sup>133</sup> “*Schreiben eines jungen Gelehrten zu B. an seinen Freund*,” *JubA* 1:530.

<sup>134</sup> *Über die Empfindungen*, *JubA* 1:58.

<sup>135</sup> *JubA* 1:59.

<sup>136</sup> *JubA* 1:48; See also “*Von dem Vergnügen*,” *JubA* 1:131.

<sup>137</sup> *Über die Empfindungen*, *JubA* 1:58.

this rehabilitation, were transformed by Kant and his followers into an idealism that was once again contemptuous of sensitive knowledge and whose only interest was the pure exercise of the intellect and of reason. It would be the nascent psychological tradition of German philosophy that was to derive the greatest benefits from this rehabilitation, extending them to the empirical sciences and promoting an image of science that is closer to our own.

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# Chapter 16

## Mendelssohn's Spinozistic Alternative to Baumgarten's Pietist Project of Aesthetics

Ursula Goldenbaum

It is the aim of my paper to show that Moses Mendelssohn is an opponent of Alexander Baumgarten and that his aesthetics is a Spinozistic alternative to that of Baumgarten (and Kant), – against the prevailing and longstanding narratives in history of philosophy, literature, and aesthetics since Hegel.<sup>1</sup> In this traditional and still prevailing view, both philosophers, Baumgarten as well as Mendelssohn, are just seen as two disciples of Christian Wolff. They are both seen as deviating from the (allegedly one-sided) rationalist position in order to re-evaluate the senses.<sup>2</sup> In addition, this historical narrative is directed towards a goal: in philosophy the goal is Kant, who is thought to have solved the problems that were raised by Baumgarten

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 20 of *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 263–64.

<sup>2</sup> The most famous or infamous author who emphasizes the discovery of individualistic irrationalism by Baumgarten as a German achievement is Alfred Bäumler, *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Ästhetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft*, reprint of 1923 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1967). Unfortunately, this judgement is prevailing until today. Cf., e.g., Wolfgang Welsch, Christine Pries, Hermann Danuser, eds., *Ästhetik im Widerstreit* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1991), 57–58; Egbert Witte, *Logik ohne Dornen: Die Rezeption von A.G. Baumgartens Ästhetik im Spannungsfeld von logischem Begriff und ästhetischer Anschauung* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2000), 13–69; Anne Pollok, *Facetten des Menschen: Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), 16–19, 22, 47n41, 49n46 and more often. For an instructive and critical summary of the discussion about Baumgarten's achievements on the “way to Kant,” see Frederick C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149–52.

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and Mendelssohn.<sup>3</sup> In literature the goal is Goethe, who is thought to have brought about the rise of German literature. This canon of the history of German literature usually begins with the battle between Bodmer & Breitinger and Gottsched's "one-sided rationalism" and continues with Klopstock, who is praised as the first model of German poetry. Lessing is usually treated as a single extraordinary phenomenon, who does not belong to any group. However, since Friedrich Schlegel, his poetry has been suspected of being too rationalist as well, lacking poetic spirit.<sup>4</sup> *Sturm and Drang* is regarded as a renewed criticism of the "one-sided rationalism" and the last step before the climax of German literature – Goethe and Schiller. What is completely dismissed though in this "ascent" of German aesthetics as well as literature, are the contemporary theoretical *battles*, the existence of entirely opposed camps of authors at the very *same* time.

However, if we look at the history of aesthetics or literature from the perspective of controversies in the German speaking world such a unique stream of development did not exist during any of the different periods of the eighteenth century. Besides the conservative factions of the churches, we can recognize – within the mainstream of the enlightenment and throughout the century – two very different and indeed opposed philosophical resp. literary positions, fighting against each other heavily. Moreover, these battles did not only happen in theory, i.e., in argument. The participants used political means as well: they forged alliances, founded journals to propagate the views of their groups, and even asked political authorities for support, e.g., for censorship of their opponents. I will not go into detail, having published a whole book about public debates in German enlightenment (see Goldenbaum, *Appell an das Publikum*). However, in order to show that Mendelssohn's aesthetics is an alternative to that of Baumgarten, rather than its further development, I need to situate the two authors in the battlefield of their time.

Thus, I will first present the two opposed camps to which Baumgarten and Mendelssohn belonged as they arose during the late 1730s until the end of the 1750s. In a second section, I will argue that Baumgarten and his Pietist friends at the University at Halle turned to poetry and aesthetics in response to the public debate over the "Wertheim Bible" 1735–1740. This debate was the decisive battle between Wolffians and Pietists in the Protestant area of the Old Empire.<sup>5</sup> Through this

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<sup>3</sup>In his most recent book, *Diotima's Children*, Beiser suggests a fresh investigation and judgement of aesthetic rationalism in its own right, without censoring its achievements in the light of Kant. See 3–4. Beiser's book provides a new comprehensive investigation of German intellectual history before Kant, questioning all the well-known judgements about it. As a result of this new perspective, the history since Kant should be re-written too.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Friedrich Schlegel, "Über Lessing," in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, Abteilung 1 (München: Schöningh; Zürich: Thomas-Verlag, 1959–1979), 2:100–126. It is again Beiser, who takes Lessing as a clear rationalist but without any negative connotation. Cf. the excellent presentation in Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 244–82.

<sup>5</sup>Ursula Goldenbaum, "Der Skandal der 'Wertheimer Bibel': Die philosophisch-theologische Entscheidungsschlacht zwischen Pietisten und Wolfianern," in Goldenbaum, *Appell an das Publikum: Die öffentliche Debatte in der deutschen Aufklärung 1687–1796*, with contributions of Frank Grunert, Peter Weber, Gerda Heinrich, Brigitte Erker and Winfried Siebers, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2004), 175–508.

historical survey I want to disclose the direct theoretical connections between the theological concerns of the younger Pietistic generation and the turn to aesthetics. In a third section, I will focus on Baumgarten's aesthetic project. It is only in the fourth section, the longest one, that I will present Mendelssohn's Spinozistic approach to aesthetics and contrast it with Baumgarten's project. Although I will spend much time on Baumgarten and his fellow Pietists, it will serve to emphasize the originality of Mendelssohn's project in contrast to Baumgarten.

## 1 The Two Camps

In case of Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) we will first have to deal with his friends Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777), Immanuel Pyra (1715–1744), and Samuel Gotthold Lange (1711–1781). Together they formed a circle of close friends at the University at Halle, who, since 1735, were dedicated to the new turn to aesthetics. They enjoyed the protection and support of the young theology professor, Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten, the older brother of Alexander, and on a higher level, of the pastor Reinbeck at the court of Berlin. Samuel Gotthold Lange was the son of Joachim Lange, head of the Halle Pietists. I should mention that all four members of Baumgarten's aesthetic circle came from Prussia, either from Berlin or from Halle. When Bodmer and Breitinger in Zürich fell out with the literary pope, Gottsched, in Leipzig, in 1740, they immediately invited Immanuel Pyra and Alexander Baumgarten to join their new "sect" in order to fight for the "good cause" as they called it.<sup>6</sup> Since the end of the 1740s, they further allied with Johann Andreas Cramer and Klopstock and the so-called *Bremer Beiträger* at Leipzig. As soon as Klopstock started publishing his *Messias* in their journal *Die Bremer Beyträge*, they celebrated his work as the incarnation of their shared literary and aesthetic goals. Wieland entered this alliance during his early years and tried to invite new members, e.g., the new rising star in Berlin Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

With the exception of Breitinger and Klopstock, who were the sons of a craftsman resp. of an officer in the higher Prussian administration, they all stemmed from the families of pastors. While the Suisse authors were Calvinists, all other members of the new sect came from Lutheran Pietistic families. All of them graduated from leading academies in their respective countries. What is striking in my eyes is the clearly political language they used in their correspondence. They consciously acted

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<sup>6</sup> See Bodmer to Pyra on April 24, 1744, in: Immanuel Jacob Pyra, *Über das Erhabene: Mit einer Einleitung und einem Anhang mit Briefen Bodmers, Langes und Pyras*, ed. Carsten Zelle (Frankfurt/New York: Lang, 1991), 101–3, with commentary on 103–5; cf. Christoph Martin Wieland, *Wielands Briefwechsel*, vol.1, *Briefe der Bildungsjahre (1. Juni 1750–2. Juni 1760)*, ed. Hans Werner Seiffert (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963), 223–24.



as an organized network, offering support to each other in publishing and reviewing, and warning each other of enemies.<sup>7</sup>

In case of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), we have only the well-known usual candidates – Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) and Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811) – as his friends and allies. In contrast to the latter group, these three friends stemmed from very different social backgrounds and had just met each other in the new but soon to be growing intellectual center of Berlin. Nicolai came from a Pietistic family in Berlin. His father ran a bookshop inherited by the son. Lessing stemmed from an orthodox pastor's family in Saxon, and Moses Mendelssohn was the son of a poor Jewish scribe in Dessau, in the small state of Sachsen-Anhalt. None of them had graduated or held an academic position; two of them were even autodidacts. Nicolai earned his living as a publisher, Lessing as a journalist and play writer, and Mendelssohn first as a tutor, then as a bookkeeper, and finally he ran his own silk company. On top of their lack of social ranking in academia, the group included a Jew. At this time, the most German and Suisse cities (like Zürich) did not even allow Jews to enter (Leipzig opened its gates for Jews only during the fairs). It was peculiar to Berlin (within Germany) that Jewish intellectuals could gather with Christians in coffee shops and clubs. This was due to the lack of social differentiation of the city, which had only recently gotten the attention of European intellectuals after Frederick II had taken power in Prussia.<sup>8</sup> Outside of Berlin it was unheard of that a Jew was going to publish to a non-Jewish audience. That Mendelssohn would even co-edit the new and immediately leading German journal *Bibliothek der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* was even more shocking, as his co-editor was the Christian Friedrich Nicolai. The surprise of the German audience is evident from the public exchange between Johann David Michaelis and Lessing about the latter's play *The Jews*.<sup>9</sup> When it was revealed that the three young Berliners were indeed friends, this was itself a challenge for the contemporaries.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The constitution of this sect can easily be grasped by the correspondence of its members. Bodmer uses, e.g., his contact to Pyra and the young Lange to get Baumgarten's *Meditationes*, as he had only excerpts from reviews in the beginning. He regularly names persons who belong to their sect and warns of other authors, e.g., of the Wolfian editor of the journal at Greifswald, *Critische Versuche zur Aufnahme der Deutschen Sprache*. The editor of the famous *Hamburgische Unpartheyische Correspondent* Zink is mentioned as problematic in terms of the common "cause." Of course Bodmer is in favor of Pyra's friend Samuel Gottlob Lange in Laublingen: "Ich schliesse, daß er von unserer Sekte ist." Pyra, *Über das Erhabene*, 102.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Steven M. Lowenstein, *The Berlin Jewish Community: Enlightenment, Family, and Crisis, 1770–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3–22.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Ursula Goldenbaum, "Lessing in Berlin," in *Aufklärung in Berlin*, ed. Wolfgang Förster (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989), 286, 291, 326; Anna-Ruth Löwenbrück, "Johann David Michaelis and Moses Mendelssohn: Judenfeindschaft im Zeichen der Aufklärung," in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, ed. Michael Albrecht, Eva J. Engel and Norbert Hinske (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), 315–32; Anna-Ruth Löwenbrück, *Judenfeindschaft im Zeichen der Aufklärung: Eine Studie zur Vorgeschichte des modernen Antisemitismus am Beispiel des Göttinger Theologen und Orientalisten Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791)* (Frankfurt/New York: Lang, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>Goldenbaum, Ursula. "Lessing contra Cramer zum Verhältnis von Glauben und Vernunft: Die Grundsatzdebatte zwischen den *Literaturbriefen* und dem *Nordischen Aufseher*," in Goldenbaum, *Appell an das Publikum*, 685–90.

When Lessing and Nicolai first entered the battle over Klopstock, Gottsched and the Epopee, it still looked as if they would take sides with the anti-Gottsched alliance. Wieland even suggested to Gleim they should invite Lessing to join their "good cause."<sup>11</sup> That Lessing was simply Gottsched's critic is still the prevailing view of German scholarship today. But for his contemporaries, it became clear soon enough that this was an erroneous impression. First Bodmer and Breitinger, then later Klopstock and Cramer – now well established at the court in Copenhagen, Meier and to a lesser extent Baumgarten in Halle were attacked by "the Berliners," as the new group of three authors in Berlin was soon apostrophized.

But what was actually at stake in the controversy between Gottsched on the one hand and Bodmer and Breitinger on the other? The question has already been raised by contemporaries, as the combatants hardly disagreed about art and its rules.<sup>12</sup> Many explanations have been given and disproved. The most common view points to Gottsched's orientation of German literature to the French model whereas Bodmer and Breitinger suggested the English taste. However, the disagreement was above all about the *function* of poetry. The two Suisse theologians wanted to focus poetry on the marvelous, whereas Gottsched stuck with the imitation of nature. Whereas the former liked Milton because his poetry centered on theological and thus marvelous topics, the latter wanted to follow Dubos and Batteux in their emphasis on the imitation of nature. The controversy was above all about the marvelous and its re-evaluation. This eager interest in the marvelous was the main reason why the Suisse turned away from Gottsched and toward the younger Halle Pietists in the late 1730s.

How then does it fit that Lessing too is generally seen as a critic of Gottsched? If we suspend the traditional view of literary history and pay attention to the main objective of Lessing's attacks between 1749 and 1766, we can see that they were directed continuously against the members of the anti-Gottschedian alliance – at first against Lange and Meier in Halle, then against Bodmer and Breitinger in Zürich, as well as against Klopstock and Cramer (first in Leipzig then in Copenhagen), and finally against Wieland in Zürich. Compared with this extended and coherent opposition against the anti-Gottschedian alliance Lessing's few and rather mocking statements about the self-appointed literary pope at Leipzig loses quite some weight. Moreover, we can even discover the surprising fact that Lessing was ready to take sides with Gottsched at some point.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, he did not support Gottsched, the

<sup>11</sup> *Wielands Briefwechsel*, 223–24.

<sup>12</sup> Mylius writes: "It seems to us that the Suisse Writings on Poetry could have occupied the same desk drawer with Gottsched's poetics without causing a quarrel, as Swift has said of the books of the ancients. We cannot give an adequate answer to those who ask for the real causes of this critical dispute. The poet who will sing of this war some day, will need as much inspiration as Homer when he wanted to describe the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon." (Preface to the first issue of the journal *Hallesche Bemühungen zur Beförderung der Kritik und des guten Geschmacks*, 1743, without page number, my translation.) Comp. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 334; see Hermann Hettner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1979), 1:262.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ursula Goldenbaum, "Lessing ein Wolffianer?" in *Christian Wolff und die Europäische Aufklärung: Akten des 1. Internationalen Christian-Wolff-Kongresses in Halle 4. – 8. April 2004*, 5 vols., ed. Jürgen Stolzenberg and Oliver-Pierre Rudolph (Hildesheim: Olms, 2008), 4:271.

literary pope, who got continuously mocked by the Berliners. But Lessing indeed agreed with Gottsched, the Wolffian.

Lessing was a Wolffian as well as his friend Moses Mendelssohn, which might not be to the liking of those to whom Wolff is simply a flat and meaningless thinker, as we are taught ever since Hegel.<sup>14</sup> However, Lessing's discussion of the fable is a great Wolffian essay directed against Bodmer and Breitinger.<sup>15</sup> The same is true for his critique of Klopstock's essay on the three levels of knowing, which he criticized on the basis of Wolff's epistemology,<sup>16</sup> to be silent about Lessing's big controversy with the pastor at the court of the Danish king, Johann Andreas Cramer, lasting 1758–1760!<sup>17</sup> Cramer had claimed that a man without religion could not be a moral being. Other examples from Lessing's reviews in newspapers and journals could easily be added. For an unbiased mind, i.e., not prejudiced against Wolff, this does not come as a surprise – Lessing was a close friend with Christlob Mylius, a student of Abraham Gotthelf Kästner and Gottsched. For a short time, from his change from the faculty of theology to that of medicine until his flight from Leipzig to Berlin, Lessing was himself a student of the Wolffian Kästner and he remained his good friend during his life.<sup>18</sup>

There is no question about Mendelssohn being a Wolffian. He had also studied Leibniz' writings, as they were available at the time. Moreover, he knew Locke and Newton (including the latter's mathematics), Hutcheson and Burke and later Hume very well. He had read the French authors Diderot, La Mettrie, and Rousseau. He even translated Rousseau's essay, *On the Origin of Inequality*, in the year of its appearance. And of course he read and reviewed Baumgarten and Meier, Klopstock and Cramer, Bodmer, Breitinger and Gottsched. It is less known though that he had also read Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza. Besides his philosophical studies he learned mathematics and physics. This prepared him to review scientific books in the journal he then co-edited with Lessing after 1758, the famous *Letters Concerning the Newest Literature*. Although he came from a Yiddish speaking background, his German was considered to be exemplary. It would even shape German style in the future. Mendelssohn read also Latin, English, and French, not to mention Hebrew.

The very young Nicolai had just arrived from Frankfurt, where he had listened to Alexander Baumgarten's lectures and discussed them with students. He caused a

<sup>14</sup>Goldenbaum, "Lessing ein Wolffianer?" 4:267–81. A complete different approach to Wolff can now be found in Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 244–82. The excellent presentation of Wolff's epistemology, theory of emotions, and especially the discussion of Wolff's concept of art, opens a new understanding for the great theoretical potential of Wolff's philosophy for a modern aesthetics.

<sup>15</sup>Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "Abhandlungen zur Fabel," in *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Klaus Bohnen et al., 12 vols., (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassikerverlag, 1997), 4:345–411, esp. the 2nd. essay, 4:376–83 and 4:388–89.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Goldenbaum, "Lessing contra Cramer," 662–79.

<sup>17</sup>Goldenbaum, "Lessing contra Cramer," 653–728.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Ursula Goldenbaum, "Das Publikum als Garant der Freiheit der Gelehrtenrepublik: Die öffentliche Debatte über den *Jugement de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres sur une Lettre prétendue de M. De Leibniz 1752–1753*," in *Appell an das Publikum*, 533n74.

small sensation with his very first publication in 1753, a defense of Milton against Gottsched's critique, thus apparently positioning himself in the anti-Gottsched camp.<sup>19</sup> However, by following the demand of Dubos and asking the arts to focus on the excitement of passion, his writing was not exactly to the liking of the Baumgarten alliance, especially Meier, Bodmer and Breitingner. But it was just this demand that the main task of the arts was the excitement of passion, which became the focus of the discussions of "the Berliners" in the years to come (as it is mirrored in their famous correspondence on tragedy).<sup>20</sup> To summarize, the new group in Berlin was rather mixed in terms of personalities when compared with the anti-Gottschedian alliance in Halle, Zürich and Copenhagen, but connected in their common dedication to Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy and to the arts.

## 2 The Birth of Baumgarten's Aesthetic Project in 1735

Baumgarten published his small disputation, the *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (in English *Reflections on Poetry*) in September 1735. As mentioned above, it became soon the programmatic writing not only of the young generation of Pietists at Halle, i.e., Meier, Pyra and Lange but of the entire anti-Gottsched faction as well, joined by all of the anti-Wolffians. However, 1735 was a crucial year in the battle between the Wolffians and Pietists. It was the year of the publication of the "Wertheim Bible," a translation of the Pentateuch by a Wolffian, Johann Lorenz Schmidt at Wertheim. It had been the aim of the author to provide an unequivocal translation of the Hebrew text in order to enable Christian theology to defend the Bible against critiques of Deists and Atheists, who were pointing to its contradictions, lacunas and anti-rational teachings. However, this translation no longer delivered the right formulations in the Old Testament to interpret certain passages as prophecies of Jesus Christ, as they had been taught by Christian theology of all denominations. As a result, the German Lutheran theologians were up in arms. Joachim Lange, who had succeeded in expelling Christian Wolff from Halle 12 years ago, but who had been silenced by the Prussian king ever since, used this opportunity to start a new campaign against Wolff and his partisans. He was eager to show that the "horrible" "Wertheim Bible" was a *necessary* product of Wolffian philosophy, undermining Christian religion of all denominations by corrupting the ground text. It was his declared goal, to reach a general ban of Wolffian philosophy in Prussia.

He did not succeed to defeat the Wolffians though. According to the "Salomonic" decision of the king, Wolff's "German Logic" became the standard teaching book at Prussian universities in 1736 by the king's order while the "Wertheim Bible"

<sup>19</sup>Friedrich Nicolai, *Untersuchung ob Milton sein "Verlohrnes Paradies" aus neuern lateinischen Schriftstellern ausgeschrieben habe* (Leipzig/Frankfurt, 1753).

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Lessing, "Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel," in *Werke und Briefe*, 3: 662–736.

was banned almost the same day in June 1736.<sup>21</sup> Also, the Prussian king, actively supported by Lange, denounced the author at the Imperial Court at Vienna. As a result, the translator was jailed in Wertheim. However, he was allowed by his rulers, the dukes of Löwenstein-Wertheim, to escape before he was sentenced. From then on, he lived in exile in Altona, which belonged to the Danish empire. He died in Wolfenbüttel in 1749. The story of the “Wertheim Bible” is almost forgotten as the history is written by the victors and the Hegelian historians were not interested in this political persecution of the Wolffians by the Pietists, but were instead eager to blame them for their insignificance.<sup>22</sup>

However, in September 1735, when Alexander Baumgarten defended his famous *Reflections on Poetry*, Joachim Lange, the head of his department had just started his campaign against the “Wertheim Bible,” not without solid political networking at the court in Berlin during the entire summer. The whole theology department at Halle was involved in Lange’s activities and it thus became the headquarters for this decisive battle against the Wolffians until 1737. All faculty members of the department, including Alexander’s brother, Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten, had to sign the denunciation of the author, Johann Lorenz Schmidt, to the Prussian king.

A wave of publications went throughout the entire Protestant area of the Holy Roman Empire until 1740. The authors were often directly invited and even pushed by Joachim Lange. Their main complaint was about the loss of the prophecies of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. They blamed the author for consciously extinguishing the prophecies in order to undermine Christian religion. However, there was another more interesting line of complaint – that the author had missed the *poetic* character of the Old Testament. Allegedly, he had not been able to recognize the *beauty* of the language and the *poetry* of the Bible because of his limited Wolffian, i.e., merely rational reading of the text. (This uninformed judgement can be found still today in the dictionaries.)<sup>23</sup> These authors cited repeatedly Boileau’s introduction to his translation of Longinus’ *On the sublime* (where Longinus praises Moses’ language as sublime) concluding that even the pagan Longinus had been

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Goldenbaum, “Der Skandal der ‘Wertheimer Bibel,’” 319–30.

<sup>22</sup> For the history of Johann Lorenz Schmidt see Paul S. Spalding, *Seize the book, Jail the Author: Johann Lorenz Schmidt and Censorship in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1998); for a comprehensive presentation of the public debate about the theoretical issues at stake cf. Goldenbaum, “Der Skandal der ‘Wertheimer Bibel.’”

<sup>23</sup> Compare, e.g., the article “Bibelübersetzungen,” in [*Die*] *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1909), column 1166; or the article “Schmidt, Johann Lorenz” in the following editions (2nd ed., vol. 5 [Tübingen: Mohr, 1931] column 207–8; 3rd ed., vol. 5 [Tübingen: Mohr, 1961], column 1458). In contrast, Immanuel Hirsch defends Schmidt against this standard critique: “Es handelt sich bei der Hauptmasse der Sätze nicht um eine Entstellung des sachlichen und logischen Sinns, sondern um eine um der begrifflichen Deutlichkeit willen vollzogene Zerstörung der literarischen Form, so wie sie in den der Erklärung dienenden gelehrten Umschreibungen (Paraphrasen) üblich ist. Meist handelt es sich um Überführung bildlicher Wendungen in begriffliche.” See Emmanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie*, vol. 2 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1951), 428.

able to grasp the sublime character of the personal speech of God "Fiat lux!"<sup>24</sup> Thus, the poetic character of the Old Testament became a topic almost 20 years before Robert Lowth's commentary on Hebrew Poetry in 1753.<sup>25</sup>

I would like to suggest that the public debate about the "Wertheim Bible" had a direct impact on Baumgarten and his circle at Halle. It is obvious that Alexander Baumgarten and his young friends, Immanuel Pyra, Gotthold Samuel Lange and Georg Friedrich Meier, all of whom studied theology at the University of Halle, were highly aware of the anti-Wolffian campaign against the "Wertheim Bible." They could not help but witness the general mobilization for the final battle against Wolffianism, as it was shaped by the chair of the department, Joachim Lange.

As mentioned above, Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten, a member of the faculty, was Alexander's brother, and Samuel Gottlob Lange was the son of Joachim Lange, the head of the department and the leader of the campaign. But we also know that Immanuel Pyra in 1736 just translated Boileau's French translation of Longinus *On the Sublime* into German and wrote his own essay on the topic.<sup>26</sup> Fortunately, Pyra reported explicitly that he was inspired to this work on the sublime – by the mention of Longinus' remark that even the pagan Longinus had acknowledged the sublimity of God's word in the Old Testament: Fiat Lux! It is obvious that it was Pyra's reading of the attacks on the Wertheim translator, which made him read and translate Longinus and then even write his own essay on the sublime discussing it with his friends. I would like to emphasize that it was the theological interest that turned Pyra to aesthetics.

There is even further evidence that the young Pietist theologians at the university of Halle were well aware of the ongoing battle between the Pietists under Joachim Lange, and the "Wertheimer," the author of the "Wertheim Bible," is explicitly mentioned in a little poem by Immanuel Pyra. There he praised Joachim Lange as the fearless persecutor of the Wertheim translator, Johann Lorenz Schmidt, as well as both the Emperor and the Prussian king for indeed stopping the devil's cunning:

Teach me what our Emperor  
and Wilhelm did to exterminate the weed  
sown from Wertheim by the devil's cunning.  
Tell me too of Lange's courage.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Goldenbaum, *Appell an das Publikum*, 65, 189, 318–19, 437.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (Oxford, 1758); and Mendelssohn's sound and extended review of it in the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, in *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), 4:20–62, hereafter cited as *JubA*.

<sup>26</sup>Zelle, *Einleitung zu Pyra*, 11.

<sup>27</sup>– Lehre mich, was unsers Kaisers Hand//Und Wilhelm that, das Unkraut auszurotten, //Das Satans List von Wertheim ausgestreut, //Erzähle mir auch Langens Tapferkeit." Theodor Wilhelm Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit: Auszüge aus seinem Briefwechsel zusammengestellt und erläutert*, repr. of 1880 ed. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 242, my translation.



There is no doubt that this has been written right after the Emperor's order to jail Johann Lorenz Schmidt. This order happened as a result of the denunciation by the Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm, who had been urged to do so by Joachim Lange. Obviously, Immanuel Pyra celebrated this persecution of the "Wertheimer" and there is no doubt that he shared this appraisal (and even his little poem) with his friends. So much for the understanding of courage and freedom of speech in the circle of Baumgarten's friends! Five years later, in 1743, Pyra published the *Proof that the Gottschedian sect corrupts the taste* (*Erweis, daß die G\*tt\*sch\*dianische Sekte den Geschmack verderbe* [gegen die Hällischen Bemühungen]). At this time, Pyra was already in correspondence with Bodmer and Breitinger and considered himself to be a member of their sect.

The same explicitly anti-Wertheim attitude can also be found in the writing of the other close friend of Alexander Baumgarten, Georg Friedrich Meier, a few years later. Although he did not mention the name of Johann Lorenz Schmidt, it is obvious which translator was blamed in the following passage published in his journal:

Only a stupid translator who – as a result of his corrupted taste – does not know the beautiful, extinguishes all that [namely the prophecies of Jesus Christ] from his cowardly translation. He shows thereby that someone who wants to undermine religion cannot have good taste and knowledge of the beautiful sciences and understands nothing else than to write purely in his own native language.<sup>28</sup>

Here again, I would like to emphasize that Meier's theological-political opposition against the Wertheim translator is directly related to his turn to beauty and taste as well as to poetry, the "beautiful sciences." It should be noticed that Meier explicitly admitted that the Wertheim translation has been written in a pure German language. Nobody ever criticized the translation for mistakes, not even Joachim Lange. Nevertheless, Meier called the translator silly, due alone to his alleged lack of poetry. It is precisely the public debate on the "Wertheim Bible" from 1735 until 1740, which caused the entire Baumgarten circle in Halle to search for a new source of the prophecies of Jesus Christ after they had vanished in the "Wertheim Bible." They found it in the poetic and thus ambivalent language of the Old Testament, the poetry of the Hebrew. I hope that this more extended historical excursus demonstrates how theological issues and the political battle between Wolffians and Pietists could indeed inspire the birth of aesthetics.

Thus, I take Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry*, written in the crucial year 1735, and his further work in aesthetics and metaphysics to originate from a theological project, just in the same way that Meier could confuse the two perspectives in his

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<sup>28</sup> ". . . daß nur ein blöder Uebersetzer, der vermöge seines verdorbenen Geschmacks das Schöne nicht kennt, alles dieses [nämlich die Weissagungen von Jesus Christus] aus seiner feigen Uebersetzung märzet, und dadurch anzeigt, daß einer, der die Religion untergraben will, auch keinen guten Geschmack und Kenntnis der schönen Wissenschaften besitze, und aufs höchste nichts weiter davon verstehe, als in seiner Muttersprache rein zu schreiben." Georg Friedrich Meier, *Der Gesellige*, 78. Stück (October 10, 1748), my translation.

short comment.<sup>29</sup> They all looked for an aesthetic reading of the Bible in order to find the hidden prophecies of Jesus Christ in the poetic dimension of the Old Testament instead of in its literal text where it could no longer be found after the "Wertheim Bible." If we look from this perspective at Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry* as well as at his later work some topics suddenly make more sense.

### 3 Baumgarten's Theoretical Approach

Baumgarten's claim for his new science of the senses and the related re-evaluation of the senses against the "one-sided rationalists" is again and again uncritically acknowledged as his greatest achievement and is celebrated by many scholars, including even Ernst Cassirer,<sup>30</sup> and certainly Alfred Bäumler, the historian of irrationalism and leading Nazi ideologist.<sup>31</sup> What is rarely acknowledged is that Wolff did in fact give great attention to sensuous knowledge, i.e., the lower faculty of knowledge. He provided an extended theory for experimental technologies in order to gain sensuous knowledge.<sup>32</sup> Thus it is simply not true that he neglected experience, as we have become accustomed to saying after the standard books in history of philosophy. But of course, Baumgarten did not simply ask for a science of sensuous knowledge in order to extend natural science. As we all know, he was instead

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<sup>29</sup>I completely agree with Mirbach's statement, expressed, unfortunately, in a very long sentence: "Will man Leibniz als den 'größten' – und als einen der letzten – 'christlichen Metaphysiker seit Augustin' [Glockner] bezeichnen, so ist Baumgarten der erste, der diese 'christliche Metaphysik' in eine umfassende, ontologisch und psychologisch begründete ästhetische Theorie überführt, in der die in der sinnlichen Erscheinung des *phaenomenon* zutage tretende Schönheit nicht nur als Ausdruck der menschlichen Erkenntnis der in Gott gegründeten Vollkommenheit der Welt, sondern zugleich als Ausdruck des – im Zweifelsfall gegen gegebene historische, politische oder gesellschaftliche Normen gerichteten – freiheitlichen menschlichen Strebens nach der gottgewollten Verwirklichung des Besten erwiesen werden soll." Dagmar Mirbach, introduction to *Ästhetik*, by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Latin/German, trans. and ed. Mirbach (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), lxxix.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment*, 338–56.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Bäumler, *Irrationalitätsproblem*, 208. Bäumlers "Erste Vorlesung zum Thema, Wissenschaft, Hochschule, Staat" is on May 10, 1933, the "Auftakt zur Bücherverbrennung. Bäumler marschierte an der Spitze der Studenten auf den Opernplatz, wo Fackeln auf einen Scheiterhaufen geworfen und Bücher 'undeutschen Geistes' den Flammen übergeben werden." Volker Gerhardt, Reinhard Mehring, Jana Rindert, *Berliner Geist: Eine Geschichte der Berliner Universitätsphilosophie bis 1946* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1999), 295. In spite of Bäumler's obvious and very early Nazi enthusiasm, his main theses are still uncritically acknowledged and recommended to students. But his appraisal of the allegedly German achievement to come up with individualist irrationalism fits his political intention. However, the irrational tendencies did not start with Baumgarten and his friends, but with Dubos, Bouhours, and Hutcheson and had rather to do with theological challenges than with national achievements.

<sup>32</sup>For an excellent explanation, see Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 50–56.



interested in poetry and arts – so it seems. But – his project of a particular science of sensuous knowledge is not simply dedicated to a philosophy of art either. The science of the senses he suggested should parallel that of reason, i.e., logic, as Baumgarten saw it. This meant indeed a very large project, in fact the doubling of Wolffian philosophy, as we will see.

Right in the beginning of his *Reflections on Poetry*, in § 2, Baumgarten defines the *idea confusa* as sensuous knowledge – *cognitio sensitiva* – and asks for the new science of sensuous knowledge. Thus he clearly picks up on the Leibniz-Wolffian terminology. That is why he was seen as a Wolffian by his contemporary Pietistic opponents and later by Hegel. In his *Metaphysics*, Baumgarten also relies heavily on Wolff's *Psychologia empirica*, i.e., Wolff's doctrine of the mind and its various faculties, among them the faculties of perception, cognition, and feeling. But the difference between the two philosophers remains clear enough when we look at the foundation of their metaphysics. Wolff defines philosophy as "the science of the possible as far as it can be,"<sup>33</sup> i.e., of everything that can be thought without contradiction. Baumgarten, on the other hand, defines metaphysics as "the science of the first reasons of knowledge in human knowledge" adding that these were not sensuous but rather super-sensuous.<sup>34</sup> Neither Leibniz nor Wolff would have started metaphysics with the supernatural or super-sensuous, even though they both allow and even argue in favor of its possibility.

In his *Reflections on Poetry*, Baumgarten wants to introduce a new science of sensuous knowledge and beautiful thinking as an *addition* to Wolffian logic and give an outline of it.<sup>35</sup> Using a Wolffian expression, Baumgarten names the new science of aesthetics an *Analogon rationis*, which means that it should parallel logic as the science of the upper faculty of knowledge. This is generally seen as his important re-evaluation of the senses. However, Wolff uses this expression of the *analogon rationis* for the mental capacities of animals to make inferences that correspond to our rational conclusions.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Wolff includes the rules for sensuous knowledge in his logic as well as in his psychology, emphasizing its significance for scientific activities, which go beyond mere rational knowledge. He particularly emphasizes nominal definitions, which are definitions by marks rather than by construction and which we can cognize through our senses, i.e., by empirical knowledge. This knowledge is different from mathematical knowledge, where we have real definitions, i.e., rules of construction, by which the possibility of the defined thing can be shown in the process of constructing. This kind of knowledge is of

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Christian Wolff, *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere/Einleitende Abhandlung über Philosophie im Allgemeinen*, Hist.-crit. ed., trans. Günter Gawlick and Lothar Kreimendahl (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1996), § 29.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Halle, 1735), trans. as *Reflections on Poetry*, with the original text, an introduction and notes, by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (University of California Press, 1954), § 1.

<sup>35</sup> Baumgarten, *Meditationes/Reflections*, §§ 115–16.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, 8th ed. (Halle, 1741), § 377.

course more certain in comparison to sensuous knowledge, i.e., more distinct. It can be extended through the cooperation of reason with the senses, allowing sense perception to be organized by a theoretical framework.

But Baumgarten does not care for this demand of cooperation between reason and the senses anymore. He rather intends to reduce the entire approach of Wolff's epistemology to logic and then to come up with a parallel organic, i.e., instrumental, science of sensuous knowledge. It is often emphasized that Baumgarten was especially concerned with the beautiful, the arts, or rather poetry. But it was not at all Baumgarten's intention to reduce aesthetics to poetry or the beautiful. The subjects of this new science should be the concepts of the particular, the unique things, whereas logic would provide only abstract knowledge, which he considered to be less rich and significant.

Among the older generation of Pietists, Baumgarten's re-evaluation of the senses and poetry caused quite some uproar. Neither art nor the beautiful had been the focus of German Pietists before. Poetry was rather a topic of the Wolffians, e.g., of Gottsched, the reformer of German theater. Even the Wertheim translator wrote poems and published about the rules of language.<sup>37</sup> Thus the turn of Baumgarten and his friends to poetry and the beautiful was seen as an appropriation of Wolffianism as well as Wolff's terminology. However, the members of the Baumgarten circle not only read the poetry of the ancients but even produced their own poetry in the style of Anacreon's lyrics. But Meier, defending their new project against older Pietistic critics, makes it quite clear that their re-evaluation of the senses had nothing to do with the body's lust, with the flesh, but only with the lower knowledge of the soul.<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned above, the programmatic *Reflections on Poetry* include many parts, which do not fit into an aesthetics, insofar as it is understood as a philosophy of art or of beauty, namely chapters about prophecy and prediction,<sup>39</sup> mantics, as well as hermeneutic chapters about the interpretation of the Bible. The same is still true of Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*, whose first volume appeared in 1750, and which devotes many pages to the discussion of the art of prediction, prophecy, hermeneutics, the marvelous, and – the parable.<sup>40</sup> The parable and the metaphor were of the greatest importance for the interpretation of those passages of the Old Testament,

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Goldenbaum, "Der Skandal der 'Wertheimer Bibel,'" 366.

<sup>38</sup> Meier defends the re-evaluation of the sensuous knowledge against "einige catonische Sittenlehrer," who associate with the word sensibility "nichts weiter . . . als die Erbsünde, und dasjenige, was die Schrift Fleisch nennt. Da nun das göttliche Gesetz die Creutzigung des Fleisches befiehlt, . . . so gefällt es diesen Herren, durch den Mischmasch ihrer Begriffe verleitet, die Ästhetik mit dem großen Banne zu belegen." Georg Friedrich Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (Halle, 1748), part 1, §22. I owe this citation to the excellent work of Ursula Franke, *Kunst als Erkenntnis: Die Rolle der Sinnlichkeit in der Ästhetik des Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten*, vol. 9, Supplementa, of *Studia Leibnitiana* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1972), 32–33, esp. footnote 71.

<sup>39</sup> Baumgarten, *Meditationes/Reflections*, §§ 60–64.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt/O., 1750), trans. as *Ästhetik*, by Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), § 4.

which had to be interpreted in Christian theology as prophecies of Jesus Christ even though they did not literally mention the savior.

The enthusiasm for the marvelous in poetry was certainly one of the ideas that Baumgarten and his friends shared with Bodmer and Breitinger. And because the marvelous melts in the sun of reason, as could be seen from the translation of the “Wertheim Bible,” it was the senses which had to take care of it.<sup>41</sup> That the real issue with the marvelous was indeed due to Christian religion became absolutely clear in the enthusiastic celebration of Klopstock’s *Messias* in both Zürich and Halle, which initiated a wave of poetic literature à la Klopstock,<sup>42</sup> the so-called *Messiades*, and caused Lessing and his friend Christlob Mylius to pour ironic comments about Meier and Bodmer. Klopstock’s religious poem on the life and the death of the Savior was seen in Zürich, Halle, and by the *Bremer Beiträge* in Leipzig, as *the* model of poetry.

However, Baumgarten’s *Reflections on Poetry* were more than just a new theory of poetics. The new science of aesthetics was to serve the knowledge of the particular and singular. In § 560 of his *Aesthetics*, Baumgarten emphasized this task and contrasted it with the abstract knowledge of reason. It is especially this paragraph that has been quoted ever since the revival of aesthetics in general and of Baumgarten in particular during the 1980s. It fits the anti-rational attitude after 1968 very well. Although it is a correct and congenial enthusiasm, the paragraph is still quite misunderstood. Baumgarten writes:

At least, I believe, it should be clear to philosophers, that all that of special formal perfection, which is included in knowledge and logical truth, could be obtained only at the price of the great and complete loss of material perfection. What else does abstraction mean than loss? [My translation.]

It sounds as though Baumgarten had written this passage for our current critics of reason. This certainly explains the enthusiastic and repeated citation of it. It expresses so well the irritation about reason, the longing for attention to the particular and the frustration with general understanding. But the famous paragraph includes much more than simply a justification of the new science of aesthetics as a philosophy of the rich sensuous knowledge. It concludes with an argument about the central project of Baumgarten, i.e., the metaphysical theory of knowledge on the basis of sensuous perception and induction. These are the tools of the new organic science, which should parallel the Wolffian logic, and thereby reduce Wolff’s epistemology to mere logic. Baumgarten’s new science was not meant to be as modest as he had announced – as a mere completion of Wolffian logic.

Already in § 3 of his *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten claims that aesthetics, i.e., sensuous knowledge, would transcend the limits of distinct knowledge, i.e., even surpass rational knowledge. In fact, he intended to establish an alternative empirical and inductive

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<sup>41</sup>Comp. Ernst Müller, *Ästhetische Religiosität und Kunstreligion in den Philosophien von der Aufklärung bis zum Ausgang des deutschen Idealismus* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2004), 33–63.

<sup>42</sup>Comp. Franz Muncker, *Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock: Geschichte seines Lebens und seiner Schriften* (Stuttgart, 1888), 143–61; Goldenbaum, *Appell an das Publikum*, 71–73.

epistemology and metaphysics for almost all knowledge outside of mathematics and mechanics. It should start with sensuous perceptions and climb to more general concepts through induction. The goal was an approximation to a *material, transcendental, metaphysical truth*, which could never be reached through the mere abstract general concepts of logic.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it was only through aesthetics that we could reach the highest possible knowledge, not through logic.<sup>44</sup> This epistemological project, which Baumgarten worked on until the end of his life, clearly competed with rather than complemented Wolff's epistemology. Moreover, it was an attempt to limit Wolff's entire philosophy to logic and mathematics, and to refer all other sciences to empirical, inductive methods, and thereby deny that reason could contribute to them.<sup>45</sup> It should not come as a surprise that Wolff himself was rather annoyed by these new alleged partisans in Halle, who wanted to crush his philosophy to death by embracing it.<sup>46</sup> He knew they were supported by the moderate Pietistic theologian Reinbeck at the Prussian court, who had been his protector in the battles with Joachim Lange. Consequently, Wolff would not attack them openly.

It is this theological-aesthetical project of Baumgarten, with its emphasis on empirical inductive methods, which caught Kant's interest. He certainly recognized it as an anti-Wolffian, empirical epistemology and metaphysics, because he was familiar with it through his teacher Martin Knutzen. Knutzen wrote in 1747: "General ideas have a greater extension than singular although a narrower or a smaller comprehension."<sup>47</sup> This is exactly the distinction between extensive and intensive clarity, which Baumgarten uses to introduce the extensive clarity of sensuous knowledge produced by aesthetic knowledge, in contrast to the intensive clarity of intellectual and rational knowledge, which is merely logical. Corresponding to this division of knowledge into aesthetics and logic, Baumgarten can celebrate Aristotle's distinction between logically certain truth and aesthetic probability.<sup>48</sup>

Baumgarten discusses this special topic of the truth of aesthetic knowledge in the later sections together with probability. He also thematizes the absolute aesthetic striving for truth in §§ 423–612. There he suddenly introduces the overarching concept of a metaphysical truth, as agreement of sensuous perceptions with the objects themselves, i.e., completely in the tradition of a correspondence theory

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<sup>43</sup>Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle, 1739), §89; Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §560.

<sup>44</sup>Adler and Mirbach both confirm this interpretation. Cf. Hans Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen: Gnoseologie – Ästhetik – Geschichtsphilosophie bei Herder* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), 33; Mirbach, introduction to Baumgarten, *Ästhetik*, xxx.

<sup>45</sup>Comp. Heinrich Schepers, *Rüdigers Methodologie und ihre Voraussetzungen: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Schulphilosophie im 18. Jahrhundert*, vol. 78 of *Kant-Studien: Ergänzungshefte* (Köln: Kölner Universitäts-Verlag, 1959), 47–50, 72–80.

<sup>46</sup>J. C. C. Oelrich, "Tagebuch einer gelehrten Reise 1750, durch einen Theil von Ober- und Niedersachsen," in *Sammlung kurzer Reisebeschreibungen*, ed. Joh. Bernoulli (Berlin/Dessau, 1782), 5:62–63.

<sup>47</sup>Martin Knutzen, *Elementa philosophiae rationalis seu logicae* (Königsberg, 1747), § 72.

<sup>48</sup>Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §579.

of knowledge (in contrast to Wolffian epistemology). This objective, material, transcendental metaphysical truth, is contrasted by Baumgarten with his new concept of subjective truth, which consists in the representation of the objective true in a given soul (§ 424) and is produced by aesthetic knowledge. Then Baumgarten declares at § 557 that the highest truth is only logical and not aestheticological, but no human intellect can ever cognize anything on the level of the highest logical truth because – “anyone who knows any object in such a way, knows at the same time everything.” Baumgarten claims that there is an infinite distance between the *aestheticological* truth, which can be reached by humans, and the highest *logical* truth, which is only available to the omniscient, due to the *malum metaphysicum*. The human being has to be content with aestheticological truth and thus with only a small part of the highest logical truth.

Thus, the epistemological program of Baumgarten’s aesthetics is an attempt to develop a new metaphysics and epistemology as an alternative to Wolff, although it heavily uses Wolff’s terminology and some elements from his logic and psychology. But whereas Wolff provided the tools to extend mathematical and logical, i.e., strictly rational knowledge, to other fields, combining it with experimental and sensuous knowledge, thus pushing the obvious limits of human knowledge further, it was the declared intention of Baumgarten to draw a strict line between that knowledge which is only for the omniscient God and that which is for us. For him, the human capacity for knowledge, due to the fall, was no longer able to grasp the rational knowledge of an objective metaphysical truth, true knowledge of essences. Humans were limited to sensuous knowledge, forming more general notions through rather uncertain induction (§ 477).

To summarize, I see Baumgarten’s aesthetics together with his metaphysics as the attempt to modernize the Protestant Aristotelian school philosophy, which had been in decline due to the overwhelming success of Wolffian philosophy since the 1720s. The re-evaluation of sensuous knowledge by Baumgarten was not in favor of the extension of knowledge through modern science. It served the limitation of reason and restricted absolute knowledge to God, thereby reducing humans to the empirical and uncertain knowledge on the one hand and providing the need for the revelation of truth on the other hand. Baumgarten’s entire alliance was interested in this kind of re-evaluation of the sensuous knowledge, particularly in order to rescue the marvelous from the grip of reason and to establish beautiful thinking as an asylum for the incomprehensible.

Of course, the theologian Alexander Baumgarten was not the first to use beauty or the arts as a vehicle to show that they cannot be grasped by reason but only perceived through our senses. This had been already discussed by the abbé Dubos. He is not only famous for asking for the arousal of the passions, he criticized the modern sciences for overestimating reason and argued that all our knowledge originated from our sensuous experience. Also, the Irish/Scottish theologian Hutcheson came up with a project to show that it is not reason that makes us judge that something is beautiful, but rather the inner sense for beauty, which somehow functions immediately and spontaneously. However, the theologian, Hutcheson, was not actually interested in beauty, but rather in morals and religion. The inner sense for beauty,

which he takes to be possessed by everybody, simply serves him as a parallel for his further reaching claim in his second essay that we also own an inner sense for morals that allows us to spontaneously judge things as morally good or evil, without referring to reason. These two inner senses were of course not related to our common five senses, which we share with the animals, and which are obviously insufficient to judge such lofty subjects like beauty or morals. What these two inner senses shared with the external senses was that neither of them was rational.

I think that Baumgarten had a similar theological intention – although he took a very different theoretical approach – to re-evaluate the senses in order to limit reason. In contrast to Hutcheson, he asked for a new *science* of sensuous knowledge, which should be recognized as having worth independently of the science of reason, i.e., logic. This suggestion that there are two different sciences corresponding to two different faculties of knowledge, reason and the senses, clearly shows that he left the Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology. In contrast, for Leibniz and Wolff, as well as for Bilfinger, the epistemology of the senses had to be closely related to reasoning. The various faculties of the mind were part of the one representing power of the mind.

Having said this, I do not want to deny the mobilizing power of this discussion for the development of a philosophy of art or the understanding of the lower faculty of knowledge in the history of German philosophy and literature. I will gladly acknowledge the great impact of Baumgarten on Kant and his own project to come up with a new science of metaphysics. And certainly I do admit the enormous success and influence of Baumgarten's definition of the poem as a "perfectly sensuous speech"<sup>49</sup> since it was even used by his opponents, Lessing and Mendelssohn (e.g., in their *Pope, ein Metaphysiker!*).<sup>50</sup> I spent so much time presenting the project of aesthetics, as it was conceived by Baumgarten and enthusiastically supported by his allies, in order to contrast it with the very different aesthetic project of Moses Mendelssohn, to whom I will now turn.

## 4 Moses Mendelssohn's Turn to Aesthetics

When Moses Mendelssohn entered the scene in 1755, the discussion between the old generation of Wolffians (Gottsched and friends) and the new generation of Pietists – "the Baumgarten alliance" – was in full swing. It had been fueled by the publication of Klopstock's *Messias* in 1748 and Meier's review of it in book length (!), including nothing but appraisal. The fronts between the camps were by now clear. Everybody knew which journal belonged to which party and which argument had to be understood in light of which partial interests. Lessing had been already recognized as a new independent voice at Berlin and Nicolai had drawn great attention with his vanguard essay concerning the question of whether

<sup>49</sup> Baumgarten, *Meditationes/Reflections*, § 9.

<sup>50</sup> *JubA* 2:49.

Milton had copied his *Paradise Lost* from other authors.<sup>51</sup> However, when Mendelssohn joined the discussion in 1755, he felt rather unfamiliar with the topics of art and beauty as he admitted to his friends. But in 1754, Lessing, Mendelssohn and Nicolai had become friends while discussing the new development in aesthetics and arts, especially in German literature. Thus, Mendelssohn was intrigued by aesthetics and the arts through his new friends.<sup>52</sup> Whereas Nicolai engaged in the aesthetic controversies, Lessing was rather interested in the practical problem of how to produce successful theater plays. He challenged his friends with practical questions: What was needed to engage the audience? What made a theater play great art? Accordingly, Mendelssohn was led to the aesthetic discussion by way of the practical question of what was required for art production as much as by theoretical questions of aesthetics. What he added to this discussion was a solid education in modern European philosophy and science. In addition, he came from a non-Christian background and lacked the common Christian interest in the marvelous and mysterious.

As a result of Mendelssohn's fresh engagement in the aesthetic discussion, he took a completely new approach to the relation of sentiments resp. emotions and reasoning. From his very first statement in the *Dialogues on Sentiments* from 1755, he made the origin of pleasure the *central* sentiment to explain the emotional constitution of human beings. The book soon became a bestseller and was translated into French within the next year. In the year of its publication, Nicolai invited him to become co-editor of his new journal on the beautiful sciences, the *Bibliothek der Schönen Wissenschaften und Künste*. Karl Philip Moritz as well as Goethe would remember this journal in their late age as having made a huge impact on German literature and art due to its well-founded (and still valid) judgements. The journal was repeatedly re-published in book format.

From his earliest turn to the arts and beautiful sciences, it was Mendelssohn's intention to *understand* the functioning of our sentiments, especially that of the beautiful, in relation to our human nature. He was certainly interested in the relation of human reason and the senses. It is typical of his approach to raise the question of why a 4/4 rhythm, which is mathematically the same as 8/8, would make a difference to the musician and also move us emotionally in a different way. How could

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<sup>51</sup> Nicolai, *Untersuchung ob Milton*.

<sup>52</sup> Mendelssohn writes to Lessing: "Ich bin der grübelnden Metaphysik auf einige Zeit untreu geworden. Ich besuche Hrn. Nicolai sehr oft in seinem Garten. . . . Wir lesen Gedichte, Herr Nicolai liest mir seine eigenen Ausarbeitungen vor, ich sitze auf meinem kritischen Richterstuhl, bewundere, lache, billige, tadle, bis der Abend hereinbricht. Dann denken wir noch einmal an Sie, und gehen, mit unserer heutigen Verrichtung zufrieden, voneinander. Ich bekomme einen ziemlichen Ansatz zum Belesprit. Wer weiß, ob ich nicht gar einst Verse mache? Madame Metaphysik mag es mir verzeihen. Sie behauptet, die Freundschaft gründe sich auf eine Gleichheit der Neigungen, und ich finde, daß sich, umgekehrt, die Gleichheit der Neigungen auch auf die Freundschaft gründen könne. Ihre und Nicolais Freundschaft hat es dahin gebracht, daß ich dieser ehrwürdigen Matrone einen Theil meiner Liebe entzogen, und ihn den schönen Wissenschaften geschenkt habe. Unser Freund hat mich sogar zum Mitarbeiter an seiner Bibliothek gewählt, aber ich fürchte, er wird unglücklich gewählt haben" (*JubA* 11:55).



reason and the senses work together and how could they work in different ways? But in addition, he paid attention to the human body as well.

Mendelssohn could not accept Hutcheson's invention of an inner sense out of the blue as an explanation for our perception of the beautiful. He criticized the aesthetic theories of Hutcheson as well as Burke from the beginning, – for begging the question (anticipating Goodman's criticism of aesthetics).<sup>53</sup> Although it is often said that Mendelssohn got his inspiration in aesthetics from the English, he clearly argues against the inner sense:

Let no one refer us to the immediate will of God. Let no one create, along with that English philosopher, a new sense of beauty, which the supreme being, on the basis of wise intentions, was supposed to have placed in our soul, as though by decree. This is the shortest way to cut off the train of rational investigations suddenly and transform nature, the most perfect whole, into a patch work.<sup>54</sup>

Here Mendelssohn certainly agrees with Spinoza's rejection of the mere will of God as a possible explanation for anything in the world. Spinoza called this type of argument the "Asylum of ignorance."<sup>55</sup> However, Mendelssohn addressed the problem with Leibniz's sophisticated reconciliation of final and efficient causes. Although God created the world according to his goals (or his will) thus allowing for final causes (very different from Spinoza) God did so by using efficient causes. While we cannot know the final causes or the will of God, we are able to discover the efficient causes to some extent and can improve our knowledge continuously. As a result, we can discover a coherent structure in our world with no gaps as far as we can see. Although Spinoza rejected any final causes and even any will for God, Leibniz and Mendelssohn can agree with him about a coherent world as brought about through efficient causes alone. Mendelssohn stated:

The system of divine intentions must be distinguished from the system of efficient causes. The most perfect craftsman knows how to fulfill the wisest intentions through the wisest means. His wisdom has chosen the best final purpose but, through the wisest arrangement of the efficient causes, he has also made it a reality. Hence, if the benevolent creator has found it to be in keeping with his intentions that human beings should take satisfaction in beauty, then he will have also let their souls be of such a constitution that this satisfaction flows naturally from it and can be intelligently explained on the basis of it.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, Mendelssohn consciously distanced himself from the English empiricists, who denied the possibility for a rational explanation of aesthetic judgements. For him, the true philosopher "considers the matter further and finds the most precise kinship between reason and experience, something that frequently is to be found

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<sup>53</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 241–52.

<sup>54</sup> *JubA* 1:169; Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 171.

<sup>55</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, 408–617 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 1, appendix.

<sup>56</sup> *JubA* 1:169; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 171.



only with difficulty, though it is always at hand.”<sup>57</sup> The mere fact that we do not yet know how things are brought about does not mean that they could not be explained in the future. Thus, from the very beginning, Mendelssohn, in agreement with his friends, did not spoil the striving of the other camp for the marvelous, nor did he look for incomprehensible inner senses, which just happened to be capable of recognizing beauty – he wanted to *understand and to explain* how we recognize beauty, how we can justify our aesthetic judgement, and how this is different from rational judgement – by merely natural causes.

Of course, Mendelssohn did study Baumgarten, Bodmer, Klopstock and the English authors and learned from them. He also learned from the French, especially from Dubos and Batteux. However, he constructed his own theory, on the basis of Leibniz and Wolff, and to some extent, I will argue, on Spinoza. He was confirmed in this approach by his friend Lessing. When Lessing suggested, in February 1758, the English authors to Mendelssohn, he did so only in respect to their empirical material, their descriptions of emotions. The aesthetic theory, Lessing urged his friend, he had to work out himself.<sup>58</sup>

Mendelssohn started his project of understanding the human emotions with the idea of a unique human capacity to experience pleasure, and asked for an explanation of “all different degrees and modifications of this satisfaction and dissatisfaction, all our inclinations and passions” from one “fundamental capacity to love and to abhor things.”<sup>59</sup> He assumed that it must be possible to reduce the sentiments of the beautiful and the sublime, as well as the different effects of various objects of the sentiment of the beautiful, and the different rules for the various arts to the very nature of the human mind and its basic capacity for cognition and emotion. Therefore, Mendelssohn understood the aesthetic investigation at the same time as a way to conceive of the functions of the human soul. In *On the Main Principles of the Fine Art and Science* he said:

Each rule of beauty is at the same time a psychological discovery. For, since it contains a prescription of the conditions under which a beautiful object can have the best effect on our mind, it must be possible for the rule to be derived from the nature of the human spirit and explained on the basis of its properties.<sup>60</sup>

Confronting Baumgarten’s and Meier’s emphasis on the obscure and the confused in the sensation of beauty with the traditional acknowledgement of the spiritual character of beauty, Mendelssohn raised the interesting question of whether there are even “sensuous gratifications which are utterly incompatible with any representation of perfection?”<sup>61</sup> This question, raised by Mendelssohn in his very first approach to aesthetics in 1755, had never entered the mind of either Baumgarten or Meier. Mendelssohn pointed to the sensual lusts of the body, which do not seem to

<sup>57</sup> *JubA* 1:402; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 147.

<sup>58</sup> Lessing to Mendelssohn on February 18, 1758, in Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 11.1:276.

<sup>59</sup> *JubA* 1:168; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 170.

<sup>60</sup> *JubA* 1:427; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 169.

<sup>61</sup> *JubA* 1:81; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 44.

be in agreement with any perfection. He clearly discussed the French authors whose works were easily available in the Berlin of Frederick the Great and were extensively reviewed in the Berlin periodicals. He also referred to them when he mentioned those philosophers who considered drunkenness of the senses as the only cause of pleasure, i.e., the motion and excitation of the nerves. Thus, Mendelssohn clearly admitted that the lust of the body is indeed pleasure, but he also drew attention to the experience of pleasure in mere rational cognition, in the knowledge of truth as well as in the fulfillment of our duties. Even a mathematician could feel intense pleasure after having solved a problem.<sup>62</sup>

Asking, how all these different kinds of pleasure could be explained by one theoretical approach, Mendelssohn concluded that this question could not be answered exclusively in terms of the obscure sensations of the body or of the rational understanding of the mind. Nor could it be the privilege of the lower faculty of cognition either. Mendelssohn looked for a common ground for all these kinds of human pleasure. Obviously, the common ground of human pleasure had to be something that both, body and soul, had in common. This common ground of sensual and mental pleasure, Mendelssohn discovered in the *transition to a higher perfection* either of the body (whereof the soul felt a more agreeable state of its spouse, its body) or of the soul (whereof the body sensed an effect in its tone, in its general mood spreading into all its parts).<sup>63</sup> I take Mendelssohn's approach to be a clear adoption of Spinoza's theory of affects, where Spinoza defines the affect of pleasure precisely as the affect that expresses the transition to higher perfection notwithstanding of the body or the soul.<sup>64</sup> Mendelssohn is quite outspoken in his argument:

If a limb or part of the human body is then stimulated ever so gently by a sensuous object, the effect reproduces itself from that point to the most distant limb. All vessels are ordered into a wholesome tension, the harmonious tone that furthers the human's body's activity and is conducive to its survival. After the enjoyment of [some measured] ecstatic [trunken] rapture, the play of vital movements of every sort proceeds more freely and lively. Wholesome perspiration, the body's dew, wells up in a continuous stream and at this moment, according to Sanctorius, produces the greatest wonders. This is undeniable testimony that, after enjoying some sensuous rapture, the body feels well and a harmonious tone is produced in it.<sup>65</sup>

This willingness to take the body's pleasure into account clearly distinguishes Mendelssohn from Baumgarten and Meier as well as from Leibniz. He shares this view with Spinoza though. Thus, if any philosopher in German philosophy deserves the title of having re-evaluated the senses in the full sense of the word, it is Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn treated this sensual pleasure of the body as a transition

<sup>62</sup> *JubA* 1:91; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 54.

<sup>63</sup> *JubA* 1:83; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 46.

<sup>64</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, parts 3 and 4, esp. 3, prop. 11, schol.; comp. Ursula Goldenbaum, "Mendelssohns philosophischer Einstieg in die schönen Wissenschaften: Zu einer ästhetischen Rezeption Spinozas," in *Die Philosophie und die Belles-Lettres*, ed. Martin Fontius and Werner Schneiders, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1996), 62–79.

<sup>65</sup> *JubA* 1:81; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 45.

to higher perfection and it can happen “before the part of the human being that thinks intermingles in that play.”<sup>66</sup> As examples from experience, Mendelssohn was not shy in listing the following bodily pleasures: “The enjoyment of love and wine . . . do they need the help of your thoughts to induce perspiring . . .? . . . it will feel an improvement, a transition to higher perfection.” Notwithstanding this appraisal of bodily joys, Mendelssohn still admitted that they were not always morally praiseworthy.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, in the moment the body experienced joy it *did* transform to higher perfection, meaning an improved constitution of the body. However, Mendelssohn was not yet interested in moral questions, because he was still looking for a common ground for the pleasure of the body and the mind.

Mendelssohn came up with a general theory of three different kinds of human pleasure, which could all be reduced to the transition of the subject to greater perfection: (1) the sensual pleasure of his/her body; (2) beauty as the sensed unity of the manifold, grasped by the lower part of our cognition; and, (3) the pleasure of the mental activity to cognize a thing’s inner connections, the happiness that his/her soul can conceive such sublime things,<sup>68</sup> related to our reason. He then correlated the sensual lust of the body, its transition to higher perfection, to the obscure ideas of the soul and the perfection of the mind to distinct ideas. But neither a distinct nor an obscure idea could correspond to beauty. Nothing could deserve the name of beauty that would not fall *at once* into our senses, being clear but un-distinct, i.e., confuse ideas. It is here that Mendelssohn agreed with Leibniz and Wolff and to this extent with Baumgarten. With this definition that beauty has to be grasped by our senses at once, Mendelssohn could also distinguish between beauty and the sublime, whereby the latter would be either sensuously immense in terms of its extension or immeasurable in terms of its power. The reception of Mendelssohn’s concept of the sublime by Kant is evident.<sup>69</sup>

According to Mendelssohn’s general theory, the body and both the lower and higher faculties of the mind are closely connected without influencing each other. They rather correspond and express each other as in Spinoza and (although in a quite different way) in Leibniz. However, the obscure, confuse or distinct ideas can be transformed into each other. Each clear but confused idea can be made clear and distinct. However, in doing so, its agreeable sensation of beauty is lost. Likewise, each rationally conceived appearance can be perceived as beautiful, but at the loss of its distinctness. One could illustrate this change of approach by a photo camera zooming closely to a detail and then moving back to picture something in its totality. Spinoza used the example of a human hand, which appears as beautiful to our eyes but loses its beauty as soon as it is studied under a microscope.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *JubA* 1:83; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> *JubA* 1:83; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 46.

<sup>68</sup> *JubA* 1:529.

<sup>69</sup> Comp. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, in vol. 5 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1913), 248–66, with Mendelssohn, *JubA* 1:191–218; *JubA* 1:459–61; *Philosophical Writings*, 192–96.

<sup>70</sup> Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Steven Barbone, Lee Rice, and Jacob Adler (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), Letter 54.

It could be said that Mendelssohn followed Baumgarten, at least in his understanding of the second kind of human pleasure, beauty. And it is true that Mendelssohn as well as Lessing adopted Baumgarten's definition of the poem as sensuous perfect discourse. They even extended it to all sentiments of beauty. To be sure, Mendelssohn took the works of Baumgarten and Meier seriously. However, he disagreed from the beginning (together with Lessing) with their focus on the marvelous and their uncritical appraisal of the *Epopee* due to this emphasis. That is where Mendelssohn criticized Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, although he did so in his usual modest way.<sup>71</sup> However, anyone who knows how central the *Epopee* was to the most furious debate about Klopstock's publication of the *Messias*,<sup>72</sup> defended, nay celebrated by Meier, imitated by Bodmer, and attacked by Gottsched, can appreciate Mendelssohn's modest but well founded critique of Baumgarten.

Mendelssohn picked up on the fact that Baumgarten made clear and confused ideas the level of knowledge that is related to beauty. However, he re-appropriated this position and incorporated it back into the philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff by insisting on the continuity of obscure, confused, clear and confused, and distinct ideas.<sup>73</sup> Also, Mendelssohn did not follow Baumgarten in his overestimation of the senses for human knowledge in general, including metaphysics. He wanted to understand how the human soul functioned and give the right place to the senses as well as to reason. Leibniz himself had used clear and confused ideas to address the problem of judgements about artworks but he never went any further to explore aesthetic problems.<sup>74</sup> Thus, while Mendelssohn stuck with Leibniz and Wolff and preserved the continuity between the two faculties of our one capacity for knowing ideas, Baumgarten and Meier took the two faculties apart, a move that would be continued by Kant with his radical separation of the two faculties of knowledge.

The great structural similarity between Spinoza's theory of affects and Leibniz' theory of perceptions, taken up by both Christian Wolff in his psychology and by Tschirnhaus in his *Medicina mentis*, explains the ease with which the Wolffian Mendelssohn could use Spinoza's principles and adapt them to his Wolffian approach without stumbling. On the other hand, it makes it somewhat difficult to distinguish

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn's review of the second volume of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1758, in *JubA* 4:263–75, quotation from 275.

<sup>72</sup> See Muncker, *Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock*, 143–61; compare Goldenbaum, *Lessing contra Cramer*, 666–67.

<sup>73</sup> I would like to thank Matthew McAndrew for allowing me to use his yet unpublished essay *Baumgarten's Theory of Cognitive Perfection* for my paper. In this essay he shows how Baumgarten has to come up with a new normative measure of progress of knowledge after paralleling the sensuous/confused and the distinct knowledge which no longer allows distinct knowledge to simply be the higher form. He will find such a new norm in the *significance* of knowledge instead of Leibniz's and Wolff's *distinctness*. McAndrew is the only author to my knowledge, who discusses Baumgarten's difficulties resulting from this change due to his re-evaluation of the senses.

<sup>74</sup> See Leibniz, "Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis," in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe. Akademie Ausgabe* (Darmstadt: Reichl, 1923–; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag), 6.4:585–92; Leibniz, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," in Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker, 291–95 (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969).

between the two theoretical approaches as Cassirer has pointed out.<sup>75</sup> However, aside from the untypical attention that Mendelssohn pays to the body, which interests neither Leibniz nor Baumgarten and Meier, and the understanding of pleasure as the *transition* of the body and the soul to higher perfection, Spinoza's greatest influence on Mendelssohn's aesthetics can be seen in his explanation of mixed affects. Spinoza, who explained all emotions as an expression of the individual's transition to either greater or lesser perfection, which is measured by its conatus to persevere in its being, acknowledged two main affects beside the conatus itself: pleasure and sadness. However, nobody can ever experience pure sadness or pure pleasure. They can only experience mixed affects, which are composed of many affects that all depend on their subject as well as on the individual's surrounding and its interactions.<sup>76</sup>

Mendelssohn as the first solid student after Leibniz of Spinoza's theory of affects in the German language knew him very well even before he got involved with aesthetics. He adopted Spinoza's theory of affects and developed an aesthetic theory on its basis. It allowed him to come up with aesthetic judgements of amazing soundness concerning contemporary artwork and poetry. While the aesthetic judgements of Meier and Baumgarten, Bodmer and Breitingner and certainly those of Kant have been rightly forgotten, Mendelssohn's aesthetic judgements about contemporary art have aged well. But above all, it is Mendelssohn's theory of mixed emotions that allowed him to develop his theory of the sublime in close connection with his explanation of beauty, as a composed emotion.<sup>77</sup> This theory was immediately adopted and described by his friend Lessing in his writings on theater and aesthetics. He referred to it in his *Laokoon* as well as in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.<sup>78</sup> He also used this theory while working on his plays. This shows that Mendelssohn's theory was ready to be applied to real art production.

I have shown elsewhere that Lessing knew about the Spinozistic background of Mendelssohn's aesthetics.<sup>79</sup> It is often overlooked how well Mendelssohn already studied and understood Spinoza in 1755. The thesis of Mendelssohn's earliest publication that Leibniz had developed his pre-established harmony as a result of his critical discussion with Spinoza is currently on its way to being acknowledged by many Leibniz scholars after a long period of ignorance and rejection that lasted 200 years.

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (Marburg: Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1902), 520.

<sup>76</sup> See Spinoza's *Ethics*, part 3, esp. the last paragraph before the General Definition of the Emotions or Affects.

<sup>77</sup> Comp. Carsten Zelle, "Angenehmes Grauen": *literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), 315–58.

<sup>78</sup> Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 5.2:165 and 6:225, 440–42.

<sup>79</sup> Comp. Goldenbaum, "Mendelssohns philosophischer Einstieg," 53–79; Goldenbaum, "Mendelssohns schwierige Beziehung zu Spinoza," in *Spinoza im Deutschland des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts: Zur Erinnerung an Hans-Christian Lucas*, ed. Eva Schürmann, Norbert Waszek and Frank Weinreich (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 2002), 265–317.

The literature about the German *Pantheismusstreit*, following the judgement of Hegel, Jacobi, and their disciples, is full of contempt for Mendelssohn's lack of understanding of Spinoza and even of Lessing. His critics even claimed that he never read Spinoza's *Ethics* in full and only knew the translation of the first part that was included in the edition of Wolff's *Theologia naturalis* (1741). This is still repeated in contemporary research.<sup>80</sup> However, Mendelssohn quoted from the original Latin of Spinoza's *Ethics* and translated his quotations himself. Alexander Altmann rightly emphasized how natural it must have been for a Jewish intellectual in the middle of the eighteenth century to study Spinoza and to take him as a role model.<sup>81</sup> In fact, Mendelssohn was the first philosopher in Europe who paid due respect to Spinoza's philosophy in public.

Of course, Spinoza was present in the earlier German discussion, contrary to the common judgements following Hegel and Jacobi. However, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, it was the *Theologico-political Treatise*, which had been read and criticized. In contrast to clandestine literature in France, it has been reviewed in German journals and thus discussed *within* the country. Wolff had then offered an objective and systematic critique of the first part of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Mendelssohn gave him credit for that. Also, it was a Wolffian who first provided a German translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*.<sup>82</sup> It remained the only German translation and almost the only edition of the *Ethics* available in 1785 when the famous *Pantheismusstreit* occurred.<sup>83</sup> The translator was no one other than Johann Lorenz Schmidt, the infamous translator of the "Wertheim Bible," who was slandered by Immanuel Pyra and Georg Friedrich Meier, but admired and highly regarded by Moses Mendelssohn. The latter knew and owned the "Wertheim Bible"<sup>84</sup> and clearly learned from it for his own translation of the Pentateuch. Even more, he learned his strategy as well as his aesthetic arguments from the public debate about this book.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Comp., e.g., Kurt Christ, *Jacobi und Mendelssohn: Eine Analyse des Spinozastreits* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1988), 17.

<sup>81</sup> See Alexander Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung: Studien zur Metaphysik und politischen Theorie Moses Mendelssohns* (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982), 29; comp. *JubA* 3.2:188.

<sup>82</sup> B. v. S[pinoza], *Sittenlehre, widerleget von dem berühmten Weltweisen unserer Zeit Christian Wolf*, trans. from Latin [by Johann Lorenz Schmidt] (Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1744).

<sup>83</sup> Comp. Ursula Goldenbaum, "Die erste deutsche Übersetzung von Spinozas 'Ethik' durch Johann Lorenz Schmidt," in *Spinoza in der europäischen Geistesgeschichte*, ed. Hanna Delf, Julius H. Schoeps and Manfred Walther (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1994), 107–25.

<sup>84</sup> I would like to thank Gideon Freudenthal who pointed me to this fact. Cf. *Verzeichniß der auserlesenen Büchersammlung des seeligen Moses Mendelssohn* (1786), reprint, ed. Hermann Meyer (Berlin: F. A. Brockhaus, 1926), in quarto: N. 254.

<sup>85</sup> Mendelssohn's deep awareness of the troubles one could enter by such a learned project as a translation becomes evident from his warnings toward the school principal at Berlin, Damm, who intended to publish his translation of the Greek New Testament, see *JubA* 22:27.

## 5 Summary

To be sure, both of the groups I have described, whose respective main theorists were Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, re-evaluated the senses and used Wolffian terminology. However, Baumgarten focused on the senses as that faculty of cognition which was capable of grasping the marvelous and the rationally incomprehensible. He paid attention to metaphorical language, to parables, since they were especially important for the way that poetry worked, and at the same time, for the way how religious activities such as prayers and sermons and the biblical text itself functioned. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, tried to find a general theory of human emotions in relation to the human nature that is constituted by body and mind. He was not bothered by the *interaction* of reason and the lower faculty of cognition. He was eager to find the reason for our enjoyment of beauty and to discover the rules for the production of art. Whereas Baumgarten used the prevailing Wolffian terminology, above all that of Wolff's psychology, Mendelssohn kept the whole framework of Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy and even made – silent – use of Spinoza's theory of affects to develop his own aesthetics. The different questions Baumgarten and Mendelssohn tried to answer produced very different theories, which could only be overlooked from the prejudiced perspective taken by the partisans of Kant's aesthetics.

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# Chapter 17

## Mendelssohn's Response to Burke on the Sublime

Aaron Koller

Even if the author's principles aren't good for much, his book is still unusually useful as a collection of all the happenings and perceptions which philosophers must accept without argument in the course of these investigations . . . [and] no one will better know how to use them than you.<sup>1</sup>

With this comment, Lessing presented to his friend Mendelssohn a copy of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. By all accounts,<sup>2</sup> Lessing did not underestimate the impact Burke's work would have on Mendelssohn's thought. But what exactly was this impact? It is commonly believed that Burke's treatment of the sublime pushed Mendelssohn toward a decisive break from his early Wolffian perfection-aesthetic and toward the supposedly "emotionalistic" aesthetic of the sublime in his later writings.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I challenge that reading. Just as Lessing expected, Mendelssohn vehemently resisted Burke's

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<sup>1</sup>"Doch, wenn schon des Verfassers Grundsätze nicht viel taugen, so ist sein Buch doch als eine Sammlung aller Eräugnungen und Wahrnehmungen, die der Philosoph bey dergleichen Untersuchungen als unstreitig annehmen muß, ungemein brauchbar . . . die niemand besser zu brauchen wissen wird, als Sie," Lessing to Mendelssohn, February 18, 1758, in vol. 11 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–), 178. Hereafter cited as *JubA* and volume number, followed by a colon and page number. All translations are my own, unless indicated differently.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Friedrich Braitmeier, *Geschichte der Poetischen Theorie und Kritik von den Diskursen: Der Maler bis auf Lessing* (Frauenfelds, 1888), 146, 171; Klaus-Werner Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Aufklärungsästhetik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Herbert Grundmann, 1984), 34, 38; *JubA* 1:400.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Fritz Bamberger, introduction to *JubA* 1:xliv–xlv. For an opposed reading, which broadly concurs with my own, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221–24.

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general theory of the sublime even while accepting his examples and observations as noncontentious data. Burke induced Mendelssohn to flesh out his view rather than to transform it, and under this influence Mendelssohn developed a plausible but incomplete theory of the sublime.

## 1 The Initial Clash

When Mendelssohn first read Burke's *Enquiry*, he had already written his own treatise on the sublime, "Betrachtungen über das Erhabene und das Naïve in den schönen Wissenschaften" (hereafter "Das Erhabene").<sup>4</sup> In that work, Mendelssohn claims that a thing is sublime which "is capable of arousing wonder through its extraordinary degree of perfection," and that the sublime in the arts specifically<sup>5</sup> "consists in the sensible expression of such a perfection that arouses wonder."<sup>6</sup> Since Mendelssohn understood beauty as sensible perfection, he basically took the sublime to be the extraordinarily beautiful, although the requirement that it produce wonder meant that it must be novel and presented suddenly.<sup>7</sup>

According to the Wolffian tradition in which Mendelssohn worked, perfection is not an occult, transcendent, unanalyzable or irreducibly individual property. Instead, it is the fundamental, law-governed character of a thing such that the existence and arrangement of its various parts are explained through the whole according to universal principles.<sup>8</sup> Since reason cognizes the universal connections among things,<sup>9</sup> Mendelssohn was attempting to give a theory of the sublime which made it *in principle* amenable to rational analysis. Of course, as he had already argued concerning beauty in his *Über die Empfindungen*, we do not find the analysis of the beautiful or sublime itself pleasurable, since pleasure is intuitive and the intuition of a manifold

<sup>4</sup>The work was pending publication. See Mendelssohn's letter to Lessing, October 25, 1757, *JubA* 11:164.

<sup>5</sup>In this early treatise Mendelssohn does not seem to consider natural sensible objects, but there is no particular reason to exclude them from sensibly expressing some great perfection.

<sup>6</sup>"... wenn sie durch ihren außerordentlichen Grad der Vollkommenheit Bewunderung zu erregen fähig ist . . . Daher wird das Erhabene in den schönen Künsten und Wissenschaften, in dem sinnlichen Ausdruck einer solchen Vollkommenheit, die Bewunderung erregt, bestehen müssen." *JubA* 1:193–94.

<sup>7</sup>*JubA* 1:196.

<sup>8</sup>Christian Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École et al., vol. 2.3 (reprint 1736 edition; Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), §503; Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt, der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1.2 (reprint 1751 edition; Hildesheim: Olms, 1983), §152 (hereafter *Metaphysik*); Alexander Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1963), §§94–95.

<sup>9</sup>Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2.5 (reprint 1738 edition; Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), §483; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§640–41.

is necessarily confused for human beings.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, rational analysis enhances our pleasure, and the feeling is even partly grounded in our distinct understanding of the object; after all, the object of our pleasurable intuition is the very same perfection that we discover through the more tedious analysis. This is why, as Mendelssohn writes a bit later, "What concerns pleasant sentiment is an effect of perfection . . . even it can be analyzed . . . The pleasant sensation is in the soul nothing other than the clear but confused intuition of perfection."<sup>11</sup>

In Burke's work, Mendelssohn encountered both a background theory of aesthetics and a view of the sublime radically different from this. Where Mendelssohn, the rationalist, attempted to give an account of the beautiful and sublime primarily based on the rational property of perfection in the object,<sup>12</sup> Burke denied any role to perfection.<sup>13</sup> He focused instead on the emotional effects that the objects produce in us, which he held were simple and unanalyzable.<sup>14</sup> While Mendelssohn, following Boileau and pseudo-Longinus, takes the paragon case of the sublime to be the Biblical "let there be light" and chooses examples of the sublime involving feelings of amazement, soaring elation, deep despair, or pity, Burke's examples focus on pain, fear, danger, darkness, rawness, and disorder. In Burke's view, "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime."<sup>15</sup> Burke also holds that the sublime differs from the beautiful in kind, and although in his view the sublime is based on terror, he nonetheless sets the sublime above the beautiful in its effect on us as well as its general significance.<sup>16</sup> These stark differences in perspective initially led Mendelssohn to admit to Lessing: "Perhaps I do not properly grasp [Burke's] thoughts, because it is still unknown to me what he understands by beautiful and sublime."<sup>17</sup>

Despite the incongruity in their attitudes and favored examples, the two philosophers shared a more fundamental view about the sublime as we actually experience it: both agreed, as Boileau had influentially put it, that the sublime is something

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<sup>10</sup> *JubA* 1:50.

<sup>11</sup> "Was die angenehme Empfindung betrifft; so ist sie eine Wirkung der Vollkommenheit . . . allein sie läßt sich zergliedern . . . Die angenehme Empfindung ist in der Seele nichts anders, als klare, aber undeutliche Anschauen der Vollkommenheit," *JubA* 1:404–5.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that the subjective act of cognizing the object does not also come into play, as it had already even in Wolff's work, e.g., *Psychologia Empirica*, *GW* 2.5, §532. But for Mendelssohn, the pleasure of the sublime nonetheless requires some basis in the perfection of the object, *JubA* 1:193.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), §3.10.

<sup>14</sup> "Pain and pleasure are simple ideas, incapable of definition," Burke, *Enquiry*, §1.2. For Mendelssohn's explicit rejection of this idea, see his 1758 commentary on Burke in *JubA* 3.1:237.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, §2.2.

<sup>16</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, §3.27, §1.7.

<sup>17</sup> "Vielleicht weil ich seine Gedanken nicht recht begriffen, weil mir noch unbekannt ist, was er unter schön und erhaben verstehe," Mendelssohn to Lessing, February 27, 1758, *JubA* 11:182.

“extraordinary and marvelous that strikes us . . . and makes a work elevate, ravish, and transport us.”<sup>18</sup> Experience showed that Mendelssohn and Burke’s examples of the sublime could both be powerfully moving in just this way, producing a feeling at least somewhat wonder-like, as well as a sort of pleasurable thrill in the body. Thus the objects of their respective inquiries were not really so different after all. But Burke’s account, unlike Mendelssohn’s, placed the sublime in the realm of fundamentally unanalyzable passions, outside the jurisdiction of reason. This was not lost on Mendelssohn, who quickly came to recognize the significant threat that Burke’s theory posed – not just to rationalist aesthetics, but to the project of Enlightenment rationalism in general. Certainly it was true, as Mendelssohn complained, that Burke was unfamiliar with Wolffian philosophy and did not give direct arguments against it.<sup>19</sup> Yet Burke’s vivid descriptions of actual emotional experience were compelling in their own right, and required a response.

Mendelssohn had already addressed this empiricist perspective to some extent in his *Über die Empfindungen*, but Burke pressed his case much harder than Euphranor,<sup>20</sup> particularly with respect to the role of negative passions and experiences characteristic of the sublime.<sup>21</sup> For Burke, our greatest and most profound pleasures arise from fear, darkness, rawness, and pain. But in the Wolffian tradition, the feeling of pain is explained as the intuition of imperfection, fear and other negative emotions as modifications of pain, and darkness as a cognitive imperfection. In other words, these emotions arise from the consideration of disorderly objects whose parts are not governed by rules of the whole. That they could be pleasurable, as Burke not only claimed but also vividly described, seemed to run directly counter to rationalist psychology. Mendelssohn’s first task, therefore, was to reconcile Burke’s descriptions of these seemingly negative pleasures with his own view that pleasure is the intuition of perfection.

There are in general two ways to read Mendelssohn’s attempt at reconciliation. First, one could read Mendelssohn as accepting the Burkean sublime objects and psychology largely on Burke’s terms. On this reading, which I will call the “weak” reading, Mendelssohn handles the Burkean sublime entirely through his new theory

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<sup>18</sup>“Cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe . . . et qui fait qu’un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte,” Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Oeuvres de Boileau*, ed. M. Amar (Paris, 1824), 3:10.

<sup>19</sup>Mendelssohn to Lessing, February 27, 1758, *JubA* 11:181.

<sup>20</sup>Euphranor is the youthful character in the correspondence who defends a sensualist/emotionalist perspective on aesthetic pleasure.

<sup>21</sup>Euphranor does raise the issue of pleasure in terror in the eighth letter: “It is no more the beautiful nature; no! The fearsome, terrible nature. And you find pleasure in it!” (*JubA* 1:74). But, perhaps because of this particular example chosen – of a depiction of sailors trying to resist terrible nature, rather a direct experience of terrible nature – Euphranor lets Palemon get away with an inadequate explanation, namely, that “every painful delight of which pity has no part grounds itself on nothing but the skill of the performing person or animal” (*JubA* 1:108). As discussed below, Mendelssohn recognized the inadequacy of this response already in 1756.

of “mixed sentiments.”<sup>22</sup> According to that theory, we can take pleasure even in imperfect objects because the positive activity of our minds involved in considering them counts as a subjective perfection. So even though a massively raw mountain or a threatening storm might be highly imperfect in itself, we can still take pleasure in viewing it simply because it provides an occasion for vigorous mental activity.<sup>23</sup> The “aesthetic illusion” created by artistic representations of such objects further distances us from the objective imperfection, so that we are left free to enjoy our subjective activity.<sup>24</sup> Such a subjective-tending view about the sublime is plausibly understood as an anticipation of Kant's full-blow subjectivism.<sup>25</sup>

According to the other reading, which I will label the “strong” reading, Mendelssohn retained the core of his original view that pleasure in the sublime is primarily based on great objective perfection. He sought ways to account for Burke's examples and observations within the framework of the rational-perfection theory. The strong approach does not exclude the theory of mixed sentiments from partially explaining the feeling of the sublime, but it retains the idea that the sublime is always based on an extremely great objective perfection. In the remainder of the paper, I defend the strong reading against the weak reading on both exegetical and substantive grounds.

## 2 The Early Response to Burke

The unpublished 1758 work “Anmerkungen zu Burkes Enquiry,” among Mendelssohn's earliest written responses to Burke, clearly illustrates Mendelssohn's struggle to preserve his basic view in “Das Erhabene.” Through a series of reflections claimed to be written “as I thought of them,”<sup>26</sup> Mendelssohn first attempts to reconcile with Burke's concept of the sublime by suggesting that it may be a more specific category, namely the so-called “sublime in the passions.”<sup>27</sup> But this suggestion is implausible, because Mendelssohn's examples of “sublime in the passions”

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<sup>22</sup>The correspondence with Nicolai and Lessing shows that this theory was already under development when Mendelssohn first read Burke, but it likely continued to percolate in Mendelssohn's mind until its publication as part of the *Rhapsodie* in 1761. Nonetheless, Mendelssohn rather unjustifiably credits Burke for its invention in the same work. See Mendelssohn to Lessing, March 2, 1757, in which Mendelssohn (apparently) rightly credits his friend for the basis of this thought (*JubA* 11:108). The idea of “mixed sentiments” is also quite explicit in Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, *GW* 2.5, §§526–29, and it is curious that Mendelssohn considers it such an innovation. Most likely, Mendelssohn meant to praise Burke for illustrating the wide implications of the kernel he had received from Lessing, and perhaps for prompting him to publish it as a comprehensive theory.

<sup>23</sup>For this reading, see Bamberger, *JubA* 1:xlili–xliv. Bamberger regards this development as a great improvement in Mendelssohn's theory.

<sup>24</sup>Segreff, *Aufklärungsästhetik*, 36.

<sup>25</sup>E.g., Bamberger, *JubA* 1:xlvii.

<sup>26</sup>Mendelssohn, *JubA* 3.1:253.

<sup>27</sup>*JubA* 3.1:238.



involve third-person depictions of strong passions, e.g., of Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex*, not the more immediate, first-person passions evoked by a threatening storm or overhanging mountain peak. It is also unhelpful, because it does nothing to account for the imperfection allegedly lying at the basis of these examples. Fortunately, by the time he had reached the conclusion of his Commentary, Mendelssohn had hit on an improved response, which runs as follows:

Some representations are primary sublime, insofar as they present wonder-worthy perfections, but others are merely secondary sublime, insofar as they cause that the representation affects us more strongly, and suddenly rushes over us, or insofar as they manage to achieve in some mechanical fashion a thrill in the outer limbs. For since the sudden enrapture of the attention in the soul is connected with a thrill in the outer limbs of the body, they must reciprocally bring forth each other, as was noticed about all effects and causes in animal nature. As in my treatise [“Das Erhabene”], I would seek the originally sublime solely in wonder [*Bewunderung*]. The secondary sublime, or the means of encouraging of the sublime, I would ascribe to all representations which are terrible, wild, raw, monstrous and such like, and at this opportunity [if I were now to write a treatise on the sublime] I would make use of the excellent comments of our author [Burke], and seek to connect them with my general principles.<sup>28</sup>

As the passage makes clear, Mendelssohn did not initially consider Burke’s sublime to be a new, separate, and independent kind of sublime. Instead, he aimed to subordinate the Burkean concept to his own. The sorts of things Burke took to be sublime were according to Mendelssohn only *means* for promoting the Mendelssohnian “primary” sublime, and they work in two ways: by “framing” the object so that it produces a greater psychological effect, and by directly causing the same physical effects which are normally produced when we contemplate something sublime. The idea that the bodily effects of the sublime could be produced directly was actually suggested by Burke in his discussion of terror, which Mendelssohn praises.<sup>29</sup> Along with the first part of the strategy, this opens up a way for Mendelssohn to explain how the Burkean examples were significantly *related* to the sublime, without admitting them as being sublime in their own right. Mendelssohn concludes the passage by suggesting that the value of Burke’s “excellent comments” lies in the “use” to which they could be put in promoting the sublime of perfection, i.e., the sublime according to “my general principles.”

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<sup>28</sup>“... einige Vorstellungen primarie erhaben wären, in so weit sie bewundernswürdige Vollkommenheiten darstellen, andere aber blos secundarie, in so weit sie verursachen, daß die Vorstellung heftiger wirkt, und uns plötzlich übereilt, oder in so weit sie irgend auf eine mechanische Weise ein Schauern in den äußern Gliedmaßen zuwege bringen. Denn da die plötzliche Hinreißung der Aufmerksamkeit in der Seele, mit dem Schauern in den äußern Gliedmaßen des Körpers verknüpft ist; so müssen sie wechselweise einander hervorbringen, wie solches von allen Wirkungen und Ursachen in der animalischen Natur bemerkt worden. Das ursprünglich Erhabene, würde ich, wie in meiner Abhandlung, bloß in der Bewunderung suchen. Das secundarie Erhabene, oder die Beförderungsmittel des Erhabenen, würde ich allen Vorstellungen zuschreiben, die schrecklich, wild, rau, ungeheuer und dergleichen sind, und bey dieser Gelegenheit würde ich mich der vortrefflichen Anmerkungen unsers Verfassers bedienen, und sie mit meinen allgemeinen Grundsätzen zu verbinden suchen,” *JubA* 3.1:252.

<sup>29</sup>Burke, *Enquiry*, §§4.2–5; *JubA* 3.1:248.

Mendelssohn had already begun to flesh out this strategy in the course of the commentary. He writes: "Greatness seizes our attention and holds it fast to an object. The raw and monstrous arouse fear [Schrecken] and astonishment [Erstaunen]. The uneven in the small parts draws our attention away from the parts and turns it to the whole. The straight line pleases only in sublime buildings, in which case it indicates inattention to outer ornamentation. The sudden transition from light to darkness, and the reverse, arouses amazement."<sup>30</sup> Thus, one important and plausible way of promoting the sublime qualities of an object involves drawing attention to itself, its wholeness, or the perfections it represents. This idea is not new – Mendelssohn had already employed it in his original treatise<sup>31</sup> to explain the requirement of novelty and the value of poetic devices such as incomplete inferences and sequences of one-syllable words,<sup>32</sup> but thanks to Burke he was able to conceive of these enhancing elements much more broadly.

The exact way in which astonishment and fear can enhance the primary sublime requires more explanation. On Mendelssohn's view in "Das Erhabene," "[the sublime] fastens our attention through [its] novelty . . . in such a way that we linger on it a while, without wandering to other objects, and when this lasts for a time, it becomes a condition of the mind called astonishment [Erstaunen]."<sup>33</sup> Since astonishment is an effect of the sublime, and "everything in animal nature" must "mutually bring forth each other," whatever can serve to cause or promote this astonishment will *promote* the sublime. But being *astounding* itself is neither necessary nor sufficient to make something sublime. As for fear (Schrecken), Mendelssohn holds that it shares important features with wonder, specifically its sudden onset and its production of trembling and related bodily effects.<sup>34</sup> For these reasons the fearful can support and enhance the sublime, but again, fear itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for the sublime. As Mendelssohn goes on to explain, only perfection can produce the feeling of wonder characteristic of the primary sublime. Fear, as such, is always produced by the cognition of imperfection. If we consider these affects separately and in themselves, the one is pleasurable and the other displeasurable.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>"Das Große fesselt unsere Aufmerksamkeit und hält sie bey einem Gegenstande fest. Das Rauhe und Ungeheure erregt Schrecken und Erstaunen. Das Unehbene in den kleinen Theilen ziehet unsere Aufmerksamkeit von den Theilen ab, und lenkt sie auf das Ganze. Die gerade Linie gefällt nur bey erhabenen Gebäuden, bey welcher Gelegenheit sie Unachtsamkeit auf äußerliche Zierathen anzeigt. Der plötzliche Uebergang von Licht zu Finsterniß und umgekehrt, erregt Erstaunen," *JubA* 3.1:247.

<sup>31</sup>Baumgarten had also used a similar strategy to explain the wonderful. See his *Reflections on poetry*, trans. Aschenbrenner and Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), §46.

<sup>32</sup>*JubA* 1:199. The use of such devices in the sublime was recommended by pseudo-Longinus in *Longinus on the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899); Boileau, *Oeuvres de Boileau*, 99–108.

<sup>33</sup>"Sie fesseln unsere Aufmerksamkeit durch das Neue . . . dergestalt, daß wir eine Weile bey ihnen stehen bleiben, ohne auf andere Begriffe auszuschweifen, und wenn dieses eine Zeitlang anhält, so wird ein solcher Zustand des Gemüths das Erstaunen genannt," *JubA* 1:196.

<sup>34</sup>*JubA* 3.1:251.

<sup>35</sup>*JubA* 3.1:251–52.

Still, one might ask how what is frightening can be sublime at all on Mendelssohn's view, given that it supposedly has its basis in imperfection. Mendelssohn does write in his commentary that the unpleasantness of fear disappears in imitation.<sup>36</sup> But it does not follow from this that for Mendelssohn *only* artistic imitations can be sublime.<sup>37</sup> A more complete answer, which can also account for the sublime in nature, is that the sublime object need not be perfect and imperfect in the same sense, or perhaps more importantly, need not be presented in a way that brings the imperfection to the fore. As Mendelssohn explains, in the sublime "the pleasantness is an effect of the perfection, which can lie either in the thing itself, or in the way in which it is represented."<sup>38</sup> To take one often-used example, our perception of a hero's virtue is actually enhanced through our fear and pity at his suffering – not because the suffering itself is a perfection, but because the shock of his pain provides a contrasting background which calls to mind and brightens the hero's virtue.<sup>39</sup> The more Burkean case of fear for our own personal destruction can be understood in a similar fashion, except that the fear comes first temporally. For example, we are initially terrified and shrink back from the stormy sea, but if we are able to contemplate it a bit, we may then begin to notice its perfection, i.e., the powerful yet law-governed motion of the waves and peaks. The perfection rushes over us suddenly because it defies our expectations, and then it shows itself more clearly against the background of the frightening destructiveness.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, Burke also made a distinction between the frightening aspect of the sublime and the *merely* frightening, and likewise for other passions associated with the sublime. He writes: "If the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person . . . they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of the passions. Its object is the sublime."<sup>41</sup> For Burke, the distinction between the frighteningly sublime and the merely frightening is *subjective*, that is, based on the sum of our feelings and attitudes toward the object, rather than on the properties of the object itself. If our fear becomes too "noxious" or the pain becomes too severe, the object cannot appear

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<sup>36</sup>JubA 3.1:252.

<sup>37</sup>Segreff, *Aufklärungsästhetik*, 35–36.

<sup>38</sup>"Das Angenehme ist eine Wirkung der Vollkommenheit, die entweder in der Sache selbst, oder in der Art, wie sie vorgestellt wird, liegen kann," Mendelssohn to Abbt, March 9, 1761, *JubA* 11:202.

<sup>39</sup>E.g., *JubA* 1:110.

<sup>40</sup>This also comes out later in the 1761 edition of the letters *Über die Empfindungen*: "The imperfect, considered as imperfect, cannot possibly be pleasurable. But since nothing can be absolutely imperfect, but good is always mixed with evil, one can bring to bear the habit of abstracting from evil, and turning one's attention to the good, with which it is connected," *Philosophische Schriften* (1761), 1:141–42; *JubA* 1:306.

<sup>41</sup>Burke, *Enquiry*, §4.7.

sublime, but if these feelings are moderated then the object will seem sublime to us. Since for Burke these passions are unanalyzable, they need not have any constant or universal relation to the observed object itself. This differs markedly from Mendelssohn's *objective* view, according to which the frighteningly sublime distinguishes itself from the merely frightening through the great sensible perfection contained in the object.

Burke also claims in his *Enquiry* that darkness and obscurity greatly contribute to the feeling of the sublime.<sup>42</sup> This raised a further problem for Mendelssohn, because what is obscure furnishes us with no information about the object's perfection, and also creates a uniformity that he claims we find tedious or even disgusting.<sup>43</sup> Now, to some extent obscurity can serve to frame and contrast with a great and more clearly perceived perfection, playing a role similar to fear and astonishment in Mendelssohn's theory. For example, in the 1771 edition of "Das Erhabene," Mendelssohn writes that in art a blinding gleam which obscures the boundaries of an object can produce a sublime effect – not because the obscurity itself is sublime, but because it makes the object seem immeasurably great.<sup>44</sup> But this response seems ineffective against the examples Burke provides in the same section of his book: the "dark woods" and the "dark part of the hut" supposedly employed by druids and Native Americans in their religious rituals. In these cases the darkness seems central to the objects, and they seem to draw their sublimity directly from their mystery and obscurity.

Unfortunately, Mendelssohn does not provide any comment on this section of Burke except to say that it is "incomparable."<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, there seems to be a ready reply available to him. Baumgarten had insisted that the perfection (or "greatness") of the sublime need not be in the object itself, provided that the object was presented in such a way that it produced great and perfect thoughts, and Mendelssohn had endorsed the same view in the original "Das Erhabene."<sup>46</sup> This seems to exactly capture the intended effect of the darkness in pagan temples: to emphasize the feebleness of the petitioners, encouraging them to think of the greatness and perfection of their gods without distraction. The darkness itself is not sublime, but it does encourage appropriately cultured observers to think sublime thoughts which have been associated with the obscure object. If there were no such great thoughts to think – if the darkness were not encountered within the context of religious doctrine and ritual – then it would be annoying or perhaps frightening, but not sublime.

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<sup>42</sup>Burke, *Enquiry*, §2.3.

<sup>43</sup>"Uniformity, meagerness, fruitlessness is unbearable to taste." *JubA* 1:172. See also *JubA* 1:398.

<sup>44</sup>*JubA* 1:459.

<sup>45</sup>*JubA* 3.1:241.

<sup>46</sup>Alexander Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), §203. See also Baumgarten's German commentary on that section, in Bernhard Poppe, *Alexander Baumgarten: Seine Bedeutung und Stellung in der Leibniz-Wolffischen Philosophie und seine Beziehungen zu Kant. Nebst Veröffentlichung einer bisher unbekanntenen Handschrift der Ästhetik Baumgartens* (Leipzig: Robert Noske, 1907), 163. For Mendelssohn's endorsement, see *JubA* 1:197.

### 3 The Sensibly Immeasurable and the Later Response to Burke

Although it seems clear enough that Mendelssohn initially defended his early view against Burke, it is possible that this strong reaction later gave way to acquiescence. Beginning with the 1761 *Rhapsodie*, Mendelssohn began to connect the sublime closely to the sensibly immeasurable. To a large extent this shift was certainly due to Burke, who had included several sections on “Vastness,” “Infinity,” and “The artificial Infinite,” although other, less clear influences must have been at work as well.<sup>47</sup> Burke’s legacy becomes even more apparent in the 1771 reworking of “Das Erhabene,” in which Mendelssohn directly borrows many of Burke’s suggestions for depicting the immeasurable in art.<sup>48</sup> In this later edition, Mendelssohn also drops his explicit claims that the sublime differs from the beautiful only in degree.<sup>49</sup>

One might read this as evidence that Mendelssohn had adopted an entirely new “mark” of the sublime, now explaining it through the mental effort required to apprehend the infinite rather than through the objective property of perfection.<sup>50</sup> This weak reading would have Mendelssohn providing a subjective, psychological basis for explaining why, for example, a mountain range is sublime but Gothic architecture is merely ugly: only objects immeasurable in either extent or internal goodness can be sublime, because only such objects offer the mind the right kind of thrilling activity. It would bring Mendelssohn much closer to Burke, who had also explained the pleasure of the sublime through the exercise of our faculties.<sup>51</sup> And it would also lend weight to the idea that Mendelssohn’s theory merely anticipates Kant’s, since Kant takes up the idea that the mathematically and dynamically infinite are the marks of the sublime.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Likely sources are Richard Addison, *Spectator*, ed. Donald Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), nos. 412–13, and Johann Jakob Bodmer’s 1741 *Kritische Betrachtungen über die poetische Gemälde der Dichter* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1971), 211–15. But these works were known to Mendelssohn from the time of his letters *Über die Empfindungen* (he refers to the *Spectator* in a 1756 essay, *JubA* 1:534), and his 1758 commentary on Burke does not evince any particular interest in the infinite or the sensibly immeasurable. Abbt emphasized the infinite in his March 7, 1761 letter to Mendelssohn on the sublime (*JubA* 11:198–99), but Mendelssohn received the letter after he had completed the first edition of the *Rhapsodie*. And Abbt’s evidently poor understanding of Mendelssohn’s previously published views in that letter suggests that they had not conversed extensively on the subject. It is also puzzling that Mendelssohn neglected to work the immeasurable into “Das Erhabene” until the 1771 edition, even though the concept was discussed in the 1761 edition of his *Rhapsodie*.

<sup>48</sup>*JubA* 1:455–58, cf. Burke, *Enquiry*, §§4.11–12.

<sup>49</sup>*JubA* 1:193, 210.

<sup>50</sup>Bamberger claims that under the influence of Burke, Mendelssohn accepted “the dissolution of the sublime from the concept of perfection and its equivalence with the ‘immeasurable,’” *JubA* 1:xliv.

<sup>51</sup>Burke, *Enquiry*, §§4.6–7.

<sup>52</sup>E.g., Ludwig Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn und die deutsche Ästhetik* (Königsberg: Graefe und Unzer, 1904), 148, 152–53; Robert Sommer, *Geschichte der Deutschen Psychologie und Aesthetik von Wolff-Baumgarten bis Kant-Schiller* (Würzburg, 1892), 134.

But this reading is mistaken. For one, Mendelssohn explicitly endorses the objective perfection view in a letter to Abbt written just after the *Rhapsodie* had gone to the printer: "an unexpected perfection lies at the basis of everything sublime in the beautiful sciences."<sup>53</sup> More importantly, Mendelssohn does not equate the sublime with the sensibly immeasurable, as this reading requires. Instead he carefully distinguishes them. Consider the key passage from the *Rhapsodie*:

The great world-ocean, a far-extended plain, the uncountable army of stars, the eternity of time, every height or depth which tires us, a great genius, great virtuous people whom we admire but cannot attain: who can behold these without shuddering, who can proceed to consider them without a pleasant dizziness? This sentiment is composed from pleasure and displeasure. The greatness of the object provide us with pleasure, but our inability to comprehend its boundaries mixes this pleasure with some bitterness, which makes it all the more charming . . . If the great object offers no manifold for us to consider in its immeasurableness, as the still sea, or an unfruitful plain, which is not broken by any objects, then the dizziness is transformed at last into a kind of disgust at the uniformity of the object, the displeasure wins out, and we have to turn away from the confused sight of the object . . . On the other hand, the immeasurability of the world structure, the greatness of a genius worthy of admiration, the great sublime virtuous one, are just as manifold as great, just as perfect as manifold, and the displeasure which is connected with its consideration is grounded on our weakness; for that reason it offers an unspeakable pleasure of which the soul can never be full.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>"Daher liegt bey jedem Erhabenen in den schönen Wissenschaften eine unerwartete Vollkommenheit zum Grunde," Mendelssohn to Abbt, March 9, 1761, *JubA* 11:202. Admittedly this statement is restricted to the "beautiful sciences" – strictly speaking, fine arts which make use of artificial signs – but the whole correspondence covered the sublime in general. In any case, other textual evidence for my reading is provided below.

<sup>54</sup>"Das große Weltmeer, eine weit ausgedehnte Ebene, das unzählbare Heer der Sterne, die Ewigkeit der Zeit, jede Höhe oder Tiefe, die uns ermüdet, ein großes Genie, große Tugenden, die wir bewundern, aber nicht erreichen können, wer kann diese ohne Schauern anblicken, wer ohne angenehmes Schwindeln zu betrachten fortfahren? Diese Empfindung ist von Lust und Unlust zusammengesetzt. Die Größe des Gegenstandes gewährt uns Lust, aber unser Unvermögen, seine Grenzen zu umfassen, vermischt diese Lust mit einer Bitterkeit, die sie desto reizender machet . . . Wenn der große Gegenstand uns bey seiner Unermeßlichkeit, keine Mannigfaltigkeit zu betrachten darbietet, wie die stille See, oder eine unfruchtbare Ebene, die von keinen Gegenständen unterbrochen wird; so verwandelt sich der Schwindel zuletzt in eine Art von Eckel über die Einförmigkeit des Gegenstandes, die Unlust überwiegt, und wir müssen den verwirrten Blick von dem Gegenstande abwenden . . . Hingegen ist die Unermeßlichkeit des Weltgebäudes, die Größe eines bewunderungswürdigen Genies, die Größe erhabener Tugenden, so mannigfaltig als groß, so vollkommen, als mannigfaltig, und die Unlust, die mit ihrer Betrachtung verknüpft ist, gründet sich auf unsere Schwachheit; daher gewähren sie ein unaussprechliches Vergnügen, dessen die Seele nie satt werden kann," Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Schriften* (1761), 2:10–11; *JubA* 1:398. Here Mendelssohn is also specifically taking issue with Bodmer, who had claimed that greatness of extent in itself produces the sublime feeling of "Bestürzung und Stille," and that manifoldness (required for perfection) is antithetical to this greatness. Consequently, according to Bodmer, the most moving great objects are a clear sky and a still ocean. See Bodmer, *Kritische Betrachtungen*, 212–18.

According to Mendelssohn, then, while we can get *some* pleasure from an immeasurable object simply from its vastness,<sup>55</sup> that is not enough to produce the sublime feeling.<sup>56</sup> In order to attain the “unspeakable pleasure” of the sublime, the thing must be “just as manifold as great” and “just as perfect as manifold.” And Mendelssohn’s most explicit published judgment of Burke’s work follows soon after in the text:

[Burke] assumed that the principle “the intuitive cognition of perfection provides pleasure” is a mere hypothesis, and the least experience which seemed to contradict this hypothesis was for him reason enough to reject it. But one who is convinced that this principle of sentiments is no hypothesis, but an established and unshakeable truth, cannot be made wrong by any experience, no matter how much it seems to present the opposite. He will consider the matter further and find the most exact correspondence between reason and experience, which is often hard to find, but is nonetheless always there.<sup>57</sup>

Later, in describing the additions to “Das Erhabene” in the preface to the 1771 edition of his *Philosophische Schriften*, Mendelssohn explains that the feelings of the sublime, great, and strong “approach the thrilling and fearful, and are therefore related to each other as far as that goes. From this it can be grasped why the sublime is often accompanied by the fearful, and tends to be supported by it.”<sup>58</sup> Mendelssohn evidently retained his early view that the great and strong are not themselves sublime, but can serve to support it by producing similar emotions and bodily effects. Further, the deletion of the claims that the sublime differs from the beautiful only in degree in this edition does not show that Mendelssohn abandoned the perfection aesthetic with respect to the sublime. It rather indicates his new recognition that the

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<sup>55</sup>Mendelssohn never adequately explains the source of this pleasure in mere vastness. Most likely, he would have held it to be a combination of (1) pleasure in the exercise of our faculties, before they are completely exhausted; and (2) a similarity with the actual sublime insofar as the object is immeasurable. Because it is similar, it will be associated with the sublime in the imagination and produce a similar feeling, much as artificial depictions of the immeasurable do. See the quotation from the preface to the 1771 edition (below) for evidence supporting this idea.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Henry Home’s similar view of the matter in his 1761 *Elements of Criticism*: “But, though a plain object of that kind [i.e., of vast size] be agreeable, it is not termed *grand*; it is not entitled to that character unless, together with its size, it be possessed of other qualities that contribute to beauty.” (Rev. ed. James R. Boyd [New York, 1863], §212). Apparently, Mendelssohn did not read this work until 1763 (cf. his letter to Iselin, July 5, 1763, *JubA* 12.1:15–16).

<sup>57</sup>“Er sahe den Grundsatz, daß die anschauende Erkenntniß der Vollkommenheit Lust gewährt, für eine bloße Hypothese an, und die mindeste Erfahrung, die der Hypothese zu widersprechen schien, war ihm Grundes genug, sie zu verwerfen. Wer aber überzeugt ist, daß dieses Grundgesetz der Empfindungen keine Hypothese, sondern eine ausgemachte, und unumstößliche Wahrheit sey, der läßt sich keine Erfahrung irren, sie mag noch so sehr das Gegentheil darzuthun scheinen. Er denkt der Sache weiter nach, und findet zwischen Vernunft und Erfahrung die allernaueste Verwandtschaft, die oft nur schwer zu finden, aber doch allezeit vorhanden ist,” Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Schriften* (1761), 2:18; *JubA* 1:400–1.

<sup>58</sup>“... die dem Schauervollen und Schrecklichen nahe kommen, und sich also in so weit einander verwandt sind. Hierdurch läßt sich begreifen, warum das Erhabene mehrentheils vom Schrecklichen begleitet, und unterstützt zu werden pflegt,” *JubA* 1:231–32.



sublime is a more *specific* phenomenon than the extremely sensibly perfect or beautiful in general, as he had previously claimed. Accordingly, in the 1771 edition Mendelssohn amends his earlier statement to the following: "One could say in general that each thing, which is or seems immeasurable according to the degree of its perfection, is called sublime."<sup>59</sup> Clearly, Mendelssohn understands immeasurability here more as the ultimate source of his so-called "secondary sublime," the one ingredient perhaps *required* to produce a feeling strong enough to earn the label of sublime. While the appearance of immeasurability may be a necessary ingredient of the sublime, it is not sufficient; objective perfection is also fundamentally required.

Nonetheless, the view that the sublime characteristically appears immeasurable gives rise to other difficulties, because sensible immeasurability and sensible perfection seem incompatible in three different ways. Cognitively, it seems that the totality and thus the perfection of an apparently immeasurable object cannot be sensed, precisely because the object is too great for our senses to grasp. Metaphysically, it seems that some objects need not have sensible perfection in order to arouse the feeling of the sublime: e.g., what perfection do the scattered "uncountable army of stars" offer to the senses? And psychologically, our inability to grasp the immeasurability is a subjective imperfection. So why do we find the sublime so wonderful and pleasurable – even more so than the merely beautiful? Although Mendelssohn does not address all of these issues thoroughly, we can reconstruct plausible responses from the limited text.

#### 4 The Cognitive Problem of the Sublime as Sensibly Immeasurable Yet Sensibly Perfect

As a preliminary matter, the notion of perfection must be made somewhat more explicit. Perfection is the agreement of a variety or manifold to unity, according to general rules of the whole.<sup>60</sup> "Unity" here need not be essential, as in the case of monadic souls, but can also be accidental and relational, as in a work of art.<sup>61</sup> It is best understood as the "togetherness" or "belonging-together" of the manifold.<sup>62</sup> For example, a painting has perfection to the extent that its various parts (its manifold)

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<sup>59</sup>"Man könnte also überhaupt sagen; ein jedes Ding, das dem Grade seiner Vollkommenheit nach, unermesslich ist oder scheint, wird erhaben genannt." *JubA* 1:457–58. Cf. *JubA* 1:193–94.

<sup>60</sup>For perfection as agreement of the manifold to unity, see Wolff, *Ontologia*, *GW* 2.3, §503; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §94. For the requirement that this agreement must be determined by general rules or laws of the whole, see Wolff, *Ontologia*, *GW* 2.3, §505; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §95. That Mendelssohn shares this view is evident from his *Über die Empfindungen* (*JubA* 1:59–60, 113, 118), his "Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften" (*JubA* 1:171), and his *Rhapsodie* (*JubA* 1:384–85).

<sup>61</sup>Wolff, *Ontologia*, *GW* 2.3, §528; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §98.

<sup>62</sup>On this see e.g., Wolff, *Ontologia*, *GW* 2.3, §532.



are sensed as belonging together (its unity) in a way that is explained chiefly through common universal principles of the whole (i.e., harmony). The principles of a particular painting flow from the fact that the whole represents something – a person, a thing, an idea, an event, etc.<sup>63</sup> In this way, all the various parts fit together in such a way that they all contribute to a single whole representation.<sup>64</sup>

Now, the whole of a sensibly immeasurable object cannot be sensed, by definition. How then is it possible for us to cognize the extent to which the parts are governed by principles of the whole? This is the cognitive problem of the immeasurable sublime, which Mendelssohn discusses in the following passages:

The immeasurable, which we indeed consider as a whole, but cannot grasp [umfassen], arouses likewise a mixed sentiment of pleasure and displeasure – in the beginning, a thrill, and when we proceed to consider it, a kind of dizziness.<sup>65</sup>

[Vast objects] have something adverse for well-brought-up minds who are accustomed to order and symmetry, since the senses finally perceive their boundaries, but can grasp [umfassen] them and bind them into an idea only with difficulty. – When the boundaries of this extension are posited ever further, they finally entirely disappear for the senses, and then the sensibly immeasurable arises. Sense, which perceives something belonging together, roams about, seeking to grasp the boundaries, and loses itself in the immeasurable.<sup>66</sup>

Precisely what Mendelssohn means by “considering” an immeasurable object as a whole is not entirely clear. The following explanation, taken from the original (1755) *Über die Empfindungen*, is one possibility:

Even this immeasurable All [the whole universe] is not a visibly beautiful object. Nothing deserves this name that does not fall clearly to our senses all at once. For that reason one only says that the world-structure is beautiful when the imagination orders its main parts into the same harmony in which reason and perception teach it to be ordered outside us. If this happens, then one perceives just the general relations of the parts of the universe to the whole, and the beautiful achieves the required magnitude in the imagination which it lacks in nature. The power of the imagination can as it were limit every beauty between the

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<sup>63</sup>Baumgarten called this *something* which all parts agree in representing the *theme* of the work (*Reflections*, §66). See also Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, §512.

<sup>64</sup>The “affirming notes” which Mendelssohn claims constitute perfection in the *Rhapsodie* (*JubA* 1:384–85) should be understood as affirmations conditional on the principles of the whole. In this way his explanation conforms closely to Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s.

<sup>65</sup>“Das Unermeßliche, das wir zwar als ein Ganzes betrachten, aber nicht umfassen können, erregt gleichfalls eine vermischte Empfindung von Lust und Unlust, die Anfangs ein Schauern, und wenn wir es zu betrachten fortfahren, eine Art von Schwindel erregt,” Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Schriften* (1761 ed.) 2:10; *JubA* 1:398.

<sup>66</sup>“Sie hat aber für wohlgezogene Gemüther, die an Ordnung und Symmetrie gewöhnt sind, etwas Widriges, indem die Sinne endlich die Grenzen wahrnehmen, aber nicht ohne Beschwerlichkeit umfassen und in Eine Idee verbinden können. – Wenn die Grenzen dieser Ausdehnung immer weiter hinausgesetzt werden; so können sie endlich für die Sinne ganz verschwinden, und alsdenn entsteht das Sinnlichunermeßliche. Die Sinne, die etwas zusammengehörendes wahrnehmen, schweifen umher, die Grenzen desselben zu umfassen, und verlieren sich ins Unermeßliche,” *JubA* 1:456 (added in the 1771 edition).

appropriate bounds, since it expands or contracts the parts of the objects until we can grasp [fassen] the required manifold all at once.<sup>67</sup>

Such a view, if applied to the sublime as sensibly immeasurable, is highly problematic. For the sublime is by its very nature *more* vast even than anything we can imagine, and if it is brought down as it were to human scale and captured as a smaller and inadequate whole in the imagination, it certainly loses most of its grand effect. But there is good reason to think that this does not represent Mendelssohn's considered view about the sublime. In the 1761 edition of *Über die Empfindungen*, Mendelssohn added the following to this passage, immediately after "to our senses all at once": "Indeed, the immeasurable, which exhausts our soaring imagination in reaching its boundaries, has its own charm, which occasionally surpasses the pleasure of measured beauty; but we can only call the world-structure beautiful in its actual sense [im eigentlichen Verstande] when the imagination . . . [etc.]."<sup>68</sup> This addition suggests that Mendelssohn meant to introduce a distinction between the beautiful "strictly speaking," which requires us at least to be able to imagine the whole, and a different sort of experience, which is not to be characterized in the same way. This does not entail that Mendelssohn now intends to sharply distinguish the beautiful from the sublime; in fact, we know from a review he published around the same time that he did not.<sup>69</sup> More plausibly, he meant to signal that his analysis of beauty as presented in *Über die Empfindungen* was to be restricted to objects either perceived or imagined as wholes, and that the sensibly immeasurable requires a further explanation.

In addition, the passages directly concerning the immeasurable in *Rhapsodie* and "Das Erhabene" (above), make no explicit mention of this forced imagining of a whole. In fact, in the *Rhapsodie*, Mendelssohn denies that we can grasp (umfassen) the whole of a sensibly immeasurable object – but this grasping (fassen) of the whole is precisely what the imagination was said to do in the letters. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Mendelssohn did not intend his idea about imaginative

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<sup>67</sup>"Allein dieses unermeßliche All ist kein sichtbar schöner Gegenstand. Nichts verdient diesen Namen, das nicht auf einmal klar in unsere Sinne fällt. Daher sagt man nur alsdenn, das Weltgebäude sey schön, wenn die Einbildungskraft seine Haupttheile, in eben dem vortreflichen Ebenmasse ordnet, wie Vernunft und Wahrnehmung lehren, daß sie ausser uns geordnet sind. Geschiehet dieses; so nimt man nur die allgemeinen Verhältnisse der Welttheile zum Gantzen wahr, und die Schönheit erlangt in der Einbildung die erforderliche Grösse, die ihr in der Natur fehlet. Die Einbildungskraft kann eine jede Schönheit zwischen die gehörigen Grentzen gleichsam einschränken, indem sie die Theile des Gegenstandes so lange erweitert, oder zusammenziehet, bis wir die erforderliche Mannigfaltigkeit auf einmal fassen können," *JubA* 1:51.

<sup>68</sup>"Zwar hat das Unermeßliche, dessen Grenzen zu erreichen, unsre befliegelte Einbildungskraft ermüdet, seinen besondern Reitz, der das Vergnügen der abgemessenen Schönheit öfters übertrifft; allein schön im eigentlichen Verstande können wir das Weltgebäude nur alsdenn nennen, wenn die Einbildungskraft . . ." Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Schriften* (1761), 1:17–18; *JubA* 1:243.

<sup>69</sup>"[Curtius] did not notice that the boundaries of the beautiful and the sublime really lose themselves in each other, for the highest degree of beautiful arouses wonder" (LB 146, February 19, 1761; *JubA* 5.1:352).

grasping to apply to the sensibly immeasurable. And the later talk of sense “roaming about, seeking to grasp the boundaries, and losing itself in the immeasurable” in particular seems distinctly opposed to the mere imagination of a whole.

What then does Mendelssohn mean by “considering” an immeasurable object “as a whole?” One plausible possibility is that in considering an immeasurable object we confusedly posit *principles* of *some* whole that give harmony to the manifold, rather than forming an inner sensible image of the whole. Since perfection only requires agreement of the manifold according to principles of the whole, we can perceive it (at least confusedly) without actually sensing or imagining the totality itself. This reading is suggested by Mendelssohn’s claim that we seek to form an idea on the basis of what we sense as “belonging together” in the immeasurable manifold. This “belonging together” would provide a basis for positing common principles flowing from some vast whole that exceeds our perception and even our imagination.

Even though they are to some extent produced on merely subjective grounds, such confusedly posited principles of the whole have a definite basis in the whole object as it really is. This is because the parts of a thing, to the extent that it is perfect, really do reflect the whole as it is, by definition. As a result, my reading of Mendelssohn’s view here does not amount to a subjectivistic “free play” theory, where the object simply gives us occasion to exercise our mental faculties in a certain way. Nor does it amount to a radical departure from the standard rationalist view. According to Wolff, Baumgarten, and also Mendelssohn himself, the principles of the whole are never merely “given” to the senses as something over and above the manifold. Even in the standard case when all the parts of the thing can be grasped together by the senses, the principles must be posited through reflection, by dialectically comparing the manifold to the purported whole.<sup>70</sup> In the case of the immeasurable, we cannot grasp the whole at all, but we are still able in just the same way to dialectically compare the manifold with common principles which we suppose govern that manifold.

Now, it may still be objected that the pleasure we take in the sublime consists precisely in the fact that the object transcends any principles that we might posit as governing it.<sup>71</sup> True, a sensibly immeasurable object goes beyond our cognitive capacities in two ways: first, not all of its manifold is available to us, and second, any principles of the whole which we posit are highly confused and insufficient, since we form them on the basis of incomplete information. But it does not follow that the pleasure we take in these objects is *due to* the transcendence of the object as compared to our understanding of it. Rather, the pleasure is plausibly construed as flowing from whatever imperfect degree of understanding of the object’s perfection we have, along with the feeling at every passing moment that the object offers yet

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<sup>70</sup>Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, GW 2.5, §§257–60; *Metaphysik*, GW 2.3, §136; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §626; *JubA* 1:51.

<sup>71</sup>Beiser raises this objection without resolving it: “The pleasure of the sublime seems to arise precisely from our *incapacity* to grasp the object as a whole,” *Diotima’s children*, 219.

more perfection to our continued contemplation of it. In this case “the source of pleasure is just as inexhaustible as before.”<sup>72</sup> We then lose ourselves in the object and its as-yet inaccessible, merely intimated further perfection – almost as we fall in love with a person, where our pleasure is based not only on the good that we explicitly recognize but also on further perfection of which we currently have only the slightest intimation.

## 5 The Metaphysical Problem of the Sublime as Sensibly Immeasurable

The problem about why apparently imperfect but very massive objects provide pleasure had bothered Mendelssohn from the beginning of his aesthetic career. In the eighth letter of *Über die Empfindungen*, Euphranor raises the example of the pleasure we take in experiencing massive, dizzying heights and depths.<sup>73</sup> Palemon does not adequately respond to this example,<sup>74</sup> and in the essay “Sendschreiben an einen jungen Gelehrten zu B.,” published anonymously by Mendelssohn in 1756, he admits that Palemon was “criminally negligent” in not addressing the cases of “people . . . wondering at great and immeasurable objects.”<sup>75</sup> His tentative suggestion in that essay – that these objects make up in diversity of perfection what they lack in unity<sup>76</sup> – could not really have satisfied him. Perfection, for one, is not a mere aggregation of unity and diversity but a certain relation of diversity to unity. And sheer diversity is in any case insufficient to explain the pleasure, because excessive diversity is also a feature of what we consider ugly, as he already had argued in *Über die Empfindungen* and indeed repeated in the very same “Sendschreiben.”<sup>77</sup>

Ironically, Burke himself led Mendelssohn to a new explanation. Although the Irish philosopher had rejected the role of perfection in aesthetics, he felt he needed to explain why we only take some things to be single vast objects, even though “the eye generally receives an equal number of rays at all times.”<sup>78</sup> Burke argues that only a single unified object, rather than many distinct objects, can produce the right kind of “uniform labour” and “attention” needed to experience the sublime. In his commentary, Mendelssohn responds: “If it is true that a number of small objects without unity scatter the imagination, where it otherwise would be made busy through unity in the manifold, the consequence is entirely easy to draw that unity in

<sup>72</sup> “. . . die Quelle des Vergnügens ist noch so unerschöpflich, als vorhin,” *JubA* 1:399.

<sup>73</sup> *JubA* 1:83–84.

<sup>74</sup> See note 21 above.

<sup>75</sup> *JubA* 1:534.

<sup>76</sup> *JubA* 1:534.

<sup>77</sup> *JubA* 1:58, 1:530.

<sup>78</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, §4.10.

manifold or sensible perfection is the source of the pleasant sentiment.”<sup>79</sup> But Mendelssohn is being a bit too quick here. The whole of a vast object may indeed contain some shared principles through which we perceive it as a single vast unity, even though at the same time no principles of the whole govern the order and arrangement of the parts. For example, it is true that we would perceive a massive garbage heap as a unity because of some shared properties in the manifold – say, a common teleological origin and close spatial proximity – but that makes the heap perfect only in the slightest degree. This is because the specific parts and arrangement of the garbage heap were just arbitrarily thrown together without much basis in universal principles of the whole. Simply because there must be *some* objective basis for our perceiving something as one unified vast object does not mean that that object has much perfection.

Yet Mendelssohn’s explanation seems much more plausible if we restrict it to natural objects. In nature, the principles that result in a particular arrangement of parts largely overlap with the principles that govern the unity of the object. Both are just the universal laws of nature. In other words, we perceive the object as one because of some perceived similarity in the manifold which is due to the laws of nature, and those same natural laws are also responsible for the specific existence and arrangement of the parts. In this way we can perceive the reasons for the disposition of the parts through the principles of the whole, which is just to perceive the perfection of the object.

But what exactly is the *focus perfectionis* of such an object, that is, the unity in which all the various laws of nature seem to agree in relation to our senses? As noted above, the perfection of fine art objects primarily consists in the arrangement of all the parts of a whole such that they all contribute to the sensible representation of some one thing. This same explanation holds in the case of natural objects: the unity of these majestic natural objects consists in the fact that they represent the lawful power, vastness, and order of nature – in other words, nature itself – in especially grandiose fashion.<sup>80</sup> Although a vast mountain range is chaotic in some sense, it is also orderly in that nature “conspired” through its laws to produce a multitude of massive peaks and crags. It is plausibly that order, not the disorder, which we behold with wonder. Of course, while all objects obey the laws of nature, only some reveal them to our senses in such spectacular fashion.<sup>81</sup> On this basis, artificial objects can

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<sup>79</sup>“Wenn es wahr ist, daß eine Menge kleiner Gegenstände ohne Einheit die Aufmerksamkeit zerstreue, da sie hingegen durch die Einheit im Mannigfaltigen rege gemacht wird, so ist der Schluß gar leicht daraus zu ziehen, daß die Einheit im Mannigfaltigen oder die sinnliche Vollkommenheit die Quelle der angenehmen Empfindungen sey,” *JubA* 3.1:249.

<sup>80</sup>Like Wolff and Baumgarten, Mendelssohn held that perfection is the order which exemplifies metaphysical truth, which is basically the lawfulness of the variety in nature (*JubA* 1:384–85).

<sup>81</sup>Importantly, this does not require that we understand natural laws to have a teleological ground. Cf. Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, in vol. 5 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900–; Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1968–), 270. Henceforth AA. Translations are from *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

be sublime either insofar as they represent this natural sublimity (as in a poem or painting), or insofar as they are actually similar to it (as in architecture).

Still, some sublime objects seem difficult to square with this explanation. The starry night may seem to be a vast canvas scattered with points of light in which there is no apparent exhibition of power or order. But perhaps our wonder at the heavens requires that we view these points of light as representing something substantially grand and massive, and not as subjective sense-data, mere points of light. In any case, while these or similar replies were surely available to Mendelssohn, he does not make them explicit.<sup>82</sup>

There also seem to be cases where we take pleasure in massive violence and disorder. In the *Rhapsodie* Mendelssohn writes the following:

Lisbon, destroyed by an earthquake, charmed an uncountable multitude people who wished to have a look at the terrible devastation. After the bloodbath at \* \* \* all of our citizens rushed onto the corpse-sown battlefield. Even the wise, who would have gladly given their lives to prevent this evil, waded through human blood after the fact and felt a thrilling delight at the consideration of the terrible site.<sup>83</sup>

It is remarkable that Mendelssohn even admits such a scene could cause a feeling of pleasure. But he is careful to explain that the object of this “thrilling delight” is not the external thing under consideration, but rather a specific aspect of the self: “The cognition of the evil, and the lively revulsion against it, is a human perfection, and must necessarily provide one with pleasure. We detest the imperfection, but not the cognition of it; we flee the evil, but not the faculty for cognizing it, and condemning it.”<sup>84</sup> Moral condemnation is not merely pleasurable as a subjective activity, but also as a perfection which we perceive reflexively in ourselves. Thus, the explanation remains within the *objective* perfection aesthetic. The sublime object here is not the devastation, but the seemingly limitless power of moral disapprobation we perceive in ourselves.

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<sup>82</sup>See Bodmer, *Kritische Betrachtungen*, 223–24, for an earlier discussion about the source of pleasure in the starry night.

<sup>83</sup>“Das im Erdbeben untergegangene Lissabon reizte unzählige Menschen, diese schreckliche Verwüstung in Augenschein zu nehmen. Nach dem Blutbade bey \* \* \* eilten alle unsere Bürger auf das mit Leichen besäete Schlachtfeld. Der Weise selbst, der mit Vergnügen durch seinen Tod dieses Uebel verhindert haben würde, watete, nach geschehener That, durch Menschenblut, und empfand ein schauervolles Ergötzen bey Betrachtung dieser schrecklichen Stäte,” *JubA* 1:383 (ellipsis in original). This passage underwent some insignificant changes from the earlier edition, cf. *Philosophical Schriften* (1761), 2:14.

<sup>84</sup>“. . . so ist die Kenntnis des Bösen selbst, und der lebhaftige Abscheu für dasselbe, eine Vollkommenheit des Menschen, und muß ihm nothwendig Vergnügen gewähren. Wir verabscheuen die Unvollkommenheit, aber nicht die Kenntnis derselben; wir fliehen das Böse, aber nicht das Vermögen es zu erkennen, und zu verdammen,” Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Schriften* (1761), 2:15. For a less clear expression of the same idea in the 1771 edition, see *JubA* 1:385–86.

## 6 The Psychological Problem of the Sublime as Sensibly Immeasurable

The psychological problem is a consequence of Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments, first published in the *Rhapsodie* of 1761. According to this theory, the pleasure or displeasure we feel from our own perfection or imperfection mixes with that of the object under consideration, creating a complex overall sentiment. In the case of the immeasurable, our inability to fully grasp the object is a cognitive imperfection which we find frustrating, and in the case of the sublime, the perception of our own weakness in relation to the object is a further source of displeasure.<sup>85</sup> As a result, the pleasure we take in the sublime involves displeasure at our own inadequacy. What then is the source of the superlative character of the sublime?

Some commentators have suggested that Mendelssohn's "moment of subjective displeasure" is an anticipation of Kant's three-moment phenomenology of the sublime from the *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*.<sup>86</sup> According to Kant, the subjective displeasure we take in our own *apparent* inadequacy gives way to a higher feeling of pleasure at our own superiority over mere phenomenal nature, on the basis of our reason and the moral law within us. Kant writes, "Sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us (insofar as it influences us)."<sup>87</sup> Because Kant explains how the experience of the sublime culminates in great pleasure, these commentators see Kant's psychology as a completion of Mendelssohn's.

But Mendelssohn's view is an appealing theory in its own right. It, too, involves a "third moment" of pleasure, though it is directed back at the object instead of at the subject's rational power. "The displeasure connected with the consideration [of sublime objects] is grounded on our weakness; for that reason *they* [the objects] offer an unspeakable pleasure of which the soul can never be full."<sup>88</sup> A sublime object seems great even at first glance, but when we compare it to our own inadequacy (which we soon feel upon contemplating it), the object appears even more magnificent.

Of course, just because it is the object, not our subject, which *seems* to carry us away, Kant is perfectly correct to claim that the ultimate object of our pleasure may

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<sup>85</sup> *JubA* 1:398.

<sup>86</sup> Braitmeier praises Mendelssohn for coming closer to Kant's mature view than Kant himself had in his *Beobachtungen* (Braitmeier, *Geschichte*, 2:173). Goldstein calls Mendelssohn a precursor to Kant in his psychology of the sublime, but criticizes him for not giving Burke's "moment of terror" sufficient due, a task completed by Kant (Goldstein, *Deutsche Ästhetik*, 148, 152).

<sup>87</sup> Kant, *AA* 5:264; see also *AA* 5:257 and 5:271.

<sup>88</sup> "Die Unlust, die mit ihrer Betrachtung verknüpft ist, gründet sich auf unsere Schwachheit; daher gewähren *sie* ein unaussprechliches Vergnügen, dessen die Seele nie satt werden kann," *JubA* 1:398, emphasis added.



actually be within us,<sup>89</sup> for we are often mistaken about the objects of such highly confused emotions.<sup>90</sup> But there are nonetheless some considerations which seem to lend Mendelssohn's theory greater plausibility. Kant's explanation of the sublime seems to require too much acculturation and reflection,<sup>91</sup> and the sublime often seems too overwhelming to be based on even unconscious reflection about ourselves. If it were, then it seems we would experience a relative diminishing of wonder at the object itself, and feel a kind of lording over it. But this runs contrary to experience.<sup>92</sup> Mendelssohn's description of the sublime object as "pressing us back into the dust"<sup>93</sup> seems much more accurate: the object is all-encompassing, we feel ourselves to be nothing in relation to it, and the implicit comparison makes the object seem all the more awesome and wonderful.

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<sup>89</sup>Kant, AA 5:262.

<sup>90</sup>Indeed, Bodmer had already suggested yet another third moment in his 1741 analysis of pleasure in "das Große": "Dazu kömmt denn die darauf folgende Betrachtung, welche die Wiederkunft seiner wirksamen Kräfte bey ihm verursacht, wenn sie ihm vergewissert daß er in diesem unermeßlichen Ganzen beständig im Wesen ist, und wenn er vornehmlich den Grund und Ursprung, warum alles ist, und in welchem alles dieses ungemessene Ganze enthalten ist, bey sich ermißt," *Kritische Betrachtungen*, 230.

<sup>91</sup>"Without the development of moral ideas, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime will appear merely repellent to the unrefined person" (Kant AA 5:265). It is possible, however, that this opinion is not essential to Kant's theory. In any case, Mendelssohn seems more correct to say that universal appreciation (even among the uncultured) counts as strong evidence that something is sublime (*JubA* 5.1:349–50). To some extent this is an empirical question, for which Kant cites only the flimsiest of evidence.

<sup>92</sup>One does on occasion sense a certain superiority when viewing certain sublime objects, but this seems to pertain more to a superiority of relative vantage rather than a superiority over the object itself. Accordingly, the feeling is characteristic of views from mountain summits but not of the night sky, etc.

<sup>93</sup>*JubA* 1:398. This thought is borrowed from Bodmer, who had explained: "Dadurch wird zugleich alle Würksamkeit des Gemüthes zu Boden geschlagen," *Kritische Betrachtungen*, 229.



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## Chapter 18

# Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast

Gideon Freudenthal

Two generations after Mendelssohn's death, Heinrich Heine compared his reform of Judaism as analogous to Luther's revolt against Catholicism.

As Luther had overthrown the Papacy, so Mendelssohn overthrew the Talmud, and in the very same way, namely by repudiating tradition, by declaring the Bible to be the source of religion and by translating the most important part of it. But by so doing he destroyed Judaic catholicism, as Luther had destroyed Christian catholicism.<sup>1</sup>

Now, whereas there is an obvious analogy between Luther and Mendelssohn in that they are both great translators of the Bible into German, it is certainly false that Mendelssohn abolished tradition or wished to overthrow the Talmud. And yet, Heine's intuition is correct: irrespective of Mendelssohn's intentions, his reform of Judaism acquired exactly this meaning and was conceived as an anti-rabbinic revolt analogous to Luther's overthrow of Papacy. Moreover, drawing on this and on another text of Heine, *The Baths of Lucca* (1829), in which Mendelssohn is not mentioned, I wish to argue that Heine characterized Mendelssohn's reform of Judaism with much insight. Heine describes in this text with great mastery the semiotic differences between Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism. This semiotic approach and the characteristics of the different confessions ensuing from its application are at the core of Mendelssohn's discussion of idolatry and Judaism.

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<sup>1</sup>Heinrich Heine, "Concerning the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany," 1833–1834, trans. Helen Mustard, in: *The Romantic School and Other Essays*, ed. Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub, (New York: Continuum, 1985), 193.

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## 1 Mendelssohn: The Jewish Luther?

In a chapter of his autobiography, dedicated to the memory of Mendelssohn, Salomon Maimon portrays Mendelssohn. “I will sketch here,” so he announces, “only the main traits of his portrait, which made on me the greatest impression. He was a good talmudist...”<sup>2</sup> The fact that Maimon begins with the praise of Mendelssohn as a good talmudist, testifies not only to Maimon’s scale of values, but also to that of traditional European Judaism: “no merit is superior to that of a good Talmudist” among the Jews, writes Maimon (*GW* 1:59). Did Mendelssohn overthrow the Talmud and repudiate tradition although he was a good talmudist himself? There is nothing in his writings that justifies such a view. And yet, Heine is on mark. Note that he does not ascribe Mendelssohn the intention to overthrow the Talmud and tradition, but says that this follows from his “declaring the Bible to be the source of religion and by translating the most important part of it.”

The emphasis on the Bible (and not on the Talmud), on Hebrew grammar as a means of Biblical literal exegesis (opposed to the attempt to read rabbinic law into the Pentateuch), and on the command of the vernacular as a key to modern (secular) culture, were major goals of Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) and regarded as a threat to traditional rabbinic culture and authority. Since 1779 it was known that r’ Raphael Cohen of Altona threatened to ban readers of Mendelssohn’s translation of the Bible (which appeared only in 1783, but has been already announced), and r’ Ezekiel Landau of Prague, the foremost rabbinic authority of the time, evidently aired misgivings that Mendelssohn did not ask for his “imprimatur” (הסכמה), although initially he presumably did not object to the project.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the nature of Mendelssohn’s biblical project itself, it also became a symbol of Jewish modernization due to its association with Naphtali Herz Weisel’s (Wessely) reform project for Jewish schools in response to Joseph the Second’s edict of tolerance.

Suggesting a reform of Jewish schooling, Weisel’s booklet *Divrey shalom ve-emet* (1782)<sup>4</sup> elicited fierce reactions of important rabbinic authorities. Weisel enthusiastically endorsed Joseph II edict to establish Jewish schools in which German and

<sup>2</sup>Salomon Maimon, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Valerio Verra (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965–), 1:472. Hereafter cited in text as *GW*.

<sup>3</sup>See Mendelssohn’s letter to Avigdor Levi, of May 25, 1779 (י"ד סיון תקל"ט), in *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumausgabe*, 19: 251–53. Hereafter cited in text as *JubA*. For Landau’s initial reaction to Mendelssohn’s project, see Samet, “Moshe Mendelssohn, Naphtali Herz Weisel and the rabbis of their generation,” in *Hakhdash assur min haTorah* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2005), 74–78. For the entire affair, see Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, Chap. 6, 164–87.

<sup>4</sup>*Words of Peace and Truth* (expression taken from Esther 9:30).

secular knowledge be taught.<sup>5</sup> These belong to the knowledge of man as such (תורה האדם), Jewish lore is God's knowledge (תורת ה') and concerns Jews only. Mendelssohn, says Weisel, translated the "Torah of our God" (תורת אלוהינו) into "very pure and clear German" (Chap. 5, p. 16; Chap. 8, p. 26), with the purpose of teaching the Jews German and enabling them to appropriate their country's culture and secular knowledge. But Weisel also criticized the poor Hebrew of talmudic scholars and (Polish) teachers of the youth. Pupils should learn proper Hebrew and grammar and Weisel recommended Mendelssohn's translation also to this end (Chap. 7, p. 25; Chap. 8, p. 26). Mendelssohn's Bible was thus given a central place in Weisel's plan for Jewish schooling. As if all this were not enough to associate Mendelssohn's Bible with Weisel's reform project, he also mentioned that he himself authored the commentary on Leviticus in this Bible (Chap. 7, p. 24). Of course, Mendelssohn's Bible was introduced also by Weisel's poetic eulogy on Mendelssohn and his enterprise (מהלל ריע). On the other hand, Weisel also emphasizes that Talmud studies are not for everyone, nor the sole religious ideal: we were not all made to be Talmudic scholars (בעלי תלמוד), God created different souls (Chap. 8), and only few should study Talmud.

Wessely's booklet was received as a major offense against traditional, rabbinic authority and culture. A few days after its publication, r' Ezekiel Landau (הנודע ביהודה) practically banned Wessely in a sermon given on January 16, 1782. This ban was repeated in a circulated letter of Landau's, written short time after this sermon. Landau explained that he did not formally ban Weisel only because this would have required the consent of a state's official, but he nevertheless demanded that nobody should host Weisel or buy any of his publications.<sup>6</sup>

In the very first lines of the letter, Landau called Weisel three times "hediote," i.e., "unlearned," ignoramus. Also r' David Tewel (Katzenelbogen) of Lissa used the

<sup>5</sup>Naftali Herz Weisel, *Divrey shalom ve-emet* (1782), Chap. 4, not paginated, p. 14. Note that Weisel refers there to Joseph decrees as *divrey shalom ve-emet* (p. 13). He thus identifies his brochure with the emperor's project – and gives both the tint of enthusiasm characteristic of the original missive of Mordechai and Esther in the Bible. The content of the original message was to celebrate "the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor" (Esther 9: 30). Later, Weisel also adds: "and the heart of every wise man will rejoice when he hears of this directive" (Chap. 8, p. 26).

<sup>6</sup>ואלמלא הי לנו חירות במדינה זו להחרים למי שהוא ראוי להחרים הייתי מחרימו אלא מחמת חקי המדינה שלא להחרים מבלי הרשות מאפלאציאן טיטול יר"ה חדלתי מזה אמנם עכ"פ פרסמתי כבר שמו לרעה ומעתה לא אקוה שמי שהוא מעדת ישראל ויהי' לו ידיעה מזה שיתן לינת לילה או יארחו בביתו להרשע הרף ויזל ... וגם ח"ו לקנות שום חיבור מהמחבר.

Quoted from Israel Nathan Heschel:

דעתם של גדולי הדור במלחמתם נגד המשכיל נפתלי הירץ וויזל שר"י, קובץ בית-אהרון וישראל, תשרי-חשוון תשנ"ג, שנה ח', גליון א (מג), עמ' קמט - קסז, המכתב: קסב-קסה.

same expression – and topped it: “hediot shebahediotot,” an ignoramus of ignoramuses, a “despicable ignoramus who did not serve Talmudic scholars and learn from them,” a “man lacking sublime wisdom except Hebrew grammar and literary exegesis of Scripture according to first truths of reason, and who has no share and heritage in the depth of the Talmud.” Landau, Tewel and other rabbinic personalities were enraged that this nobody dared advise learned Talmudic scholars about the proper education of Jewish youths.<sup>7</sup> In short, the rabbinic elite correctly judged that the Jewish reformers in Berlin promoted an understanding of Judaism that threatened them and their authority. However, there was nothing heretic in Mendelssohn’s translation or commentary as such and it seems that the attacks on him were of short duration – and renewed with the formation of ultra-orthodoxy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Today this is the common view of conservative orthodoxy.

Mendelssohn never said things similar to Weisel. And yet Heine was certainly correct in characterizing Mendelssohn’s reform: as Luther rebelled against Papacy, so the Maskilim (Jewish Enlighteners) revolted against the rabbis and the central place that the Talmud occupied in Jewish culture and curriculum. The Maskilim and Mendelssohn emphasized the Bible – at the cost of Talmudic studies. Moreover, the introduction of the Jews to the vernacular – also by means of Mendelssohn’s translation of the Pentateuch – enabled them to appropriate general culture and contribute to it, thus undermining traditional authority and the rabbinic monopoly over learning.

## 2 The Baths of Lucca

There is yet another “protestant” aspect to Mendelssohn’s reform of Judaism: his criticism of religious symbols. Here, too, Heine’s diagnosis is precise, insightful and congenial to Mendelssohn’s approach. However, he does not mention Mendelssohn in this context. Let us, therefore, first read Heine and then see whether and how it may apply to Mendelssohn.

In his *The Baths of Lucca* (1829), Heine portrays two converted jews, an “enthusiastic” (schwärmerisch) catholic Don Quixote and a down to earth protestant Sancho Panza. While the Catholic master kneels before the Madonna and the Crucifix, the servant polishes his master’s spurs, and when the master has finished his prayers, the servant polishes the crucifix “with the same rag and with the same diligence and spittle with which he had just cleaned his master’s spurs.” “I dare say that the old Jewish religion suits you much better, my friend” – says Heine to the servant.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Quoted from:

דעתם של גדולי הדור במלחמתם נגד המשכיל נפתלי הירץ וויזל שר"י, [ב'], קובץ בית-אהרון וישראל, כסלו-טבת תשנ"ג, שנה ח', גליון ב (מד), עמ' קז - קלא. מובאות בעמ' קכב, קכה, קכז.

<sup>8</sup>Heinrich Heine, *Works of Prose*, ed. Hermann Kesten, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1943), 110–13. Translation slightly altered.

It is all here: unsophisticated enthusiastic Catholicism and its symbols (the Crucifix and the Madonna) and the refusal of the Jewish/Protestant servant to acknowledge the sacred nature of the symbol: As a (reformed) protestant, he polishes it like any other metal object,<sup>9</sup> as a Jew, he spits on the crucifix, the foremost case of idolatry for Jews in Europe, thus fulfilling the precept (*mitzvah*) "... but thou shalt utterly detest it, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a cursed thing" (Deuteronomy 7:26) שקץ תשקצנו, ותעב תתעבנו, כי חרם הוא.

Before I turn to the deep meaning of Heine's text, let me quote some more of it. Once Heine diagnoses that the servant is too Jewish to be Catholic, he questions him about Protestantism. The Protestant religion is enlightened, says the servant, perhaps even too sensible to be a proper religion. A decent religion needs some enthusiasm and wonders.

"But who could pass a miracle there?" I thought when I looked in Hamburg, at a Protestant church once that belonged to the very bare sort, with nothing but brown benches and white walls, and on the wall nothing hanging but a little blackboard, with half a dozen white numbers on it. "Maybe you do this religion an injustice," I thought again, "maybe these numbers can pass a miracle just as well as a picture of the Mother of God, or a bone from her husband, saint Joseph?" and to settle the matter, I went to Altona right away, and bet on just those numbers in the Altona lottery. ... but I assure you, upon my honor, not a single one of the Protestant numbers came out. Now I knew what I had to think, ... will I be such a fool as to bet my salvation on a religion where I've bet and lost four marks and fourteen shillings already?

What symbols do we have here? We have *reliquia*, a bone from Joseph. This is a symbol whose meaning and importance depend on its real connection with a source of holiness. It stands for a holy person, *pars pro toto*. It symbolizes in an "indexical" fashion (C. S. Peirce's terminology). The Crucifix and the Madonna are different. If they were not blessed, then they symbolize "iconically"; they resemble their referents. Finally, we have the "symbolic," conventional representation of the arabic numerals. There is no connection but convention between these symbol and their referents. With these three kinds of symbolization, the major three kinds of the symbolic function discussed nowadays in semiotics are captured. But Heine says much more. He grades religions according to a scale constituted by the kind of representation, reaching from the indexical, real symbol, over the iconic representation to the conventional symbol. Catholicism stands for the full-blown symbol, which works wonders and suits the *schwärmerisch* master. "Your excellency," says the servant to his master, "is a rich man and can be as Catholic as you wish; you can have all your brains Catholically incensed and become as dumb as a Catholic bell and you still can eat; but I'm a businessman and have to keep my seven senses together to make some money".

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<sup>9</sup>This, of course, is the same attitude as Maimon's who refused to acknowledge the sanctity of the *shophar* and related only to its natural properties, "a ram's horn." See more on this below.

Protestantism, however, is too reasonable. Its churches look like lecture halls and it is “short of fantasy and miracles” – so, is it a religion at all? Well, it has a cross at least, which symbolizes iconically, by similarity, an object, the original cross, and the original cross symbolizes indexically the sacrifice of Jesus. And Jesus, in turn, signifies indexically God Himself: He is visible and worldly and yet also divine.

Finally we have in the Protestant church the numerals. Numerals are purely conventional symbols. I now sin against Jewish lore and explain a joke. Well, in what consists the servant’s mistake? First, he interprets the numbers according to context. The numerals are in a church, hence they must have a religious meaning. Second, he knows nothing of Protestant churches (and this suffices to indicate that he didn’t convert to Christianity out of religious motives, but – as most Jews in the nineteenth century, Heine included – to evade discrimination) – and therefore does not know that the numbers refer to the chorals to be sung. And since he believes that a fully-fledged religion has to perform miracles, he interprets the numbers as a key to the only miracle he cares for: the prize in the lottery. Now the lesson: Numerals may be purely conventional, but their interpretation depends on the pre-suppositions of the interpreter. There is no guarantee that they will not be interpreted in some mystical way.

I summarize Heine: The very same material objects may serve different symbolic functions, from the most concrete – the indexical representation – over pictorial resemblance to the abstract-conventional. The interpretation is determined not only by the representation itself but depends also on the recipient. Religions differ in the mode of representation. The more concrete the symbols are, the more they are fully-fledged religious and, at the same time, prone to idolatry and superstition. The more abstract a representation is, the more difficult it is to see whether and how it can serve a function in religion.

Now, Heine’s text reads like a literary adaptation of Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* (1783): Mendelssohn’s reference to the Pythagorean numbers to show that even numerals can be ascribed metaphysical meaning,<sup>10</sup> and Mendelssohn also narrates that a visitor from a foreign culture misunderstood script for a picture. The visitor to the bare “Temple of Providence” sees the congregation looking in solemn contemplation at the inscription “God. All wise, all-powerful, all-good, rewarding the good,” may believe that they are “showing divine adoration to black lines on a white surface.”<sup>11</sup> Heine may have not at all thought of Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* here; but he shared with Mendelssohn the basic understanding of symbolism in religion. And from Heine, I now turn to Mendelssohn.

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<sup>10</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem; or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, ed. Alexander Altmann (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1983), 117.

<sup>11</sup>*Jerusalem*, 114.

### 3 Religion and Idolatry United in the Religious Symbol

The intimate connection between religion and idolatry in religious symbols is manifest in an inscription on the pedestal of the “Kornmarkt-Madonna” in Heidelberg (1718). This statue shows the holy virgin as queen of heaven with baby Jesus on her arm. The inscriptions (in Latin and German) read:

Non statuam aut saxum sed quam designat honora.  
(Honor neither statue nor stone but what they designate.)

The German turns the imperative into an indicative:

Noch Stein noch Bild noch Säulen hier das Kind und Mutter lieben wir.  
(We love here neither stone nor image or columns but child and mother.)

Whereas the inscriptions do not testify to a poetic talent in either language, they may claim priority to the kind of paradox which became famous through René Magritte’s “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (written under a picture of a pipe). The paradox consists in this: The statue became the site of religious ceremonies in the eighteenth century. The ceremony addresses the divine persons presented and the practitioners turn to them in prayer. And yet the inscription orders and declares that this is not (or should not be) the true fact of the matter. In fact, the practitioners do not intend the visible divine persons, but invisible divine persons of which the visible persons are merely representations. The statue to which the practitioners turn “stands for” the invisible Holy Family. We are supposed to regard the statue merely as a “symbol,” not as the divine object intended. In contradistinction to normal activities, which appear as what they are, this is a symbolic activity, which seems to be something that it is not: it appears to be an adoration of a sculpture, in fact it is the adoration of an invisible entity. Problems arise as soon as we attempt to understand the expression that something is “merely a symbol.” We naturally think of conventional signs as natural languages consist of, signs which can be replaced without further ado by others. “What’s in a name?/That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.”<sup>12</sup> However, this is not at all the case here. True, they are other representations of the Mother of God, but they are all figures of a rather young woman with unmistakable traits. The symbol here is not merely conventional, it is an icon, a symbol that is similar to what it represents. We may not expect the ceremony to directly address the invisible divine person without symbols at all. But if the symbol is indispensable and also not merely conventional, isn’t it holy in itself in some sense? The positive answer to this question is given first by the code of behavior appropriate in the presence of the icon: it is venerated, and disrespectful behavior is considered a sin (“blasphemy”). But the sacred nature of the statue is best expressed by the inscriptions I quoted above: it is because the statue itself is considered holy that the inscriptions admonish and remind the practitioner that it is not the statue that he is adoring but the designated divine personae. Note, that a transgression of

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<sup>12</sup>Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, act II, scene 2.



this recommendation does not necessarily mean that the practitioner believes that this very statue is the mother of God. In fact, most believers would never think so. And yet, the warning is not unwarranted: most practitioners will – consciously or not – ascribe some holiness to the icon. Holiness, so the critic claims, can be ascribed only to the divine itself, not to human means to remember or represent the divine.

The temptation to ascribe to the statue a sacred status is not only rooted in its iconic or indexical nature. It may be strengthened in different ways. First, the symbol may be consecrated, thus conferring “holiness” (in some sense and degree) on it by standard religious procedures. Moreover, the very nature of a religious ceremony bestows holiness on the objects involved. A ceremony is the very opposite of an arbitrary convention. Once it exists, its minutest details, its structure and every gesture, the words declaimed and their intonation, the garments and the decoration – each and every detail must conform to the rule. Finally, the frame of mind and religious emotions evoked in the course of the ceremony, imbue whatever forms part of it with a sacred patina.

“The symbol,” says van der Leeuw, a renowned phenomenologist of religion, “is a participation of the sacred in its veritable, actual, form: between the sacred, and its form, there exists community of essence.”<sup>13</sup> This is exactly what Mendelssohn means when he says of idolatry that here signs are understood “not as mere sign,” but as “the things themselves.”<sup>14</sup> But with him, the religious symbol is seen as part of a much more comprehensive phenomenon: the role of signs in human culture.

According to Mendelssohn, signs are essential to thought, to being human. Mendelssohn cautiously said that we may perhaps form a concept without signs, but he insisted that we cannot retain it over time or “think” without signs.<sup>15</sup> The mediums of thought, of abstraction, inferences, comparisons etc. are signs, not ideas. On the other hand, at variance with normal practices, not the actions with sensual objects themselves should be of interest, but their “sense.” The signs should be as it were transparent, the eye (or ear etc.) should not stop at the sensual impression but see through the “sign-vehicle” its sense, the content represented. This is already a very demanding notion. It becomes even much more demanding with religious ceremonies. Here the action itself is performed with utmost attention to its detail, following meticulously the prescriptions. And yet, the religious enlighteners demand that neither the ceremony nor the signs-vehicles involved should be of importance but merely their meaning. It comes as no surprise that, in fact, the caveats are not successful and that religious symbols are considered holy. Signs are indispensable to retain a content over time – and religious signs hence are indispensable for religion – and they inevitably produce idolatry. Religion and idolatry are in fact inseparable. This is where Mendelssohn’s semiotics comes in. The insight into the

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<sup>13</sup>G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 448.

<sup>14</sup>Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 110–11.

<sup>15</sup>*Jerusalem*, 105.

essential connection between religion and idolatry is in the center of Mendelssohn's thought, and it naturally forbids a radical solution. The solution can be only a choice of symbols least likely to promote idolatry and a permanent critique of the continuously budding idolatry. In Mendelssohn's view, both functions are best fulfilled by Judaism. Judaism – so Mendelssohn says – consists in transitory ceremonies that leave nothing permanent behind which could be ascribed holiness. Judaism is hence a soil on which idolatry cannot grow. It is rather an antidote against idolatry. To use an expression of Francis Bacon, ceremonies are “transitory hieroglyphics.”<sup>16</sup> They present the religious content (even iconically, as hieroglyphics were believed to represent) but they are transitory and leave no permanent object that could be venerated and adored. It is therefore that Mendelssohn believed that he could insist on the necessity of symbols and at the same time criticize their promotion of idolatry and, finally, recommend Judaism as a religion that is nevertheless a remedy to idolatry.

#### 4 Mendelssohn Religious Semiotics

Mendelssohn's entire philosophy is based on semiotics. I cannot argue for this thesis here,<sup>17</sup> and will rather begin in the middle, as it were, with his religious semiotics.

In the second part of *Jerusalem*, there are some 15 pages on semiotics. Until now, no interpretation of *Jerusalem* took these pages seriously and as a key to understanding this work. Alexander Altmann dismissed the whole theory developed there as “the least substantiated of all theories he ever advanced.”<sup>18</sup>

Many scholars simply repeated this verdict. So what is Mendelssohn's theory of idolatry? Mendelssohn, like his contemporaries and many successors, believed that humans first used “natural symbols,” as when something represents its kind. We all often use a “sample” to refer to the kind of things we have on our mind. Mendelssohn also suggests that things were named after their most conspicuous characteristic, and that they then represent not only their kind but this property, as when a lion represents strength. This is an important step since now a material object comes to represent a concept, a general property. The following development is described as follows:

In the course of time, one may have found it more convenient to take images of the things, either in bodies or on surfaces, instead of things themselves; later, for the sake of brevity, to make use of outlines, and next, to let a part of the outline stand for the whole, at last, to compose out of heterogeneous parts a shapeless but meaningful whole; and this mode of designation is called hieroglyphics.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, book 2, Chap. 16, (3), in *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Arthur Johnson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 131.

<sup>17</sup>I argue for this interpretation in my *No Religion Without Idolatry: Mendelssohn Enlightened Judaism* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup>Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 546.

<sup>19</sup>Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 108.

Now, remember that Mendelsohn writes before the deciphering of the hieroglyphics. The theories of the time stated that the real meaning of the hieroglyphics was known only to an elite of scribes. The hieroglyphics represented the deepest mysteries of religion and by its charisma the elite subdued the common people. People may come to believe that the signs themselves are holy and that they can even be used for some kind of magic if they are believed to partake in the nature of what they represent. In present locution we can say: understanding symbolic or iconic symbols as indexical representations is the first step towards idolatry. Mendelsohn believed that the only remedy is to ban all permanent representation and use only symbols that disappear after their usage and cannot be adored. He therefore recommends exclusively ceremonies. Mendelsohn also wishes to make us believe that this is Judaism, at least “ancient, and original” Judaism, as distinguished from Judaism of his days, which he judges to be close to idolatry:

True judaism is no longer found anywhere. Fanaticism and superstition exist among us to a most abhorrent degree. Were my nation not so stupid, it would stone me on account of my Jerusalem, but people do not understand me.

I will now turn to some examples to illustrate the power of Mendelsohn’s theory.

#### 4.1 *Nekhushtan* נחושתן

The Hebrew word for copper is *nekhoshet* (נְחוֹשֶׁת), the Hebrew word for snake is *nakhsh* (נָחַשׁ), and the Hebrew word for mantic is *nakhsh* (נָחַשׁ). All three words not only sound similarly, but contain the same three letters נ.ח.שׁ and seem to have the same ‘root.’

God once punished the people of Israel for their sins and “sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.” When Moses prayed for the people, God said to him: “Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived” (Numbers 21:7–9). Here an image of an animal is introduced for medical (we would say today: magical) purposes. An idolatrous intention is, of course, excluded because God Himself commanded to do so. And yet, by the time of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, the device was already venerated as an idol. The righteous king Hezekiah destroyed it together with other means of idolatry:

He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it *Nehushtan* (2 Kings 18:4).

Note that the non-conventional connection between symbol and referent here is double: there obtains a visual iconic connection between the figure of the snake and

the fiery serpents, and there obtains an audible and linguistic connection between serpents, snake, copper and mantic: נחש, נחושת, נחושתי, נחש.

Mendelssohn's theory explains this case. Once permanent objects are used in religious ceremonies, they are likely to be considered "natural symbols" and finally holy in themselves. What was first an iconic representation that heals by the well-known principle *similia similibus curantur* (medicaments cure their similars) may be ascribed magical power (an image of a snake heals the bite of a snake) and then venerated: the image of the snake became holy in itself.

## 4.2 *Urim and Thummim* אורים ותומים

The case of the brasen serpent is a clear case of idolatry, developing against the original intention of God. But it seems that there are cases where God himself introduces something that is clearly prone to idolatry. Mendelssohn attempts to interpret away such possibility. My next example concerns the Urim and Thummim. We do not know what these (אורים ותומים) were, and the whole point of the example is to find out what these words refer to.

In pericope Tetsaveh ("And thou shalt command") in the book of Exodus, God himself gives orders for the arrangement of the service in the tabernacle. Also the garments of Aaron and further vessels are described, among them a Khoshen (חשן), translated as "breastplate." Then Moses is ordered as follows:

And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually (Exodus 28:30).

What are the Urim and the Thummim? In Numbers 27 we read that Eleazar the priest, "shall ask counsel ... after the judgment of Urim before the LORD: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in ..." (Numbers 27:21). The Urim and perhaps also the Thummim are hence involved in divination. This is also what Ibn Ezra suggested and in his short commentary he adds an explanation how the Urim and Thummim serve in divination by astrology.

Needless to say that this is unacceptable to Mendelssohn. Astral magic is to him "association of God with others" (שיתוף), a transgression of the second commandment, and astrology falls presumably under the same verdict. This cannot be what God ordered. Mendelssohn turns to Ibn Ezra's critic, Nachmanides, and summarizes his comment with significant omissions.

**(30) The Urim and the Thummim.** The script does not explain what these are, nor did He order their production as he did with all other vessels, but mentioned them here for the first time with the definite article, the Urim and Thummim, and [speaking of] practice (מעשה), no craftsman has been mentioned but Moses alone since He [God] said that he [Moses] shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and this shows that they were not the making of an artisan and craftsmen did not make them (לא היל' לבעלי המלאכה בהם מעשה)

and the congregation of Israel did not donate for them, but they are a secret revealed by God to Moses and he wrote in holiness, and they are the making of Heavens.<sup>20</sup>

Now, the emphasis on the fact that the Urim and Thummim were not manufactured aims at excluding the plausible reading that they were idols. Nachmanides argues the point explicitly against Ibn Ezra. Thus the way is open for the suggestion that they were carriers of a script written by Moses, although the text uses no word associated with “writing” or “script.” Having established this, the question arises: what had been written by Moses? Mendelssohn suggests “a secret.” Then Mendelssohn quotes the canonic commentator Rashi to establish that they were named after their function, to enlighten (אורים means lights) and to ascertain the judgment (תמים means faultless, perfect). However, Mendelssohn omits the beginning of Rashi’s sentence. “This is the inscription of the Explicit Name [המפורש שם, the Tetragrammaton], which he placed into the folds of the breastplate, by means of which ...” The purpose of the omission is clear. Mendelssohn does not wish to suggest that the Urim and Thummim were talismans. He is opposed to all kinds of magic.

But Mendelssohn omits even more. He relies on Nachmanides for the arguments that the Urim and Thummim were not idols, but he does not even mention Nachmanides’ own exegesis. Nachmanides suggests that the inscription was of “holy names” and proceeds with a description of the magical technique used in divination. It does not come as a surprise that Mendelssohn ignores it all. He merely says that Aaron carried an inscription on his heart. As such, it is similar to God’s command “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart” (Deuteronomy 6:6) which is understood as the precept of phylacteries, and as such it is legitimate and not idolatrous.

Mendelssohn had good reasons to fear that the Urim and Thummim would be interpreted as idols. This is not only strongly suggested by the text itself, but was so interpreted in John Spencer’s *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus* (1686), that Mendelssohn owned. The case of the Urim and Thummim showed how idolatry could return through the back door after it had been thrown out through the front door. Traditional exegetes excluded the possibility that these were idols and saw no flaw in the use of holy names in divination. Mendelssohn’s more restricted conception

<sup>20</sup> ל) את האורים ואת התמים, לא פירש לנו הכתוב מה הם, אף לא צוה על עשייתן, כאשר צוה בשאר כלים, כי אם הזכירם (ל) עתה בפעם הראשונה בהי"א הידיעה, את האורים ואת התמים, וכן במעשה לא נזכר אומן כי אם משה לבדו שאמר ויתן אל החשן את האורים ואת התמים, ויראה מזה שלא היו מעשה אומן חרש ולא הי לבעלי המלאכה בהם מעשה, ולא לקהל ישראל בהם נדבה כלל, אבל הם סור מסור מפי הגבורה למשה, והוא כתבו בקדושה, והם מעשה שמים, לכך יזכירם סתם ובהי"א הידיעה, כמו וישכן מקדם לנגן עדן את הכרבים (בראשית ג כ"ד), והנה צוה השם את משה שיניח בין כפלי החשן את כתב האורים והתמים, ונקרא כך על שם שעל ידו הוא מאיר את דבריו ומתמם את דבריו, וכן נקרא משפט על שם אותו הכתב, שנאמר ושאל לו במשפט האורים (במדבר כ"ז, כ"א), לפי שעל ידו הוא מברר ומאמת את דבריו, כמ"ש למעל' בשם רש"י ז"ל (ל מדברי הרמב"ן ז"ל ל בבאור דברי רש"י): את משפט בני ישראל, הם האורים והתמים, דבר שהם נשפטים ונוכחים על ידו, אם לעשות דבר אם לא רש"י

of enlightened religion excludes also this interpretation. He had good reasons to fear that script tends to foster idolatry. His case in point is the paradigmatic case of idolatry in Judaism: the Golden Calf. This brings to the fore the connection between hieroglyphics and idolatry discussed in *Jerusalem* and dismissed by Alexander Altmann as an unsubstantiated hypothesis.

## 5 Idolatry: The Golden Calf

In the beginning of his commentary on Exodus 32, Mendelssohn explicitly announces that he adopts the reading of Yehuda Halevy (Kuzari I, 92–98) and the commentaries of Nachmanides and Ibn Ezra.<sup>21</sup>

Mendelssohn first extensively relates Halevy's interpretation. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai, the people expected him to return with new visible signs of the newly revealed God, as he was later to bring: the tablets in the shrine were to be put in the tabernacle, on which the cloud would rest. All these are visible objects. People felt the need for something to which they may point when narrating the wonders of their God, as we do when we point to Heaven when alluding to God's works. Their first intention was to have a lasting symbol to replace Moses who disappeared.<sup>22</sup> However, they didn't deny God who delivered them from Egyptian slavery. The Israelites hence did not renounce God, nor was the usage of a perceptible sign per se an offense – such signs were introduced by God and Moses – but rather they introduced upon their own discretion an image and ascribed to it divine power. This transgression came about under the influence of astrologers and writers of talismans (Kuzari I, 97).

Israel Samoscz Halevy, Mendelssohn's teacher, interpreted this as a reference to those who attempt to “draw divine affluence” (הורדת שפע אלהית) with the aid of “an image done for the cult of Heavens” (Ozar Nechmad, ad locum).<sup>23</sup> Maimonides, too, associates the Egyptian veneration of animals, or rather: their images, with the corresponding constellation. The Egyptians, he explains with reference to Onquelos, “used to worship the sign of Aries and ... therefore forbade the slaughter of sheep.”<sup>24</sup> Their high respect for cattle is presumably also connected – directly or indirectly – to star worship.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Commentary on Exodus 32:1.

<sup>22</sup>Israel Samoscz, *Otzar Nechmad*, on *Kuzari* I, 97; p. 128; Mendelssohn's commentary on *Exodus* 32:1.

<sup>23</sup>ספר הכוזרי בחמשה מאמרים. עם שני הבאורים המפורסמים קול יהודה, ואוצר נחמד. ווארשא, דפוס ר' יצחק גאלדמאן, תר"מ, 1880–1879.

<sup>24</sup>Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:46, p. 581.

<sup>25</sup>*Guide* 3:30, pp. 522–23.

Now, “calf” and “ox” may be used synonymously. This is natural enough, and concerning the sin of the calf it even has support in the psalm to which Mendelssohn refers here.<sup>26</sup> Second, the shape of the calf or ox is, of course, associated with the constellation Taurus.<sup>27</sup> R’ Abraham, the son of Maimonides, relates the interpretation of his father that the people of Israel adhered to the opinion of astrologers that exodus occurred in the sign of Taurus.<sup>28</sup>

Mendelssohn first adopts the view of some commentators that the original intent of the Israelites was not idolatry in the sense of worshipping stars instead of God. When Moses did not return for 40 days, the people did not wish another god, but “another Moses,” “another guide,” a “permanent thing that will not perish and die like him” to lead them. They wished to have something to which the divine power adheres, “since in those days it was widespread knowledge that the divine adheres to the idols and makes them prophesy.”<sup>29</sup>

Once they had this image, they were tempted to try practices of astral magic and draw the forces of Taurus to the image of the calf. Like other commentators before him, Mendelssohn explains the sin as the outcome of a process.<sup>30</sup> It begins with the wish to turn to something visible when referring to the invisible God, it leads to the ascription of divine powers to this idol which is connected to heavenly powers, it may end with worship of the idol itself. Indeed, the Israelites finally called out: “These be thy gods, O Israel which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). In short: idolatry begins with the ascription of “intrinsic meaning,”

<sup>26</sup>Psalms 106:20: “They made a calf in Horeb, and worshipped the molten image. Thus they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass.”

<sup>27</sup>Ibn Ezra, Halevy’s close friend, also explains the sin as an attempt at astral magic. In his short commentary he suggests that the form of a calf was chosen because “in India there are people who think that this form receives supreme power” and that “he who understands astronomy knows why they chose the form of a calf.” In his long commentary, he first relates the view of astrologers who explain that at the time the connection between the planets was in Taurus – and now rejects it (commentary on *Exodus* 32:1). See for details Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham’s Ibn Ezra’s Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999), 291–99.

<sup>28</sup>Commentary on *Exodus* 32:4. See M. Kasher, *Torah Shlema*, reprint, 12 vols. (Jerusalem, 1992–1996), notes to *Exodus* 32, vol. 6:90. This view was shared by others. See Kasher, “Supplementa,” in *Torah Shlema*, 6: 206–12. See also Moses Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, *Hilchot Avoda Zara*, Chap. 1. Nachmanides offers an alternative interpretation. Drawing on *Ezekiel* 1:10 (and on *Shemot Rabba*, 42), he suggests that the supreme powers which should have been drawn down on the figure were of the Divine carriage that is also associated with an ox. See also Kimchi on *Ezekiel* 1:28.

<sup>29</sup>Mendelssohn in his commentary on *Exodus* 32:1. והיו בוחרים במעשה ידי אדם, כעין תרפים אשר עשו להם. וכי ה' הרב הזה מפורסם בימים ההם שידבק ענין אלהי בצורות התרפים ההם, וינבא בימים ההם להגיד להם צרכיהם, כי ה' הרב הזה מפורסם בימים ההם שידבק ענין אלהי בצורות התרפים ההם, וינבא אותם.

See also the commentary on *Genesis* 31:19.

והנה יעשו אותם [התרפים] קטני אמנה להם לאלהים לא ישאלו בשם הנבדד ולא יתפללו אליו רק כל מעשיהם בקסמים אשר יגידו להם התרפים

The commentary was penned by Shlomo Dubnah, but Mendelssohn says the same things in his commentary on *Exodus* 32:1.

<sup>30</sup>Similar things can be said of Maimonides. See Moshe Halbertal & Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 42–44.

then holiness to what should have been regarded as signs only. What began as an innocent need for a perceptible sign may lead to the denial of the unique God or at least to adoring other gods next to Him.

We can now better understand Mendelssohn's claim that idolatry consists in misunderstanding the representational function of an image. The basis of different kinds of idolatry is not that the image is taken to be the divine, but that it is ascribed divine power, that it is supposed to share in "force" and "spirit" with the divine or that the divine "adheres" (ידבק) to it. At the beginning of the story of the Golden Calf, Mendelssohn remarks that in those days people believed that divine essence (ענין אלהי) adheres to certain "images" or house-gods (תרפים) – as those stolen by Rachel from Laban – which could, therefore, be used for divination.<sup>31</sup> This view depends on conceiving the relation of the sign to the signified not as purely conventional, but as real, such that the sign partakes in the properties of the represented. From here the way may lead to the negation of God, but this is not even necessary; it suffices that the symbol is ascribed divine powers to make its referent, God, lose His singular place or even recede into the background and fade: "thus they were led from one thing to the other, from thought to thought, until they began to refer to him in service and prayer as all idolaters" (commentary on Exodus 32:4). This, however, does not yet explain the association of this sin with hieroglyphics. Here Warburton comes in.

### 5.1 *Hieroglyphics and Idolatry*

Warburton develops in great length a series of arguments to support the thesis that "the true original of animal worship in Egypt was an improved kind of hieroglyphics, called symbols." His arguments are first that this kind of idolatry was peculiar to the Egyptians, second that the Egyptians didn't worship icons of animals only, but also of plants "and, in a word, every kind of Being that had qualities remarkably singular or efficacious." These qualities represent a characteristic property which, in its turn, stand for a person in the same way in which animals represent specific human characters in fables. Third, the Egyptians also adored Chimeras, fantastic compounds of several parts of humans or beasts or mixtures of both which were certainly not existing in nature. Also the fact that different cities venerated representations of different animals although the Egyptians had "one national religion" shows that these were representations of a Deity or of lesser Hero Gods "of whom Animals were but the Representatives," not of the animals themselves.<sup>32</sup> Warburton concludes:

But to put the matter yet further out of question, it may be observed that the most early Brute-Worship in Egypt was not an Adoration of the Animal, but only of the Picture or

<sup>31</sup> See Bi'ur to Exodus 32:1 and Genesis 31:19.

<sup>32</sup> William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist*, 2 vols., 1737–1741, reprint of the 2nd English edition, 1741 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 2:165–68.



image of it. ... From the Second Commandment, and Moses's Exhortation to Obedience, it appears that the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus, worshipped no living Animal, but the Picture or Image only: – "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me. Though shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any Likeness of any thing that is in Heaven above, or that is in the Earth beneath, or that is in the Water under the Earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them" (Exod. 20: 3,4,5). The consequence was, that Hieroglyphics were forbid; a plain Proof of their being the Source of that Idolatry in question.<sup>33</sup>

The second commandment is hence a measure against the hieroglyphic idolatry of the Egyptians. In Mendelssohn, the association between idolatry and hieroglyphics is so strong that it enters into his translation of the Pentateuch and not only into his commentary. In his commentary on Exodus 20:20 (the second commandment), Mendelssohn refers to Leviticus 26: 1:

Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the LORD your God (King James translation).

Mendelssohn translates:

Macht Euch keine Götzen, errichtet kein Bild, kein Denkmal, und duldet in eurem Lande keinen Stein mit Bilderschrift zur Verehrung.<sup>34</sup>

Mendelssohn hence follows Warburton and interprets the second commandment as referring explicitly to hieroglyphics (Bilderschrift). In a note ad locum added to the commentary of Herz Weisel, Mendelssohn remarks that hieroglyphics served the sages of Egypt to write down those things that they wished to conceal from the people and of which they said that they are sublime figures that should be venerated and worshiped in order to induce respect for them (and, of course, for themselves) in the eyes of the multitude. We find here both elements of idolatry mentioned also in *Jerusalem*: the inclination of the multitude towards the imagination and mysteries and the interest of the sages in deceiving the common people and securing their own superiority and rule.

This interpretation of hieroglyphics as idolatry in Leviticus is prepared in Mendelssohn's translation and explanation of the word *khartum* (חרטום) used in Genesis and Exodus. The King James translation renders the plural, *khartumim* (חרטמים), "magicians of Egypt." Mendelssohn translates חרטמים as "Bilderschriftkundige," "experts in hieroglyphics," (see Genesis 41:8, Exodus 7:11, 22) and also "magicians."<sup>35</sup> The explanation is given in the commentary on the first

<sup>33</sup>Warburton, *Divine Legation*, 2:170.

<sup>34</sup>Luther: "Ihr sollt euch keinen Götzen machen noch Bild, und sollt euch keine Säule aufrichten, noch einen Malstein setzen in eurem Lande, daß ihr davor anbetet; denn ich bin der HErr, euer GOtt."

<sup>35</sup>Mendelssohn added an explanation of the latter word in brackets. These magicians change with their arcane crafts the "appearance of things" (die durch verborgene Künste den Schein der Dinge verändern können). Thus Mendelssohn severs their art from the (evidently: real) transformation of the rod into a serpent by God's wonder (through Moses and Aaron) reported in the previous verse.



locus: חרטום (khartum) says Mendelssohn, is derived from חרֶט (kheret) and this is the instrument with which you produce engravings on hard surfaces:

And it is known that at the beginning of writing all things and ideas were written by means of pictures and engravings called hieroglyphics or pictorial script [Hieroglyphen oder Bilderschrift] and this writing was practiced by the sages of Egypt and by its means their priests and sages concealed their scientific knowledge and mechanics and magic (חכמת התולדות והתחבולות ומעשה הכשפים) from the multitude since only the priests and the leaders of the people understood it, and until today nobody can interpret these engravings and pictures, and it is therefore possible that khartum (חרטום) was the person who understood these pictures and engravings and knew how to use them and adequately interpret them, and these were the sages and the magicians and the interpreters of dreams in Egypt.

This explanation of “khartum” is repeated briefly in the context of the story of the Golden Calf. In Exodus 32:3–4 we read that the people of Israel brought their golden Earrings to Aaron:

And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool (kheret), after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

In his translation, Mendelssohn omits the word kheret (חרט) (engraving tool), but returns to it in his commentary: “A tool of goldsmiths with which one engraves and notches forms in gold, as the pen of the scribe that engraves letters in tablets and books.”<sup>36</sup> Thus Mendelssohn moves from the tool of the goldsmith to the pen of scribes, from a three dimensional figure to pictograms and letters engraved in tablets.

The khartumim (חרטמים) are hence scribes, sages and magicians who use a חרט (kheret; engraving tool) after which tool they are named, to engrave or delineate the hieroglyphics. They may use magic to draw the “divine affluence,” e.g., by preparing an image of a calf and thus draw divine powers from the constellation of “Taurus,” bull. Consider now the sign of Taurus  and compare it with the ancient aleph,  or with a later א. These are all “outlines” of a pictogram of a bull, whether they derive from one another or from a common source or, finally, are independent of one another. Mendelssohn suggests that the time of revelation was the time of transition from hieroglyphics to alphabetical script and that the Hebrew alphabet derives from hieroglyphic pictograms. The pictogram of the calf first directly represented a calf (which, in turn, may represent a property of heroes or gods), later the same pictogram (or its simplified variant) represented the syllable with which the word for calf or bull begins. Now, “bull” is in Hebrew “eleph” or “aluph,” written אֵלֶפֶת,

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In this Mendelssohn follows Ibn Ezra, but he omits Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the “wise,” who were also summoned by Pharaoh. Ibn Ezra suggests that these were astrologers (חכמי המזלות). See Ibn Ezra’s long commentary on Exodus 7:11 and 7:22. Mendelssohn quotes Ibn Ezra’s first commentary.

<sup>36</sup>In the commentary, Mendelssohn offers some German words as translations: Ziesel, Meissel and Grabstichel.

as also the name of the letter “aleph” is written (see Deuteronomy 7:13; 28:4,18,51). Note that in Hebrew the difference between the syllables “e” and “a” or “u” does not show in writing, since aleph is a consonant only and the vocal is not written. The sign in question is hence either a pictogram referring to a bull or already the alphabetical letter “aleph” representing the syllable “א” with which the word “eleph” or “aluph” (אֵלֶפֶת), bull, begins. The sin of the calf hence consisted in using either a pictogram of a calf or an aleph (if the two can be distinguished), an image (צלם) of the constellation Taurus (or of the word “eleph,” bull, referring to Taurus) to draw divine powers by means of the affinity between the star group and this representation and put them into human service.

The difference between Aaron and the Egyptian magicians is that in their case the intentional deception of the multitude is stressed, whereas Mendelssohn (with other commentators) does not accuse Aaron of ill intentions, but rather blames the desire of the multitude to have a pictorial idol, not only an abstract God (more on this below). Mendelssohn summarizes his theory thus:

I already told you about the custom of ancient nations (that did not yet know the art of writing) to engrave shapes and pictures and different figures, each denoting something of which they wished to inform posterity. And the sages knowledgeable of history knew the reference of each and every figure and as we already said in our commentary, among them were the Khartumim of Egypt and the sages who knew the interpretation of these figures and announced what was seen in them. And in the beginning these forms were nothing but signs of script referring to something, similar to the letters of the alphabet which we use that have no intrinsic meaning but signify only (שאינן בהם הוראה עצמית כי אם הוראה סימנית). But in the course of time and the deterioration of the Ages, these khartumim deceived the multitude with corrupt views and falsities and said that these figures have an intrinsic meaning and attributed to them occult qualities and false effects. And from there stems the error of idols and talismans which lead most people astray on crooked paths and to revolting deeds, as is well known, except the patriarchs and their sons whom God, blessed be He, has singled out as His special people and gave them Torah (lore) and Mitzwot (precepts) to safeguard them from those revolting things.<sup>37</sup>

Torah saves from idolatry because the second commandment forbids representations; Mitzwot, the ceremonial law, forestall idolatry because ceremonies are transient and leave nothing behind to worship. To emphasize this difference, Mendelssohn adopted his teacher’s, Israel Samoscz’s idea that the calf was made of gold in order to make it permanent “since Gold is lasting longest of all things in the world, and as the naturalists know it does not suffer corruption and some even thought that it cannot corrupt in all eternity.” When the multitude saw that Moses did not return from the mountain, writes Mendelssohn, they believed he died and resolved: “Let us now make something lasting that will not corrupt and die like him.”<sup>38</sup> Actions, the most transient of all things, are diametrically opposed to the incorruptible gold of the calf.

<sup>37</sup>Mendelssohn’s note to the commentary on Numbers 15: 37(8)–41.

<sup>38</sup>Israel Samoscz, *Nezach Israel*, on *Kuzari* I, 97:128; Mendelssohn’s commentary on Exodus 32:1.

## 6 Judaism as an Antidote to Idolatry

The dilemma is hence this: without perceptible signs, no abstract ideas can be retained, but permanent signs are conducive to idolatry. To this dilemma, the Ceremonial law revealed to Moses is the remedy.

The major advantage of the ceremonial act and of the spoken word in comparison to images and the written word is that once the act is completed or the word spoken nothing remains:

Man's actions are transitory; there is nothing lasting, nothing enduring about them that, like hieroglyphic script, could lead to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding.<sup>39</sup>

Since no object remains after the act is performed or the word spoken, it cannot become an object of adoration. The first services rendered by the ceremonial law to Judaism are hence positive and negative: the ceremonial law gives as it were a “body,” an external representation to mental content, to thoughts. A sequence of actions is remembered “bodily,” like riding a bicycle, not mediated by their meaning. “Knowing how” is independent of “knowing that.” Moreover, embodied in actions, the existence of thoughts of a certain kind – religious thoughts (although not specified) – is rendered public and shared by the community. The rite is analogous to a word which has a “core” shared meaning and very different connotations (analogous to the different thoughts of the practitioners). But different from a written word, this “body” of thoughts does not last and therefore does not promote idolatry as do permanent objects. Moreover, the fact that the ceremonies are performed in a community and that their meaning must be explained, means that people do not study books in isolation and become “literati,” men of letters (*Jerusalem*, 103–4), and that religious doctrines ossify: each generation educates in personal contact its successor and the understanding of religion adapts continuously to changing historical circumstances.

It was, at first, expressly forbidden to write more about the law than God has caused Moses to record for the nation. ... The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction.<sup>40</sup>

The ceremonial law thus is the social bond itself and also the “bond” between action and contemplation. This dual character is essential. Although the social bond itself may be ascribed religious meaning,<sup>41</sup> the ceremonies are not merely a means of creating a social bond – otherwise soccer could replace them. They are religious signs even though their exact meaning may remain unknown. The meaning of the ceremonies should rather be elaborated ever anew within a practicing community and across generations.

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<sup>39</sup>Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 119.

<sup>40</sup>*Jerusalem*, 102–3, cf. 128.

<sup>41</sup>In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn remarks that outside of society man cannot fulfil his duties towards God. Societal life therefore has also a religious meaning. See *Jerusalem*, 40.

## 7 Ritual Articles: Mendelssohn's Reform of Judaism

The claim that in Jewish ceremonies “there is nothing lasting, nothing enduring about them” is simply false. In this description of the Jewish rite, Mendelssohn obviously distorts Jewish religious practice. He passes in silence over the ritual articles that are used in religious ceremonies. These articles last after the ceremony ended, and they are in fact ascribed intrinsic religious value of their own, some according to religious law (הלכה), some by custom. Moreover, the language of the Torah and even the Hebrew alphabet often were and are ascribed intrinsic significance, often even considered sacred. In fact, the attribution of intrinsic value to representations is ubiquitous in Jewish practice and law. In passing in silence over these very well-known facts, Mendelssohn misrepresents or rather wishes to reform Judaism.

In Judaism, two kinds of “ritual articles” are distinguished, those to which sanctity adheres, and those that merely serve in the performance of a precept: תשמישי קדושה and תשמישי מצווה. When the former cannot be used anymore, they are put in special repositories (גניזה), and kept there or buried on a Jewish cemetery. Thus not only every object on which God's name or a religious text is written may not be thrown away, but neither all material objects that were used together with a sacred text: the cloth cover of a Torah scroll, its case, the straps and cases of phylacteries etc. This is Halacha!<sup>42</sup> It is easy to see that it is not the meaning of the text that is venerated, but the material article itself: an electronic medium with the entire text of the bible, and be it in Hebrew, and in Hebrew letters and with the cantillations, does not enjoy any respect whatever; the same text written on parchment does. Simple Ritual articles, which are not ascribed intrinsic sanctity but merely serve the fulfillment of a mitzvah, may be disposed of – but in fact they are not. It is true, the religious law does not forbid putting a broken shofar or a worn out tsitsit in the garbage – but this is not done. They are either put in the same repositories as the sacred articles or used for a “dignified” purpose, until they so-to-say disappear. Both kinds of ritual articles may be and often are venerated. Torah scrolls are shown respect by religious law: people should rise when in presence of a Torah scroll and not turn their back to it, etc. etc. This is Halacha. But the custom does not stop there: Torah scrolls are kissed (not directly! the scroll is touched with the tsitsit and the tsitsit is kissed), Mezuzot are kissed (not directly! the mezuzah is touched with the hand and the hand is kissed) and are often believed to have magical powers – as are phylacteries too. There is no clear-cut distinction between respect shown to a religious symbol and idolatry. Moreover, what begins with showing respect is likely to become idolatry.

<sup>42</sup>ת"ר תשמישי מצוה נזרקין תשמישי קדושה נגזזין ואלו הן תשמישי מצוה לולב שופר ציצית ואלו הן תשמישי קדושה דלוסקמי ספרים תפילין ומוזות ותיק של ס"ת ונרתיק של תפילין ורצועותיהן. תלמוד בבלי, "מגילה" פרק ד, דף כד. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayyim*, # 154; *Yoreh Dea*, # 282.

Consider a story from Salomon Maimon's autobiography. Maimon reports a dispute with a rabbi whose authority he refused to accept. The rabbi reproaches Maimon for his impious conduct and Maimon shows no insight. The rabbi

began to cry aloud, "Shophar! Shophar!" This is the name of the horn which is blown on New-Year's day as a summons to repentance, and at which it is supposed that Satan is horribly afraid. While the chief rabbi called out the word, he pointed to a Shophar that lay before him on the table, and asked me, "Do you know what that is?" I replied quite boldly, "Oh yes! it is a ram's horn." At these words the chief rabbi fell back upon his chair, and began to lament over my lost soul.<sup>43</sup>

Maimon's answer is so "bold," because he refuses to acknowledge the Shophar as a religious symbol of New-Year and repentance. His answer degrades it to a material object of dubious origin – the carcass of an animal. Even in enlightened circles, rejecting the "superstitious belief" that Satan is horribly afraid of the shophar, Maimon's answer would count as sacrilege, this although a shophar is not a "sacred article" but merely a "ritual article."

This theme is, of course, not new in Judaism. Already Maimonides polemicized against the use of Torah scrolls and phylacteries as magical utensils and considered these practices idolatrous,<sup>44</sup> and the very same controversies are still with us today.

Mendelssohn's discussion of Jewish ceremonies is hence not a presentation of Judaism (ancient or modern) but a radical reinterpretation of its practices. Such reinterpretation is common with reformers, of course. Mendelssohn speaks of "ancient, original Judaism, as I conceive it" as others speak of "ancient, original" Christianity, Communism or Liberalism. In all these cases, the normative concept is presented in descriptive terms, as "true" and "original," and the reform as a restoration. Now, this is not to say that Mendelssohn merely used a rhetorical trick. He may have sincerely believed that his conception restores essential original Judaism and that the practices that are inconsistent with it, are negligible. However, he very well knew that the practice he presents as "Judaism" is very different from actual present practice in Jewish communities – his own included. He explicitly said so:

True judaism is no longer found anywhere. Fanaticism and superstition exist among us to a most abhorrent degree. Were my nation not so stupid, it would stone me on account of my Jerusalem, but people do not understand me.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup>*Solomon Maimon: Autobiography*, 261–62. The remark on the alleged fear of Satan refers presumably to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashana, fol. 16b.

<sup>44</sup>See *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Avoda Zara, 11, 12 and Hilchot Tefilin u-Mzuzah, 5, 4. See also Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006).

<sup>45</sup>"Das wahre Judentum ist nirgend mehr, Schwärmerei und Aberglauben ist bei uns in der größten Abscheulichkeit. Wenn meine Nation nicht so dumm wäre, so würde sie mich wegen meines 'Jerusalems' steinigen, aber sie verstehen mich nicht." Mendelssohn in conversation with Sophie Becker. See Sophie Becker, "Briefe einer Kurländerin" (Berlin, 1791), Bd. 2, 172 ff. Neue erweiterte Ausgabe: *Vor hundert Jahren: Elisa von der Reckes Reisen durch Deutschland 1784–86, nach dem Tagebuche ihrer Begleiterin Sophie Becker* (Stuttgart, 1884), 196, 217–18, 225, 232–33. Partially quoted in: *Moses Mendelssohn. Zeugnisse. Briefe. Gespräche* (Berlin: Welt-Verlag 1929), 148–50. The quotation above is from the entry of November 27, 1785. Translation according to Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 722.

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# Index

## A

- Abbt, Thomas, 65, 66, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77, 79,  
146, 152, 217, 219, 220, 225–230, 232,  
233, 235, 236, 240, 336, 338, 339
- Abbild* (depiction, image), 9, 166, 195
- Acosmism, 120, 129
- Actuality, 169, 179, 187–192, 194, 196, 197,  
200, 201, 207, 208, 212
- Aepinus, Franz, 60, 61
- Aesthetic
- certitude, 263, 266, 292
  - life, 266, 267
  - life of cognition (*vita cognitionis  
aestheticae*), 262, 263, 266, 267
  - light, 263, 265, 266
  - magnitude, 264, 265
  - probability, 313
  - truth, 265, 266, 290, 292, 312, 314
  - wealth, 263
- Aesthetics, 23–25, 84, 102–103, 154, 209, 259,  
263, 273, 279–297, 299–324, 332, 345
- Agent-causality, 252
- Altmann, Alexander, 22, 42, 43, 46, 50, 53,  
56, 60, 71–73, 107, 108, 110, 111, 113,  
117, 122, 123, 147, 150, 160, 169, 174,  
184, 192, 193, 206, 220, 225, 227, 229,  
231, 232, 236, 237, 239–243, 261, 263,  
269, 275, 323, 356, 359
- Ars characteristic*, 70–74
- Ars combinatoria*, 71
- Ars inveniendi*, 70, 75, 77
- Artistic representations, 261, 262, 264, 265,  
268–274, 276, 333
- The Art of Conjecturing*, 41–46, 48, 51, 54,  
56, 57, 62, 63
- Arts, 22, 24, 25, 70, 75, 77, 259, 276, 296,  
305, 311, 314, 316, 330, 368

- Attribute(s), 7, 62, 77, 85, 90, 92, 113–115,  
117, 118, 120, 121, 124, 129, 134, 135,  
140, 154, 170, 175, 189, 193, 196, 232,  
247, 281, 283, 289, 296, 368

## B

- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb, 25, 60,  
133, 184, 259, 260, 261, 279–297,  
299, 330
- Bayes, Thomas, 50
- Bayle, Pierre, 17, 110, 111, 113, 115, 117,  
118, 120, 137, 138, 141, 225, 236
- Beautiful, 3, 21–22, 206, 223, 261–266, 275,  
276, 296, 308, 310, 311, 314, 316–318,  
320, 329–332, 338–343
- Beauty, 21, 209, 247, 248, 259–263, 265–268,  
273, 274, 276, 281, 288, 290, 292, 293,  
295, 296, 306, 308, 311, 314–318,  
320–322, 324, 330, 340, 342, 343
- Beiser, Frederick, 203, 204
- Bernoulli, Jacob, 41–62, 188, 293
- Bernoulli, Nicholas, 43
- Bestimmungsgrund*, 46
- Bewegungsgrund*, 46, 248
- Bildung*, 35–36
- Bilfinger, Georg B., 194, 315
- Biot, Jean-Baptiste, 99
- Bodily, 112, 114, 116, 152, 275, 276, 320,  
334, 335, 340, 369
- Bodmer, Johann Jakob, 300–305, 308, 312,  
318, 321, 322, 326, 339, 347, 349
- Body, 3, 25, 26, 46, 112, 114, 115, 117,  
120–122, 132, 133, 140–143, 147, 148,  
150, 152, 204, 211, 222, 237, 238, 240,  
242, 243, 260, 275, 276, 281–283, 294,  
311, 317–320, 322, 324, 332, 334, 369



*Bon sens*, 197–199, 205–207, 209, 210 (see also: Common sense, and: understanding, as sound human understanding)  
 Breitinger, Johann Jakob, 300, 301, 303–305, 308, 312, 322  
 Bullough, Edward, 271, 272, 274  
 Burke, Edmund, 275, 304, 317, 329–349

## C

Calculation(s), 41, 43, 44, 49, 71, 74, 87, 188–190  
 Cambridge Platonism, -ists, 132, 139, 140, 152  
 Carnap, Rudolf, 10, 17  
 Cassirer, Ernst, 309, 322  
 Cavallo, Tiberius, 84, 99–100  
 Certainly, 16, 18, 26, 65, 66, 70–73, 75, 79, 102, 116, 117, 120, 121, 134, 144, 151, 164, 165, 176, 179, 207, 210, 218, 219, 227, 229, 239, 261, 267, 268, 303, 309, 312, 313, 315–317, 322, 332, 338, 343, 351, 354, 365  
 Certainty, 45, 47, 48, 50, 51, 54–62, 66–72, 77, 136, 139, 141, 143, 167, 168, 177, 188, 189, 211, 213, 214, 249, 252, 254, 265, 266, 292–295  
 Chance, 5, 41, 42, 50–52, 75, 119, 124, 146, 189  
 Chisholm, Roderick, 252  
 Choice, 12, 19, 54–58, 113, 119, 129, 144, 163, 224, 246–250, 252, 265, 266, 359  
 Christianity, 109, 120, 151, 210, 356, 371  
 Clarke, Samuel, 115, 247  
 Commercial arithmetic, 41  
 Common sense, 7, 10, 16–19, 34, 52, 197–199, 203–214, see also *Bon sens*, and understanding, as sound human understanding  
 Compatibilism, -ists, 245, 253, 254  
 Comprehension, 251, 313  
 Concepts, 4, 23, 47, 68, 114, 131–155, 162, 187, 209, 222, 238, 246, 272, 280, 304, 333, 358  
 Consciousness, 13, 14, 133, 134, 139, 149, 151, 152, 170, 174, 178, 180, 211, 212, 272, 281, 284–286  
 Conti, Alberto, 83, 99  
 Contingent beings, 143, 170, 191, 192, 195  
 Continuity, 25, 133, 140, 147, 151, 163, 189, 190, 224, 248, 321

Correspondence, 24, 72, 110, 115, 122, 159, 184, 186, 187, 192, 211, 232, 235–237, 239, 290, 301, 302, 305, 308, 313, 332, 333, 339, 340  
 Cramer, Johann Andreas, 301–304  
 Cranz, August Friedrich, 30

## D

De Moivre, Abraham, 42–44, 47, 49, 51  
 Demonstration, 43, 46, 48, 61, 66–69, 74–79, 137, 144, 150–152, 207, 208, 210, 238, 243, 247, 284, 294  
 Descartes, René, 120, 132, 133, 137–139, 150, 180, 181, 189, 192, 198, 206–209, 221, 224, 242, 275, 279, 284, 285  
 Desire, 29, 71, 89, 90, 125, 126, 139, 145–148, 151, 152, 170, 209, 237, 248, 250, 252, 265–267, 271, 272, 293, 296, 368  
*Determinatio positiva*, 193, 197  
 Determinism, 53–62, 118, 120, 124, 128, 129, 245, 246  
 Determinists, 129, 245, 252, 253  
 Divine, 9, 13, 14, 29, 54–56, 59, 113–115, 117, 118, 120, 121, 124, 125, 128, 129, 139, 141, 143, 144, 146, 148, 151, 152, 210, 225, 227, 228, 236, 242, 248, 317, 356–358, 363–368  
   mind, 13, 118–120  
   substance, 113, 114, 117, 118, 120, 125  
 Dogmatism, and dogmatic reason, 41, 193, 200, 201  
 Dualism, 15, 16, 114, 165, 242–244  
 Dualist, 4, 6–10, 165–167, 171, 172, 242, 243  
 Du Bos, Jean-Baptiste, 259, 269, 303, 305, 309, 314, 318 (Dubos)

## E

Eberhard, Johann August, 198, 204  
 Efficient cause, 5, 122, 126, 232, 317  
 Emancipation, 30–32, 35  
 Emotional impact, 263, 265–268  
   of art, 266  
 Emotions, 3, 109, 115, 180, 263–269, 272, 275, 304, 316, 318, 322, 324, 331, 332, 340, 349, 358  
 Enlightenment, 21, 27, 35, 36, 109, 148, 203, 214, 217–219, 221, 223, 230, 232, 233, 241, 279, 280, 300, 332, 352  
 Equal temperament, 83–103  
 Euclid, 75, 76, 78, 85, 87, 97, 99

Euler, Leonhard, 43, 65, 83, 87, 101, 102  
 Evil, 12, 58, 126, 129, 142, 143, 227–232,  
 249, 250, 267, 270, 271, 315,  
 336, 347  
 Existence, 3, 68, 108, 134, 159, 186, 207, 228,  
 237, 249, 281, 300, 330, 369  
 Existence  
 as *actio* and *passio*, 194  
 as *Daseyn*, 187, 190, 193, 194  
 ideal existence, 161, 165, 193  
 God, 138, 175, 186, 192, 193, 207,  
 209, 294  
 Experience, 10, 28, 46, 51, 52, 55, 56, 59, 60,  
 85, 115, 116, 132, 133, 140–142, 164,  
 172, 175, 176, 178–181, 186, 191, 196,  
 197, 199, 205, 211, 222–224, 273, 279,  
 280, 282, 284–286, 292, 309, 314,  
 317–320, 322, 331, 332, 340, 343, 345,  
 348, 349  
 Extension, 7, 8, 11, 12, 113–115, 117, 118,  
 120–122, 124–126, 128, 129, 133, 170,  
 171, 195, 203, 208, 222, 232, 313, 314,  
 320, 342  
 Extensive finity, 128

## F

Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 155, 214, 217,  
 219, 233  
 Final cause, 126, 317  
 Finite modes, 117, 120, 121  
 Fischer, Johann Carl, 83, 100, 101  
 Fogliano, Ludovico, 85, 87  
 Force, 11, 13, 15, 28, 31, 34, 46, 55–57, 61,  
 62, 119, 126, 153, 176, 221, 232, 282,  
 364, 365  
 Foreknowledge, 54, 58  
 Freedom, 12, 16, 53–55, 59, 109, 118, 119,  
 121, 124, 128, 129, 136, 155, 247, 253,  
 254, 264, 308  
 Free will, 41, 53–57, 59, 118, 120, 124, 126,  
 245–254

## G

Games of chance, 41, 50  
 Genius, 66, 68, 96, 132, 183, 186, 263, 265,  
 274, 339  
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 108, 123,  
 300, 316  
 Gottsched, Christoph, 110, 300, 301, 303–305,  
 311, 315, 321  
 's Gravesande, Wilhelm Jacob, 44–46, 48–50, 53  
*Grund (causa, ratio)*, 250

## H

Hamann, Johann Georg, 108, 174, 175,  
 218, 241  
 Haller, Albrecht von, 267  
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 120, 299,  
 304, 310, 323  
*Hen kai pan*, 124  
 Herder, Johann Gottfried, 108, 126, 150, 151,  
 235–244  
 Herz, Marcus, 131, 153, 154, 163, 178,  
 184, 185  
 Hinske, Norbert, 136, 219–221, 225, 226, 232  
 Hobbes, Thomas, 33–35, 150, 245, 246, 304  
 Home, Henry, 340  
 Hospers, John, 17  
 Hume David, 17, 24, 41, 47, 51, 154,  
 204, 207, 210–212, 222, 269, 270,  
 292, 304  
 Hume's scepticism, 47–52, 222  
 Hutcheson, Francis, 273, 304, 314,  
 315, 317  
 Huygens, Christiaan, 41, 43, 44, 47

## I

Ibn Ezra, Abraham, 361–364, 367, 372  
*Idea confusa*, 310  
 Idealism, 6–10, 16, 18, 108, 111, 112,  
 123, 125, 129, 133, 159–181, 186,  
 191, 196, 207, 212–214, 218, 222,  
 223, 297  
 Idealists, 4, 6–10, 15–18, 159–181, 190, 195,  
 196, 198, 199  
 Ideas, 3, 26, 42, 73, 87, 111, 135, 160,  
 189, 204, 220, 245, 263, 279, 310,  
 329, 358  
 Illusion, 6, 9, 166, 175, 178, 187, 190,  
 295, 333  
 Image (das Nachbild), 187  
 Imagination, 61, 115, 118, 132, 145, 166,  
 191, 207, 267, 272, 283, 286, 340,  
 342–345, 366  
 Imitation, 243, 261, 269, 272–274, 277,  
 303, 336  
 of nature, 303  
 Imitative, 274, 277  
 Immediacy, 72, 179, 181, 197,  
 206, 207  
 Immortality, 131, 133, 135–144, 146, 149,  
 150, 152, 186, 207, 238  
 Imperfection, 140, 177, 247, 248, 266, 269,  
 332–336, 341, 347, 348  
 Incompatibilism, 245  
 Indistinct inferences, 206, 207, 209

- Individuals, 25, 31, 32, 59, 69, 112–114,  
 117, 121, 124, 132, 136, 149–151,  
 209, 221, 223, 224, 226, 227,  
 229–232, 241, 271, 280, 281, 283,  
 289–291, 322, 330
- Induction, 41, 167–170, 290, 292, 295,  
 312–314
- Inference, 9, 10, 47, 51, 52, 59, 168, 177, 187,  
 193, 196, 200, 205–211, 214, 221, 294,  
 310, 335, 358
- Infinite, 11, 13, 14, 55–58, 92, 114, 115,  
 117–120, 124–126, 128, 129, 146, 147,  
 149, 151, 163, 164, 192, 213, 252, 274,  
 290, 314, 338
- attributes, 117, 120, 124
- extension, 115, 117, 118, 120, 129
- modes, 117
- substance, 114, 124, 128
- thinking, 117, 129
- Inner sense, 134, 135, 178, 188–190, 208, 314,  
 315, 317, 318
- Intellectual perfection, 152, 276
- Intensional infinity, 126
- Intensive infinite, 128
- Intuition, 52, 68, 134, 153, 161, 164, 175, 180,  
 191, 195–197, 212, 213, 260, 266–268,  
 283, 296, 330–332, 351
- Intuitive reason, 214
- Israel, Manasseh Ben, 23, 30, 31
- J**
- Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich, 128, 203–215,  
 218, 233
- Jakob, Ludwig Heinrich, 175, 176,  
 186, 201
- Jeans, James, 101
- Jerusalem*, 23, 29–35, 72, 210, 232, 356, 359,  
 360, 363, 366, 369, 371, 375
- Judaism, 31, 33, 52, 119, 210, 351, 352, 354,  
 356, 359, 360, 363, 369–371
- Judgement, 24, 61, 62, 134, 140, 150, 153,  
 185–187, 197, 199, 201, 203, 206,  
 207, 209–211, 213, 221, 232, 246,  
 247, 283, 299, 300, 306, 316–318,  
 321–323
- K**
- Kant, Immanuel, 68, 108, 131, 134, 183–201,  
 222, 231, 320
- Kirnberger, Johann Philipp, 102
- Klopstock, Friedrich Gottlieb, 300, 301, 303,  
 304, 312, 315, 318, 321
- Knowledge, 3, 26, 45, 73, 84, 109, 134, 166,  
 183–202, 209, 222, 240, 249, 260,  
 279–297, 308, 353
- Kuehn, Manfred, 198, 204, 206
- L**
- Lambert, Johann Heinrich, 65–80, 107, 160,  
 162–164, 178–180, 184, 185, 279
- Lange, Joachim, 111, 112, 301, 305–308, 313
- Lange, Samuel Gotthold, 301–303, 307
- Language, 3–5, 7, 11–12, 17–19, 26–29, 31,  
 34, 52, 72–74, 121, 133, 171, 187, 220,  
 232, 240, 301, 306, 308, 311, 317, 322,  
 324, 357, 370
- Lavater Johann Kaspar, 108, 235
- Laws of thought, 188, 199
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 3, 23, 26, 36, 41,  
 73, 107, 111, 123, 129, 133, 194, 209,  
 242, 247, 248, 254, 269, 280, 299, 305,  
 310, 315, 329, 337
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 5, 23, 60, 72,  
 107, 120–129, 169, 203, 218, 269,  
 299, 329
- Libertarian(s), -ism, 53–57, 59, 245, 252, 253
- Life, 15, 17, 19, 41, 61, 108, 126, 133, 135,  
 138–142, 144, 146, 147, 150–152, 160,  
 166, 184, 185, 204, 221, 225, 226, 228,  
 235, 236, 238–241, 243, 262, 263, 266,  
 267, 270, 272, 304, 312, 313, 369
- of aesthetic cognition, 262, 263, 272
- Locke, John, 33–35, 75, 148, 149, 153, 207,  
 221, 222, 224, 279–282, 284, 304
- Longinus, 264, 265, 306, 307, 331
- M**
- Magnitude natural, 264–265
- Maimon, Salomon, 5, 24, 120, 213, 222, 352,  
 355, 371
- Marvelous, 303, 311, 312, 314, 316, 318, 321,  
 324, 332
- Mathematical music, 83
- Mathematical probability, 41–44, 52, 57, 58
- Mathematics, 41, 42, 44, 47, 48, 51, 54, 60,  
 61, 71, 72, 74–77, 87, 89, 132, 143,  
 183, 187, 188, 208, 294, 304, 313
- of infinites, 55
- Mediation, 73, 197, 212, 260
- Meier, Georg Friedrich, 131–155, 262, 263,  
 266–268, 270–272, 301, 303–305,  
 307, 308, 311, 312, 315, 318, 319,  
 321–323
- Messiah of Enlightenment Reason, 219

- Metaphysics, 16, 25, 26, 33, 66, 69, 77, 79, 80, 107, 132, 151, 154, 160, 183, 202, 203, 207–209, 220, 221, 224, 228, 230, 232, 233, 281, 288, 289, 291, 294, 308, 310, 313–315, 321  
     as metametaphysics, 17  
 Michaelis, Johann David, 73, 302  
 Mixed affects, 322  
 Mixed emotions, 267, 322  
 Mixed sentiment(s), 259–277, 333, 342, 348  
 Model (Vorbild), 25, 29, 31, 35, 50, 68, 75, 79, 149, 163, 170, 195, 223, 242, 274, 300, 303, 312, 323  
 Modes, 29, 114, 117, 120–122, 124, 214, 230, 267, 356, 359  
 Monism, 121, 122, 122, 125, 242–244  
 Montmort, Rémond de, 42–44, 47  
 Moral duties, 150  
 Morality, 14, 16, 19, 129, 132, 138, 151, 155, 204, 245  
     good, 124, 126, 315  
 Moral necessity, 58, 126, 245–254  
 Motives, 46, 55–57, 59, 125, 227, 246, 248, 252, 253, 356  
 Music, 83, 104, 152, 268, 316
- N**
- Necessary being, 13, 188, 190–197, 200, 201, 208  
 Necessity, 11, 12, 58, 62, 67, 119, 126, 224, 229, 245–254, 283, 359  
 Newton, Isaac, 83, 84, 87, 90, 92, 94–96, 99, 132, 304  
 Nicolai, Friedrich, 24, 204, 302–305, 315, 316, 333
- O**
- Objective actuality, 189, 190, 193, 194, 196, 197, 200, 201  
 Object of experience, 223  
 Obscurity, 61, 287, 295, 337  
 Occasionalist, 51, 115  
 Original (Urbild), 9, 36, 49, 56, 59, 68, 83, 109, 113, 115, 122, 142, 145, 147, 165, 170, 174, 178–180, 187, 195, 204, 210, 232, 273, 282, 323, 333, 335, 337, 342, 353, 356, 360, 361, 364, 365, 371
- P**
- Palingenesis, 238–240  
 Pantheism, 12–16, 218, 220  
*Pantheismusstreit*, 323  
 Parallelism, 66, 115, 116, 121, 122, 124, 275  
 Paralogism(s), 134, 136, 149, 154, 155, 179, 190  
     of reason, 131–135  
 Pascal, Blaise, 43, 44  
 Passions, 61, 85, 114–116, 136, 137, 139, 250, 282, 291, 305, 314, 318, 332–334, 336, 337  
 Perfection(s), 117, 141, 144, 148, 149, 152, 192–195, 209, 222, 223, 226–229, 231, 232, 236, 238–240, 247–248, 250, 259–277, 288, 290, 291, 296, 318–320, 322, 329–348  
     most perfect being, 188, 190–197, 200, 201  
 Pietist(s), 299–324  
 Pleasure, 12, 21, 125, 129, 248, 259, 260, 269–271, 273, 275–277, 293, 296, 316, 318–322, 330–333, 336, 338–340, 343–345, 347–349  
*Popularphilosophie*, 217–233  
 Possible world(s), 116, 118–120, 124, 128, 139, 142–144, 148, 194, 223, 224, 248  
*Predicatum ponens*, 193, 197  
 Pre-established harmony, 26, 111, 112, 115–117, 120, 122, 128, 144, 145, 220, 233, 243, 322  
 Principle of (Non-) Contradiction, 188, 285, 286, 289  
 Principle of individuality, 241  
 Principle of sufficient reason, 54, 58, 250–254, 289  
 Probabilistic version, 253–254  
 Probability, 41–62, 87, 139, 188–190, 254, 265, 266, 292–293, 313  
 Prototypes, 7–10, 13, 116, 119, 163, 170–172, 187, 195–197  
 Pseudo-Longinus, 331, 335  
 Purified pantheism, 12–16  
 Purified Spinozism, 124  
 Purpose of life, 238–241, 243  
 Pyra, Immanuel, 301, 302, 305, 307, 308, 323
- R**
- Rationalism, 204, 209, 210, 214, 218, 222, 223, 236, 300, 309, 332  
 Rational knowledge, 199, 281, 288, 290, 291, 294, 310, 312–314  
 Rational psychology, 133, 135, 155  
 Real and objective existence, 193  
 Realism, 28, 207, 210, 211, 285, 296

- Reality, 11, 14, 46, 128, 133, 139, 141, 143,  
162–165, 170, 176, 178, 188, 191–195,  
197, 198, 220, 225, 229, 279, 284–287,  
293–295  
of the outside world, 194, 195, 198
- Reasoning, 42, 46, 49, 58, 62, 71, 75, 109,  
112, 117, 122, 123, 133–136, 169, 189,  
190, 193, 195, 200, 209, 214, 240,  
248–250, 253, 285, 315, 316
- Reason(s), 13, 15, 16, 18, 25, 35, 46, 50, 52,  
54, 61, 68, 71, 79, 86, 109, 113, 115,  
120, 126, 128, 131–135, 137, 138, 141,  
143, 163, 166, 167, 174, 175, 177,  
186–190, 195, 197–201, 203–214, 218,  
219, 221–224, 227, 232, 233, 235, 236,  
239, 240, 266, 282, 283, 290–292, 294,  
295, 297, 303, 310–317, 320, 321, 324,  
330, 332, 343, 348, 354  
for actions, 250, 252–253  
for belief, 250  
is self-critical, 201  
nature of, 197, 200  
needs of, 197, 199, 200  
orienting oneself in, 199, 200  
unbridled speculation(s), 199, 201
- Refutation of Idealism, 159–181, 186,  
191, 196
- Reid, Thomas, 198, 204–207, 210, 211, 214
- Reimarus, Elise, 108, 181
- Reimarus, Johann Albert Heinrich, 108, 123,  
133, 150
- Reinhold, Karl Leonhard, 155, 213, 218, 219,  
222
- Religion, 14, 16, 24, 31, 52, 116, 120, 138,  
141, 142, 183, 204, 209, 210, 304–306,  
308, 312, 314, 352, 354–360, 363, 369
- Rémond de Montmort, 42, 43
- Representation(s), 7–9, 12–14, 70–74, 115,  
119, 128, 134, 139–142, 144, 145, 147,  
148, 153, 161–174, 178, 188, 196,  
211–212, 222–224, 248, 259–262,  
264–277, 286–288, 290, 293, 296, 314,  
318, 333, 334, 342, 346, 355–357, 360,  
361, 365, 368–370
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 5, 35, 72, 304
- S**
- Sceptic, 180–181, 198, 199
- Scepticism, 47–52, 79, 207, 208, 222, 236
- Schlegel, Friedrich, 300
- Schneewind, Jerome, 248
- Schütz, Christian Gottfried, 174–175,  
184, 186
- Sensation(s), 139, 140, 173, 210–212, 224,  
279–281, 283, 293, 295, 305, 318,  
320, 331
- Senses, 6, 9, 11, 18, 58, 79, 152, 164, 175,  
178, 187–190, 207, 208, 212, 213, 223,  
238, 260, 266, 274, 276, 279, 283, 285,  
293–296, 299, 309–321, 324, 341–344,  
346, 355
- Sensibility, 25, 140, 142, 149, 150, 152, 161,  
162, 164, 165, 167, 174, 181, 237–239,  
243, 280, 281, 283, 284, 286–288, 291,  
292, 294, 296
- Sensual ideas, 283
- Sensuous knowledge, 309–315
- Sensus communis*, 203, 207
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third  
Earl of, 24, 25, 223, 288
- Singulars, 152, 281, 283, 286, 289–292,  
313, 365
- Skepticism, 213
- Smith, Robert, 100, 101
- Solipsist, 6, 284
- Soul, 6, 8, 9, 112–116, 119, 121, 131–155,  
166, 167, 171–172, 177, 178, 186, 207,  
208, 211, 212, 224–226, 233, 237–239,  
242, 248, 260, 264, 269–271, 274–277,  
282, 283, 285, 287, 290, 291, 293, 294,  
296, 311, 314, 318–322, 331, 334, 341,  
348, 353, 371  
and body, 112, 113, 121, 133, 142, 152,  
242, 319, 322
- Space, 25, 68, 126, 137, 143, 154, 161, 163,  
167, 176, 178, 186, 190, 201, 237, 241,  
261, 268, 296
- Spalding, Johann Joachim, 146–148, 150, 152,  
217, 219–221, 225, 226, 236
- Speculation, unbridled, 199, 201
- Spinoza, 11–12, 15, 16, 18, 23–26, 29, 31,  
33–35, 107–129, 203, 211, 213, 214,  
218–220, 230, 232, 233, 275, 304,  
317–324
- Spinozism controversy, 203, 205, 214
- Spirit(s), 4, 58, 61, 108, 109, 113, 117,  
129, 131, 132, 144, 151–153, 174,  
210, 221, 225, 230, 266, 300,  
318, 365
- Stewart, Matthew, 24
- Strauss, Leo, 22, 123, 198
- Sturm, Johann Christoph, 90, 92  
*Sturm und Drang*, 241, 267, 300
- Sublime, 264, 265, 275, 306–307, 318, 320,  
322, 329–349, 354, 366
- Sublimity, 5, 264, 265, 307, 337,  
347, 348

Substance(s), 7, 11–14, 16, 113–114, 117, 118, 120–122, 124, 125, 128, 132, 134, 135, 148–150, 152, 154, 165, 170, 171, 228, 242, 243, 291, 293

Sufficient causes, 246

Sufficient reason, 54, 58, 250–254, 289

Sulzer, Johann Georg, 68, 69, 73, 78, 162

Supreme intellect, 6, 169, 170, 190

Sympathy, 268–271, 276

Swedenborg, Emanuel, 132, 152

Swinden, Jean Henri van, 95

**T**

Talmud, 52, 351–354, 371

Testimony of the external senses, 188, 189

Testimony of the inner sense, 188, 189

Tetens, Johann Nicolaus, 107, 160, 184, 185, 198

Theism, 12–16

Theory of mixed sentiments, 259–277, 333, 348

The touching, 263, 266, 267

Thing in itself, 131, 135, 172–174, 176–178, 186, 197, 201

Thinking, 4–6, 13, 14, 32, 36, 44, 59, 71, 74, 109, 113, 114, 117, 121, 122, 124–126, 128, 129, 135, 148–150, 155, 164, 165, 167–173, 175, 178–180, 183, 185, 189, 190, 197, 198, 200, 213, 240, 243, 244, 271, 280, 310, 314

Thomasius, Christian, 137, 143, 279

Thought, 7, 11, 13, 14, 24, 26, 27, 29, 33, 36, 52, 68, 73, 109, 113, 114, 116, 121, 122, 125, 128, 131–135, 137, 138, 142, 143, 145, 149, 151, 152, 154, 155, 159, 169–172, 175, 178–179, 181, 184, 186–189, 191–193, 195, 197, 200, 201, 229, 233, 239, 247, 254, 261–267, 272, 279–280, 283, 284, 294, 299–300, 310, 356, 358–359, 368

Time, 46, 50, 142, 145, 153, 154, 160–167, 170, 178, 186, 189, 190, 237, 241, 250, 263, 296, 334, 335, 352, 360

Tragedy, 117, 259, 268–270, 305

Tragic, 117, 268, 269, 273, 276, 277

Transcendental idealism, 108, 123, 165, 176, 178, 180, 181

Translation, 22, 23, 27–30, 72, 110, 204, 264, 305–308, 312, 323, 352–354, 366, 367

Truth, 3, 9, 10, 12, 23, 27, 65, 68–70, 122, 134–136, 166, 167, 171, 187–190, 192, 196, 209, 213, 224, 263, 265, 266, 272, 281, 287–292, 313, 314, 319

Tschirnhaus, Graf, 125, 285, 321

**U**

Ugliness, 261, 267

Ugly, 261, 262, 264, 268, 338, 345

Ugly things (turpia), 261, 262

*Urbild* (origin, prototype) 9, 13, 171, 172, 187, 195

Understanding, 16, 23, 73, 118, 147, 162, 175, 180, 181, 191, 195, 197–199, 201, 210, 212–214, 251, 268, 289, 291, 308, 312, 315, 318, 319, 321–323, 331, 344, 354, 356, 359, 360, 365, 369

sound human understanding, 16, 197–199, 201, 210 (see also *Bon sens*, and common sense)

Universal(s), 3, 32, 33, 50, 74, 139, 150, 221, 229, 230, 260, 283, 288–290, 330, 337, 342, 346

language, 29, 73

Universality, 282

**V**

Verbal disputes, 3–19, 201

Virgil, 265

*Vocation of Humankind*, 217, 219–221, 225, 226, 232

Vocation of man, 225, 235–244

Voluntary, 58, 59, 249, 250, 252

*Vorbild* (example, model) 163, 195

**W**

Wachter, Johann Georg, 110, 124

Wealth, 263, 264, 266

Weishaupt, Adam, 218, 219, 223, 224, 229

Wertheim Bible, 300, 305–309, 312, 323

Witt, Egbert, 43, 299

Wittgenstein's exhortation, 7

Wolff, Christian, 3, 25, 26, 36, 41–62, 66, 70, 74, 76–78, 107, 108, 110, 111, 117, 119, 120, 123, 126, 129, 133, 136, 137, 142, 149, 153, 155, 184, 193, 194, 209, 221–224, 228, 229, 232, 247–250, 254, 259–261, 266, 273, 274, 279–297, 299, 303–305, 309–315, 318, 320, 321, 323, 324, 330, 337, 344

Writing, 21–36, 54, 62, 65, 67, 101, 109, 110, 143, 145, 160, 183, 197, 211, 219, 243, 260, 270, 304, 305, 308, 322, 352, 362, 368