

HOW TO BELIEVE IN NOTHING: MOSES MENDELSSOHN'S SUBJECTIVITY AND
THE EMPTY CORE OF TRADITION

Yuval Kremitzer

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2017

© 2017
Yuval Kremnitzer
All rights reserved

Abstract

How to Believe in Nothing: Moses Mendelssohn's Subjectivity and the Empty Core of Tradition

Yuval Krennitzer

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, it aims to illuminate key aspects of the work of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the 'Father of Jewish Enlightenment,' in particular, his well-known, and universally rejected, theory of Judaism. Secondly, it brings Mendelssohn's ideas and insights to bear on the problem of Nihilism, a problem in the development of which Mendelssohn is usually considered to have played a merely incidental role. It is argued that these two domains, seemingly worlds apart, are mutually illuminating.

Moses Mendelssohn enters our history books in two separate contexts, which seem to have nothing in common. In the context of 'Jewish Studies,' Mendelssohn is best known for his idiosyncratic view of Judaism as a religion devoid of any principles of belief, and for his confidence in its compatibility with reason – positions developed in his *Jerusalem: Or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783). In the history of philosophy, Mendelssohn is known as the last representative of the dogmatic Leibniz-Wolff School, rendered obsolete by Kant's critical, transcendental turn. In this broader context, Mendelssohn is also widely recognized to have played a role, if only contingently, in the

emergence of the term *Nihilism* at a decisive moment in the historical development of the problem, namely, the so-called pantheism controversy, in the context of which he published his last work of philosophy, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's existence* (1785). And yet he has never been taken as belonging to the development of the problem in its essence.

This dissertation aims to show that Moses Mendelssohn's work offers a decisive intervention in the problem of Nihilism, arguably the fundamental problem of Modernity, an intervention that has great value for contemporary debates of the problem. Following and expanding on Kant's intervention in the controversy, which I show to have been deeply engaged with Mendelssohn, makes it possible to bring to light Mendelssohn's unrecognized contribution. In response to Kant's groundbreaking critical philosophy, which seeks to account for the conditions of possible experience, Mendelssohn develops a theory of the experience of possibility. Implicit in this theory is a profound reformulation of the problem of Nihilism, as a crisis in the experience of possibility. Mendelssohn's unique post-Kantian philosophical position regarding subjectivity, nature and the divine absolute is given more concrete articulation in being related and traced back to his political theology and his reflections on Judaism. In this way, the two separate lines in Mendelssohn's reception – as the father of Jewish enlightenment and as an incidental facilitator, or vanishing mediator, in the consequential pantheism controversy – coalesce, and illuminate each other.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO BELIEVE IN NOTHING? MOSES MENDELSSOHN'S SUBJECTIVITY AND THE EMPTY CORE OF TRADITION	1
NIHILISM: OVERVIEW, OR MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING	9
NAME CALLING	19
IN THE UNIVERSITY	24
INTERVENTION: MENDELSSOHN'S NEITHER/NOR	29
PART 1: MENDELSSOHN AND THE PANTHEISM CONTROVERSY	42
1. FROM DUSK TILL DAWN: MENDELSSOHN'S <i>MORNING HOURS</i> AND THE ECLIPSE OF ENLIGHTENMENT	42
1.1 MENDELSSOHN AND KANT, STYLE AND SUBSTANCE	42
1.2 MENDELSSOHN AND THE CRISIS OF ENLIGHTENMENT: INTELLECTUAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANTHEISM DEBATE	44
1.3 THE PANTHEISM CONTROVERSY	51
1.4 JACOBI'S CHOICE: HYPER CRITICISM OR HYPOCRISY	67
1.5 CONTINGENCIES: MENDELSSOHN V JACOBI ON SPINOZA AND CONTINGENCY	70
1.6 REORIENTATION: KANT AS A READER OF MENDELSSOHN	76
1.7 THE FIGURATIVE: MEDIATING INTELLIGIBILITY AND SENSIBILITY	80
1.8 COMMON SENSE: THE DOGMATIC ERROR	84
1.9 THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE SUPERSENSIBLE: HOW TO GET THERE, WHERE TO GO, AND WHAT TO DO	87
1.10 RATIONAL BELIEFS: HOW TO BELIEVE WITHOUT BELIEVING	96
2. MENDELSSOHN AND THE EXPERIENCE OF POSSIBILITY	99
2.1 <i>MORNING HOURS</i> – A POST-KANTIAN TEXT?	99
2.2 GOD IS UNCONSCIOUS – MENDELSSOHN'S ORIGINAL PROOF FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD	107
2.3 THE COGITO'S SHADOW: FROM CONDITIONS OF POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE TO THE EXPERIENCE OF POSSIBILITY.	114
2.4 SURPLUS KNOWLEDGE	121
2.5 THE ACTUALITY OF POSSIBILITY	129
2.7 MENDELSSOHN'S CLASH OF THE FACULTIES: THE DIVISION AND UNITY OF COGNITION AND DESIRE	140
2.8 DIVIDED BY COMMON SENSE: JACOBI, KANT, MENDELSSOHN	148
2.9 THE OBJECT OF THOUGHT – BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY	151
2.10 THE DREAM OF COMMON SENSE	155
2.1 FIGURES OF MIND	158
PART 2: MENDELSSOHN'S <i>JERUSALEM</i>	161
3. READING <i>JERUSALEM</i>	161
3.1 REFUSING THE CHALLENGE – MENDELSSOHN AND JACOBI	161
3.2 WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT? THE DIVISION AND UNITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE	166
3.3 ENLIGHTENMENT'S PREJUDICE	168
3.4 <i>JERUSALEM'S</i> DIVISION	170
3.5 THE POWER OF DIVISION: THE POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE AS A TEMPORAL ONE	173

3.6 THE DIVISION OF POWER	182
3.7 THE ORIGINAL DIVIDE	186
3.8 MENDELSSOHN'S MINIMAL ATOMISM	188
3.9 THE FREEDOM OF FORCED CHOICE	192
3.10 THE ARTICULATION OF REALITY AND THE REAL OF THE IMPERATIVE	196
3.11 HAVING POWER	197
3.12 (NO) TIME FOR A CHOICE	199
3.13 THE IMPERATIVE BETWEEN THE PERFORMATIVE AND THE AFFIRMATIVE	202
3.14 PROMISE, OATH AND BELIEF IN THE OTHER	207
4. MIRACLE AND TRADITION	214
<hr/>	
4.1 THE CONTEXT – IN DEFENSE OF JUDAISM	214
4.2 THE CHALLENGES: CRANZ AND MÖRSCHER	217
4.3 DIVINE LEGISLATION	220
4.4 THE DIVISION OF TRUTH: NECESSARY, CONTINGENT AND TEMPORAL (HISTORICAL)	222
4.5 EVENT AND AUTHORITY	225
4.6 HEARING VOICES	231
4.7 THE FIRST DETOUR: PROGRESS, BETWEEN THE NAIVE AND THE SKEPTIC	234
4.8 EVERYTHING FUNDAMENTAL: MENDELSSOHN'S ELUSIVE BELIEF	239
4.9 THE SECOND DETOUR: MENDELSSOHN'S CRITIQUE OF MEDIA	245
4.10 THE FORMATION OF LANGUAGE – THE PRIMAL SCENE OF SIGNIFICATION	247
4.11 THE SWERVE OF LANGUAGE	253
4.12 THE FETISHIZING OF MEDIA: MEANS AND MEANING	254
4.13 HIEROGLYPHS AND IDOLATRY	258
4.13 JUDAISM, BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY	273
<hr/>	

Acknowledgments

In my time as a graduate student at Columbia University, and in the years leading up to my doctoral research, doing graduate and undergraduate work at Tel Aviv University, I had the privilege of learning from teachers, colleagues and friends, who have not only generously shared their insight and knowledge with me, but have also helped shape my intellectual perspective, influencing, often subtly and unbeknownst to me, the very way I listen, read, and ask questions. It is impossible to fully acknowledge all that I owe and everyone to whom I'm indebted, but that is surely no reason not to try.

I was fortunate to have in my dissertation committee five scholars I deeply respect and from whom I have learned much more than I could hope to convey. Dan Miron, my dissertation supervisor, is a rare intellectual force, whose boundless erudition and absolute command of a wide array of fields of knowledge had left him, after six decades of scholarship, and an unquestionable standing as a master of his field, as passionate for, and open to new ideas as a freshman college student. Both intellectually and in his institutional capacity as the Leonard Kaye professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature in the department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS) at Columbia University, Dan had stubbornly kept Jewish studies a field to be pursued within uncommon, and often uncomfortable, challenging contexts. His students, and I amongst them, have been made to confront the necessity, both challenging and opportune, to

negotiate the boundaries of the field, and aim to strike a balance between rigorous specialization and broad intellectual concerns. Every time I had stepped into Dan's office I left it both enlightened and uplifted, having learned something valuable I often hadn't even considered inquiring about. I cannot thank him enough.

Mladen Dolar's ideas and work had a formative influence on me long before I had the good fortune to meet and eventually have him as a reader of my dissertation. Mladen's capacity to combine conceptual rigor and philosophical originality with a masterful and careful textual work, historically sensitive, has set the standard by which I judge, unfavorably, my own work. Mladen's reading cuts, without fail, straight to the heart of things and formulates the flaws and advantages of the text read with philosophical acumen and in the clearest of terms. I would not have a clear conception of my own work, nor a clear sense of purpose, if it wasn't for his critical engagement and reading. For his friendship and emotional support throughout the turmoil of writing the dissertation I know not the proper words of gratitude.

I wrote my first paper on Kant and Mendelssohn in Dorothea von Mücke's seminar on Late 18th century German Aesthetics and The Philosophy of History at Columbia University. Dorothea is a model citizen of the intellectual community, once known as the republic of letters. I owe a great debt not only to Dorothea's provocative intellectual framework, which combines intellectual and literary history with a deep engagement and understanding of philosophy, and offers a fresh, critical approach to the enlightenment, but

also to her encouragement, her exacting reading of my work, and her deep investment in the prospects and opportunities of young scholars, such as myself, lucky enough to have her as a mentor.

Timothy Mitchel, with whom I began to study the interconnection between political theory and materialism, has been extraordinarily generous with his time and insight. His reading and critical responses to my work and ideas have always enriched my way of thinking, and offered new perspectives I had not previously considered. Every conversation with Sudipta Kaviraj - whether in his office, the elevator or the copy room - turns immediately into an intellectual experience. Sudipta's broadmindedness and his capacity to draw unexpected comparisons between civilizational contexts, seemingly worlds apart, is conceptually oriented while keeping a keen eye to the cultural and historical specifics. All of this makes him the perfect interlocutor to any intellectual project that has the good fortune of engaging his nearly infinite curiosity. The mentorship of Sudipta and Tim exemplifies what makes MESAAS a unique and exciting intellectual setting any graduate student would be lucky to enjoy.

I am grateful to all my teachers at Tel Aviv University. Jose Bruner, Adi Ophir and Moshe Zuckerman, each in his own way, were responsible for initialing me into critical thinking. Eli Friedlander was my first introduction to two key eras and areas of my scholarly interest: Kant and post Kantian philosophical and aesthetic movements (German Romanticism), and early 20th century reception of this legacy, particularly in the work of

Walter Benjamin. Eli's engagement with philosophy, while sober and calm is a deeply existential one, and remains a model and inspiration for me. Igal Halfin taught me many things, ranging from 20th century political messianism, particularly Stalinism and Nazism, to post structuralist critical theory and psychoanalysis and the fraught intersection of history and anthropology; but above all, he taught me how to teach myself, and others. Igal, who I'm now proud to call my friend, remains a constant challenge, always keeping me on my toes, driving me not only to explicate my ideas but also to ground them and be clear about their relevance to the world we inhabit. Igal embodies an ideal of authentic intellectual engagement and passion, in which intellectual and 'ordinary life' pursuits are never separate domains.

Eric Santner from the university of Chicago had generously shown me hospitality and friendship. I have learned much from reading his work for more than a decade now, and have benefited even more from his teaching and my conversations with him. Eric is tirelessly seeking new and better formulations for some of the deepest and broadest problems of modern life, and constantly finding new ways to bring complex theoretical issues into direct contact with ordinary, everyday experience, a quality apparent in his writing but even more so in his teaching and live conversation. I am deeply grateful for his friendship and mentorship.

All graduate students should be as fortunate as I have been in enjoying the friendship, guidance and engagement of colleagues and peers of the likes of which I have been

blessed with. Informally but unmistakably, the company of and conversations with my friends during graduate studies have not only made me smarter, but were often the main, if not sole source of comfort and solidarity. Their contribution to my work, while often indirect, has been immense. I have enjoyed and learned from my conversations with Ghassan Fawzi, Suzanne Schneider-Reich, Kali Handelman, Ahmed Dardir, Roni Henig, and Nasser Abourahme, my colleagues and friends at Columbia University. Yitzhak Lewis, my friend, colleague and collaborator at Columbia, a visionary and a natural leader and organizer, had co-created with me an intellectual setting for our graduate seminar group in Jewish studies. I have learned much from our intellectual exchange, and have also been trying to learn from his unshakable disposition and ever constructive pragmatic attitude to life. Both my friends Noam Yuran and Nitzan Lebovic I consider academic 'older brothers'. Nitzan had supported me from my very first steps in Academia, and is also responsible for my interest in the problem of Nihilism. I can scarcely think of a conversation with Noam from which I haven't learned something new, or was forced to more carefully construct an argument, all the while enjoying myself deeply. My friends from Chicago University, Amichai Amit and Anastasia Berg, have opened a gateway into their unique intellectual world for me, and their company kept me thinking, and warm, in the cold winters we've spent together in Chicago. My gang from Ljubljana, Simon Hajdini and Lidija Šumah, generous as they are brilliant, have almost instantaneously become my close friends and comrades. I know of no better proof for the reality of spirit than the true comradeship I have enjoyed in a climate often geared towards competition and self-promotion.

Gil Anidjar, Elik Elhanan, Rivka Feldhay, Mordehai Kremnitzer and Simon J. Cook have read and commented on the work in different stages. I have gained much from their suggestions, critiques and encouragements. Rivka had not only confidence in the project, even when mine was quivering, she was also capable, at crucial junctures, to help me get reoriented and realize what it was I was doing. Simon, who I employed as an editor, but have quickly come to consider a friend and a colleague, has done much more for this project than edit it – although he had done a fine job at that too. Simon served as a ‘creative producer’ and Socratic midwife for both the overall structure of the work and some of its key arguments. This project would not have come to fruition if it weren’t for our peripatetic walks together, which often I begun not knowing which way I wanted to go, and ended realizing I have already gotten there.

Writing a dissertation is often a lonely undertaking, which is not to say it is done alone. Many friends and family members have provided mental, spiritual and material support. My parents, Neomi and Mordehai Kremnitzer, who have allowed me to grow up without giving up on my less than practical passions, have always encouraged and supported me in a myriad of ways, only some of which I am fully conscious of. Without their love and support I could not have set forth on this path, let alone get as far as I have. My parents in Law, Simon and Hana Samama, and my uncle in Law, Avi Adler, have the rare gift of being able to continuously offer invaluable help without ever evoking a sense of debt, only pure gratitude. My brother, Guy Kremnitzer, is not only one of my favorite

people in general, but also one of my favorite people to talk to. Every conversation with Guy, a true autodidact, is engaging and profound, offering an opportunity to gage something of a new topic he had just recently mastered all by himself. Much of my thinking has developed in the course of our conversations throughout the years. His penchant for problem solving and eye for design, were generously enlisted to the cause of my dissertation in critical moments.

Finally, my wife Michal, my sine qua non, who sets such a high standard of commitment and originality in her work as an artist, has been a constant source of inspiration for me. The support and encouragement she had given me are enough to put me forever in her debt, but it is her strong, unwavering love and care for me and our son Adam that I value above all. Adam, whose appearance in this world had forever changed my life, and keeps changing them, proves to me daily that miracles – making the impossible possible - are real, if utterly of this world. They both give me reason to keep looking for reasons. This work has been dedicated to them since the very beginning, long before it was written.

To Michal and Adam, for keeping it Real

Introduction: How to Believe in Nothing? Moses Mendelssohn's Subjectivity and the Empty Core of Tradition

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, it aims to illuminate key aspects of the work of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the 'Father of Jewish Enlightenment,' in particular, his well-known, and universally rejected, theory of Judaism. Secondly, it brings Mendelssohn's ideas and insights to bear on the problem of Nihilism, a problem in the development of which Mendelssohn is usually considered to have played a merely incidental role. It will be argued that these two domains, seemingly worlds apart, are mutually illuminating.

Moses Mendelssohn enters our history books in two separate contexts, which seem to have nothing in common. In the context of 'Jewish Studies,' Mendelssohn is best known for his idiosyncratic view of Judaism as a religion devoid of any principles of belief, and for his confidence in its compatibility with reason – positions developed in his *Jerusalem: Or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783). In the history of philosophy, Mendelssohn is known as the last representative of the dogmatic Leibniz-Wolff School, rendered obsolete by Kant's critical, transcendental turn. In this broader context, Mendelssohn is also widely recognized to have played a role, if only contingently, in the emergence of the term *Nihilism* at a decisive moment in the historical development of the problem, namely, the so-called pantheism controversy, in the context of which he published his last work of philosophy, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's existence* (1785). And yet he has never been taken as belonging to the development of the

problem in its essence. I shall argue that Mendelssohn's views of Judaism are best understood in light of the issues raised in the controversy, and also that the controversy and its aftermath appear in a new light as a result of revising Mendelssohn's involvement in it. Making Mendelssohn's thinking available and relevant entails a consideration of the reasons for its neglect, and his inclusion, in turn, may bear consequences for how to consider the problem and expand the parameters of the debate.

The manner in which Mendelssohn had come to seem so utterly irrelevant to the debate on Nihilism is every bit as interesting as the problem itself, for it seems a matter of tone and resonance far more than a matter of substance. As we shall see, Mendelssohn views Judaism as organized around divine legislation, which he distinguishes from revelation. Unlike revelation, as commonly understood, divine legislation is understood by Mendelssohn to be binding, but as involving no determinate content, no final significance. In the chapters that follow, we will spend much time in working up to, and unpacking Mendelssohn's thinking here. For now, let us simply note that, for Mendelssohn, this feature is ultimately the key to the vitality of the tradition, perhaps even the key to its survival through the turmoil of history. It is in strikingly similar terms that later generations would come to describe the deep crisis of tradition.

If one were to look for something like a 'Jewish take' on Nihilism, one natural place to begin would be the vibrant, if deeply troubled, intellectual scene of early twentieth-century German Jewry. Indeed, in his influential 'Homo Sacer,' Giorgio Agamben, one

of the main contemporary theorists of Nihilism,¹ has singled out as paradigmatically encapsulating the modern crisis of meaning, or Nihilism, an expression used by Gerschom Scholem, the founder of the modern study of Jewish mysticism, to describe the law in Kafka's universe in his correspondence on the topic with Walter Benjamin:

Being in force without significance: nothing better describes the ban that our age cannot master than Scholem's formula for the status of law in Kafka's novel... everywhere on earth men live today in the ban of a law and a tradition that are maintained solely as the "zero point" of their own content... All societies and all cultures today... have entered into a legitimation crisis in which law (we mean by this term the entire text of tradition in its regulative form, whether the Jewish Torah or the Islamic sharia, Christian dogma or the profane nomos) is in force as the pure "nothing of revelation."²

"Being in force without significance," describing here the modern crisis of tradition, could equally apply to Mendelssohn's formula for the vitality of tradition, indeed, what enables it to withstand dramatic historical transformations. One formula, resonating in two echo chambers, and producing an entirely different tune. And yet, while the difference is minimal, a matter of tone and inclination rather than substance and content, there

¹ On Agamben as a theorist of nihilism see S. Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 137-62.

² G. Agamben and D. Heller-Roazen, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 51.

seems to be an abyss separating Moses Mendelssohn, the ‘first German-Jew,’³ and the last generation of German-Jews before the Holocaust, the generation of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, to name a few. Whatever else separates Mendelssohn from these and other German-Jews of their generation, they are all united by their distance from the optimism regarding enlightenment associated with Mendelssohn and embodied in his unique if momentary position: an observant Jew hailed as ‘the Socrates of Berlin,’⁴ a symbol of the universal promise of enlightenment.

The father of Jewish enlightenment, it would seem, had no heirs. Not only did his biological offspring forsake Judaism in order to partake in the culture of their times,⁵ none of his intellectual heirs seem to have been able to hold on to both their heritage and enlightenment. For Arendt,⁶ after Mendelssohn the only respectable position for a

³ In the sense of a significantly dual identity, participating in both the majority, German culture and the life of the Jewish community. The entry of Mendelssohn, the son of a Jewish scribe, into Berlin, has become apocryphal, signifying the beginning of ‘German-Jewish dialogue.’ See for example Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch, 1743-1933* (Picador, 2003). Two centuries later, Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem, a prime product of the German-Jewish complex, would declare the notion of a ‘German-Jewish dialogue’ a myth. Gershom Scholem, “Wider den Mythos Vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch,” *Judaica* 2 (1970).

⁴ M. Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁵ Four of Mendelssohn’s six children converted to Christianity. Mendelssohn’s oldest surviving daughter, Brendel Mendelssohn, (1764-1839), would become known as Dorothea von Schlegel, novelist and translator and the wife of Friedrich von Schlegel. Von Schlegel first converted to Protestantism and then, with her husband to Catholicism. See M.A. Meyer et al., *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Emancipation and Acculturation, 1780-1871* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 168-98.

⁶ Arendt never treated Mendelssohn in depth. Where she does mention him, she does not quite go so far as to label him a parvenu, but she certainly sees his position as untenable, and quite likely

Jew was that of a pariah,⁷ someone allowed into the category of exceptional human being on the precondition that he no longer belongs to the religion of his people; one neither properly included within their particular identity nor fully belonging to the universal. To occupy a role in public life, one had to be estranged from one's own people. Whatever role history has assigned Mendelssohn in the subsequent developments of Jewish history, he certainly did not perceive himself as 'the Jewish Luther,' as he has been often referred to,⁸ that is, someone offering a path for his people within the universal, a mere emulation, doomed to fail, of a way that would ultimately lead to the secularization of the Jews modeled after that of the Christian world. If there was an authentic position held by Mendelssohn that enabled both adherence to Jewish religion and full participation in the ideas of enlightenment, after his death it was no longer tenable, as if it perished along with him.

In the context of the wider narrative of enlightenment, Mendelssohn's moment as 'the

inauthentic, motivated by the desire to fit in. See 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question,' in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), 3-18.

⁷ Arendt drew the two concepts of pariah and parvenu from Bernard Lazare, the Jewish-French Anarchist known for his open debate with Theodor Herzl. Arendt edited some of his writings in English for Schocken Books in the 1940s. She uses the Pariah/Parvenu dichotomy in a few places in her book on totalitarianism, in her Rahel Varnhagen book and in a few of the essays collected in 'The Jewish writings.' See for a few examples: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New-York, 1958, 66; *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, (trans. C. Winston), London, 1957, 169; *The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in The Modern Age*, New York, 1978, 67-90.

⁸ Heinrich Heine wrote: "as Luther had overthrown the Papacy, so Mendelssohn overthrew the Talmud; and he did so after the same fashion, namely, by rejecting tradition, by declaring the Bible to be the source of religion, and by translating the most important part of it. By these means he shattered Judaic, as Luther had shattered Christian, Catholicism; for the Talmud is, in fact, the Catholicism of the Jews." H. Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany: A Fragment* (Beacon Press, 1959), 94.

Socrates of Berlin' has been relegated to an historical footnote by the Kantian break in the history of philosophy. The title Mendelssohn had endowed upon Kant – “the all destroying” – has outlived the life and works of its author, consigning Mendelssohn to the wrong side of history, the last representative of the now obsolete pre-Kantian philosophy.

In the grand narrative of the history of ideas Mendelssohn plays the role of vanishing mediator in at least two ways. He is the author of ideas to be later developed and systemized by others, especially in the field of aesthetics,⁹ and he played a crucial role in debates in which his own intervention no longer seems to deserve much attention. More than a case in point is the notorious pantheism debate, which stood at the intersection of politics, religion and the viability of metaphysical systems, where many of the stakes of further developments in German philosophy were spelled out, and where Mendelssohn conventionally appears again as a failed mediator. Either naive or inauthentic, Mendelssohn's insistence on both rationalism and faith did not withstand the test of time.

It is in light of the aftermath of the pantheism controversy that Mendelssohn was held,

⁹ See for a few examples: A. Nivelle, *Kunst- und Dichtungstheorien zwischen Aufklärung und Klassik* (De Gruyter, 1971); K.W. Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Aufklärungsästhetik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bouvier, 1984). L. Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn und die deutsche Ästhetik* (Gräfe & Unzer, 1904). For a more recent critical appraisal of this period of German Aesthetics see F.C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (OUP Oxford, 2009).

by the aforementioned generation of German-Jews, the last before the Holocaust, to be a tragic failure.¹⁰ Neither here nor there, Mendelssohn just did not seem to have the goods. His conception of religion did not seem to offer the depth and emotional charge of myth and mysticism, and his conception of enlightenment, of truth and reason, had nothing original about it, and held no promise. Mendelssohn was old, but not even the good kind of old, belonging to antiquity, still in contact with the power of origin, but merely the modern, unappealing, 'just out of style' kind of old.

Mendelssohn did not fare any better amongst political thinkers and activists concerned with solutions to 'the Jewish problem.' As a political theorist, Mendelssohn's advocacy of Jewish rights in European countries held little appeal for Zionists and non-Zionists alike in the aftermath of the great turmoil of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In light of all this, it might seem strange to insist on a reading of Mendelssohn through the lens of themes and interests common to Mendelssohn and the German-Jews of the early twentieth century. Strange, that is, to insist that Mendelssohn's writing is relevant to contemporary debates regarding politics and religion, faith and reason. Themes like the decay of tradition and authority, the growing distance between theory and practice,

¹⁰ For a brief yet excellent recent assessment of Mendelssohn's reception history, see Michah. Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 1-9. For a discussion of Mendelssohn's reception in the context of the pantheism controversy, from Leo Strauss through Alexander Altman to Fredrick Beiser, see Martin Yaffe's 'Strauss on Mendelssohn: An Interpretive Essay,' in L. Strauss and M.D. Yaffe, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 219-317.

and the hollowness of the law are common to Mendelssohn and his unfaithful heirs. But where Mendelssohn sees the key to the vitality of the Jewish tradition in its adherence to a law that has no final meaning, Scholem and Benjamin¹¹ – and following them, Agamben – see the deepest crisis of a secularized modernity in its profound Nihilism.¹²

Is there a way to reconsider this double effacement of Mendelssohn, as the heirless father of Jewish enlightenment and as mere vanishing mediator in the affair that gave birth to the modern problem of Nihilism? In what follows, I shall argue that indeed the two aspects must be thought together. Since Mendelssohn's role in the pantheism controversy has been taken as entirely reducible to the purely accidental, mere historical background for the emergence of consequential intellectual and philosophical developments, there has never been an attempt to assess his possible contribution to that ongoing debate. His contribution, as well as his seeming irrelevance to the debate at the time, we will proceed to argue, has to be understood in light of his arguments in *Jerusalem*, published in 1783, about reason, belief and revelation.

¹¹ It was in the midst of Benjamin's immersion in Kafka's writings that he received from Scholem a first edition of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. See H. Eiland, *Walter Benjamin* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 240. There is a remarkable overlap between the themes and concerns of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and Benjamin's writings on Kafka, including the notions of a law that has no final meaning, what Scholem described as 'validity without significance' in Benjamin and Scholem's correspondence on Kafka, a phrase Agamben describes as paradigmatic for the modern experience of a senseless, yet valid, tradition. See Agamben and Heller-Roazen, *Homo Sacer*, 51.

¹² See Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith (Harvard University Press, 1980), 142.

Nihilism: Overview, or Much ado about nothing

Nihilist: "We believe in nothing Lebowski. Nothing. And tomorrow we come back and we cut off your Johnson." (The Big Lebowski)

We believe in nothing. Such a statement points to the spontaneous, cynical attitude of contemporary, modern society. We know that behind every appearance of objectivity lie subjective interests and desires, behind all claims of morality the brute operations of power, behind our illusions of freedom complex mechanisms of domination. While in academic circles one can encounter a rekindled interest in living, non-mechanistic nature,¹³ which more and more appears open to change and innovation,¹⁴ while the technological horizon seems open to unforeseen possibilities (we may be able to avoid death, rewrite our DNA, leave the planet, and so on¹⁵), our second nature – the domain of culture and society, once associated with freedom, meaningful life and creativity, seems hopelessly determined by senseless, contingent, mechanisms beyond our control, accessible perhaps to understanding and theorizing, but as fixed and unchangeable as Newtonian physics.

¹³ See, for example: J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2009), and L.R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Open Humanities Press, 2011).

¹⁴ C. Malabou and M. Jeannerod, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (Fordham University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ The possibility with which Hannah Arendt famously opens her reflections on the human condition, chronicling the demise of the political, public sphere. H. Arendt and M. Canovan, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

In this way, 'belief in nothing' encapsulates a certain, well known ending of the story of western modernity. Beginning with an unprecedentedly optimistic vision of the future, and so resolved upon leaving the past behind, modernity, once its confidence in enlightenment was shaken, if not destroyed, was left with neither a future nor a past. We stand now torn between a blind leap into an unknown, no longer promising future, and an attempt to recover the past from which we believe that we have broken so decisively, and perhaps too hastily.¹⁶ The modern sense of progress, resting on evident improvements in modern scientific and technological knowledge, had carried over to a confidence that human life could be endlessly improved through the sharpening of reason and disillusion from unchecked beliefs. Once knowledge is liberated from its received, unchecked assumptions, it is opened into infinite progress, infinite accumulation, and promises to take society as a whole along with it on this wondrous ride. For a variety of reasons, however, recent history seems to have dissuaded many from this optimism; the unstoppable march forward in scientific knowledge and technological power¹⁷ has indeed increased human powers beyond our wildest imaginations, but rather than bringing about eternal peace and prosperity it has shown to be equally, if not more compatible with the destruction of human life and life worlds,

¹⁶ See for example: M.A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 7-10.

¹⁷ M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (Garland Pub., 1977). If Heidegger's story about the decline of the west (the forgetting of the question of being) can be summarized as the falling trajectory of being towards modern technology, conceived as an object to be manipulated and worked on, Foucault in his genealogy of the subject offers the complementary story of the fall of the subject from a technological, practical affair, to an object of knowledge. See M. Foucault et al., *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France 1981-1982* (St Martins Press, 2005).

establishing the reality of mass extinction, human and natural, advancing ever growing social-economic inequalities, and opening up the possibility of utter and complete annihilation on a planetary scale.¹⁸ Ours is a modernity 'gone wild,' detaching itself from, and ultimately undermining the very ideas and values that had championed it. In sum, we seem no longer able to believe in the core values or ideas of our own, modern life form, seeing them as self-delusional, ideological constructs.

We believe in nothing, we have nothing to fix our hopes on, no signpost or compass to orientate our will. All we know is that *this*, reality as we know it, is morally bankrupt and intrinsically unsustainable. We cannot want this, what appears in front of us; yet we no longer believe there is anything beyond it. We either despair, melancholically resigning from all grand ambitions,¹⁹ holding them to be futile and inauthentic, and more likely than not a sure road to disaster, and settle for our limited, petty life and pleasures, or we affirm the only possible course of action that remains: the destruction of the order of the

¹⁸ See R. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Naturalism and Anti-Phenomenological Realism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁹ As Robert Pippin emphasizes, Nietzsche speaks of the devaluation of our 'Highest Values.' See R. Pippin, 'Heidegger on Nietzsche on Nihilism,' in T.L. Pangle and J.H. Lomax, *Political Philosophy Cross-Examined: Perennial Challenges to the Philosophic Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 176. It would be nonsensical to speak about a devaluation of all values, since some minimal value commitment is implicated even in the simplest of actions, as action is inherently self-conscious. See S. Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 17-64. This is why such a devaluation is perhaps best captured as a crisis in sublimation, a crisis in the capacity to elevate something to the level of the 'Highest.' See Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (MIT Press), 72-85.

world as we know it, hoping against hope that from the ruins something better will emerge.²⁰

We believe in nothing. Read with a slightly different inclination, however, there emerges from this statement a paradoxical, positive credo. We believe in nothing, which, by nature of the everyday magic of the form of propositional language, can also mean that, whether we know it or not, whether we have meant it or not, we have asserted a nonsensical belief that nothing is something, indeed an object, if not the only possible object of belief. There is no surprise that the very term Nihilism – the casting of *nihil*, nothing, in the form of a belief system, or ideology, the form of an ‘ism’ – produces a paradoxical and elusive object.²¹

As Robert Pippin nicely puts it, it is “as if the most prominent and disturbing manifestation of Nihilism is the absence of any manifestation.”²² Nihilism, understood as the incapacity to fully believe, to truly commit, could appear in the guise of its opposite,

²⁰ In her study of Nietzsche, Alenka Zupančič offers this definition: “Indeed, if one were to define more precisely the general term “nihilism” (which is often used in a loose, careless fashion), one could say that it refers to nothing but the configuration of this mortifying either/or. Nihilism ‘as such’ is the configuration wherein the will (or desire) is captured in the alternative between directly willing nothingness itself and not willing. In this sense, Nihilism is not a general category that then falls into active and passive Nihilism; it refers to the very tension spanning the space between these two figures or ‘alternatives’ – it does not exist outside this space.” Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow*, 66.

²¹ Nietzsche spoke of Nihilism as “that most uncanny of guests,” knocking at our door. See ‘Nachgelassene Fragmente,’ in F.W. Nietzsche, G. Colli, and M. Montinari, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. XII (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag), 125. Recently, Shane Weller had organized his genealogical account of Nihilism around its uncanny nature. See S. Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests*.

²² Pippin, ‘Heidegger on Nietzsche on Nihilism,’ 175.

of overzealous commitments, masking an underlying doubt as to their value.²³ We seem to either believe too much, or too little, no longer being able – were we ever? – to simply believe, to take things at face value; to spontaneously see the value in things, and just be “in the midst of life.”²⁴

Nihilism is often associated with ‘the death of God,’ or secularization, as its dark shadow, its monumental side effect.²⁵ It is not clear, however, how far this helps clear up the fog. Secularization, in this problematic, diagnostic, sense, has been understood as the disenchantment of the world, the progressive disappearance of magic, of what cannot be accounted for scientifically, from the world (from Weber²⁶ to Taylor²⁷), and the gradual replacement of God by Man. Alternatively, it has been described as a concealment of Modernity’s theological origins: secularization here means the process of disguising or forgetting the theological, an act of repression that only makes the hidden more potent and unruly.²⁸ ‘Secularization’ in its negative, that is, nihilistic sense,

²³ Pippin draws attention to this, easily overlooked remark Heidegger makes in his analysis of Nietzsche: “Nihilism is at work even – and especially – there were it is not advocated as doctrine or demand, there were ostensibly its opposite prevails.” See M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two: Volumes One and Two* (HarperCollins, 1991), vol. 1, 26.

²⁴ “Being in the midst of Life” is a notion that lies at the heart of Eric Santner’s comparative reading of Freud and Rosenzweig. E.L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

²⁵ To be distinguished from the more triumphant, or prescriptive sense. For a consideration of the connection and distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive understandings of secularization see J. Cassanova, ‘The secular, Secularizations, Secularism,’ in C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. VanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 54-74.

²⁶ M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Beacon Press, 1993).

²⁷ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Classic examples include: C. Schmitt et al., *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); K. Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological*

thus oscillates between two, opposing meanings: it denotes either a world increasingly devoid of meaning and purpose, hollowed out like a lifeless shell, or a world laden with meanings that have been set free from their contextual and practical confinement, constantly overflowing and threatening to burst out of their secularized understanding, like the incredible Hulk bursting out of Bruce Banner's ridiculously unsuitable clothes.²⁹ We either cannot believe, or we suffer from surplus belief. Since we can no longer possess belief, fully avow it, it now possesses us.³⁰

Nihilism, then, is a modern problem, the problem of the modern as such. For it arises in the context of an epoch and a civilization that defines itself in temporal, historical terms as fundamentally new,³¹ as a decisive break with the past. No longer determined by

Implications of the Philosophy of History (University of Chicago Press, 1957). The famous polemical response is H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (MIT Press, 1985). More recently, one can classify such diverse genealogical approaches as those of Gillespie and Agamben under the same rubric of 'concealed origins.'

²⁹ See for example Gillespie's genealogy, tracing the origins of modern Nihilism to the nominalist revolution of the middle ages that led to an emphasis of the divine will over God's reason. This, he argues, lies at the origin of our anxiety-ridden sense of 'contingency.' Despite the medieval origins, the disastrous consequences only fully emerge in modernity, with the gradual replacement of God by Man. Such a limitless divine will is clearly not cut for human measures. See M.A. Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) and *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.

³⁰ Robert Pfaller builds upon Octavio Manoni's distinction between (avowed) faith and (disavowed) belief, to develop a typology of cultures. Disavowed beliefs, superstitions that nobody avows first personally, but are intrinsically attributed to some other, are universal. They are to be found in 'primitive' and 'civilized' societies alike. It is only in some cultures that a notion of faith develops, and it is only from this perspective, the assumption that belief is something that is to be first personally, consciously avowed, which makes disavowed beliefs, or as he calls them, "illusions without owners," appear problematic. R. Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (Verso Books, 2014).

³¹ R. Koselleck (K. Tribe trans.), *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

tradition and circumstances, modernity is a self-grounding,³² self-asserting and self-defining age.³³ For such a civilization, the persistence of the past, of what was to have been left behind, is a haunting, disturbing specter.

The productive tension captured by the expression ‘the death of God’ is worth spelling out, as it brings out some of the elusive qualities of belief. Declaring God to be dead, to have died, is certainly something different from mere disillusionment, the shaking off of an erroneously held belief, gaining a better knowledge as to reality and the nature of things. Minimally, it asserts that God, at least for as long as he was worshipped and believed in, in some way existed, indeed, lived. It further suggests that his passing away is to be dealt with in a completely different manner than the correction of a mistake or illusion. The implication, in other words, is that beliefs have a life and a reality of their own. They die, rather than dissipate, leaving behind them a heritage and debts, although due to their incorporeal existence, they are intrinsically harder to bury and mourn, their heritage harder to take on, and their debts harder to repay. The figure of the death of God thus raises a series of questions pertaining to the nature and life of beliefs, cautioning against their reduction to items of knowledge. It is not primarily an intellectual crisis, a problem of credible belief, analogous to the skepticism and rejection of a scientific claim, although it is clearly linked to such claims of knowledge.³⁴ Belief, in this sense, should not be assimilated into knowledge, understood entirely as some kind

³² P. Fitzpatrick, *Modernism and the Grounds of Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³³ R.B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Wiley, 1999), 120.

³⁴ Pippin, ‘Heidegger on Nietzsche on Nihilism,’ 174.

of neutral propositional content. And so, having trouble believing is an existential crisis – whether psychological or civilizational – a crisis in one’s mode of being, in the ability to lead a life.³⁵

With such high stakes and broad cultural-historical concerns, it is clear that the problem of Nihilism is not an abstract philosophical problem, of concern for specialists and intellectuals alone.³⁶ Unlike skepticism or solipsism, which are problems that arise, as it were, when we abandon our everyday immediate experience, and reflect on our ways of knowing, Nihilism is taken to be a much wider cultural problem that impacts our ordinary, everyday experience. Nor is it, for that matter, indifferent to abstract, philosophical or scientific knowledge. Nihilism, we might say, deals with the real effects of abstraction, which seem to bring knowledge into direct conflict with life. At stake is a knowledge that is detrimental to life, destructive in nature, annihilating everything vital, dissolving all organic bonds, cutting the ground beneath our very feet, and severing our relation to the world and others. Nihilism arises as an historical-philosophical problem, as it deals with the emergence of a form of knowing,³⁷ whose origins are a matter of much dispute, but seems to culminate in the modern, scientifically inclined outlook, which tears apart the organic tissue of a life form; the emergence of a life form that can

³⁵ For analysis of the self-destructive nature of modernization see M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Verso, 1983).

³⁶ Although it is often localized as a problem of late nineteenth-century European intellectual elites.

³⁷ Whether understood more narrowly as an ‘episteme’ or ‘discourse’ or more broadly as ‘ontological horizon,’ a fundamental experience of being. Indeed, it could be said that it is the matter of a mode of knowledge, understood more narrowly, in Heideggerean terms, ontically, which brings about a catastrophic shrinking of humanly possible ‘ontological horizons.’

no longer take anything for granted, restlessly questioning everything, seeking for grounds, scrutinizing all appearances, until it can only appear to itself as an apparition, a mere semblance, hovering in the void.

But the figure of the death of God also carries the weight of a specific, though globally consequential history, namely, the history of Christianity. The death of God is a deeply Christological image, arguably the very characteristic mark of Christianity, with its central icon of the crucified Christ. To the extent that the death of God is an intrinsic component of modern secularization, so to that extent secularization, and even atheism, become essentially epiphenomenal of Christianity.³⁸

In Nietzsche, it is worth recalling, the declaration of the death of God is met with mockery and indifference, rather than melancholy and panic,³⁹ for how can a transcendent, supersensible being die? God has long been dead, God can never die – either way, the message does not seem to get through. The death of God arises as an epistemological and existential problem only under the assumption that it is impossible

³⁸ A point on which both champions and critiques of Christianity and secularization are in agreement. Favorable accounts of the essential link between Christianity and secularism run from Hegel to Žižek. See for example S. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000). For critical accounts see T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. (Stanford University Press, 2003); T. Asad, *Genealogies Of Religion*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); C.M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. (Oxford University press, 1992).

³⁹ F. Nietzsche et al., *Nietzsche: The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 480-1.

for God to die. It is a problem that arises, as it were, with the 'fall' of what was held to be transcended.⁴⁰ As Heidegger puts it in his analysis of Nietzsche:

[The] "Christian God" also stands for the "transcended" [*Übersinnliche*] in general in its various meanings – for "ideals" and "norms," "principles" and "rules," "ends" and "values," which are set "above" beings, in order to give being as a whole a purpose, an order, and – as it is succinctly expressed – "meaning" [*Sinn*]. Nihilism is that historical process whereby the dominance of the "transcended" becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning. Nihilism is the history of beings [*die Geschichte des Seienden*], through which the death of the Christian God comes slowly but inexorably to light.⁴¹

In this key, Nihilism is understood as a problematic "fall" into immanence,⁴² a fall, if you will, into contingency, an arbitrary world of nature without a sense of order and purpose,

⁴⁰ A perspective from which the real question, what emerges as a near impassable epistemological barrier, is how to understand any other kind of belief. Could anyone really believe in Gods that are not only ontologically, but morally not transcendent? See P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁴¹ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four: Volumes Three and Four* (HarperCollins, 1991), vol. 4, 4.

⁴² In the political-theological register, Eric Santner speaks of the transition from absolute monarchy, in which the sovereign, by virtue of his divine, "second" body, is transcendent to the political body, to the post-revolutionary democratic political body, in similar terms, as the body into which the sovereign has "fallen" is now charged with an excessive immanence. See E.L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3- 62.

and a contingent fall at that, an historical accident, the destiny of that civilization that had erected such transcendence to begin with.⁴³

Name Calling

The elusiveness of the object meant to be named by the term, is matched by the ferocity with which the act of naming is pursued; attaching the label of nihilism is rarely done in the manner of an indifferent, scientific classification. Nihilism is either diagnostic or accusatory, depending on how one imagines this pathology is to be combated.⁴⁴

Aside from inflicting a mild dizziness, the brief overview offered above has surely intimated to the reader that the literature on the topic, which is as difficult as it is vast – indeed, to the extent that it has the pretense of identifying the core problem of modernity, it is in principle as vast as an exhaustive genealogy of modernity can be, i.e.

⁴³ “In Nietzsche’s view, Nihilism is not a *Weltanschauung* that occurs at some time and place or another; it is rather the basic character of what happens in Occidental history. Nihilism means that the uppermost values devalue themselves. This means that whatever realities and laws set the standard in Christendom, in morality since Hellenistic times, and in philosophy since Plato, lose their binding force, and for Nietzsche that always means creative force.” Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two: Volumes One and Two*, vol. 1, 26.

⁴⁴ Nihilism is to be overcome, even if ‘nihilistically,’ as it were. Weller’s discussion of twentieth-century theories of Nihilism and their relation to literature highlights this distinctive feature of the discourse of Nihilism. It belongs to the very development of the term that theorists turn the concepts back against the thinker or thinkers from whom they have inherited them, redefining the problem such that it now includes the previous theoretical perspectives on which they are building, and who they now seek to overcome as part of the problem. See Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests*.

of indeterminate scope – is far from offering anything resembling a consensus as to the nature and history of its object.⁴⁵

Setting aside, for now, the conceptual difficulties in approaching the problem, its terminological emergence and trajectory are easier to determine. The term first arises in relation to Kant's transcendental philosophy and, after a brief yet stellar literary carrier in the anti-nihilistic novels of Turgenev⁴⁶ and Dostoyevsky, makes its way to the center of Nietzsche's anti-philosophical thought, where it receives some of its decisive formulations and associations.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Looking at only a select few of recent accounts, one can see the origins of nihilism traced to different historical epochs, ranging from medieval Nominalism's collapsing the 'scholastic synthesis of reason and revelation' (Gillespie), to Aristotelian politics and metaphysics (Agamben), or Plotinus (Cunningham). See Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, G. Agamben, *The Coming Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and *The Man without Content* (Stanford University Press, 1999), and C. Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (Taylor & Francis, 2005), respectively. The historically 'expansive' application of the term goes as far back as Windelband's influential history of philosophy, which applies the term to Gorgias' 'doctrine' that "there is no being." W. Windelband and J.H. Tufts, *History of Philosophy with Special Reference to the Formation and Development of Its Problems and Conceptions* (Macmillan, 1931), 103. John Burnet's subsequent distinction between 'cosmological' and 'ethical' nihilism, attributed to Gorgias and Thrasymachus respectively, stands in a long line of classifications, divisions and subdivisions of the problem, still very much in play today. J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato* (Macmillan, 1932), 120. An historical and sociological classification of Nihilism is offered by Goudsblom. J. Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1980). More recently, Carr distinguished a resigned, post-modern Nihilism from its predecessors, who have still held the hope of overcoming it from within. Slocombe argues that genealogical and classificatory accounts cannot but do violence to this elusive subject matter, which he offers to connect with the sublime. See W. Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern* (Routledge, 2013).

⁴⁶ Maraglit and Buruma, see in Bazarov, Turgenev's nihilist, a prime example of what they call Occidentalism. Indeed, their notion of Occidentalism has much in common with nihilism.

⁴⁷ Or its first 'radical inflation,' as Weller puts it.

Why was Kant's legacy of transcendental idealism seen to be so disastrous? Astute contemporary critiques have found Kant's turning of the philosophical gaze inward, so to speak, aiming to establish knowledge and morality on an understanding of our subjective constitution, a position which can only lead to catastrophic consequences for knowledge and morality alike. Nihilism in this context was intended to name, indeed, to call out, extreme Kantians who considered the thing-in-itself as nothing for our cognition.⁴⁸ Such a position could only give rise to disastrous cognitive, and moral consequences: all we know are appearances, illusions, with no grasp on the real. But it is Friedrich Jacobi who is credited – in a rare scholarly consensus on the topic – with first developing the term conceptually, in a letter to Fichte⁴⁹ in 1799.

More than a decade earlier, however, Jacobi had been involved in the infamous “pantheism controversy” with Moses Mendelssohn, where he argued that Spinozism amounted to atheism. The controversy had its origins in a private correspondence between Jacobi and Mendelssohn regarding Lessing's alleged Spinozism, and is today

⁴⁸ The first use of the term in print was apparently by F.L. Goetzius in his *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia* (1733), which was, however, a relatively unknown work and seemed to have played no role in later reappearance and development of the concept. In the late eighteenth century it was used by J.H. Obereit, and more importantly, by D. Jenisch, who characterized transcendental idealism as Nihilism in 1796 in his *On the Ground and Value of the Discoveries of Herr Professor Kant in Metaphysics, Morals, and Aesthetics*. He uses the term to describe the work, not of Kant, but of the extreme Kantians who teach that things-in-themselves are nothing for our cognition. See Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, 65.

⁴⁹ Fichte was influenced by Jacobi, and had expected his support in the controversy (known as the ‘atheism controversy’) over his own philosophy, a controversy that would ultimately cost him his position. Scholars today are baffled by this expectation, which was indeed disappointed, as Jacobi intervened in favor of Fichte's accusers. See D. Henrich and D.S. Pacini, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 84.

considered, alongside Kant's transcendental philosophy, the major intellectual event of the period, ushering in a series of important intellectual and cultural developments. In Jacobi's view, Spinoza's admirably consistent application of rationality's prime principle (the principle of sufficient reason) leads inevitably to a world with no room for spontaneity, creativity and freedom. For Jacobi, there was no point in offering a philosophical counter argument, for it was rational philosophy itself that was the problem; it could not but lead to such a deem, unlivable view of reality. The only way out was a *salto mortale*, a leap of faith. Philosophy, in its unwitting path of despair, can only bring us to the brink of an existential choice. His argument against Fichte follows a similar path. As he sees it, Fichte's Idealism recognizes no truth beyond consciousness or reason and therefore falls into an absolute subjectivism that is essentially an inverted Spinozism. It reduces everything to the activity of the I, and thus reduces God to a mere creation of the human imagination, just as Spinozism had reduced God to (a lifeless, mechanistic) nature. Jacobi concludes:

Man has this choice and this choice alone: nothing or God. Choosing nothing he makes himself God; that means he makes God an apparition, for it is impossible, if there is no God, for man and all that is around him to be more than an apparition. I repeat: God is and is outside me, a living essence that subsists for itself, or I am God. There is no third Possibility.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 66.

As Nihilism emerged, as both a concept and an accusation, the significance of the epistemological and metaphysical background seems to have been taken for granted. It just seemed obvious, for many contemporary participants, that certain metaphysical outlooks have disastrous consequences.

Indeed, this notion is shared by the two paradigmatic figures of criticism that emerge and crystalize in the wake of this affair. One model of critique is of course the Kantian, which links freedom with rational criticism and the rejection of metaphysical dogma, often associated by Kant with ‘mysticism.’⁵¹ This model is often invested in securing the boundaries of philosophy against ‘lazy,’ undisciplined thought. The other emerging model, embodied by Jacobi, could be labeled as anti-philosophical; it rejects philosophical criticism as itself dogmatic and asserts a certain immediate, preconceptual knowledge, or belief, as primary to, and sometimes as capable of curing, the ailments of philosophy and rationalism.

In this narrower sense, then, Nihilism is a post-Kantian problem,⁵² essential to the development of one of the post-Kantian trajectories, often referred to as ‘Continental

⁵¹ On Kant’s early attraction, and then rejection of ‘mysticism,’ see Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, 67-8.

⁵² The identification of Kant’s philosophy as a major moment in the history of the problem, indeed, one in which it reaches its fully developed, contemporary form, is shared by many genealogical accounts to this day, even as interpretations of the problem, and Kant’s role in it, vary significantly and are even diametrically opposed. For example, Gillespie sees in Kant, specifically in his third antinomy, the articulation of the absolute tension and separation between nature and freedom, the culmination of a process that originates in the medieval “nominalist revolution.” “While the earlier separation of a scientific and an aesthetic/moral realm governed by different standards and laws clearly called into question the initial global claims of modernity,

philosophy': from the Romantics and German idealists to Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger and on to the French post-structuralists. Moses Mendelssohn seems like an odd fit, to say the least, in this trajectory. In the history of philosophy, Mendelssohn emerges as the last representative of the dogmatic Leibnitz-Wolf school philosophy, which Kant's critical turn had rendered obsolete. After Kant, Mendelssohn's realm of influence had been decisively restricted to Jewish affairs, in part due to the 'disciplining of Philosophy' that followed the rise of the modern German University.

In the University

Willi Goetschel describes the disciplinary process as "the transformation through which philosophy changed from an enlightenment project of independent critique of independent intellectuals into a fully professionalized discipline in the modern university during the nineteenth and early twentieth century."⁵³ While philosophy became a stakeholder in the university, playing a central role in the formation of the modern academic curriculum, it also became professionalized and disciplined, a process accompanied by its differentiation and reconstitution in relation to the other disciplines

it was really Kant's codification of this separation in his antinomy doctrine that cut the ground out from under the modern project as a whole" (*Theological Origins*, 7). Agamben, on the contrary, sees in Kant the culmination of a long process, where two ontological spheres – the sphere responsive to Being as what "is," and the sphere of religions, responsive to Being as "ought," come to their zone of indistinction. See *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, in particular 43, 259-61, 270-87, and G. Agamben and A. Kotsko, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty* (Stanford University Press, 2013), in particular 195-9, 224, 232-4, 243-72, respectively.
⁵³ W. Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (Fordham University Press, 2013), 1.

that it was instrumental in engendering. The proliferation of distinction outside, with the constitution of new disciplines, was accompanied by an internal differentiation into subfields, which eventually gave rise to such categories as “Jewish Philosophy.”⁵⁴ Mendelssohn is, as Goetschel puts it “the classic that modern Jewish philosophy never had”.⁵⁵

During the nineteenth century, Mendelssohn’s memory lived on mainly within the Jewish world, where he was celebrated as a bridge between the community and the gentile society. His first biographer, Isaac Euchel,⁵⁶ referred to him as Rambemam, (Rabbi Moshe ben Mendel), echoing the title of Rambam given to Maimonides. The implied analogy was intended to signify that, like Maimonides, Mendelssohn was renowned amongst the gentiles as a profound philosopher, and respected by the Rabbis for his extensive Talmudic learning. While much of his teaching was never accepted, he was respected by Reform and Orthodox Jews alike.⁵⁷ By the end of the century, however, many criticisms, on all fronts, had started to emerge, centering on the views Mendelssohn had expressed in his *Jerusalem*. Mendelssohn now seemed too liberal to

⁵⁴ As Goetschel points out, this double process of differentiation, external and internal, “confronts philosophy, at the institutional level with its inner tension between its universal claims and its modern form of professionalization, whose historically particular determinants are undeniable.” Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy*, 2. For more on the institutionalization and professionalization of modern, university philosophy, see also S. Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 18-32, and J. Derrida and P. Kamuf, *Without Alibi* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 202-37.

⁵⁵ Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy*, 189.

⁵⁶ Isaac Abraham Euchel, *Toldot Rabenu Hehakham Moshe Ben Mendel* (Berlin: Hinukh ne'arim, 1838).

⁵⁷ Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 3.

the socialists, while for the Zionists (such as Peretz Smolanskin) he appeared as a traitor to his people in following the dangerous political illusion of Jewish emancipation. He was too rational for the Orthodox and too atavistically attached to *Halakha*, Jewish law, for the Reform Jews.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, the bicentenary of Mendelssohn's birth in 1929 was celebrated in Jewish communities across Germany and accompanied by many publications. The main event in Mendelssohn's reception – an event now more than eight decades in the making – was the initiation of a definitive scholarly edition of his works, the bicentenary edition, or the *Jubiläumsausgabe*, which began in 1929 and was projected to have sixteen titles, before the rise of Nazism put a long halt on the enterprise. The international board was headed by Adolf von Harnack, the leading protestant theologian in Germany and prominent members included Ernst Cassirer, the leading Kant scholar of the day, and, Lucien levy Bruhl, a leading anthropologist and philosopher from France. Prominent scholars of Jewish studies were involved in editing the volumes. The project's supervising editors included Ismar Elbogen, "Weimar's premiere Jewish historian"⁵⁹ and Julius Guttman, the leading historian of Jewish philosophy, and amongst the editors of specific volumes was one of Guttman's young research associates, Leo Strauss.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁹ I. Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 1994), 6.

As Micha Gottlieb remarks, in the same way that many today feel an affinity with the Weimar era, people of that era seemed to have felt an affinity with the late eighteenth century, the eclipse of the age of enlightenment, epitomized for some by the pantheism controversy.⁶⁰ An influential case in point is Leo Strauss.

Strauss, then a young Zionist attracted to Jewish Orthodoxy, was a harsh critic of the Weimar republic. Liberalism, in his view, was Nihilism, which, in the context of the German Jews of his day, meant it offered only tepid, inauthentic half measures that allowed Jews to be tolerated – but secretly despised – by the majority society on the condition they leave their religious identity behind. Liberalism had thus left Jews existentially moribund, alienated from both German and Jewish identities. Mendelssohn interested Strauss for he remained committed, at least “externally,” to “Orthodox” Jewish concepts such as revelation, providence and the immortality of the soul, and saw no contradiction between his religious stance and reason. Mendelssohn’s position attracted Strauss, but he suspected it was untenable. Strauss noted that Mendelssohn was called out on these tensions, in the pantheism controversy with Jacobi. Strauss’s view of Mendelssohn’s performance in the controversy was heavily influenced by the arguments of Jacobi, who was the subject of his dissertation.⁶¹ In seeking to bridge faith and reason, Strauss deemed Mendelssohn’s stance “indecisive, lukewarm and

⁶⁰ Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 2.

⁶¹ Strauss’s 1921 dissertation, written under the supervision of Ernst Cassirer was entitled “The Problem of Knowledge in F.H. Jacobi.” See ‘Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobis,’ in Leo Strauss, *Philosophie Und Gesetz, Frühe Schriften*, vol. II, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), 237-93.

mediocre,” a “cautious half-dogmatism.”⁶² Strauss’s judgment of Mendelssohn was thus largely shaped by his understanding of the pantheism controversy, and Mendelssohn’s failure, in his eyes, to live up to the challenge it had posed. His judgment – which echoed Jacobi’s dismissive judgment of his opponent in the pantheism affair - has had a lasting effect on Mendelssohn’s subsequent reception,⁶³ in part because of it being the only authoritative account until the publication of Alexander Altman’s magisterial biography of Moses Mendelssohn in 1973.⁶⁴

Perhaps due to the rekindled interest in the faith/reason debate with the so called ‘return of religion,’ the 1990s saw a surge of literature on Mendelssohn, in parallel (in the strict, geometric sense of no crossing) with a rekindled scholarly interest in the pantheism controversy.⁶⁵ On all fronts, Jacobi’s judgment, mediated by Strauss, seemed to have left a permanent impact.

Within “Jewish Studies,” many of the recent accounts have tried to come to terms with the tensions that seem to split Mendelssohn in two: the Orthodox Jew and the German enlightenment philosopher. Thus, to cite but two prominent examples, Allan Arkush

⁶² Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 6.

⁶³ See Martin Yaffe’s ‘Strauss on Mendelssohn: an interpretive essay,’ where, amongst other things, Yaffe details the differences between Leo Strauss and Alexander Altman’s accounts of the pantheism controversy. In *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 59-145.

⁶⁴ A. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, 1973).

⁶⁵ See for example, Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); P.W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

sees Mendelssohn as a deist willing to reform Judaism to adapt to the times,⁶⁶ while David Sorkin sees him as a traditionalist only half-heartedly committed to enlightenment values.⁶⁷ Others have attempted to offer a more nuanced, middle path, showing Mendelssohn to be consistent in his own way, so to speak.⁶⁸ In a sense, both those whose empathize the tension, and those who try to reconcile them are right, and both are wrong; Mendelssohn, as will be argued, is both consistent and irrecoverably split; his is the consistency of a split unity.

Intervention: Mendelssohn's Neither/Nor

In the field of Jewish studies, Moses Mendelssohn is best known for his highly controversial, if not idiosyncratic account of Judaism as a religion that is committed to no principles of belief, an idea almost universally rejected, and, as I shall argue, deeply misunderstood. Outside this field, Mendelssohn is mostly known for having played the role of Jacobi's interlocutor in the pantheism controversy, though he is not seen as having contributed anything substantial to it or to its subsequent developments.

Mendelssohn's non-belonging to the debate, I argue, is not only a clue that allows for a reinterpretation of Mendelssohn, but also an omission constitutive of the debate.

⁶⁶ A. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁶⁷ D. Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Halban, 2012).

⁶⁸ See, for example Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, and Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

In a memorable scene from Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*, Leon, Ninotchka's suitor, tells her the following, well known joke: A man comes into a restaurant. He sits down at the table and he says 'Waiter, bring me a coffee without cream.' Five minutes later the waiter comes back and says 'I'm sorry sir, we have no cream. Can it be without milk?'

There has been much, worthy philosophical commentary on this joke in recent years, and it is not our intent to add to it. The point to be taken from this joke is that what is subtracted from a given substance shapes in important ways at least our experience of it. Coffee without cream is not the same as coffee without milk. The pantheism controversy and its aftermath, I argue, are in this sense "without Mendelssohn"; that is to say, while his involvement in the affair appears contingent, thus excluding his views from the essence of the controversy, that very exclusion is essential, establishing the very parameters of the issue.

While a few pioneering works, to be briefly discussed below, have brought Mendelssohn's thinking on Judaism and his involvement in the pantheism controversy into contact, there has been to date no attempt to connect Mendelssohn's fundamental claim about Judaism, i.e., that it subscribes to no beliefs, with the larger issues at stake in the pantheism controversy. The primary premise of the present research is that it is necessary to bring the two into contact, and this for two reasons: to illuminate Mendelssohn's thinking about Judaism and, also, to beat down new paths within the larger debate on Nihilism. Though it might seem a strange move made in regard to a figure held to epitomize 'dogmatic' philosophy, this study takes up Mendelssohn as a

‘critical model’ in Adorno’s sense,⁶⁹ allowing us to revisit a philosophical problem in a way that affects the very parameters in which the question is posed. Such critical models are philosophical case studies, intended to brush the examined text against the grain with “the ambition of bringing out the liberating potential of the not yet realized.”⁷⁰

If one goes by the standard account of Mendelssohn’s role in the pantheism controversy it is immediately obvious that he has nothing to contribute to the ongoing philosophical debates sketched above. Certainly, it cannot be questioned that Mendelssohn failed to perceive Jacobi’s challenge as the epoch-making intervention it turned out to be.

Mendelssohn seems to have recognized no inescapable contradiction between the modern, scientific outlook and traditional religion and morality, nor did he perceive Spinoza’s philosophy of immanence to be the radical consequence of all rationalism, an inescapable ‘fall’ into contingency and immanence. Such are the generally agreed signs of Mendelssohn’s limitations. Yet if the controversy and its implications are examined from Mendelssohn’s viewpoint, what comes into view are rather the limitations of the debate itself, or at least the limitations of the debate as it has been framed ever since the controversy. This novel perspective is attempted in the first part of the dissertation. What emerges into view from this work of repositioning is that Mendelssohn’s ‘failure to see’ the problem does not have to be taken as a sign of his naivety, inauthenticity or limited capacities as a philosopher. Indeed, and as becomes clear in the second part of

⁶⁹ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Routledge, 1990), and T.W. Adorno and H.W. Pickford, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁷⁰ In Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy*, 8.

the dissertation, one only need look elsewhere in his writings, namely in his “Jewish” work, *Jerusalem* (1873), to see he that he did address the problem, albeit in his own way and on his own terms. And from this neglected perspective it is also clear why the challenge as it was presented to Mendelssohn failed to make the impression that commentators have looked for.

While the arguments of the following chapters take a novel perspective, they do draw on – and should be situated in relation to – some recent literature on Mendelssohn. In general, two significant lacunas mar existing scholarship. We begin by dwelling on the first, which can be stated as follows: the pantheism controversy deals with the relation of knowledge – in its most abstract – and practical life, and it is precisely Mendelssohn’s unique outlook on the question of this relation that makes him relevant to the lingering debate, but also, quite possibly, what has made his relevance virtually invisible so far. Both Mendelssohn’s metaphysical reflections and his political theology are practical/theoretical complexes, and do not allow for such neat separation. Indeed, what emerges – as we shall see – is a strange kind of unity, a fundamentally split unity.

Two excellent studies have recently offered readings of both Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* and his *Morning Hours*, each, however, highlighting one aspect at the expense of the other. Gottlieb has dedicated an excellent, book length study⁷¹ to Mendelssohn’s involvement in the pantheism controversy, which takes seriously Mendelssohn’s views

⁷¹ Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*.

on Judaism as explicated in his *Jerusalem*. But Gottlieb understands the controversy as essentially a pragmatic, political affair. In a series of publications,⁷² Willi Goetschel has also related Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* to his intervention in the controversy (which intervention is set out in his *Morning Hours* of 1785). Goetschel approaches both texts from the other end than does Gottlieb, so to speak, emphasizing Mendelssohn's "metaphysical aesthetics," as he calls it, which he sees as a Spinozist legacy. In this dissertation I shall argue that the pantheism controversy, and perhaps consequentially, much in the debate around Nihilism, has to do with the links established between metaphysical views and practical, political affairs.

The topic of political theology, heavily discussed across academic disciplines, has in recent years been recognized to be overdetermined.⁷³ Certainly, a major tension within this constellation is its oscillation between two interrelated problems, or two interrelated intersections: religion and politics, theory and practice. One could group under the heading of practical philosophy a set of texts and problems that speak to the relation between religion and politics as fundamental social institutions, with changing relations over time and across cultures. As a problem in social and political theory, political theology has to do with the limits and grounding of power, with legitimizing power, of the order of law and its exception, as explored in the tradition that can be traced back from Carl Schmitt to Thomas Hobbes and even Aristotle, and whose most recent inheritor is

⁷² Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy, and Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004)

⁷³ Hammill, Graham L., Julia Reinhard Lupton, and Etienne Balibar. *Political Theology and Early Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1-20.

Giorgio Agamben. It is often assumed in the exploration of such problems that the more abstract, metaphysical issues are epiphenomenal or expressive of the more fundamental, practical reality. However political theology can also be seen as the site where these very categories – religion and politics, and by extension, perhaps more fundamentally, the material, secular realm, and the spiritual – are determined. At this more abstract level, and as a branch of theoretical philosophy, stands the problem of the relation and boundary between the material realm and the spiritual, the sensible and supersensible. Pursuing this line of inquiry, it is often implicitly assumed that it is on this level that the ‘real issues’ lie, either because such fundamental perceptions determine the horizon of meaning of a given life form, or at least because they reveal something other levels of inquiry cannot properly approach. We are dealing with the limit and encounter of the theoretical and practical, either as a problem in practical philosophy, or as a problem of theoretical philosophy. Either branch must include in some way, its other.

While no doubt a simplification, it is possible to trace these two fundamental orientations to the two figures of critique that crystalize in the pantheism controversy. It could be said that Jacobi, the proto existentialist anti-philosopher, orients our thinking in the first direction – on the level of ‘lived experience,’ always concrete and particular, where things take shape, and where even the most abstract philosophical ideas are in truth grounded. At the same time, it is one of the fundamental legacies of Kant’s critique that, while difficult, these domains, the practical and theoretical, must – and therefore can –

be kept apart. That giving up on – at least the possibility – of freedom, understood as rational self-determination, is a moral disaster, freely submitting to the worst, self-induced slavery. In relation to the figures of Jacobi and Kant, Mendelssohn's position is elusive, since it rejects both – seemingly exhaustive – alternatives. For Mendelssohn, as we shall gradually explicate in the following pages, theory and practice do not form strictly separate domains, nor is one reducible to the other.

This brings us to the second major lacuna in existing scholarship, which has to do primarily with Mendelssohn's relation to Kant's philosophy. As we shall see, the pantheism affair had the effect of tying the fate of Kant's immediate reception to Jacobi's challenge. Kant's philosophy was heralded as a response to that challenge, and subsequent generations of intellectuals saw the need to go beyond Kant to a large degree in light of Jacobi's challenge. Due to at least to some extent to Mendelssohn himself, the idea that he might offer a worthwhile, interesting response to Kant, or to Jacobi's existential challenge, has never been seriously considered. Yet for Mendelssohn there is no contradiction between the 'existential' outlook and the 'rational' one: while distinct, they coincide. The unity of Mendelssohn's thought is elusive, since it is a fundamentally split unity. The fundamental duality consistently attributed to Mendelssohn is not strictly speaking false; but the assumption underlying it – namely, that being split is disastrous, makes it impossible for his thinking to come to light.

This second problem manifests itself also on the level of style. In his influential study, Dieter Henrich had identified Jacobi with the emergence of a new style of philosophy that brought it much closer to literature.⁷⁴ Between the existentially inclined, expressive mode of philosophy associated with Jacobi, and Kant's difficult, rigorously conceptualized philosophy for the specialist, there once again seems to be no position for Mendelssohn other than that of a tepid, half measure. Indeed, the difficulty in interpreting Mendelssohn has, somewhat paradoxically, to do with his disarming clarity of expression. There is something self-effacing not only in Mendelssohn's rhetoric, but in his very style, in his plain-speaking manner of presentation.⁷⁵

The very word 'style' has a similar effect, as it is either taken to be an epiphenomenal ornament to work of substance, or, in a modernist vein, to hold the secret key, to 'show' what cannot be directly said. For Mendelssohn, modes of expression as well as media of communication are far from merely ornamental, nor does he allow them the 'final say' over substance. Indeed, Mendelssohn's conjoined inquiry in his *Jerusalem* into the division of politics and religion, and the limits between image (with its inherent bond to

⁷⁴ Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, 74. "This period was also one of extraordinary productivity in literature. Jacobi, a very influential philosopher, was also a writer... his was not a superficial impressionist philosophy... but a serious work that contributed in important ways to the development of philosophy at the time... Jacobi was the first genuine *Poeta Doctus*, a learned poet in the fullest sense... both a creative philosopher-scholar and a creative writer. Moreover, many others like him emerged during this time... I do not think there has been any time in history, before or after, in which the connection between literature and philosophy was as direct and mutual."

⁷⁵ Mendelssohn never produced a canonical philosophical work, one putting forward a systematic, original intervention. Much of his work is scattered in theories of art and beauty, in literary criticism, essays of psychological observation, and so on.

the sensible) and sign (with its supposed transparency), between the figurative and the conceptual, displays a sensitivity to the interrelated problems of political-theology and the seemingly more theoretical-linguistic problem of the limits between conceptual work and figurative speech.⁷⁶

As Willi Goetschel notes, resistances to the pigeonholing of a Jewish thinker under the rubric of “Jewish Philosophy” are as old as the emergence of such rubrics.⁷⁷ In the early twentieth century, the expansion of the category “Jewish thought” had moved in the direction of including styles and themes that do not fit the mold of disciplinary philosophy. Most prominent has been Jewish mysticism, emerging as an exciting, new field of study almost single handedly through the work of Gerschom Scholem.

Scholem’s contemporary “Jewish philosophers,” figures such as Franz Rosenzweig and

⁷⁶ Gil Anidjar has recently argued for the centrality of blood, both literal and figurative – indeed, on the very threshold between them – in Christianity. The argument is nicely encapsulated in his recasting of Carl Schmitt’s famous formula: “All significant concepts of the history of the modern world are liquidated theological concepts. This is so not only because of their historical development but also because of their systematic fluidity, the recognition of which is necessary for a political consideration of these concepts.” Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). This topic will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4, but already here we can see the confusion that arises, the ‘bleeding’ of one domain into the other, in relating to two domains by the terms of one of them, boundaries and jurisdiction, and the resulting, literal violence. Does the problem arise because of a tendency to imagine symbolic difference, a distinction, in terms borrowed from the perceptible world, ‘boundaries’ and ‘borders’? Is the problem, then, the irreducible figurative nature of language, operative even ‘behind the back’ of conceptual distinction? Or is the problem related to the very operation of conceptual distinction, even if it were to be liberated from this imagery of boundaries? Is the separation or distinction between religion and politics a mere example of this fundamental linguistic problem, or is it more intimately bound up with it? As we shall see Mendelssohn has much to say about the boundaries and intersection of both politics and religion, and ‘image’ and ‘sign’, and a reading of *Jerusalem* needs to account for their connection and intersection in his writing.

⁷⁷ See Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy*, 3.

Martin Buber, were to varying degrees and in different ways, heavily influenced by the mystical tradition, reacting against what they perceived as a sterile rationalism. For various reasons, the interest in Jewish mysticism and mystically inclined philosophers has, up until recently, far eclipsed interest in Mendelssohn, who is usually considered to be a paragon of a failed rationalism. Mendelssohn's explicit criticism of "fanaticism" and "enthusiasm" have no doubt contributed to this image. As we shall see, however, Mendelssohn's rationalism coincides, rather than clashes with 'mystical' experience, and his critique of "mysticism" is not directed against any particular set of ideas but rather a certain social institutionalization of 'the mystical'. Both Mendelssohn's metaphysical-theological and political-theological branches of thought seem to bring together seamlessly elements drawn from modern (Leibnitz, Kant) and medieval (Maimonides) philosophy, as well as from the "unwritten" Jewish theology as developed by the early modern Kabbalists (Jewish mystics), into a uniquely Mendelssohnian unity, divided through and through.

In the four chapters that follow these introductory arguments and claims will be fleshed out. Chapter One reviews the pantheism controversy and revises the standard account of Mendelssohn's role within it. The second part of this first chapter then challenges the accepted reading of Mendelssohn's role by way of a reading of Kant's contribution to the controversy in his essay 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' It is shown that Kant's own position arose out of much greater engagement with that of Mendelssohn than is

normally acknowledged. Kant is seen to be responding to Mendelssohn's, rather than Jacobi's challenge.

Chapter Two turns from Kant to Mendelssohn, following in the footsteps of Kant's essay, but going beyond the point that he was willing to go. The chapter offers a reading of Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours*, which was composed in part as Mendelssohn's response to the controversy but also as a response to Kant's critical philosophy. Mendelssohn is shown to have held the very position that warranted, for the first time, being named a Nihilist, namely, a radicalization of Kant's philosophy that denies all reality to the thing in itself. And yet, rather than being led to nihilist conclusions, it is this radicalization of Kant that stands at the basis of Mendelssohn's 'original proof' for the existence of God. Implicit in this exegesis is a rearticulation of the challenge of Nihilism as a problem in the experience of the possible. If Kant had set out to establish the necessary conditions of possible experience, Mendelssohn, or so I argue, offers an account of the experience of possibility. This chapter thus sets out the philosophical core of the argument of this thesis.

The second part of the dissertation – the third and fourth chapters – constitute an attempt to unpack, clarify, and show the practical implications of Mendelssohn's philosophical position as outlined in Chapter Two. This is achieved by way of a chronological step backwards and a careful reading of the two parts of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, composed in 1783, before the pantheism controversy arose. As will become

clear, the basic positions behind Mendelssohn's metaphysical arguments in *Morning Hours* are to be found already in *Jerusalem*, albeit here set out in a more concrete form in which their practical as well as theoretical implications are to be clearly discerned.

Chapter Three offers a close reading of part one of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, where his metaphysical picture finds its proper place in the context of his practical philosophy and political theology. It is argued that what connects the metaphysical speculations of *Morning Hours* and the political theology developed in *Jerusalem* is an ontological picture of the divine, that is, the transcendent, figured not as what lies beyond and outside the worldly, secular plane of immanence, but as what prevents this terrain from closing in on itself, and thus opens the space for the creation of values and life forms. At stake is a view of internal division (whether on the level of the individual subject or that of society) as a positive condition of possibility for human action. Though subtle and careful (for two reasons: his position as a Jew in a Christian society, and his personality), Mendelssohn is presenting his understanding of the political-theological division, modeled after division in time, rather than in space, as an alternative to the commonly held (i.e. Christian) model.

Chapter Four turns to the second part of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, where he discusses, amongst other things, his own religion, Judaism. Following Mendelssohn's distinction between divine legislation and revelation, and his theory of media and language, Mendelssohn is shown to understand the difference between beliefs and

value systems or ways of life, not in terms of a difference in the contents of belief, but a difference in the manner, or form that belief takes. The positive and productive condition of all society, discussed in previous chapters of *Jerusalem* as a divided unity, can develop problematically in two directions, which Mendelssohn understands as two directions inherent in the structure of language. The Ceremonial Law given to the Jewish people is understood to counteract the two opposing tendencies, allowing adherents of Judaism to conjoin a radical freedom of thought with a fidelity to their tradition. Thus, Mendelssohn's vision of Judaism as founded on no prescribed doctrine, not only offers an interesting and unique account of the peculiarities and particular history of Judaism and the Jewish people, but also suggests an alternative view as to the ideological or normative glue of society, one that is not restricted to a fixed, unquestionable set of core beliefs, and can therefore be open to radical shifts in epistemic systems.

Part 1: Mendelssohn and The Pantheism Controversy

1. From Dusk till Dawn: Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* and the Eclipse of Enlightenment

1.1 Mendelssohn and Kant, Style and Substance

The intellectual history of the pantheism controversy (1785) has largely taken Mendelssohn's role in it to be entirely reducible to the purely accidental, serving as the historical background for the emergence of consequential intellectual and philosophical developments. As we shall see, this is in part surprising, since Kant's famous contribution to the controversy is in fact a deeply engaged response to Mendelssohn. Following Kant's reading will allow us to shed some light on Mendelssohn's contribution to the affair, and to the persistent problem of nihilism more generally. Mendelssohn's contribution, as well as his seeming irrelevance to the debate at the time, we will proceed to argue, has to be understood in light of his arguments in *Jerusalem*, published in 1783, about reason, belief and revelation. This means that we are reading in reverse chronological order, or against the grain. We begin at the end, and then work backwards

In his day, Mendelssohn was celebrated for his exceptional powers of expression.⁷⁸

Indeed, for Kant, just this was the mark of Mendelssohn's genius, what made him

⁷⁸ See Willi Goetschel 'Writing, Dialogue, and Marginal Form: Mendelssohn's Style of Intervention' in R. Munk, *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics* (Springer Netherlands, 2011), 21-40.

exceptional.⁷⁹ This is why Kant, who had a low opinion of the capacity of the ‘popular philosophers’ of the Berlin enlightenment circles for serious philosophical thought,⁸⁰ and who considered his own powers to make complex philosophical ideas communicable to be limited, put so much stock in recruiting Mendelssohn as an ally to his new philosophy. Mendelssohn stood alone, in Kant’s estimation, as one in whom the powers of expression did not come at the expense of rigorous, critical thought, a master of common sense as Kant would come to define it in his third critique⁸¹: “Few men are so fortunate as to be able to think for themselves and at the same time be able to put themselves into someone else’s position and adjust their style exactly to his requirements. There is only one Mendelssohn.”⁸²

Today, it seems, Mendelssohn is more readily recognized as a skillful writer than as a lasting source of philosophical insight. Paradoxically, the peculiar difficulty entailed in reading Mendelssohn has to do with his clarity of expression. That is, the difficulty in

⁷⁹ Immanuel Kant and Arnulf Zweig, *Correspondence*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 105-08.

⁸⁰ He described it as “mere misology, reduced to principles,” and “the euthanasia of false philosophy.” See Lewis Beck, White, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 321.

⁸¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 86-90. Kant’s notion of common sense has been widely commented upon. He seeks to distinguish his notion from, well, the commonsensical notion of common sense – what he calls, healthy understanding, which he sees ultimately as perceived wisdom, a hindrance on independent thinking. Common sense as the faculty of taste is to be understood as the capacity to uncover universality in particulars, a capacity that requires taking the perspective of others into account in assessing one’s own pleasure. It is an account of the pleasure in judgement, what Mendelssohn, before Kant, had defined as the faculty of approval, mediating the faculties of desire and cognition.

⁸²

interpreting Mendelssohn is not due to a density of idiosyncratic concepts, or a highly complex architectonic of the argument, but is rather linked to his straightforward style of expression and his tendency to treat his own speculative insights as if they were self-evident, commonsensical truths. If there is more to uncover in his writing, it is hidden in plain sight.

1.2 Mendelssohn and the Crisis of Enlightenment: Intellectual Consequences of the Pantheism Debate

Mendelssohn's death in 1786 coincides, in more than one respect, with the end of the age of enlightenment and the emergence of the specter of nihilism, "that most uncanny of guests."⁸³ The school of philosophy in which he was brought up, the so called Leibnitz-Wolff school, was soon to become, along with him, a footnote in the history of philosophy, attached to the heels of the sweeping new critical moment of Kant's transcendental philosophy, ushering in that most difficult and dense philosophical era, German Idealism and, more broadly, marking the moment when the optimism in the purging light of day associated with the enlightenment gave way to darker forces with the rise of romanticism and the age of revolutions.

Fredrick Beiser describes this transitional period, which achieved its dramatic climax in the pantheism controversy, as the crisis of the authority of reason.⁸⁴ As he notes, the

⁸³ See 'Nachgelassene Fragmente,' in F.W. Nietzsche, G. Colli, and M. Montinari, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. XII (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag), 125.

⁸⁴ Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

identification of the era as the age of reason, or the age of criticism, is not a retrospective historical nomination, but belongs to the self-perception of its leading intellectual powers. Here is the definition Kant himself gave to his times in the preface to the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit. Religion through its holiness and legislation through its majesty commonly seek to exempt themselves from it. But in this way, they excite a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to that unfeigned respect that reason grants only to that which has been able to withstand its free and public examination.⁸⁵

Enlightenment's crisis was immanent, in that the principle of critical authority came to a crisis from within. Beiser is here worth quoting at length:

The enlightenment was the age of reason because it made reason into its highest authority, its final court of appeal, in all intellectual questions. Its central and characteristic principle was what we might call the sovereignty of reason. This principle means that there is no source of intellectual authority higher than reason. Neither scripture, nor divine inspiration, nor ecclesiastical and civil tradition have the authority of reason. While reason judges the legitimacy of all these sources of authority, none of them stands in judgment of it.

⁸⁵ I. Kant, P. Guyer, and A.W. Wood, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 100-1.

Paradoxically, the crisis of the enlightenment arose from within, and indeed, from its most cherished principle. The problem is that this principle is self-reflexive. If reason must subject all beliefs to criticism, it must be subject to its own tribunal – to criticism. To exempt its tribunal from scrutiny would be nothing less than ‘dogmatism,’ accepting beliefs on authority, which is the very opposite of reason. The criticism of reason therefore inevitably became the meta-criticism of reason. If the enlightenment was the age of criticism, the 1790s were the age of meta-criticism. All the doubts about the authority of reason, which are so often said to be characteristic of our ‘post-modern’ age, were already apparent in late eighteenth-century Germany.⁸⁶

Let us note in passing the abundance of legal and political terminology in Beiser’s account: authority, tribunal, sovereignty, a semantic field that will become important in the ensuing chapters, as we move from the metaphysical to the political-theological.

Kant was the decisive figure of the era included within the canon of philosophy, and his rise to that status was historically linked with Jacobi’s challenge.⁸⁷ Beiser is unequivocal as to its significance:

⁸⁶ Frederick. C. Beiser, *Hegel* (Routledge, 2005), 22.

⁸⁷ Kant’s gain in popularity and respect was due, to a large extent, to Karl Leonard Reinhold’s presentation of Kant’s philosophy as the supreme rebuttal of Jacobi’s challenge, something Kant himself had not done, as we shall see when we discuss Kant’s contribution to the controversy. “The decisive breakthrough [of Kantianism] came sometime in the autumn of 1786. With Reinhold’s *Briefe über die kantische Philosophie*. In an elegant, popular, and lively style

Along with the publication of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* in May 1781, the most significant intellectual event in late eighteenth-century Germany was the so-called pantheism controversy between F. H. Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn.⁸⁸

The controversy began in the summer of 1783 as a private quarrel between Jacobi and Mendelssohn but, when it became public two years later it engaged almost all the best minds of late eighteenth-century Germany, including Kant, Herder, Goethe, and Hamman. While the interest of intellectual historians in the pantheism controversy has grown in recent decades, it is taken for granted in the existing literature that Mendelssohn's role in it belongs squarely to an incidental dimension. What is historically consequential for post-Kantian philosophers and influential intellectual movements, such as romanticism, is the combined legacy of Kant's critical philosophy, which, despite its radical critique and ensuing limitations on the possible scope of knowledge, had aimed to secure both knowledge and ethics in light of modern science, and Jacobi's charge that such attempts are futile and that modern philosophical and scientific knowledge is, in principle, incompatible with ethics, freedom and religion. In the aftermath of the pantheism controversy, Mendelssohn could not be seen as having

Reinhold had succeeded in making Kant's philosophy intelligible to a wider public. The *Briefe* had created – to quote a friend of Kant's – 'a sensation.' But it is important to note the secret behind Reinhold's success. He established the relevance of the critical philosophy to that dispute foremost in the public eye: the pantheism controversy." Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 45.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

anything of substance to offer. To return to Beiser's commentary:

It is difficult to imagine a controversy whose cause was so incidental – Jacobi's disclosure of Lessing's Spinozism – and whose effects were so great. The pantheism controversy completely changed the intellectual map of eighteenth-century Germany; and it continued to preoccupy thinkers well into the nineteenth century. The main problem raised by the controversy – the dilemma of a rational nihilism or an irrational fideism – became a central issue for Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.⁸⁹

Beiser, whose study aims to fill in a grave lacuna in intellectual history (in the English-speaking world), puts the blame for neglect of critical attention on this crucial episode on its deceptive appearance as a personal affair: “The reason for this neglect primarily lies with the controversy itself, in that its deceptive appearance masks its underlying significance. It has an outer shell – the biographical issue of Lessing's Spinozism; an inner layer – the exegetical question of the proper interpretation of Spinoza; and a hidden inner core – the problem of the authority of Reason.”⁹⁰

Although the nature and limitations of the present study force us to focus on the intellectual stakes of the debate, on authority and reason, it is important to note that

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 47.

such a foreclosure is not inconsequential, and that at least in so far as Mendelssohn is concerned, it runs the risk of losing sight, in advance, of his position on the matters at stake. That one can hardly understand enlightenment, as a historical phenomenon as well as a political-philosophical project, without at least acknowledging the specific, highly entangled relationship between the personal, the public and political sphere, and the abstract theoretical sphere, is not a charge against Beiser; it is certainly legitimate, and indeed at times necessary, to emphasize intellectual debates at the expense of their historical and cultural context. But the relations between these two spheres – the public and the private – belong to the debate not only as contextual, historical background but also as subject matter. Certainly, no understanding of Mendelssohn is possible without paying close attention at least to his views on this interconnection, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 4. For Mendelssohn, as we will come to see, belief is not a private affair; rather, it belongs in the overlap of the public and the private.⁹¹

⁹¹ Reading the correspondences surrounding the affair, and comparing them with previous, heated debates in which Mendelssohn had partaken, leaves a strong impression of ethical decay, indicated, but not limited to, the dismissive, personal and at times even anti-Semitic character of the correspondence between Jacobi and his supporters in the controversy, such as Herder, Goethe and Hamann. It is quite striking to note how these writers and intellectuals, who had before treated Mendelssohn as a philosopher from whom one could learn and with whom one could passionately, yet respectfully, disagree, were all of a sudden happy to reduce him to a stereotypical representation of a ‘Jew,’ and even an ‘errant Jew’ (*Erzjude*), how all of a sudden, his arguments could be dismissed categorically and referred to as “rabbinic lectures” and ‘Jewish tricks’ (*Pfiffe*). See A. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, 1973), 701-2. While it is doubtfully productive to focus too much on the interpersonal nature of the debate and the assessment of the respective characters at play (which in any case has been done rather exhaustively, if differently evaluated, by Strauss, Altman and Beiser), it is also wise not to disregard such elements, which both enabled and contributed to the “scandalous” effect of the controversy. Jacobi’s cynical use of Lessing’s and Mendelssohn’s public reputations to further his cause and to establish his public standing, his willingness, if not outright enjoyment in casting a shadow over a famed, and at the time, highly unlikely, personal relationship between a Jew and a Christian that had become symbolic of the promise of

There is hardly any dispute amongst scholars that the lasting, consequential stakes of the debate lie in the conjuncture of Kant's critical philosophy and Jacobi's proto-existentialist challenge. The present study does not seek to claim that Mendelssohn did in fact play a more significant role in the controversy than the standard accounts permit.

There is no point in arguing against the course of historical development. There is, however, a great deal of interest in reading what was never written (to borrow Benjamin's expression) in the history of these intellectual developments. On top of shedding new light on a much-researched topic, such a reading of what does not fall under the debate as it is framed has the added advantage of making visible the limitation of the established frame of reference. To do so, we trace an undercurrent of the controversy with the following two objectives in mind: (1) *to allow for a reinterpretation of Mendelssohn's role within it, pointing towards an alternative formulation of the problem;* (2) *to allow for an explication of the strong connection*

enlightenment, his lack of any genuine effort to communicate and debate with Mendelssohn, and his entirely combative 'take no prisoners' attitude, are not merely personal attributes of an historical figure, accidental or external to his philosophical attack on enlightenment's pretense for objectivity, but are part and parcel of it. Most importantly, his generally dismissive attitude towards his "opponent" in the dispute, intimately linked with his proto-existentialist approach, and his arrogant assurance that Mendelssohn could not begin to fathom the depths of his insights seems to have had an unfortunate, lasting impact on the commentary and historical reception of the affair, as we have seen in the introduction. Leo Strauss, the first major figure to comment on the affair in the twentieth century, clearly adopts Jacobi's point of view in the controversy, including his appraisal of Mendelssohn as both a naïve enlightener, incapable of appreciating the depth of faith and a second-rate philosopher, incapable of appreciating the 'true significance' of Spinoza's philosophy as Jacobi had interpreted it. See his commentary on the affair in L. Strauss and M.D. Yaffe, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 59-145. And see Yaffe's detailed interpretive essay as to the differences in the interpretations of the affair between Altman and Strauss. *Ibid.*, 219-317.

between his interests and contributions in the controversy and his political theology as developed in his Jerusalem, which he had published just as the affair began to unfold, and which, in turn, will be shown to be his lasting, substantial contribution to the problem of nihilism.

Kant's intervention in the controversy not only makes possible, but indeed calls for such a reinterpretation. As we shall see, Kant's contribution, contained in his essay 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' displays an intimate and far reaching engagement with Mendelssohn, much more than it does a response to Jacobi's challenge. Thus, we shall make use of Kant as a reader of Mendelssohn, pointing towards the elements in Mendelssohn's text that deserve renewed attention. Before we proceed to a reading of Kant, however, a brief account of the pantheism controversy,⁹² as well as a summary presentation of Jacobi's challenge are in order.

1.3 The Pantheism Controversy

On March 25, 1783 Elise Reimarus, friend of Jacobi, Lessing, and Mendelssohn, and daughter of Herman Samuel Reimarus,⁹³ wrote Jacobi from Berlin. Just the day before,

⁹² In my survey of the affair in the following pages, I am deeply indebted to, and draw heavily on Beiser's masterful account of it, as it is the most up to date, succinct account, and best sets up the intellectual stakes and consequences of the affair. See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 61-74. My understanding of Mendelssohn's behavior in the affair, however, differs somewhat from Beiser's, and is closer to the one accounted for by Altman. Writing in a biographical context, Altman provides a wide context for the Jacobi-Mendelssohn relationship, and a detailed assessment of their behavior in the 'affair'. See Altman, 593-653.

⁹³ Reimarus (1694-1768), a well-known Deist German philosopher of the enlightenment, was the author of an *Apologie* ('an apologie for, or some words in defense of, reasoning worshipers of

she had learned from Mendelssohn about his plans to finish his long-promised work intended as a tribute to the character of his closest friend of thirty years, Lessing. After a few months delay, Jacobi wrote back to Reimarus on July 21, 1783, asking her if Mendelssohn knew about Lessing's final religious views. He had something important to confide to her: "In his last days, Lessing was a committed Spinozist!"

Such was Spinoza's reputation in eighteenth-century Germany that to be a Spinozist was also to be an atheist; the charge was explosive. As Mendelssohn was well aware, Lessing was not only his friend, but also a symbol – an ideal of the Enlightenment, his character viewed as personifying broadmindedness, liberalism and tolerance, whereas Spinoza, in sharp contrast, was associated with "danger and abomination".⁹⁴

Mendelssohn now faced a serious challenge. To simply acknowledge Lessing's Spinozism would be bound to shock the public and defame rather than dignify Lessing's character, and along with him, the very image of the Enlightenment. To ignore or repress the claim of Lessing's Spinozism, on the other hand, would open his intended biography to charges of dishonesty.

Surface appearances notwithstanding, Jacobi's letter to Reimarus was disingenuous, a calculated, tactical move. His concern about discretion or the consequences of revealing Lessing's Spinozism to the public be taken as a genuine one, given that he

God'), unpublished in his lifetime due its controversial study of the historical Jesus. Lessing had published parts of this work posthumously as "Fragments of an anonymous writer," in his *Zur Geschichte und Literatur* in 1774-1778, giving rise to what is known as the *Fragmentenstreit*.

⁹⁴ See Omri Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, (Oxford university press, 2014), 200.

would publish his intimate conversations with Lessing only two years later. Jacobi, evidence suggests, was laying a trap for Mendelssohn. He calculated that his information would compel Mendelssohn to doubt or deny the claim of Lessing's Spinozism, which was tantamount to calling his best friend an atheist. In response, Jacobi could then divulge the contents of his personal conversations with Lessing. Exposing Mendelssohn's ignorance of their mutual friend's most intimate opinions, would cast doubts as to the solidity and true extent of that famous friendship, and would position Jacobi as Lessing's true friend and confidant.⁹⁵

Mendelssohn responded to Jacobi's charge by asking for clarifications. He wanted to know what precisely Lessing meant, what did he, in the context, understand as

⁹⁵ Jacobi's eagerness to contest Mendelssohn's claim was already apparent in a previous, smaller literary clash that Jacobi had contrived with Mendelssohn only a year earlier, which foreshadows much of the later controversy. In his *Etwas, das Lessing gesagt hat* (1782), Jacobi cited Lessing's critique of Protestant princes to support his attack on all forms of political and religious authority. Lessing the courage to criticize the Protestant princes as well as the Catholic popes had signaled to Jacobi that Lessing, unlike the Berlin "Enlighteners", despised by Jacobi for being ready to abandon their intellectual ideals in order to compromise with the moral and political status quo, had the integrity to take a point to its logical conclusion, despite the moral and political consequences. Thus, Jacobi felt that Lessing was on his side in the struggle against every form of despotism, including the "despotism of the Aufklärung" in Berlin. After Jacobi's book appeared Mendelssohn made some critical comments on it, a few of which questioned Jacobi's understanding of Lessing. Jacobi then took the extraordinary step of fabricating an article against himself, consisting inter alia of Mendelssohn's remarks. He then published the article anonymously in the January 1783 issue of the *Deutsches Museum*. This remarkable ploy was intended to give Jacobi the opportunity to have a public debate with Mendelssohn. In this prelude to the pantheism affair, Mendelssohn was not lured into battle, as he did not consider Jacobi worth his time. Insulted and frustrated by it, Jacobi was determined not to allow Mendelssohn to slip away again. Gottlieb sees this early exchange as fundamental, as he understands the affair in general to have been of a political, practical character. See M. Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 62-74.

Spinozism, what specific doctrines of Spinoza did he espouse, and what were the circumstances under which he had made such statements. Jacobi would have to clarify and expand. It is worthwhile noting that while Mendelssohn had deep suspicions as to Jacobi's character and intentions, he never expressed any doubts as to the veracity of his claims, which is certainly one reason why such suspicions are usually excluded from the scholarship on the topic. I do not mean to argue that Jacobi was lying, only to point to the fact that such a possibility was not even entertained by Mendelssohn.

Nonetheless, if it turned out that Jacobi was right about Lessing's Spinozism, Mendelssohn conveyed to Jacobi via Reimarus, he saw no reason to suppress this fact. "Even our best friend's name should not shine in a better light than it deserves," Mendelssohn told Reimarus. Mendelssohn's readiness to acknowledge and publicize Lessing's Spinozism, provided Jacobi managed to substantiate his allegation, was in part a sign of his confidence that, if Jacobi should justify his claim, he was in a position to properly interpret the meaning of Lessing's Spinozism, having the advantage of long conversations over the years with Lessing on philosophy in general and Spinozism in particular.

A battle between Jacobi and Mendelssohn was now brewing. Reimarus sent a summary of Mendelssohn's letter to Jacobi requesting more information about Lessing's Spinozism. Two months later, on November 4, 1783 Jacobi wrote a long letter describing conversations in which Lessing allegedly made his confession of Spinozism.

This account of his conversations with Lessing would come to have an enormous impact on the cultural scene of late eighteenth-century Germany.

Jacobi transcribed a conversation from the summer of 1780 concerning the young Goethe's then-unpublished poem 'Prometheus':

Lessing: I find the poem⁹⁶ good... The point of view in it is also my own... The orthodox concepts of the divinity are no longer for me. "One and All," I know no other.

Jacobi: Then you would be pretty much in agreement with Spinoza.

Lessing: If I were to name myself after anyone, then I know no one better.

Jacobi: Spinoza is good enough for me; but what a mixed blessing we find in his name!

Lessing: Yes, if that's the way you look at it... But do you know anyone better?

According to Jacobi, the conversation, interrupted at this point, continued the next morning when Lessing called on him:

Lessing: I've come to talk to you about my "One and All." You were shocked yesterday?

Jacobi: You did surprise me, and I did feel some embarrassment. But you did not shock me. It surely wasn't my expectation to find you a Spinozist or pantheist; and still less did I think that you would lay down your cards so quickly, bluntly and plainly. I came for the most part with the intention of getting your help against Spinoza.

⁹⁶ Hans Blumenberg's engagement with the controversy focuses on Goethe's poem and the Prometheus myth. See Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, (MIT Press, 1985), 403-429.

Lessing: You know Spinoza then?

Jacobi: I believe that I know him like very few others.

Lessing: Then there is no need to help you. You too will become his friend. There is no philosophy other than Spinoza's.

Jacobi: That might well be. For a determinist, if he is to be consistent, must also become a fatalist. Everything else follows from there.

...

Lessing: So we won't be parting company over your credo [Spinoza]?

Jacobi: We don't want that on any account. But my credo does not rest with Spinoza. I believe in an intelligent and personal cause of the world.

Lessing: Oh, all the better then! Now I'll get to hear something completely new.

Jacobi: I wouldn't get so excited about it. I get myself out of the business with a *salto mortale*. But usually you do not find any special pleasure in standing on your head?

Lessing: Don't say that, as long as I do not have to imitate it. And you will stand on your feet again, won't you? So if it's no mystery, I'll have to see what there is to it.

Lessing went on to defend fatalism, displaying an indifference to free will. "I notice you would like to have your will free," he told Jacobi, "I desire no free will." Faithful to Spinoza's Ethics, Lessing dismissed this notion as a dispensable human fancy. Lessing challenged Jacobi to offer a conception of the personality of God, that differs from that of Leibniz, since this philosophy, in the end, boils down to Spinoza's. Jacobi admitted

that there is indeed a correspondence between the philosophy of Leibniz and Spinoza,⁹⁷ as Leibniz's determinism inevitably leads to the fatalism of Spinoza. Here the dialogue reached a crucial point, allowing Jacobi to present his unique, proto-existentialist philosophy. Having admitted the identity of Spinoza's and Leibniz's philosophy, and having rejected the fatalism inherent in them, Jacobi, it seemed to Lessing, was turning his back on all philosophy.

Lessing: With your philosophy, you will have to turn your back on all philosophy.

Jacobi: Why all philosophy?

Lessing: Because you are a complete skeptic.

Jacobi: On the contrary. I withdraw myself from a philosophy that makes skepticism necessary.

Lessing: And withdraw yourself – where?

Jacobi: To the light, the light Spinoza talks about when he says that it illuminates itself and the darkness. I love Spinoza since, more than any other philosopher, he has convinced me that certain things cannot be explained, and that one must not close one's eyes in front of them but simply accept them as one finds them... Even the greatest mind will hit upon absurd things when he tries to explain everything and make sense of it according to clear concepts.

Lessing: And he who does not try to explain things?

⁹⁷ It was Mendelssohn who had offered the first unbiased, philosophical appraisal of Spinoza. There he also argued for Leibniz's indebtedness to Spinozism.

Jacobi: Whoever does not want to explain what is inconceivable but only wants to know the borderline where it begins: he will gain the largest space for human truth.

Lessing: Words, dear Jacobi, mere words! The borderline you want to fix cannot be determined. And on the other side of it you give free rein to dreaming, nonsense and blindness.

Jacobi: I believe that the borderline can be determined. I want not to draw it, but only to recognize what is already there. And as far as dreaming, nonsense and blindness are concerned ...

Lessing: They prevail wherever confused ideas are found.

Jacobi: More where false ones are found. Someone who has fallen in love with certain explanations, will blindly accept every consequence.

At this point, Jacobi summarized his philosophy in a few famous lines:

Jacobi: As I see it, the first task of the philosopher is to reveal, to disclose existence.

Explanation is only a means, a way to this goal: it is the first task, but it is never the last.

The last task is what cannot be explained: the irresolvable, immediate and simple.

Mendelssohn seemed quite impressed with Jacobi's account. In a letter to Elise and Johann Reimarus, he praised Jacobi and even sent him his apologies for his previous brusqueness. He now could see that Jacobi was one of the very few who had dedicated themselves to thinking. Mendelssohn went even farther: such were Jacobi's merits that

he could understand why Lessing wanted to confide in him. (This had been seen as concession, tantamount to his recognizing that he alone did not have privileged access to Lessing's character, although, as we shall come to see, it is doubtful Mendelssohn could ever have had such pretense.) Having admitted the strength of his opponent, Mendelssohn decided to withdraw from the fray. As he explained: "The knight he had challenged to combat had removed his visor; and upon seeing his worthy foe, he now picked up his gauntlet." If Lessing was guilty of Spinozism, his weakness and folly should serve as an example, a warning to "the devotees of speculation."

After apologizing to Jacobi and withdrawing his challenge, Mendelssohn had apparently abandoned the struggle, and the contest over before having ever started. Jacobi was "completely satisfied" and took "great joy" in Mendelssohn's statement that the example of Lessing could serve as a warning, as Elise Reimarus wrote to Mendelssohn a month later (December, 1783). If Jacobi was satisfied and joyous with Mendelssohn's reply, it was not only because of Mendelssohn's recognition of his intellect and merit, warranting him the title of Lessing's friend and confidant. The talk about Lessing's views serving as a warning had reaffirmed Jacobi's deepest critique of the Berlin Enlighteners, their readiness to compromise in philosophy. Mendelssohn seemed to be admitting that reason, if it were not controlled by moral and religious guidelines, would end in the atheism and fatalism of Spinozism. And that was the essence of what Jacobi had wanted to say.

The apparent truce between Jacobi and Mendelssohn lasted for the next seven months. Mendelssohn's disarming letter might have been a delaying tactic, a way of bargaining for time, for, as he told Elise and Johann Reimarus, he needed more time to consider Jacobi's position.

In July, 1785, Elise Reimarus wrote to Jacobi reporting a change in Mendelssohn's literary plans. Mendelssohn had told her he will set aside the book on Lessing's character for a while, in order to "risk a contest with the Spinozists". Without Mendelssohn's consent, Elise Reimarus had unwittingly resounded the drums of war. For Jacobi, A "contest against the Spinozists" could mean only one thing: an attack upon Jacobi himself, who claimed that all philosophy ended in Spinozism. A month later, Mendelssohn wrote to Jacobi directly for the first time, sending him his objections to his report on Lessing's conversations. Then, in a few dramatic lines, Mendelssohn made his challenge: "You have thrown down the gauntlet in chivalrous fashion; I will pick it up; and now let us fight out our metaphysical tournament in true knightly custom." Jacobi replied directly to Mendelssohn, excusing his lack to reply to the objections to ill health, but promising to send him a detailed reply soon, and in the meanwhile enclosing a copy of his 'Lettre a Hemsterhuis,' a mock dialogue between Spinoza and himself, setting forth his own interpretation of Spinoza. Jacobi added, disingenuously, that he knew nothing about throwing down the gauntlet. But, if Mendelssohn thought it was thrown, he was not so cowardly as to turn his back.

Before Jacobi's reply arrived in Berlin, Mendelssohn made a consequential decision. He wrote Elise Reimarus on April 29, 1785 that he intended to publish the first part of his book without consulting Jacobi or waiting for the reply to his objections. Mendelssohn was tired of waiting for Jacobi's reply, and felt that if he stated his views formally and clearly, he could put the whole debate on more substantial footing. Although this seemed to be a perfectly reasonable decision, it was a questionable move considering Mendelssohn's delicate relationship with Jacobi, one bound to strain the already weakened trust between them. Though Mendelssohn had received permission to cite Jacobi's report, it was still understood that he would not make any use of it before consulting Jacobi. It was Jacobi who was the witness of Lessing's confession, and it was he who provided the information in the first place. However, Mendelssohn did not think that his decision would break this tacit agreement. He explained to Elise Reimarus that he would not mention Jacobi's conversations in the first volume of his book, eventually published as *Morgenstunden (Morning Hours)*. Only the second volume would consider them; but there was still plenty of time for Jacobi to be consulted about that. In this way, Mendelssohn told Reimarus, he could give a formal statement of his position while still keeping his promise to Jacobi.

Mendelssohn in all likelihood wanted to beat Jacobi to press, to get his version of events in first, and protect Lessing's reputation against any damaging allegations Jacobi might make about Lessing's Spinozism. True to his word, Mendelssohn did not mention anything about Jacobi's conversations in the first volume of his book, known to us today

as Morning Hours. But he did include a chapter on Lessing's pantheism, where he attributed "a purified pantheism" to Lessing, a pantheism he did not consider detrimental to the truths of morality and religion, the essence of which he had developed decades earlier. Such a chapter was probably designed in part to preempt Jacobi and to deprive him of much of the shock value of his revelations about Lessing's Spinozism. There was another reason for his resolve to go ahead with publication, one only strengthened by Jacobi's reply to his objections: it was proving impossible to argue with Jacobi. They were speaking different philosophical languages and there seemed to be no common terms for debate. It would make no difference if Jacobi saw the manuscript, as his criticisms would be unintelligible anyway.

Only at the end of April 1785, eight months after receiving Mendelssohn's objections, did Jacobi send Mendelssohn a reply. But rather than engaging with Mendelssohn's points, Jacobi told Mendelssohn in no uncertain terms that he had missed the point, a judgment that outlived both opponents in the brewing battle. This was indeed no basis for a dialogue. In an ominous tone, Jacobi prophesized in the letter a battle, casting the dispute in theological terms, a war of Good against Evil: "Perhaps we will live to see the day when a dispute will arise over the corpse of Spinoza like that over the corpse of Moses between the archangel and satan."

On July 21, 1785, Mendelssohn wrote a long overdue letter to Jacobi, informing Jacobi of his decision to publish his book. Mendelssohn honestly and bluntly told Jacobi that he

found everything he wrote incomprehensible. He then stated that by publishing his book he would be able to establish the *statum controversiae*, an ambiguous and ill-chosen Latin phrase in this delicate context; Mendelssohn did not explain how he wanted to determine the state of the controversy, leaving Jacobi – who was prone to paranoia – to guess whether he would refer to his conversations with Lessing. He did not mention his intention of referring to them only in the planned second volume because he reckoned – rightly – that Elise Reimarus had already informed Jacobi of his detailed plans. But months had gone by since she had done so. By waiting so long to write Jacobi directly, and then leaving his plans so vague, Mendelssohn had left too many gaps to be filled by Jacobi's feverishly suspicious imagination.

Judging by Jacobi's reaction to the letter, he had indeed assumed the worst and understood Mendelssohn's decision to go public as a flagrant violation of his trust. For all he knew, Mendelssohn would portray him as the *advocatus diaboli*, that is, as a simple Spinozist who knew nothing about the standpoint of faith that transcended all philosophy. Jacobi was furious, and would not allow Mendelssohn to preempt him. In a frantic haste, Jacobi patched together his own book out of his own letters to Elise Reimarus and Mendelssohn, Mendelssohn's letters to him and Reimarus, and the report of his conversations with Lessing, all embellished with quotations from Hamann, Herder, Lavater, and the Bible. Jacobi compiled the book in a single month, titling it *Über die Lehre von Spinoza in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*. Since Jacobi did not want Mendelssohn to get wind of his plans, he did not ask him for permission to publish his

correspondence. This was unethical, but he felt that it was fair, tit for tat, given that Mendelssohn had made unauthorized use of his conversations with Lessing. Jacobi's strategy paid off. His *Briefe* appeared as early as the beginning of September, while Mendelssohn's *Morgenstunden*, due to publishing delays, did not come out until the beginning of October. By a narrow margin, Jacobi had won the publishing race.

If Jacobi was angered by Mendelssohn's move to publish, Mendelssohn was shocked to the point of disbelief by Jacobi's publication. But the fact was that Jacobi had beaten him to press, which had a serious consequence: he could no longer be sure that *Morgenstunden* would protect Lessing's reputation; for *Morgenstunden*, unlike Jacobi's *Briefe*, did not openly discuss Lessing's confession of Spinozism. Mendelssohn was also disgruntled with Jacobi's unauthorized publication of his private correspondence, and deeply hurt by Jacobi's insinuation that there had been no philosophical rapport between him and Lessing. This last point was driven home by Jacobi in the cruelest fashion. In the beginning of his *Briefe* he said that he once asked Lessing whether he ever divulged his true philosophical convictions (his Spinozism) to Mendelssohn. "Never" was Lessing's answer, Jacobi claimed.

With this bitter climax, the dispute had come to its tragic close. In a desperate attempt to wipe out the blemish on Lessing's name and defend the integrity of his friendship with Lessing, Mendelssohn decided to write a riposte to Jacobi's *Briefe*. So, during October and November 1785, in a grim and restless mood, Mendelssohn wrote his final

statement on the controversy, his *An die Freunde Lessings*. This brief tract was intended as an appendix to *Morgenstunden* and a replacement for the second volume that Mendelssohn had been planning. The heart of Mendelssohn's tract is his analysis of Jacobi's intentions in publishing his conversations with Lessing. According to Mendelssohn, Jacobi's aim was to warn people of the dangers involved in all rational speculation – the atheism and fatalism of Spinozism – and to lead them back to “the path of faith.” Jacobi held up Lessing as an example of how reason leads us astray and into the abyss of atheism. Mendelssohn speculated that Jacobi initiated the conversations with Lessing in the first place, in order to convert him to his orthodox and mystical version of Christianity. Lessing, Mendelssohn was convinced, saw through Jacobi's proselytizing zeal but was had played along for the sake of his intellectual amusement. Lessing always took more pleasure in seeing a false belief defended competently than a true belief defended incompetently. Rather than confiding his deep, secret beliefs to Jacobi, Lessing was merely playing along, encouraging Jacobi to develop his argument. By suggesting that Jacobi had been duped, Mendelssohn not only questioned the depth of Jacobi's friendship with Lessing, but also aimed to establish his superior understanding of Lessing. This interpretation of Lessing tone was also meant to clear Lessing's name from the accusation of that dangerous brand of Spinozism that would have amounted to atheism.

Mendelssohn completed his *An die Freunde Lessings* at the end of December 1785. In his eagerness to be done with the whole matter, Mendelssohn decided to deliver the

manuscript as soon as it was completed. On December 31, 1785, a bitterly cold day in Berlin, Mendelssohn left his house in a rush to hand over the manuscript to his publisher, and in his hurry forgot his overcoat, as it turned out, a fatal mistake. Upon his return, he fell ill. His condition rapidly declined, and on the morning of January 4, 1786 he died. News of Mendelssohn's death spread throughout Germany and was met with almost universal regret and dismay.

Mendelssohn's death became the subject of a huge scandal, which is one reason why the pantheism controversy attracted so much public interest. The scandal arose when some of Mendelssohn's friends suggested, and others baldly asserted, that Jacobi was directly responsible for Mendelssohn's death. According to reliable reports, Mendelssohn was so upset by Jacobi's *Briefe* that his health began to deteriorate. Even if Jacobi were not the incidental cause of Mendelssohn's death, he certainly had created its essential preconditions. As one report somewhat dramatically put it: "He became a victim of his friendship with Lessing and died as a martyr defending the suppressed prerogatives of reason against fanaticism and superstition." The pathos of Mendelssohn's mourning friends, which seems today so exaggerated, may be read as an indication of their sense of an intellectual tectonic shift unsettling the ground beneath their feet.

1.4 Jacobi's Choice: Hyper Criticism or Hypocrisy

What was it that made the stakes seem so high, a matter of life and death, if only figuratively? While the tension between faith and reason was certainly not a historical novelty, and in the eighteenth century the intellectual forces identified with the *Sturm und Drang*, such as Hamann and Herder, had already mounted a serious critical challenge to the enlightenments' faith in reason's authority, for the purposes of this study the pantheism affair has a privileged status for more than accidental, historically contingent reason – namely, Mendelssohn's direct involvement in it. Jacobi had identified Spinozism with scientific naturalism, and therefore as the only thorough philosophy possible, leading inevitably to fatalism and atheism. This had two significant consequences: it brought faith into direct conflict with reason, and it did so precisely by applying the instrument of critical reason, by taking philosophy at its word, and pushing the claims of criticism to their inevitable, logical outcome. The authoritative, precise knowledge of philosophers and scientists was now seen not only as insufficient for a meaningful life, as it was, for example, for Hamann,⁹⁸ but as directly detrimental to it. Jacobi had pushed his readers to an existential choice: either knowledge or life, either a lifeless theory, subjecting human life to the blind mechanism of nature, seeking to ground everything but unable, ultimately, to ground even itself, or a leap of faith over the abyss towards a life of faith and freedom.

⁹⁸ See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 16-43. Whereas Hamann held that faith and reason are independent of each other so that reason neither demonstrates nor refutes faith, Jacobi argued that reason and faith are in conflict, so that reason refutes faith. Thus, he said that reason, if consistent, leads to atheism. Hamann was aware of the further step taken by Jacobi, and saw in it indeed a step to far. See *ibid.*, 47.

In his 1786 letter on the doctrine of Spinoza, Jacobi argued that reason – if it is only thorough, honest, and consistent – does not support but rather undermines morality and religion. The core of Jacobi’s attack on reason rests on his identification of rationalism with a complete scientific naturalism, and more specifically with the mechanistic paradigm of explanation.⁹⁹ Jacobi saw Spinoza as the paragon of this new scientific naturalism because Spinoza had banished final causes and held that everything in nature happens according to mechanical laws. The fundamental principle of Spinoza’s philosophy, Jacobi argued, is nothing less than the principle of sufficient reason. Spinoza is to be praised because he, unlike Leibniz and Wolff, had the courage to take this principle to its ultimate conclusion: a complete scientific naturalism. This principle means that there must be a sufficient reason for any event, such that, given that reason, the event must occur and cannot be otherwise. If this principle holds without exception, Jacobi reasoned, then there cannot be: (1) a first cause of the universe, a God who freely creates it, and (2) freedom, the power of doing otherwise. For Jacobi, the first

⁹⁹ I largely follow here Beiser’s account of the significance and consequence of Jacobi’s challenge. According to this view, the significance for Jacobi of Spinoza was in the uncompromising, thoroughly consistent application of the principle of sufficient reason, or PSR as philosophers fondly call it. See *ibid.*, 44-91. Paul Franks emphasizes the significance of the negative version of the PSR in Jacobi – nothing comes from nothing. This formula has historically been understood as the fundamental link of Spinozism and Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. It is what Jacobi draws from this negative version that Franks holds to be most consequential for Hegel. According to Jacobi, for Spinoza, individual things are nonentities, and substance is indeterminate. As indeterminate, Jacobi argues, it is also a negation, and therefore lacks genuine being, which is always determinate. For him, only individuals can be actual. See Paul. F. Franks, ‘Nothing Comes from Nothing: Judaism, the Orient, and Kabbalah in Hegel’s reception of Spinoza.’ In D.R. Michael, *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*.

result means that Spinozism leads to atheism, the second implies that it ends in fatalism.

Jacobi's attack had the effect of bringing the enlightenment face to face with a dramatic dilemma: either a rational atheism and fatalism or an irrational leap of faith, a *salto mortale*. There was no middle path, no rational justification for our most important moral and religious beliefs. In sum, Jacobi was saying that the search for a natural morality and religion is futile, and what is worse – dishonest. Since reason cannot ground itself rationally, its self-assertion, its claim for authority, is no better than any other irrational act of self-determination. In fact, it is worse, since it claims a higher ground, it pretends to be impartial while in fact it is as self-interested as all other claims, and equally groundless. Jacobi's meta-critique, or rather hyper-criticism, has found criticism to be hypocritical. The existential choice between atheism and faith is, naturally, far from a free one. It is the choice between authentic, irrational self-assertion, and the dishonest, veiled claim for power and superiority based on the critically uncritical confidence in reason's capacity to set its own limits, transgress them, and have absolute authority over all other claims. The only honest choice seems to be to reaffirm one's ungrounded freedom, and the immediacy and self-evidence of all that cannot be inferentially grounded, including the particularity of one's life form, namely, what is received from tradition.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Jacobi uses in this context the Hebrew word *Kibbel*, with a clear allusion to Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mysticism with which Spinoza was identified by many, including Jacobi. See Franks, *Nothing Comes from Nothing*, 7.

Jacobi certainly did not intend to legitimize and popularize Spinoza's philosophy. But its newly gained popularity was inseparable from the new existential pathos Jacobi had injected into the intellectual debate. It was in the service of preventing philosophy from collapsing into the lifeless despair Jacobi had associated with Spinozism that Herder, and later Schelling and others, would turn to Spinoza. Their Spinoza, however, would be the exact opposite of Jacobi's; whereas he saw Spinoza's monism as a lifeless, mechanical universe, they would come to see in it a vitalist one, bursting with life.

Before we proceed on our 'less traveled' path, and follow Kant's engagement with Mendelssohn, it is instructive to review the philosophical considerations that made Mendelssohn, if not immune, than at least to a large degree indifferent to what has been seen as fundamentally challenging in Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza. In chapter 3, we shall address what we may for now call Mendelssohn's theological reasons for refusing Jacobi's challenge (although, as we shall see, such a classification is not entirely appropriate). But the fundamental difference between Jacobi's and Mendelssohn's philosophical, and existential orientations, has to do with their different views of contingency, and the role it plays in Spinoza.

1.5 Contingencies: Mendelssohn v Jacobi on Spinoza and Contingency

Mendelssohn's role in the pantheism affair is, as noted above, taken in the scholarship to be purely an historical accident. There are two persistent themes that we have seen emerge in the Nihilism debate, which converge, in the context of the pantheism

controversy, in Jacobi's influential interpretation of Spinoza: contingency and immanence.

The modern world, this goes without saying, is under the sign of contingency, and as such is trapped within an 'immanent frame.' This is precisely what makes Spinoza the first target of Jacobi's attacks. In offering a naturalistic frame of explanation, Spinoza had left no room in the world for purposive pursuits, for the spontaneity (self-causation) entailed in divine creation as well as in human willing.¹⁰¹ Such a realm of immanence is contingent, in the sense that we are reduced to mere observers, unable to account for any meaningful agency.

For various reasons (to be explored in the course of this study), Mendelssohn saw no such threat in Spinoza. Indeed, Mendelssohn ultimately parts ways from Spinozism because he believes it is incapable of accounting for contingency, which he deems the most fundamental aspect of human reality, and which he understands quite differently than Jacobi. Mendelssohn notes, quite presciently, that Spinozism seems to lend itself just as easily to causally mechanistic accounts as it does to more vitalistic accounts,¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Dieter Henrich emphasizes in his account of the Jacobi's critique of Spinozism the impossibility of transition, within a closed network of reasons, between nothing and being, between the infinite and the finite. See D. Henrich and D.S. Pacini, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 98.

¹⁰² Moses Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel. O. Dahlstrom and Corey. Dyck (Springer, 2011), 84. Spinozism is a "two-headed Hydra... one of these heads bears the heading: *Everything is one*; the other: *One is everything*." That is why, Mendelssohn notes, Spinozism has been attractive to both 'atheists' and 'enthusiasts,' or 'mystics.'

as indeed would be championed by Herder and later Schelling. More importantly, it fails to account for contingency.

Mendelssohn distinguishes between two senses of the contingent. What we call 'accident,' he says, aims to cancel intentional, final causes. What we call 'chance' is more radical, as it aims to cancel efficient causes as well. This sense of contingency emerges on the plane of history, rather than nature, and may indeed be what distinguishes the two. We shall return to this second sense of contingency and its link to history in chapter 4.

Through the use of 'accident' we want merely to cancel the influence of final causes on the entity acting, and through the use of 'chance' we want solely to cancel the immediate effect of events upon one another, without denying that each of these events depends on its own series of causes. Of course, only for historical truths, for 'news,' as we call it, is the conditioning of events itself ascribed to chance. Things that take place only a single time in the course of history and perhaps may never or at least never under the same circumstances recur, can join together without being immediately brought forth, or even only occasioned, by one another.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 66. Compare with Althusser's account of over-determination as applied to the realm of history. L. Althusser, *For Marx* (Verso, 1969), 87-128.

Mendelssohn begins his discussion of contingency in the context of Epicureanism and ends it in the context of his reply to Lessing's (refined) Spinozism. He first notes that in Hebrew, which was his first philosophical language, there is no word for contingency, and the word used to translate it carries almost the opposite meaning, that of a happy encounter, a mark of providence.¹⁰⁴ While in the early stages of his discussion Mendelssohn seems to subscribe to the view that contingency is ultimately an illusion,¹⁰⁵ arising from the limits of our finite (in Kantian terms, discursive) intellect, he breaks with this view on a decisive point. Contingency, he argues, cannot be grasped in its conceptual opposition to the necessary, for such an opposition 'reifies' contingency itself, and thus makes it 'pass into its opposite,' to use an appropriate Hegelian anachronism, and become itself necessary.

The contingent being is not on hand on account of the fact that its dependence on a necessary being makes the opposite unthinkable, for then it would, indeed, have to be necessary and immutable itself. What follows in a necessary way from a necessary truth must itself be necessary. Thus, the reason for a contingent being's existence or its dependence upon the necessary cannot be found in its property of being an object of knowledge. If this were the case, then it would not itself come to actuality merely somewhere and at some time, but instead would

¹⁰⁴ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 65. Mendelssohn probably had in mind the Hebrew word *mizdamen*, which is a reflexive form of the root *zmn*, which means time, and carries in its semantic horizon the sense of invitation of summoning, as well as chance occurrence.

¹⁰⁵ For an historical account of contingency, focused on it being an illusion, see I. Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

necessarily remain immutably the same for all time; for, as an object of knowledge, it is immutable and eternal. Its dependence upon a necessary being will therefore have to be sought rather in the fact that it has become an object of the faculty of approval.¹⁰⁶

Mendelssohn's appeal here to God's volition seems to immediately position him on the side of tradition. But that should not make us overlook his reasoning, which is anything but 'old news.' The core of Mendelssohn's argument lies in the insight that the notion of contingent existence does not rise from its abstract opposition to necessary being, nor is it explained through it, but is conceptually linked rather to the self-limitation of the necessary being – not to the knowledge of God, but to his act of will. Mendelssohn's turn to God here is not a frightened escape from the abyss of contingency, but an attempt rather to save the phenomenon, so to speak. God's will here is not a *deus ex machina* solution to put a stop to philosophical and existential anxieties, but rather an attempt to account, on both a conceptual and existential level, for our sense of reality as profoundly, fundamentally contingent.

This becomes clear in Mendelssohn's rejection of the 'refined' Spinozism he attributes to Lessing. Mendelssohn's notion of refined Spinozism is the idea that the Spinozistic ontological picture is plausible (and, in the context of the pantheism controversy, not a threat to morality and religion) as a picture of the ideal existence in God's mind, the

¹⁰⁶ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 70.

world as a realm of non-actualized potentiality. It should not be taken as a mere exercise in apologetics, an attempt to ‘smooth over’ the scandal of (Lessing’s) Spinozism, as it is commonly conceived, but rather as expressing some of Mendelssohn’s most profound metaphysical and existential insights. For what the Spinozist *deus sive natura* cannot account for, according to Mendelssohn, is precisely contingency. Knowing ourselves to be contingent is, for Mendelssohn, the fundamental human experience. Contingency, Mendelssohn believes, is to be understood not as a mechanical, causal determinacy, but as ‘falling short’ of the ideal, the sense that things could, and should, be perfected, actualized and articulated.¹⁰⁷ Falling short of the ideal reality that is in God means for Mendelssohn that contingent reality is under-determined, not fully actualized and articulated, as it is in God’s mind. It is the gap between the ideal and the real that Mendelssohn takes to be fundamental; the world we inhabit, in its actuality, is ‘the best,’ in a very specific, paradoxical sense – in that it can be better. And it is precisely in this, in reality ‘falling short’ of the ideal, failing to rise to (its own) notion, that Mendelssohn sees divine providence – God has left room for improvement, for perfection.

It is in light of his view of contingency that, as we shall see, Mendelssohn’s idea and experience of God do not fall easily under the rubrics of immanence or transcendence. For Mendelssohn, God’s transcendence is not understood as his existing outside me, or

¹⁰⁷ Boehm advances a similar argument as to the meaning of contingency as a possible Kantian rebuttle of Spinozism, one however, never explicitly formulated by Kant himself. See Boehm, *Kant’s Critique of Spinozism*, 174-183.

outside the world, but rather, in preventing the earthly world, the plane of immanence, from closing in on itself entirely. This uniquely Mendelssohnian view comes to light most forcefully and effectively in his communications (and, especially, miscommunications) with Kant.

1.6 Reorientation: Kant as a Reader of Mendelssohn

As the scandal was unfolding, Kant was pressured to take sides.¹⁰⁸ Both parties had expected his support, and actively attempted to enlist him to their cause. He was finally persuaded to participate and address the core issue: not the correct interpretation of Spinoza but the relation of knowledge and faith, truth and reason.¹⁰⁹

Kant's intervention in the controversy is contained in his essay 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' and has received, outside the context of the controversy, fragmentary yet privileged treatment by the likes of Heidegger,¹¹⁰ Lyotard¹¹¹ and Derrida,¹¹² and this is perhaps because it seems to offer a certain snapshot of the Kantian critical enterprise in

¹⁰⁸ See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason : German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 113-26. See also Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 685, 705-7, 50-2.

¹⁰⁹ See *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 751.

¹¹⁰ M. Heidegger and J. Stambaugh, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit* (State University of New York Press, 1996), 101-2.

¹¹¹ J.F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment, [Sections] 23-29* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹¹² J. Derrida and G. Bennington, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2 vols., vol. II (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 60-73.

becoming.¹¹³ While written before the publication of the second and third critiques, readers familiar with the Kantian enterprise are struck by its “extemporaneity” – one can clearly see not only the germs of the ensuing critiques but also their systematic relations. Since we will not be able to treat this fully here, we shall only mark that not only does the text address directly the relation of the theoretical and practical or moral realms, i.e., the subject matters of the first and second critiques,¹¹⁴ it also touches upon issues that Kant will deal with in the third: the purposiveness of nature, the notion of an archetypical being or intellect, and common sense.

Kant develops in the essay an account of how the theoretical and practical realms are to be articulated from the critical, transcendental point of view. It is his first attempt to show that the limitations imposed upon human cognition by his transcendental philosophy in fact make room for a belief that is, nevertheless, by no means exempt from the criticism of reason, and is rather a ‘rational faith.’

¹¹³ More recently, two ambitious, and to some extent opposing interpretations of Kant have put a lot of emphasis on Kant’s ‘Orientation’ essay. See, firstly, A. Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment: Kant's Theory of Sensibility* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 131-45. And secondly, A. Goldman, *Kant and the Subject of Critique: On the Regulative Role of the Psychological Idea* (Indiana University Press, 2012), 158-86. For Nuzzo, ‘Orientation’ provides ground to argue for the essential embodiment of the Kantian subject, inclusive of its practical pursuits, i.e., in the supersensible domain of freedom, whereas for Goldman, ‘Orientation’ serves to argue for a privileged, retroactive and semi-constituent role played by the psychological idea, i.e., the unified subject which is beyond sensible experience in the Kantian critique.

¹¹⁴ Kant had published his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, just a year prior, in 1785, but would not publish the second critique until 1788, and the third until 1790.

From the standpoint of intellectual history, in light of the influence that Jacobi's challenge has evidently had on post-Kantian philosophy, it is usually taken for granted that herein lies Kant's response to that very same challenge. And yet, as we shall argue, that does not seem to be the case. Kant, we shall see, is much more engaged with Mendelssohn's intervention than with Jacobi's challenge, and we shall take advantage of his perspicuity to provide us with an orientation for our reading of Mendelssohn in the next section.

Before we take up a closer reading of Kant's intervention, however, some preliminary clarifications are in order. To begin with, Kant's critical philosophy had been configured in the first critique as a response to both skeptics and dogmatists, indeed, as the only way out of the deadlock between them. For Kant, skepticism arises because of dogmatism; dogmatists go too far, assume too much, to which skeptics react with a doubt that turns out to be no less dogmatic. A naïve or dogmatic empiricist like Locke leads to the skepticism of a Hume. Though a simplification, we can say that Kant's critical, or transcendental philosophy is closer to the theoretical orientation of the skeptics (it is famously Hume who woke him from his dogmatic slumber) and to the practical orientation, the aim and purpose of the dogmatists. Critical reason should align itself with the radical doubts of the skeptic and put our knowledge under the harshest scrutiny, but do so in order to secure knowledge and experience. The Kantian breakthrough lies in seeing the critical limitations of our capacities of knowledge as productive. What both skeptics and dogmatists fail to acknowledge is that the critical

examination and limitation of our ways of knowing is the only way to yield and secure knowledge.

As we shall see, Kant is faithful to this strategy in his essay on orientation in thinking. He will aim to show that the dogmatist, Mendelssohn, while well intentioned, had assumed too much, and thus his position inevitably leads to that of the skeptic. Setting aside for the moment the correctness of this appraisal, a question arises as to its suitability to the challenge at hand. For what is at stake is not the possibility of theoretical knowledge taken in isolation, but the charge that theoretical knowledge as such, if only thorough and consistent, is destructive, and leaves no room for freedom and God. In other words, while Hume's skepticism did not commit him to nihilistic consequences, our 'skeptic' here, namely Jacobi, is not one who claims we cannot know but rather that, if we realize what our knowledge amounts to, we cannot want to know. Indeed, we cannot want at all, or rather, our knowledge would not be able to account for our spontaneous, subjective position as free agents. Kant seems not at all impressed by Jacobi's challenge. Kant's third antinomy in the first critique had forcefully shown that freedom and a causally determinate nature are incompatible; but that had just marked the limits of our understanding, of what we can theoretically know, and did not amount to a positive claim as to the reality of either opposing claims. From the position of practical, ethical reason, for Kant Jacobi's position amounts to an endorsement of heteronomy, the subjection of our will to pathological motivations, and thus, the very opposite of freedom as Kant understands it, namely autonomy, a self-

subscripted legislation, a submission to one's reason alone. In short, Jacobi's position does not pose a philosophical challenge, in Kant's estimation. His engagement with Mendelssohn's position, on the other hand, is far more extensive and complex. It is in Mendelssohn that he finds both the "material" to be worked out conceptually and, we shall argue, a philosophical challenge, albeit one that he does not fully respond to.

1.7 The Figurative: Mediating Intelligibility and Sensibility

In the essay, Kant aims to show that the limitation of our knowledge of empirical experience, of the sensible, is what opens up the space for the proper relation to the supersensible. He does so by taking up a figure of thought from Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* – the figure of orientation in thinking – and its related theme, the idea of common sense.

However exalted we may wish our concepts to be, and however abstract we may make them in relation to the realm of the senses, they will continue to be associated with figurative notions. The proper function of these is to make such concepts, which are not in other respects derived from experience, suitable for use in the experiential world. For how else could we endow our concepts with sense and significance if we did not attach to them some intuition (which must ultimately always be an example derived from some possible experience)?¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ 'What Is Orientation in Thinking?' in I. Kant and H.S. Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 237.

Kant takes this meditation on the figure of thought as an opportunity to account for the role of the figurative in critical thinking. The primary function of the figurative, to which he alludes here, is that of schematism, that is, of mediating between the realms of the sensible and the intellectual, which Kant had severed.¹¹⁶ Building on this fundamental (transcendental) cognitive function, of mediation between the sensible and the intellectual, everyday figurative language, always rich with and bound to spatio-temporal, empirically specific features, is shown to be necessary for the illumination of concepts for which we in principle have no adequate representation, that is, ideas.

¹¹⁶ Transcendental idealism, in assigning a constitutive role to human cognition, breaks with both traditional empiricism and Idealism. While cognition in general is deemed synthetic, in the sense that it is the product of both the intellect and sensibility, the two realms or dimensions must first be radically separated. It is the failure to first properly distinguish these realms, by means of the transcendental reflection on the conditions of possibility, that is the fundamental mistake (or the source of the profound confusion, amphiboly) shared by the two dogmatic schools. As Kant famously put it, the idealists' mistake is that they "intellectualize the senses" and the empiricists' mistake that they "sensualize the intellect." One can discern two opposing lines of critique charged against Kant, stemming from this double gesture of severing and uniting intelligibility and sensibility. From Hamann to Heidegger, Kant's severing of the two domains is seen as a philosophical abstraction, disregarding the pre-philosophical unity in which they are given to us in the concrete totality of our life forms. See Johann Georg Hamann 'Metacritique of the Purism of Reason,' in G.G. Dickson, *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism* (De Gruyter, 1995), 517-34. For Heidegger, Kant "shrank back" from the investigation of the common root of intelligibility and sensibility that he had initiated. Heidegger sees their common root in Kant's transcendental imagination. See M. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Indiana University Press, 1997), 112-20. Already in *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel also criticizes Kant for failing to realize his own accomplishment in his doctrine of transcendental imagination as mediating the heterogeneous domains of sensibility and understanding. But for Hegel, Kant's problem is that he had remained too empirical, that he "shrank back," as it were, from his own insight as to how overcome the finitude of cognition. See G.W.F. Hegel, H.S. Harris, and W. Cerf, *Hegel: Faith and Knowledge: An English Translation of G. W. F. Hegel's Glauben und Wissen* (State University of New York Press, 1988). For a succinct discussion of Hegel's critique of Kant along these lines see Goldman, *Kant and the Subject of Critique: On the Regulative Role of the Psychological Idea*, 116-20.

If we then subtract the figurative associations from this concrete act of the understanding – first those of fortuitous sense-perception, and then the pure sensuous intuition itself – we are left with the pure concept of the understanding, but with its scope now enlarged so as to constitute a complete rule of thought... and in the application of our understanding and reason there may still lie hidden certain heuristic methods of thought which, if we could carefully extract them from experience, might well enrich philosophy with a useful maxim, even in abstract thought.¹¹⁷

Therein lies the heart of the Kantian promise, and the possible answer to both skeptics and dogmatists: a careful examination of (the conditions of) our experience can not only secure the validity of experience, but it can also be the source of maxims to guide our use of reason beyond the confines of experience. If we rigorously examine what it is that we do in understanding, that is, if we discover the rules that govern and set limits to our experience (constitutive, transcendental – the rules without which there would be no experience) we can extract (a different kind of) rules that will help guide us in our abstract theoretical and, more importantly, in our practical, moral thought, valid even in the absence of experiential material to rely on. And it is in this context that Kant declares his qualified, critical, allegiance with Mendelssohn in the debate:

¹¹⁷ Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 237.

To this category [of useful maxims for abstract thought] belongs that principle to which the late Moses Mendelssohn expressly declared his allegiance – but only, so far as I know, in his last writings [i.e. *Morning Hours*]... namely, the maxim that it is necessary to orientate oneself in the speculative use of reason [which Mendelssohn, on other occasions, credited with considerable powers of cognition of supra sensory objects, and even with the power of conclusive proof] by means of a certain guideline which he sometimes [namely, in *Morning Hours*] described as common sense, sometimes as healthy reason and sometimes as plain understanding. Who would have thought that his admission would not only have such disastrous effects on his favorable opinion of the power of speculative reasoning in theological matters (which was in fact inevitable) but also that even ordinary healthy reason, given the ambiguous position to which he relegated the use of this faculty in contrast to speculation, would risk becoming the basic principle of zealotry and of the complete subversion of reason? And yet, this is what happened in the controversy between Mendelssohn and Jacobi, particularly as the result of the important conclusions reached by the perceptive author of the *Resultate*.¹¹⁸

Kant is here referring to and relying on an essay published by Thomas Wizenmann (at the time anonymously),¹¹⁹ which argues that in allowing common sense to instruct

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 237-8.

¹¹⁹ See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason : German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 109-13. For a different view, highlighting the difference between Jacobi's and Mendelssohn's views of common sense, see Paul Franks, 'Divided by common sense: Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Reason

reason, as Mendelssohn seems to do in his *Morning Hours*, he had already conceded the main point of the debate to Jacobi, who utilized an expansive notion of common sense, as entirely authoritative over the claims of speculative, or inferential reason. Jacobi had indifferently appealed to the authority of both Thomas Reid and David Hume to justify his use of “faith” (*Glaube*),¹²⁰ our intuitive confidence in the objectivity of the given. As Wizenmann, and following him Kant, saw it, Mendelssohn, who had sought to secure the authority of reason by putting a stop to its aimless wandering, had appealed to the very same sub-rational faculty that allowed Jacobi to dethrone reason. We shall attend to Mendelssohn’s anything-but-commonsensical notion of common sense in the next chapter. For now, let us continue to be guided by Kant.

1.8 Common Sense: The Dogmatic Error

Mendelssohn, Kant suggests, was on the right track in arguing that speculative reason needs to be orientated, but, in the ambiguous relation he established between common sense and reason, in violating the strict autonomy of reason, he had made himself, unwittingly, an ally to Jacobi’s irrationalism. Mendelssohn needed to be rescued from himself. While supplying some useful if vague coordinates for thinking, he has both limited reason too much and given it too free a reign. This is what happens if we do not

and Inferential Justification.’ In Munk, *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, 203-16.

¹²⁰ For Jacobi, sense perceptions are “apprehensions,” that is, they take hold of an object and are judgment-like events, implicitly rational from the beginning. See George Di Giovanni, ‘Hume, Jacobi, and common sense: an episode in the reception of Hume in Germany at the time of Kant,’ *Kant-Studien*, 89 (1998), 44–58, 47, 53.

first critically determine the limits of knowledge. Nonetheless, Kant argues, the solution is to be found along Mendelssohn's path.

I shall also show that it was in fact reason alone which Mendelssohn recommended as a necessary means of orientation – not a supposed sense of truth of a mysterious kind or an effusive intuition in the name of faith to which tradition or revelation can be grafted on without the consent of reason, but as he staunchly affirmed with righteous fervor, human reason pure and simple. But if this is so, the latter can no longer make lofty claims for its speculative powers, or claim in particular that they possess exclusive authority as the means of demonstration; and in so far as it is speculative in character, it will be left with the sole function of purging the ordinary concept of reason of contradictions, and of defending the maxims of healthy reason against the sophistical attacks of speculative reason itself... if the concept of orientation is extended and defined more precisely, it may help us to cast light on the various ways in which the maxim of healthy reason is applied to the cognition of supra-sensory objects.¹²¹

By appealing to healthy reason or common sense, Mendelssohn could surely not mean for anything but reason alone to act as guide, and Kant will proceed to develop the notion along those lines. The concept of reason that will result will be more suitable to offer guidance, but as a result suffers some severe limitations as to its speculative

¹²¹ Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 238.

pretensions. Kant then proceeds along a much more careful path than the one taken by Mendelssohn. He first defines orientation according to its most basic, ordinary usage – geographic orientation, and then gradually “climbs up the ladder” of abstraction.

To orientate oneself, in the proper sense of the word, means to use a given direction – and we divide the horizon to four of these – in order to find the others, and in particular, that of sunrise. If I see the sky in the sun and know that it is now midday, I know how to find south, west, north and east. For this purpose, however, I must necessarily be able to feel a difference within my own subject, namely that between my right and left hands. I call this a feeling because these two sides display no perceptible difference as far as external intuition is concerned. I orientate myself geographically purely by means of a subjective distinction; and if all the constellations, while in other respects retaining the same shape and the same position in relation to each other, were one day miraculously transposed so that their former easterly direction now became west, no human eye would notice the slightest change on the next clear night...¹²²

There is here, at the zero level of the figure’s signification, not only a figurative allusion to but also, in a nutshell, the basic coordinates of the Kantian Copernican revolution, the reorientation of philosophical inquiry to the subjective, a priori conditions of experience:

¹²² Ibid., 239.

without a purely subjective contribution, something that cannot be attributed to the world outside us,¹²³ there would be no such ordered world to begin with.¹²⁴

1.9 The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Supersensible: How to Get There, Where to Go, and What to Do

Gradually, Kant “turns off the lights,” leading us from orientation in the sensible world to the darkness of the supersensible.

I can now extend this geographical concept... to signify any kind of orientation within a given space, i.e., ...in a purely mathematical sense. In the darkness, I can orientate myself in a familiar room so long as I can touch any one object whose position I remember... finally, I can extend this concept even further if I equate it with the ability to orientate oneself not just in space... but also in thought, i.e., logically. It is easy to guess by analogy that this will be the means whereby pure reason regulates its use when, taking leave of known objects (of

¹²³ Nuzzo offers extensive context for Kant's usage of incongruity in his pre-critical and critical writings. See Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment: Kant's Theory of Sensibility*, 23-6, 32-40, 50-1, 68, 133.

¹²⁴ Heidegger's criticism of Kant in *Being and Time* harks on this point precisely. What Kant calls orientation is in fact a reorientation. Kant presupposes a conception of space as the domain of objects 'out there' as fundamental. In positing an external standpoint, in which the subject seeks orientation in a world that stands, as it were, in front of him, he neglects or disregards our always already being-in-the-world, our prior, pre-philosophical, everyday familiarity with the world around us and the objects in it, what Heidegger calls our “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) into a world of meanings, in which our possibilities of action are manifest. A prior involvement which alone allows for the reorientation, which Kant takes as his starting point. We have been in the room, “dwelled” in it, before the lights were turned off, so to speak. See Heidegger and Stambaugh, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, 101-2.

experience), it seeks to extend its sphere beyond the frontiers of experience and no longer encounters any objects of intuition whatsoever, but merely a space for the latter to operate in. It will then no longer be in a position, in determining its own faculty of judgment, to subsume its judgments under a specific maxim with the help of objective criteria of knowledge, but only with the help of a subjective distinction. This subjective means which still remains available to it is simply the feeling of a need which is inherent in reason itself. It is possible to remain secure against all error if one does not venture to pass judgement in cases where one's knowledge is insufficient for the judgment in question. Consequently, while ignorance is in itself the cause of the limits of our knowledge, it is not the cause of the errors within it.¹²⁵

We can only know what experience permits us to know. Our knowledge is limited to the sensible world, but this in itself does not undermine it, only the haphazard transgression of these limits leads to error. Reason has thus far led us to recognize the limits of our knowledge. From this point on, although we depart from knowledge, we are not leaping into blind faith. Beyond the limits of knowledge, reason can still think, and it is in fact only here that its function as a guide assumes its full significance. From this point on, beyond knowledge, reason's proper function is strictly regulative.

¹²⁵ Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 239-40.

But if it is not just a matter of indifference whether one wishes to make a definite judgement on something or not, if this judgement is made necessary by a real need (in fact by a need which reason imposes on itself), and if we are at the same time limited by lack of knowledge in respect of factors essential to the judgment, we require a maxim in light of which this judgment can be passed; for Reason, must sooner or later be satisfied. But if it has been established in advance that no intuition of the object is possible here, and that it is not even possible to find something of a similar kind which might enable us to provide our extended concepts [of the object in question] with a representation appropriate to them and hence also with a guarantee of their own real possibility, only two further steps remain to be taken. Firstly, we must carefully examine whether the concept with which we wish to venture beyond all possible experience is itself free from contradiction; and secondly, we must reduce at least the relationship between the object in question and the objects of experience to pure concepts of the understanding. In so doing, we certainly do not turn the object into an object of the senses; but we do at least think of something which is itself supra-sensory as capable of being applied by our reason to the world of experience. Without these precautions, we would be unable to make any use whatsoever of such a concept, and would indulge in fantasy instead of thinking.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Ibid., 240.

Taking measured, precise steps, guided by the figure of orientation, has allowed Kant to open up a space of thinking beyond the limits of experience. It is a dark, empty space, abstracted even from space itself. But how is thinking to take even one step in such utter darkness? With analogy to the feeling of right and left, reason, devoid of the experiential material of the senses, can use its own special need – special, in that it is self-imposed – as a compass. But what is this need of reason? It cannot be a psychological need, for, in Kantian terminology, that would merely be an inclination, a pathologically (causally determined) induced, impulse. The need Kant is addressing here must in some sense be rational, belong to reason itself. Reason needs unity, it aims at totality.¹²⁷ This is what causes the historical errors of reason, its inherent need to grasp the totality. This need cannot be satisfied in the theoretical realm, since totality and unity are not objects of experience. Reason cannot know the absolute; but this need for the absolute, denied for theoretical knowledge, is permissible, even necessary, in the practical realm. We may say that for Kant, reason has a problematical but not unreasonable need to move beyond the confines of understanding. The principle of healthy reason, or common sense, has the negative function of shepherding away idle speculation. The issue for Kant, however, will not be merely to deny reason's need, but rather to find the terrain and the conditions for its satisfaction. Reason is to be denied

¹²⁷ For an exposition of reason's demand for unity see Stephan Engstrom's introduction to I. Kant and L.W. Beck, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), xv-lIiii. See also S.P. Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge* (Harvard University Press, 2009). Dieter Henrich speaks of the primacy of unity over being as what distinguishes between the platonic and Aristotelian traditions. It is the former idea, the issue of unity, which he calls *henology*, that he finds crucial for understanding the philosophy of the period. Henrich and Pacini, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, 85-92, 96-7.

this need in the realm of theoretical knowledge, since in looking for it there it can only find its own phantasy, what it projects there.

Since objects of the senses do not exhaust the entire field of possibility, it is possible to think of various things in the supra-sensory world, even if reason feels no need to extend its scope to include them, let alone assume that they exist. Reason finds enough to do with those causes within the world that reveal themselves to the senses without needing to concern itself with the influence of beings of a purely spiritual nature; on the contrary, to assume such an influence would hinder its operations. For since we know nothing of the laws by which such beings may operate, whereas we know – or can at least hope to discover – a great deal about the former (i.e. the objects of the senses), a presupposition of this kind would in fact undermine the use of reason. To search for such influences, or to play with such imaginings, is therefore not a need at all, but merely a kind of inquisitiveness which leads only to empty dreaming.¹²⁸

In steering reason away from such idle activity, the path is cleared to the positive function of the principle of common sense, which is to supply reason with the faith it requires in pursuing its aims. Kant has not only sharply divided the sensible from the intellectual; he has also sharply divided the theoretical from the practical. We can only attribute existence to what is present, or at least can be represented by our senses and our a priori conditions of experience. But this, for Kant, does not amount to denying

¹²⁸ Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 241.

altogether the realms of supersensible objects such as God, or the soul. Such objects remain thinkable, and in some sense, indispensable. Their proper status only comes to light once we deny them as objects of cognition. While speculating as to the nature of the spiritual world is 'empty dreaming,' the concept of some such beings, far from an idle play of the imagination, is not only permissible but, indeed, fulfills a profound need of reason. Such ideas, however, must not only be devoid of contradiction, that is, thinkable, but must be fully in accord with our empirical use of the understanding lest our efforts at thought divulge into enthusiasm.

But it is quite a different matter with the concept of an original archetypical being, both as the supreme intelligence and as the highest good. For not only does reason itself feel a need to make the concept of the unlimited the basis of the concept of everything limited – and hence all other things, this need in fact also extends to the assumption that the unlimited exists, for without this assumption, our reason can find no satisfactory basis for the contingent existence of worldly things, let alone for the purposiveness and order which are evident to such a remarkable degree in everything (in the small even more than in the large, since the former is closer to us). Without the assumption of an intelligent creator, no explanation can be given for this circumstance – or at least no intelligible explanation – without falling into complete absurdities; and even if we cannot prove that this purposiveness is impossible without an intelligent first cause – for we would in that case have sufficient objective grounds for this assertion and

would have no need to appeal to subjective ones – we are still, despite our lack of insight, subjectively justified in assuming that this is so because reason needs to make this assumption. *That is, in order to explain the phenomenon in question, reason needs to presuppose something which it can understand: for nothing else to which it can attach a concept is able to remedy this need.*¹²⁹

This argument is only fully developed in the third critique, but the core idea is here already present in the essay on orientation in thought. Regulative ideas, in the (practical) service of theoretical knowledge, are justified by reason; reason must assume the concord of its sought-out objects with its ways of knowing. That is, it must assume the intelligibility of that which it investigates, i.e., nature, even though it cannot know in advance that it is in fact intelligible, that is, suitable for our ways of knowing.¹³⁰

Readers familiar with Kant's critical enterprise will recognize in this passage not only the germ but also the systematic interconnectedness of the elements to be developed in his second and third critique. As Kant would go on to argue in these two critiques, the concept of God is ultimately necessary, not only for the interests of morality, to make freedom possible, as it were, but also for the interests of the empirical study of nature,

¹²⁹ Ibid., 241-2.

¹³⁰ As Kant will go on to argue in the third critique, not only the phenomenon of living nature brings to mind a certain teleology, but also, the very concept of nature presupposed by empirical research relies on at least the possibility of the multitude of empirical laws cohering under the unity of the concept of nature. Such an order within diversity seems to follow a teleological, purposive, or part/whole logic. But since purpose is not a category of the understanding, the investigation of nature must not assume its purposive structure, only behave *as if* it had one.

i.e., to make the concept of nature (as knowable by us) possible. While we cannot here go into the details of the arguments later developed in the ensuing critiques, it is worthwhile noting that these developments are here, in a long and difficult footnote, explicitly connected to Mendelssohn's original proof for the existence of God in his *Morning Hours* – a proof in which Kant took a great deal of interest and which we will address in chapter two. Before we move on to Mendelssohn, however, let us conclude our reading of Kant's essay.

The need of reason, Kant continues, can be regarded as “twofold in character.” It has a theoretical use and a practical use. The first, which we have just discussed, is merely conditional – that is, we must assume that God exists “if” we are interested in judging, if we are to conceive of the systematic unity of empirical laws, and so view nature as teleological. Passing judgment on such affairs is the special interest of the peculiar animal that is the speculative philosopher. Not everybody is concerned with thematizing the relation of the sensible and the super sensible. The practical use is much more important, and indeed, “unconditioned,” because in our moral lives “we must pass judgment.” Here, in our moral life, we need the idea of a supreme intelligence to confer “objective reality” on the idea of the “highest good,” understood as the “proportional distribution of happiness to morality,” that is, divine justice and retribution, or providence. This is necessary in order to prevent the “highest good,” and along with it morality as a whole, from being seen as merely ideal.¹³¹

¹³¹ Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 243.

God, the highest good (for freedom Kant reserves the status of a fact of reason) is an idea without which reason would have no guidance, no compass, in its most important pursuits. Kant terms such necessary presuppositions, responsive to the need of reason, 'rational beliefs.' They are distinguished from dogmatic beliefs in that they do not claim insight. That is, they are beliefs, properly distinguished from knowledge, in that they do not claim anything about their objects apart from indispensability for the practical pursuits of reason, in its theoretical and more importantly, in its practical use.

Kant goes on to suggest that in order to be guided by reason in either the theoretical or practical realms, we do not need to be explicitly aware of the role that such metaphysical ideas play in our judgment. The person "who has common but (morally) healthy reason can use it to plan his course, for both practical and theoretical purposes."¹³² And the speculative philosopher can use such rational beliefs to "orientate himself on his rational wanderings in the field of super sensory objects." But Kant says little in this essay about how speculative orientation takes place, or how our commitment to such metaphysical pursuits offers us such a "signpost."

¹³² Ibid., 245.

1.10 Rational Beliefs: How to Believe Without Believing

To recap, the healthy use of reason or common sense is charged with providing guidance to reason in both its theoretical and practical pursuits. In theoretical pursuits, it has a negative and positive role; it is to steer reason away from idle speculation, that is, from seeking knowledge beyond the sensible realm, and, in its 'wandering' in the supersensible, it is to supply reason with the presuppositions that are useful and necessary for its advancement. Here it is to provide (moderate) uplift and encouragement, rather than strictures and limitations. In the practical realm, the maxim of common sense or healthy reason offers the same positive encouragement as it does the philosopher in his speculative pursuits, only here this service is absolutely indispensable for it is not a privileged activity, of interest to some, but something we all must engage in.

Despite the conceptual rigor displayed by Kant, here as elsewhere, the main ideas developed – rational belief and common sense – remain rather elusive. Kant's critical achievement in the first critique is hard to deny; there is a striking, fundamental, difference between the critical and the dogmatic, or pre-critical position when it comes to claims of knowledge. After the transcendental critique, all metaphysical claims – claims about reality in itself, and the existence of anything beyond the limits of our experience – are to be treated with extreme suspicion, if not direct dismissal. Kant has definitely secured a position that is neither skeptical nor dogmatic. But this difference, and much of Kant's achievement, is to a large extent eroded here. On the one hand, the difference between asserting a 'rational belief,' say, in the existence of God, that is,

arguing for it being a proposition necessary for the use of reason, and the dogmatic assertion of such an existence, is not a huge one; the critical position articulated here is definitely not oceans apart from the dogmatic position. Considering Kant's suggestion, that such 'rational beliefs' may function properly and effectively without an explicit understanding as to their ontological status as merely regulative, as in the case of 'the common man,' it becomes harder still to see the marked distinction from dogmatic beliefs. Indeed, one gets the sense that what we have here is the dogmatic belief, with the addition of a disclaimer, at once affirming and denying the belief. To push things a bit in the direction of absurdity, it is almost as if for Kant the distance between dogmatic and rational, critical beliefs is the distance between the assertion "There is a God" and the assertion "I believe there is a God," where the addition "I believe" serves a double, paradoxical function, distancing the belief from the believer by adding the subjective qualification. It is as if in saying "I believe" what one really says is "I believe but I don't really believe," or, more fully articulated: "I believe, but I also know that my belief does not amount to knowledge, but is only a belief," which is to say "I don't believe, that is, I know that I cannot know this, and only believe in it, but nonetheless, I believe it".

If Kant's position here comes awfully close to good old fashioned dogmatics, it has the added disadvantage of simultaneously rubbing against the "skeptic." The criterion of reason's need, despite Kant's intentions and efforts, leans far too much in the direction of the skeptic. Reason's claim for authority cannot rest easily on a 'rightful need.' For if a need of reason can justify a belief, why not a need of faith? If reason is justified in being

guided by a quest for meaning, it is harder to assert the superiority of its pursuit over the pursuit of meaning by different means.

2. Mendelssohn and the Experience of Possibility

2.1 *Morning Hours* – A Post-Kantian Text?

Having traced Kant's engagement with Mendelssohn in his 'Orientation' essay, we now begin the turn from Kant to Mendelssohn. *Morning Hours*, which was composed in part as Mendelssohn's response to the pantheism controversy, was also a response to Kant's critical philosophy, as was evident to contemporaries, including Kant, but is no longer evident today. In order to see what it was that Kant and others understood as a response to the 'critical turn,' we will have to part ways with Kant's more dismissive remarks relegating Mendelssohn's contribution to its exemplification of the merits, but mostly the shortcomings of the dogmatic philosophy, now rendered obsolete by Kant's transcendental idealism. As we shall see, Kant and Mendelssohn are more familiar with each other's thinking, and more susceptible to each other's influence, than is usually assumed. But their most productive influence on each other lies in their points of misunderstanding, where each "mistranslates" a line of thought from the other and, thereby, unwittingly alters his own. In order to shed light on Mendelssohn's (mis)readings of Kant, we shall take one further step guided by Kant's – perhaps equally productive – (mis)reading of Mendelssohn, paying close attention, specifically, to the themes he brings out in response to Mendelssohn's only claim for originality in *Morning Hours*, his proof for the existence of God.

Published in Berlin in the summer of 1785 as a series of lectures held at dawn, *Morning*

Hours is the most sustained presentation of Mendelssohn's epistemological and metaphysical views,¹³³ all elaborated in the service of presenting proofs for the existence of God (of which one, in particular, namely Mendelssohn's only 'original' proof, will occupy our attention in the pages below). Mendelssohn presents *Morning Hours* as a report of the oral instruction he has given to his son and a friend of the family in philosophical matters, held at dawn, while his mind was still fresh. The seventeen lectures, intended to summarize Mendelssohn's philosophical views in the service of proving the existence of God, contain, due to the historical circumstances of its composition, an independent literary unit (lectures 13-15), dealing with Lessing's alleged Spinozism, with which we have dealt with briefly in the previous chapter. In what follows we will limit ourselves to those elements of the text pointed to by Kant.

Mendelssohn's self-effacing presentation of his position certainly bares some of the responsibility for its continuous neglect. He presents the work as if it is already outdated. If Mendelssohn had a moment, he seems to be saying, it is now behind him. His health has prevented him from pursuing the latest developments in metaphysics, his life-long passion. The present belongs to Kant, who he nicknames "the all-quashing." These are the very opening lines of his introduction to the work:

¹³³ As Altman puts it, unlike his other great works, this was "wholly Mendelssohnian." His best seller *Phaedon* was, in part, a reworking of the Platonic dialogue, while *Jerusalem* was particularly complex, responding to various immediate challenges. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 672.

The following discourses on God's existence contain the result of everything that I previously read and myself thought about this important object of our research. For 12–15 years I find myself utterly incapable of expanding my acquaintance [with ongoing research]. A so-called neurological infirmity to which I have succumbed during this time prevents me from any mental exertion and, what the doctors find particularly strange, reading others' thoughts aggravates me almost even more than my own reflections do. Thus, I am acquainted with the writings of great men who have distinguished themselves in metaphysics during this time... even the all-quashing Kant, only from insufficient reports of my friends and from learned reviews that are rarely more instructive. For me, then, this science still stands at present where it stood around 1775, for this is as long as it has been that I have been compelled to keep my distance from it. Indeed, in better times it was my most faithful companion, my only consolation amidst all that is repugnant in this life, and now I had to evade it like a mortal enemy on every path I trod. Or, what is even harder, I had to shun it like a contaminated friend who herself warns me to avoid all contact with her. I did not have enough self-denial to obey her. From time to time clandestine breaches ensued, albeit never without remorseful atonement.¹³⁴

Mendelssohn had previously communicated similar sentiments to Kant in private. On April 10, 1783, he had written to Kant:

¹³⁴ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, xix.

For many years, I have been as though dead [*wie abgestorben*] to metaphysics. My weak nerves forbid me every exertion and I amuse myself with less stressful work of which I shall soon have the pleasure of sending you some samples. Your *Critique of Pure Reason* is also a criterion for my health. 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.¹³⁵

Somewhat discouraged, Kant had not abandoned hope that Mendelssohn would be of aid in promoting his difficult work. In August 16, 1783, he wrote to Mendelssohn:

That you feel yourself dead to metaphysics does not offend me, since virtually the entire learned world seems to be dead to her, and of course, there is the matter of your nervous indisposition (of which, by the way, there is not the slightest sign in your book, *Jerusalem*). I do regret that your penetrating mind, alienated from metaphysics, cannot be drawn to the *Critique*, which is concerned with investigating the foundations of that structure. However, though I regret that the *Critique* repels you, I am not offended by this.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, trans. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190-1.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

Either doubting or simply disregarding Mendelssohn's medical excuses, Kant was gracious enough not to be offended by the repulsion he attributed to Mendelssohn; it was understandable, since, despite the rigorous thought and twelve years of labor that had gone into the work, it had had to be completed hastily "with the greatest attentiveness to its content but less care about its style and ease of comprehension."¹³⁷ It is because of this (perhaps unavoidable) weakness in the manner of presentation, that Kant had put so much stock in enlisting Mendelssohn to his philosophical cause.

The capacity to both think for oneself and at the same time take into account the position of others, which as we saw in the last chapter, Kant attributed to Mendelssohn, would come to be the very definition of Kant's last word on common sense, or *sensus communis*, in his third critique.¹³⁸ After complementing Mendelssohn for his singular capacity to communicate complex ideas without dumbing them down, Kant writes that Mendelssohn might encourage others to examine the validity of three crucial points: (1) the distinction between analytical and synthetic judgments, and the difficulties involved in synthetic judgments a priori; (2) the contention that synthetic judgments a priori are possible only about the formal conditions of any possible experience; (3) the view that the only speculative cognition that is possible a priori is confined to objects of our experience and does not include the things in themselves. The precision with which Kant here laid the salient points of his work must have given Mendelssohn a more distinct view of the work as a whole, even if details still remained blurred.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ See chapter 1, footnote 5.

Already Mendelssohn's introduction to *Morning Hours* shows, at the very least, a recognition of the consequences of Kant's critique, namely, the destruction of the metaphysical edifice upon which he has relied, and he also seems to be willing to pass the torch, to entrust to Kant the task of rebuilding what he has destroyed. While philosophical speculation has sunk into ill-repute, Mendelssohn does not have the pretense of being capable of revitalizing it himself, the condition of his mental powers being what it is. That business "may be left to better heads, to the profundity of a Kant who will hopefully build up again with the same spirit with which he has torn down. I content myself with the limited intention of leaving behind to my friends and posterity an accounting of what I have held to be true."¹³⁹

Despite Mendelssohn's insistence that he could not come to terms with Kant's philosophy, and had only second hand knowledge of it, contemporaries had their doubts. In a review of *Morning Hours* in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, Christian Gottfried Schütz, who had become one of Kant's earliest followers, after recalling Mendelssohn's proclamations of outdatedness and weakness of mind, commented:

One nevertheless believes... [that Mendelssohn's work shows] traces of the fact that he had before him the famous work by Herr Kant: on the other hand, these lectures show no traces of nervous debility. One might be tempted to regard what

¹³⁹ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, xx.

Herr Mendelssohn says about it as Socratic irony, were it [the nervous debility] not otherwise reliably known.¹⁴⁰

Others were willing to go further, so far even to suggest, in clear opposition to Mendelssohn's proclaimed intentions, that *Morning Hours* had not only come to terms with the Kantian critique, but, in fact, offered a decisive response to it.¹⁴¹ And it was perhaps this triumphant tone that triggered Kant to respond in such a dismissive tone, presenting Mendelssohn as the supreme exemplar of the dogmatic philosophy his critique was meant to undermine.

Nevertheless, while Kant was eager to dismiss all talk of Mendelssohn's work as a serious response to his critique, he nonetheless regarded it as a challenge:

Although the work of the worthy Mendelssohn is to be considered in the main as a masterpiece of the self-deception of our reason... it is [nevertheless] an excellent work. Apart from the sagacious and novel things stated with exemplary clarity in the "preliminary notions" on truth, appearance and error – things that can very well be used in every philosophical lecture – it will prove of considerable value for the

¹⁴⁰ Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 675.

¹⁴¹ As may be gathered from a letter written to Kant by Ludwig Heinrich Jakob, his disciple and admirer in Halle: "Mendelssohn deserves to have his book favorably received.... But right away I heard some triumphal songs... that celebrate a victory that Herr Mendelssohn, according to his own statements, never even had in mind. Yes, one could even make out from certain reviews that this book is thought to have dealt a serious blow to the Kantian critique." Kant, *Correspondence*, 246.

critique of human reason by its second section. For since the author... eventually arrives at the conclusion that nothing is conceivable unless it is actually conceived by some being and that no object can be real unless it be conceived; and since, moreover, he concludes that an infinite and active intellect must be real... this extremely sharp witted pursuance of the chain of our conceptions, to the extent that they embrace total being, offers a splendid opportunity, as well as a challenge, to subject our capacity of pure reason to a radical critique... as a result, pure philosophy is bound to gain, even assuming that after examination it turned out that illusion had interfered... one may also regard this final bequest of dogmatizing metaphysics as its most perfect product.... and as an enduringly valuable monument to the sagacity of a man who knows and controls the whole force of the mode of thinking that he has adopted...¹⁴²

Kant's characterization of Mendelssohn has stuck, as has Mendelssohn's characterization of Kant. Mendelssohn's sharp and vivid act of naming would propel Kant's reputation as the "all destroyer," unleashing a restless dynamic of criticism. Kant's dry, antiquarian handling of Mendelssohn would have the effect of embalming him in amber and cataloguing him in the museum of antiquated viewpoints. Focusing on Kant's substantive engagement with Mendelssohn, rather than his sweeping proclamations and dismissive tone, should allow us at least to shake up some dust from this pristine exemplar of yesterday's dogmatism.

¹⁴² Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 684-85.

2.2 God is Unconscious – Mendelssohn’s Original Proof for the Existence of God

In uncharacteristic fashion, Mendelssohn’s makes one claim for originality in his book, an original proof for the existence of God. As we shall see, Mendelssohn’s original proof of God’s existence, which attracted Kant’s critical attention, incorporates, and revises, significant Kantian themes.

Kant was greatly intrigued by Mendelssohn’s proof. In a letter to Gottfried Schütz dated November 1785, he called it “an extremely penetrating pursuit of our chain of concepts” that “provides us with a splendid opportunity as well as a challenge to subject our capacity of pure reason to a total critique.”¹⁴³ Kant’s response to the challenge is to be found in his essay on ‘Orientation,’ albeit buried in a footnote. It is interesting, not to say symptomatic, that Kant refrains from pointing his reader directly to Mendelssohn’s only claim for originality in the text.

In his essay on ‘Orientation,’ Kant dedicates a long footnote to Mendelssohn’s proof, although without making the reference to Mendelssohn’s text sufficiently explicit. Indeed, for readers unfamiliar with Mendelssohn’s text the footnote seems not only opaque but unwarranted, as it is unclear from Kant’s text in itself what prompts this dense and difficult remark. Having stated in the body of the text that reason has a real

¹⁴³ M. Mendelssohn and M. Gottlieb, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible* (Brandeis University Press, 2011), 233.

need not only for the concept of an original, archetypical being, but also to assume its existence; as without the assumption of the existence of the unlimited, reason can find no basis for the contingent existence of worldly things, let alone for the purposiveness and order evident in the world around us, Kant attaches the following long footnote.

Since reason needs to assume reality as given before it can conceive of the possibility of anything, and since it regards those differences between things which result from the negations inherent in them simply as limits, it finds itself compelled to take a single possibility – namely that of an unlimited being – as basic and original, and conversely, to regard all other possibilities as derivative. Since even the general possibility of each particular thing must necessarily be present within the totality of existence as a whole – or at least since this is the only way in which the principle of universal determination allows our reason to distinguish between the possible and the actual – we find a subjective ground for this necessity, i.e., a need on the part of our reason itself to base all possibility on the existence of an utterly real (supreme) being. This is the source of the Cartesian proof of God's existence, in as much as subjective grounds for presupposing something for the use of reason (whose use always remains basically confined to experience) are treated as objective: in other words, a need is regarded as insight. This proof is like all the other proofs of the worthy Mendelssohn in his *Morgenstunden* [*Morning Hours*]: they accomplish nothing in the way of demonstration. But they are not for this reason by any means useless.

For on the one hand, such highly perceptive accounts of the subjective conditions under which our reason operates give us an excellent incentive to perfect our knowledge of this faculty (and in this respect, they remain exemplary): and on the other hand, when we are compelled to pass judgment but lack objective grounds for doing so, a conviction of truth based on a subjective aspect of the use of reason continues to be of great importance. We must simply refrain from claiming that what is only a necessary presupposition is in fact a free insight, so as not to show our adversary in dogmatism needless weakness which he can exploit to our disadvantage. It probably did not occur to Mendelssohn that dogmatizing in the supra-sensory sphere with the help of pure reason leads straight to philosophical zealotry, and that only a critique of this same faculty of reason can thoroughly cure this evil.¹⁴⁴

At the end of the previous chapter we pointed out the ambiguity in Kant's notion of 'rational belief' and cast some doubt on the sharp distinction Kant wants to draw between such warranted, rational beliefs, based on reason's need, and the unwarranted, dogmatic insight. But in this footnote Kant seems to take a further step "backwards," returning to his own pre-critical proof for the existence of God,¹⁴⁵ which in

¹⁴⁴ Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 242.

¹⁴⁵ I. Kant, D. Walford, and R. Meerbote, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 107-202. For a brief exposition of the proof, in the larger context of Kant's philosophical position, see. P.W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 32. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant speaks of this proof as illusory. But in his response to Mendelssohn he comes to see it as necessary demand of reason. Franks points to this change in Kant's position as significant not only for Kant's thinking but for the development of German

the critique he had discarded as illusory. And while he now qualifies it as a need of reason, he nonetheless assigns it a crucial, if not constitutive role in his own transcendental edifice. The assumption of God's existence, Kant tells us, is necessary for us to distinguish between the possible and the actual, between the intelligible and the sensible,¹⁴⁶ a distinction the significance of which can hardly be overstated for the Kantian edifice.¹⁴⁷

idealism in general, in the direction of what he calls derivative monism, which for him is central to the German Idealist ideal of the system. The context, namely Kant's reply to Mendelssohn, serves Franks as evidence that this change in Kant's thinking had occurred earlier than presumed. As to Mendelssohn's possible role in prompting this change, Franks remains silent.¹⁴⁶ Kant ends his shorter (and overall dismissive) reply to Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* thus: "To be sure, it seems strange that we are only able properly to determine our concepts of things in themselves by first reducing all reality to the concept of God... yet that is merely the means of separating everything sensible and of what pertains to the appearance from what can be considered through the understanding as belonging to things in themselves. Hence even with all cognitions that we might ever have of things through experience, the question: what their objects might be as things in themselves? Cannot at all be considered meaningless." See I. Kant, G. Zöllner, and R.B. Louden, *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 181. In this short essay, Kant takes issue with Mendelssohn on two accounts: (1) Mendelssohn's reduction of philosophical disputes to verbal disputes and, more significantly, (2) Mendelssohn's assertion that the thing in itself is a meaningless concept. We shall discuss both of Mendelssohn's claims below.

¹⁴⁷ See Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism*, 66. "According to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'our concepts of things in themselves' are ultimately derived from the a priori structure of the understanding. In the negative sense, our indeterminate concept of things in themselves is an abstract concept of a thing in general or a transcendental object. In the positive sense, our concepts of things in themselves are categories that are extended to the unconditioned. But according to this 1786 text, 'our concepts of things in themselves' – presumably, of things in themselves in the positive sense – are derived from the idea of God, hence from an idea of reason. Clearly, a shift in Kant's thinking has occurred. And this shift creates a new possibility: the possibility of a metaphysical deduction of the categories whose first principle is not the concept of a finite, discursive understanding, but rather the idea of God as *ens realissimum*. But this is the possibility of derivation monism."

Since we here intend to make use of Kant only in order to shed new light on Mendelssohn, we will not be able to fully unpack this difficult footnote, and shall restrict ourselves to only a few remarks, aiming not so much to offer an interpretation or critique of Kant, but rather to enable us to measure the distance and proximity between him and Mendelssohn, to see where there is a possible meeting of the minds, and where the lines of communication short-circuit. As it turns out, it is in the case of the latter that new insights are gained.

The distinction between possibility and actuality, which Kant here makes dependent on the rational belief in God's existence, is a key presupposition in the establishment of the legitimate sphere of knowledge and experience.¹⁴⁸ The distinctive feature of our finite, discursive understanding, according to Kant, is the gap we encounter within it between our concepts, or intellect, on the one side, and on the other, the sensible material which supplies them with particular content, and is empirical in nature, is given, that is to say, from 'outside.' Our concept of a chair does not in itself determine all the particulars that pertain to this or that, actual, empirical chair. Our understanding entails the subsuming of particulars (sensible appearances, empirically given) under universals. In that sense,

¹⁴⁸ This is an essential element of Heidegger's critique of Kant. Heidegger points to a methodological circularity in Kant's critique, which, in his view, helps clarify its limits. See M. Heidegger, *What Is a Thing? Translated by W.B. Barton, Jr., and Vera Deutsch, with an Analysis by Eugene T. Gendlin* (1967). As Avery Goldman makes clear, in the case of the modal principle of possibility such circularity is especially clear: possibility is distinguished by Kant as an a priori condition of experience; and yet experience itself is defined by this conception of possibility, which limits experience to what can be sensibly given to a perceiving consciousness. In her impressive study, Goldman follows Heidegger's critical insights with the aim of defending Kant's circularity. See Goldman, *Kant and the Subject of Critique: On the Regulative Role of the Psychological Idea*.

our possible cognition is dependent on it being actualized empirically. For us, therefore, there is always a gap between appearances and things themselves. For our cognition, things in themselves are empty abstractions, concepts from which we abstract all phenomenal material, thinkable but not knowable, and yet, as we have seen in the essay on 'Orientation,' they also have a positive extension in the unconditioned, supersensible realm. In his Famous Section 76 in the third critique, Kant juxtaposes our discursive understanding with an intellectual intuition or *intellectus archtypus* – which he speaks of in 'Orientation, and in the context of which he here makes his footnote – that forgoes this distinction. Such a hypothetical divine intellect forgoes the distinction between the form and matter of cognition, intelligibility and sensibility, universal and particular, and indeed, possibility and actuality; such a mode of thinking determines its objects down to the last detail, and is thus a cognition of things in themselves rather than appearances. For it, as it were, there is no gap between the possible and the actual, the thinkable and the real: what it thinks possible is immediately actualized. The ultimate ground, what is most real (most necessary, highest in the hierarchy of grounding),¹⁴⁹ is not the most actual, but what, in transcending this (and other, related) distinction(s), establishes them for us. While Kant is here reiterating the gist of his pre-critical (only possible) proof for the existence of God, which emphasizes the necessary being of God (although, in the qualified, critical inclination of a necessary presupposition), the basic matrix of the argument is identical with that of the deservedly

¹⁴⁹ It is in this light that Franks interprets Kant's famous assertion that "to be" is "not a real predicate." See Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism*, 50.

famous Section 76 of the third critique. In both cases, a being, or an intellect that forgoes the distinction between possibility and actuality is needed in order to properly delineate the limits of our experience, for which that distinction is fundamental. That is, for our conceptual distinction to hold an exception to it has to be stipulated. The setting of our boundaries entails their transgression. In any case, Kant finds himself compelled, in response to Mendelssohn's text, to reconsider the necessity of delineating the realm of the possible. In his work on modality, we are led to understand, Mendelssohn is acting on a justified need of reason, and there is nothing mistaken in his "pursuit of our chain of concepts," nothing, that is, besides one crucial misstep: that he mistakes the need of reason for a "free insight," in other words, an unjustifiable, dogmatic, metaphysical assertion.

Taking a closer look at Mendelssohn's "proof," we shall continue to be guided by Kant's response to Mendelssohn. That is, we shall see what use Mendelssohn is making of the modalities (possibility and actuality), and to what extent Kant's criticism hits its mark, namely, is Mendelssohn guilty of an illegitimate move from a need of reason to a free insight? As we shall see, Mendelssohn develops these key notions in a way that is not quite captured by Kant's account, which results in undermining Kant's sharp distinction between reason's need and insight. But he only gets there through his own "mistranslation" of Kant's philosophy.

2.3 The Cogito's Shadow: From Conditions of Possible Experience to the Experience of Possibility.

Let us now Attend to Mendelssohn's proof:

I will attempt to conduct this proof in another way as well, in a way that, as far as I know, no philosopher has touched on. Hence, take notice, my sons!

In addition to the immediate feeling of my own existence (that is, as we have seen, beyond all doubt), I also presuppose the following perception as indubitable: 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; and even what I know of myself is in and for itself capable of far greater development, greater distinctness, and greater completeness than I am able to give it. This observation is, it seems to me, no less undeniably evident [than the consciousness of my own existence]. As a perception of the inner sense, it has its subjective certainty and since, with respect to myself, my own 'I' is also the subject of thoughts, the predicate 'Immediately known' can be attributed to me as well. That I do not know everything that pertains to my existence can be no deception of the senses, no illusion. For in the first place we are not transposing something known internally onto an external object; we have no intention of connecting the make-up of one sense with that of others, of inferring from often to always, all of which were sources of sensory illusion.... in fact, it would not be possible for either our body or

our soul to be on hand if they were merely what we distinctly observe of them.¹⁵⁰

Note, first, Mendelssohn's move from less to more, from the lack in our knowledge to the assertion that there is more to know: "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." Therein lies the crux, easily overlooked, of Mendelssohn's argument, as well as his implicit reception of Kantian ideas.

It is quite plausible that Kant saw the extent to which Mendelssohn's proof was a response to his critique of the Cartesian cogito. Indeed, Mendelssohn understands Descartes achievement – the certainty of the 'cogito' – in a way that departs from Descartes himself, and is best clarified by Kant's critique and development of this certainty as that of the transcendental 'I' or the unity of apperception. In recasting the 'cogito' as the unity of apperception, Kant famously criticized Descartes for privileging the certainty of the 'I' as content or object of a thought (cogito as my thinking of myself), and had put the focus on the formal, if implicit, self-consciousness involved in cognition regardless of its object. Since the 'I's spectral presence accompanies all cognitions as a formal condition of the unity of apperception,¹⁵¹ the 'I' that appears as an object of knowledge has no privileged status, and is to be known like all other objects of

¹⁵⁰ D.O. Dahlstrom, C. Dyck, and M. Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence* (Springer Netherlands, 2011), 103.

¹⁵¹ Several commentators have pointed to Mendelssohn's argument in his best seller *Phaedon* (1767) that unity is a feature of the soul, rather than reality, as foreshadowing Kant's unity of apperception. See M. Mendelssohn, *Phaedon: Or the Death of Socrates* (the author, by J.Cooper, 1789).

experience, as receiving its material from the outside, that is, empirically. In contrast, the transcendental 'I' itself, as a formal condition of experience, is not an object of experience. This is one of the crucial differences between Kant's transcendental idealism and pre-critical idealism. To the extent that idealism as it is commonly understood runs the risk of the self-enclosure of the mind, or solipsism, that is, a picture in which we have ideas in our mind, and the world 'out there,' with no way to connect them, no way to guarantee that our ideas are 'about' the world, with Kant that divide is both overcome and radicalized. In transcendental idealism, there is no longer any worry that we are alone, trapped in our minds, as there are necessary, universal features which all human minds share that are constitutive of the world (the conditions of possible experience). Yes, causality, for example, is not to be found 'in the world,' it is a contribution of the mind, but it is a necessary, constitutive one – without it there would just be no experience. All experience, and all knowledge, is a synthesis between our concepts of the understanding, not derived from experience, and the passive input of experiential 'matter.' Thus, the mind/world gap had been significantly reduced, if not entirely collapsed. But the very same gesture that had brought the world 'out there' within reach, had driven an insurmountable gulf within subjectivity. The same dualism that holds for our access to the world out there (empirical/transcendental), now holds for our access to our 'inner' world as well.

Like Kant, Mendelssohn notes that the certainty of the 'I' lies not in the particular act of consciousness (I think), but in this 'I's shadowy, or implicit, underlying presence in all

cognitive acts broadly construed.

The philosopher [Descartes] could have said with equal right: I hope, therefore I am; I fear, therefore I am, and so forth. Only, according to his theory, all those alterations that transpire within us possess the common characteristic that he calls 'thought.' He thus included them all in the general phrase, *I think*.¹⁵²

Mendelssohn, as he so often does, minimizes the distance between philosophical positions. He did so in regards to Lessing's 'refined Spinozism,' and seemed to think that, in general, much in philosophical dispute is terminological rather than substantive.¹⁵³ While, like Kant, he sees the certainty of the cogito not in its content, but in its form, he simply attributes that insight to Descartes himself.¹⁵⁴ Consequently, he subtly denies the possibility of deriving existence from this certainty, just like Kant, and instead offers a deceptively commonsensical definition of existence:

And existence? If we begin from ourselves, as we must necessarily do in all our

¹⁵² Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 29.

¹⁵³ As he puts it in *Morning Hours*: "I fear that, in the end, the famous quarrel among materialists, idealists, and dualists would amount to a merely verbal dispute, more something for the linguist than the speculative philosopher." *Ibid.*, 42. Kant was greatly irritated by this position. "I am, however, of a completely opposite opinion and assert that in matters over which one has quarreled for a long period of time, especially in philosophy, there has never been at the bottom a quarrel of words but always a true quarrel over things." See Kant, Zöllner, and Loudon, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, 179. Below we shall have the opportunity to explain Mendelssohn's position in regards to philosophical beliefs and quarrels.

¹⁵⁴ Here, and elsewhere, Mendelssohn's seems to apply the equivalent of Davidson's hermeneutical 'charity principle' pushed ad absurdum. It seems that for Mendelssohn, novelty in philosophy depends on treating the old as already addressing the challenges of the new.

knowledge, then *existence* is merely a common word for *acting* and *undergoing*.

We are conscious of acting or undergoing something every moment of our life and the characteristic that these two have in common we call 'existence.' I have concepts and sensations; therefore, I am a conceptualizing and sensing being. I act or undergo something; therefore, I am actually on hand.¹⁵⁵

Note that existence belongs on neither side – neither in acting nor in undergoing, neither the active nor passive, neither in thinking nor in substance.¹⁵⁶ What is beginning to be teased out here is a paradoxical notion of existence (*Daseyn*), which is understood neither as a 'whatness,' or essence, nor as a 'thatness,' or pre-conceptual existence, but lies rather in their co-dependence or co-articulation. It is, as Mendelssohn so disarmingly puts it, a 'common word' for what, as he will proceed to argue in his original proof, is in human beings never unified.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 29-30.

¹⁵⁶ See M. Mendelssohn and B. Rosenstock, *Last Works* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 208-9. The editors explain the misunderstanding between Jacobi and Mendelssohn along the lines of their opposing views of existence. Mendelssohn, they argue, understands being, or existence, in terms of "whatness," while Jacobi Understands it in terms of "thatness." As we shall see, for Mendelssohn, the very distinction is abstract, and yields no concept of existence, or being. Mendelssohn's view can more profitably be compared with Agamben's modal ontology, his recent attempt, at the closure of his *Homo Sacer* project, to rejoin the modern. See G. Agamben and A. Kotsko, *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 146-75. As we shall see, Mendelssohn's thinking is best understood in light of his interest in the primacy of what lies in-between essence and existence, that is, their co-articulation.

¹⁵⁷ Indeed, to say that Mendelssohn's definition of existence [*Daseyn*] as what acting and undergoing have in common is deceptively commonsensical is an understatement. Developed speculatively this is nothing short of the unity of being, as both substance and subject of change. Being is neither attributed to activity nor passivity, neither subjectivity nor objectivity but what they have in common.

Mendelssohn pushes Kant's limitation of our knowledge beyond Kant's intentions. Using Kant's language, which identifies knowledge with conceptual, or discursive determination, Mendelssohn dismisses all residual talk about the thing in itself as nonsensical, in its implicit reliance on something like an unknowable knowledge. To ask for the thing in itself is to:

...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 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.¹⁵⁸

Mendelssohn denies an external perspective, a knowledge of an entirely different kind.¹⁵⁹ We are now in a position to appreciate why Mendelssohn is so certain that the lack of self-knowledge cannot be a mere illusion, as it belongs to what Kant would have called the transcendental status of the 'I.' But Mendelssohn draws very different conclusions from this gap at the heart of subjectivity. While Kant might be right in assigning an empirical status to the knowledge I do possess about myself, the absence of knowledge is not easily confined to the empirical. While it might make sense to

¹⁵⁸ Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Whereas Kant, in his response to Mendelssohn, is moving precisely in that direction, to be most fully articulated in his mature conception of intellectual intuition in the third critique.

subject all contents of thought to the same criteria of understanding, the lack of self-transparency in itself raises the issue of the ontological status of self-knowledge, and by extension, of knowledge in general.

If Descartes vacated all phenomenal contents in order to reach the purely formal, but certain, position of the cogito, Mendelssohn begins his own, original, journey to God by taking hold of that very void. What matters for Mendelssohn in Descartes is not so much the 'I think' as the hollowed out, formal 'I.' The very assertion of the 'I' as the site of enunciation opens a gap that all subsequent enunciations cannot quite suture.

Whatever follows 'I' hovers in indeterminacy. This lack of knowledge or indeterminacy is not merely a psychological, empirical state – susceptible to deception and the illusion of the senses – but, understood along the lines of the Kantian gap between the transcendental 'I,' the condition of possibility for the unity of apperception and the empirical, psychological 'I,' it is a formal condition, a result of the gap between the 'I' and subsequent predicates, and therefore 'immediately known,' as certain as the Cartesian cogito. Indeed, it is the very form of the 'I,' stripped from all phenomenality and presuppositions, taken as its own content. The space of reflection is not opened up by self-transparency, but rather by the formal inaccessibility of the subject to itself.

While not reducible to empirical, psychological experience, it is important to Mendelssohn that this formal aspect is not a mere abstraction from experience, but rather accompanies everyday experience elusively yet palpably, just as the unity of

apperception does. Mendelssohn both radicalizes and threatens Kant's transcendental/empirical divide by, so to speak, internalizing it even further. The very gap between the 'I' that thinks and itself as an object of experience is taken as an immediate, if elusive, object of experience. It is what accompanies immediacy by always eluding it, the elusive immediacy of the immediately elusive. In other words, it is the paradoxical empirical experience of our abstract, formal, transcendental aspect, that can never become an object of empirical knowledge.

For Mendelssohn, to know oneself as unknown is not merely to determine the limits of (self) knowledge, to declare 'this is as far as one can go'; it is already to assert the reality of a privation. The knowledge that consciousness is barred is not merely a statement of limits, a recognition of the limits of human understanding, but also, at the same time, the assertion of the unknown as real, or rather, as we shall see, as something to be realized.

2.4 Surplus Knowledge

What warrants Mendelssohn's move from the lack of self-knowledge to the existence of God? Is such a move not precisely what Kant had characterized as a leap from a need (of reason) to a free insight? While Mendelssohn moves swiftly, giving credence to Kant's sense that a leap is involved, it is possible to slow him down, as it were, and attend to his implicit chain of reasoning, in which Kant found no fault. Let us first note

that Mendelssohn had already fundamentally digressed from the Kantian coordinates of reason's need. Recall that, for Kant, reason is in need of overstepping the boundaries of what it can know, it has a justified need for unity and totality that cannot be located within the realm of experience, of theoretical knowledge, and must be sought, instead, in the practical realm. For Mendelssohn, the act or recognition of limitations already yields a special kind of knowledge; indeed, the lack and surplus in knowledge coincide; the recognition of absent knowledge is already the assertion, if only unconsciously, that the knowledge which lacks in me is real somewhere else. Since what I do not know of myself is irreducible to empirical knowledge, it cannot simply be taken to be 'out there,' waiting to be empirically discovered (even if that 'out there' is understood, in contemporary, modern terms, as 'internal' in the sense of the specific make up of one's brain, it is still, in the important sense, 'out there,' that is, in principle given to knowledge, present and actual). The knowledge that lacks in the subject is essentially elusive, never simply present. And yet it is 'mine,' it lacks in me, setting my project of knowledge in motion.

According to Mendelssohn, it is because the lack in (self) knowledge is immediately present that I must assume that knowledge in God. God is not in possession of an entirely different kind of knowledge, the understanding of which is necessary for philosophically delimiting our own, (as seems to be the case for Kant), but the very site, the holder of such knowledge that I do not presently possess.¹⁶⁰ God is He who knows

¹⁶⁰ Very much like the Lacanian notion of the subject supposed to know, the presupposition that the other holds the knowledge I lack, which sets psychoanalytic transference in motion. That is,

what alludes me. This is Mendelssohn's reasoning. If it is true that we know that we don't know, in the sense articulated above:

...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.... there must therefore be a thinking being, one intellect that thinks in the most perfect way the sum total of all possibilities as possible and the sum total of all actualities as actual.¹⁶¹

At first glance, Mendelssohn's argument, to which he, against his nature, attributes originality, contains not a speck of novelty. It seems as if Mendelssohn is merely rehashing the old Aristotelian notion of the active intellect, as that which actualizes potential knowledge or thinking, in the post-Cartesian, modern vain of a 'proof,' which takes its starting point in the subject's project of knowledge¹⁶² and then reaches to God.

it is the unconscious assumption that the other, say, the analyst, holds the key to one's unconscious. While strictly speaking such an assumption is of course erroneous, it is a necessary precondition for analytic work, and thus, in a different register, it is true: only in going through this erroneous assumption can interpretive insight be gained.

¹⁶¹ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 104.

¹⁶² Leo Strauss saw this as the deep blind spot of modernity, what made it ultimately blind to all authentic religion. Taking as its starting point the project of knowledge as fundamental, seeking, as it were, to ground everything on reason, modernity was incapable of even properly comprehending the past it had strayed away from, in which the relation is reversed: philosophy is to be grounded in revelation. This is his reading of Maimonides, for example. Maimonides' problem, he argues, is not the philosophical justification of religion, but the political-theological, legal justification of philosophizing. See L. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (State University of New York Press, 1995). Despite Strauss' portrayal of his own dissertation on Jacobi as a "disgraceful performance" there are reasons to believe that Strauss remained committed to his early engagement with Jacobi throughout his career. See Rodrigo Chacón, "On a Forgotten Kind of

This impression is augmented by Kant's interpretation:

[Mendelssohn]... eventually arrives at the conclusion that nothing is conceivable unless it is actually conceived by some being and that no object can be real unless it be conceived; and... concludes that an infinite and active intellect must be real...¹⁶³

Kant's reading seems sound, and not at all unfair. And yet, if we follow Mendelssohn's argument closely some crucial differences do emerge. Mendelssohn's most likely source for his Aristotelian idea is Maimonides, whose work he studied with great passion and dedication, at a young age, and was his first introduction to philosophy.

For Maimonides, the active intellect – the Arabic term *'aql* translated the Greek *nous* – was the particular incorporeal form that causes the potentiality of the rational faculty to turn into actuality.¹⁶⁴ The active intellect causes potential to become actual both in mind and in nature:

Grounding: Strauss, Jacobi, and the Phenomenological Critique of Modern Rationalism," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 76, Issue 4, October 2014, 589-617.

¹⁶³ Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 684-5.

¹⁶⁴ In this sense, the young Hegel, criticizing Kant for failing to acknowledge the homology, if not identity, between his transcendental imagination, actualizing cognition, as it were, in mediating the sensible and the intelligible, and his intellectual intuition, which, on a higher plane, does the same, mediating also between (practical) reason and the understanding, was not only philosophically astute, but, in a proper Hegelian fashion, displayed at the same time an acute sensibility to the history of philosophy. It is as if in 'naturalizing' the cognitive function of the active intellect in the first critique, getting rid of a superfluous metaphysical, or quasi-metaphysical entity, the exorcised spirit had to return, on a higher level of the theoretical edifice.

The active Intellect[’s]... existence is indicated by the facts that our intellect passes from potentiality to actuality and that the forms of the existents that are subject to generation and corruption are actualized after they have been in their matter only in potential. Now everything that passes from potentiality to actuality must have necessarily something that causes it to pass and that is outside it. And this cause must belong to the species of that which it causes to pass from potentiality to actuality.¹⁶⁵

While Mendelssohn does not here use the term active intellect, his pointing to God as ‘the holder’ of our potential knowledge does seem to accord with this traditional view. Is Mendelssohn to be understood in light of this tradition of philosophy, which had obviously played a part in shaping his views, or should he be understood in light of the momentous present to which he belonged, but according to his own testament, did not fully understand? It is precisely in the tension between these options that his position can come to light; it is here that his position subtly, yet decisively breaks both with the Aristotelian tradition and the Kantian position. For Mendelssohn’s accent is placed not on the actualization of possible knowledge but, rather, on its very potentiality. God, for Mendelssohn, is not required in order to account for the passage from potential to actual knowledge; all to the contrary, God is necessary for keeping possibility and actuality apart, that is, to account for the phenomena of possibility itself. In this emphasis on the

¹⁶⁵ M. Maimonides and S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 257.

distinction between the possible and the actual, Mendelssohn is closer to Kant than he is to Maimonides, as Kant seemed to have sensed. But, as we shall see, the two modern thinkers part ways in their understanding of what is required in order to account for our experience, in which possibility and actuality are distinct, and in regards to the role God has to play in this division.

For Kant, the idea of a primary existent (in the pre-critical period, only possible ground, reiterated in what is orientation), and that of the intellectual intuition (as archetypical, Section 76 of *Critique of Judgment*), both serve the same purpose: they are limit concepts that serve to account for the particularity of our, discursive knowledge, for which the distinction between possibility and actuality is fundamental. For us there emerges an unsurpassable limit to our possible knowledge: possible knowledge is possible experience, i.e., what can be 'filled' with sensible material. The 'identity' of possibility and actuality is the sovereign exception, so to speak, to our mode of understanding. In transgressing the limits, it establishes them. What Mendelssohn's argument drives at, as we shall see, is close to Kant, but also markedly breaks with him.

We may begin by noting that while we shall attend in more detail to Mendelssohn's conception of the divine in the following chapters, we may already now make note of one important facet of Mendelssohn's thought: God is not thought in accordance with the logic of a sovereign exception, transgressing and setting our limits, but as

something that, in its transcendent withdrawal,¹⁶⁶ allows and makes room for human determination, articulation and actualization.

For Mendelssohn, the strange factuality of our non-knowledge is the very source of our experience of potentiality or possibility; and for that very reason, it is doomed to dissipate if we take the limits of possibility as a given/entirely determined and knowable.

¹⁶⁶ Speaking of a divine withdrawal is to evoke the Kabbalistic idea of *Zimzum*, attributed to Isaac Luria (1534-1572) and his followers. In this doctrine, a significant clinamen from the traditional neo-Platonic doctrine takes place: the act of creation is no longer understood in terms of divine overflow, where the divine, infinite intellect's act of (necessarily, self-reflective, there is nothing outside it) thought brings into reality its finite counterpart, the created world; on the contrary, creation is understood as an act of divine self-limitation. Mendelssohn's association of Cabbalism with enthusiasm and superstition seems, on the face of it, to make it beyond implausible that the ideas associated with the mystical tradition could have been influential on him. In chapter 4, however, we will see that his relation to mysticism is not one of dismissal, and more importantly, that his criticism of mysticism or enthusiasm has nothing to do with the content of their beliefs, with the ideas held by them to be true, but with the way they are believed. Scholarship in the last decades has done much to undermine the distinction between the mystical tradition, the philosophical, and the rabbinic in Judaism as ideological, a product of modern Jewish – that is, post-Mendelssohnian “Jewish studies” – attempts to distinguish themselves from the irrational orientalism associated with the mystical tradition. See, for example, Gil Anidjar's, “Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable: On Orienting Kabbalah Studies and the “Zohar of Christian Spain,” In *Jewish Social Studies* (Indiana University Press) and G. Anidjar, “*Our Place in Al-Andalus*”: *Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters* (Stanford University Press, 2002). Thanks to this critical scholarship we can now better appreciate how historical figures in Judaism could be, at the same time, rabbinic legal scholars, philosophers and mystics. However, this critique is usually limited by its own framing as a ‘critique of modernity’: at the same time that it makes some, premodern, figures more understandable historically, it makes other figures – like Moses Mendelssohn – much less understandable. The possibility that Mendelssohn could have been a harsh critic of the mystical tradition and at the same time incorporate some of its key ideas does not seem thinkable. And yet by Mendelssohn's time Kabbalistic doctrines have become widespread, semi-official, Jewish “theology.” Indeed, Mendelssohn's theories of religion are crucial for any serious attempt to account for the very status of the mystical tradition in Judaism; they raise the possibility that it is because Judaism is not organized around a dogma, as Mendelssohn argues, but in a sense, around the resistance to dogma, that its theology is developed in a subterranean, esoteric, and perhaps explosive, eruptive way – everything that Freud had understood as the “unwritten” side of tradition, especially potent, in his reading, in Judaism. See S. Freud and K. Jones, *Moses and Monotheism* (Knopf, 1939).

Such a limit must, as Mendelssohn conceives of it, sink into the background of our experience, as it were, withdraw from consciousness. For Mendelssohn, God is required in order to maintain the boundary between the possible and the actual, which, as we shall see, turns out to be a rather complicated matter (and one, ultimately, that does not afford a conception of God as simply external to this world).

For Mendelssohn, we have argued above, the problem is not the passage from potentiality to actuality, but their correlation. Mendelssohn brings back to the surface the (historical and essential) link between privation and potentiality.¹⁶⁷ “Potentiality... does not merely indicate contradiction-free thinkability; such thinking is already implied in essence, in cognition. For potentiality, in contradistinction to thinkability, the concept of time comes into play: we understand potential to be that which is not yet actual. Thus, privation and potentiality conjoin.”¹⁶⁸ In beginning with the Cartesian Cogito, and affirming the lack in our knowledge as equiprimordial or co-present with any moment of consciousness, the relation between potential and actuality is radically altered. Every present, any given actuality of thinking, is marked by the ghostly reality of what is absent from it. For Mendelssohn, it is only on account of the reality, however elusive, of what is absent in the present actuality that a notion of possibility emerges.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “Privation is Necessarily attached to all potentiality.” M. Maimonides and S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. I (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 128.

¹⁶⁸ H. Cohen, A.S. Bruckstein, and R. Gibbs, *Ethics of Maimonides* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 97-8.

¹⁶⁹ In a Hebrew commentary on Maimonides treatise on Logic written in 1760, Mendelssohn points out the strange ontological status of unrealized potentials, their odd relation to non-being: “if the causes have occurred by virtue of which Ezra actually became a scribe, then the proposition ‘Ezra is a scribe’ falls in the realm of the truly possible; for it has been decided in

2.5 The Actuality of Possibility

From this perspective, Mendelssohn radicalizes Kant's limitation of our knowledge, rather than simply disregards it. Mendelssohn rejects the idea of a meta-language, or meta-knowledge – to limit knowledge to representation by means of concepts does not leave room for any sense of existence devoid of conceptual articulation. We can call this Mendelssohn's theory of intelligibility: to seek to know is to assume not only that such a knowledge is possible, but that it is actual – since that is what possibility itself implies. To speak of a possible, hypothetical knowledge, that is impossible for us, is for Mendelssohn a patent, though understandable mistake, arising from the difficulty of the notion.

favor of Ezra's being a scribe, as opposed to his not being a scribe. Nevertheless, it cannot be described as a necessary proposition, as long as its contrary, 'Ezra is not a scribe,' has not ceased to be possible. That is why the logicians have appropriated a special name and designated it an 'actual' proposition or an 'existential' proposition, i.e., as a possible proposition that has become actual by the causes that have brought it from potentiality to actuality. For there are possible things that never become actual; of this sort is the possible that has no potential at all. Nevertheless, it *is*, since no contradiction is contained either in it or in its contradictory... If it is still potential – regardless of whether it has a remote or an immediate potential –, then it stands as it were in the middle between existence and nothingness. But if it has passed from potentiality to actuality, it resembles the necessary and is called 'actual' or 'existential.'" Interestingly, Mendelssohn is exploring this spectral dimension of potentiality by evoking the very same figure to which Agamben gives pride of place in tracing a history of potentiality from Aristotle to Melville's *Bartleby*, the figure of the scribe. See G. Agamben and D. Heller-Roazen, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford University Press, 1999). In Agamben's reading, from Aristotle through Avicenna and up to *Bartleby*, the figure is associated with the capacity of the scribe to write, retaining the idea of the unwritten, the *tabula rasa*. For Mendelssohn, it is a matter of destination, *Beruf*, of not becoming a scribe – indeed, Mendelssohn's own destiny, as a son of a scribe, whose elegant handwriting had in all likelihood reflected a paternal influence (see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 3.).

...everything actual must not only be thinkable but also thought by some being or other. To every real existence, there corresponds an ideal existence in some subject or other; to each thing, a representation. Without being known, nothing is knowable; without being noticed, no characteristic mark, without a concept, no object is actually on hand.

The counterintuitive idea, that there must be an actual knower of everything we hold as knowable, loses much of its absurdity if one stops and reflects, as Mendelssohn does, on what is implied in knowability, that is, in describing something as a possible object of knowledge. Consider the far more readily acceptable Kantian idea, eluded to in his 'Orientation' and developed in the third critique, that in order to investigate nature empirically we must on some level assume that it is purposive, i.e., suitable for our understanding, that it can accord with our concepts or be conceptualized. In that context, Kant also develops his notion of purposiveness without purpose, what is required for aesthetic, reflective judgment if it is to reflect on particulars as such, i.e., not through the lens of a concept. Mendelssohn's idea of the actuality of possible knowledge can be understood in this light. To approach something as a possible object of knowledge is to assume that it has that kind of organization that we can only understand as resulting from an act of cognition, or to put it in linguistic terms, and using the linguistic analogy of translation, to bring something into one's language is to treat that thing as being in a foreign language, in principle available for translation because it

is in a language; we can call this, in a Kantian vein, meaningfulness without meaning, a sense for sense, as it were.¹⁷⁰ This is where the Kantian picture of our understanding as constitutive of reality finds the most resonance with Mendelssohn. Things *are*, can be said to exist, only in so far as they are conceptually, or linguistically constituted. For Mendelssohn, to speak of something being the object of possible knowledge is already to presuppose, or sense, that it is meaningful, that is, in some way conceptually articulated, only not yet by us.

For Mendelssohn, as for many post-Kantian philosophers, the idea of the thing in itself, apart from our perspective, is unsustainable, and yet, he also asserts it as a real, if shadowy experience. While as a rule, in principle, there can be no meaning to a thing that does not accord with a concept, that is precisely what the fundamental experience of subjectivity attests to. It is an exception where no exceptions are permissible or thinkable.

[The] agreement between a thing and its concept knows no exception... My own existence is undeniable for me. It is equally impossible for me to deny the fact that inherent in my actual existence are characteristics and constitutive features that I do not consciously know and that even those of which I am conscious do not by far have in my conception the perfection that pertains to them in the thing.... in a

¹⁷⁰ Compare with Benjamin's early essay on language, in which naming, bringing into language, is understood as an act of translation. See 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man,' in W. Benjamin et al., *Selected Writings: 1913-1926* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 62-74.

word, between concept and thing, if I look merely at my knowledge of myself, the most perfect harmony is not to be found, the necessity of which we have just proven.¹⁷¹

It is first and foremost in our self-relation that we encounter the thing in itself, in the discrepancy we sense as a need, a demand or an urge for realization and articulation. The paradox emerges as a result of Mendelssohn's understanding of possibility as arising out of the privation of knowledge, and therefore, of necessity assuming, or presupposing, its own actuality. Whatever is known to be unknown – our very selves – is, as such, as an object eluding knowledge, inescapably imagined as an object of knowledge of the other.

With this, we come to see that Mendelssohn's claim for originality in his proof is not as pretentious and vain as it first seemed. God is not merely the site of the knowledge we lack, something we presuppose in asking questions, in seeking to know. God, for Mendelssohn, is responsible for keeping that knowledge *as possible* for us. The emphasis is not on God as actualizing our potential knowledge, but on maintaining possibility and actuality conjoined in their very separation. The problem for Mendelssohn, then, is not how to pass from possibility to actuality, but how to establish their relation so that possibility does not collapse into actuality. As we shall see, such a collapse might result not only from failing to separate these domains, but also from

¹⁷¹ Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 106.

separating in such a way that makes any contact between them unthinkable, separating them too much, so to speak.

As Mendelssohn understands it, there are two ways in which potentiality may collapse into actuality. Possibility and actuality may collapse into one another, either by being conceived as entirely separate, or by failing to be kept sufficiently apart. Mendelssohn takes up this paradoxical status of possibility, in what seems to be an 'ordinary language' investigation:

It seems to me that here the word 'can,' thanks to its multiple meanings, once again introduces confusion into the concepts. We must steer clear of the word if we want to avoid its snares. If it is said of a thing, that it is capable of something, can do something or can suffer something, that it has a capability, facility, predisposition for something, does this not mean a certain possibility that we ascribe to it?... it nonetheless still remains 'a mere possibility,' as the logicians call it, a possibility, nothing of which has yet become actual. For example, elasticity or the capability to be stretched is attributed to the air that surrounds us, in as much as it is not yet stretched. The capacity of standing up is ascribed to me as I sit here, before I actually exercise it. Thus, in all these cases, mere possibilities are asserted as predicates of subjects. But how can mere possibilities be on hand as actual predicates?... do we not contradict ourselves if we attribute to a thing that is actually on hand, as part of its make-up, something that is not actually on hand, if

we hold a mere possibility to be a predicate of something actual? And nonetheless, the complete set of everything with which human beings are acquainted is full of these apparent contradictions, of possibilities, dispositions, capacities, that are remote or near, larger or smaller capabilities, talents, and so forth, by means of which things actually on hand are designated and distinguished from one another. How does this happen? Should we reproach the entire mass of human knowledge as absurd on account of this?... it is a mere difficulty with the words...¹⁷²

Mendelssohn is here bringing to view the difficulties lurking behind our everyday understanding of possibility. In saying that something 'can,' we mean to draw a distinction between its present state and what is possible for it; possibility is to be distinguished from actuality. But we also seem to attribute possibility as a predicate, an attribute of things as they are. What is it then? Is it the opposite of actuality, or is it reducible to it?

Possibility, for Mendelssohn, is the ability to see how things could be different than they are. It cannot then, be understood as an intrinsic property of a thing as it is, that is, reducible to actuality, nor can it be a complete abstraction from things as they are, possible, as it were, only insofar as it is never actualized. Such a complete opposition between possibility and actuality seems to allow for no contact between them, and thus

¹⁷² Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 104-5.

the sense of the possible is lost. One could even say that such a notion of possibility – arguably, the status of Kantian regulative ideas – is possible not because it is thinkable, but because it can be thought only in its opposition to actuality, that is, only insofar as it is in reality impossible. It is only thought as possible, retaining its ideal status as a feature of thought, insofar as it is not realized. It seems that the experience of possibility can disintegrate in two directions; either by failing to be distinguished from actuality, from things as they are, or by being defined in contradistinction to the real.

Possibility, as such, must have some reality for Mendelssohn. We have seen that for Mendelssohn the transcendental ‘I,’ in that it continuously does not become an object of experience, does form a special kind of what we might call virtual experience. It is not, in never becoming an object of experience, that is, never passing into actual experience, a mere abstraction, but rather, it is what drives, in its perpetual ‘flight’ from experience, the very pursuit of knowledge.

For Mendelssohn, the pursuit of knowledge, either of nature or of the self, is not so much a matter of the reassurance that it is there to be known, as it were, suitable for our knowledge, but rather has to do with a sense of the object – either nature or the self – as “inexhaustible”:

The human soul is as inexhaustible [*unerschöpflich*] as nature; mere reflection cannot possibly establish everything about it, and everyday experience is rarely

decisive. The happy moments in which we, as it were, catch nature in the act never escape us as easily as when we want to observe ourselves. At such moments, the soul is much too preoccupied with other concerns to be able to perceive what transpires in it.¹⁷³

Counterintuitively, for Mendelssohn, what makes possible the pursuit of knowledge, and indeed any engaged activity, is not the assumption that the object pursued is real, if by that we understand fully actual, or given. On the contrary, what makes knowledge – and indeed, anything – possible is also what makes it necessarily possible, so to speak, namely, its elusive character, the actuality of the unrealized.

We could say then that in Mendelssohn's conception of possibility there is a certain miraculous quality assigned to reality, but on the provision that miracles happen all the time, indeed that the most miraculous is the everyday experience of possibility.

It is not the concept of God that is decisive for Mendelssohn, what and how we think of God, but the function God is seen as performing, whether we know it or not. Indeed, in some sense, the idea of God developed here is of an essentially unconscious God;¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ M. Mendelssohn and D.O. Dahlstrom, *Moses Mendelssohn: Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169.

¹⁷⁴ Mendelssohn had in fact developed, without using the word, a concept of the unconscious. In the 1780s Mendelssohn was engaged in the establishment of Karl Philipp Moritz's magazine 'Know thyself, or Magazine of experiential psychology, a reader for the learned, edited with support of some friends of the truth by Karl Philipp Moritz.' An important study that Mendelssohn contributed to the magazine was occasioned by a pathological experience reported by the famous Spalding, who had been attacked by a sudden incapacity to write and speak; he

being constantly aware of God as the holder of our potentials is an anxiety filled experience, one that would undermine the very function it takes note of. For God to fulfil the task Mendelssohn sees him as performing, that is, to make possible our experience of possibility, he must rather sink into the background, as it were, relied on in the same way one relies on one's feet to carry one. God, for Mendelssohn, is not so much a necessary presupposition as the very necessity of presupposing, the minimal presupposition entailed in the project of knowledge: that there is something *to* know. While in some sense such a presupposition is indeed necessary, it seems that already in conceiving it as such, as a necessary presupposition, its function and purpose is undermined. For if all I have to guarantee that there is something to know is my knowing that I need to so presuppose, that need has to be frustrated as soon as it comes to mind. For Mendelssohn, rather, insofar as you experience the absence of knowledge as an opportunity to discover, and (as we shall see in subsequent chapters) the gaps and inconsistencies in reality as an opportunity to act, then there is a God for you, or rather, God is there for you.

felt a "tumultuous disorder" in one particular region of his mind, though his capacity for speculative thinking functioned properly as before. Whereas Spalding had tried to account for it in purely physiological terms, Mendelssohn offered a psychological account. In a manner that vaguely anticipates elements of Freudian thinking, Mendelssohn explained the stuttering as resulting from "unwelcome ideas" that were "strangers" in the soul. Mendelssohn's essay here introduced, with remarkable emphasis, the concept of the "unconscious" in two senses of the term: (1) as the zero of awareness in purposive actions that, as a result of expertise, proceed almost mechanically; (2) as repressed ("dislodged") ideas that, being as yet "unwelcome," have been consigned to oblivion but become effective in dreams. The recalcitrant character of these ideas and the disturbing effect they have on the proper functioning of the ego, certainly call to mind key Freudian formulations. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 668-71.

Implicit in Mendelssohn's 'proof' for the existence of God is an alternative, and rather illuminating, if depressing, account of what Nihilism, or the death of God, amounts to. For being God forsaken would be the loss of the experience of possibility; the oscillation between the reduction of possibility to actuality, and their utter separation. The condition under which experience is either trivial or impossible.¹⁷⁵ Recall that for Mendelssohn the evidence for this other site of knowledge, which can properly distinguish and separate actualities and potentialities, is the gap in self-knowledge – it is the immediacy of lack here, the experience of not knowing myself fully. If what I do not know of myself is merely an illusion, I am reduced to what is immediately present in consciousness. But this immediacy includes, for Mendelssohn, a certain lack: I immediately know that I do not know all there is to know about myself. By denying this, all possible knowledge to be gained by any process of articulation is robbed, in advance, of any sense of discovery. There is ultimately nothing we can learn, even about ourselves. Experience is entirely trivial, for what is unknown is robbed of its potency.

The term *nihilist* was first made popular as a name for extreme Kantians, those who,

¹⁷⁵ The Lacanian notion of the real as unrealized can be of service here. Reality is constituted against the background of what is missing from it. The Lacanian real is the unrealized, which, in dropping out of the frame, so to speak, is constitutive of reality. There are, at bottom, two anxieties in regards to the minimal gap between reality and the real (as unrealized). Either the real collapses into reality, thereby collapsing reality as we know it, allowing for the 'real unthing,' as Mendelssohn calls it, free reign, a psychotic reality where everything is possible, or we collapse the real into reality, in which case there is really nothing more to what we do not know. Reality itself thus becomes a suffocating real, where nothing is possible. To sustain the distance between reality and the real, Mendelssohn is suggesting, we must assign possibility its own reality. Paradoxically, the possible, to be worthy of its name, must be impossible, in the sense that it must be irreducible to the actual or given field of possibility, but, as impossible, it must have real bearing on our actuality, it must be realizable.

unlike Kant himself, denied the existence of the thing in itself.¹⁷⁶ Mendelssohn, we have seen, rightfully earned this dubious honorific. But it is no accident, no mere historical oversight, that he fails to be so named. For Mendelssohn, strangely, finds God precisely where, along with any sense of reality, he ought to have vanished.

Mendelssohn views God as maintaining the split in subjectivity as a positive condition, allowing for the experience of possibility (note that in the post-Kantian tradition this “dualism” is precisely what everybody wants to overcome). As we shall see in the following two chapters, this view is in accord with his political-theological imagination, in which God’s transcendence is not to be imagined as a site beyond this world, but as what prevents this world from closing in on itself. Yet Mendelssohn is keenly aware that this experience of God is not directly evident, nor guaranteed, and indeed, keeping it in view and being responsive to it is the main task of his political theology. Belief, for Mendelssohn, is a practical more than a theoretical problem. But this is a problematic oversimplification. As we shall begin to see presently, Mendelssohn’s views as to how the practical and the theoretical relate to each other follow a similar logic to the one we saw at play in his ‘proof’; he takes care to both separate them, and allow for their coarticulation.

¹⁷⁶ M.A. Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.

2.7 Mendelssohn's Clash of the Faculties: The Division and Unity of Cognition and Desire

For Mendelssohn, the existential or psychological are not in opposition to rational argumentation, but rather, the two coincide. They are distinct, but inseparable. We have seen this at the plane of metaphysical argumentation. We shall now see that this structure pertains to Mendelssohn's explicit reflections as to how the theoretical and practical relate to each other, first, in what directly follows, on an individual level, and then, in the next chapter, on the collective level, as theorized in his political theory.

Already in the introduction to *Morning Hours* we get the sense that, for Mendelssohn, theoretical disputes are to be understood not only at the level of the explicit issues in dispute, but that one should also pay attention to what is implicit in the manner in which they are argued in practice. This is how Mendelssohn describes the intellectual climate in which he composed his book:

I know that my philosophy is not the philosophy of the times... In recent times, Germany's best heads speak of all speculation with contemptuous disdain. One presses for facts, clings merely to the evidence of the senses, gathers observations, heaps up experiences and experiments, perhaps with all too great a neglect of universal principles. In the end the mind accustoms itself so much to touching and gawking that it deems actual only what lets itself be treated in this manner. Hence, the penchant for *materialism* that threatens in our days to

become so universal and, from the other side, the desire to see and touch what, given its nature, cannot befall our senses, the penchant for *fanaticism*.¹⁷⁷

Mendelssohn's analysis of the intellectual arena in which he seeks to intervene makes a connection between two opposites: the materialists (naturalists, bent on exorcising spirit) and the fanatics (irrational spiritualists). What allows for this connection is not a shared belief, but a certain underlying figure of thought, not a shared understanding or interpretation, but an underlying metaphorical horizon, disclosed in their attitude towards the real, rather than in their understanding of it. What is real, so they imagine – whether spirit or matter – is to be sensed, touched. Mendelssohn's analysis of the spirit of his time renders the dispute over the principle underlying all reality – dead, mechanistic matter or divine spirit – secondary to the manner in which the relation and accesses to this substratum is imagined. At issue for Mendelssohn is not so much what the bickering parties respectively believe to be the underlying ground of reality, the point of their discord, but rather the identity in their attitude towards it. While they differ in the contents of their philosophical beliefs, something in their disposition betrays that they share the form, they believe in the same way.

The very nature of the heated debates on such abstract questions reveals that there is more at stake here than the objective nature of things. The issue is not so much what is

¹⁷⁷ Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, xx.

the real, but the desire shared by opposing parties to touch and be touched by it. With this fundamental shared frame of reference, the choice is not between scientific materialism or religion, but between a spiritualized materialism and a materialistic spiritualism.¹⁷⁸ What both sides lose touch with, so to speak, is the untouchable reality of thinking as such (indeed, its strange, uncanny materiality). What neither side can conceive, nor imagine, is a reality that is untouchable, with which no contact is possible.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ It is interesting to compare Mendelssohn's treatment of materialism and spiritualism with Kant's. Only three pages after Kant's 'refutation' of Mendelssohn's proof of the persistence of the soul, Kant explains the significance of his refusal as a doctrine of rational psychology, i.e., a dogmatic thesis as to the unity of the soul, as a way to avoid both materialism and spiritualism. If there is a segment we are entitled to speculate Mendelssohn had read through, at least, it is this one. "Thus there is no rational psychology as doctrine that might provide us with an addition to our self-consciousness, but only as discipline, setting impassable boundaries for speculative reason in this field, in order, on the one side, not to be thrown into the lap of a soulless materialism, or on the other side not to get lost wandering about in a spiritualism that must be groundless for us in life; on the contrary, it rather reminds us to regard this refusal of our reason to give an answer to those curious questions, which reach beyond this life, as reason's hint that we should turn our self-knowledge away from fruitless and extravagant speculation toward fruitful practical uses, which, even if it is always directed only to objects of experience, takes its principles from somewhere higher, and so determines our behavior, as if our vocation extended infinitely far above experience, and hence above this life." Here, in a nutshell, is Kant's thesis elaborated in his 'Orientation' essay. Note that Kant's concern is to avoid two extremes: soulless materialism and a groundless spiritualism. For Mendelssohn, the two have much more in common than they would care to avow; both are incapable of imagining, or thinking, of the reality of something that is untouchable. See Kant, Guyer, and Wood, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 452-3.

¹⁷⁹ Daniel Heller Roazen, shows touch, the sense of contact, to be the principle elusively underlying the history of *sensus communis*, what is common to all senses, from Aristotle to modernity. See D. Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (Zone Books, 2007). There might be, however, a way to think of contact without entirely subordinating it to the sensible. Such an attempt is carried out by Agamben in offering an interpretation of the Platonic idea as the unpresupposed, that is, as a move away from propositional, representational language – the fundamental, seemingly inescapable presupposition of language of a world of which it is about – to an idea of language that touches. "Only by extinguishing the presuppositional power of language is it possible for it to let the mute thing appear: the thing itself and language itself are in contact at this point – united only by a void of signification and representation. A word can signify itself only by means of a representative void – hence the metaphor of touching: the idea

Like Jacobi and Kant, for Mendelssohn, there is a built-in tension between our conception of the truth, or objectivity, and our investment or appraisal of it, or our subjectivity. And yet, this tension, for Mendelssohn, is not to be overcome by their possible concord or unification (as in Kant), nor by the subordination of one to the other (as in Jacobi). It is a productive tension.

We begin to see the nature of this productive tension in lecture 7 of *Morning Hours*. Mendelssohn here argues that the customary division of the faculties into those of cognition and desire has to be enlarged. The sentiments of pleasure and displeasure, which were usually lumped together with desire, formed a group of their own. He here elaborated what he had noted as early as 1776 in a short essay entitled, ‘On the Ability to Know, the Ability to Feel, and the Ability to Desire,’¹⁸⁰ where he develops the idea of aesthetic “disinterested pleasure,” to use Kant’s phrase in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which may well be indebted to Mendelssohn.¹⁸¹ Between cognition and desire, Mendelssohn suggested, there lay the act of approbation, of approving, the satisfaction of the soul.

is a word that does not denote but ‘touches.’ That is to say, as happens in contact, it manifests the thing and at the same time also itself – recall in *De Anima* 423b 15, the definition of touching as that which perceives not ‘through a medium’ [*metaxy*] but ‘at the same time [*ama*] as the medium.’” Agamben and Kotsko, *The Use of Bodies*, 132.

¹⁸⁰ Mendelssohn and Dahlstrom, *Moses Mendelssohn: Philosophical Writings*, 307-10.

¹⁸¹ See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 678.

We consider the beauty of nature and art with pleasure and satisfaction, without the least stirring of desire. It seems rather to be a particular characteristic mark of beauty that it is considered with tranquil satisfaction, that it pleases even if it is not in our possession... it seems more fitting to me to designate this satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the soul, which is without a doubt a seed of desire but not yet desire itself, with a particular name and distinguish it from the restlessness of the mind associated with desire. I will call it the faculty of approving in order by this means to separate it from knowledge of truth as well as from the longing for the good. It is, as it were, the transition from knowing to desiring, and it combines these two faculties through a gradation so fine that it only becomes noticeable once we have gained a certain distance. We can accordingly consider the soul's knowledge in diverse respects.¹⁸²

Based on his division of the faculties, Mendelssohn distinguishes the true and the false as the “matter” of cognition from the beautiful and the ugly, the good and evil, as the “form” of cognition. Truth is analogous to matter in that it has the binary structure of an either/or, which we tend to associate with the presence or absence of matter. Things are either true or false, in the same objective sense that a stone is either there or it is not. While there could be no more or less in true and false, the objects of approval and disapproval are essentially subject to comparative evaluation. Unlike the material, binary aspect of knowledge involved in the ascertainment of truth, the formal aspect of

¹⁸² Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 43.

evaluation is seen as the expanse, or the spectrum between extremes. Value judgments differ from fact judgments, in that they do not seek to – and cannot – determine that something *is* good or bad, beautiful or ugly, but only *how* good or bad it is. Evaluating differs from ascertaining truth, or determining a fact, since nothing ever is *The Good*, or *The Beautiful*. Evaluation is therefore intrinsically subjective and relative, assessing its subject matter in light of given circumstances and subjective preferences. Having divided the faculties in theory, Mendelssohn's hylomorphic language now seems to see them as unified in practice.

Every item of knowledge, if considered fundamentally, already conveys with itself a kind of approval. Every single concept, insofar as the concept is merely thinkable, has something pleasing to the soul, something that occupies its activity.¹⁸³

Insofar as something occupies or attracts our attention, it already conveys an approval, a preference. Our preferences and evaluations color all our activities, including our thinking and knowing. Yet Mendelssohn's dualistic, hylomorphic unity, is soon complemented, and complicated, by a diametrically opposed view, that of a split unity.

I will give you a more notable distinction between these different respects of

¹⁸³ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 43.

knowledge, a distinction which seems to me to have important consequences. Both faculties – the faculty of knowledge as well as the faculty of approving – are, as we know from psychology, expressions of one and the same power of the soul, though they differ with regard to the goal of their striving. The former faculty proceeds from things and comes to an end in us, whereas the latter faculty takes the opposite path, proceeding from us and having external things as its goal. By virtue of the drive for truth, we seek to bring our knowledge into agreement with the immutable truth, without regard for satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This is not the case with the expression of the approval drive. When this drive is set into motion, its goal is not within us but rather is to be found in things outside of us, and in the same things it proceeds to make actual those predicates that agree with our approval, our satisfaction, and our wishes. The former drive wants to reshape human beings according to the nature of things, the latter drive wants to reshape things according to the nature of human beings.¹⁸⁴

As in the sketch of 1776, Mendelssohn also differentiates here between the objectivity of cognition and the subjectivity of approval, in the sense that in searching for true knowledge we seek to adapt our thinking to reality as it is, whereas the act of approbation tends to make reality conform to our standards. Both cognition, the faculty of knowledge, and approbation, the faculty of evaluation, are understood by Mendelssohn as drives, indeed, subjectivity and objectivity are imagined as two

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 44.

opposing vectors of one and the same drive, revolving around, and at the same time establishing the inner/outer relation; one direction strives to make outer reality conform with our preferences, the other to make us conform to what is conceived as external. What is important to note is that in this view the fundamental distinction between inner and outer is not something static, or given in advance, but the product of the crossing of these two vectors, or more precisely, it is the very tension between the objective tendency, which assumes the external, or objective as given, and seeks to make us accord with it, and the subjective, which sees outer reality as amenable to the given, inner reality.

There is a certain, perhaps productive tension between Mendelssohn's two, successive accounts. The first, hylomorphic and metaphoric, gives the impression of what might be described as a static dynamics: understood as the formal and material aspects of knowledge, the faculties are always operative together, but their relationship seems static; the second account complicates this static picture with what in the previous picture seemed given and pre-established: the division of the subjective and objective, inner and outer, is here seen as the outcome, always tenuous, of a field of struggle, or as the force field between two poles of attraction. In other words, Mendelssohn first gives an account of the division from an objective (or, in his terms, material) perspective, and then an account from the subjective (or dynamic and formal) perspective.

2.8 Divided by Common Sense: Jacobi, Kant, Mendelssohn

To bring to view Mendelssohn's complex view of how the theoretical and the practical relate to each other, it is useful to compare it Jacobi's notion of common sense, which Kant, we have seen, thought Mendelssohn failed to distinguish himself from, and to Kant's own, critical notion, which he begun to develop in his essay on 'Orientation.'

For Jacobi, common sense implies an immediate form of knowledge, one that is not fully translatable to conceptual language, and is superior to it in that it affirms those vital realities that inferential reason can never fully grasp: the existence of a reality outside me, the crucial sense of individual existence, and even the existence of God. This immediate relation to reality is superior to inferential, conceptual reason, not only in that it surpasses it in what it can know, so to speak, but perhaps more importantly, in its affirmative nature; it connects, rather than severs us from our life worlds. Common sense and faith are one and the same. Immediate knowledge has primacy over mediated, reasoned knowledge, not only in that it is superior, but also in that it determines it, colors what we know conceptually whether we are aware of it or not.

We have seen some of Kant's criticism of such a notion of common sense in his essay on 'Orientation.' In that essay, Kant's amended common sense was to serve a double function: it was to prevent the understanding from overstepping its boundaries, and to guide and support reason in its practical pursuits. Kant will go on, in his third critique, to develop a notion common sense that is to mediate between the faculties of cognition and desire, bringing them into contact by keeping them apart. To serve that purpose it

would have to be sharply distinguished from the vulgar notion of ‘healthy’ or ‘sound’ human understanding, which is understood by him as the uncritical reliance on what is commonly held to be true, on accepted, received views, the very opposite of a critical stance.¹⁸⁵ If Jacobi’s common sense celebrates immediacy, Kant’s common sense had the role of a mediator.

We shall presently examine Mendelssohn’s notion of common sense, as it emerges in *Morning Hours*. But from what we have seen so far, in Mendelssohn’s division of the faculties, in comparison to the views of common sense sketched above, there emerges something quite perplexing. In seeing approbation as the form of cognition, Mendelssohn seems to go a long way in Jacobi’s direction, in so far as it seems there is no position of purely objective knowledge, our knowing is always embedded in preferences and inclinations. On the other hand, Mendelssohn describes the faculties in dynamic terms as standing in tension, pulling in opposite directions.

Mendelssohn is often described in the literature as a proponent of ‘good practical sense,’¹⁸⁶ of the sort Kant had suspected cannot but collapse into the irrationalism of

¹⁸⁵ Instead, Kant develops the notion of common sense as what, in being neither a judgment of desire nor a judgment of cognition, emerges an independent realm, the training ground of judgment as such.

¹⁸⁶ The notion of pragmatic common sense lies at the core of Gideon Freudenthal’s reading of Mendelssohn. See Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). Sorkin, while highlighting the distinction as fundamental, takes the notion of practical knowledge, or wisdom, to be unproblematic. See D. Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Halban, 2012). Gottlieb has a more nuanced approach, but he offers no account of this dimension of Mendelssohn’s thinking. Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-*

Jacobi, ultimately subordinating and limiting reason's freedom received wisdom. But is this so? Can Mendelssohn, who, with his hunched back, the result of many evenings studying Maimonides' philosophy – literally embodying the disfiguration of the body by study, by theoretical activity – have had such a low opinion of the merit and value of the realm of theory?¹⁸⁷ Could Mendelssohn, who as we saw took great pains to both distinguish the theoretical and practical realms, and give an account of their interaction that avoids subordinating one to the other, simply advocate acting in accordance with popular doxa? In light of what we have seen so far it seems clear, at least, that in his view this relation – between the practical and the theoretical – is far from static and unproblematic.

Indeed, for Mendelssohn there is nothing more mysterious than common sense. Benjamin's maxim in his essay on surrealism is here particularly instructive: "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."¹⁸⁸ Although the tone of this remark by Benjamin seems far removed from Mendelssohn's style, it does shed light on the core of his sensibility. For

Political Thought. Rosenstock draws comparisons between Mendelssohn and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, often read as a philosophy of 'everyday language.' Bruce .B. Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond* (Fordham University Press, 2010).

¹⁸⁷ There is in Mendelssohn's life a continuous thread of theoretical affairs baring heavily, and grimly, on his health. From the nervous breakdown following the Lavater affair, to his letters to Kant, in which he measures his health by his (in)capacity to engage with Kant's critique.

¹⁸⁸ *Surrealism*. In W. Benjamin et al., *Walter Benjamin - Selected Writings, 1927-1930* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 216.

Mendelssohn, the problem of relating common sense – that intuitive, practical, everyday understanding in the midst of things – and theoretical, speculative reason, is the fundamental mystery. Significantly, in his *Morning Hours* he stages their relationship in a dream.

Kant's point of departure in 'What is Orientation?' – the figure or orientation in thinking – is taken from the most famous – in large part, because of Kant – segment of *Morning Hours*, namely a dream Mendelssohn reports on. While Kant doesn't address the dream directly, he does present his own procedure as a way to avoid the collapse of thinking into mere dreaming. Indeed, before his presentation of the dream, Mendelssohn takes up the old Cartesian problem of distinguishing dream from reality.

2.9 The Object of Thought – Between Dream and Reality

For Kant, we should recall, the only way to avoid metaphysical dreams is to clearly limit our pursuit of knowledge to the realm of possible experience, that is, for what can be supplied empirical, sensible material as support. Knowledge is grounded in, and restricted to, empirical reality. It is this restriction that also supplies the criterion to distinguish between dream and reality; dreaming is projecting into reality what cannot be found in it, the products of our own desires and wishes. Not paying enough care to the distinction between our subjective needs and objective reality is what makes dogmatic metaphysicians, of the likes of Mendelssohn, mistake dreaming for thinking.

Mendelssohn presents a different picture:

Rational knowledge and the order in which it serially places concepts one after another holds no other interest for the soul than the interest proper to this resolve [to meditate]. It follows this series of thought because it seeks to obtain a determinate end by this means. For the most part this resolve, this final purpose, is a supersensory object that is seldom mighty enough to resist the charm of the imagination's rich imagery. Hence, the soul would not long remain faithful to its resolve if an obscure consciousness of the present did not restrain it from its wayward path. But it is also necessary that the consciousness of the present not be mighty enough to captivate the soul entirely and render obscure the concept of the resolve [to meditate] along with the thoughts that lead to it. The present should merely remind the soul of its actual state and, by this means, of its resolve so that, undisturbed, it can pursue the order of reason. *The impression of the present must be neither too strong nor too weak, neither too lively nor too feeble, if the soul is to be able to maintain itself in a disposition conducive to meditating. All-too-strong impressions of the present overpower rational knowledge too much; by contrast, those that are all-too weak abandon the soul to the play of the imagination, and it takes flight into reveries...* Where have we come to? Indeed, have I not through my own example just confirmed the very doctrine I wanted to present? I began by stating the difference between subjective and objective representations in order to find the identifying marks by which we can distinguish

the state of being awake from a dream. Without having fully attained this final purpose, the soul has followed the path of the imagination, engaged in describing rapture and enthusiasm, and slipped away from these to the requirements of meditation: and just now I was of a mind to digress even further into the rule of lyric poetry.¹⁸⁹

It is hard to define Mendelssohn's poetic-philosophical gesture here: he declares himself to have exemplified the very failure to distinguish, to supply a criterion for distinguishing between reality and dream – the final purpose set before reason, to clearly delineate the realm of actuality. Instead, he himself drifted in reverie. But in the unsteady course of his line of thought, some significant conceptual work in fact has been achieved. It is a rather special case of example, one indeed that teaches something very different from what it pretends to. A sort of self-effacing performative paradox, where the very declaration of failure in attaining his goal masks the way in which he had indeed attained it. Such a gesture, easy to miss, allows a glimpse at something so close to the surface it is nearly undetectable: an elusive object produced/attained in the very failure to reach one's purpose.

Instead of supplying us with a clear-cut criterion to distinguish dream from reality, Mendelssohn gives an account of what we may call presence of mind, or wakefulness, which, paradoxically, seems to situate presence of mind between dream and reality.

¹⁸⁹ Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 33. Emphasis added.

The capacity to contemplate (meditate, to hold on to an object in thinking) is under the influence of two vectors of influence. Too strong of a draw to the empirical, to the immediate, to what is taken to be actual and concrete and reason becomes subservient to reality, incapable of pursuing its quest, and its object disintegrates. Too weak a pull, and reason might lose all ground in reality and drift in reverie. (In a sense, the very insistence on purging dream from reality is what brings these two vectors into play.) The same principle we saw in play in Mendelssohn's division of the soul's faculties is operative here as well; dream and reality are not distinguished once and for all, but can be seen as two vectors of power, pulling in opposite directions. Going all the way in either direction is to lose both; they only remain in relative separation in so far as something – here, thinking – can position itself in between them.

In this more dynamic imagery, a reality purified of all dream elements turns out to be something quite different from objective observance; it is a kind of passion for the real, a fanaticism, an infatuated dream of a reality devoid of all semblance. It makes contemplation impossible. Pure speculation, without any concern with brute reality, with the factual and the given, becomes itself a flight of fancy. Thus, presence of mind is not the criterion to distinguish between dream and reality, but the very edge, practically keeping them from collapsing into one another, by avoiding positioning itself on either side. With this paradoxical performative distinction in mind we can assess Mendelssohn's dream of common sense.

2.10 The Dream of Common Sense

*Historical materialism bases its procedures on long experience, common sense, presence of mind, and dialectics.*¹⁹⁰

In the dream, Mendelssohn finds himself among a group of travelers in the Swiss Alps.

The group has two guides. One is described as a rash young man, quick to act, equipped with “a muscular built, but not the sharpest intellect.” The other is a woman, “With a deeply introspective look and a visionary physiognomy; dressed in a fantastic manner, she had something on the back of her head that looked similar to wings.”¹⁹¹

Both serve as guides for the group, which includes amongst them Mendelssohn, our dreamer. After a while, the group comes to a fork in the road. There the two guides split ways, and the group remains stuck, unsure who to follow. Then, an elderly matron approaches from behind, with measured steps. She consoles the group, assuring them they will not be stuck for long. She also explains the allegorical meaning of their guides, naming one, the rash young man, “common sense,” and the other, the mysterious looking woman, “contemplation.” She explains: “Sometimes they part ways for a short time, often for insignificant reasons. If those traveling with them are steadfast enough to wait at the fork in the path and to follow neither of them, they come back to let me

¹⁹⁰ W. Benjamin and R. Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 476.

¹⁹¹ Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 59. Mendelssohn’s characterization of the two guides appears as a splitting in two of the traditional figure of *Kairos*, the God of the right time or opportunity, who was depicted as a young man rushing forward with only a single lock of hair on its forehead, as if to suggest that an opportunity can only be seized when faced, head on, equipped with wings both at the shoulders and heels.

resolve their dispute.” In most cases, common sense tends to be right and, she continues, “contrary to what one might expect, the female person tends to let herself be instructed. On the other hand, if, as sometimes also happens, she is in the right, then he, the obstinate one, cannot be brought to yield. In the face of the most convincing reasons, he laughs at me in his peasant manner, mumbles some rustic platitude, and stubbornly goes his way once more.” With this, the travelers turn to the old matron, and ask for her name: “What then is your own name, you who decide their dispute?” “On earth”, she replies, “I am called reason; in heaven...” Here, suddenly, she is interrupted by “an awful clamor... a fanatical swarm of locals from the region has gathered around the lady, contemplation, and resolved to drive away both common sense and reason. “Shouting and raging, they pressed upon us, we were in a state of fright – and I awoke.”¹⁹²

Here, again, it is the plain, straightforward nature of the dream that poses the challenge. Freud believed dreams in which the secondary process manages to come up with a narrative “faultlessly logical and reasonable” the toughest to interpret: “Dreams which are of such kind have been subjected to a far-reaching revision by this psychological function that is akin to waking thought; they appear to have a meaning, but that meaning is far removed as possible from their true significance.”¹⁹³ Mendelssohn’s dream goes even further in self-interpretation – the dream is not only coherent, but it

¹⁹² Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 59.

¹⁹³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Penguin, 1991), 630-1.

even offers its own explicit interpretation of its allegorical significance.

The dream ends abruptly, and points to a mystical, divine interpretation. What we call reason goes by another, secret, name in heaven. What could it be? We are left guessing. But before we search for solutions in the heavens above we can note something far closer to the surface. While contemplation, the young, dreamy lady, is powerless to part ways with common sense, and tends, instead, to let herself be guided by his far inferior intellect, conforming along the way to the traditionally enforced patriarchy, reason, whose sole advantage over speculation seems to be her old age, is capable of reversing the relations of power and exercise authority even over the brutish young man. Could it be that reason is an older version of contemplation?

We may begin to appreciate what it was that drew Kant to Mendelssohn's dream here, and also why he felt he had to correct it. The speculative identity of reason and speculation is much closer to Kant than he is ready to admit; indeed, perhaps too close for comfort. It is our power to abstract, to 'rise above' the immediacy of experience that can judge against our inclinations. But the dream 'stages' a difficult, and threatening question: given the tyrannical power of common sense, how is reason to raise itself above it? What is threatening in this picture is the realization that our ordinary judgments are not merely bound to the empirical as 'sense data,' but also to our causally determined inclinations, and above all, that the very separation between the two (the theoretical and practical) is not a primordial (or empirical) fact, given to reflection, but itself the precarious product of an abstraction, that remains just that, an

empty abstraction, unless it is capable of a remarkable feat – to give up on its abstraction. Reason is to be realized.

Mendelssohn's admission that our cognition is far more intuitive than we might like to think, embedded as it is in a rich fabric of prejudice and assumptions, is not meant to give common sense the upper hand. All to the contrary, it suggests something quite daring: that the test of reason is to take a counter intuitive step against the forceful restrictions of the reality principle that is common sense, and also, that in order to be able to do this, it must age, gain experience, suffer constraints and pressures that are foreign to its nature, that is, it will have to lose something of its lofty opposition with common sense. It will have to lose quite a lot by way of self-image and dirty its hands.

Bearing in mind Mendelssohn's positioning of presence of mind at the very site of the division between dream and reality, we can also gain a better understanding of the dream's abrupt end, and offer a solution for the mysterious, heavenly name of reason. Reason's name, the deep secret of the dream that otherwise is insistent on interpreting itself, the one thing reason is not allowed to disclose, is given in awakening. Awakening is the divine name of reason, since Mendelssohn's reason only emerges through dreaming – it is what emerges at the point of contact between dream and reality.

2.1 Figures of Mind

But it is not only reason that is driven away by the crowd; along with it disappear both speculation and common sense. The faculties of the mind, which in Kant gain so much

precision, disappear twice over. They disappear in the dream, as it reaches its nightmarish excess, and they disappear altogether in awakening. Figures of thought, in particular the figures of thought itself, those metaphors without which thinking cannot be imagined or gain any reality,¹⁹⁴ disappear as abstractions, mere fictions: there is no room for their reality from the stand point of a reality that is to be truly devoid of all dream elements. They are colorful ways of talking, but amount to no more than wishful thinking. But neither are they to be celebrated in the enchanted landscape of the dream. Indeed, their moment of truth is their vanishing point, right at the nightmarish edge between dream and reality. The dream is capable of thinking what consciousness cannot. The deep anxiety disclosed in the dream is the confrontation with the unthinkable – the utter destruction of all thinking, the reign of senseless violence. A reality without thinking cannot even be represented in the dream, only as its limit. It is from this impossible thought that the dream escapes to reality. It is in reality as we ordinarily perceive it, not in the dream, that we can escape this, because even if we banish all figures of thought from it as unreal, we do so only in the service of assuring ourselves of the well-ordered, comprehensible – indeed, reasonable – nature of reality as we know it. The secret name of reason is awakening, not in the sense of finally leaving our dreams behind, but because reason has its particular reality only at the impossible juncture between dream and reality, and is doomed to disappear when they are kept entirely apart. The ultimate phantasy – shared by both ‘dreamers’ and ‘realists’ – is the separation of dream from reality, of viewing the dream as devoid of all reality,

¹⁹⁴ Such as those that Hans Blumenberg called ‘Absolute Metaphors.’ See H. Blumenberg and R.I. Savage, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Cornell University Press, 2010).

and reality as the sober opposition to the dream. It is not only that the dream touches on something very real that reality can only shy away from – the possible dissolution of all coherent reality, the dissolution of thinking – and that reality can only dream of coherence. Both dimensions are only perceivable from the point of their overlap.

While it is true that Mendelssohn is an advocate of common sense, his view of it is neither commonsensical nor entirely abstract. Mendelssohn's figures of thought do not serve to exemplify an abstract idea, to bring to understanding what eludes it, nor do they serve to inspire or provoke feelings, to promote the self-congratulatory assertion of one's intuitions and wishes. They serve a very precise function, namely to interrupt the most concrete of abstractions: the abstract opposition of the abstract and the concrete, the ideal and the real.

Part 2: Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*

3. Reading *Jerusalem*

We have established that *Morning Hours*, Mendelssohn's intervention in the pantheism controversy, can be read as contributing to post-Kantian philosophical discussion. In this last work, Mendelssohn was responding to fundamental issues that arose in the aftermath of Kant's transcendental turn. The basic lesson of our reading is that, while Mendelssohn internalizes, and even radicalizes, fundamental Kantian ideas (such as the thing in itself, and the transcendental/empirical divide) that were and are seen as having disastrous consequences for both reason and faith, in Mendelssohn's hands they serve to strengthen faith rather than shake it. But this is not to say that Mendelssohn's faith is unshakable, nor that he is blind to fundamental problems that pertain to the relation of faith and reason. In the second half of this thesis we turn from *Morning Hours* to his earlier, political-theological work, *Jerusalem*. Here we shall find that Mendelssohn did wrestle with these issues, but found his solutions in his own religion, Judaism.

3.1 Refusing the Challenge – Mendelssohn and Jacobi

Mendelssohn is rarely seen as having offered a meaningful response to Kant's philosophy. In Part I we tried to amend this perception by suggesting that his reception

of Kant, while in many ways a “mistranslation,” is nonetheless insightful and relevant for still ongoing debates. But another reason for the neglect of Mendelssohn in the context of the pantheism controversy is that he is commonly perceived as having failed entirely to appreciate, let alone come to terms with, Jacobi’s challenge.

Rather than assume, as did Jacobi, and as has much of the historical commentary, that Mendelssohn was philosophically incapable of understanding the profundity of Jacobi’s critique, and, at the same time, was also too much of a rationalist to grasp the meaning of Jacobi’s existential challenge, we shall rather take Mendelssohn at his word and attempt to understand why he believed Jacobi’s challenge to be a specifically Christian problem.

Mendelssohn regarded Jacobi’s *salto mortale* as “a salutary device of nature,” which is understood by Altman as a disillusionment from vane metaphysical pursuits and a return to common sense. After having indulged in abstruse speculation for a while, one was well advised to return to normal by using one’s common sense. In other words, Mendelssohn minimized Jacobi’s existential option for faith by explaining it away psychologically as a natural antidote for too many sterile metaphysical exertions.¹⁹⁵

By now we have come to see that for Mendelssohn common sense was not the ‘magical’ solution for all philosophical and existential problems. The return to reality that

¹⁹⁵ Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 635.

Mendelssohn is after is a far cry from reducing philosophical speculation – again, Mendelssohn’s life long, deepest passion – to a psychological problem. Indeed, as we have seen, it is the very tension between the psychological and the metaphysical that lies at the heart of his thinking. There is nonetheless a valid, worthwhile clue in Mendelssohn’s association of Jacobi’s leap of faith with his own philosophical return to reality or awakening. Mendelssohn’s existentialism, the problem of how to bring one’s most abstract insights into contact with lived reality, is not seen in terms of an existential either/or between faith and reason, and further, it is not seen as an entirely individualistic matter, but as a social, political, and historical problem.

Mendelssohn associated Jacobi’s leap of faith with his loyalty to Christianity, and contrasted it with his own rationalism, which he believed was unchallenged by the religion he professed. There is ample evidence that Mendelssohn saw in Jacobi a new Johann Kaspar Lavater, whose attempt to convert Mendelssohn, some fifteen years earlier, had left a lasting impact on Mendelssohn’s physical and psychological condition. In a letter to Kant of October 1785, he seeks to draw Kant’s attention to Lavater’s presence in Jacobi’s work; Jacobi cites Lavater at the end of his essay as a source of solace, which Mendelssohn adds, “conveys no solace to me, because I cannot understand it. All in all this work of Herr Jacobi is an unusual mixture, an almost monstrous birth, with the head of Goethe, the body of Spinoza, and the feet of Lavater.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Kant, *Correspondence*, 231.

In 1769, Lavater had sent Mendelssohn a translation of Charles Bonnet's *Palingénésie philosophique* and demanded that he either publicly refute Bonnet's arguments (which to his mind presented incontrovertible proof of the truth of Christianity) or convert.

Mendelssohn refused to do either, and many prominent intellectuals of the time took his side, including Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and Herder.

As we shall see in the next chapter, Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* was not only written in response to a similar challenge, but is also to be read as a deep philosophical response to the very idea that one's religious and ethical life is dictated or flows from what one holds to be true. Neither, however, is it to be conceived as irrational.

Mendelssohn's identification of Jacobi as a new Lavater is often produced as evidence for the depth of Mendelssohn's misunderstanding of his rival (a misunderstanding the responsibility of which at least some commentators attribute to Jacobi's confusing style).

Jacobi was far from your run of the mill religious fanatic, and he was certainly not interested in converting Mendelssohn. (Indeed, considering that Jacobi's leap of faith is meant to reaffirm one's life world, it is doubtful that conversion was even deemed a viable option.) Nonetheless, as we shall argue, Mendelssohn's identification is not without a point. As will emerge from our reading of *Jerusalem* in the following two chapters, Mendelssohn had reason for deeming Jacobi's dilemma as grounded in a

Christian political-theology, and for thinking that he himself had already dealt with it in *Jerusalem*.

Likewise, I shall not discuss the honest retreat to the flag of faith that you, on your part, propose. This proposal is entirely in the spirit of your religion, which imposes upon you the duty of suppressing doubts by faith. The Christian philosopher may amuse himself by teasing the naturalist and by raising knotty points that drive him from one corner into another and invariably elude his grasp when it seems surest. My religion knows of no duty to remove such doubts by any arguments except rational ones; it commands no [mere] faith in eternal truths. I have, therefore, an additional reason to seek conviction [by rational means].¹⁹⁷

Mendelssohn did not see himself as caught in Jacobi's dilemma, since, as we shall presently see, he had developed a notion of religion that is not threatened by doubts, and this because, in a fundamental sense, it is not based on any prescribed beliefs.

Neither faith nor enlightenment are understood by Mendelssohn through the lens of the individual. Before we move to *Jerusalem*, then, it is helpful to briefly review his conception of enlightenment.

¹⁹⁷ Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 635.

3.2 What is Enlightenment? The Division and Unity of Theory and Practice

In September of 1784 the Berlinische Monatschrift published an answer to the question, “What is Enlightenment?” written by Mendelssohn. Kant's much more celebrated answer to the same question would be published three months later.¹⁹⁸

Whereas enlightenment appears in Kant's essay as a clear cut positive concept, a good to be strived for, Mendelssohn's attitude is more reserved. Mendelssohn views enlightenment as something that must be thought in its relation to culture. The two relate to each other as theory to practice.¹⁹⁹

A language attains enlightenment through the sciences and attains culture through social interaction. Through the former it becomes better suited for theoretical usages, through the latter for practical usages. Both together make it an educated language.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Foucault repeatedly returned to Kant's essay as the beginning of a new era of Modernity. Foucault does refer to Mendelssohn's essay, but only in order to mark the common, ultimately tragic destiny of Enlightenment and Jewish *Haskalah*. See Michel Foucault, *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New Press, 2003), 43-44. See also Miriam Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 17-64.

¹⁹⁹ David Sorkin has pointed out that “this distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge... may well have resulted from his [Mendelssohn's] view of Judaism.” David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (Halban Publishers, 2013), 13. Michael Mack focuses his reading of *Jerusalem* around this distinction. See Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 79-88.

²⁰⁰ Moses Mendelssohn. On the Question: What is Enlightenment? In James Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (University of California Press, 1996), 54.

Note that the subject of neither culture nor enlightenment is individuals – it is language. Language is the subject of *Bildung*, of formation – the process of articulation and realization – which involves the interplay of theory and practice, enlightenment and culture. As we shall see, this will be of decisive significance in understanding Mendelssohn’s theory of language and belief developed in the second part of *Jerusalem*.

Enlightenment is related to culture as theory is to practice, as knowledge to ethics, as criticism to virtuosity. Regarded (objectively) in and for themselves they stand in the closest connection, although subjectively they very often are separated.²⁰¹

We saw in the previous chapter the same formulation developed on the level of the individual in Mendelssohn’s division of the faculties. Mendelssohn not only sees enlightenment as intertwined with culture, he also fears that enlightenment can be corrupted if its entanglement with culture is overlooked.

If certain useful and – for mankind – adorning truths may not be disseminated without destroying prevailing religious and moral tenets, the virtue loving bearer of enlightenment will proceed with prudence and discretion and endure prejudice rather than drive away the truth that is so closely intertwined with it.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 55.

3.3 Enlightenment's Prejudice

Mendelssohn's defense of prejudice seems contrary to the spirit of enlightenment. It seems his position is one of moderate or conservative enlightenment. Yes, enlightenment, but not too much, not if it disturbs the established order of culture.²⁰³ But Mendelssohn's position is more nuanced, and it contains the germ of dialectics. Mendelssohn's concern is not so much that enlightenment might, so to speak, throw away the baby with the bath water, that, in its hurry to get rid of prejudice it might also lose sight of the truth intertwined within it. Rather, he is pointing towards enlightenment's own blind spot, as it were, its own prejudice.

Nothing is more opposed to the true good of mankind than this sham enlightenment, where everyone mouths a hackneyed wisdom, from which the spirit has already long vanished; where everyone ridicules prejudice, without distinguishing what is true in them from what is false.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Altman is one of the few commentators to see Mendelssohn's positions as more radical than Kant's. Altman points out that, in defending Kant's thesis, Mendelssohn went beyond Kant in suggesting that in some cases, what Kant called the public use of reason was permissible within one's function (what Kant called the private use of reason). See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 663. Goetschel offers an illuminating comparative reading of both texts, which includes a survey of past comparisons. See W. Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (Fordham University Press, 2013), 210-29.

²⁰⁴ Moses Mendelssohn. On the Question: What is Enlightenment? In Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, 57.

As Mendelssohn elsewhere puts it, “you can cut through all the roots of an obsolete prejudice without completely taking away its nourishment. For in such case it feeds off the air.”²⁰⁵

This striking metaphor should be taken to express Mendelssohn’s deep understanding, based, in part, on his own experience, that prejudice is not done away with by being disproved, by being consciously disavowed. Prejudice is not mere ignorance, a mistake to be corrected, and is resistant to better knowledge.²⁰⁶ Mendelssohn is well aware that the disavowal of prejudice does not do away with it, and in fact, can itself be a way of affirming it, even endowing it with new nourishment. Pure and simply rejecting the past can be a way of feeding its effect on the present, and indeed, giving it a new, more ephemeral, but for that very reason – inexhaustible – source of nourishment. Outrooting will not do, it only makes the problem of the past’s uncritical effect on the present more ubiquitous and transparent, invisible, in giving one the illusion of having overcome it once and for all.

Mendelssohn ultimately aims at enlightenment’s own prejudice, the problematic illusion

²⁰⁵ From Mendelssohn’s introduction to the Menashe Ben Israel’s “Vindication of the Jews”. See M. Mendelssohn and M. Albrecht, *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* (Meiner, F, 2005), 11.

²⁰⁶ Octave Manoni has called attention to this common, everyday, yet elusive form of belief maintained, rather than rejected through ‘better knowledge’. See Octave Manoni “I Know Well but All the Same”, in M.A. Rothenberg, D.A. Foster, and S. ed, *Perversion and the Social Relation: Sic Iv* (Duke University Press, 2003), 68-92. Robert Pfaller develops the distinction between (avowed) faith and (disavowed) belief, with far reaching consequences for the critique of ideology and the history of religion. See R. Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (Verso Books, 2014).

that pertains to the project of enlightenment – to enlightenment as a project – that prejudice can be done away with. This is, in his mind, *The* prejudice with a capital T, the uncritical presupposition of enlightenment as a project. What is called for is not a rash rejection of so called received wisdom, an attitude that has itself become something of a received wisdom in the circles of enlightenment, but neither is it a matter of simply reaffirming one’s own prejudices; rather, the issue is how to relate in a critical manner to that which one – inevitably – receives, what one is confronted with as a given. The difficult task, indeed, “Man’s destiny in general,” is “not to suppress the prejudices but to shine light on them.”²⁰⁷ This issue of how to relate to the entanglement with the given forms the core of Mendelssohn’s engagement with the division between theory and practice, and it stands at the center of his political-theological reflections in *Jerusalem*.

3.4 *Jerusalem’s* Division

In reading Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* one must begin just before the beginning. Before we can engage with the body of the text, a few preliminary remarks as to its structural organization and title are in order.

²⁰⁷ Mendelssohn, “Soll man der einreißenden Schwärmerei durch Satyre oder durch äußere Verbindung entgegenarbeiten?” (Jub A 6.1, pp. 137-141). The context, a reply to the question “Should one steer the increasing fanaticism by way of satire or political pressure?”, is interesting. Mendelssohn here criticizes the self-congratulatory sham enlightenment attitude (*Afteraufklärung*), which consists in mocking other people’s prejudices, as a deep form of blindness, in which the other’s supposed superstition, ridiculed, serves to promote one’s own sense of superiority.

Mendelssohn's book is divided into two sections. The first is Mendelssohn's treatment of the division between religion and politics, and the second a treatment of Judaism that has, among other things, the immediate purpose of responding to a series of provocations. The most recent of these was issued by an anonymous writer,²⁰⁸ who suggested that, according to Mendelssohn's own publicly expressed views on matters of religion and politics, he should abandon Judaism. Mendelssohn was provoked to show that his way of life does not stand in contradiction with the philosophical principles he has expounded.²⁰⁹

Is Judaism then a particular case, in which the principles elucidated in the first part of *Jerusalem* will be applied or tested? Is it an exception to the rule, or perhaps a paradigm? As Willi Goetschel has noted, much in the interpretation of this book has suffered from a failure to fully consider the implications of the title in its relation to the book.²¹⁰ It is crucial to allow the ambiguity of the title to resonate fully: *Jerusalem, or, on*

²⁰⁸ Scholarship has identified the anonymous writer as August Friedrich Cranz, but evidence suggests Mendelssohn himself thought him to have been Joseph Baron of Sonnenfels.

²⁰⁹ Altman had already noted that the division of the book is complicated by the "Jewish" concerns of the first part and the "philosophical" concerns of the second. We aim, in part, to achieve some clarity as to the unity of the book, a unity that is founded, as it were, on division.

²¹⁰ See Willi Goetschel, "Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy," *Bamidbar: Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag), no. 1 (2011). Goetschel draws attention to how, already in his title, Mendelssohn is signaling a refusal to think in accordance with the Athens/Jerusalem dichotomy, and sees Mendelssohn's project as an alternative casting of the universal and the particular. Goetschel interprets the title in light of the concluding line of the book, a quote from Zechariah "Love Truth, Love Peace!" In the continuation of the passage, the prophet addresses Jerusalem as the city where many and powerful nations will seek and worship God. In alluding to the Jewish prophetic tradition, Mendelssohn is cryptically promoting the vision of Judaism's mission to mediate between the particularity of all nations on earth, their states and cultures, and the project of a universality of worldwide liberation that includes all of humanity without any exception. "Jerusalem",

religious power and Judaism. What does Jerusalem stand for in the title? Is it a reference to the historical kingdom, which Mendelssohn treats in the second part of the book, or should it be read allegorically, and if so, as an allegory of what? As an image of the state or of the divine kingdom? Is it possibly the union of both? Considering that Mendelssohn is offering in his book both a philosophical account of politics and religion in general, and an account of Judaism, does the title 'Jerusalem' stand for the particular configuration of religious power proper to Judaism, or does it hold sway over the topics of power and religion in general? How does Jerusalem, terrestrial or not, relate to the subtitle, dealing with religious power and Judaism?

One should enter the book attentive to what remains unarticulated in the title, which refuses the structure of a proposition and offers instead a name as interchangeable with either two topics, religious power and Judaism, or their conjunction, leaving it to the

Goetschel claims, "symbolizes the universal in the shape of the specificity of a locality, history, and particular religion," and by alluding to this, alternative vision of universality and particularity, "Mendelssohn confronts the Christian Hermeneutic of Jerusalem with one whose particularity highlights the limits of a universalism that comes at the expense of the exclusion of Judaism, the very source and origin of the spiritual notion of Jerusalem as universal symbol – a fact to which Mendelssohn's contemporaries turned a blind eye." See Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 148. While the reading offered here is in line with much of Goetschel's insights, and indeed is indebted to them, a fundamental ambiguity remains. Is the Jerusalem alluded to the historical, earthly one, or the messianic ideal? Herder, whose reaction to the book was positive, qualified his support of the book by reference to this ambiguity: "To be sure, in the heavenly, or future Judaism no one will doubt your theory." See Alexander Altman, 'Introduction,' to Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Alan Arkush (Brandeis University Press, 1983), 27. This would come to be a recurring line of criticism against Mendelssohn's book, and we shall address it at the end of Chapter 4.

reader to divide, gather and conjoin the names and nouns in the title.²¹¹

3.5 The power of Division: The Political Theological Difference as a Temporal One

With this background in mind, we now arrive at the beginning. Mendelssohn begins his treatment of the distinction between religion and politics by noting that striking the right balance between them is one of the hardest tasks of politics, a task for which occasional practical solutions have been found, but no sound theoretical ones:

For centuries men have strived to solve it, and here and there enjoyed perhaps greater success in settling it practically than in resolving it in theory. Some thought it proper to separate these different relations of societal man into moral entities, and to assign to each a separate province... but the extent of these different provinces and the boundaries dividing them have not yet been accurately fixed.²¹²

Already here Mendelssohn is alluding to the conventional (“some thought it proper”), and thus, non-essential origin of thinking a difference in “relations” in terms of the difference between “entities” and “provinces.” Mendelssohn will offer an alternative vision of the distinction between the “two relations” further on, but he immediately points

²¹¹ Goetschel notes the homologous structure of Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem: Or, on Religious Power and Judaism* and his *Phaedon: or On the Immortality of the Soul*. In both, there is a name and a philosophical problem. See Goetschel, “Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy,” 24. But in *Jerusalem*, another name, naturally associated with Jerusalem, namely, Judaism appears on the side of the theoretical problem.

²¹² Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 33.

out the double bind of this type of struggle over boundaries. While border disputes between these two powers have proven violent and tragic, their concord and harmony seem only to come at the expense of what Mendelssohn calls “the noblest treasure of Human felicity”: “For they seldom agree but for the purpose of banishing from their realms a third moral entity, liberty of conscience, which knows how to derive some advantage from their disunity.”²¹³

Indeed, it is possible that this particular mode of distinction, aiming at an impenetrable boundary between two entities, is what causes the two domains to ‘bleed’ into each other, and in the process to shed blood. Even peaceful separation between them is a politics as a “continuation of war by other means,”²¹⁴ to borrow Foucault’s famous reversal, a repressive order that exerts violence on the conscience of its subjects, demanding more than mere obedience to laws.²¹⁵

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ See Michel Foucault et al., *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 1st ed. (New York: Picador, 2003), 15.

²¹⁵ Eric Santner analyzes what he calls the “crisis of investiture,” indeed, a crisis in the institution of institution, or the efficacy of the symbolic, in the context of the dissemination of the king’s second body into the political body of the new sovereign, “the people,” in the aftermath of the French Revolution, as a problematic fall of the transcendent, second body of the king, invested by the church, leading not to immanence plain and simple but rather to an excess of immanence. See E.L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 1997). The history of the state is bound up with a complex relation to the law, one that does not allow a simple narrative of secularization. Harold Berman’s *Law and Revolution* delineates the transformation that occurred in European law after: (a) the rediscovery of Justinian Law codes in twelfth-century Bologna; (b) the subsequent invention of law for the Roman Catholic Church; and (c) the Protestant reformation that followed. Berman sees in the “investiture reform” – the struggle over the right to invest with office – a crucial moment in the creation of a body of law able to progress through revolutions. It was this struggle that gave shape to the separation of church and state in

After a brief yet learned critical discussion of ecclesiastical law, Mendelssohn proceeds to criticize the political theories of Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes is criticized for failing to properly distinguish might and right, ultimately, nature from society, and Locke for making the sole purpose of society temporal welfare, for excluding from the mandate of society all consideration of the eternal. While these critiques seem to be independent, their connection does encapsulate the essence of Mendelssohn's intervention. To establish a convincing distinction between nature and society, between physical and symbolic power, one has to give an account of the eternal – not so much as what transcends earthly life, but as what prevents its self-enclosure.

The “common good,” writes Mendelssohn:

...includes the present as well as the future, the spiritual as well as the earthly.

One is inseparable from the other. Unless we fulfill our obligations, we can expect felicity neither on earth nor in heaven. Now, two things belong to the true fulfillment of our duties: action and conviction. Action accomplishes what duty demands, and conviction causes that action to proceed from the proper source, that is, from pure motives. To both man is led by reasons; to actions by reasons that motivate the will, and to convictions by reasons that persuade by their truth.²¹⁶

western Europe, and the creation of the first state like entity - the church. See H.J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, the Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

²¹⁶ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 40.

Hobbes, according to Mendelssohn, fails to account for the inherent relation action has to duty. His attempt to deduce duty from a realm of action that precedes it is doomed to fail. The trouble with Hobbes is that, in making fear the source and motive for political organization, his theory fails to account for the social bond it is set to explain: “according to his system, all right is grounded in power, and all obligation in fear.”²¹⁷

A Hobbesian account, in which the motivation for the social bond is fear, does not give rise to a proper notion of action and its relation to obligation, to a normative force – as distinct say, from physical movement or reaction. One cannot derive the power of obligation or duty, what one ought to do, from fear. That is, an account of an action, as distinguished from mere causal movement, or reaction,²¹⁸ entails a relation to a duty, to ends, to what one ought to do.²¹⁹ Mendelssohn’s theory will be an attempt to amend

²¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

²¹⁸ Derrida’s critique of political theology revolves around deconstructing this very distinction, that is, the distinction between reaction and response. J. Derrida and G. Bennington, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2 vols., vol. I (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²¹⁹ This is why Mendelssohn presents Hobbes’ political theory as grounded in what Hobbes perceived as the highest good, the greatest felicity, namely the tranquility required for a speculative life. Of Hobbes, he writes: “living in a time of strife, and by nature inclined toward a quiet, speculative life, he regarded tranquility and safety, no matter how they were obtained, as the greatest felicity. He believed therefore, that the public welfare would be best served if everything, even our judgement of right and wrong, were made subject to the supreme power of the civil authority. In order to do so more legitimately, he assumed that man is entitled by nature to everything it has endowed him with the ability to obtain. The state of nature is a state of tumult, a war of all against all, in which everyone may do what he can do; everything one has the power to do is right. This unfortunate condition lasted until men agreed to put an end to their misery, to renounce right and might, as far as public safety was concerned, and to place both in the hands of an established authority. Henceforth, whatever the authority ordered was right... according to his system, all right is grounded in power, and all obligation in fear.” Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 35. Mendelssohn does not fault Hobbes for his

this. It might seem strange to associate action so closely with duty.²²⁰ What Mendelssohn's definition of action aims at, as will become gradually clear, is to reveal human activity as social to its core, in that agents act by assuming a certain role, function, or symbolic mandate. This feature is nicely captured in English by the dual meaning of the word to act. Humans act "as" – as sons, friends, generals or carpenters, all of which are social roles that bear with them a sense of commitment, if only implicitly. Or as Mendelssohn puts it: "action accomplishes what duty demands." Acting presupposes, as it were, some codified normative space. As we shall see, it is this very presupposition that ultimately refers politics to religion.

This is also why Locke, in turn, is criticized for narrowing the scope of human purposive strivings, for limiting the goal of politics to the furthering of this-worldly happiness, and making politics indifferent to convictions. The separation Mendelssohn attributes to Locke amounts to the following maxim: "Believe what you will about what transcends this world in private; public matters are of this world." Mendelssohn believes this separation to be untenable. The more action is driven by conviction, Mendelssohn

error. For Mendelssohn, the distinction between might and right has become a matter of common sense, of ordinary language. "This is a distinctive feature of moral truths. As soon as they are brought to light, they become so much a part of the spoken language and so connected with man's everyday notions that they become evident even to ordinary minds." Ibid., 37. Moral, practical truths, become so absorbed in practical life that their moment of appearance before consciousness seems to efface itself. As soon as they come to light, they immediately become transparent, self-evident truths, hidden in plain sight.

²²⁰ Agamben has dedicated a book length study to discredit the notions of duty and office as ethical principles, foreign to but intertwined with the ancient ontology of being and its ethics of possibility. For Agamben, Kantian ethics of duty are the universalization of the priestly model, itself an attempt to repeat the sacrifice of Christ. See G. Agamben and A. Kotsko, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

argues, the happier people are, and coercion, the province of politics, is driven to a minimum. The task of politics then is to relate the two – convictions and actions – not simply to separate them. The divorce of practical and theoretical reasoning cannot lead to happiness.

With this, Mendelssohn proceeds to criticize the standard understanding of the distinction between religion and politics as a distinction between two jurisdictions, one in charge of temporal happiness, the other of the eternal. “It is... neither in keeping with the truth nor advantageous to men’s welfare to sever the temporal so neatly from the eternal.”²²¹ Mendelssohn’s point here is a subtle one, and it is easy to miss its full significance. If we are to distinguish between jurisdictions based on a temporal distinction, between this present world and the coming one, we are treating the domain of time as if it was divisible in the same way space is, as if one could draw a clear cut boarder between the present (and by extension, the temporal) and the future (and by extension eternity, the world to come). The misunderstanding here is twofold. In the first place, it fails to see the internal connection temporality implies between this moment and the next, the inadequacy of dividing time as if it was a spatial expansion. Secondly, it fails to see this connection as the very site of human eternity. Mendelssohn makes the first point by reference to rabbinic sources: “this life, say the rabbis, is a vestibule in which one must comport oneself in the manner in which one wishes to appear in the inner chamber.”²²²

²²¹ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 39.

²²² Ibid.

This world and the coming one are not separable in the same way one territory is separated from the next and cannot form two wholly independent jurisdictions. This world, the present, is a preparation for the next. To be invested in one is to be invested in the other. The second misunderstanding has to do with the human relation to the eternal. The crucial, and more difficult point is that it is precisely this strange inseparability of time, the link between one moment and the next, that displays the presence of the eternal in human life:

Man will never partake of eternity; his eternality is merely an incessant temporality [*Sein Ewiges ist bloß ein unaufhörliches Zeitliche*]. His temporality never ends; it is therefore, an essential part of his permanency and inseparable from it. One confuses ideas if one opposes his temporal welfare to his eternal felicity. This confusion of ideas is not without practical consequences. It shifts the borders of the sphere in which man can act in accordance with his capacities, and strains his powers beyond the goal which providence has so wisely set for him.²²³

There is much in this passage that merits unpacking. For now, let us note only this: Eternity properly understood is not a limitless expansion of time, but a timeless temporality. The presence of the eternal in human life, bound to finite temporality, is not to be found by reference to what transcends it, but rather in what is incessant in it, in

²²³ Ibid.

what pushes life forward. What inheres in life is something neither reducible to its finitude, nor external to it. Note the image of eternity as an inner chamber. It is an inside to which one does not yet have access, a sealed off interior.

This image sheds light on what in chapter 2 we saw as driving Mendelssohn's proof for the existence of God, namely the experience of the inner void as the very site of the eternal. We can now begin to see in what way this void or absence is seen by Mendelssohn as a positive condition for human life and action. In other words, eternity in human life is what opens the very horizon of the future, what inheres and persists, beyond the present moment.

Eternity appears, however, as an incessant drive, a repetition, bearing the stamp of the past. The power that pushes forward to the future is none other than the great mystery of the past, of what appears in the present as persisting – “it is,” as Mendelssohn puts it, “an essential part of his permanency and inseparable from it.” The mystery is in its persisting – what is experienced as a repetition for which the present cannot account. The present is what it is, separated from its past and future by being split, internally, between past and future. Rather than being some ideal Other time – which would entail thinking of time on the basis of space, seeking its other, eternity, *outside* of it – is the internal index that ties the present to what is to come by virtue of what in it persists from the past. It operates as a force within the present, connecting one moment to the next in their very separation. Paradoxically, eternity is not beyond the horizon of time, or some

infinitely deferred future, but what separates the present from the future, the timeless break between one moment and the next, which opens up the possibility – perhaps never to be fulfilled – of a future that is not the mere causal continuation of the present, a mere extension of it.²²⁴ Ultimately, a distinction in time is a distinction between two kinds of difference, between, we could say, quantitative difference and qualitative difference.²²⁵ The difference between indifference, and difference, if you will. The

²²⁴ At the core, the problem here is how to relate two elements that lack any mediation, whose only mediation is their very gap. This is the context in which Plato discusses the instant – a time devoid of time – in his *Parmenides*. Plato, *Complete Works* (Hackett Pub., 1997), 388. Plato sets up a series of oppositions that do not admit of mediation: movement and rest, being and non-being, the one and the many, the like and the not like, etc. The crucial point is that the notion of an instant becomes necessary where mediation as transition is impossible. When confronted with two elements that have no common ground, it is the only thing to establish a connection where division is fundamental. Indeed, it is necessary in order to express their non-relation, incommensurability or contradiction. ‘A and not A’ is only a contradiction when we assert them at the same time. It is this insight that lies at the core of Mendelssohn’s argument for the immortality of the soul in his philosophical bestseller *Phaedon*. The soul, so the argument goes, is not something that can be accounted for in terms of generation and degeneration, coming and ceasing to be, since its primary feature and contribution is its unity, which is not to be found in the phenomenal world. It is in that sense, in having to be conceived as emerging (and possibly disappearing) all at once, that Mendelssohn conceives of the soul as something miraculous and eternal, unaccountable in purely natural terms, for naturalism allows for no leaps. This is quite possibly what attracted the young Jacobi to Mendelssohn’s text, which he had aspirations to translate. Note also that Mendelssohn’s argument, seen by some as anticipating key elements of Kant’s unity of apperception, had received a critical treatment from Kant in his first critique. Conceived as a power, or intensive magnitude, Kant argues, the soul can be thought to wither away. See Mendelssohn, *Phaedon: Or the Death of Socrates*. Kant, Guyer, and Wood, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 449-55.

²²⁵ Note that for Mendelssohn eternity is not experienced in some exceptional time, qualitatively different from the continuous present of the everyday. Rather, it is accessible as that very repetition, as that which drives life forward. To repeat, the briefest formula to express this conception would be “a moment is that which separates between moments.” The fundamental unit, or atom of time is the very split between two moments. For an illuminating account of atomism on which this account of the structure of time heavily relies, Mladen Dolar, “The Atom and the Void – from Democritus to Lacan,” *Filozofski vesting* 34, no. 2 (2013). We begin, as it were, with a split that precedes both the unity, the qualitatively different (One) and the many. The fundamental split named by the instance does not belong on the side of the qualitatively different, the singular or exceptional, as opposed to the quantitative, repetitive time of everyday

shortest formula for this would be to say that a moment – the indivisible atom of time – is that which separates two moments, connecting them by separating them. Thinking of division on the basis of time, then, leads us to immediate mediacy, so to speak, in which division *is* the indivisible. One divides into two, two do not merge into one.²²⁶

3.6 The Division of Power

If religion and politics cannot be properly conceived as having separate jurisdictions, as two entities that are to be harmonized through the articulation of their relationship, and both need to be taken as invested in guiding human life towards happiness, there needs to be some other criteria to distinguish between them. What forms the distinction for Mendelssohn is power itself; not its unity, but its division. It is the division into two kinds of power, the coercive power of politics, and the power of persuasion (of claims, petitions and commands) that finds its most radical formulation in religion. Rather than deriving the power proper to each domain from their supposedly separate jurisdictions, Mendelssohn seeks to establish their distinction by studying the different powers they operate as the original division of power. Or, perhaps more precisely, Mendelssohn situates the distinction between politics and religion at the very site of the original

life. Quality and quantity are themselves oppositions mediated by the instant. A division must have already taken place. The moment names their division as their relation.

²²⁶ By referencing this slogan of dialectics, I do not mean to propose that Mendelssohn has himself explicated a notion of dialectics. However, his thinking does display a confrontation with what we might call, after Benjamin, ‘a dialectics at a standstill.’ Contrary to the image of Mendelssohn as a mediator, in the sense of a seeker of compromise, I aim to highlight the areas of his thinking in which the lack of mediation is the only mediation, the areas of immediate mediation.

division of power, between what we might call “symbolic” and “real” power.²²⁷

The state gives orders and coerces, religion teaches and persuades. The state prescribes laws (*Gesetze*), religion commandments (*Gebote*). The state has physical power (*Gewalt*) and uses it when necessary, the power (*Macht*) of religion is love and beneficence. The one abandons the disobedient and expels him; the other receives him in its bosom and seeks to instruct, or at least to console him... in one word, civil society, can have the right of coercion... has actually obtained this right through the social contract. Religious society lays no claim to the right of coercion, and cannot obtain it by any possible contract. The state possesses perfect, the church only imperfect rights.²²⁸

There is a power – political power – that ultimately manifests itself in exclusion, that

²²⁷ The division of powers Mendelssohn is outlining is closely linked to the distinction between “potestas” and “auctoritas,” analyzed by both Arendt and Agamben. As we shall see, Mendelssohn offers a unique account of their original intersection and growing independence. See ‘What is Authority?’ in Hannah. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin Books, 1968), 91-141. and Giorgio. Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 74-88. Agamben has more recently reformulated the problem in terms of the relation between “power as government and effective management, and power as ceremonial and liturgical reality,” or what he calls ‘kingdom’ and ‘glory.’ See G. Agamben, L. Chiesa, and M. Mandarini, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford University Press, 2011), xii. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo. Chiesa and Matteo. Mandarini (Stanford University Press, 2011). p. xii. Agamben’s insistence that this question has not been interrogated before seems strange. Not only does it disregard the entire tradition of the critique of ideology, from Marx onwards, it also ignores Louis Marin’s work on the political theology of absolute monarchy, in which this is the central question. See Louis. Marin, *Portrait of the King* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 216.

²²⁸ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 45.

achieves its totality and articulation by means of its power to exclude, to self-constitute its boundaries. The other power – religious power – is one that knows of no exclusion, and is powerful to the extent that it resists self-enclosure. It is essentially incomplete, non-whole. We shall return to this distinguishing below.

It is not surprising that readers have taken Mendelssohn to be denying religion any real power. Mendelssohn seems to be allowing the state the full force of law, the right to coerce, while allowing religion only the “softer” powers of instruction, consultation, and persuasion. The state is allowed to use physical force, while religion is confined to a merely symbolic, linguistic efficacy. It is a very elusive power indeed.

The full force and meaning of Mendelssohn distinction between politics and religion, in terms of a distinction between law and commandment, only comes into view when his book is taken in its totality, that is, when read together with the study of the commandment’s role in Judaism. But we can already mark the path on which our interpretation will set us. What are we to make of the distinction between Law and Commandment? The two, diametrically opposed interpretations of Mendelssohn attitude towards religion,²²⁹ can be easily matched with two opposing interpretations of the

²²⁹ See, for example A. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (State University of New York Press, 1994) and Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*. Arkush sees Mendelssohn as a deist who understands that enlightenment theism undermines the authority of traditional Judaism and seeks to reshape Judaism in a liberal mode. Sorkin sees Mendelssohn as a Jewish traditionalist who uses the language of German enlightenment to bolster his essentially premodern faith. Gottlieb has recently offered a middle position. See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought*. Gideon Freudenthal has recently attempted to defend Mendelssohn’s consistency. See Gideon

commandment in its relation to law. One either considers the commandment as analogous to Law, but of divine origin, and thus doubts Mendelssohn's sincerity in his endorsement of the enlightenment principles that seem to characterize the first part of the book, or one conceives the Commandment as having a purely moral value, focusing on it being, in Mendelssohn's view, non-enforceable. This latter interpretation naturally leads to a suspicion of Mendelssohn's devotion to the religious law he espouses in the second part of the book. The key to avoiding this forced choice between Judaism and enlightenment is to focus on the fact that Mendelssohn is speaking of a power of Commandment – of the imperative – irreducible (and prior) to enforceability.²³⁰

Mendelssohn defines the realm of imperfect right in terms of “soft” imperatives – claims and petitions. We might suspect that behind every petition, request or advice – the soft or polite modes of the imperative – hides a command. We are offered a course of action, a choice, but it is always already forced.²³¹ We may choose to deny a petition, a claim, but this is not without consequences.²³² We operate within a field of unwritten

Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). Freudenthal grounds his interpretation of Mendelssohn in a notion of semiotics borrowed from Pierce, and of common sense pragmatism, that covers over the questions this interpretation seeks to unfold.

²³⁰ For Kelsen, law is defined in reference to enforceability. See H. Kelsen, *Pure Theory of Law* (Lawbook Exchange, 2005).

²³¹ Lacan's canonical example of the forced choice is “Your money or your life.” It is clearly forced, in that choosing one item – money – means losing both. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Karnac Books, 2004), 212. As we shall see, the political-theological for Mendelssohn unfolds as the drama of the intersection of force and choice.

²³² Interestingly, the lesser known finding of the famous Milgram experiment has shown that direct orders are overwhelmingly disobeyed. Obedience was achieved as long as there remained a space for justification.

laws, implicit duties and obligations. In this view, the petition or the claim only veils the command. But what if we turn this picture around? We might then say that behind any command lurks a petition, a claim. The fact is that a command is a command even if we choose to disobey it. The effectivity of the command in its strong sense has to do with our capacity to disobey it. In other words, a command must be internalized, it must be chosen.

3.7 The Original Divide

Mendelssohn's account of the division of power follows the early modern tradition of political theory in that it is set as a narrative of the transition from the state of nature to that of society. While it is supposedly meant to account for the political theological difference, it is marked by a striking absence of any reference to the divine. The only implicit link between religion and his account of the transition from nature to society consists in his application of the distinction between perfect and imperfect rights and duties. The latter, we have seen, pertain to religion, but also cover the entire field of the state of nature.

Mendelssohn sets the stage for his discussion by distinguishing between perfect (*vollkommene*) and imperfect (*unvollkommene*) rights and duties:

The first are called compulsory rights and compulsory duties; the others, however, are called claims (petitions) and duties of conscience. The first are external, the

others only internal. Compulsory rights may be exacted by force, but petitions may be denied. Omission of compulsory duties is an offense, an injustice; omission of duties of conscience, however, is merely unfairness.²³³

Note that the distinction is between inner and external duties. As we shall see, Mendelssohn's narrative revolves around their intersection, the interpenetration of the inner and outer.

While the distinction between perfect and imperfect rights is derived from the legal theory of Grotius, Mendelssohn articulates it as a relation of humans to their potentiality. To appreciate Mendelssohn's theory, we must hear the full resonance of the German *unvollkommen*: "imperfect" here is to be read as unarticulated, unclear, that which has not fully arrived, what is on its way.²³⁴ "Right" here is incomplete. The move for perfection, as we shall see, is the move to articulation, expression, and the setting of boundaries. We can already hear the status of the *unvollkommene Recht* (imperfect right/unarticulated law) as a field of potentiality: what is imperfect is defined by its potential for perfection, the inarticulate as a potential for articulation. We can think of this realm of imperfect rights as one of unwritten laws, with emphasis placed on

²³³ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 47.

²³⁴ Mendelssohn inherits from Leibniz and Wolf the conception of perfection as the highest unity *within* diversity. Following Leibniz's conception of reality as the "best possible" world, perfection is the mark of reality. Put differently, the better articulated a thing is, the higher its actuality, and this merges with a sense of self determination and self-actualization that could be attributed to Spinoza. See Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*, 85-99.

unwritten; there is already a field of normative pressure, claims and petitions, but there are no norms, no clear criteria and distinctions. Normativity without norms. There is nothing to conjoin these claims with the coercive power of law. This vision of the primordial state of society is very close to the original sense of community as expounded by Roberto Esposito,²³⁵ of a *cum munus*, a common debt, gift or office, in which the very boundaries between the common and its members are not quite set, and what exerts its pressure is precisely this privation, this “nothing in common,” as Esposito puts it. The pure gift and the pure demand or duty truly coincide here – the given of community is its own lack, its duty to articulate itself by establishing rights and duties, by entering into a social give-and-take.

3.8 Mendelssohn’s Minimal Atomism

Despite his affection for Epicurus, Mendelssohn is far from a political atomist in the standard understanding of this term.²³⁶ In his account, people do not simply enter society as individuals, renouncing some natural rights for some other benefit. Two things set Mendelssohn apart from this tradition of thought. Firstly, his understanding of the social-political character of human capacities. It is at the level of one’s powers, what

²³⁵ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 1-19.

²³⁶ Mendelssohn’s sympathy for Epicurus is striking, considering the name Epicurus has become synonymous, in the Jewish tradition, with heresy. Mendelssohn goes so far as to describe his religious views as “quite Epicurean.” Presumably, his point of allegiance with Epicurus is the idea that God, properly conceived, is nothing to fear. On Mendelssohn’s attitude to Epicurus see Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought*, 22.

is most fundamentally one's own, that he introduces sociality.²³⁷ Secondly, his account of temporality. As we shall see, the transition from the state of nature to that of society, in Mendelssohn's account, is not something that simply happened at some point in time, nor is it a necessary, structural presupposition. Rather, it is the intersection of these two, mutually exclusive perspectives.

Seeing that no clear boundaries are established, Mendelssohn sets out to isolate what could be conceived as properly one's own. In Mendelssohn's view, this field of potentiality, of inarticulate normative pressure, exerts its powers precisely on the capacities of its individual members.²³⁸

The goods to which man has an exclusive right are (1) his own capacities; (2) whatever he produces by means of those capacities... even in the state of nature, before any contract whatsoever was enacted among men, they were excluded from the original joint ownership of goods.²³⁹

²³⁷ Mendelssohn's account of the social bond is perhaps more Democritian than democratic, as it is an attempt to deduce the relation between the one and the many from the relation between the one and the void. In his account, the split between the one and the many must be internalized, must split the one itself: a self-determining one, capable of choice, is internally split between the one who issues the command and the undifferentiated many, or the void that is to be unified under the command. On the reception and difference between Democritus' and Epicurus' atomism, see Dolar, "The Atom and the Void – from Democritus to Lacan."

²³⁸ Recent commentators have noted Mendelssohn's emphasis on capacities and powers. See Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*. See also Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond*. Both have seen in this evidence of Spinoza's influence on Mendelssohn. Our account of Mendelssohn's theory, however, is not easily subsumed under a Spinozistic order of immanence.

²³⁹ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 47.

Men's capacities, as Mendelssohn sees it, are the fundamental property, what is properly one's own, independent of any social convention or agreement, that is, independent of any established social exchange. That is, for us to be able to speak of a relation between some-one and others, to distinguish, minimally, the common from its members, the individuals that compile the multitude must be seen as carriers of power, as being capable of independent action. Otherwise they would be organs of a whole. There would not be a real distinction between the one and the many, and plurality would be subsumed under the totality of the common. However, as we shall see, what is most properly one's own appears as what must be appropriated through a certain externalization, or rather, more precisely, the crucial moment is the split intersection of the inner and outer, which entails a retroactive change in the status of their prior separation.

To the extent that one possess such goods "which are not necessarily required for maintaining his existence, he is obligated to employ a part of them for the benefit of his fellow man, that is, for benevolence. For the improvement of one's existence is inseparable from benevolence."²⁴⁰ One should pay close attention to the limited sense Mendelssohn gives the idea of property here. One's powers are one's own, in the sense that they cannot be simply used by another. Indeed, this would be the definition of (pre-symbolic) violence, to force someone. Mendelssohn's version of the state of nature thus

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

pushes to the extreme the disconnect between language and power. There are claims, petitions, without the power to coerce on the one hand, and pure violence on the other. In other words, in such a state of affairs, what one can do (what is in one's power) is one's own, insofar as another can either petition him or forcefully – violently, unjustly – make him do something, which would be a sheer act of violence. It would be *Gewalt* without *Recht*. Pure force, without justification.²⁴¹

But the powers of individuals are only activated as powers to the extent that they can be seen as the addressees of demands of others. It is the fact that there is a plurality of demands, without a criterion by which to choose, that will make choosing necessary.

Political power, as we shall see, arises with the connecting of force, efficacy, with reason, ground or justification.²⁴² Whereas religious power, the power of imperfect rights that stands as its background, arises by a certain subtraction – the effectivity proper to this domain is linked to its lack. This *Recht* without *Gewalt*, without even the power of reason, a criterion for decision, is what endows this realm with its own peculiar power.²⁴³

²⁴¹ The emphasis on force is intended to avoid the productive ambiguity of the German *Gewalt*, which can stand for both sanctioned and unsanctioned violence.

²⁴² Mendelssohn's investigation in *Jerusalem* can be read as complementary to Benjamin's investigation of violence. Benjamin focuses on the problematic entanglement of law and violence, the dialectics that makes law forever bound to violence – either law making or law preserving, a distinction the law ultimately fails to make. In Mendelssohn, we can see the operation of a power that precedes this entanglement.

²⁴³ Mendelssohn's account allows us insight into the dimension of power that is devoid of violence, insofar as violence is connected to enforcement. This is a dimension of power that endows language with its own particular efficacy. A power that cannot be said to make, or force

In Mendelssohn's state of nature, everything belongs to everybody and to no one: everybody has equal claims – imperfect rights – and no one has perfect rights. Even one's own capacities belong to this field of normative pressure. They are only privileged in the sense that it is up to each member's discretion to decide on the extent and circumstances of the use of his powers. This is Mendelssohn's law of nature: "That man, in the state of nature, is independent, and that to him alone belongs the right to settle cases of collision between [his] own use and benevolence [of his own capacities]."²⁴⁴

3.9 The Freedom of Forced Choice

The limited sense in which these powers belong to him is that it is up to his discretion to decide, not whether or not to dedicate some of his powers to society, but merely to determine the particulars: when, what, and to whom to dedicate his powers. One's capacities are not one's own by being excluded from the field of inarticulate normative pressure, or imperfect rights. On the contrary, they are precisely what is addressed by this pressure. It is our power over our capacities that allows us to decide. One's right over his power is absolute in this state, as Mendelssohn puts it, because, when it comes

anything, but is rather connected with allowing, making something possible. To borrow Werner Hamacher's coinage, one could call this power affirmative. See the main text below and Werner Hamacher, 'Affirmative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,' in A.E. Benjamin and P. Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (Routledge, 1994), 110-38.
²⁴⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 52.

to our powers, no one else could be in a better position to decide on the concrete use of them: what, when, and how much we are to contribute to the common good.

Mendelssohn's primordial choice is a forced one. As Christine Korsgaard puts it:

"Human beings are *condemned* to choice and action. Maybe you think you can avoid it, by resolutely standing still, refusing to act, refusing to move. But it's no use, for that will be something you have chosen to do, and then you will have acted after all. Choosing not to act makes not acting a kind of action, makes it something that you do."²⁴⁵

Mendelssohn's account gives us a sense of the compulsion involved in acting freely, the implicit externality involved in acting out of internal motivation.

For Mendelssohn, what sets capacities apart, and makes them the locus of normative pressure, is the inherent link between "improving one's existence" and the dedication of one's powers for another.

In social life, man must renounce certain of his rights for the common good, or as one may say, he must very often sacrifice his own advantage to benevolence. He will be happy if this sacrifice is made on his own prompting and when he realizes, in each instance, that he acted solely for the sake of benevolence. Benevolence, in reality, makes us happier than selfishness; but we must, while exercising it, be aware that it springs from ourselves and is a display of our powers [*aber wir*

²⁴⁵ Christine .M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Ebsco Publishing, 2009), 1.

müssen uns selbst und die Äusserung unserer Kräfte dabei empfinden].²⁴⁶

Benevolence, properly understood, should be experienced as the expression of one's own powers. But how does one feel himself and the expression of his power in an act of benevolence? To answer this, that is, the link Mendelssohn seeks to establish between the exercise of one's power and benevolence, we must observe the transition, offered by Mendelssohn, from the state of nature to a state of society. In stark contradistinction to standard theories of the social contract, the foundational gesture for Mendelssohn is not a reciprocal agreement between two parties but an asymmetrical act of commitment, understood as a promise.²⁴⁷

Man in the state of nature, is the master of all that is his, of the free use of his powers and capacities... it depends on him alone how much, when, and for the benefit of which of his fellow men he will dispense with some of the goods which he can spare. All his fellow men have only an imperfect right to his surplus goods, a right to petition; and he, the absolute master, has a duty of conscience to devote a part of his goods to benevolence.²⁴⁸

This is the state of absolute potentiality, as it were. It is with the first step towards

²⁴⁶ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 41.

²⁴⁷ Even Goetschel, who emphasizes Mendelssohn's originality in his political theory, and even points to the above-mentioned asymmetry, still conceives of it as a contract theory. See Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought*, 189-209.

²⁴⁸ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 52.

actuality that everything is transformed:

“Once this man has passed a judgement, that judgement must be valid... the action must have force [*Kraft*] and effect [*Wirkung*], if my right is to mean anything at all.” The power one has over one’s own capacities has meaning only if and when one decides to dedicate some of one’s power to the common good, to assume an obligation. Such an act of decision, Mendelssohn makes clear, must have a performative power, effectively transferring one’s right over his power to another, making the other’s right perfect and his own imperfect.

This foundational act of decision and transfer of power is defined by Mendelssohn as a promise, and stands at the basis of the social bond. The foundational moment, passing from what one *can* to what one *must* do, transferring some of one’s power to the other, is the only way for that right to have meaning in the first place.²⁴⁹ One’s independence, the right to decide over the use of one’s powers, is only realized when one makes a promise, assumes an obligation, and thus effectively transfers some of one’s power to another. One has power only insofar as one is capable of dedicating some of that power

²⁴⁹ There is an element of retroactivity here. One must presuppose the capacity of choice in order to isolate an individual who will be capable of entering into social relations. But that capacity is only realized, indeed, is only real, once the subject – as he can now be named, has entered into social relations, with his duties and obligations. See Mladen Dolar, 'Beyond Interpellation,' *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2 (1993). As we shall see, for Mendelssohn political subjectification involves a remainder, the name of which is religion. The impossible choice not to choose at all, not to self-constitute or limit oneself, barred by what we can call symbolic castration, has a certain effectivity that persists. It is the stuff of fantasy, perhaps, but that does not render it a mere illusion.

– one’s own – to society, allowing the claims of others to become compulsory demands, giving the other the force of law and submitting to coercion by others. The self-determination of an individual sets in motion the articulation of relations, the passage from imperfect to perfect right. But as we shall see, for that move to take place, for a promise to be issued, for one to give one’s word, one must already have taken a leap of faith.

This act of commitment has to be effective. Thus the moment that will expose the speaker to the enforcement of others also must display a most peculiar power of language, a retroactively performative power. The ‘I will’ that is the outcome of this process of the actualization of one’s power, of the ‘I can,’ must come to precede it, as in Arendt’s slogan of political action: “we will and we can!”²⁵⁰

3.10 The Articulation of Reality and The Real of the Imperative

*The human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow.*²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), 86. Arendt’s worry that violence has to do with the separation of the I-will and I-can is prefigured in Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*, particularly in the second part, to which we shall attend below.

²⁵¹ Hannah Arendt and Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition: Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 208.

In order to realize one's powers, what makes one independent, one has to internalize the imperative, the demands of others. The realization of one's own power, or potential, is only made possible with the internal splitting of that power, its othering. One achieves one's independence, one's separation from others, by assuming a symbolic mandate.

It is important to note that in Mendelssohn's account the objective order of the social world, the reality principle of having to exercise one's powers against the coercive power of others, and the submission to a public criterion of truth, to being held to one's word, is something cut off from the subject, in a sense, as he enters social intercourse. That some of the capacity or power of the individual has been conceded to society – in order for society to become objective, to assume a law-like, public, and intersubjective character, the very features of reality – appears as the condition for the exercise of one's possibilities. Reality is here indeed a principle. Whether or not this would be experienced as an unbearable imposition from the outside, or as the "expression of one's own power," is a matter of relating conviction to action. In other words, to realize one's power, duty must be assumed. Everything hinges on what we make of that assumption.

3.11 Having Power

Mendelssohn's analysis penetrates the meaning of *having* power. It is only from within this nexus in which language and power intersect that one can be said to have (even his

own, supposedly prior) power. You can because you must, as Kant would have it. Note that the promise, that moment that creates the bond, does create a temporal nexus between religion and politics. As we shall see, understood as the realm of imperfect right, from which the law proper emerges, religion can be seen as a realm of pure possibilities, and politics as a concrete actualization. But since possibility and actuality are codependent terms, such a realm of inarticulate possibilities is not really antecedent, but rather only emerges, as background, along with the actualization, as a retroactive projection. It is only from within a given present situation of a concrete commitment, or indeed a set of binding commitments and articulated laws, that such a background, the abstract freedom of what could have been, is projected, like a shadow. It is as a result of this slipping into the background that a sense of mystery, of a shadowy realm of alternate realities, elusively co-present, emerges. In Mendelssohn's account, before the law, before language and articulation, one does not encounter the brute power of nature, but rather something like the very form of language, without any identifiable content. A vague sense, so to speak, comparable with the encounter with an alien language (on which, see chapter 2), here in the form of demands that cannot be answered in the absence of a criterion – an established order, or law. And it is this absence or lack of organizing principle that makes language exert power.²⁵² By

²⁵² The situation is much akin to Lacan's matrix of desire: "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting." Jacques. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan. Sheridan (Routledge, 1977), 287. Desire is the result of the gap between needs and demands. Needs have to be expressed in language, in demand. But this translation carries a residue. The demand is immediately for more, and less, than the fulfillment of the need. The gap between them is desire, and the reason why desire is the desire of the other, why what to want – the question of the will, needs to be raised. By having one's desire appear as a question, as a

encountering the demands of others without a preexisting principle for response, one confronts the alien core of language. One is faced with a primordial forced choice: to enter into the social exchange, the give and take with its commitments and obligations, or lose oneself in the abyss where the possible and the impossible have not been differentiated. But this foreclosure of the impossible choice does not merely push it to the background, as a primordial past. Religion with its imperfect right has a role to play within the established order.

3.12 (No) Time for a Choice

Mendelssohn's story of emergence from the state of nature can be read as an attempt to account for the very primordial nature of this power of choice, a sense of the primordial that is different from an absolute beginning or ground. It is not what one must think first, but what must come before the beginning. What is presupposed, implicitly, in acting. As Mladen Dolar puts it: "choice is a retroactive category; it is always in the past tense, but in a special kind of past that was never present. The moment of choice can never be pinpointed; it passes directly and immediately from a 'not yet' to an 'always already.' It is past by its very nature."²⁵³

Recall that what one encounters in this primal scene of society are claims and petitions,

matter of choice, one presupposes there is something one ought to want. To ask what do I want, is to ask what ought I to want, or what does the other want that I want.

²⁵³ Dolar, 'Beyond Interpellation,' 83.

that is, the imperative without the backing of authority, without anything to ensure its enforcement. It is precisely here, in its “weak” sense, that one encounters the puzzling ontological status of the imperative, of the order. To paraphrase a German saying, order ought to be; which also means that order, strictly speaking, is not. There ought to be an ought, a standard, a measure, an order. Order is experienced in its real dimension not as a given, but as given in its absence, as a task to be accomplished, as something which ought to be. It makes the establishment of a social order both necessary and to an extent impossible, or at least, incomplete.²⁵⁴

The great merit and power of Mendelssohn’s account lies in what is absent from it, indeed, in the role it assigns absence. Mendelssohn does not posit a positive order that precedes human sociability and lies outside it, always knocking on its borders, such as Hobbes’ war of all against all; a time before time, as it were. One is induced into sociality – into history – not by the pressure of nature, but by society appearing as an absence of, and thus a call for, its own principal of organization. This primordial scene is not a moment in the past, but what every present, in being present, projects into its background. The groundlessness of the imperative in its “weak” sense, the claims and

²⁵⁴ Compare with the role Kojin Karatani assigns religion in his recent formulation of world history, based on a reconceptualization of the material base as the mode of exchange rather than that of production. See Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, trans. Michael.K. Bourdaghs (Duke University Press, 2014). Karatni posits mode of exchange x, that of the pure gift, as prehistorical hunter-gatherer communism, repressed from history, the primordial past the repression of which constitutes history, as well as the regulative idea of history, the perpetually deferred ethical horizon of history, what it ought to be, or should strive for. He views historical world religions as the return of the repressed, the symptomatic presence within history of its repressed past and future-oriented ethical pressure.

petitions of others, is what makes room for self-grounding human action and the establishment of laws and boundaries. If laws make things explicit, articulate relations and realize potential grounds, then the imperative could be said to make things implicit, to open up the space for decision and action as movements towards articulation by dropping into the background.

Benjamin's distinction between what can be communicated through language and what can be communicated in it is instructive here.²⁵⁵ The formal aspect of command is something that both supports and subverts the structure of law. We could say that the imperative, the demand, is what is communicated in, rather than through the law. It is the medium of the law, but as such, it carries a message of its own. It is the message implicit in the medium as such, in being addressed. In Mendelssohn's account, it is the very absence of concrete norms that, by committing and internalizing the demands of others as binding, creates the pressure to enter into normative relations. What is internalized in the act of commitment is not a preexisting bond, but the absence of a bond as enticing. While Mendelssohn does not establish the connection explicitly, from his definition of belief as the trust one puts in a promise, it is apparent that in making a promise, a commitment, in beginning to act, one must, if only implicitly, take something for granted, that is, take a huge leap of faith. The assumption of a duty is indeed an assumption with nothing to vouch for it.

²⁵⁵ Walter. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913-1926* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 62-74.

3.13 The Imperative Between the Performative and the Afformative

In his seminal commentary on Benjamin's critique of violence, Werner Hamacher coined the term 'afformative' to describe what Benjamin dubs divine violence, a power juxtaposed to the mythological power of law, caught in the dialectics of (self) constitution, between the constitutive and constituted. Afformatives are not a subcategory of performatives. Rather, afformative, or pure, violence, is a:

...condition for any instrumental, performative violence, and, at the same time, a condition which suspends their fulfillment in principle... while affirmations do not belong to the class of acts – that is, to the class of positing or founding operations – they are, nevertheless, never simply outside the sphere of acts or without relation to that sphere. The fact that affirmatives allow something to happen without making it happen has a dual significance: first, that they let this thing enter into the realm of positings, from which they themselves are excluded; and, second, that they are not what shows up in the realm of positings, so that the field of phenomenality, as the field of positive manifestation, can only indicate the effects of the afformative as ellipses, pauses, interruptions, displacements, etc., but can never contain or include them. The afformative is the ellipsis which silently accompanies any act and which may silently interrupt any speech act. What "is" afformative can therefore never be presented in the form of a rule or a law.... deposing is neither a historical, nor even a causal consequence, but rather the absolute precondition of every historical positing violence... afformative is not

aformative; afformance 'is' the event of forming, itself formless, to which all forms and all performative acts remain exposed.²⁵⁶

Mendelssohn's imperatives are situated on the edge between the performative and the affirmative, between self-grounding activity and its own subversive precondition. The imperative in his account is not precisely the pure form of law, devoid of content, as it might appear. In Mendelssohn's account, it appears equally as the pure form of formlessness, so to speak, of a content without form. The command is neither form nor content, but the very gap between form and content, what enables – and disturbs – the determination of content by form.

With this we may, with Mendelssohn, return to religion, which, as the reader might have noticed, has been strikingly absent from an account that began by arguing against the severance of the eternal and the temporal, the religious and political domains.

Having established the origin of coercive rights as necessary for the realization of human capacities, it is clear why no such rights exist in the domain of religion.

Let us now apply this theory of rights, duties, and contracts, to the difference between state and church. Both... have as their object actions as well as convictions, the former insofar as they are based on the relations between man

²⁵⁶ Hamacher, 'Afformative, Strike,' Benjamin and Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, 128.

and nature, the latter insofar as they are based on the relations between nature and god. Men need each other; they hope for, promise, expect from, and render each other services and reciprocal services. The mixture of abundance and want, power and need, selfishness and benevolence given them by nature impels them to enter into a social connection in order to obtain a wider field of action for their capacities and needs. Every individual is obliged to use a part of his capacities... for the benefit of the society of which he is a member.... Not so the church!... God is not a being who needs our benevolence, requires our assistance, or claims any of our rights for his own use, or whose rights can ever clash or be confused with ours... In the system of human duties, those towards god form, in reality, no special division. Rather, all of man's duties are obligations towards god. Some of them concern ourselves, others our fellow men.²⁵⁷

Note, first, that Mendelssohn does not speak of a relation of man to nature and man to God. Religion is rather the relation of nature to God from which man seems to be subtracted. It as if being excluded from that relation makes it possible, and necessary, for man to be the bearer of duties. The fact that man has to relate to his nature, that his being is given to him as a task, is inseparable from a relation of nature to something beyond it, that stands as its ground – a relation in which man has no proper place. In Mendelssohn's view, there is no need to add a relation of humans to their God as a separate realm of duties. The very phenomenon of having duties, refers – upon

²⁵⁷ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 56.

reflection – nature to something beyond it, prevents the enclosure of nature. The duty to have duties cannot be accounted for on the grounds of nature itself. But it is not by adding something to nature, a spiritual, metaphysical soul, that we arrive at the human animal. It is the inarticulate nature of human relations that implies a leap in natural causality, a break must be assumed. The relation of God to nature here is not so much as the creator but as leaving room within creation, leaving something undetermined in it.²⁵⁸ God here is not so much the creator of nature as what prevents nature from being the sole ground of human freedom. In a sense, humans are subtracted from the relation between God and nature because their relation to their own nature is directly that relation. It is as if in their practical, ethical obligations, in which they take their freedom and duties for granted, humans stand between God and nature, separating between them. The old Aristotelian formula for what lies outside the city, outside the political realm - either gods or beasts – is given a subtle but not insignificant twist. The anthropological difference is not guaranteed by this double exclusion, neither nature nor God, but constitutes it. In so far as there are human societies, nature and god are kept apart.

²⁵⁸ In his commentary on the role of religious law in Maimonides, Amos Funkenstein makes a similar argument. The fact that in the fulfillment of ceremonial maxims there is always a degree of indeterminacy points, in this reading, to a minimal indeterminacy in creation itself. “Maimonides developed one of the most original philosophies of science in the Middle Ages...[H]e proved that not only are laws of nature (the ordering structure of nature) in themselves contingent upon God’s will; but that each of them must include, by definition, a residue of contingency, an element of indeterminacy. No law of nature is completely determining, and no natural phenomenon completely determined (*omnimodo determinatum*), not even in God’s mind... The purpose can never determine the material actualization in all respects, down to the last particular, a ‘thoroughgoing determination’ is ruled out by the very material structure of the world.” ‘Maimonides: Political Theory and Realistic Messianism,’ in A. Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (University of California Press, 1993), 138-39.

The logical space Mendelssohn establishes for religion is thus not one that allows for a separate realm of duties, a distinct relation towards God. Religion, which establishes a relation with God, cannot be thought on the model of the relation between humans and their nature. God is not a person with claims and needs that are to be settled with our own, an entity whose powers and claims can come into collision with our own. The transcendence of God is a transcendence of transcendence – it is not simply that God is beyond our reach, but that the relation to his being transcends the logic of boundaries and their beyond, surpasses the very logic of proper place. Thus, our duties to God are not a special set of duties, separable from our duties to ourselves and others. They are, in a sense, the pure form of duty, a mute obligation, the power of the imperative as such – a pure *ought*, without content and without the supplement of coercion. They are implied in the very phenomenon of normatively structured human relations.

If the pure performative of the promise opens up a movement of articulation of social relations, beginning from particular, interpersonal commitments and opening into larger and more abstract norms and laws, it only does so against the background of an impersonal, inarticulate and impossible (non) relation. The relation to God is not reducible to an interpersonal relation, it is a personal relation to the impersonal, which accompanies all such relations.

3.14 Promise, Oath and Belief in the Other

If politics is understood by Mendelssohn as a move to the articulation and actualization of capacity/potentiality, religion is understood as the power of potentiality as such, of what remains unarticulated, in the very act of articulation. Religion is what remains unwritten in the act of writing. Far from being purely impotent, therein lies the peculiar power Mendelssohn sees as proper to religion. Just as the promise is the foundation of political life, it is in Mendelssohn's opposition to the oath where we can begin to see the elusive power of religion.²⁵⁹

To begin to see the full implication of Mendelssohn's political theology, it is helpful to focus our attention on Mendelssohn's juxtaposition of two social linguistic institutions or

²⁵⁹ In the context of his analysis of the oath, which Agamben sees as the most fundamental human institution, on the threshold between religion and politics, offering a revealing account of anthropogenesis, and of the power unique to human beings, he writes: "Something like a human language was in fact only able to be produced in the moment in which the living being, who found itself co-originally exposed to the possibility of both truth and lie, committed itself to respond with its life for its words, to testify in the first person for them. And just as *mana* expresses, according to Levi-Strauss, the fundamental inadequation between signifier and signified...so also does the oath express the demand, decisive in every sense for the speaking animal, to put its nature at stake in language and to bind together in an ethical and political connection words, things, and actions. Only by this way was it possible for something like a history, distinct from nature and, nevertheless, inseparably intertwined with it, to be produced." Agamben Giorgio, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath (Homo Sacer II, 3)*, trans. Kotsko Adam (Stanford University Press, 2011), 69. These words apply almost verbatim to Mendelssohn's account of the promise as the foundational entry into language and society. It is only by giving one's word, and thus, effectively exposing oneself to coercion, to being forcefully held to one's word, that one can be said to possess his word in the first place. Only by committing, in a gesture of asymmetrical giving, can the social give and take get going. Human capacities, the thing most properly one's own, only truly become so in their alienation/expression in language in the form of a promise, a commitment. The proper meaning of 'I can,' depends on a presupposed 'I promise,' 'I commit,' or 'I will.' To have power, as opposed to force, is to operate within a field of power, to expose oneself to the power of others.

practices, which seem, on the face of it, very close to each other: the promise and the oath. In Mendelssohn's analysis, the former serves as the basis for the transition from nature to politics, understood as an actualization of potential, imperfect law (*Recht*). The latter, on the other hand, allows us to see what forever remains beyond its scope, what remains 'on its way' in that very event, what remains potential in the very passage into actuality, and is effective as such.

Mendelssohn draws far reaching and highly controversial conclusions from his division of powers. He denies religion not only any form of coercive power, in the widest sense possible – religion is denied even the “softer” power of material reward and its denial (he calls it indirect bribe and indirect punishment, the awarding and withholding of any form of privilege)²⁶⁰ – but also the minimal element of sovereignty, the authority to define its own boundaries, to set limits to its scope. He denies this at both the immediate social-political level, by denying the right of excommunication,²⁶¹ but also on a more structural level, by denying religion the prescription of principles of belief.

First principles, says Mendelssohn are like the rules of the game. If someone denies them, he continues, a judge would be justified in saying: “You deny the basic principles, lad! with you all dispute is at an end. But you will at least comprehend that we, too, are permitted... to rid the earth of such a monster... yet the priest... is obligated to engage

²⁶⁰ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 61.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

him in discussion about the principles themselves.”²⁶² Mendelssohn is fully aware what this position amounts to.

Some people still appeal to the law of nature. Every society, they say, has the right of exclusion. Why should not also a religious society have it? But I reply: this is precisely where a religious society constitutes an exception. By virtue of a higher law, no society can exercise a right which is diametrically opposed to the primary purpose of the society itself. To exclude a dissident... is like forbidding a sick person to enter a pharmacy. In fact, the most essential purpose of religious society is mutual edification. By the magic power of sympathy one wishes to transfer truth from the mind to the heart; to vivify, by participation with others, the concepts of reason, which at times are lifeless, into soaring sensations.²⁶³

It is in this light, that is, Mendelssohn’s objection to ‘first principles’ in religion, that we can understand Mendelssohn’s objection to the institution of the oath. Believing, Mendelssohn explains, based on an analysis of the Hebrew word, is not to be understood as holding a proposition to be true, but rather trusting, relying on something. Trust is granted. What one relies on does not appear in the form of ‘first principles.’ It constitutes one’s very disposition – Mendelssohn speaks of *Gesinnung*, which can be

²⁶² Ibid., 81.

²⁶³ Ibid., 74. Interestingly, Mendelssohn then tells the story of an Epicurean – in the Jewish tradition, a synonym for a heretic – stumbling into a Stoic school, and being cured of his ailing skepticism. What Mendelssohn is after here is the power to create values, to make something valuable.

translated as conviction as well as disposition. According to Mendelssohn, there are no principles that cannot, or should not be doubted.²⁶⁴ Yet one trusts implicitly, as it were, in the very act of thinking, indeed, in the very act of acting.

Furthermore, one cannot even be sure what one's own most fundamental beliefs are. One's beliefs seems to be, in a way, inexpressible, or rather, expressing them, putting them in a propositional form, misses the point in advance. In forcing people to take an oath regarding their beliefs:

...we are putting their conscience to a cruel torture when we question them about things which are solely a matter of the internal sense. Do you believe? Are you convinced? Persuaded?... In case there still remains any doubt in some corner of your mind or heart, let us know it or God will avenge the abuse of his name. Even if he had to state a proposition from the first book of Euclid, he would, at that moment, hesitate and suffer inexpressible torment. The perceptions of the internal sense are in themselves rarely so palpable that the mind is able to retain them securely and to give them expression as often as it may be desired. They will slip away from it at times, just when it thinks it has taken hold of them. I may feel sure of something right now, but a moment later, some slight doubt of its certainty may sneak or steal its way into a corner of the soul and lurk there, without my being aware of its presence. Many things for which I would suffer martyrdom today may

²⁶⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 81.

perhaps appear problematic to me tomorrow. If, in addition, I must also put these internal perceptions into words and signs, or swear to words and signs which other men lay before me, the uncertainty will be still greater. My neighbor and I cannot possibly connect the very same words with the very same internal sensations, for we cannot compare them, liken them to one another without again resorting to words.²⁶⁵

Certainty, the conviction in the truth of the matter is ephemeral. Man cannot alienate/express/articulate his inner most intimate disposition. The trust here, expressed at first by the term “perceptions of the inner sense,”²⁶⁶ is intrinsically bound with their inarticulate nature,²⁶⁷ which, as we saw in the previous chapter, is the ground for Mendelssohn’s original proof of God. This is a domain that is only real by virtue of being on its way to language, neither belonging to it nor outside of it, a kind of mute, alien core.²⁶⁸ The inner sense is not an expression of absolute interiority. One’s beliefs are rather, to use Lacan’s coinage, extimate.

What one trusts implicitly must remain just that, implicit. As such, it can in fact be the

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁶⁶ Peter Fenves connects Mendelssohn’s “inner sense” with the sensibility of the romantics, Mendelssohn’s true heirs, as he implies. See ‘Language on a Holy Day: The Temporality of Communication in Mendelssohn,’ in P.D. Fenves, *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 80-97.

²⁶⁷ This, the internal gap in the relation to oneself, to the innermost, is what constitutes the only proof for the existence of God that Mendelssohn considered his own original contribution. See chapter 2.

²⁶⁸ In Benjamin’s terms, it is what is communicated in language, not through it, not the content, but the medium. See “On Language as Such”, p. 64.

basis of intimacy. Only laboriously, and in the course of a life-long intimate friendship, may we, occasionally, find communion for our dispositions. As long as that friendship consists of profound disagreement, that is.

“With my best friend,” writes Mendelssohn of his discussions with Lessing, “whom I believed to be ever so much in accord with me, I very often failed to come to terms about certain truths of philosophy and religion. After a long dispute and altercation, it would sometimes emerge that we have had each connected different ideas with the same words. Our ideas had to rub against each other for a long time before they could be made to fit themselves to one another, and before we could say with any assurance: Here we agree!”²⁶⁹

What Mendelssohn seems to be implying in this invocation of his friendship with Lessing – shortly after his death and before the pantheism controversy – is that it would take the labor and nuances of a lifelong conversation with a close friend, fraught with the most fundamental disagreement, to bring to language one’s own fundamental beliefs. We can already see that belief, for Mendelssohn, is a political-theological complex, in that it follows the same structure and logic of articulation.

²⁶⁹ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 66-7.

In the second part of *Jerusalem*, as we shall see in the next chapter, Mendelssohn explores this intimate topography of belief, in the context of a collective, rather than an individual, as he moves to discuss the religion of his fathers, namely Judaism.

4. Miracle and Tradition

We have seen that for Mendelssohn, belief is a political/theological complex, or, what for him amounts to the same, a matter of articulating the configuration of the private and the public, the inner and the outer. If political power is engaged in the setting of boundaries and the codification of relations, a movement from the private to the public, as it were, and from the abstract to the concrete, then religious power is engaged in preventing that movement from reaching its end, serving as a positive ‘obstacle,’ so to speak. In the second part of *Jerusalem*, as we shall see, Mendelssohn recasts these ‘vectors’ in terms of developmental tendencies inherent in the structure of language, and develops a vision of Judaism’s Ceremonial Law as a means to avoid straying too far in either direction. Such a position, Mendelssohn believes, makes the event of revelation, rather than any particular content revealed by it, the effective ‘ideological glue,’ thus allowing for a conception of Judaism as dogma free. Divine legislation, as opposed to revelation, Mendelssohn argues, is not a demand to believe in anything in particular, but an aid in avoiding two problematic forms of belief.

4.1 The Context – In Defense of Judaism

In Mendelssohn’s account, the political-theological difference is, as we have seen, a difference that precedes the entities it differentiates. The separation between the two is also their link, in the same way language separates and links the spoken and unspoken,

the written and unwritten. The theoretical challenge in thinking such a difference is twofold. On the one hand, it is crucial to maintain the difference, the separation into two. On the other, the two are only separated or differentiated so long as they remain held by the thread of their split, that is, one loses sight of the difference as fundamental if one assigns the entities divided too much independence, as if the division has effectively created, once and for all, two separate realms. Paradoxically, such was Mendelssohn's argument: it is precisely giving too much credence to the independence of these elements, erecting a wall between them, as it were, that causes the wall to crack and become a site of struggle, one element threatening to invade the other.

It is precisely the difficulty in grasping this that prompts the two challenges posed to Mendelssohn, and to which the second part of *Jerusalem* offers a reply.²⁷⁰ If the first part of the book discusses religion and politics structurally, the second part moves into the terrain of history. While it has as its main theme the characterization of Judaism as having no principles of belief, making no claims for an exclusive revelation, one of the most intriguing and famous discussions in this second part of the book is Mendelssohn's philosophical-historical account of the structure and development of language and script, elaborated in one of the digressions characteristic of the text.

²⁷⁰ Mendelssohn compares the uncanny effect of his arguments on such readers to seeing the apparition of a ghost: "Some... readers and reviewers behaved quite strangely... they did not indeed dispute my arguments but, on the contrary, allowed them to stand. No one attempted to show the slightest connection between doctrinal opinions and right. No one discovered a flaw in the conclusion that my assent or failure to assent to certain eternal truth gives me no right over things... yet, nevertheless, they were startled by the immediate conclusions of my arguments as if by an unexpected apparition. 'What? So there is no ecclesiastical law at all?'" Ibid., 77.

Mendelssohn explains this compulsion to digress in light of the strange topography in which he finds his subject matter situated: “My subject matter borders on so many others that I cannot always keep to the same road, without deviating into byways.” The relation of his subject matter – is it Jerusalem, Judaism, or religious power? – to its periphery, to its surroundings, necessitates a movement of thought that digresses rather than progresses continuously and uninterrupted.²⁷¹ With this thematic move into the terrain of history, the historical context of its composition also bursts onto the scene. As Elias Sacks puts it: “*Jerusalem, or on religious power and Judaism* is a book that Mendelssohn would have preferred not to write.”²⁷²

Composed and published over several months from 1782 to 1783, Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* was, as we have already seen in the previous chapter but now must investigate more closely, composed in response to charges, in part made anonymously, that aimed not so much at a critique of his reasoning as implied that his reasoning was in contradiction with his practical orientation and way of life – a type of claim that, Mendelssohn writes, “ought to be banished forever.” While Mendelssohn finds the

²⁷¹ Indeed, as we shall see, what it at stake for Mendelssohn is the creation of a space that allows for the movement of meaning. Such a space can collapse in two opposite ways: either by reaching its goal immediately, or by way of infinite approaching. As we shall see, this double challenge to human strivings is the fundamental problem to which the text responds. The organizational structure of his argument thus corresponds with the elusive thematic core, or the object of his endeavor.

²⁷² E. Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn’s Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism* (Indiana University Press, 2016), 22.

charges obscene and offensive, he accepts that there is a core of truth in them, which “cuts to the heart.”

In 1782, a year before *Jerusalem* appeared, Mendelssohn published a preface to a German translation of *Vindication of the Jews*, a 1656 work by a Dutch rabbi, Menashe Ben Israel, urging the readmission of Jews into England. Mendelssohn’s 1782 preface addresses an emerging debate among German politicians and intellectuals surrounding the question of whether Jews should receive the civic rights of the Christian population. Mendelssohn here devotes considerable attention to a 1781 tract by the Prussian bureaucrat Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, who insists that Jews should receive a substantial degree of civic equality, and that Jewish communities should retain privileges such as the authority to excommunicate dissidents. Mendelssohn praises Dohm’s call for civic equality but rejects his proposal for the preservation of the power of excommunication, arguing instead that all forms of religious coercion are rationally indefensible and inconsistent with the teachings of Judaism, a thesis we have already seen (in chapter three) developed in the first part of *Jerusalem*.

4.2 The Challenges: Cranz and Mörschel

The most important response to Mendelssohn’s preface was *The Search for Light and Right in a letter to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn*, published anonymously by the satirist August Friedrich Cranz. Cranz’s charge is that if Judaism’s foundational documents endorse the punishment of failures to follow Jewish practice, then Judaism is a tradition

that permits coercion in religious matters, and Mendelssohn's rejection of coercion commits him to altering or abandoning this tradition, or at least to substantially reforming Judaism by eliminating the punishments endorsed since Moses, and perhaps to rejecting Judaism altogether in favor of Christianity.

In a postscript to *The Search*, a chaplain, Daniel Ernst Mörschel, addressed another aspect of Mendelssohn's preface: statements that express a positive attitude towards reason's role in religious life, calling for the toleration of "adherents of natural religion" who derive truth from rational reflection, and describing worship as participation in "reason's house of devotion." Mörschel writes:

I have found signs leading me to believe that you are just as removed from the religion into which you were born as from the one that I received from my fathers. But I would not find it necessary to accuse you of hypocrisy if your considered response led us to conclude that you are equally indifferent to Judaism and Christianity because you are, in your sense [of the term] "a despiser of all revelation." As proof of my suspicion, aside from [statements defending adherents of natural religion], I quote the following passage verbatim from your preface: Reason's house of devotion requires no locked doors.²⁷³

²⁷³ Ibid., 26.

Mendelssohn is not called out to revisit his claims, against which, as he notes, there was raised no substantial objection, but rather to confess that his positions are in contradiction with his way of life. Against Cranz's charge, which he admits is not an unreasonable description of the manner in which some of his coreligionists understand matters, Mendelssohn distinguishes between the "original" constitution in which God was directly the King, and all subsequent historical configurations. We shall come back to this surprisingly elusive "origin" at the end of this chapter. The point here is to note that Mendelssohn provides a defense of coercion only under these, unique conditions. He further provides a more substantive defense of the idea of divine punishment as a feature of divine mercy. In light of his critique of the notion of duties towards God (discussed in chapter one), Mendelssohn rejects the idea that there can be offenses against God (God cannot suffer offenses), thus disqualifying the notion of infinite punishment. In contrast to the anxiety regarding punishment and salvation characterizing an economy of grace, Mendelssohn presents the certainty that God will leave no offense unpunished as the supreme form of mercy. Punishment serves to prevent the anxiety regarding ones standing before the divine.²⁷⁴ Against Mörschel, he will have to show how that his rejection of revelation does not lead him to atheism. In order to rise to this challenge, he proposes a conception of (his) religion, that does not rest on revelation, yet does not succumb to atheism.

²⁷⁴ Nietzsche shows how divine mercy and forgiveness create an infinite debt. Mendelssohn sees in the idea that God will not allow for human sin to go unpunished the mark of his paternal mercy, for the promise of due punishment puts a limit on human indebtedness.

What he saw was, in part, not wrong. It is true that *I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers*. Yet Mr. Mörschel is misled by an incorrect conception of Judaism when he supposes that I cannot maintain this without departing from the religion of my fathers. On the contrary, I consider this an essential point of the Jewish Religion and believe this doctrine constitutes a characteristic difference between it and the Christian one.

4.3 Divine Legislation

Judaism, Mendelssohn argues, is not a revealed religion, at least by the standard Christian, understanding of that term. It is rather a divine legislation.

I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine legislation – laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity, propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no universal propositions of reason. These the eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through nature and thing, but never through word and script.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁵ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 89.

What marks the difference between ‘divine legislation’ and the realm of ‘doctrinal opinions’ and ‘universal propositions’ is their medium of transmission. What is, or can be, a universal proposition, is not to be revealed through word or script. It should be accessible to all,²⁷⁶ and transcend the plurality of languages and traditions. Whatever we are to make of “divine legislation” as opposed to “divine revelation” must be related to the way that the former is bound up in ‘word’ and ‘script,’ bound up, that is, in a medium of tradition that differs in its accessibility from the universality of nature.²⁷⁷

Historical truths, Mendelssohn argues, are distinct in their relation to the medium of their transmission. It is not that Judaism has historical, particular dogmas, such as the belief in election, or the story of exodus, as opposed to universal truths. This would only mean that the universally valid proposition Judaism finds fundamental has as their content

²⁷⁶ It is based on this aspect of the argument, and Mendelssohn’s distinction in other contexts between public and private miracles that commentary has traditionally understood Mendelssohn’s distinction between divine legislation and divine revelation to consist in the public nature of the former in contrast to the private nature of the latter.

²⁷⁷ Mendelssohn’s translation strategy follows and exemplifies the logic of this distinction. Consider the following example: “And now the divine voice proclaimed: I am the eternal, your God, who brought you out of the land of *Mizrayim*, who delivered you from bondage... A historical truth, on which this people’s legislation was founded, as well as laws, was to be revealed here – commandments and ordinances, not eternal religious truths.” Note, not only that the understanding of universal truth is presupposed but also that Mendelssohn has no trouble translating the name of God, traditionally forbidden for pronunciation as it risks disclosing something of the nature of the Godhead, in one single word – the eternal, but he does not translate the Hebrew name for Egypt, which he renders in transliteration from the Hebrew as if to retain its semantic horizon as a site of enslavement. The proper name of God can be translated by a single word, but the historical context, what Egypt means for Jewish history, i.e., slavery – should not.

historical facts.²⁷⁸ But the distinction between universal truths and historical ones is much more than a difference in subject matter. Judaism is organized, in Mendelssohn's view, around the act and event of divine legislation, being addressed by the issuing of the commandment. It is not the content of revelation so much as the very act that is here decisive, and indeed, operative. Judaism is not organized, in Mendelssohn's view, around the content of divine legislation, which is accessible to all, but by being its addressee, by being commanded.

4.4 The Division of Truth: Necessary, Contingent and Temporal (Historical)

Mendelssohn proceeds to divide and subdivide truth. First there are eternal truths, themselves divided into necessary and contingent truths, both stemming from God, from his intellect and will respectively. The former are necessary in that they are conceivable in no other way, the latter are necessary in their actuality "because they became real in this and no other way." To the first set belong the propositions of mathematics and the art of logic, to the second belong the general propositions of physics and psychology, "the laws of nature, according to which this universe, the world of bodies and the world of spirits is governed. The former are immutable even for the Omnipotent, because God himself cannot render his infinite intellect changeable; the latter, however, are subject to

²⁷⁸ This seems to be how Kant understood Mendelssohn's argument here. See his discussion of rationality in historical belief in relying on the testimony of others in 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 244.

the will of God and are immutable only insofar as they are in accord with his intentions.”²⁷⁹

Now, beside these eternal truths, necessary and contingent, are historical, temporal truths: “Things which have occurred once and may never occur again; which have become true at one point in time and space through a confluence of causes and effects, and which, therefore, can only be conceived as true in respect to that point in time and space.”²⁸⁰

It is easy to assume that historical truths are a subset of contingent truths. And yet, perhaps, there is a clue in the fact that Mendelssohn does not divide them so. Historical, temporal truths are distinguished from the eternal, in both its contingent and necessary manifestations. Neither contingent nor necessary, history is where, it would seem, the contingent and the necessary, what belongs to the will and the knowledge of God respectively, intersect, not unproblematically.²⁸¹ For we have seen in previous chapters

²⁷⁹ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 91.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Agamben’s suggestion that the key question of power in the West pertains to the relation between the “governmental, administrative” and the “ceremonial, liturgical” leads him to trace their genealogies to the question of the being and acting of God, that is, the tension between the being of God having to be though as immutable, and the event nature of revelation, at the dawn of the classical age and the rise of Christianity in late antiquity. See Agamben, Chiesa, and Mandarini, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. His complex archeology thus leads him, interestingly, to what Boyarin considered to be the key axis around which Jews and Christians, over the span of centuries, constituted their respective difference, what he calls logos-theology, the status of the revealed word of God. The process resulted in the Christian theological doctrine, on the one hand, from which Agamben derives his “division of power,” and the rabbinical institutionalization of a legal discourse that refrains from such a doctrine. See D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Boyarin is here following recent trends in

that a crucial aspect of Mendelssohn's metaphysical theology is his insistence on the irreducible gap between God's knowledge, the eternal, immutable representation of what is best, and his creation, through an act of will, of what falls short of the ideal, our contingent world.

Historical time is the site where the necessary and the contingent intersect. Note that Mendelssohn speaks of the confluence of causes and effects. While this may be taken as the intersection of more than one causal chain, it can also be read as the intersection of cause and effect themselves, as if they were themselves separate elements here intersecting. There is a way to bring these two readings together: history would then be the realm of consequences, where causes intersect with effects, and the confluence of causal chains would be indicative of that. The question 'Why?' as it pertains to an historical event is not to be explained by mere reference to a causal chain. It involves the intersection of several such chains. This seems to be the very definition of what, from a modern standpoint, is defined as contingency – it just happens to be the case that these causal chains have here intersected. But reference to contingency seems to do very little to quiet the question.²⁸² It is here precisely the absence of a cause – there

research that reject the idea of Judaism as a 'mother' religion, preceding, and superseded by Christianity and ideological constructs. Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are more profitably to be considered as 'twin' religions, articulating their identities in reference one to the other. See I.J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (University of California Press, 2006).

²⁸² See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Clarendon Press, 1963), 69-70. Evans-Pritchard, explaining the nature of witchcraft among the Azande of the southern Sudan, began with the example of a granary which, one day while people were sitting beneath it, collapsed. The Azande, who know about termites, are not satisfied with this as a reason for the calamity. They ask rather about the particularities of the event. Why did the granary collapse at that moment, and with certain people beneath it? Evans-Pritchard argues that

is no one cause that accounts for the intersection of the relevant causal chains – that has the relevant effect. The question of meaning of an historical occurrence lies in its singularity – why here and now, why do these people – and is in that sense only raised in light of this absent cause, and cannot be explained away by evoking contingency. Contingency seems to bring about its own necessity – the necessity of the absent cause.

4.5 Event and Authority

Temporal truths involve a punctuation of the flow of time, a point in which a proposition becomes true. Mendelssohn is proposing a conception of history that insists on both necessity and contingency, both the truth and its occurrence. It is the nature of this punctuation of time by truth that he believes differs from the conception of revelation he attributes to Christianity. What is immediately veiled by revelation is revelation itself, to the extent that one takes the revealed content to be decisive. It is the eventual nature of revelation that is sidestepped by the truth revealed in it.

what they are after is what caused such causal chains to intersect, at that time and place. In looking for their answer, they find the witch to whom the event is attributed. In revisiting Evans-Pritchard's classical study, James Siegel compares the search for a magical explanation with modern trauma. It is not true, he says, that we simply let go of such excessive 'why' questions: "We understand that we cannot answer the question posed by Azande. But we pose it also, all the same. When, for instance, we are involved in a bad accident, the sign of our being traumatized is precisely that we feel compelled to repeatedly recall the scene of the accident. A similar accident happening to someone unknown to us is less likely to stimulate such memories. If it does, we believe we identify with the person in the scene with ourselves... There is a singularity about the event when 'I' am involved in it... It is not the breaking of the traffic laws that makes the accident abnormal. It is that they were broken in such a way that I became a victim. A victim not merely of negligence and perhaps criminality but a victim of circumstances." J.T. Siegel, *Naming the Witch* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 75-6.

Historical propositions, “which have become true at one point in time and space through a confluence of causes and effects, and which, therefore, can only be conceived as true in respect to that point in time and space [*die sich zu Einer Zeit zugetragen, und vielleicht niemals wiederkommen; Sätze, die durch einen Zusammenfluß von Ursachen und Wirkungen in einem Punkte der Zeit und des Raumes wahr geworden, und also von diesem Punkte der Zeit und des Raumes nur als wahr gedacht werden können*].”²⁸³

The German *von*, here translated as ‘in respect,’ allows for a slightly, yet meaningfully, different translation: it is *from* that point in time that these events are to be thought, that is, not only can they not be thought before, and need to be thought in relation to that moment in time, but it is also from within that very break in time that they are to be conceived. Truly conceiving them entails situating oneself within that very break.

These sets of propositions – necessary, contingent and temporal – differ also in respect to their “means of persuasion, or in the manner in which men convince themselves and others of them.” In accordance with their different nature, they belong to different epistemological registers. The doctrines of the first kind, the necessary truths, “are founded upon reason, that is, on the immutable coherence and essential connection of ideas, according to which they either presuppose or exclude one another.” Such are mathematical and logical propositions. They all show the possibility or impossibility of

²⁸³ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 91.

thinking certain ideas in association with others. The truths of the second kind, eternal and contingent, what we would call, empirical, require in addition to reason also observation. Here, the reliance on others can be seen as contingent upon the limitation of our time. Given the opportunity, we could, perhaps gladly, verify such truths with our own experience.

This is where historical truths differ. Here, trust in the testimony of others is not only necessary but belongs to the nature of the event.

Those passages which, as it were, occur but once in the book of nature must be explained by themselves, or remain incomprehensible; that is, they can only be perceived, by means of the senses, by those who were present at the time and place of their occurrence in nature. Everyone else must accept them on authority and testimony... In historical matters, the authority and credibility of the narrator constitute the only evidence. Without testimony, we cannot be convinced of any historical truth. Without authority, the truth of history vanishes along with the event itself.²⁸⁴

The transition from the second kind of truth, which we may call empirical, to historical truths involves a fundamental change in the role, function, and even meaning of the term experience. Whereas empirical fact must be indifferent to the impressions of its perceiver, in principle repeatable and equally accessible to anyone's experience, and

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 93.

thus the reliance on the testimony of others is accidental, historical experience is essentially mediated by others.

The truth of an event is inseparable from its mediation, its transmission, and that is what sets them apart epistemologically. An event is never properly known by an individual knower, relying solely on his cognitive powers. To recognize an event is a collective, and historical, transgenerational, enterprise.

However, this move away from empirical fact does not imply for Mendelssohn the problematic mysticism of revelation as traditionally understood, namely, an ultimately private, incommunicable affair, and one that relies on the miracle of divine grace.

Miracles and extraordinary signs are, according to Judaism, no proofs for or against eternal truth of reason. We are, therefore, instructed in scripture itself not to listen to a prophet if he teaches or counsels things contrary to established truths, even if he confirms his mission by miracles.²⁸⁵

For Mendelssohn, the belief in miracles is secondary to the trust one must assign to a tradition. A miracle would only be taken as a sign, as something carrying meaning, for those who already see themselves as inheritors of the tradition. To understand the effectivity of miracles is to understand the effectivity of language. Of one's own language, that is, of speaking a language amongst the plurality of languages. The status

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 99.

of the effectivity of history and tradition is inseparable from their plurality, from there being histories and traditions. Indeed, the trouble in inquiring after the authority of tradition is that tradition and authority form a kind of hermeneutical circle: tradition is that form of life in which authority is in full sway, authority is the traditionally grounded power.²⁸⁶

Mendelssohn thus reverses the order of miracle, authority and tradition: a miracle can never be the explanation for tradition. Rather, tradition is the miracle to be explained. Authority here must be granted – it is the condition of possibility for there being a medium of tradition. And authority cannot be derived from a miraculous act. At best, a miracle can be an additional sign, alongside writing and other linguistic signs, which serves to confirm authority.

Divine legislation, as opposed to divine revelation, is fundamentally inseparable from tradition and authority. The elevated status of trust in authority in the case of such truths is linked to their status as events. An event in the meaningful sense of the term, i.e., more than a mere occurrence but that which marks a break between before and after, which raises a question of meaning, is something that simply does not exist without a medium of tradition, or fidelity, to borrow Badiou's language.²⁸⁷ The event does not have

²⁸⁶ See H.J.S. Maine, *Ancient Law* (J. Murray, 1912).

²⁸⁷ Compare with Badiou's definition of fidelity: "I call fidelity the set of procedures which discern, within a situation, those multiples whose existence depends upon the introduction into circulation (under the supernumerary name conferred by an intervention) of an eventual multiple. In sum, a fidelity is the apparatus which separates out, within the set of presented multiples, those which depend upon an event. To be faithful is to gather together and distinguish the

the status of an objective, empirical fact, it does not belong to the order of nature, of what happens. It never simply is or has taken place, but it always in some sense ought to have taken place, remains to come.²⁸⁸ An event is imperative, it has a deontological dimension and it engages the practical attitudes – desires, wishes and actions – of those involved with it, not only their cognition. A fact is to be acknowledged and reckoned with, an event is to be realized and reinterpreted.²⁸⁹ The event to a large extent *is* nothing but the tradition it ensues, the fidelity it instigates, the commitment to realize it. It is in essence directed towards transmission and thus cannot be thought outside its subjectification. An event is not an occurrence that can be rendered as a mere matter of fact. While empirical facts must be “out there” regardless of our recognition, waiting to be discovered, events are unheard of only in the sense that there

becoming legal of a chance.” A. Badiou, *Being and Event* (Continuum, 2005), 232. Without going into the highly technical language and complex ontological structure of Badiou’s enterprise, we can here point to an affinity on the issue of the complex existential dependence at play – fidelity is to separate between what is given in a situation, and what owes its existence to such an intervention.

²⁸⁸ In more dynamic terms, closer to the sense given to the event in Heidegger, Agamben speaks of an event/origin as something that “cannot be understood in any way as a given that can be situated either in a chronology... or even beyond it, in an atemporal metahistorical structure... it is rather, a force working in history... just as the child in psychoanalysis expresses a force that continues to act in the psychic life of the adult... something... necessarily presupposed as having happened but that cannot be hypostatized into an event in a chronology... not in fact an event that can be considered completed once and for all; it is always under way...” G. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath (Homo Sacer II, 3)* (Polity, 2011), 10-11.

²⁸⁹ Bringing together the two senses, in English, of the word realization, as making something real and existent and as coming to a different understanding of past events. Eli Friedlander makes this observation in the context of his reading Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image, a reworking of his notion of origin as something that lies neither in the past nor in the present but in their coarticulation. See Eli Friedlander, “The Measure of the Contingent,” *Boundary* 35, no. 3 (2008): 21.

is a difficulty in hearing them fully, in being properly addressed by and responsive to them.

4.6 Hearing Voices

At issue in Divine legislation, Mendelssohn makes clear, is how to hear, even listen to, the voice that issues the commandment.

I return to my previous remark. Judaism boasts of no exclusive revelation of eternal truths that are indispensable to salvation... revealed religion is one thing, revealed legislation, another. The voice which let itself be heard on Sinai on that great day did not proclaim, "I am the eternal, your God, the necessary, independent being, omnipotent and omniscient, that recompenses men in future life according to their deeds." This is the universal religion of mankind, not Judaism; and the universal religion of mankind, without which men are neither virtuous nor capable of felicity, was not to be revealed there. In reality, it could not have been revealed there, for who was to be convinced of these eternal doctrines of salvation by the voice of thunder and the sound of trumpets? Surely not the unthinking, brute like man, whose own reflections had not yet led him to the existence of an invisible being that governs the visible. The miraculous voice would not have instilled any concepts in him and, therefore, would not have convinced him. Still less would it have convinced the sophists whose ears are

buzzing with so many doubts and rumination that he can no longer hear the voice of common sense. He demands rational proofs, not miracles.²⁹⁰

Note the slippage from the thundering voice of trumpets to the sober, silent voice of common sense.²⁹¹ The point of conjunction of these two opposites is their disjunction with the content they aim to support. The voice offers no aid to the universal truth – it can only undermine it.²⁹² There are two kinds of deafness that correspond to the two problematic modes of consciousness. The unthinking brute cannot comprehend the sublimity of the invisible, he has no concept of such a power (as a source of language).

²⁹⁰ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 97-8.

²⁹¹ My reading of the voice in Mendelssohn largely follows Dolar's notion of the voice; not the fully present support of meaning that came under Derridean attack under the name of phonocentrism, but the elusive voice-object that undermines meaning. See M. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006).

²⁹² It is interesting that Mendelssohn approaches the problem of the voice from the opposite end to the manner in which it appears in Kant. In Kant, human freedom begins with the ability to quibble with the voice, understood as instinct. See, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History,' in Kant and Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 223-4. An interesting point of overlap between Mendelssohn and Kant occurs in the way the voice for both seems to slip between domains, which might be the most salient feature of its elusive materiality. Kant moves from the voice of God to the voice of nature – presumably, at this level there is no difference. The problem of listening to the voice posed here by Mendelssohn emerges for Kant in his second critique. See Kant and Beck, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 51. For discussion see Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 83-103. For Kant, we must first learn to distance ourselves from the voice, be able to see it as external – heteronomous – and therefore, not a real source of authority for us. We must then learn to hear the voice of reason, which is inaudible because it is our internal exterior, that which only arises in us, but is for that reason, the only thing capable of pushing us beyond our nature (inclination). Second nature would be a kind of repetition and substitution of a lost power. The picture for Mendelssohn is quite different. He is offering here no speculation as to what came before historical time. Since the voice belongs neither outside nor inside there is no point in such a narrative of internalization. The voice can only be heard, so to speak, at the very site of such a splitting between inside and outside, before and after – nature and culture. Dorothea Von Mücke discusses Kant's voice in the context of the emerging discourse of human lack of instinct. See D.E. von Mücke, *The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 38.

The voice, if heard, can do nothing but scare him out of his wits. For him the voice would drown the message, he could hear nothing but its violence, its raw power. The voice cannot instill any understanding in him, cannot push him towards meaning. Its authority cannot be thus established. The sophist, on the other hand, can no longer hear the voice of common sense, as his ears are “buzzing with doubts and ruminations.” The sophist does not have an ear for common sense, quite literally: sense for him does not cohere, and is divorced from all that is common. For him sense belongs only on the side of distinction and differentiation, the skeptic unmasking of what is commonly held to be true as mere appearance, as semblance. The sophist’s ears are abuzz with doubts as to the veracity of what he is hearing. For the sophist, the voice is no longer audible, since it is completely infused in the text. The brute is incapable of moving beyond the mere force of enunciation, while for the sophist enunciation dissolves without remainder in the enunciated message.

In Mendelssohn’s account, a tradition that is to be truly alive would have to avoid both of these opposing modes of consciousness, which make hearing the voice – opening the space for mediation itself as meaningful – impossible. What he sets out to isolate is a tradition founded upon this voice, a way of life that makes this voice audible. A means (medium) and technology (practical know-how) animated by the commanding voice, rather than the message it carries. As we shall see, the ceremonial law is understood by Mendelssohn as a way to hear the voice proclaiming the law, and to avoid the two modes of deafness.

4.7 The First Detour: Progress, Between the Naive and the Skeptic

Mendelssohn's opposition to the idea of God revealing essential truths to parts of humanity, coding them in particular languages and addressing them to particular peoples, leads him to a critique of the notion of progress.²⁹³ The idea of divine revelation, of God revealing the truth necessary for His creation's felicity, in a particular moment and to particular people, is in contradiction with the idea of divine providence.

It is by designing the appropriate media for the discovery of truths that Mendelssohn sees the mark of providence. The truths necessary for human felicity cannot depend on a supernatural revelation:

If therefore, mankind must be corrupt and miserable without revelation, why has the far greater part of mankind lived without true revelation from time immemorial? Why must the two Indies wait until it pleases the Europeans to send them a few comforters to bring them a message without which they can, according to this opinion, live neither virtuously nor happily?²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Arendt's judgement of Mendelssohn as lacking a conception of history is thus hardly justified. The reason Arendt could not locate a conception of history in Mendelssohn is because of his explicit rejection of a progressive account of history. See H. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), 7-8. Arendt's judgment in this regard has been up until recently a consensus in the literature. For the only exception so far, to the best of my knowledge, see Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism*.

²⁹⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 94.

While eternal truths must be accessible to all, the manner in which they become manifest in particular life forms varies in degree and quality from a rather inarticulate but vivid practical disposition to one that is more finely articulated but therefore also weakened in its effectivity.

According to the concepts of true Judaism, all the inhabitants of the earth are destined to felicity; and the means of attaining it are widespread as mankind itself, as charitably dispensed as the means of warding off hunger and other natural needs. Here men are left to brute nature, which inwardly feels its powers and uses them, without being able to express itself in words and speech except in the most defective manner and, as it were, stammeringly. In another place, they are aided by science and art, shining brightly through words, images, and metaphors, by which the perceptions of the inner sense are transformed into a clear knowledge of signs and established as such.²⁹⁵

Mendelssohn opposes the notion of progress, in so far as it suggests that at particular moments in history particular life forms have had an exclusive access to universal truth. Mendelssohn does not deny the difference in knowledge and refinement between contemporaneous cultures, what we might call civilization, and he recognizes this difference as an advancement, a progress, but in a qualified sense. It comes with a cost. The gaining of clearer knowledge is not always necessary or useful.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

The man who lives simply has not yet divided the objections which so greatly confuse the sophist. For him the word nature, the mere sound, has not yet become a being that seeks to supplant the deity. He still knows but little of the difference between direct and indirect causality; and he hears and sees instead the all vivifying power of the deity everywhere – in every sunrise, in every rain that falls... this mode of conceiving things has in it something defective, but it leads directly to the recognition of the invisible, omnipotent being, to whom we owe all the good which we enjoy. But as soon as an Epicurus or a Lucretius, a Helvetius or a Hume criticizes the inadequacy of this mode of conceiving things and (which is to be charged to human weakness) strays too far in the other direction, and wants to play a deceptive game with the word nature, providence again raises up other men among the people who separate prejudice from truth, correct the exaggerations on both sides, and show that truth can endure even if prejudice is rejected. At bottom, the material is always the same, – there endowed with all the raw but vigorous juices which nature gives it, here with the refined good taste of art, easier to digest, but only for the weak. On balance, men's doings and morality of their character can perhaps expect just as good results from the crude mode of conceiving things as from the refined and purified concepts.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 95.

There is a certain excess to human life,²⁹⁷ which the naïve consciousness senses vividly everywhere, but, for that very reason, misperceives. By seeing everything as full of life, invested with meaning, it cannot isolate and conceive the source that animates. Things appear as immediately invested with meaning, alive and vital. Alas, the process of conceptual clarification, set on purifying meaning from the realm of the sensual and securing a sound understanding, is soon led to act against itself, to undermine its own quest for knowledge. The conceptual apparatus ‘cooks’ the Real it is after, ‘digesting’ a processed and weakened (conceptually mediated) version of reality, a reality precisely devoid of its raw, pre-conceptual force. Seeking to divest our picture of reality from all emotional investment and to perceive it objectively leads to an objectivity devoid of its object. Better put, objectivity itself becomes the object, they coincide entirely. While the naïve perception is attributed to human weakness in face of the excess it encounters, the incapacity to perceive things clearly leading to mystification; conceptual clarification soon becomes itself a form of defense, capable of digesting only a reality purified and distilled so as to be digestible by its own powers of understanding. Indeed, in purifying all meaning from the perceptual world, the excessive power that the naïve consciousness senses and perceives in the world around it attaches to the process of

²⁹⁷ Erich Santner speaks of the “too muchness” of life as a problem shared by Freud and Rosenzweig. One of his suggestions is to consider trauma as generated “by *too much of address*, by an excess immanent to an address that resists metabolization, that is symbolically ‘indigestible.’” See E.L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32.

purification itself, which therefore tends towards its own self-undermining.²⁹⁸ The skeptic falls under a subtler deception, but a deception nonetheless.

Naive consciousness is crude, but has a sense for the mystery. The skeptic falls prey to the illusion that one could eliminate all mystery. The truth that is to survive the correction of prejudice is the truth of mystery, so to speak, or more precisely, what the naive consciousness takes to be mysterious. Sure enough, what the naïve mode of conceiving things sees as a mysterious power behind the realm of appearances, endowing everything with life, can be explained away by rational, scientific thinking. But, recall that the role of *Bildung* for Mendelssohn is not to simply do away with that sense, but rather to shine a new light on it. This 'doing away' with prejudice, leads, in his analysis, to a sophism blind to the illusion it is wrapped up with, namely, the mystification of knowledge, which turns a blind eye to the inescapability of mediation. The skeptic demands a piece of knowledge that is immediate, purified of all human projections, and thus ends up only being capable of perceiving ("digesting") a reality completely mediated by his conceptual apparatus. Demanding that everything would be grounded soon leads to despair; the doubt whether there is anything we can know that is worth the effort.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Zupančič interprets in similar terms Nietzsche's ascetic ideal, as a drive for purification that ultimately turns against itself. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (MIT Press), 46-71.

²⁹⁹ See Chapter 2 on Mendelssohn's condition of impossibility.

The issue for Mendelssohn is how to retain an amount of naivety, the sense of mystery, not as a manner of not knowing, of keeping ignorant about unpleasant facts of life, but as the very attitude of research and discovery.

4.8 Everything Fundamental: Mendelssohn's Elusive Belief

Mendelssohn recognizes in these 'shapes of consciousness,' to use the Hegelian term, a practical attitude or disposition. While such a minimal discrepancy between consciousness and its implicit presuppositions is unavoidable, as he proceeds to account for (his own) tradition he will do so in terms that seek to avoid the double pitfall or the deadlock presented by the alternative between skepticism and crude naivety.

Although the divine book that we received through Moses is, strictly speaking, meant to be a book of laws containing ordinances, rules of life and prescriptions, it also includes, as is well known, an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines which are so intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity. All laws refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them. Hence, our rabbis rightly say: the laws and doctrines are related to each other like body and soul. I shall have occasion to say more about this below, and shall content myself here with

presupposing it as a fact, of the truth of which anyone can convince himself if he pursues the laws of Moses for that purpose, even if only in translation.³⁰⁰

Mendelssohn will unpack a little the connection a tradition establishes between truth and doctrine,³⁰¹ the strange unity achieved by it, in his discussion of Ceremonial Law. What keeps his focus here is the strange appeal such a tradition exhibits (although the two issues are by no means unrelated).

The experience of many centuries also teaches that this divine law book has become, for a large part of the human race, a source of insight from which it draws new ideas, or according to which it corrects old ones. The more you search in it, the more you will be astounded at the depths of insight which lie concealed in it. At first glance, to be sure, the truth presents itself therein in its simplest attire and, as it were, free of any pretensions. Yet the more closely you approach it, and the purer, the more innocent, the more loving and longing is the glance with which you look upon it, the more it will unfold before you its divine beauty, veiled lightly, in order not to be profaned by vulgar and unholy eyes. But

³⁰⁰ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 99.

³⁰¹ A major concern for Walter Benjamin throughout his career, which, after H.N Bialik, he will come to call Hallakha and Aggadah. This notion occupies Benjamin's thought in particular in his essay on Kafka. We know that he had received from his friend Scholem a first edition copy of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* at the same time he immersed himself in Kafka. See Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On The tenth Anniversary of his Death,' in W. Benjamin et al., *Selected Writings*, vol. II, part 2 (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 794-816.

all these excellent propositions are presented to the understanding, submitted to us for consideration, without being forced upon our belief.³⁰²

The truth presents itself in a deceptively simple attire, “free of any pretensions.” And yet it becomes a “source of insight” from which one “draws new ideas” or “corrects old ones.” The more one is capable of gazing at it innocently, the more it reveals its beauty. The issue is how to adopt such a gaze, how to trust in the possibility of uncovering meaning, confronted with an object that appears to hide nothing.

In truth, everything depends here also on the distinction between believing and knowing, between religious doctrines and religious commandments. To be sure, all human knowledge can be reduced to a few, fundamental concepts, which are laid down as the bases. The fewer these are, the more firmly the structure will stand. But laws cannot be abridged. In them everything is fundamental; and in this regard, we may rightly say: to us, all words of scripture, all of God’s commandments and prohibitions are fundamental.³⁰³

The text contains ordinances, as well as eternal truths (which are in principle accessible to anyone). What is unique, Mendelssohn suggests, is precisely their connection, the

³⁰² Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 99-100. As Altman notes, in speaking of the beauty of the Torah, Mendelssohn is making use of a metaphor with a long tradition, comparing the Torah to a hidden, beautiful woman. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 543. Mendelssohn is not merely simplifying the metaphor, as Altman suggests. The beauty here is a result of the pursuit – the lover has to overcome the ugliness and plainness of his beloved. On the long history of this metaphor see G.G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (Schocken Books, 1965), 32-86.

³⁰³ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 101-2.

vivid manner in which they relate to each other (like body and soul). But what maintains this relationship of life between them? Or indeed, any relationship at all?

Mendelssohn is here confronting the core of the challenge he has set himself up to meet. He has struggled to separate the two realms – that of reason and that of commandment – absolutely, and is now aiming at their conjunction.

Commandment and prohibition, reward and punishment are only for actions, acts of commission and omission which are subject to man's will and which are guided by ideas of good and evil and, therefore, also by hope and fear. Belief and doubt, assent and opposition, on the other hand, are not determined by our faculty of desire, by our wishes and longings, or by fear and hope, but by our knowledge of truth and untruth.³⁰⁴

The separation seems absolute, and the connection between the two realms impossible. Belief is separated from all desire and motivation, cannot be effected by rewards or punishment and should only be susceptible to reasons. But this absolute separation begins to falter.

Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic law, there is not a single one which says: you shall believe or not believe. They all say, you shall do or not do. Faith is not commanded, for it accepts no other commands than those that come to it by means of conviction. All the commandments of the divine law

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 100.

are addressed to man's will, to his power to act. In fact, the word in the original language that is usually translated as faith actually means, in most cases, trust, confidence, and firm reliance on pledge and promise.³⁰⁵

While trust, like belief, cannot be the result of a command, and is not a matter for the will, it differs from the former in its relation to the truth. While a belief can be shaken by evidence and argumentation, trust can only be broken. Belief is either justified or not, trust is granted. If rational belief is indifferent to the will, to reward and punishment, trust can be said to be equally indifferent to knowledge, to evidence and argumentation. Recalling Mendelssohn's division of the faculties, we might say that trust belongs to the subjective pole, the vector that issues from the inside to the outside, seeking to realize in reality what it wishes for, whereas belief in this context belongs on the objective pole, the vector that seeks to adjust our inside in accordance with external reality.

The text of tradition is paradoxically more revealing, seen as having more and more meaning to be uncovered the more the gaze is trusting. Naivety here is not the mark of mere simplicity, but of the capacity for fascination, for enchantment, as an attitude of interpretation, of the uncovering of truth. What opens up the space of engaged reflection is a certain indifference or suspension of conceptual determination, which makes it possible to perceive in the plain looking text ever more meaning to uncover.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

After surveying Jewish history to give support to his claim that Judaism has no principles of belief, Mendelssohn refers the insisting reader to Hillel for guidance.

Should you, nevertheless, want to obtain to their quintessence, listen to how the great teacher of the nation, Hillel the Elder, who lived before the destruction of the second temple, conducted himself in this matter. A heathen said: “Rabbi, teach me the entire law while I am standing on one foot!” Shammai, whom he had previously approached with the same unreasonable request, had dismissed him contemptuously; but Hillel, renowned for his imperturbable composure and gentleness, said: “Son, love thy neighbor as thyself. This is the text of the law; all the rest is commentary. Now go and study!”³⁰⁶

What allowed Hillel to answer the heathen? Did he have a better conception of the essence of Judaism so that he could reduce it to a single maxim? This is clearly not Mendelssohn’s intention, as he has just emphasized the impossibility of the reduction of the law. And indeed, Hillel’s answer certainly does not offer a reduction that would render the engagement with the tradition redundant. Hillel can only serve as the hero of

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 102. It is worthwhile noting that this is not an entirely faithful quotation. While this version of the so-called golden rule or rule of reciprocity, important to Christianity, has biblical origins (Leviticus, 19:18), Hillel’s version is put in the negative: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.” We see here again that for Mendelssohn the core idea can be put in different words with relative ease. What is veiled in this translation is the possible undertone of scolding, of Hillel reprimanding the heathen who approached him. Mendelssohn’s choice of evoking the biblical verse rather than Hillel’s version, however motivated, thus veils the undercurrent of hostility and aggression embedded in the ethical maxims, and which drew Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* to his own exegeses of this famous verse. See S. Freud, J. Strachey, and P. Gay, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (W.W. Norton, 1989), 66-9.

Mendelssohn's story to the extent that his abridgment fails, albeit in a very specific and productive way.

Hillel's maxim, like the foundational text, is dressed in deceptively simple attire. There is no apparent difficulty in comprehending it, let alone one that would prompt an engaged study of an entire tradition. What the Hillel story is set up to demonstrate is the sense in which laws, in opposition to propositions, cannot be abridged. What cannot be captured by understanding is precisely the force of the maxim, its instructiveness. What practical maxims in themselves reveal is the gap between the simplicity of understanding them and the profound, immense difficulty in making them instructive, effective. In the ethical, practical realm, Mendelssohn thought, examples do not serve to clarify an abstract idea, but rather, to bring the ideas from the mind to the heart.

4.9 The Second Detour: Mendelssohn's Critique of Media

Mendelssohn sees the Ceremonial Law as a way to hear the voice, a manner to be attentive, and receptive, to the act and event of revelation, rather than to its content.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁷ Compare with the mystical idea of the divine voice as the empty core of revelation, reported by Scholem. Scholem concludes his reflections on authority and mysticism with the following tale about the theories of the Hassidic Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov, a younger contemporary of Mendelssohn's, bearing remarkable resemblance to our interpretation of Mendelssohn. "Rabbi Mendel Torum of Rymanov (1745-1815), one of the great Hassidic saints, throws a striking light on the whole problem of the relationship between authority and mysticism. The revelation given to Israel on mount Sinai is, as everyone knows, a sharply defined set of doctrines, a summons to the human community; its meaning is perfectly clear, and it is certainly not a mystical formula open to infinite interpretation. But what, the question arises, is the truly divine element in this revelation? The question is already discussed in the Talmud. When the children of Israel received the ten commandments what could they actually hear, and what did they hear? Some maintained that all the commandments were spoken to the children of Israel directly by the

This entails for him a notoriously complex digression into the nature and history of language and means of communication. Since the Ceremonial Law is for Mendelssohn a medium in which to receive the very mediation of revelation, he is compelled to reflect more explicitly about the advantages and shortcomings of mediation in general.

It seems to me that the change that has occurred in different periods of culture with regard to written characters has had, at all times, a very important part in the revolutions of human knowledge in general, and in the various modifications of men's opinions and ideas about religious matters, in particular; and if it did not produce them completely by itself, it at least cooperated in a remarkable way with other secondary causes.³⁰⁸

divine voice. Others said that only the first two commandments: 'I am the Lord thy God' and 'thou shalt have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20:2-3) were communicated directly. Then the people were overwhelmed, they could no longer endure the divine voice. They had been obliged to receive the remaining commandments through Moses. Moses alone was able to withstand the divine voice... who repeated in a human voice those statements of supreme authority that are the ten commandments. This conception of Moses as interpreter of the divine voice was developed much more radically by Maimonides, whose ideas rabbi Mendel of Rymanov carried to their ultimate conclusion. In rabbi Mendel's view, not even the first two commandments were revealed directly to the whole people of Israel. All that Israel heard was the *aleph* with which in the Hebrew text the first commandment begins.... this strikes me as a highly remarkable statement, providing much food for thought. For in Hebrew the consonant *aleph* represents nothing more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel. Thus, the aleph may be said to denote the source of all articulate sound... to hear the aleph is to hear next to nothing; it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself contains no determinate, specific meaning. Thus, with his daring statement... rabbi Mendel transformed the revelation on mount Sinai into a mystical revelation, pregnant with infinite meaning, but without specific meaning." Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 29-30.

³⁰⁸ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 104.

Mendelssohn here already outlines in passing what is perhaps the most elusive question pertaining to media in general, the question of its effectivity. The extent to which means of communication, from natural language to electric media, can be taken to shape and transform the opinions and ideas, which, it would seem, they are meant to merely mediate. Unpacking this is essential in the endeavor to conceptualize the effectivity of the ‘divine legislation,’ the very giving of the law, apart from any particular content of revelation. He begins his discussion with an account of the formation of language.

4.10 The Formation of Language – The Primal Scene of Signification

Scarcely does a man cease to be satisfied with the first impressions of the external senses (and what man can long remain content with them?), scarcely does he feel the urge implanted in his soul to form concepts of those external impressions, when he becomes aware of the necessity to attach them to perceptible signs, not only in order to communicate them to others, but also to hold fast to them himself, and to be able to consider them again as often as necessary.³⁰⁹

Note how perception appears immediately as something that demands or pushes itself to be rendered into concepts. It is as if the lack of concepts appears as a meta-maxim to

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 104-5.

construct concepts, in the same way that, in Mendelssohn's 'original proof,' the lack of (self) knowledge was seen as a demand for self-articulation.

The first step toward the separation of general characteristics he can, and indeed must, take without making use of signs, for even now all new abstract concepts must still be formed without the help of signs and are only later designated by a name. The common characteristic must first be separated by the power of attention from the fabric with which it is interwoven and must be rendered prominent. What facilitates this is, on the one hand, the objective power of the impression which this characteristic is capable of making on us, and, on the other hand, the subjective interest we have in it.³¹⁰

What Mendelssohn's primal scene of signification highlights is the absolute ambivalence between sign and signified, and between subjectivity and objectivity. The isolation of a feature, of a distinctive mark, involves in equal measure the two dimensions, or vectors, of Mendelssohn's drive. The scene is everywhere ambivalent. For what is a characteristic mark? This account of the emergence of a pure difference is a scene of utmost tension between the emergence of a pure sign and a pure object, or signified. What is entailed in this abstraction of a characteristic is precisely this ambivalence, redoubled on each side of the distinction. It is the ambivalent distinction between an abstract concreteness, so to speak, the "this" of pure reference, of determination without

³¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

content, and concrete abstractness, the palpable presence/absence or the objectivity of indeterminacy as such.

The zero-experience of sense is not the experience of a determinate sense, but the absence of sense; more precisely: the frustrating experience of being sure that something has a sense, but not knowing what this sense is. This vague presence of a non-specific sense is sense “as such,” sense at its purest – it is primary, not secondary, i.e., all determinate sense comes second, it is an attempt to fill in the oppressive presence-absence of the that-ness, of sense without its what-ness.³¹¹

In what sense is this the zero-experience of sense? This ambivalence of the primal scene of signification is caught, as it were, in the act of primal distinction, between distinction and indistinction, between difference and indifference. It is the ambivalence between a pre-symbolic sign with thing-like characteristics, a sign that directly intervenes in reality, which cuts into the fabric of being, and an object with sign-like characteristics, an object that is imperceptible in itself, and stands for its own cut, taking the place of its own separation from the background, folding that from which it was removed – the undifferentiated totality, ‘the fabric’ of being – into itself, as the indeterminate object.

³¹¹ S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (Verso, 2010), 378. But the greatest usefulness of this quote is that it is in direct relation to liturgy: “Why is this liturgy necessary? Precisely because of the precedence of non-sense over sense; the liturgy is the symbolic frame within which the zero level of sense is articulated.”

Whatever it is that was thus isolated, a unique sign or unfathomable object, it does not quite reach understanding or consciousness; it cannot be grasped, only momentarily retained, and with great effort. It is not isolated by designation, by fixing its meaning in a sign, but by repetition itself, a signifying repetition that precedes thought.

But this throwing into relief and consideration of the common characteristic costs the soul some effort. It does not take long for the light which attention concentrated on this point of the object to disappear again, and the object is lost in the shadow of the whole mass with which it is united. The soul is not capable of advancing much farther if this effort must be continued for some time and has to be repeated too often. It has begun to set things apart, but it cannot think.³¹²

What sets an object apart from its surroundings, the unfathomable x that is in it more than itself, that vivifies and attracts our attention is, in principle, not something that can be pinpointed once and for all. There is a sense for sense, so to speak, but no concrete, articulated thought. There emerges therefore a separation and repetition in the soul, prior to thinking. It can repeat this pure mark or cut, but it cannot endow this repetition with significance. It seems repetition must be repeated.

What is one to advise [the soul] to do? Wise providence has placed within its immediate reach a means which it can use at all times. It attaches, either by a natural or arbitrary association of ideas, the abstracted characteristic to a

³¹² Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 105.

perceptible sign which, as often as its impression is renewed, at once recalls and illuminates this characteristic, pure and unalloyed. In this manner, it is well known, originated the languages of men, which are composed of natural and arbitrary signs, and without which man would be but little distinguished from the irrational animals; for without the aid of signs, man can scarcely remove himself one step from the sensual.³¹³

But how is a perceptible sign connected to an abstracted characteristic? The answer may lie in what Mendelssohn himself seems compelled to repeat, as if arbitrarily. Not once but twice does Mendelssohn here mention the division of signs into ‘natural’ and ‘arbitrary.’³¹⁴ If we take this division – and its repetition – to be revealing, we can offer the following interpretation, which will prove helpful in coming to terms with Mendelssohn’s ensuing reflection on media.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ In his ‘Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge’ (1746), Condillac had presented a theory of the origin of language that played a seminal role in eighteenth-century discussion of the philosophy of language. Rousseau, Diderot, d’Alembert, and Herder take their cues from Condillac’s ‘Essay.’ While Mendelssohn may not have had firsthand knowledge of Condillac, he carefully studied Rousseau’s second discourse, which refers to Condillac, and which Mendelssohn translated in 1755 directly after its publication. This gave Mendelssohn indirect knowledge of the seminal conception of the origin of language Condillac had introduced. Condillac stresses the fundamental role of signs for the process of cultural development. Defining language as the constitutive faculty of the mind’s activity, thinking emerges, Condillac observes, as defined by the limits of language. For a discussion of Condillac’s semiotics, see Dorothea E. von Mücke, *Virtue and the Veil of Illusion: Generic Innovation and the Pedagogical Project in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 18-61. For a comparison between Condillac’s and Herder’s semiotics see *ibid.*, 161-73.

The ambivalence of the sign-thing is mediated by the distinction between two kinds of signs: arbitrary and natural. This is the distinction between two orders of mediation – ‘natural signs,’ which connect signs to their signified by means of resemblance, a continuity between the sign and its signified, and one which connects them arbitrarily, by means of the connection between signs themselves. The origin of language is to be traced back to the split and distinction between two fundamental media, one which operates by evoking the perceptible, similarity (the imaginary), and one which operates by evoking the imperceptible (symbolic) difference. One medium operates in a medium of continuity with what it mediates, the sharing of qualities between image and depicted (resemblance), and the other by means of a break, a disconnect between sign and signified (representation).³¹⁵ In this way, the ambivalence between the sign and the thing is represented, so to speak, in the very distinction between two modes of representation or mediation.³¹⁶ While we rely on both orders of representation for our understanding, it is in their very separation that Mendelssohn’s primal scene of signification is represented. In Kantian terms, understanding relies on the combination of both these orders, of the order of concepts (symbolic, arbitrary signs, which reach their objects by means of definition, reference to other concepts) and intuition (imaginary, sense perception). But such combination always implies their underlying split.

³¹⁵ This is the irreducible division, the division as irreducible, characteristic of temporal difference, discussed in chapter 1.

³¹⁶ Historically, the two translations of the Greek *mimesis*, imitation and representation. See B. Cassin et al., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 659-74.

Mendelssohn's ensuing reflections on language trace the various trajectories taken by these two linguistic dimensions in their development into media of communication. Such developments carry advantageous as well as problematic dimensions

4.11 The Swerve of Language

Natural signs develop quite naturally into hieroglyphs:

In the course of time, one may have found it more convenient to take images of the things... 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, and at last, to compose out of heterogeneous parts a hapless but meaningful whole; and this mode of designation is called hieroglyphs.³¹⁷

While the development of signs from pictorial representation to hieroglyphs can be accounted for "quite naturally," the transition to alphabetical script "seems to have required a leap, and the leap seems to have required "more than ordinary human powers."³¹⁸

Thus, *while Mendelssohn does not explicitly argue that alphabetic script is a development of arbitrary signs, they do seem to follow the same logic, which also*

³¹⁷ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 107-8.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

explains why no developmental schema is offered. Indeed, Mendelssohn's fascination with the alphabetic system of signs has to do with what we may call its purely symbolic character, the fact that it signifies through an interplay between signs, none of which directly signifies. The miraculous quality of the alphabet is that there is no accounting for its genetic development, no transition describable between representing by means of similarity between the sign and the signified and the representation by means of interplay between signs. "The real difficulty presented... by the transition to our script consisted in the fact that, without preparation and cause, one had to conceive a deliberate plan of designating, by means of a small number of elementary signs and their possible transpositions, a multitude of concepts which would seem neither to admit of being surveyed nor... encompassed."³¹⁹

4.12 The Fetishizing of Media: Means and Meaning

Mendelssohn is not juxtaposing our 'good' alphabetic script to the problematic hieroglyphs. All development of media has a dialectical effect on society. It contributes to its advancement, but at the same time it creates new modes of illusion and servitude.

The development of writing and modes of designation must also have had different effects on the progress and improvement of concepts, opinions and knowledge. In one respect, to their advantage. The observations, experiments

³¹⁹ Ibid.

and reflections in astronomical, economic, moral and religious matters were multiplied, propagated, facilitated, and preserved for posterity. These are the cells in which the bees collect their honey, and save it for their enjoyment and that of others. However, as always happens in things human, what wisdom builds up in one place, folly readily speaks to tear down in another, usually employing the very same means and tools... what had been simplicity and ignorance now became seduction and error... the great multitude was either not at all or only half instructed in the notions which were to be associated with these perceptible signs. They saw signs not as mere signs, but believed them to be things themselves. As long as one still used the things themselves or their images and outlines, instead of signs, this error was easily made. For besides their signification, the things also had a reality of their own. The coin was, at the same time, a piece of merchandise which had its own use and utility, therefore, the ignorant person could easily misjudge and wrongly specify its value as coin. Hieroglyphs could, to be sure, partly correct this error, or at least did not foster it as much as the outlines did, for its images were composed of heterogeneous and ill-matched parts, misshapen and preposterous figures which had no existence of their own in nature and could, therefore, as one should think, not be taken for writing. But this enigmatic and strange character of the composition itself afforded superstition the material for all sorts of inventions and fables... hypocrisy and willful abuse were busy, and furnished it with tales which it was not clever enough to invent. Whoever had once acquired consequence and authority

wished, if not to increase, at least to preserve them. Whoever had once given a satisfactory answer to a question never wanted to be remiss in his responses.³²⁰

Note how the very advancement represented by hieroglyphs, the fact that they cannot be mistaken for a simple representation of a natural object, becomes the very manner in which they deceive. By giving an image without any natural correspondence, hieroglyphs give the impression of being the image of the supersensible itself, giving an image to what has none. Hieroglyphs for Mendelssohn are dangerous in so far as they threaten to saturate the empty space of the missing image.³²¹ They substitute in place of that which has no image an image that does not depict anything. Although some of Mendelssohn's rhetoric speaks of manipulation of these features of the medium, it is ultimately the medium itself that pulls its users into a web of deception. Indeed, under the new media condition: "What had been simplicity and ignorance now became seduction and error." This might explain why there is no straightforward road of articulation and clarification. If in the previous juxtaposition of naïve and skeptic consciousness, naive perceptions, relying on figurative language and vivid imagination, besides having their own merit, could in principle be easily corrected and refined, hieroglyphs represent a different set of relations with respect to the truth. The "enigmatic character" of the new composition is productive of fables, and it restructures society around them. Since the signs are opaque, the multitude must believe there are others

³²⁰ Ibid., 110-11.

³²¹ This is precisely the functionality of the psychoanalytic concept of fetish: it is the last thing seen before the void; standing on the edge of the absent, it comes to stand for it.

who are in a position to interpret these mysterious signs, while those in positions of authority must believe in the ignorance of the masses and are invested in propagating it, never shying away from supplying the multitude with what they demand.

The elusive critical point Mendelssohn is aiming to point out is the objective illusion entailed in media fetishization. It is not only the naive believers who are duped by a cynical intellectual elite, the priestly cast; both are, as it were, under the charms of the medium they are involved in interpreting and manipulating. In an important sense, it renders the distinction outlined above, between naive and skeptic consciousness, meaningless – since here, illusion is not to be corrected by the refinement of knowledge, it pertains to the nature of the medium, it is objective. The priests misleading the masses share in their fundamental illusion. The trap is in the very relation to language, in which both enlighteners – those in charge of theoretical knowledge – and the masses are led astray by the nature of the sign. But it is the final step that is the most crucial, namely, the recognition that the media critic does not fare any better in this objective illusion. If the Egyptians are duped in that they confuse signs with the supersensible, the substitute for the thing itself, the clever media critique who points this out is “guilty” of what amounts to the same mistake, albeit on a different register – after all, he is attributing to the medium the power to shape the minds and lives of the people duped by it, to create practices and beliefs. Material qualities become the direct causal agent for the suppressible. Like the most naive of believers, he is attributing to the medium a magical power of sorts. And therein lies the real “magic” of the medium – it is effective whether you believe in it naively, abuse it cynically or

analyze it skeptically. The bottom line remains the same. There is, in that sense, no position of knowledge external to it, immune to its deception. The remedy for this kind of objective illusion is therefore not a change in consciousness, but has to be a practical one, namely the creation of a space where a different articulation of society and language is possible.

Mendelssohn explicates his media critique of idolatry in his discussion of hieroglyphs. However, the same structural problem that is exemplified in hieroglyphs pertains, in a subtler but for that reason more dangerous way, to the modern, alphabet-based means of communication. Mendelssohn is not dividing the signs into good alphabetic symbolic signs and bad hieroglyphic imaginary ones. Both are needed, and both present a potential problem. The Ceremonial Law aims at warding off the problematic nature of both hieroglyphs and the alphabet in a modern print society.

4.13 Hieroglyphs and Idolatry

Mendelssohn belongs to a tradition of thinkers³²² in the history of religion that sees in monotheism not an achievement of progress or election but the original religious idea, and other forms of worship as a straying away from that fundamental religious core.

However, this notion of his should be read in accordance with his conception of belief as

³²² Following in this context in the footsteps of Maimonides, in all likelihood. On Maimonides' conception of monotheism as 'original' see Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, 131-54.

being irreducible to its explicit expressions. Take his description of the “man who lives simply”:

[He] has not yet divided the objections which so greatly confuse the sophist. For him the word nature, the mere sound, has not yet become a being that seeks to supplant the deity. He still knows but little of the difference between direct and indirect causality; and he hears and sees instead the all vivifying power of the deity everywhere – in every sunrise, in every rain that falls... this mode of conceiving things has in it something defective, but it leads directly to the recognition of the invisible, omnipotent being, to whom we owe all the good which we enjoy.³²³

It is on this level that Mendelssohn’s deism is placed. The intuitive sense of mystery, of something more behind appearances, a power vivifying them, is itself a recognition of the invisible, omnipotent being; however it is one that could be, and tends to be, misconstrued. This is where in Mendelssohn common sense and metaphysics both coincide and part ways. Some sense of the divine, Mendelssohn believes, is inescapable, and is inscribed in dispositional attitudes, regardless of the conscious contents of the believers. While there is merit in articulating these intuitive perceptions, namely, avoiding a brutish mystification, a problematic structuring of society around a secret core, accessible only to a few, there is also a risk involved in the push towards

³²³ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 95.

articulation, as we will come to see shortly. Seeing that beliefs are a complicated matter, highly dependent on mediation, Mendelssohn is careful to note that we cannot simply assume we are witnessing idolatry.

“In Judging the religious ideas of a nation that is otherwise still unknown, one must, for the same reason, take care not to regard everything from one’s own parochial point of view, lest one should call idolatry what, in reality, is perhaps only script.”³²⁴

Mendelssohn gives the example of a foreigner visiting Europe, who, seeing the inscription on a church wall, concludes that Europeans worship black lines on a white surface. “Our own travelers may very often make similar mistakes when they report to us on the religion of distant people... In plundering the temple, the conquerors of Jerusalem found the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, and took them for idols of the Jews... in the same way, at the present day, readers still laugh at the Indian philosophers who say that this universe is borne by elephants...”³²⁵

In all these cases, observers all too hastily assume that signs are worshiped directly, as substitutes of what they represent. Mendelssohn is well aware that worshipful practices and beliefs are embedded in symbolic representation and figurative linguistic practices. Thus, the distinction between script and idolatry is not as simple and straightforward as one might assume. Idolatry for Mendelssohn is not simply the worship of idols. What seems like such a worship might be a legitimate expression of a symbolic worshiping of

³²⁴ Ibid., 114.

³²⁵ Ibid.

the invisible, omnipotent deity. The dangerous core of idolatry is the over proximity and even confusion between the material nature of the medium and the content it aims to mediate. And while it is easier to see this in signs that seem to operate on the basis of resemblance, it's far from being the case that the arbitrary signs are immune from such peril. Mendelssohn gives the example of the Pythagoreans:

A certain school of philosophers conceived of the bold idea of removing men's abstract concepts from everything figurative and image like, and of attaching them to such written signs as could, by their nature, be taken for nothing else, to numbers. Since numbers in themselves represent nothing, and are not in natural relation with any sense impressions, one should suppose that they would not be liable to any misinterpretation; one must take them for arbitrary written signs of concepts, or else consider them unintelligible. Here, one should think, the rudest intellect could not confound signs with things, and every abuse would be prevented by this subtle device. To anyone who does not understand numbers they are empty figures. Those they do not enlighten they will, at least, not lead astray. However, soon enough folly took its wonted course even in this school. Dissatisfied with what one found so intelligible, so comprehensible, one looked for a secret power in the numbers themselves; for an inexplicable reality, again, in the signs, by which their value as signs was again lost. One believed, or at least one made others believe, that all the mysteries of nature and the deity were concealed in these numbers; one ascribed miraculous power to them, and

wished to satisfy through them and by means of them not only men's curiosity and avidity for knowledge but also all their vanity, their striving for high and unattainable things, their forwardness and greed, their avarice, and their madness.³²⁶

While all signs systems are susceptible to distortion, there are important distinctions to be drawn between the logic and mechanism of their respective deceptions. Alphabetic script, and its further development in Mendelssohn's contemporary print society, deceives precisely by displaying things on the surface.

The alphabetic script makes man, according to Mendelssohn, "too speculative." It "displays the symbolic knowledge of things and their relations too openly on the surface; it spares us the effort of penetrating and searching and creates too wide a division between doctrine and life."³²⁷

Hieroglyphs are a perversion of figurative language (natural signs). They extend their signifying logic of resemblance beyond its proper limitations by drawing excessive attention to themselves, thus effectively no longer signifying, pointing towards the beyond, but coming to substitute it, take its place. But what is the problem with alphabetical signs? Whereas hieroglyphs present an illusion of mystery, alphabetical script produces the illusion of transparency. If hieroglyphs pretend to be mysterious, full

³²⁶ Ibid., 117.

³²⁷ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 118.

of meaning, while in fact they are mere signs, alphabetical script pretends to be a transparent means to an end.

It is relatively easy to see the problem with a sign assuming the place of the signified, taking its place. But what is the problem with a sign pretending to be a sign? The key is the connection between the illusion pertaining to the “displaying of things too openly on the surface” and the creation of “too wide a division between doctrine and life.” While with hieroglyphs we have already reached the level where knowledge about the true nature of the signs does not dispel their effectivity, their “magic,” here knowledge is itself, directly, a mode of not knowing, or not believing what you know.

Consider Mendelssohn’s critical description of “the great upheaval in the whole system of human knowledge and convictions” brought about by the print revolution:

We teach and instruct one another only through writings; we learn to know nature and man only from writings. We work and relax, edify and amuse ourselves through overmuch writings. The preacher does not converse with his congregation; he reads or declaims it in a written treatise. The professor reads his written lectures from the chair. Everything is dead letter... hence it has come to pass that man has almost lost his value for his fellow man. Intercourse with the wise man is not sought, for we find wisdom in his writings. Hoary age has lost its venerableness, for the beardless youth knows more from books than the old man knows from experience. Whether he understood correctly or incorrectly does not

matter; it is enough that he knows it, bears it upon his lips, and can talk about it more boldly than the honest old man who, perhaps, has the ideas rather than the words at his command.³²⁸

With alphabetic script, knowing becomes a way of actively not knowing, of indifference to the significance and consequences of what one possesses as knowledge and holds to be true. Under these conditions, the gap between doctrine and life is indeed unbridgeable.

The Ceremonial Law, which Mendelssohn calls a 'living script,' was meant to avoid both pitfalls. The written as well as the unwritten laws have directly, as prescription for action and rules of life, public and private felicity as their ultimate aim. But they are also, in large part, to be regarded as a kind of script, and they have significance and meaning as ceremonial laws. They guide the inquiring intelligence to divine truths, partly to eternal and partly to historical truths upon which the religion of this people was founded.

The Ceremonial Law was the bond that was to connect action with contemplation, life with theory... to induce social contact between school and teacher, inquirer and instructor...and it fulfilled this mission in the early period, before the constitution degenerated...³²⁹

³²⁸ Ibid., 103-4.

³²⁹ Ibid., 128.

The Ceremonial Law produces a certain excess of meaning, but it also produces a movement of ongoing interpretation. The symbolic actions performed are meaningful, in the sense that they relate, point to, or may bring up doctrines and tales, but they do not possess a determinate meaning. They give rise to an open ended, though not boundless, contextualization. In this way, they establish relations of intellectual authority of the kind Mendelssohn felt was no longer available in modern life. As Benjamin would remark in the context of his programmatic engagement with Kant's philosophy: "For the enlightenment, there were no authorities, in the sense not only of authorities to whom one would have to submit unconditionally, but also of intellectual forces who might have managed to give a higher context to experience."³³⁰

The living script, the performance of symbolic activities that have no ultimate ground or reason, is a way to avoid the ideological closure of a life form, to avoid an over familiarity or stiffening habituation. These are excess practices, and in their excessiveness, resist total habituation, a totally smooth and transparent functioning. "Far from being an obstacle to the living experience of meaning, the presence of such 'enigmatic signifiers,' which emanate unknown meaning, i.e., this very obstacle to a full

³³⁰ Walter Benjamin 'On The Program of The Coming Philosophy,' in Benjamin et al., *Selected Writings: 1913-1926*, 101. The essay offers a revision of the Kantian philosophy, particularly its concepts of knowledge and experience, so that it can account for religious experience. Interestingly, it is in this context that Benjamin appeals to Mendelssohn's authority as both demanding and enabling the overcoming of Kantian philosophy from within, so to speak: "Every demand to return to Kant rests on the conviction that this system, which encountered a notion of experience whose metaphysical aspect met with approval of men such as Mendelssohn... will prove adequate for a new and higher experience yet to come. This simultaneously presents the primary challenge faced by contemporary philosophy and asserts that it can be met." *Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 102.

transparency of meaning, is what makes a given symbolic space truly alive, engaged in a passionate struggle to unearth meaning and is the ultimate source of its vitality.”³³¹

The fact that these are signs one produces oneself, in one’s very activity, is crucial for Mendelssohn, since it makes the fixation on images impossible. Being part of a “living script,” participating in the sign system, means it is only legible from above, so to speak, from God’s eye view. Meaning cannot, according to this line of reasoning, be attached too firmly to the signs themselves, allowing them to stand in for and block the empty space of the impossible image. Instead, it moves and animates the social body itself.

Such media conditions are true to the event of legislation, precisely by effectively refraining from assigning it significance, by keeping the space open for re-interpreting the very foundation of the tradition. Mendelssohn’s wager is that Ceremonial Law is a way to utilize the structural gap between practice and theory, what one does and what one understands, in a way that constantly refers one to the other, thus keeping them in constant, yet flexible contact.

But is this a description of what the Ceremonial Law is, or of what it ought to be? We are brought back to the question that was left open in the title of Mendelssohn’s book; which Jerusalem is Mendelssohn referring to? The heavenly, or messianic Jerusalem to come at the end of days, or the historical, earthly one? The ideal or the real?

³³¹ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Ideology II: Competition is a Sin,’ <http://www.lacan.com/zizdesolationroad.html>. Accessed 3/20/2017.

From what we have seen in Mendelssohn thus far, we should not expect the answer to fall on either of these two alternatives. For Mendelssohn's makes great efforts not to separate the real from the ideal in such a way that allows for no contact between them, and nor does he seek to conflate them.

Mendelssohn attributes the ideality of the Ceremonial Law, as we have seen above, to the 'original constitution,' which he proceeds to describe as the direct rule of God over the Jewish nation.

In this original constitution, state and religion were not conjoined, but one; not connected, but identical. Man's relations to society and his relation to God coincided and could never come into conflict. God, the creator and preserver of the world, was at the same time the king and regent of this nation; and his oneness is such as not to admit the least division or plurality in either the political or metaphysical sense. Nor does this monarch have any needs. He demands nothing from the nation but what serves its own welfare... hence, in this nation, civil matters acquired a sacred and religious aspect, and every civil service was at the same time a service to God... everything down to the least police measure was part of the divine service.³³²

It was only in this context, Mendelssohn replies to Morschel's charges, that religious offenses were punishable, since they were, at the same time, political offenses. With the

³³² Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, 128.

destruction of the temple all civil bonds were dissolved, and with them all punishment in religious affairs.

But why, I hear many a reader ask, why this prolixity to tell us something that is very well known? Judaism was a hierocracy, an ecclesiastical government, a priestly state, a theocracy, if you will. We already know the presumptions which such a constitution permits itself. By no means! All these technical terms cast the matter in a false light, which I must avoid. Invariably, all we want to do is to classify, to fit things into pigeonholes... but why do you seek a generic term for an individual thing, which has no genus, which refuses to be stacked with anything, which cannot be put under the same rubric with anything else? This constitution existed only once; call it the Mosaic constitution, by its proper name. It has disappeared, and only the omniscient knows among what people and in what century something similar will again be seen. Just as, according to Plato, there is an earthly and also a heavenly Eros, there is also, one might say, an earthly and heavenly politics. Take a fickle adventurer, a conqueror of hearts... and speak to him of the song of songs... just as little will a politician a la mode understand you if you speak to him of the simplicity and moral grandeur of that original constitution. As the former knows nothing of love but the satisfaction of base lasciviousness, the latter speaks... only of power, the circulation of money, commerce, the balance of power and population; and religion is to him a means which the lawgiver uses to keep the unruly man in check... this false point of view... I had to remove from the eyes of my reader. For this reason, I have not

called the object by any name, but sought to represent it with its properties and determinations. If we look at it directly, we shall see in true politics, as a philosopher said of the sun, a deity, where ordinary eyes see a stone.³³³

This is quite a remarkable passage. Beginning with a caution against labeling as a way to avoid understanding, grappling and coming to terms with the singularity of his subject matter, Mendelssohn seems to compromise with this demand for nomination and gives a proper name – the Mosaic constitution – to this singular constellation, which is no longer, and who is to tell if and where something similar will again come about? Jerusalem, a name without an object, meets its unnamed object.

We seem to have arrived at an answer. Mendelssohn was talking about the historical, biblical Judaism. But he immediately proceeds to speak of an earthly and heavenly politics. It was with the aim of overcoming the cynical outlook on politics, a view that considers politics as a mere exercise of power, that he had avoided naming the object. Here, it seems clear, heavenly is not meant to designate a different sphere, but rather, a different outlook. A strategy meant to make the reader see the heavenly or divine in earthly politics. Offering the metaphor of looking directly at the sun in order to gauge its divinity as an analogy to his descriptive rather than nominative strategy sheds a blinding, excessive light, rather than an illuminating one, just like looking directly at the sun. Mendelssohn had to blind his readers with too much light, make them look directly at the object that should illuminate others, and never be viewed directly. How can this

³³³ Ibid., 131-2.

direct gaze at the sun come to terms with Mendelssohn's earlier statement that the nature of his object, bordering on so many others, make digressions and detours the only available mode of exposition? The object we come to gaze at directly is the digression itself. Mendelssohn wants his readers to come to see an object that exists only in digression. The ideal, Mosaic constitution, as it turns out, was extremely short lived, passing in a glimpse of an eye.

I have said that the mosaic constitution did not persist long in its erstwhile purity... already in the days of the prophet Samuel, the edifice developed a fissure which widened more and more until the parts broke asunder completely. The nation asked for a visible king of flesh and blood....³³⁴

But just a few pages before, Mendelssohn had put the date of corruption even earlier. Already in the first days after the miraculous lawgiving, the nation relapsed into the sinful delusion of the Egyptians, and clamored for an image in the shape of an animal.³³⁵

Is Mendelssohn playing a cynical game, or just being inconsistent? Could it be that the true Judaism had lasted for only a couple of days; and in any case, was corrupted completely by the time of the prophet Samuel, even before the establishment of the political kingdom of Israel? The perfect unity of state and religion, which Mendelssohn is

³³⁴ Ibid., 132.

³³⁵ Ibid., 120.

forced to name the ‘Mosaic constitution,’ is neither an historical reality, nor an abstract ideal to strive for. Actual, historical Judaism is nothing but a series of failures to live up to its ideal, and this from the very beginning. But it is only from these failures that the ideal – what could, and should have been – can shine through.

4.13 Judaism, Between Past and Future

In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn developed a vision of Judaism as caught between two poles of attraction; between the forward propelling drive for knowledge, and the fixation on the abyss of the primordial.³³⁶ His understanding of belief as an ideological complex, which does not allow for a purely intellectual understanding of belief, nor reduces it to irrational, intuitive perception, but rather calls for an examination of the linguistic and social modes of belief, may account, in part, for his relative disconnect with the passionate dilemma between knowledge and belief he played an instrumental role in transmitting to subsequent generations. His account of Judaism as organized around an ideological glue, so to speak, that is irreducible to any doctrinal content, may contribute to an understanding of a life form that had been marked, in the greater part of its history,

³³⁶ Jan Assman, in his polemic with Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, has put forward the notion of counter religion to name the significant shift in the history of religion that arises with the introduction of the distinction between true and false religion. See J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Harvard University Press, 1998). More recently, along with Guy Stroumsa, Assman proposed that this defining feature could offer a replacement to Jaspers’ notion of axial age religions. What such religions have in common, more than anything else, so they argue, is their self-perception as counter religions, reacting against what came before. J. Assmann and G.G. Stroumsa, *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions* (Brill, 1999). This notion may require a qualification in the case of Judaism, if we take Mendelssohn seriously. Judaism in this light is both a counter religion, and a counter counter religion.

by its dispersity between cultures, and was perhaps meant by Mendelssohn as a conception of tradition that need not be threatened by fundamental epistemic changes,³³⁷ a tradition that could survive, as a tradition, even the vicissitudes of modernity. But the result is, above all, an anti-essentialist account of Judaism. Judaism is nothing but the sum total of its failures to live up to its idea, and that idea, in turn, is not a mere abstraction, but what, in continuously failing to have been realized, exerts what Walter Benjamin would call a “weak, messianic power.”

³³⁷ Sacks makes an argument along these lines. See Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism. Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script.*

Bibliography

- Adorno, T.W. *Negative Dialectics*. Routledge, 1990.
- Adorno, T.W., and H.W. Pickford. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Agamben, G. *The Coming Community*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- . *The Man without Content*. Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Agamben, G. *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath (Homo Sacer Ii, 3)*. Polity, 2011.
- Agamben, G., and A. Kotsko. *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*. Stanford University Press, 2013.
- . *The Use of Bodies*. Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Agamben, G., and A. Kotsko. *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*. Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Agamben, G., and D. Heller-Roazen. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Agamben, G., and D. Heller-Roazen. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Agamben, G., L. Chiesa, and M. Mandarini. *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Stanford University Press, 2011.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by K. Attell. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Althusser, L. *For Marx*. Verso, 1969.
- Altmann, A. *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*. University of Alabama Press, 1973.
- Altmann, A. *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*. University of Alabama Press, 1973.
- Anidjar, G. *"Our Place in Al-Andalus": Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters*. Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Arendt, H. *The Jewish Writings*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009.
- Arendt, H., and M. Canovan. *The Human Condition: Second Edition*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Arendt, H. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books, 1968.
- . *On Violence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970.
- Arendt, H. *The Jewish Writings*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009.
- Arendt, H., and Margaret. Canovan. *The Human Condition: Second Edition*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Arkush, A. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*. State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Arkush, A. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*. State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.
- Asad, T. *Genealogies Of Religion : Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore :Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

- Assmann, J. *Moses the Egyptian*. Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Assmann, J., and G.G. Stroumsa. *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*. Brill, 1999.
- Badiou, A. *Being and Event*. Continuum, 2005.
- Beck, L. White. *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Beiser, F.C. *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing*. OUP Oxford, 2009.
- Beiser, F.C. *The Fate of Reason : German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Beiser, F.C. *The Fate of Reason : German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Beiser, F.C. *Hegel*. Routledge, 2005.
- Bell, C.M. 1992. *Ritual theory, Ritual practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benjamin, A.E., and P. Osborne. *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*. Routledge, 1994.
- Benjamin, W., and R. Tiedemann. *The Arcades Project*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Benjamin, W., M.P. Bullock, M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith. *Selected Writings: 1913-1926*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Benjamin, W., M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith, and R. Livingstone. *Walter Benjamin - Selected Writings, 1927-1930*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Benjamin, W., M.W. Jennings, M.P. Bullock, H. Eiland, and G. Smith. *Selected Writings*. Vol. II, part 2: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Benjamin, W., and G. Scholem. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*. Translated by Gary. Smith. Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Bennett, J. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2009.
- Berman, H.J. *Law and Revolution, the Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Berman, M. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Verso, 1983.
- Blumenberg, H. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. MIT Press, 1985.
- Blumenberg, H., and R.I. Savage. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Blumenberg, H. *Work on Myth*. MIT Press, 1985.
- Boehm, O. *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Boyarin, D. *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
- Brassier, R. *Nihil Unbound: Naturalism and Anti-Phenomenological Realism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Bryant, L.R. *The Democracy of Objects*. Open Humanities Press, 2011.
- Burnet, J. *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato*. Macmillan, 1932.
- Buruma, I., and A. Margalit. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Calhoun, C., M. Juergensmeyer, and J. VanAntwerpen. *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2011.

- Cassin, B., E. Apter, J. Lezra, and M. Wood. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Chacón, R. "On a Forgotten Kind of Grounding: Strauss, Jacobi, and the Phenomenological Critique of Modern Rationalism." *The Review of Politics*, 76, 4 (2014): 589-617.
- Cohen, H., A.S. Bruckstein, and R. Gibbs. *Ethics of Maimonides*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.
- Cunningham, C. *Genealogy of Nihilism*. Taylor & Francis, 2005.
- Dahlstrom, D.O., C. Dyck, and M. Mendelssohn. *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*. Springer Netherlands, 2011.
- Derrida, J., and G. Bennington. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. 2 vols. Vol. I: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- . *The Beast and the Sovereign*. 2 vols. Vol. II: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Derrida, J., and P. Kamuf. *Without Alibi*. Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Dickson, G.G. *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism*. De Gruyter, 1995.
- Dolar, M. *A Voice and Nothing More*. MIT Press, 2006.
- Dolar, M. "The Atom and the Void – from Democritus to Lacan." *Filozofski vesting* 34, no. 2 (2013): 11-26.
- . "Beyond Interpellation." *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2 (1993): 75-96.
- Eiland, H. *Walter Benjamin*. Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Elon, A. *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch, 1743-1933*. Picador, 2003.
- Engstrom, S.P. *The Form of Practical Knowledge*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Esposito, R. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Euchel, I.A. *Toldot Rabenu Hehakham Moshe Ben Mendel* [in Hebrew]. Berlin: Hinukh ne'arim, 1838.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Clarendon Press, 1963.
- Fackenheim, E.L., R. Jospe, and International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization. *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996.
- Fenves, P.D. *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin*. Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Fitzpatrick, P. *Modernism and the Grounds of Law*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Foucault, M., F. Gros, F. Ewald, and A. Fontana. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France 1981--1982*. St Martins Press, 2005.
- Foucault, M., M. Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, François Ewald, and David Macey. *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*. 1st ed. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Foucault, M. *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. New Press, 2003.
- Franks, P.W. *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism*. Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Franks, P.W. "Nothing Comes from Nothing": Judaism, the Orient, and Kabbalah in Hegel's Reception of Spinoza", in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, Ed. M. Della Rocca, October 2005. Online.
- Freud, S., and K. Jones. *Moses and Monotheism*. Knopf, 1939.
- Freud, S., J. Strachey, and P. Gay. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. W.W. Norton, 1989.
- Freud, S. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by James. Strachey. Penguin, 1991.

- Freudenthal, G. *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012.
- Friedlander, E. "The Measure of the Contingent." *Boundary* 35, no. 3 (2008): 1-26.
- Funkenstein, A. *Perceptions of Jewish History*. University of California Press, 1993.
- Gillespie, M.A. *Nihilism before Nietzsche*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Goetschel, Willi. "Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy." *Bamidbar: Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag), no. 1 (2011): 9-34.
- Goetschel, Willi. *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought*. Fordham University Press, 2013.
- Goetschel, Willi. *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- Goldman, A. *Kant and the Subject of Critique: On the Regulative Role of the Psychological Idea*. Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Goldstein, L. *Moses Mendelssohn und die deutsche Ästhetik*. Gräfe & Unzer, 1904.
- Gottlieb, Michah. *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2011.
- Goudsblom, J. *Nihilism and Culture*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1980.
- Hacking, I. *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Hammill, Graham L., Julia Reinhard Lupton, and Etienne Balibar. *Political Theology and Early Modernity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Hegel, G.W.F., H.S. Harris, and W. Cerf. *Hegel: Faith and Knowledge: An English Translation of G. W. F. Hegel's Glauben Und Wissen*. State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Heidegger, M. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Indiana University Press, 1997.
- . *What Is a Thing? Translated by W.B. Barton, Jr., and Vera Deutsch, with an Analysis by Eugene T. Gendlin*. 1967.
- Heidegger, M. *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two: Volumes One and Two*. HarperCollins, 1991.
- . *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four: Volumes Three and Four*. HarperCollins, 1991.
- . *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Garland Pub., 1977.
- Heidegger, M., and J. Stambaugh. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*. State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Heine, H. *Religion and Philosophy in Germany: A Fragment*. Beacon Press, 1959.
- Heller-Roazen, D. *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*. Zone Books, 2007.
- Henrich, D., and D.S. Pacini. *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*. Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Kant, I., and H.S. Reiss. *Kant: Political Writings*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Kant, I., and L.W. Beck. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993.
- Kant, I., D. Walford, and R. Meerbote. *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Kant, I., G. Zöllner, and R.B. Loudon. *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Kant, I., P. Guyer, and A.W. Wood. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kant, Immanuel, and Arnulf Zweig. *Correspondence*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- . *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.

- Kantorowicz, E.H. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Karatani, Kojin. *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*. Translated by Michael K. Bourdaghs. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Kelsen, H. *Pure Theory of Law*. Lawbook Exchange, 2005.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Ebsco Publishing, 2009.
- Koselleck, R., and K. Tribe. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Routledge, 1977.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Karnac Books, 2004.
- Latour, B. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Leonard, M. *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Löwith, K. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- Liotard, J.F. *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment, [Sections] 23-29*. Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Mack, Michael. *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Maimonides, M., and S. Pines. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Vol. I: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- . *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Vol. II: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Maine, H.J.S. *Ancient Law*. J. Murray, 1912.
- Malabou, C., and M. Jeannerod. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* : Fordham University Press, 2009.
- Marin, Louis. *Portrait of the King*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Mendelssohn, M. *Phaedon: Or the Death of Socrates*. the author, by J.Cooper, 1789.
- Mendelssohn, M., and B. Rosenstock. *Last Works*. University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Mendelssohn, M., and D.O. Dahlstrom. *Moses Mendelssohn: Philosophical Writings*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Mendelssohn, M., and M. Albrecht. *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*. Meiner, F, 2005.
- Mendelssohn, M., and M. Gottlieb. *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*. Brandeis University Press, 2011.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*. Translated by Alan Arkush. Brandeis University Press, 1983.
- . *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*. Translated by Daniel. O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck. Springer, 2011.
- Meyer, M.A., M. Brenner, M. Breuer, and M. Graetz. *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Emancipation and Acculturation, 1780-1871*. Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Michael, D.R. *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*.
- Munk, R. *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*. Springer Netherlands, 2011.
- Nietzsche, F., B. Williams, J. Nauckhoff, and A.D. Caro. *Nietzsche: The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- Nietzsche, F.W., G. Colli, and M. Montinari. *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*. Vol. XII: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Nivelle, A. *Kunst- und Dichtungstheorien zwischen Aufklärung und Klassik*. De Gruyter, 1971.
- Nuzzo, A. *Ideal Embodiment: Kant's Theory of Sensibility*. Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Pangle, T.L., and J.H. Lomax. *Political Philosophy Cross-Examined: Perennial Challenges to the Philosophic Life*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Pfaller, R. *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners*. Verso Books, 2014.
- Pippin, R.B. *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*. Wiley, 1999.
- Plato. *Complete Works*. Hackett Pub., 1997.
- Rödl, S. *Self-Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Rosenstock, Bruce .B. *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond*. Fordham University Press, 2010.
- Rothenberg, M.A., D.A. Foster, and S. ek. *Perversion and the Social Relation: Sic Iv*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Sacks, E. *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism*. Indiana University Press, 2016.
- Santner, E.L. *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- . *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Schmidt, James. *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. University of California Press, 1996.
- Schmitt, C., G. Schwab, T.B. Strong, and L. Strauss. *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Scholem, G.G. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. Schocken Books, 1965.
- Scholem, Gershom. "Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch." [In German]. *Judaica* 2 (1970): 9-10.
- Schorsch, I. *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*. Brandeis Univ. Press, 1994.
- Segreff, K.W. *Moses Mendelssohn und die Aufklärungsästhetik im 18. Jahrhundert*. Bouvier, 1984.
- Siegel, J.T. *Naming the Witch*. Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Slocombe, W. *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*. Routledge, 2013.
- Sorkin, D. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*. Halban, 2012.
- Strauss, L. *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*. State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Strauss, L., and M.D. Yaffe. *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Strauss, Leo. *Philosophie und Gesetz, frühe Schriften*. Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. II, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997.
- Taylor, C. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Veyne, P. *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- von Mücke, D.E. *The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

- von Mücke, D.E. *Virtue and the Veil of Illusion: Generic Innovation and the Pedagogical Project in Eighteenth-century Literature*. Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Weber, M. *The Sociology of Religion*. Beacon Press, 1993.
- Weber, S. *Institution and Interpretation*. Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Weller, S. *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Windelband, W., and J.H. Tufts. *History of Philosophy with Special Reference to the Formation and Development of Its Problems and Conceptions*. Macmillan, 1931.
- Yuval, I.J. *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. University of California Press, 2006.
- Žižek, S. *Living in the End Times*. Verso, 2010.
- Žižek, S. *The fragile absolute, or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* London: Verso, 2000.
- Zupančič, A. *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*. MIT Press