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Abstract

This work is an analysis of Moses Mendelssohn's contributions to aesthetic rationalism, a tradition that arose in 18-century Germany. Rationalists held that aesthetic experience is primarily explained by the perfection of the object being considered, where perfection is a fundamental, rational (law-governed) property. As this work shows, Mendelssohn was among the first to acknowledge and effectively address several significant objections to the rationalist theory: its seeming inability to account for pleasure generally, tragedy and tragic pleasure more specifically, and the sublime; and its apparent blindness to the claims of genius and Rousseau's ethical critique of the arts. Many commentators have claimed that Mendelssohn saw these issues as reasons to move away from aesthetic rationalism, but Mendelssohn in fact attempted to address each of them from within the rationalist framework. Mendelssohn's resulting elaboration and defense of the rationalist tradition illustrates its resilience and lasting relevance.

**The Flower of Human Perfection:
Moses Mendelssohn's Defense of Rationalist Aesthetics**

Aaron M. Koller

August 2011

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Pleasure	10
Part 1: The descriptive theory of pleasure	13
Part 2: The normative theory of pleasure	47
Part 3: Mendelssohn on pleasure, beauty, and the will	61
Chapter 2: The role of art in human life	80
Part 1: Mendelssohn's response to Rousseau	80
Part 2: Key points in Mendelssohn's theory of fine arts	105
Chapter 3: Tragedy	113
Chapter 4: Genius	163
Chapter 5: The sublime	228
Appendix: On a few key issues in rationalist aesthetics	258
Note on translations	266
Bibliography	267
Vita	272

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Ich habe es erfahren, was Erbauung ohne Erleuchtung für ein elendes Ding sey.

- Moses Mendelssohn

Introduction

Despite Mendelssohn's recognition as a leading aesthetician in his own time, and despite the widespread esteem currently enjoyed by Mendelssohn's contributions to political philosophy and philosophy of religion, his aesthetics is severely under-researched and under-appreciated.¹ No book-length work on the topic exists in English, and the most recent such German work is over 25 years old.² Unfortunately, this neglect is wholly undeserved, based primarily on a misunderstanding of Mendelssohn's views and his place in the development of aesthetics.

This history of 18th-century German aesthetics is usually viewed as a grand anticipation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and so most commentators on Mendelssohn's aesthetics are eager either to praise him by demonstrating his anticipation of Kant, or to damn him by pointing out "regression" into the older and supposedly obsolete rationalism. Braitmaier,³ Bamberger,⁴ Goldstein,⁵ Guyer,⁶ Vogt,⁷ Beck,⁸ and Zammito⁹

¹ There are some encouraging signs of renewed interest, such as Anne Pollock's edition of Mendelssohn's *Ästhetische Schriften* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 2005), and a chapter of Frederick Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² Klaus-Werner Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Aufklärungsästhetik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1984).

³ Friedrich Braitmaier, *Geschichte der poetischen Theorie und Kritik von den Diskursen der Maler bis auf Lessing* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1888-1889), 2:148, 164, 173.

⁴ Fritz Bamberger, introduction to *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe* (hereafter *JubA*) ed. F. Bamberger, et al. (Berlin, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann, 1929-1976), 1:XLII-XLVII.

⁵ Ludwig Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn und die deutsche Ästhetik* (Königsberg: Gräfe und Unzer, 1904), 16-18, 148-153, 228-229.

⁶ Paul Guyer, "18th-century German Aesthetics," last modified 2007, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-18th-german/>.

⁷ Wolfgang Vogt, *Moses Mendelssohns Beschreibung der Wirklichkeit menschlichen Erkennens* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 189, 197, 212-215.

represent the former attitude, while Cassirer,¹⁰ Sommer,¹¹ and Baeumler¹² represent the latter. As this dissertation shows, the overall approach on both sides is fundamentally mistaken—not just because it applies an inappropriate and anachronistic standard to history, but also because it obscures what is truly valuable about Mendelssohn’s thought. This value only becomes apparent, as I will show, when we read Mendelssohn not as a mere anticipation of Kant, but as one of the last and greatest defenders of aesthetic rationalism.

The tradition of aesthetic rationalism was first intimated by Leibniz in his 1684 essay “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas”,¹³ and flourished in Germany until the death of Lessing in 1781. The theory developed within this tradition rested on three fundamental theses:

1. That aesthetic phenomena can be explained as *rational* phenomena. “Rational” is meant in a double sense: metaphysically, in the sense that the phenomena are taken to conform to universal laws, and psychologically, in the sense that the phenomena are taken to be cognizable through the faculty of reason, and at least

⁸ Louis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 326.

⁹ John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24-25.

¹⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 125.

¹¹ Robert Sommer, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der deutschen Psychologie und Aesthetik von Wolff-Baumgarten bis Kant-Schiller* (Würzburg: Stahel, 1892), 113-118.

¹² Alfred Baeumler, *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Ästhetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923), 136.

¹³ See “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas” in G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, tr. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 24. There, Leibniz claims that works of art please or displease due to objective, law-governed properties in them, even when these properties are perceived only confusedly.

in principle (if not in fact) capable of being explained discursively. Since rationalists understand the faculty of reason as the ability to perceive the connections among things according to universal laws, the two senses of “rational” are deeply interconnected, and can be traced directly back to Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason and his psychology. This thesis enables aesthetic phenomena to be cognized and described scientifically, at least in principle.

2. That the pleasure characteristic of aesthetic experience is primarily due to beauty, which has an objective basis in the perfection of the perceived object. As Wolff explains in his *Psychologia Empirica*, the common definition of the beautiful as “that which pleases” could only be “temporary and nominal.” In truth, he claimed, “Beauty consists in the perfection of a thing, insofar as it is apt to produce pleasure in us by its power.”¹⁴ Strictly speaking, this thesis is independent of (1). That is, one could hold (with the *Stürmer und Dränger*, for example) that objective but non-rational properties make an object beautiful or pleasing. Or, one could hold (with Kant, for example) that the pleasingness of certain objects can be explained through universal principles, but that these principles relate to subjective psychology alone, not to any determinate properties of the object. Nonetheless, rationalist aestheticians held that beauty is objective *because* it depends on the rational property of perfection in the object.

¹⁴ Christian Wolff, *Psychologia empirica* (hereafter *PE*), div. 2, vol. 5 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968) §§543-544.

Perfection is a rational property because it relates the parts of an object to the whole according to universal laws.

3. That art has a legitimate and even central place in ethics and human life.

Rationalists believe that the will is determined by the desire for perfection, and that the good, like beauty, is a form of perfection. Thus, they held that the enjoyment of beauty tends to produce in us a desire and love for the good, and thereby makes us more virtuous.

Mendelssohn's rationalist predecessors, especially Wolff, Baumgarten, and Gottsched, made great progress in systematizing the first two of these principles and drawing out their implications, aiming to develop sciences for each of the arts. Wolff developed a science of architecture, while Gottsched, Baumgarten and others created elaborate systems which aimed to do the same for other arts, especially poetry. In large part because they made remarkable progress in their efforts, these thinkers did little to defend the basic principles of aesthetic rationalism. Why bother defending the foundations of a program that, judging by the newly burgeoning German arts, was enjoying great success?

But by the early 1750s, new ideas from within Germany and older ideas from outside it were beginning to put pressure on the pillars of aesthetic rationalism. Why not judge art simply according to the pleasure and mental activity it affords, without regard to any determinate objective properties? How could tragedy, considered by many to be the highest form of art, be explained as an instance of perfection? What about the sublime and works of genius, which seem to explode the bounds of rationality? And is

art really a force for positive edification, or rather for ethical corruption? These are serious worries, and no one was more aware of them, or did more to address them from within the rationalist tradition, than Moses Mendelssohn.

Each chapter of this dissertation will take up one of these issues and Mendelssohn's response to it:

Pleasure. Pleasure is a general problem for rationalist aesthetics primarily because the competing sensualist tradition held pleasure to be non-cognitive but also decisive in aesthetic matters – a theory which leads quickly to a stark subjectivism. With his first work on aesthetics, the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* [*Letters on the sentiments*], Mendelssohn remedied Baumgarten's relative neglect of pleasure in aesthetic matters. Yet many commentators have argued that in doing so, he moved away from rationalism and took a sharp, subjective/psychological turn. In the first section of this chapter, I analyze the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, reconstructing Mendelssohn's descriptive theory of pleasure and addressing the evidence that Mendelssohn moved away from rationalist theory. I conclude that the work is best characterized as a defense, explication, and (to a small but significant degree) expansion of rationalist theory – not a turn away from it.

The second section of Chapter 1 takes up the normative theory of pleasure, which encompasses the metaphysics of good and bad pleasure, as well as the ways in which they are distinguished by human beings (taste and criticism). I argue that Mendelssohn de-emphasized the concept of "false pleasure" which previous rationalists had used to ground their theories of "bad pleasure." Instead, Mendelssohn preferred to

see pleasure as always related to the good and perfect, with “bad pleasure” explained as a failure to attend to the bad and imperfect aspects of a given object. This has important implications for the way in which Mendelssohn would approach aesthetic questions. On the relation between taste and criticism, I argue that Mendelssohn largely followed Baumgarten, and that he was aware of, but inadequately addressed the worry that taste might be radically subjective.

The third and final section of Chapter 1 addresses the relation between pleasure and the will. Many commentators have suggested that in his later writings, Mendelssohn began to strictly separate the faculties of cognition, pleasure, and the will, helping prepare the way for Kantian non-cognitivism about pleasure and the autonomy of the will. Against these commentators, I argue both that Mendelssohn’s thought was largely consistent across his entire career, and that while Mendelssohn was not as clear as he should have been, he was certainly no proto-Kantian about pleasure and the will. I conclude this chapter with a reconstruction of Mendelssohn’s final view on pleasure and the will.

Art and its role in life. Mendelssohn was deeply influenced by Rousseau’s moral critique of culture and arts, but it is less clear what effect this influence had. Some commentators see Mendelssohn as a moral stickler who gave art only a narrow role in promoting virtue, while worrying incessantly about its possible corrupting effects. Others see Mendelssohn as a liberal champion of the arts who gave the production of beauty a central role in the virtuous life itself. In the first section of Chapter 2, I reconcile these competing views by showing that Mendelssohn was indeed something of an

austere moralist, but only for a brief period in his early career. Subsequently, through his conversations with Lessing and Nicolai, he began to see art as having its own essential role in life, and he retained this view for the rest of his life. As part of my discussion, I argue for a novel dating of the disputed text *Briefe über Kunst*.

The second section of Chapter 2 reviews some points in Mendelssohn's theory of art that have broad significance for rationalist aesthetics. The most significant of these is contained in a *Literaturbrief* in which Mendelssohn clearly anticipates Kant's distinction between art and nature.

Tragedy. Mendelssohn's correspondence with Lessing on tragedy is widely recognized as being highly significant, but the precise philosophical issues and arguments at stake have not been clearly described. As I show in the Chapter 3, tragedy is a threat to the rationalists' psychology of pleasure, creates problems for their ethical theory of art, and seems not to conform to the ideal of art which Mendelssohn published around the same time as the correspondence. These problems arise because rationalist theory is oriented toward perfection, but tragedies are by their nature depictions of great imperfections. The correspondence, as I read it, is a collaborative working out of these issues, a project which Mendelssohn had partly begun on his own in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. After tracing its development, I reconstruct Mendelssohn's view at the close of the correspondence. I conclude that this view remains squarely within the rationalist tradition, and that Mendelssohn did not, as several commentators have suggested, use tragedy as an opportunity to argue for the autonomy of art from ethical concerns. The remainder of the chapter addresses later developments in Mendelssohn's view,

particularly his theory of “mixed sentiments.” I argue that Mendelssohn indeed moved toward a more subjectively-oriented theory of tragedy in his later writings, but that this shift occurred largely at the descriptive level. His theory about what tragedy *ought* to be remained largely unchanged from the end of his correspondence with Lessing in 1757.

Genius. Genius, it was widely agreed, is in some sense necessary for the production of the greatest works of art. But what exactly is genius? Even as thinkers like Young in England and Hamann in Germany were arguing that genius is a kind of supernatural divine inspiration – with the authority of no less than Plato behind them – the concept was largely being neglected in rationalist circles. Mendelssohn was among the first to take up the challenge of bringing the genius back to earth, and explaining her powers as natural (if rare) phenomena, even while retaining a central role for the faculty of reason in the production of art. While he never wrote an independent work on the topic, Mendelssohn wrote three reviews of others’ theories of genius which are analyzed in Chapter 4. Perhaps the most interesting of these is Mendelssohn’s review of Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz’s *Versuch über das Genie*, an almost completely neglected work which concerns the role of reason and intellectual intuition in genius. I conclude that Mendelssohn was consistently wary of assigning special *sui generis* powers to the genius, and instead attempted to explain it as a natural, law-governed phenomenon. Despite the claims of some commentators, he made no concessions to the *Sturm und Drang* on this point.

The sublime. In 1757, Mendelssohn published a rather conventional rationalist account of the sublime that explained it essentially as an unusually and unexpectedly great

species of beauty. Reading Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1758 caused Mendelssohn to rethink his account. How could order and comprehensibility, which Mendelssohn took to be hallmarks of the beautiful, be squared with Burke's account of the sublime as something inherently disorderly and incomprehensible? Many commentators argue that this question led Mendelssohn to move away from rationalism and embrace much of Burke's sensualist theory, at least where the sublime is concerned. In Chapter 5, I analyze and reconstruct Mendelssohn's published and unpublished responses to Burke. While Mendelssohn took Burke's psychological observations at face value, I argue that he worked consistently to offer rationalist explanations of sublime phenomena. The result is an account that plausibly explains the sublime without straying from a broadly rationalist framework.

While rationalist aesthetics is by no means complete or correct on every point, it is far from trivially false or useless, as has too often been assumed. More than anyone else's, Mendelssohn's work demonstrates the surprising resilience and explanatory power of this important but neglected tradition.

Chapter 1: Pleasure

The principle that pleasure is the intuition of perfection had been endorsed by Wolff,¹⁵ Gottsched,¹⁶ Baumgarten,¹⁷ and other German rationalists in the early part of the 18th century, well before Mendelssohn had an inkling of their philosophy. According to this doctrine, pleasure purports to represent a real, rationally analyzable property of perceived objects – their perfection. As a result, rationalists held that one could, at least in principle, determine through analysis whether a particular feeling of pleasure really or instead only apparently had perfection as its object. Since the rationalists also explain beauty as perfection insofar as it is observable or sensible (i.e., capable of being perceived clearly but confusedly), beautiful (and apparently beautiful) objects give rise to a certain form of pleasure, which is susceptible to the very same analysis.¹⁸ This opened up a way to an *objective* standard of taste, in which there is a clear distinction between a true and false pleasure felt when considering a given sensible object.

These early rationalists, however, did not rigorously investigate the *connection* between the perfection of an object and the felt pleasure associated with it. Wolff's argument that the observability of perfection produces the feeling of pleasure amounts to little more than a gesture to experience, but without anything approaching an adequate survey of it. Baumgarten simply assumes the principle without any argument

¹⁵ *PE*, §511.

¹⁶ Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit* (hereafter *EG*) (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1762), "Theoretischer Theil," §5, 1:102.

¹⁷ Alexander Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle: Hemmerde, 1779), §655.

¹⁸ *PE*, §§543-544. Wolff is very clear that the production of pleasure alone does not *truly* make something beautiful, since even *merely apparent* beauty produces a kind of *false pleasure*. True beauty, according to Wolff, is the power of an object to produce (true) pleasure in us *through its (real) perfection*.

at all. This apparently egregious lacuna can be explained by the fundamentally *practical* orientation of both Wolff's and Baumgarten's aesthetics, along with their conception of art. Both were primarily interested in improving and refining the production and judgment of art, and both adhered to the traditional concept of art (*ars, techne*) as human making in general. Wolff divides *techne* into "technologia," making with the body, and "ars liberalium," making with the mind. Baumgarten conceives his science of aesthetics as a *theoria artis liberalium*, which he understood in much the same way as Wolff, although he was somewhat more liberal in his understanding of the liberal arts (e.g. he includes painting and sculpture). As a result, both emphasized the *rules* or principles they held to be involved in the good construction of objects that would increase their perfection, and which would allow them to be judged properly.

For this reason, the early German rationalists did not make the feeling of pleasure itself a primary concern in their aesthetics, leaving it particularly vulnerable to two ideas originating in France. The first is Dubos's claim in his 1719 *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* that a sizeable portion of human activity, including the beauty of many arts but also spectacles like gladiator fights, serve merely to busy the mind in new and interesting ways, and thereby divert one from the tedium of everyday life.¹⁹ The second is Batteux's invention of the concept of fine arts in his 1746 work *The fine arts reduced to a single principle*.²⁰ According to Batteux, the purpose of the fine arts,

¹⁹ See Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London: Nourse, 1748), 1-9.

²⁰ Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux arts reduits a un même principe* (Paris: Durand, 1746), 7.

which include painting, poetry, music, dance, and sculpture, is simply to please us.

These ideas would become dominant themes in Germany by the early 1750s.

Both of these innovations forced questions about the connection between the perfection of the object and the feeling of pleasure to the fore. If pleasure consists in a subjective busiment of the mind, then why must fine art objects be constructed in any particular way? And if the artist intends a work merely to divert or please, why should it be judged according to an apparently alien standard of perfection (or, one might add, according to Batteux's own standard of imitation)? Put another way, if there must be perfection in such works, it seems that it ought to consist directly in the object's propensity to produce the feeling of pleasure. Or, as Mendelssohn would have his character Euphranor put the objection in 1755, "You say that the perfection of a thing is the reason why we find its representation pleasing? [It's] the other way around... the pleasure which a certain object provides us is the reason that we call it perfect."²¹

As the passage suggests, Mendelssohn took up these worries about the feeling of pleasure which his predecessors had left hanging. Yet according to many commentators, his engagement with the French tradition caused him to move away from rationalism, and to theorize pleasure and beauty more in merely subjective, psychological terms.²² In this chapter, I argue against that view. Instead, as I will show, Mendelssohn was the first to present the full-blown Wolffian/Baumgartian theory of pleasure and beauty as a

²¹ *JubA*, 1:73.

²² Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 22-24; Sommer, *Grundzüge*, 134; Vogt, *Beschreibung*, 189; Frederic Will, Jr., "Cognition through Beauty in Moses Mendelssohn's Early Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14.1 (1955): 100, 104; David Jan Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 206.

complete and effective defense *against* the ideas of Dubos and a narrowly hedonistic interpretation of Batteux. For now, I will abstract from the thornier issues of tragedy, genius, and the sublime. These topics are treated in subsequent chapters.

As Mendelssohn himself explicitly admits,²³ most of his thought on pleasure and beauty is not original. It is best understood as a new juxtaposition and refinement of preexisting views, whose significance lies mainly in their presentation within a new intellectual context. Thus one should not expect to find fundamental innovation in Mendelssohn's theory of pleasure and beauty, although it does contain some important new elaborations beyond Wolff's theory.

Part 1: The descriptive theory of pleasure

The first part of this chapter concerns Mendelssohn's descriptive theory of the connection between pleasure and beauty in its objective sense. By "descriptive theory" I mean the psychology and related metaphysics of beauty and pleasure as they are actually experienced. Mendelssohn treats this subject most thoroughly in his first work on aesthetics, the 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. I consider Mendelssohn's theory of good and bad pleasure, along with his view of taste, in Part 2 of this chapter.

The Origin and Background of Mendelssohn's *Briefe*

Johann Georg Sulzer, not Mendelssohn, was the first person to attempt to reconcile Wolff's theory of pleasure with the Dubosian idea that pleasure is the subjective feeling of busiment and diversion. According to his 1751-1752 "Recherches sur l'origine des sentiments agréables et désagréables" ["Research on the origins of

²³ *JubA*, 11:349.

pleasant and unpleasant sentiments”],²⁴ the essence of the soul consists in the bringing forth or development of ideas, and it is in a state of pleasure when the flow of its ideas is sufficient and unimpeded.²⁵ Following de Pouilly in claiming that we take pleasure in whatever exercises our faculties without exhausting them,²⁶ Sulzer argues that those objects are pleasurable which are most amenable to an effortless and sufficiently voluminous production of ideas. Objects that obstruct the flow of ideas, on the other hand, are painful. Sulzer then argues that the objects most suitable for maintaining an easy flow of ideas are simply those having a high degree of perfection.²⁷ “Such an object presents a quantity of ideas at once, which are connected together with each other through the tie of unity, [so] that the mind is therefore capable of developing them, and bringing back all the variety in this object to a single common focal point. The soul, perceiving this quantity of connected ideas that it can easily develop... considers the objects... as plunder which satisfies its essential taste, and rushes toward them full of desire.”²⁸ In this way, Sulzer connects Dubos and de Pouilly’s view of pleasure as an

²⁴ Johann Georg Sulzer, “Recherches sur l’origine des sentiments agréables et desagréables,” in *Histoire de l’Academie Royale des Sciences et des Belles Lettres: Année 1751* (Berlin: Haude et Spener, 1753), 57-100; *Année 1752* (1754), 2:350-390. Except where exact terminology is crucial, I will generally refer to Sulzer’s own translation of this work into German, published as “Untersuchung über den Ursprung der angenehmen und unangenehmen Empfindungen” in *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, trans. Johann Georg Sulzer with Christian Garve (Leipzig: Weidmanns, 1773), 1:1-98.

²⁵ The apt metaphor of “flow” is due to Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1969), 96-97.

²⁶ Louis-Jean Lévesque de Pouilly, *The Theory of Agreeable Sensations*, trans. anonymous (Edinburgh: J. Dickson, 1766), 13, 24. The original French edition was published as *Théorie des sentimens agréables* (Geneva: Barrillot, 1747).

²⁷ De Pouilly had already come very close to making this claim. He wrote, “Order, symmetry, and proportion are agreeable, because they render it easy for the mind to comprehend, and retain the different parts of an object” (*Agreeable Sensations*, 28). He apparently lacked the distinctly Wolffian idea of perfection, however.

²⁸ Johann Georg Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:38.

activity to Wolff's view that pleasure relates to perfection. However, Sulzer's explanation entails a rejection of Wolff's view that pleasure *is* the perception of perfection. Rather, for Sulzer perfection *occasions* a certain kind of mental activity which is identified with pleasure. Although Sulzer was happy to make use of Wolffian concepts, he explicitly rejected Wolff's explanation of pleasure along with Descartes', calling them "unsatisfying."²⁹

Mendelssohn's early outline or plan for his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, labeled "Von dem Vergnügen," shows that Mendelssohn originally conceived the aesthetic aspect of the *Briefe* primarily as a response to Sulzer (its ethical aspect, not treated directly in this dissertation, is primarily a response to Maupertuis's *Essai de morale*). In this outline, which consists of 20 numbered points, Mendelssohn begins by accepting Maupertuis's definition of the pleasant sentiment as "a representation which we would rather have than not have."³⁰ (He does not, however, accept any of the consequences which Maupertuis derives from this assumption). But, as Mendelssohn goes on, Wolff and Descartes were no less correct to say that pleasure "arises from the consideration of an object as something perfect."³¹ The topic of the planned work follows naturally: "how this [latter] doctrine can be connected with the previous explanation, or why we would always rather have a representation of perfection than not."³² Already Mendelssohn's intention to retain the Wolffian view is apparent.

²⁹ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:11.

³⁰ *JubA*, 1:127.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

After summarizing Sulzer's view in "Von dem Vergnügen" sections 6a-d, Mendelssohn writes that Sulzer had indeed provided one possible answer to his question about why the soul prefers perfection to imperfection.³³ Yet, "I believe this explanation is neither the only one, nor one which can be applied in all particular cases."³⁴ Mendelssohn next poses two objections to Sulzer's theory. First, he scoffs at the idea that even sensible pleasures can be explained through the easy production of many concepts. "I dare not say with the professor [Sulzer] that the pleasure in the enjoyment of a beautiful lady arises merely from a quantity of concepts."³⁵ Second, Mendelssohn claims that Sulzer's view of pleasure entails a "paradoxical conclusion," namely, that it "gives credit only to our weakness, in that we prefer unity in manifoldness to mere manifoldness. In relation to God the perfect would deserve almost no preference." In other words, Mendelssohn seems to think that Sulzer's view entails that we, and by extension God,³⁶ should always prefer objects having "unity" to those that exhibit "mere manifoldness," which he takes to be a mark of weakness. His own "provisional considerations" which follow are aimed to "resolve these difficulties."³⁷

Altmann finds these objections straightforward. According to him, Mendelssohn rightly attacks Sulzer for excessively intellectualizing sensible pleasures, and for failing to notice that de Pouilly's view that the soul takes pleasure in easiness "ultimately

³³ Sulzer himself neither posed this question nor attempted to answer it.

³⁴ *JubA*, 1:128.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Fundamental to the rationalist tradition is the idea that God's will and cognition differ from our own only in degree. This preserves continuity between our own concept of the good and God's.

³⁷ *JubA*, 1:129.

suppresses" the supposed characteristic activity of the soul, "the striving of the monad after more distinctness of cognition."³⁸ But if we look a bit more closely, Mendelssohn's objections become extremely puzzling.

Regarding sensible pleasure, Mendelssohn explains in "Von dem Vergnügen" that sensible pleasures arise from the obscure perception of a bodily condition which promotes its "preservation or well-being," i.e., its "perfect condition."³⁹ Going on, he explains the "[single] ground of the various appearances in the arousal of pleasure... [namely,] every object which contains a perfection provides to our understanding an amount of concepts by means of the manifold, and by means of the unity provides to our reason the opportunity to gain insight into the conception of these manifold concepts and the ground of their coexistence."⁴⁰ Mendelssohn claims here that sensible pleasure is a perception of perfection, and perfection provides us with the opportunity to gain insight into and develop concepts out of the thing perceived. On the surface, this explanation seems to be exactly the same as Sulzer's! At the very least, his disagreement is not so straightforward as Altmann assumed.

The second objection is even more curious. According to Altmann, Sulzer sees the unity of a perfect object as providing for easiness in the development of concepts from it, and Mendelssohn rejects this view.⁴¹ However, as cited above,⁴² Mendelssohn

³⁸ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 101. Bamberger, *JubA*, 1:XXX and Ch. A. Brandis, introduction to *Moses Mendelssohn's Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. G. B. Mendelssohn (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1843-1845), 1:83-84 provide only a cursory and unsatisfying analysis of Mendelssohn's response to Sulzer.

³⁹ *JubA*, 1:130.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 103.

⁴² See *JubA*, 1:130.

agrees with Sulzer that the unity of a perfect object allows one (“provides the opportunity”) to gain an easier insight into the arrangement of its parts. Thus, it isn’t clear how he can object to its providing “easiness” in Sulzer’s limited sense. Sommer even reads Mendelssohn as agreeing with Sulzer, intending to replace Baumgarten’s unity as “focal point” [Brennpunkt] with Sulzer’s unity as easiness.⁴³ Along similar lines, Vogt claims that for Mendelssohn beauty consists in mere ease of thought with no objective basis.⁴⁴ Thus the role played by “easiness” in Mendelssohn’s reply to Sulzer is far from clear, and left genuinely ambiguous in the text of “Von dem Vergnügen.”

Both of these issues are worth a re-examination in light of Mendelssohn’s finished work. It would, however, be a mistake to understand the *Briefe* primarily as an extended discussion of the problems Mendelssohn explicitly raises in “Von dem Vergnügen.”⁴⁵ The *Briefe* contain far more new and interesting material, much of which is best seen in contrast with an aspect of Sulzer’s work not explicitly mentioned by Mendelssohn in his sketch: Sulzer’s utter confusion about the relation between pleasure and the intellectual powers of the soul.

Sulzer claims that all pleasures are based on the intellect,⁴⁶ but he never adequately justifies that assertion. Remarkably, he raises the objections that the pleasures of wine and beautiful women seem to be counterexamples to his theory, but he responds inadequately, mentioning only that some people have put these bodily

⁴³ Sommer, *Grundzüge*, 129.

⁴⁴ Vogt, *Beschreibung*, 186-187.

⁴⁵ Altmann comes close to suggesting this (*Frühschriften*, 101), although he also claims that the *Briefe* go significantly beyond what is contained in the outline.

⁴⁶ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:8.

pleasures aside when they become acquainted with more intellectual pleasures.⁴⁷ He insists that even sensible pleasures must be in some sense intellectual or else they would leave the soul indifferent,⁴⁸ but his actual explanation of sensible pleasure does not always involve the intellect. He seems to prefer explaining sensible pleasures physiologically, as objects which set the nerves into a harmonious play.⁴⁹ Along the same lines, he claims that pleasure is ultimately a simple concept – presumably a minimal unit of the soul’s activity⁵⁰ – but this seems strictly opposed to something intellectual, which must involve analysis or synthesis. Finally, he wavers incredibly on the question of whether intellectual or sensible pleasures are preferable for us. Although he does explicitly claim – citing the example of Alexander the Great of all people – that intellectual pleasures are superior, it is hard to see how his theory leads to this conclusion. Intellectual pleasures, Sulzer says, are weaker and require significant effort to enjoy. They are, however, less prone to excess and easier to bring to mind.⁵¹ This is not exactly a strong or convincing case for the superiority of the intellectual. Sulzer also claims that sensible pleasures only aim at our preservation while intellectual pleasures aim at our happiness. But he does not respond to the obvious objection that sensible pleasures can also make us happy. Finally, Sulzer does not leave space in his theory for a specific pleasure in the beautiful, but attempts to classify it now as sensible, now as intellectual. One of the great merits of Mendelssohn’s *Briefe* is that it offers a clear and

⁴⁷ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:14-15.

⁴⁸ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:22.

⁴⁹ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:55-58.

⁵⁰ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:11.

⁵¹ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:74-76.

unambiguous account of all of these important matters, all within the rationalist framework.

Structure and overview of the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*

The *Briefe* is written as an epistolary dialog between two interlocutors, Palemon and Euphranor. The name “Palemon” is taken from a character in Shaftesbury’s *The Moralists*, a work which Mendelssohn held in extremely high regard. (The name is changed to “Theokles,” another of Shaftesbury’s characters, in the revised edition, so that it would better refer to the relevant parts of Shaftesbury’s dialog). Altmann speculates that Mendelssohn took the name “Euphranor” from an essay Meier had published under that name, in which beauty had been defined as a sensibly cognized perfection.⁵² More likely in my view, since both Meier’s definition of beauty and his essay were unremarkable, Mendelssohn (like Meier before him) simply intended the name to stand for the original Greek *euphraino*, “to delight.” This fits with Euphranor’s emphasis on pleasure, enjoyment and his pleasure-oriented “youthful system of ethics.”⁵³

Mendelssohn describes Palemon as an English philosopher who leaves his homeland to escape the “extravagant imaginings mixed with French gallantry which are sold as metaphysics by many of its people.” He is willing to give up all the comforts of home in order to satisfy “his inclination toward rigor” and find people who “consider

⁵² Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 112.

⁵³ *JubA*, 1:48.

right thinking worthier than free thinking.”⁵⁴ This, along with certain of Palemon’s statements which appear autobiographical,⁵⁵ clearly indicates that Palemon represents Mendelssohn’s own views. But there is some contention in the literature about Euphranor’s role. On the one hand, Palemon is constantly correcting his youthful friend’s excessive enthusiasm in reaching sensualistic conclusions. On the other hand, Palemon seems to accept parts of what Euphranor says, and Euphranor is no materialist in the mold of Maupertuis or empiricist in the mold of Burke or Hume. This is evident from the fact that Euphranor holds the rationalist’s basic view that beauty is the confused intuition of perfection.⁵⁶ On this basis, Altmann argues that Euphranor’s theory is not supposed to be *refuted* but simply encompassed within a larger theory.⁵⁷ Altmann also attributes Euphranor’s claim that sensible pleasures do not relate to perfection to Mendelssohn himself.⁵⁸ Segreff attributes other of Euphranor’s theoretical claims to Mendelssohn.⁵⁹

In my view, this is incorrect. Mendelssohn’s essay “Sendschreiben an einen jungen Gelehrten zu B.” published anonymously in 1756, purports to summarize the main argument of the *Briefe* and clearly indicates Euphranor as the foil.⁶⁰ While Palemon

⁵⁴ *JubA*, 1:43.

⁵⁵ See *JubA*, 1:64-65.

⁵⁶ *JubA*, 1:48

⁵⁷ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 110.

⁵⁸ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 125.

⁵⁹ Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 18.

⁶⁰ “There were [also] fugitive spirits who considered the human being to be more a feeling than a thinking creature. Such people believe that a philosopher makes the world into a grave when he seeks knowledge where nature has determined him only to feeling; they look at a rational person with pitying glances, as one looks down at a flagellant. The author [i.e. Mendelssohn himself] *puts these thoughts in the mind of a youth* (i.e., Euphranor), who seeks to make them quite apparent by means of

takes all of Euphranor's observations (including general observations) about experience seriously, he rejects all of his theoretical explanations – except the basic view that beauty is a perception of perfection.

Euphranor's "initial" acceptance of the view that beauty is the perception of perfection shows that the *Briefe* is not a polemic against the sensualists and empiricists. It is rather intended as an elaboration of the rationalists' view from the superficial, naïve, and weakly held opinions of Euphranor to the sophisticated and well-defended theory of Palemon. Euphranor sees all kinds of problems and exceptions to the rationalist theory and it is up to Palemon to show how the theory can account for these apparent deficiencies. Mendelssohn hopes to convince the public of the truth of the rationalist theory not by defending its basic premises or attacking alternative theories, but by showing its inner plausibility and explanatory power.

Nowhere does Mendelssohn attempt to provide an independent argument for the view that pleasure is the perception of perfection. To some degree, he considered this proposition purely axiomatic, writing in 1761 that "this basic principle of sentiment is no hypothesis, but an established and unassailable truth."⁶¹ Yet he was also clearly committed to the idea that it must be able to explain experience, as we will see throughout the dissertation. Thus Mendelssohn likely would have agreed that this "unassailable truth" is a theoretical posit, justified through its explanatory power.

various reasons and examples." (*JubA*, 1:526, emphasis added). Mendelssohn also writes of Palemon that "he distinguishes himself everywhere in this work through his didactic tone" (*JubA* 1:527).

⁶¹ Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Schriften* (hereafter *PS*) (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß, 1761), 2:18.

In terms of its content, the *Briefe* is anything but a popular work. Its apparently accessible dialogic form belies a deep complexity and reliance on established doctrines of Wolffian and Baumgartian philosophy. Mendelssohn often uses technical terms and ideas from this tradition without explaining them, assuming they would be known to his readers. For this reason it will often be necessary to refer to the rationalist philosophers, especially Wolff and Baumgarten, in explaining Mendelssohn's own views.

Euphranor's objections and Palemon's reply

In his first two letters, Euphranor attacks the involvement of reason in the enjoyment of pleasures, particularly beauty. In general, he argues, what is needed for pleasure is not thinking, but passion and affect along with certain motions in the body. Our feeling for beauty develops by emphasizing our sensibility, not our intellect. Euphranor's reasoning is based on the assumption that there is a gulf between reasoning, thinking, and analysis on one side and feeling on the other. Since the enjoyment of beauty is not merely a cold reasoning, he concludes that it must consist merely of feeling and bodily enjoyment. Euphranor further insists that reason is actually antithetical to enjoyment. Those "anatomists" who subject poetry to rules and treat their subjects like scientists "dissecting an insect" have "turned their feeling into a logical argument... We feel no more as soon as we think."⁶²

This opening salvo from Euphranor brilliantly raises one of the chief questions considered in the work: What exactly is the psychological relation between the feeling of

⁶² *JubA*, 1:46-49.

pleasure, especially aesthetic pleasure, and reason? If we want to feel beauty, must we really suppress our reason and allow ourselves to be guided by emotion alone? Within the context described above, the question becomes: Can the Wolffian theory really account for the actual experience of beauty and other pleasures, or must the rationalist admit that pleasure is not well explained as a rational perception of perfection after all?

In his reply, Palemon argues that feeling is not opposed to reason, as Euphranor had assumed, but instead continuous with it. The argument has two parts: one pertaining to the cognitive faculties themselves, and the other to the way in which the faculties relate to beautiful objects.

As Palemon's reply makes clear, Euphranor's assumption about reason and feeling rests on a certain kind of error. He had admitted that beauty consists in the confused [undeutlich] perception of perfection. But unlike the Latin *confusa*, the German *undeutlich* can seem to be merely a negation of *deutlich* [distincta], leaving its meaning somewhat vague. As a result, Euphranor seemed to think that *undeutlich* opens the door to obscure (*dunkel*) sentiment, on which he says our pleasure in beauty and even our happiness depends.⁶³ He also seems to think that *undeutlich* is synonymous with pure feeling, and is different in kind from *deutlich*, which lies strictly within the domain of reason. Palemon denies both of these last points. "The truth is certain: neither distinct nor fully obscure concept[s] agree with the feeling of beauty."⁶⁴ Beauty is neither

⁶³ *JubA*, 1:48.

⁶⁴ *JubA*, 1:50.

something fully intellectual, nor a merely bare feeling, but something clear but confused – something sensible – which has cognitive content even where we cannot explain it.

Palemon's claim that beauty is perceived confusedly must not be understood as a requirement that we not perceive *anything* distinctly. Undeniably, we immediately intuit many distinctions in most artistic and natural objects that we encounter. Beauty "falls between the bounds of complete obscurity and complete distinctness," but in that range there is an infinite variation of clarity, confusion, and distinctness with respect to the parts of the object.⁶⁵ Palemon means simply that enjoying the beautiful does not involve striving to analyze the object down to its fundamental elements to achieve a maximal degree of distinctness. He does not intend to exclude the activity of making some distinctions among its parts and assigning reasons for them. This activity, Palemon goes on to argue, is an important part of aesthetic experience.

In the third and fourth letters, Palemon insists that both the cognition and creation of beauty must focus on the object as a whole, rather than on the rules for ordering the parts. Beautiful objects must have determinate boundaries such that the senses or at least the imagination can grasp them as a whole.⁶⁶ In a partial show of affinity with Euphranor, Palemon points out that musicians are more concerned about the opinion of those with a practiced ear, who follow the overall melody, than those who merely know the rules of harmony in great detail.⁶⁷ This shows that even Palemon

⁶⁵ See the Appendix for a more detailed account of this claim.

⁶⁶ *JubA*, 1:50-51.

⁶⁷ *JubA*, 1:55.

considers the sensible intuition of the whole to be irreplaceable in the experience of beauty.⁶⁸

But Palemon does not, like Euphranor, think that the story ends with the initial perception of the whole. His own analysis of aesthetic experience gives analysis and aesthetic rules significant roles as well. Responding to Euphranor's claim that analysis destroys pleasure, Palemon counters that analysis actually *enhances* pleasure if related to the intuition in the right way. "Reason rather increases [pleasure], if one only knows to order the particular concepts into the appropriate shadow, so that they do not take away deserving light from the whole through their all-too-bright gleam."⁶⁹ Although beauty must initially fall to the senses without effort, we can greatly enhance our enjoyment of beautiful objects by subsequently contemplating their parts and the rules connecting them. This analysis makes subsequent perception of the whole more comprehensible and more enjoyable. "Through the intuition of the whole the parts will lose their bright colors, but they will leave behind traces which elucidate [aufklären] the concept of the whole, and provide the pleasure that arises from it a greater liveliness."⁷⁰ Even though a distinct consideration of the rules connecting the parts does not – and should not – occur at the moment we enjoy the object, a *prior* analysis nonetheless modifies our overall

⁶⁸ Vogt, *Beschreibung*, 217f, is wrong to think that Mendelssohn was the first in his tradition to give sense perception its own value. Mendelssohn follows Baumgarten on this point.

⁶⁹ *JubA*, 1:527.

⁷⁰ *JubA* 1:54. Vogt is therefore incorrect to claim that knowledge of rules or any greater insight into the object "is of no consequence" during the moment of enjoyment (190). That it is of consequence is the precisely the point Mendelssohn is trying to make.

grasp of the object in a way that makes it more enjoyable. Thus distinct contemplation does not destroy pleasure; rather, it prepares one for feeling it in all its fullness.⁷¹

Importantly, distinct analysis of the parts can contribute to the confused intuition of the whole *precisely because* both the distinct analysis and the confused intuition have the same cognitive object: the relation of the parts to the whole according to rules. The intuition will be fuller and its relations grasped more clearly when those same relations have already been perceived more distinctly. According to Palemon, one should guard against being conscious of the rules or overly conscious of the component parts during the moment of enjoyment. Hence Palemon's recommended method for enjoying beauty is a multi-step process: "choose, sense, contemplate, enjoy." Rules are important as preparations for the artist, too, who ought to internalize them but not be conscious of them at the moment of creation, because that would distract him from the beauty of the whole.⁷²

Although Baumgarten never wrote about the contemplation of beauty in such psychological terms, Mendelssohn's theory here is closely connected to Baumgarten's distinction between natural and artificial aesthetics. Baumgarten recognized that everyone has some natural ability to perceive law-governed connections among complexes of determinations, even if they cannot enunciate what they perceive. In other words, people have a natural ability to perceive perfection clearly but confusedly.⁷³ However, he held that it is also possible to determine the laws of beauty distinctly

⁷¹ *JubA*, 1:53.

⁷² *JubA*, 1:55.

⁷³ Alexander Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt an der Oder: Kleyb, 1750), §2.

through analysis. This analysis, though not in itself pleasurable, would improve and refine our natural aesthetic sense. What Baumgarten says here about his proposed science of aesthetics in general, Mendelssohn applies psychologically to the individual's enjoyment of beautiful objects.

The distinction between beauty and perfection; Mendelssohn's reply to Sulzer

Palemon's task in the fifth letter is to distinguish the pleasure of beauty from more intellectual forms of pleasure. Along these lines, he insists that beauty must be distinguished objectively from what he calls "perfection." "Now is the time to separate the boundaries of perfection and beauty, and show both in their true form... Beauty requires unity [Einheit] in the manifold... Perfection requires no unity, but instead agreement of the manifold."⁷⁴ This appears to be a departure from Mendelssohn's rationalist predecessors, including Wolff, Baumgarten, Gottsched, and Meier, who had all seen beauty as the sensible form of perfection. Some commentators have argued that Palemon wants to make beauty "autonomous" or different in kind from the more intellectual perfection. According to Altmann, for example, "perfection" is strictly an objective property of an object that can be perceived distinctly, while beauty is a fundamentally different, merely subjective property.⁷⁵

There is, however, another explanation for Mendelssohn's claim here: he is using the terms "unity" and "perfection" in a somewhat idiosyncratic way. Unity, according to Wolff, is merely an inseparability or connectedness of some determinations such that

⁷⁴ *JubA*, 1:58.

⁷⁵ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 115, 128-129. Will seems to recognize that Mendelssohn does not intend such a sharp separation ("Cognition through Beauty," 99) but does not provide an account of the distinction.

they belong together as one thing.⁷⁶ Unity can be essential, as in a monad, but also accidental, as in an aggregate or composite being. It is implausible that Mendelssohn would deny this very weak kind of unity to perfection. Indeed, in the text Mendelssohn repeatedly uses the terms “Gleichheit” [“similarity”] and “Einerley” [“uniformity”] as synonyms of “Einheit” [“unity”]: Palemon writes that “the similarity, the uniformity in the manifold is a property of beautiful objects;”⁷⁷ perfection “provide[s] manifoldness, but no uniformity in the manifold.”⁷⁸ This nonstandard usage of the term implies that “unity” in this text means something more akin to “similarity” and “uniformity.”

The term “perfection,” too, is clearly not being used in the more general sense of “conformity of a manifold with rules of the whole.” Instead, Palemon is using the term in a sense taken from Leibniz’s *Monadology*: “Perfection is nothing but the amount of positive reality, in the strict sense, leaving out of account the limits or bounds in things which are limited.”⁷⁹ Perfection in this sense abstracts from any limitation or imperfection, counting only the absolute amount that the manifold agrees with the whole (this is elsewhere identified with the degree of reality for Leibniz). Accordingly, Mendelssohn claims that the beauty of an organism is limited to its external, visible appearance, while its perfection pervades limitlessly into its internal construction, even to intestines and other organs that are not pleasing to the senses.⁸⁰ Likewise, as

⁷⁶ Christian Wolff, *Ontologia*, div. 2, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), §§328-329.

⁷⁷ *JubA*, 1:58.

⁷⁸ *JubA*, 1:59.

⁷⁹ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 218. For proof of Mendelssohn’s familiarity with this concept, see his “Rezension der Beurtheilung der Schrift usw. von Waser und Wieland,” *JubA*, 2:160.

⁸⁰ *JubA*, 1:59.

Mendelssohn points out, the beauty of a dwarf-tree garden is limited to the harmony of the visible arrangement of its parts, but the perfection of a tree is unlimited in that all of its (even invisible and inner) parts contribute to a common end of the whole.⁸¹ Other examples of the enjoyment of what Mendelssohn terms “perfection” include the contemplation of the world-structure and the mathematician’s confused survey of an entire proof as a whole, neither of which is limited by the confusion of sense.⁸²

The term “beauty” also acquires a more specific meaning in the *Briefe*. Wolff thought of a thing’s beauty as its power to produce pleasure in us through its perfection, which implies that *all* perceivable elements of a thing’s unity-in-variety contribute to its beauty. In Mendelssohn’s *Briefe*, however, beauty is understood as a more narrow subset of observable perfection, namely, “beautiful objects must present an order or a perfection which falls to the senses, and indeed falls to the senses without effort,”⁸³ or more specifically, “nothing deserves this name [of beauty], that does not fall clearly to our senses all at once.”⁸⁴ This is why, when explaining the pleasures of music, Mendelssohn considers the consonant chords as its *beauty* but the resolution of dissonance as its *perfection*.⁸⁵ Consonance, according to Mendelssohn, consists of simple integer relations among vibrations and is immediately perceptible; the more complex dissonant tonal relations require a resolution and so cannot be immediately perceived all

⁸¹ *JubA*, 1:60.

⁸² *JubA*, 1:52, 1:91, 1:531.

⁸³ *JubA*, 1:58.

⁸⁴ *JubA*, 1:51.

⁸⁵ *JubA*, 1:85.

at once.⁸⁶ But both clearly have a rational basis, and both are sensed. The only difference is that the perfection involved in the resolution of dissonance is not sensed *all at once* or *effortlessly*.⁸⁷ Thus, “perfection” is more intellectual than beauty only in the sense that the experience of perfection involves a more expansive comparison of perceptions than beauty.

As a result, the actual experience of sensible objects, especially those extended in time, will often involve the *sensing* of both “beauty” and “perfection.” Beauty is merely the perfection that falls *immediately* and *effortlessly* to our senses, while perceiving “perfection” requires going beyond what is immediately apparent to our senses at one particular time. However, as Mendelssohn is careful to point out, “it is true that there is a kind of perfection connected with this beauty, for from the general plan of beauty, reasons can be given why the dwarf-trees [from the above example] are arranged just as they are.”⁸⁸

From this it is apparent that Mendelssohn is not making a sharp distinction between beautiful and perfect objects, nor is he denying that beauty involves perfection in the sense described by Wolff and Baumgarten. He is simply pointing out that there is a difference in degree: the harmony of beautiful objects involves more limitation, while

⁸⁶ *JubA*, 1:115. The specific examples of tonal relations given by Mendelssohn are integer approximations of geometrically proportional intervals. Mendelssohn claims that the consonant intervals are 1:2 (an octave), 2:3 (approximately a perfect fifth), 3:5 (approximately a major sixth), and 5:8 (approximately a minor sixth). The examples of dissonant intervals are 8:9 (approximately a major second), 8:15 (approximately a major seventh) and 45:64 (approximately the augmented fourth).

⁸⁷ Altmann, who has Mendelssohn make a sharp distinction between beauty and perfection, is puzzled at why Mendelssohn should consider the imitation of the passions to be a source of metaphysical perfection (131). According to my reading, this is simply because the imitation of the passions requires a relatively *unlimited* manifold, i.e. one extended in time.

⁸⁸ *JubA*, 1:60.

the harmony of perfect objects involves less. The limitation of beauty has both a subjective and an objective aspect. Subjectively, it is caused by the limited powers of our senses, which confusedly perceive what is really manifold as something more uniform (e.g., a patch of color in a painting). Objectively, the beauty of an object is governed by laws of this sensibly perceived manifold, i.e. laws of phenomena, not laws of the underlying substances. In general, this limitation of beautiful phenomena, occasionally called “unity” but more often “uniformity” in the *Briefe*, reduces the amount of variety in the object, limiting the overall degree of perfection that can be perceived. At the same time, it allows what perfection there is to be grasped easily by the senses. This easiness makes the pleasure more accessible, but also reduces its potential intensity.

The reason behind Mendelssohn’s somewhat puzzling use of these terms is revealed in a footnote to the fifth letter: “In order to excuse the author under discussion [Sulzer], one could perhaps say that he indicated both the uniformity and the agreement of the manifold with the same word ‘unity’ (*unité*), and consequently brought beauty and perfection under a common name.”⁸⁹ The charge is quite unfair to Sulzer, who consistently uses *unité* in the sense of “agreement,” not “uniformity.”⁹⁰ Yet it is clear that the peculiar use of the term “unity” is taken from Mendelssohn’s reading of Sulzer, and he emphasizes the unlimitedness of perfection only as opposed to the limited beauty – not for the purpose of redefining the term.

⁸⁹ *JubA*, 1:113.

⁹⁰ See especially Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:27-33 and *Recherches* (1751), 79-83. Vogt, *Beschreibung*, 183 follows Mendelssohn in misreading Sulzer here.

All of these idiosyncratic usages are dropped in Mendelssohn's later writings, including his 1757 essay on the fine arts. There he writes straightforwardly that "if the cognition of perfection is sensible, it is called beauty."⁹¹ This change does not, however, represent a significant shift in Mendelssohn's views,⁹² but a return to the standard use of technical terminology. Mendelssohn adopted this usage in the *Briefe* solely in order to emphasize his disagreement with Sulzer, and never intended to use it in other contexts.

This distinction between a limited and unlimited manifold can also make sense of Mendelssohn's worries about Sulzer's views on easiness and difficulty in the apprehension of perfection (above). In the *Briefe*, Mendelssohn explains that if we insist perfection must be easily grasped, then our inclination toward perfection would be attributed to our weakness or our need for ease.⁹³ However, argues Mendelssohn, it is only because a great manifold exhausts our limited cognitive powers that we require it to be limited in order to enjoy it. Put another way, a beautiful manifold is easy to comprehend precisely *because* it is limited. It is therefore more immediately pleasurable for our limited minds. More unlimited perfection, on the other hand, offers a greater and deeper source of pleasure for those who are capable of understanding it. Now as we saw, Sulzer too held that greater and more unlimited perfections offer more pleasure for those capable of grasping them.⁹⁴ Why then does Mendelssohn continue to make Sulzer

⁹¹ *JubA*, 1:430.

⁹² As Sommer suggests, *Grundzüge*, 114-116.

⁹³ *JubA*, 1:57.

⁹⁴ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:15-16. Mendelssohn even breaks with Wolff here to agree with Sulzer. Wolff had argued that more difficult cognition produces greater pleasure because it better reflects the perfection of the mind. Christian Wolff, *Horae subsecivae Marburgenses*, div. 2, vol 34.1 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1983), Trimestre Aestivum I §9, p. 191.

his main target of criticism on this point?⁹⁵ Mendelssohn was likely in close personal contact with Sulzer at the time he wrote the *Briefe*,⁹⁶ and certainly knew him extremely well prior to the publication of the revised 1761 edition, which retains all of this content. For that reason it is unlikely that Mendelssohn's objections are based merely on misunderstanding.

In fact, Mendelssohn's complaint pertains not so much to the "easiness" of beauty per se, as to this easiness against the backdrop of Sulzer's general devaluation of perfection. In his essay on sentiment, Sulzer sees perfection as having primarily instrumental value in occasioning our pleasurable contemplation.⁹⁷ Further, in his 1754 essay on perfect happiness, Sulzer had agreed with Maupertuis that "the sentiment of pleasure makes one happy and the sentiment of pain makes one unhappy."⁹⁸ Taken together, this view denies value to perfection in itself. For if my happiness consists in pleasure, and my pleasure consists in easy enjoyment, then I have no reason to strive after greater perfection for its own sake. It is within this context that Sulzer calls Descartes' and Wolff's accounts of pleasure, which see objective perfection as valuable in itself, "unsatisfying."⁹⁹ On his view, perfection has only instrumental value insofar as it provides occasion for me to feel pleasure – but only when I am capable of grasping it. Easiness, on the other hand, *is* valuable in itself because what I find easy I enjoy, and enjoyment makes me happy.

⁹⁵ *JubA*, 1:56-57, which is a paraphrase of Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:38-39.

⁹⁶ Altmann, 109-110.

⁹⁷ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:37-39.

⁹⁸ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:324

⁹⁹ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 11.

This emphasis on easiness at the *expense* of perfection is precisely what Mendelssohn wants to resist. The mere inner “enjoyment” of pleasure, as envisioned by Pouilly, Dubos, and now Sulzer, which strives toward nothing beyond itself, would undermine Mendelssohn’s rationalist view that the highest good consists in an increase of perfection. In the *Briefe*, as in “Von dem Vergnügen,” Mendelssohn’s clearest response to this idea appears in the form of a rather obscure theological retort: “why does the wise Creator, whom the thought of all possible worlds at once cannot exhaust, prefer the perfect to the merely manifold?”¹⁰⁰ In other words, God in fact prefers the perfect, even though his infinite power of thinking would also allow him to think sheer manifoldness (lacking unity and perfection) with the greatest ease. Since Mendelssohn, like the other rationalists, held that pleasure determines the will (as discussed in Part 3 of this chapter), God must therefore take greater pleasure in perfection than in sheer manifoldness. And that implies that perfection, not easiness, is the basis of divine—and by implication human—pleasure. Rather than viewing pleasure as a mere enjoyment of easiness, Mendelssohn insists that we should see it as a source of self-improvement, something that prods us toward our own perfection and that of those around us.¹⁰¹

In sum, Mendelssohn does not mean to reject the idea that easiness, and even Sulzer’s subjective play of faculties,¹⁰² play some role in pleasure. He is happy to say that some of the pleasure I feel while contemplating a beautiful object is due to the easy

¹⁰⁰ *JubA*, 1:57.

¹⁰¹ Altmann recognizes that Mendelssohn’s main disagreement with Sulzer involves his conception of the relation between pleasure and the good (*Frühschriften*, 104-105). But he is incorrect to think that Mendelssohn rejected easiness altogether. In fact, Mendelssohn and Sulzer agree that pleasure *in general* always involves easily grasped (intuitable) objects.

¹⁰² Sulzer uses the term “play” (“jeu,” “Spiel”) in his 1752 work, *Recherches* (1752), 354; *Schriften*, 1:55.

exercise of my cognitive faculties.¹⁰³ Instead, the disagreement concerns the priority of explanation: Sulzer thinks that perfection pleases simply *because* it allows one to easily develop concepts. Mendelssohn, by contrast, holds that perfection pleases because pleasure *is* the perception of perfection, even while the easy development of concepts provides a secondary, reflexively oriented pleasure. According to Mendelssohn the perception of *perfection*, not easiness in the development of concepts, is the single true and necessary explanation of all pleasure. Even the exercise of my faculties is pleasurable only because it confusedly reflects my own cognitive perfection.¹⁰⁴

One additional point about the easiness of beauty is worth mentioning. In the fifth letter, Palemon claims that the feeling of sensible beauty is to be ascribed to our impotence. But in the fourth letter, he had written that pleasure separated from bodily feeling depends on the positive power of the soul.¹⁰⁵ Since the experience of beauty is no mere bodily feeling, this suggests that pleasure in beauty *does* depend on the positive power of our soul. These apparently contradictory claims can be reconciled by recognizing that both are true in different senses. That we take pleasure in a limited manifold *at all* is due to the limitation of cognitive powers, and hence to our impotence. But, at the same time, the pleasure that we get out of these objects nonetheless depends on the degree of insight that we have into them. “The representation of the parts just as their agreement is grounded in the positive power of our soul, [and] both require an

¹⁰³ *JubA*, 1:58, 1:60.

¹⁰⁴ The idea that we are pleased by our own cognitive perfection was standard in Wolff, but Wolff associated this pleasure with the discovery of truth, not with the mere exercise of faculties (*PE*, §§532, 536).

¹⁰⁵ *JubA*, 1:56

exertion and striving of this original power."¹⁰⁶ Beauty for Mendelssohn is a balancing act: it should contain as much variety and perfection as possible, and we perceive this through our active cognitive powers. But it must also take into account our limitations, so that there is not so much variety that we fail to perceive the perfection at all.¹⁰⁷

The *sui generis* character of sense perception and the experience of beauty

Despite the affinity Mendelssohn acknowledges between sense and intellect, there is one respect in which sense perceptions are undeniably *sui generis*: their specific character as we experience them. No description of a rainbow, however complete, could exactly replace the experience of actually seeing one. The intuitive and confused nature of sense is irreplaceable, and exactly what the confusion adds does not seem amenable to any rational analysis. Leibniz recognized this unique quality of confusion in his "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas," writing that in the confusion of sense our mind "fashions some new thing for itself."¹⁰⁸ Mendelssohn accepted this view. In a fragment entitled "Die Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten" ["The relation between the beautiful and the good"] written in a few years after the *Briefe*, he explains:

With every sensible feeling a sea of concepts flows into our soul. The soul thinks when it perceives some of these concepts distinctly; and it senses, as soon as it abandons itself to the impression and grasps all of them at once. The elements are just the same whether we grasp them with reason or with the senses, and a sensible sentiment is nothing other than the perception of endlessly many effects and counter-effects, which are not distinguished in and for themselves by the distinct concepts of the understanding. But since they present themselves to the soul at once, they produce an effect which is entirely different from the effect of single concepts of the understanding, and for that reason are called phenomena.

¹⁰⁶ *JubA*, 1:113.

¹⁰⁷ *JubA*, 1:58-59.

¹⁰⁸ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 27.

The concepts of the understanding relate to sensible sentiment as some tone of a string to the roar of the sea, or as the voice of an audibly speaking man to the noise and the hollow murmurings of a collected people. For from the mixture of many concepts a composite appearance arises, which is fully distinguished from the elements from which they arise, just as some two bodies, which come together produce a third which shows entirely different sensible properties as those from which it is composed....

The musical triad is, as known, at bottom nothing but a sensible perception of a certain relation. But what we sense in hearing the triad is far distinguished from the consideration of some relation, for here the sentiments have reproduced themselves through all nerves and have become appearance. Just so arouses a regular statue entirely different sentiments than the relations from which it is composed; and we even sense moral virtue differently than we grasp it with reason.¹⁰⁹

Even though confused perception contains the same content as distinct perception, it just *feels* different from both distinct perception and from other kinds of confused perception. Consequently, each sense modality has its own, unique, and irreducibly specific character. Does it follow in aesthetics that each sense modality would have its own characteristic kind of beauty, so that these beauties differ in kind from each other as well as from the distinct perception of perfection?

The importance Mendelssohn gave this question even in the *Briefe* is apparent from his lengthy discussion there about the possibility of a color piano (expanded in the second edition).¹¹⁰ This device, first conceived by Louis Bertrand Castel and further developed by Johann Gottlob Krüger, was supposed to provide the same beauties to sight that the piano provides to hearing. Sulzer had denied the possibility of such a “music of color,” even though he admitted that there was a perfect physical

¹⁰⁹ *JubA*, 2:183-185.

¹¹⁰ Altmann gives some helpful background on the topic (*Frühschriften*, 131) but does not seem to recognize its philosophical significance within Mendelssohn’s treatise.

correspondence between color and tone.¹¹¹ The sense of sight, Sulzer thinks, is just characteristically weaker and less prone to stirring up strong passions than the sense of hearing.

Against this, Mendelssohn points out that the development of a music of color is still in its infancy. We do not yet know how to represent the passions through colors, as we do through tones, and we do not yet know the rules for combining color with magnitude, as we do for tone and volume. He goes on to suggest several ways in which progress might be made toward these goals with the help of Hogarth's theory of the serpentine line.¹¹² "Perhaps this invention could also provide a way of expressing human passions in a color-melody."¹¹³ Mendelssohn goes on to express some new concerns about the possibility of a music of color, which run as follows: First, we can distinguish more colors than tones in a single moment. Next, the eye retains colors over time, so that we mix recently past colors with present in different and unexpected ways. Finally, the colors would have to be presented more slowly than tones because we are not accustomed to having this sort of content represented visually. Mendelssohn certainly acknowledges that there are significant differences between the sense modalities. Yet he also insists in this section that the differences are *explainable*, i.e. reducible to the quantities of determinations and the degree of confusion characteristic of the perception. As a result, there is no *essential* barrier to the representation of the same content through different sense modalities, although there may be contingent

¹¹¹ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:62.

¹¹² *JubA*, 1:87.

¹¹³ *JubA*, 1:116.

physiological features which makes some perceptual content more appropriate for one sense modality than another.

In sum, Mendelssohn downplayed the specific character of each sense modality as strongly as possible in aesthetics. Each sense indeed has *sui generis* qualities, but nothing about our aesthetic experience, he argues, *irreducibly* depends on these peculiarities. Instead, everything depends on the knowledge of appropriate principles, along with various quantitative differences in the sensible content: which aspects of the perception are clear or obscure and to what degree, which aspects are divided into space, and which into time, etc. He would adopt a similar approach in explaining the particular arts (discussed further in Chapter 2).

Bodily pleasure

Wolff's account of pleasure emphasizes its cognitive aspect to such a degree that it often seems to neglect the *feeling* of pleasure. From the account of pleasure in his *Psychologia Empirica*, one wonders if he thinks that experiencing pleasure is any different from experiencing the color green. In addition, Wolff insists that pleasure *just is* the intuition of perfection,¹¹⁴ but he often writes about it as if it were something *produced* by such an intuition – without, however, elaborating on what this might be.¹¹⁵ This ambiguity left a wide opening for materialists to attack the rationalists' entire analysis of pleasure. For example, La Mettrie argued in his 1748 *L'homme machine* that since everyone agrees pleasure is always *accompanied* by bodily effects akin to a mild "fever"

¹¹⁴ *PE*, §511.

¹¹⁵ See *PE*, §§512-514.

or “seething,” we should admit that the pleasure *just is* the totality of these physical effects.¹¹⁶

Euphranor’s claims that bodily pleasure¹¹⁷ is a kind of seething of the blood and excitation of the bodily organs stems from this sort of thinking.¹¹⁸ Although Euphranor focuses on bodily pleasures like those of drink and sex, he had also insisted that a “seething of the blood” was required for all pleasure, including that of beauty (JubA 1, 49). This, it seemed to him, made the perception of perfection or any other mental act superfluous.

In “Von dem Vergnügen,” Mendelssohn had rejected Sulzer’s attempted explanation of bodily pleasure on the grounds that we do not develop “a multitude of concepts” out of the objects involved in such pleasures. But this does not mean, as Altmann argues, that he accepted Euphranor’s claim that these pleasures do not rest on any perfection.¹¹⁹ Palemon could not be any more explicit when he claims, in direct response to Euphranor on the very issue, that “All pleasure is grounded in the representation of a perfection.”¹²⁰ Mendelssohn’s response to Sulzer is not to deny the role of perfection in sensible pleasure, but rather to shift the *object* of bodily pleasure away from whatever occasions the pleasure (e.g. the bottle of wine) and to the subject’s body. This perfection in the body is perceived “obscurely,” and has nothing to do with

¹¹⁶ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L’Homme machine* (Leiden: Elie Luzac, 1748), 79-81.

¹¹⁷ Mendelssohn and others generally use the term “sinnliche Lust” which is more directly translated as “sensible pleasure.” In order to more clearly distinguish this pleasure from beauty (which is also sensible – but in a different sense), I have chosen to refer to this pleasure as “bodily pleasure,” and will generally translate “sinnliche Lust” as “bodily pleasure.”

¹¹⁸ *JubA*, 1:48.

¹¹⁹ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 125.

¹²⁰ *JubA*, 1:81.

developing ideas from the *object* associated with the pleasure. In this way Mendelssohn involves both the body and the mind in bodily pleasure: certain motions occur in the body which increase its perfection, and the mind perceives this perfection obscurely, filling it with pleasure. Evidently, even in “Von dem Vergnügen” the complaint had not been that Sulzer overly *intellectualized* bodily pleasure, but that he had mistaken its *object*.

Thus far, Mendelssohn’s view about bodily pleasure is not particularly original. It is almost identical to Wolff’s, who explains in his *Psychologia Empirica*, “If we refer any sensations to the perfection of our status, we perceive pleasure from them.”¹²¹ He provides the following example: “Infants, while they drink the milk of the mother, observe the removal of hunger and thirst, troubling sensations, and are calmed [by noticing] that it is good for their body. Hence a notion of the perfection of their status arises, which is joined with the sweet milk, so that through confused notions they are accustomed to refer the perfection of their status to the sweet milk.”¹²² So, according to Wolff, the infant does not notice any perfection in the milk itself. Instead, it notices the improved state or perfection of its own body, and then *refers* or *associates* that more perfect state to the milk, which it has recently consumed. Wolff does not say explicitly that the perception is obscure, but as his example involves an infant with paltry cognitive powers, it is likely that he would have agreed.

¹²¹ *PE*, §550.

¹²² *Ibid*.

Karl W. Jerusalem, best known today as the suicide victim who inspired Goethe's *Werner*, is also the author of the only contemporaneous critique of Mendelssohn's theory of bodily pleasure.¹²³ Jerusalem argues that an obscure perception cannot explain bodily pleasure: Since the perception is obscure, we are not conscious of the "harmonious tension of nerves" or the other specific motions which actually constitute the body's perfection.¹²⁴ We only become aware of the improved condition of the body *through* the feeling of pleasure itself.¹²⁵ And, "what is only a consequence [viz., the improved condition of body] cannot explain the cause, consequently the obscure representation of perfection of the body also cannot be the cause of the pleasure [Vergnügens] which arises from bodily pleasure [sinnlichen Lust]." ¹²⁶

According to Altmann and Lessing,¹²⁷ Mendelssohn did not "escape" this objection until he expanded his view of bodily pleasure in the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsodie*. There, Mendelssohn admits that he should not have considered the soul to be a mere spectator of the body's increased perfection during the enjoyment of bodily pleasure.¹²⁸ Due to the mind-body harmony (discussed further below), the perfection of the mind increases along with that of the body, so that the soul can enjoy its own improved state as well. But Jerusalem's objection hinges on the *obscurity* of the representation of improvement, not its object. Presumably, if the mind perceives the

¹²³ Jerusalem's *Philosophische Schriften* ed. G. E. Lessing (Braunschweig: Lessing, 1776) was published posthumously. Cf. Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 108.

¹²⁴ Jerusalem, *Schriften*, 68.

¹²⁵ Jerusalem, *Schriften*, 69.

¹²⁶ Jerusalem, *Schriften*, 70.

¹²⁷ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 107-108; Lessing, publisher's addenda to Jerusalem, *Schriften*, 113-115.

¹²⁸ *JubA*, 1:225-226.

improvement of the body obscurely, it would also perceive the resulting improvement in its own degree of perfection obscurely. Therefore it is hard to see how this addition to Mendelssohn's view is relevant to Jerusalem's criticism at all.

Fortunately, Mendelssohn had ample resources to respond even in the 1755 edition. Jerusalem's argument has two fatal flaws. First, it confuses the epistemic with the metaphysical. While it may be true that we can only become *aware* of our subtly improved condition through the feeling of pleasure (an epistemic point), it does not follow at all that this feeling is not in fact *caused* by an improved condition of the body (a metaphysical point). Second, there is no distinction between the obscure perception of the body's perfection and the feeling of pleasure. They are one and the same. There is no reason to think that Mendelssohn meant only to explain the *cause* of bodily pleasure, rather than its essence.

The involvement of bodily pleasure in beauty and intellectual pleasure

Although his general theory of bodily pleasure itself is not new, one of Mendelssohn's most significant contributions to the rationalist theory of pleasure is his success in explaining the *felt* aspect of pleasure in general, including the mental pleasures of beauty and the intellect. Mendelssohn begins by arguing that "In the organic construction of the body, things can exchange determinations so that cause and effect are mutual."¹²⁹ There is in particular, he goes on, a strongly pronounced harmony between the mind, brain, and body, such that if a certain bodily motion puts the brain into a certain state which brings with it a certain perception, then that perception would

¹²⁹ *JubA*, 1:89.

tend to bring with it the same motion in the brain and in the body. He concludes, "If it is true that every bodily pleasure, every improved condition of the body fills the soul with the sensible representation of a perfection, then conversely every sensible representation of a perfection must draw after itself a well-being of the body, or a kind of bodily pleasure."¹³⁰ Every perfection enjoyed by the soul through its representation is reflected in the body as an improvement of its state. This improvement is then sensed by the mind, producing a bodily pleasure.

Therefore, it follows according to natural law that every perceptual and intellectual pleasure would be accompanied by *affect*, Mendelssohn's term for the bodily effects of originally mental pleasures. Affect includes the "seething" of the blood and other motions of the limbs, and our subsequent perception of this more active, perfect state. Mendelssohn explains that affect "expresses itself through the same effects as bodily pleasure, but they are distinguished from each other in their causes. The latter begins in the limbs through the effect of external objects, and spreads from there to the brain. Affect, on the other hand, arises in the brain itself [i.e. from the perception]."¹³¹ Because the expression of affect is the same as that of bodily pleasure, they can only be distinguished through an analysis of the feeling and its causes, and not through the mere intensity of feeling.

Following a Platonic parable, Mendelssohn suggests that human beings have been partly "compensated" for being robbed of the pleasure of having more distinct

¹³⁰ *JubA*, 1:90.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

representations with the gift of this bodily affect. But only partly: “The soul would be delighted with greater ecstasy, if its concepts of perfection were fully distinct.” Although the idea of compensation may seem quaint, the passage does nicely illustrate Mendelssohn’s commitment to rationalism.¹³²

Mendelssohn’s overall psychology of pleasure can be summed up as follows. All pleasure is identified with the intuition of perfection. That intuition either 1) contains a relatively *unlimited* perfect manifold, perceived clearly but confusedly; 2) contains a relatively *limited* perfect manifold, perceived clearly but confusedly; or 3) has one’s body as its object, and is perceived obscurely. The first is intellectual pleasure, or pleasure in “perfection.” The second is the pleasure of beauty. And the third is bodily pleasure. All sorts of pleasures have a bodily component due to the mutually connected nature of the mind and the body. As a result, the first two kinds of pleasure, although they are distinct from the third, are always accompanied by bodily affect.

While this last point closed a critical gap in Wolff’s theory, Mendelssohn left a significant lacuna of his own. In the *Briefe* there appears to be scant acknowledgement of subjective pleasure, the pleasure we take in our own (especially cognitive) perfection. Mendelssohn does acknowledge the role of the easy production of ideas in Sulzer’s sense, but does not emphasize it. And even in his example of the mathematician’s intellectual pleasure,¹³³ the emphasis is more on pleasure obtained from the proof itself (perceived confusedly) than the mental ability required to complete it. This is surprising,

¹³² The allegory of compensation was added in the 1761 edition (*PS*, 99).

¹³³ *JubA*, 1:91.

because Wolff had consistently emphasized the role of subjective pleasure, particularly with regard to intellectual pleasures.¹³⁴ Mendelssohn would rediscover subjective pleasure in his correspondence on tragedy with Lessing (see Chapter 3).

Part 2: The normative theory of pleasure

The metaphysics of good and bad pleasure

According to the rationalist tradition, to have an intuition of perfection is to perceive an object *as* perfect, a mental act which involves an implicit and immediate judgment. The feeling of pleasure involved in such a judgment may be true or false: true if the object in some sense really is perfect, and false if it merely *appears* to be perfect.¹³⁵ Importantly, when we have a “false pleasure,” we are not wrong that we are having a certain feeling. Rather, we are wrong about the cognitive content of the feeling: our implicit judgment about the object is wrong. We get a similar feeling of pleasure whether or not the object *really is* perfect, so long as it *appears* to be. This view implies that we can get pleasure in imperfection simply by virtue of having falsely judged a thing to be perfect.

The distinction between true and false pleasure grounds a distinction between good and bad pleasures. A true pleasure is good because its object really is perfection, and perfection (suitably and variously qualified) is identified with the highest good; while a false pleasure is bad because its object is not really perfection, and therefore does

¹³⁴ *PE*, §532, §536.

¹³⁵ *PE*, §516.

not contribute to the highest good.¹³⁶ Mendelssohn himself explains that if pleasure is ontologically prior to perfection (so that false pleasure is an empty concept), then the “epicurean system” which makes the feeling of pleasure into the highest good would be vindicated.¹³⁷ By explaining pleasure as something that relates cognitively to a more fundamentally normative aspect of the world, rationalists gave pleasure an important role to play in the highest good without making it into the highest good.

This general view leaves open what exactly goes wrong when we make a false intuitive judgment about perfection. Unfortunately, the early rationalists tended to be somewhat vague on this important point. Wolff suggests that the error can be caused by a faulty conception of the good: “Suppose one has an incorrect concept of the rules of a good speech. If he now listens to a speech that agrees with all of these rules, then he has, according to his opinion, a cognition of the perfection of the speech. For this reason he feels pleasure at it; thus his pleasure arises out of a false opinion [Wahne] of the perfection.”¹³⁸ Gottsched explains that false pleasure arises when an “agreement of the manifold according to well-grounded rules... only appears to be present, as long as one judges according to confused representations of the senses and the imagination.”¹³⁹ His example, “a face can appear beautiful in the distance that is full of blotches and scars [when seen] close-up”¹⁴⁰ suggests that the error may be caused by a lack or distortion of

¹³⁶ See e.g. Wolff, *Ontologia* §516.

¹³⁷ *JubA*, 1:312-313.

¹³⁸ Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken Von Gott, Der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, Auch allen Dingen überhaupt, Den Liebhabern der Wahrheit mitgetheilet* (hereafter *Metaphysik*) (Halle, 1747), §405. See also *PE*, §550, where Wolff provides other examples that suggest the same explanation.

¹³⁹ *EG*, “Theoretische Theil,” §952, pp. 503-504.

¹⁴⁰ *EG*, “Theoretische Theil,” §953, p. 504.

information, perhaps akin to a perceptual illusion. Both Wolff and Gottsched agree that one can feel pleasure at something, or an aspect of a thing, that is actually imperfect.

Remarkably, Mendelssohn does not seem to share this view about false pleasures. In the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, he explains that a poison which produces a temporary feeling of pleasure does so not because the person drinking it has falsely judged the poison to be good for him, but because the poison really has (temporarily) improved the condition of his body.¹⁴¹ “The false view of the pleasure-seeker,” Mendelssohn explains, is that “he does not listen to the earnestly warning voice of the future. The present is a Siren, which lulls him with its deadly sweetness.”¹⁴² In another important example, Mendelssohn explains that the ancient Romans took pleasure in brutal gladiator fights not because they falsely judged them to perfect, but because they were able to suppress the feeling of pity in order to focus on the skill of the combatants, which is a real perfection.¹⁴³

So, rather than treating these cases as applications of false conceptions of the good or as illusions, Mendelssohn explains them through a deficiency of attention. The person who has taken the poison notices only present feeling of well-being in his body, and pays insufficient attention to the future harm which will follow. The Roman spectator notices only the skill of combatants and the vicarious thrill of victory, paying insufficient attention to the suffering and injustice involved. In both of Mendelssohn’s examples, although the imperfection objectively outweighs the perfection, the perfection

¹⁴¹ *JubA*, 1:83.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *JubA*, 1:108-109.

seems greater to the subject because it is perceived more clearly. In the first case, the perfection perceived more clearly because the person *cannot* perceive the future ills except very obscurely; and in the latter case, the Romans had accustomed themselves to ignoring the suffering of others so that they *do not* perceive the imperfection clearly. Either way, the subject perceives the perfection as dominant, so that they feel pleasure.

Mendelssohn makes his attention-centric account of bad pleasure explicit in the 1761 edition of the *Briefe*, adding the following to the passage about the Roman gladiators:

The imperfect, considered as imperfect, cannot possibly be pleasant. But since nothing can be absolutely imperfect, but in all cases good is mixed with evil, one can get in the habit of abstracting from evil, and turning one's attention to the good that is connected with it. One calls this a spoiled taste, and there is no abomination in the world for which we could not find a kind of taste in this way.¹⁴⁴

Mendelssohn's theory of good and bad pleasure carries with it a new theoretical commitment: under his scheme, every instance of pleasure must have some real—not merely apparent—perfection at its ground. This, in turn, had two practical consequences for his aesthetics in general. First, it would bar theorists from assuming that a pleasure is “false” and bad simply because they could not immediately provide a distinct explanation of the underlying perfection, a temptation to which Wolff and Gottsched were especially susceptible. On Mendelssohn's view, analysts of pleasure must instead presume that pleasure is always based on some underlying perfection. If they want to criticize the pleasure, they must give an explanation for why the feeling involves a deficiency of attention to some greater imperfection. Following this requirement, in later

¹⁴⁴ *PS*, 1:141-142.

chapters we will see Mendelssohn go to great lengths to attempt to explain the more difficult cases of pleasure, especially tragedy and the sublime. Second, Mendelssohn's view allows for a more constructive form of criticism because it has to try to identify what is good and perfect in all forms of pleasure, even where overall imperfection and evil predominate.

A few further observations about this development are worth mentioning. First, Mendelssohn's theory is in no way a radical departure from earlier rationalist psychology. The "faculty of attention" had been described by Wolff and its role in various mental processes, including abstraction, sensible judgment, and invention was particularly emphasized by Baumgarten. In fact, Baumgarten's psychology contains the entire foundation of Mendelssohn's idea,¹⁴⁵ although he did not actually reach Mendelssohn's view.¹⁴⁶ So, rather than treading completely new ground, Mendelssohn made innovative use of preexisting theory.

Second, Mendelssohn's view is no more or less normative than the earlier view. Both theories offer a description of pleasure in general as well as a description of how pleasure might variously relate to the perfection and imperfection of objects. And in both theories, this latter distinction is supposed to provide normative ground for a distinction between *good* and *bad* pleasure, which was in turn connected with a theory of the will (discussed in Part 3 of this chapter).

¹⁴⁵ See Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§608-609, 655-659, 670.

¹⁴⁶ See Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §18 for his strong commitment to true and false beauty.

Third, Mendelssohn's different approach to this issue explains why he only rarely uses the terms "true" and "false" pleasure (and never in his published works). Even when we take pleasure in something largely imperfect, the feeling still relates to something perfect in it, so calling the feeling "false" can be misleading. Pleasure always truly relates to the perfect and the good in a thing, but we can be mistaken about the amount of evil connected with it.

Judgments about good and bad pleasure: taste and criticism

In the rationalist tradition, *taste* is the ability to distinguish between the perfect and the imperfect through sense, or confused cognition. Because taste is sensible, it works immediately and manifests itself as felt pleasure or displeasure. Since pleasure is an intuitive and confused cognition, taste is distinguished from the ability to judge perfection through distinct or discursive analysis. This latter use of *intellect* to discover the perfection or imperfection of aesthetic objects is *criticism*.¹⁴⁷ Rationalists differed about exactly how taste and criticism relate to each other, and this has led to some confusion, which I will attempt to clear up in this section.

Many commentators believe that there is a deep tension in Wolff and Gottsched's view of taste. For, while both insist that taste is a sensible faculty, they also make claims which might seem to indicate they think taste is really intellectual in some deep sense. In other words, they are thought to have confused taste and criticism. Braitmaier writes, for example, that "the [Wolffian] school teaches and wrongly demands an entirely general raising of the lower confused faculties to the level of higher distinct cognition, and so

¹⁴⁷ For definitions of taste and criticism, see Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §607.

also for aesthetic sentiment."¹⁴⁸ Beiser suggests that Gottsched's view of taste involves a deep tension, writing that his theory's "conclusion contradicts its starting point. It begins with the thesis that taste belongs to sensibility... and it ends with the thesis that taste belongs to the understanding... To resolve this tension, Gottsched has to make one controversial assumption: that the confused representations of sensibility are ultimately reducible in principle... to the distinct representations of the understanding."¹⁴⁹ Yet, Beiser argues, this assumption is implausible, so the tension is irresolvable.¹⁵⁰ Both Braitmaier and Beiser also believe that this problem was only corrected in the works of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, while others, especially Cassirer,¹⁵¹ think these later rationalists too remained excessively intellectualistic.

In my view, while there is certainly something excessively intellectualistic about Wolff and Gottsched's view of taste, it is not well-explained as a general tension or confusion of sensible taste with intellectual criticism. Rather, the intellectualism arises naturally and internally from the early rationalists' perspective on art in combination with their limited, pre-Baumgartenian view of sensibility. The purpose of this section is to clarify the meaning of this early "intellectualism" about taste, and to explain how Mendelssohn thought about and contributed to this issue. In general, it is important to remember that the rationalists universally held that intellect and sense are both forms of reason, and that both faculties ultimately have the same object. So, there is no

¹⁴⁸ Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, 1:61.

¹⁴⁹ Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 86.

¹⁵⁰ Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 86-87.

¹⁵¹ Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form*, 120-128.

incoherence or contradiction in the claim that criticism and taste ought to agree – the question, to a large extent, is *how* they ought to be made to agree. The most important relevant developments centered around the following related questions:

1. In practice, how *prescriptive* is criticism in matters of taste?

Wolff and Gottsched thought that criticism should be extremely prescriptive to taste. However, even these philosophers did not believe that intellectual criticism is the *only* arbiter of taste. They could not have held that, because they (especially Gottsched, who wrote far more than Wolff on this topic) did not attempt to derive the principles of taste entirely *a priori*. Gottsched, especially, makes extensive use of examples in the development of his theory. To the extent that his principles are abstracted from these examples, he allows that taste can operate properly independent of distinct criticism.¹⁵² Indeed, the strong powers Wolff and Gottsched assign to criticism for ruling over taste are a direct consequence of their broader view about intellect and sense. Lacking Baumgarten's concepts of extensive clarity and sensible perfection, they held that sensibility is nothing more than a confused and weak intellectual capacity. Thus, a sensible judgment of taste is a confused judgment about the very same conformity to principles which the critic judges distinctly. As a result, any principles of art discovered by criticism would automatically bear directly on questions of taste. In the end, according to Wolff and Gottsched, while taste can produce accurate judgments, it will generally not do as good a job as the intellect in judging any particular object.

¹⁵² Though Gottsched does have a tendency to fall back on Greek authority to justify his rules, it is wildly implausible that *all* of his examples were chosen *solely because* they conformed to rules he had developed *a priori* or from authority.

By contrast, Baumgarten's theory gave the senses a positive role that is irreplaceable by intellect *for finite beings*. While intellect aims solely at *intensive* clarity, the sensible perfection of beauty involves a wide *extent* of agreement among a thing's determinations. For finite beings with limited intellects, then, sensible perfection is inherently better grasped by sense, which aims at *extensive* clarity at the expense of some *intensive* clarity. Since the human intellect cannot even grasp many of the sensible principles involved in beauty, its role in prescribing principles to taste became greatly diminished. Rather than discovering distinctly the very same principles which sense judges confusedly, in Baumgarten's scheme criticism describes, connects, and systematizes inherently sensible principles. The complexity of these sensible principles made the subsequent *prescription* of critical principles to aesthetic judgment a far more uncertain matter of interpretation. In sum, Baumgarten held that:

- a) Distinct knowledge of principles governing perfection is relevant to taste only when these principles are also sensible;
- b) Our human senses are inherently better than our intellect at judging the sensible perfection contained in sufficiently *extensively* clear representations.

This does not, however, entail that a more powerful mind could not make valid and prescriptive *intellectual criticisms* of *human taste*. In fact such a mind would certainly have this capability, but since we do not have this mind to consult, we need to make do with the cognitive powers that we have. Mendelssohn agrees fully with Baumgarten on this issue. He writes that in matters of beauty "taste must reprimand reason,"¹⁵³ but in the

¹⁵³ *JubA*, 2:183.

same essay makes clear that taste perceives nothing except rational principles, confusedly.¹⁵⁴

2. How much does the *exercise* of criticism impact the *exercise* of taste?

Wolff and Gottsched were extremely optimistic about the psychological effect that critical reflection could have on the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Not only did they think that a distinct perception of perfection would increase the pleasure felt at the corresponding confused perception, but they also held that distinctly recognizing the imperfection of a thing would eliminate or greatly reduce the pleasure one felt in sensing it. Gottsched is most explicit about this, writing, "All our pleasure disappears when we learn to see the error in a supposed beauty."¹⁵⁵ Baumgarten is, unfortunately, silent on this issue.

Mendelssohn did not entirely share the view of the early rationalists. He certainly believed that a distinct, analytical perception of perfection could have an *enhancing* effect, increasing the pleasure felt at the corresponding intuitive confused perception. This was, of course, one of the central claims of the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (especially the third and fourth letters). But at the same time, he was very skeptical of the *corrective* use of the intellect. This comes out in his early defense of his argument against suicide, in which he admits that intellectual considerations would not convince people who feel the need to end their lives.¹⁵⁶ And in a later essay (discussed further below), Mendelssohn writes, "Bring out, for a certain person who loves the

¹⁵⁴ *JubA*, 2:185.

¹⁵⁵ *EG*, "Theoretischer Theil," §953, p. 504.

¹⁵⁶ *JubA*, 11:47.

grotesque, and finds no taste in the sublimity of an Apollo, a thousand rational grounds, and just as many authorities that Apollo is excellent, and you will bring him to silence – perhaps to imitation – but not convert him.”¹⁵⁷ The reason for this is that pleasure is sensible (confused) and sensible cognitions generally contain far more material (*notae*) than a corresponding distinct cognition. This greater amount of material makes sensible cognitions generally more pleasurable and motivating than intellectual cognitions, even if we have a distinct awareness of some imperfection in them. Mendelssohn codifies this point in the *Rhapsodie*, but he had first suggested it in a letter to Lessing of January 1757.¹⁵⁸

3. In the case of beauty, to what extent should intellectual criticism investigate the object, and to what extent the emotions and mental activity produced in the subject by the object?

Wolff and Gottsched saw criticism as being concerned primarily with the object being considered, not with the emotions produced in the subject. This was, in part, a consequence of their doctrine of true and false pleasures, which lacked an account of *how* subjective features other than false beliefs about the object might affect judgments about perfection. Another factor was the minimal role the early rationalists assigned to the senses. Since on their view the human intellect can discover everything relevant to taste, and intellect perceives things as they are, not merely as they appear to be, there was little reason to worry about the nature of our confused perception. This is not to say that Wolff and Gottsched were completely unconcerned with sentiment and emotion,

¹⁵⁷ *JubA*, 3.1:326-327.

¹⁵⁸ *JubA*, 1:414-415; 11:171-172. This theory is discussed further in Part 3 of this chapter.

only that it was not the *primary* target of their critical analysis. They thought that if they established principles of taste with respect to art objects through criticism, then the subjective emotional aspects would take care of themselves.

In Baumgarten's aesthetics, the sensible cognition of the object became just as important to the analysis of aesthetic experience as the object itself. Mendelssohn, of course, was always deeply concerned with the subjective aspect of aesthetic experience – this is why he is so interested in the feeling of pleasure in his first work on aesthetics, and in many other emotions in his later writings.

In sum, it would be misleading to say that for early rationalists, intellect and criticism are the only arbiters of taste, while the later rationalists rejected this view. In fact, *no* rationalists held that intellect is the *only* arbiter of taste, while *all* held that intellect is, at least in principle, the *ultimate* arbiter of taste. Wolff and Gottsched, the earlier rationalists, were much more optimistic that human beings could actually *attain* distinct knowledge of these ultimate standards, and their theories developed accordingly. Later rationalists like Baumgarten and Mendelssohn were in this respect much more modest, but they still held that true standards of taste could be known distinctly *in principle*, even if this knowledge could never actually be attained by human beings.

The later rationalists' emphasis on subjective feeling and response is a more significant difference. However, it is important to see that this subjectivity is nothing radically *sui generis*, but simply a recognition that people cognize different aspects of sensible objects with different degrees of clarity, and differences in overall knowledge

among individuals produce great variation in associative effects. Emphatically, this does not mean that *no rational grounds whatsoever* can be given for some judgments of taste. Rather, it means these rational grounds must in part be conditioned by the particular limitations on each subject's cognitive powers (which in turn depends on the subject's particular character, history, and experiences). Consequently, there is no single, unconditional, and universally valid standard of taste. Even if (per hypothesis) we knew the ultimate standard of taste with perfect distinctness, it would still have an irreducibly subject-dependent element. That Mendelssohn held this view is apparent in the *Briefe*, both from his example of the Roman gladiators with their corrupted taste and from this more general claim about differences in cognitive powers: "Beings endowed with sharper senses must find a disgusting uniformity in our beauties, and what exhausts us [because it is too complex] can give them pleasure."¹⁵⁹

Now, given that sensible objects are extremely complex and can be viewed in an infinite number of different ways, and given the great diversity among cultures and individuals, does it follow that the later rationalist aesthetics led, in essence, to radical subjectivism in matters of taste? To his great credit, Mendelssohn eventually recognized this issue and offered a response. It appears in a late commentary on Lavater's 1772 *Von der Physiognomik*:

In general all sensible cognition has a nondeceptive subjective truth; and since this is also valid of beauty, it can be concluded with certainty that the object, which produces this subjective appearance, must also possess the required properties, at least in relation to this subject. The most extravagant taste has some ground in the object. Things have various sides from which they can be

¹⁵⁹ *JubA*, 1:59.

considered. It depends on habit, practice, inborn and developed ability, inclinations, mental properties, and the angles and folds of the soul, to where the attention draws itself in the viewing of an object, and to which sides it is to stick. And the shadows and light of the object conform to this perspective, and also our judgments about its beauty or ugliness... [beauties¹⁶⁰] must necessarily be changeable according to time, space, climate, education, nutrition, religion, and form of government...

...In fact, only I alone can say which appearance is appropriate to my capabilities and engages without tiring them. Rational grounds and authority can do nothing here against inner conviction.

But what? Are all critiques in vain, all rules groundless, all reasons [offered] in matters of taste merely prattle? Anything but! Among all kinds of taste a single one must be the most beneficial for the perfection and happiness of human beings. This will be the true, right taste, which all people must strive to achieve. And insofar as man, at least indirectly, has some power even over the mixture of his capabilities, and can give them training and direction according to pleasure; it also stands in his power to approach this single true taste more or less, and to form his sentiment of beauty as it is most appropriate to his vocation [Bestimmung] and to the purpose of his existence.

This is the high office of the critic. It should show us: 1. which taste is the best, that is, according to the highest principle, which sentiment of beauty is most beneficial and appropriate to the true destiny of men, to the purpose of his being; 2. How we should form and direct our powers and abilities, insofar as it is up to us, in order to be blessed with this taste."¹⁶¹

For Mendelssohn, then, the highest standard of taste, as well the role of the critic, is *ethical*, and must aim at promoting the highest human good. Does the endorsement of such a "highest principle" imply that Mendelssohn believes in an absolutely universal standard of taste after all? Although his phrasing is perhaps not ideal, there is no direct implication that "what promotes human perfection" must be independent of individual and cultural differences. He is only committed to the more plausible, if no less

¹⁶⁰ Mendelssohn is referring here especially, but not exclusively to "living beauties," that is the beauty of expression as opposed to the beauty of form.

¹⁶¹ *JubA*, 3.1:324-327.

contentious idea that there is *something* essentially common to all human nature which determines the best taste, *as conditioned* by the more specific properties of individual cultures and human beings. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn is all-too-terse about giving *content* to this ethical standard:

But which taste is most beneficial to the vocation of man? Undoubtedly that according to which one can feel the frightful, sublime, bold, and naïve in their full strength without being distracted by disgusting and ridiculous associated concepts; but in other cases, where a collision¹⁶² is avoidable, one is also practiced in delighting in the fine and civilized. The more one approaches this ideal, the more perfect and more correct is our taste.¹⁶³

Mendelssohn's emphasis on the frightful and bold in this passage is somewhat surprising, but the view is so sketchy that it is hard to draw any definite conclusions from it. Certainly, Mendelssohn should have engaged more thoroughly with this important issue.

Part 3: Mendelssohn on pleasure, beauty, and the will

During the early part of his philosophical career, Mendelssohn held the Platonic and traditional rationalist view that beauty, like other pleasures, contributes to virtue by producing a love and desire for perfection in us, at least when our choice of pleasure is guided by reason.¹⁶⁴ But how exactly did he see pleasure and beauty as relating to the will? In the first two editions of *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (1755 and 1761), Mendelssohn explains in the sixth letter that "pleasure... differs from the will only in degree... even the will posits an underlying good, the advancement of our perfection,

¹⁶² "Collision" refers to conflict between rules, but it is not clear which rules Mendelssohn means here.

¹⁶³ *JubA*, 3.1:327.

¹⁶⁴ *JubA*, 1:65.

without which our choice would remain eternally undetermined. Only through the intensity of striving [Verlangens] is the object of pleasure distinguished from the object of the will." Pleasure and the will involve the same "essential elements which are inseparable from both," namely:

- 1) "a consideration of the object, of its manifold parts, and their connection"
- 2) "a [subsequent] judgment that this object is good"
- 3) "a [subsequent] desire [Verlangen], or the judgment that I would rather have than not have this representation".¹⁶⁵

Mendelssohn had previously posited these same elements of willing in his sketch for the *Briefe*, "Von dem Vergnügen."¹⁶⁶ Ordinarily, we do not experience these "steps" distinctly, but we can learn to recognize them in our own experience, Mendelssohn explains. The context makes clear that the "good" of the second element includes the specific perfection of beauty. The third element is meant to connect Maupertuis' definition of pleasure as "a representation I would rather have than not have"¹⁶⁷ to the rationalists' idea of conatus, the striving after perfection. On Mendelssohn's view, pleasure is akin to a preference for a representation. When the preference becomes sufficiently strong, it transitions into an effective desire that leads to action – specifically, it would seem, the continuation of the pleasurable representation.

This theory accords with the standard rationalist view that pleasure is the transition, by degrees, between perceiving and willing.¹⁶⁸ Crucially, it allows the experience of beauty to contribute directly to the desire for the good. For, since beauty is

¹⁶⁵ *JubA*, 1:66.

¹⁶⁶ *JubA*, 1:129.

¹⁶⁷ See Pierre Louis Maupertuis, *Essai de philosophie morale* (Berlin, 1749), 1.

¹⁶⁸ See *PE* §509.

a form of perfection, and the perception of beauty gives us pleasure, the feeling of beauty is not different, but simply lesser, than the desire for the objectively and distinctly known good. As a result, experiencing beauty instills in us a desire for the good in general.

In two of his late writings, Mendelssohn does posit a division of the faculties into cognition, sentiment (also called the “faculty of approval,”) and desire (or will). No other piece of Mendelssohn’s philosophy is more frequently viewed as an anticipation of the Kantian system.¹⁶⁹ Prima facie, Mendelssohn’s division does seem to be proto-Kantian, because Kant held that pleasure and displeasure are non-cognitive,¹⁷⁰ and that the will is governed by its own laws independent of pleasure and displeasure. Commentators who see in Mendelssohn an anticipation of Kant are apparently convinced by this surface similarity. Beiser, on the other hand, argues that Mendelssohn never really gave up the traditional view despite the new categorization, which he argues is merely nominal or instrumental.¹⁷¹

In Part 3 of this chapter, I trace the development of Mendelssohn’s thought about pleasure and the will, explaining the motivation and significance behind Mendelssohn’s division of faculties. I show that there is ultimately a deep tension and even ambiguity in Mendelssohn’s thinking on these issues, but also a deep continuity with his earliest thought. In the end, while the texts are genuinely murky on important points,

¹⁶⁹ Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, 2:148; Sommer, *Grundzüge*, 136; Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18-19; Vogt, *Beschreibung*, 212-213.

¹⁷⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft in Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1908), 5:203-204.

¹⁷¹ Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 240-243.

Mendelssohn was certainly no proto-Kantian and most likely never gave up the core of the traditional rationalist view about pleasure and desire.

Refinements to the view, 1757 to 1771

It turns out that the view described in the 1755 *Briefe* is overly simplistic, and Mendelssohn accordingly refined his theory several times. First, he noticed the importance of the *manner* in which the perfection in an object is perceived. In a fragment titled “Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen,” which was attached to a January 1757 letter to Lessing as part of their correspondence on tragedy, Mendelssohn writes, “The more good is contained in a representation, the more distinctly we perceive the good, and the less time is required [to perceive it], then the greater is the desire, and the more pleasant the enjoyment.”¹⁷² This explains how it is possible for us to take more pleasure in and prefer a representation X that is objectively less perfect than another representation Y: we may prefer X if we perceive its perfection more distinctly or more quickly, even if it contains less perfection than Y objectively (*ibid.*). Mendelssohn published this refined theory of enjoyment and motivation in his *Rhapsodie* of 1761.

In this context another of Karl W. Jerusalem’s objections against Mendelssohn’s theory of pleasure is worth mentioning. Jerusalem writes, “The soul cannot take something to be a perfection according to obscure concepts at the same time it takes it to be an imperfection according to distinct concepts. The obscure representations cease as soon as the soul clarifies its concepts to distinctness; the pleasure... must therefore

¹⁷² *JubA*, 2:149.

necessarily disappear as soon as the soul distinctly cognizes that [the bodily condition] will destroy it, or make it less perfect. Experience, however, teaches the opposite."¹⁷³

Yet according to Mendelssohn's 1757 account, a confused cognition of a thing's perfection can certainly outweigh a distinct cognition of its imperfection, provided either that the confused cognition contains more good or works more quickly. In fact this would not be uncommon, for a more distinct cognition will generally be more abstract (due to human cognitive limitation), meaning it contains less content, and it would also often occur more slowly, since the mind must work through a lengthier chain of reasoning. For example, when considering whether to smoke a cigarette I may think distinctly and abstractly that cigarettes in general are bad for health, and perhaps think through the consequences of this to my own future well-being. But at the same time, I consider the pleasure I expect to get from this particular cigarette much more immediately, concretely and fully, with more vivid imagination, even anticipating the bodily pleasure it will provide. This can certainly outweigh the more distinct and abstract negative considerations which course slowly through my mind.

In the same correspondence in which Mendelssohn developed this refinement, Lessing also convinced him that we can feel pleasure through the reflexive perception of our own powers (a perfection of our subject). In this way it is possible feel a subjective pleasure even at the perception of imperfect objects. Mendelssohn includes, but does not emphasize this point in his discussion of mixed sentiments in the 1761 *Rhapsodie* (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). In that work, Mendelssohn continues to insist on a

¹⁷³ Jerusalem, *Schriften*, 65.

continuity between pleasure and desire: “Concerning the pleasurable sentiment, it is an effect of perfection, a gift of heaven, which is inseparable from the cognition and the choice of the good; even it can be analyzed and resolved into the original drive toward perfection.”¹⁷⁴ This is a natural extension of Mendelssohn’s original theory: we can strive for representations of our own perfection just as we strive to represent the perfections of objects outside of us.

Deeper doubts about this view first appeared in the 1771 edition of *Philosophische Schriften*, in which Mendelssohn included a brief set of comments on the earlier edition.

The first comment is:

P. 28: ‘[We learn from experience] that the soul would rather have a representation of perfection than not have it, and the representation [of an imperfection], etc.’ False! The disinclination does not always pertain to not-having the representation, but also often to the disapproval of the object. The imperfection is objectively evil and arouses disapproval, but subjectively, as representation, [it is] a praedicatum ponens [an expression of reality or perfection] and therefore good...¹⁷⁵

Mendelssohn provides two examples in the opening of the revised *Rhapsodie*. First, if a loved one suffers, we do not wish to be unaware of the suffering, but instead desire to remove the cause of the suffering. Second, Mendelssohn recycles his bloody battle example from the first edition, pointing out that “even the wise” wish to view the scene of carnage if it has already happened. Both examples show (in somewhat different ways) that we may prefer to have than not to have an unpleasant, imperfect representation, because the object of our “disinclination” or revulsion in these cases is not the

¹⁷⁴ *PS*, 27.

¹⁷⁵ *JubA*, 1:225.

representation, but the state of affairs represented. In a way, this analysis is a natural consequence of the subjective/objective distinction that Mendelssohn had accepted with respect to pleasure in 1757. But it raises a new question: does Mendelssohn now think that the will comes apart from pleasure, simply because (as the first example shows) we can desire to have even an unpleasant representation?

The second comment seems addressed to that very question:

P. 48. 49. Pleasure should not have been compared with the will. The former is an inner consciousness that a representation A improves our condition; the will on the other hand [is] a striving of the soul to make this representation actual. Pleasure is at it were a favorable judgment of the soul about its actual condition; the will on the other hand is a striving of the soul to make this condition actual. Desire, of which pleasure is accustomed to be accompanied, does not belong essentially to the enjoyment of pleasure [zum Genusse des Vergnügens].¹⁷⁶

In this passage, Mendelssohn clearly repudiates his earlier claim that desire or the will differs from pleasure only in degree. They have, after all, different objects: the object of pleasure is a representation of perfection, while the object of desire is the *actualization* of such a representation.¹⁷⁷

This is certainly a significant new development in Mendelssohn's thought, but it is not a radical change. While Mendelssohn eliminates the claim from 1761 edition of the sixth letter of the *Briefe*, "the object of pleasure is only distinguished from the object of will by the intensity of desire,"¹⁷⁸ he still insists in the 1771 edition that "the desire *which*

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ The "condition of soul" here should be read as a particular example; Mendelssohn never thought that pleasure and willing were merely self-directed. See *JubA*, 1:404-407.

¹⁷⁸ *PS*, 48.

is connected with that pleasure is only distinguished by degree from the actual will.”¹⁷⁹ He also revises “the three elements of will” theory for the 1771 edition. Of these three elements, the initial two remain the same: we first represent an object and then judge it to be good. The third element is changed from “a judgment that we would rather have than not have this representation” to “desire, or the striving of the spirit to make such a representation actual, or to obtain it.”¹⁸⁰ But crucially, the perception of the representation as good, which must precede desire, is pleasurable by definition. So, for all of these reasons, Mendelssohn still considered pleasure to be at least a necessary condition for desire. Even in the example of the suffering loved one, our desire is led by a pleasurable representation of a state where the cause of the suffering has been eliminated.

Mendelssohn also continues to hold that *cognitions*, provided they have the right content, lead to desire and action.¹⁸¹ The view that pleasure “can be resolved into the original drive for perfection” is retained, while Mendelssohn expands on his theory that a cognition that contains more “positive notes” (perfection) will be pleasurable.¹⁸² And pleasure and desire are both determined according to the same quantities he had posited in the 1757 fragment “Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen,” namely the quantity of perfection and the distinctness and speed of perception. Thus Mendelssohn writes even in the 1771 *Rhapsodie*, for example, “The less time is required to consider the perfection

¹⁷⁹ *JubA*, 1:258, emphasis mine.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *JubA*, 1:413.

¹⁸² *JubA*, 1:384-387.

offered to us by a certain concept, the more pleasant is its intuitive cognition, and the more powerful the desire to enjoy it.”¹⁸³ He also retains the thought that beauty impels us to desire the good: “We are called [bestimmt] in this life not only to improve the powers of the understanding and the will, but also to educate feeling through sensible cognition and the obscure drives of the soul through sensible pleasure to a higher perfection.”¹⁸⁴ So, despite his doubts about the theoretical adequacy of his original theory, Mendelssohn clearly wanted to retain the core Platonic implications of that view.

Nonetheless, it must be asked whether Mendelssohn still holds that pleasure, by itself, determines the will. He has, after all, plainly disavowed the idea that the pleasure involved in a representation simply becomes a desire for that representation if the pleasure is intense enough, through a natural necessity. If “desire does not belong essentially to the enjoyment of pleasure,” it seems that something further must be added to pleasure – something that results in the judgment that I ought to actualize this representation. But what would determine such a judgment? What, in other words, distinguishes a representation which I merely perceive with pleasure from one which I perceive with pleasure and also desire to actualize? Mendelssohn does not directly address this all-important question in the 1771 work, so I turn now to the later passages for clarification.

¹⁸³ *JubA*, 1:415.

¹⁸⁴ *JubA*, 1:393.

The later passages

As far as I am aware, it has not been previously recognized that “das Erkenntnis-, das Empfindungs- und das Begehungsvermögen,” which Mendelssohn posits in an oft-cited 1776 fragment,¹⁸⁵ are simply iterations of the three “essential elements of the will” which he had already indicated in “Von dem Vergnügen” and in the sixth letter of the 1755 *Briefe*, and the third of which he revised in 1771. Recall that in the *Briefe*, the first element was simply the perception of the object – Erkenntnis. The second element was the consideration of the object as good (or bad), which is pleasurable or displeasurable – Empfindung. And the third element (in the revision) was the striving to actualize that representation – Begehren. This illustrates a much deeper continuity in Mendelssohn’s thought than most commentators credit him for.

Let us now consider the key passages in the 1776 fragment. Mendelssohn writes, “Between the faculty of cognition and the faculty of desire lies the faculty of sentiment, by means of which we sense pleasure or displeasure from an object: approve of it, and find it good and pleasant – or disapprove of it, and find it faulty and unpleasant. – There are thoughts and representations about which we do not involve ourselves at all, which are not connected with any sentiments. There are also sentiments, which never become desire. We can find a piece of music or a painting which moves us beautiful, without desiring anything.”¹⁸⁶ Here Mendelssohn treats sentiment as something that includes cognition, but goes beyond it; and desire as something that includes pleasure, but goes

¹⁸⁵ *JubA*, 3.1:276-277.

¹⁸⁶ *JubA*, 3.1:276.

beyond it. The enjoyment of art is singled out as a pleasure that does not become desire. There is no suggestion at all that the faculties are completely independent in the sense that the desire and will can operate independently of pleasure or pleasure independently of cognition, as Kant would later claim. But, we are left with the same question as before: what exactly constitutes sentiment beyond cognition, and what exactly constitutes desire beyond pleasure?

Mendelssohn still provides little help on this question. Most significantly, he writes soon after the passage above that “Every sentiment is connected with a desire [Begehren] to put the properties of the object in harmony with our concepts. This desire is the element of striving.”¹⁸⁷ The claim appears to baldly contradict what Mendelssohn had written just a few sentences earlier – that some sentiments never become desire.

This tension reappears in the 1785 *Morgenstunden*, in a section which draws substantially on the 1776 fragment. In *Morgenstunden* Mendelssohn writes of “the approval [Billigen], the assent [Beyfall], the pleasure of the soul, which is far removed from desire.”¹⁸⁸ Again, he singles out the beautiful, claiming that it seems “to be a particular feature of beauty that it is considered with a quiet pleasure; that it pleases even if we do not possess it, and it is also very far removed from the desire to possess it. Not until we consider the beautiful in relation to ourselves, and view the possession of it as a good, does the desire arise in us to have it, to bring it to ourselves, to possess it – a

¹⁸⁷ *JubA*, 3.1:277

¹⁸⁸ *JubA*, 3.2:61.

desire that is very far removed from the enjoyment of beauty.”¹⁸⁹ He admits that the pleasure of beauty produces an inclination to consider the object further, but suggests that this not be considered desire, at least not strictly speaking. Pleasure is “a seed [Keim] of desire, but not yet desire itself.”¹⁹⁰ Thus far, this rhymes with the former passage from the 1776 fragment, where each mental function depends on the previous, but also goes beyond it in some unspecified way.

Yet within the very same paragraph, Mendelssohn claims that the “Billigungsvermögen” (a new name for what he had called the *Empfindungsvermögen*, the faculty of sentiment, in the 1776 fragment), “is as it were the transition from cognition to desire, and connects both of these faculties through the finest gradation.”¹⁹¹ Two paragraphs later, he writes, “Strictly speaking, every cognition already brings a kind of approval with it. Each concept, insofar as it is merely thinkable, has something that pleases the soul, that engages its activity, and which is thus cognized with pleasure and approval.”¹⁹² Further, “Both the faculty of cognition and the faculty of approval are, as you know from psychology, expressions of one and the very same power of the soul.”¹⁹³ Like the latter passage from the 1776 fragment, these suggest that the faculties differ in degree only, with nothing new being needed to transform cognition into pleasure, and pleasure into desire.

¹⁸⁹ *JubA*, 3.2:61-62. Mendelssohn is getting the sense of desire as aiming at possession from Wolff. See *Metaphysik*, §492; *PE*, §579.

¹⁹⁰ *JubA*, 3.2:62.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *JubA*, 3.2:63.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

A murky solution

Unfortunately, nothing Mendelssohn writes in the *Morgenstunden* adequately relieves the tension between these sets of passages. Following a line of thought he had begun in the 1776 fragment, Mendelssohn does explain that one important difference in the faculties has to do with their directionality – whether they involve a striving to bring our concepts into conformity with the way the world is, or a striving to bring the world into conformity with our concepts.¹⁹⁴ The faculty of cognition does the former, he explains, while the faculty of approval [sentiment] does the latter.¹⁹⁵ While interesting, it must be said that this distinction does little more than create a terrible muddle. The faculty of approval here is simply not the same as the faculty he had just described as being involved in the experience of beauty – after all, the previous “faculty of approval” did not always involve desire. Soon after, Mendelssohn also writes that the faculty of approval is connected to our general inclination toward being moved,¹⁹⁶ which also contradicts his claim that this faculty characteristically strives to put the world into conformity with our concepts. The faculty of desire itself is not given a place in this apparently new scheme, even though the act of striving to make the world conform to our representations, to produce the good, is plainly what Mendelssohn had up to this point called *desire*.

The problem with Mendelssohn’s explanation here becomes especially obvious in the final retelling of his *Lieblingsbeispiel*, the bloody battle: “As soon as the evil has

¹⁹⁴ *JubA*, 3.1:276-277.

¹⁹⁵ *JubA*, 3.2:63-64.

¹⁹⁶ *JubA*, 3.2:65.

occurred, and can no longer be altered, then it stops becoming an object of our faculty of approval; now it stimulates our faculty of cognition, which wants to cognize these things as they are, not as we would wish them or prefer them to be.”¹⁹⁷ Yet it is plainly false that a person would not *disapprove* of such a scene, and not find it displeasurable, at least from the perspective of the object. Mendelssohn himself had admitted as much. He is perhaps right to deny that we would want to deceive ourselves about the carnage, but that does not seem relevant. Much more salient is that we would not *strive to undo the carnage*, which would be an expression of our faculty of desire. But Mendelssohn, hewing to his inexplicable new categorization, fails to recognize this (though he had in previous explanations of this example).

Setting that unfortunate bit of theorizing aside, Mendelssohn does attempt in one place to address the question of what determines whether a particular mental act is an instance of cognition or approval. He asks why we sometimes strive for the truth, but at other times allow ourselves to be deceived in order to enjoy an artistic illusion. Mendelssohn explains that this depends on our *intention* in the given situation, and in particular which capacity of our soul we wish to exercise.¹⁹⁸ But this hardly answers the question. At best, it pushes it back a step: what determines our *intention* in a particular situation? Mendelssohn comes closest to answering when he writes, “As soon as we take an interest in the thing itself and its reality, we resist all illusion, however happy that

¹⁹⁷ *JubA*, 3.2:66.

¹⁹⁸ *JubA*, 3.2:64-65.

[illusion] would make us, and strive for truth."¹⁹⁹ Unfortunately, this claim is inadequate to our question, since it presupposes an interest in or intention to realize an object. And, it is certainly false at the descriptive level. People are often taken in by comfortable illusions and shape their wills around them. Charitably, since Mendelssohn could not have been ignorant of this, he actually meant to make a normative claim here. But in that case, the statement does not help answer the descriptive question of what determines the difference between cognition, pleasure, and will.

Without much guidance from what Mendelssohn actually said, we must retreat to the question of what he *should* have said, given what *needed* to be said in order to address the issue. The issue can be summarized in the following way: Mendelssohn noticed that the existence of subjective pleasure (1757) required a refinement in his theory of the will. At first he saw that a displeasurable representation does not always determine us to strive for the removal of that representation (the suffering loved one example), and that a representation of a displeasurable object (the bloody battle example) does not always determine us to strive for the removal of that object (1771). Later, he noticed that the representations of a certain pleasurable objects (the beautiful) do not always determine us to strive toward the object – i.e., to possess it or take it into ourselves; and perhaps also that not every cognition produces pleasure or displeasure (1776). In order to address these worries, Mendelssohn argues that pleasure is something beyond cognition, and desire is something beyond pleasure. But what, exactly?

¹⁹⁹ *JubA*, 3.2:65.

Fortunately, there is a very straightforward and plausible account that also retains all of Mendelssohn's Platonic intuitions. Mendelssohn never mentions any *sui generis* feature which must be *added* to cognition to yield pleasure, or which must be *added* to pleasure to yield desire. Further, he insists that the three faculties (at least in some sense) differ only in degree, and that they are all expressions of the same power of the soul. Therefore, we can surmise that pleasure arises naturally out of something specific that is *already contained in (some) cognitions*, and desire arises naturally out of something specific that is *already contained in (some) pleasurable representations*.

Mendelssohn even suggests something along these lines in the last part of the 1776 fragment, writing:

Every sentiment is connected with a desire to bring the properties of the object into harmony with our concepts. This desire is the element of striving. The moment of its effectiveness stands in a composite relation to 1) the goods cognized (according to their extension and intension), 2) possibility (inner and outer), and 3) difficulty. That moment which is greatest in each instant transitions from the dead power of desire into the living power of activity, which is either merely inner, that is if only the attention and focus of the soul is being directed; or outer, if the limbs are moved according to their goal to change thoughts or things.²⁰⁰

According to this suggestion, desire is nothing more than a recognition of the good in the representation of a state of affairs *that is possible and not too difficult for me to bring about*.

Mendelssohn does not develop this thought further, but it could be parsed as follows, as part of a complete theory of cognition, pleasure, and will: Pleasure is the intuition of perfection, so if we become aware of such an intuition within our total

²⁰⁰ *JubA*, 3.1:277.

representation of the world at a given time, then we feel pleasure. It follows that if the perfection is not noticeable, or we deliberately abstract from it, or our representation contains an equal amount of offsetting imperfection, then we will not feel pleasure. Desire (in the strict sense), as Mendelssohn claims repeatedly and mostly consistently, is the striving to make a certain object of representation X actual, or to make the world conform to X. So, desire (in the strict sense) is determined by a judgment that X ought to be actualized. This judgment, in turn, could be determined by the perfection perceived (pleasurably) in a representation of a possible world W in which I strive for the actualization of X. If I perceive a relatively large amount of perfection in my representation of W relatively quickly and distinctly, then I get a lot of pleasure from that representation and begin to desire it, and if the desire is intense enough, actually to strive for it. In other words: if the idea of bringing about X is pleasing to me, then I desire to bring about X to that extent. On the other hand, if a representation of my actualizing X does not please me, or even if I just do not think about actualizing X, then I do not desire X. On this view, desire (in the strict sense) is a natural consequence of a *particular kind of pleasurable representation* – namely, a representation of my bringing about a certain state of affairs. In a looser sense, I can also desire my own subjective having of certain representations on account of the pleasure they afford.

Mendelssohn's worrisome counterexamples can now be analyzed in the following way: in the case of the bloody battle, the representation of the scene as it is amounts to a subjective perfection, which is pleasurable. I perhaps wish in some sense that the battle had not happened, but the representation of myself *actualizing* that state of

affairs lacks perfection, because it contradicts the order of nature or simply lacks any law connecting means and end.²⁰¹ Such a representation does not give me pleasure and so I do not strive for it. In the suffering loved one example, the representation of suffering is objectively displeasurable, and I do want to be rid of it as far that displeasure goes (this is an expression of desire in the loose sense). But at the same time, it is necessary for me to have that representation in order for me to represent myself as acting to alleviate the suffering. This latter representation contains a large amount of perfection, since it connects my actions to an improved state of affairs according to confusedly perceived instrumental principles. So, it is pleasurable, even more (all things considered) than a representation of my striving to become ignorant of the suffering, which after all involves inflicting an imperfection on my subject as well as allowing the suffering to continue objectively. That is why I prefer to alleviate the suffering than to be ignorant of it. In the case of experiencing beauty, I do not represent myself as actualizing any representation at all, so desire in the strict sense does not enter into this experience. Nothing, however, bars the experience of beauty from contributing to my desire for the good. For beauty shows me how to recognize the good, and desire arises naturally as soon as I add to this recognition a consideration of the representation as a possible object of my will.

Still, while Mendelssohn certainly does not assign *sui generis* principles to the three mental faculties as Kant does, he also does not explicitly develop his own account

²⁰¹ Or to use Mendelssohn's suggestion from the fragment, reversing the carnage would be infinitely difficult.

of pleasure and the will in light of the problems he discovered. His view as written remains unsatisfyingly murky. One might only wish that he had discovered these matters earlier in his career, when perhaps he would have had the peace and mental clarity to treat them with the careful attention they deserve.

Chapter 2: The role of art in human life

Part 1: Mendelssohn's response to Rousseau

Sometime in 1755, Lessing introduced Mendelssohn to the works of Rousseau and encouraged him to translate the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*²⁰² into German. Rousseau's praise of nature as the happiest state for human beings and his attack on the ethical value of the arts are both diametrically opposed to the rationalist views that humanity is improved through cultivation and that the arts play an important role in this improvement. Mendelssohn was fascinated by Rousseau's arguments, and wrote up several responses to him over the subsequent years.

While Mendelssohn's response to Rousseau is wide-ranging, the discussion of this chapter will focus on the issue of the role of the arts in human life.²⁰³ Interestingly, Mendelssohn's responses to Rousseau on this topic are not all consistent. There seem to be two Mendelssohns: one a conservative moral stickler who sees art in an instrumental and subordinate role, constantly worrying about its corrupting effects; the other a patron of the arts who gives them a central place of their own in human life. This tension is reflected in the secondary literature, with one group accusing Mendelssohn of inappropriate moralizing²⁰⁴ and of subordinating art entirely to moral ends. "The cognizing and sensing of sensible perfections get their value only as a practice and

²⁰² In: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and other early political writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 111-188.

²⁰³ For a more general discussion, see Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, p. 224-230.

²⁰⁴ See Sommer, *Grundzüge*, 112, 115; Annemarie Deditius, *Theorien über die Verbindung von Poesie und Musik: Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing* (Liegnitz, 1918), 6.

preparation for the cognition of true morality” writes Deditius.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, many other commentators²⁰⁶ insist that Mendelssohn saw art as being an essential part of human life in its own right, as an end in itself rather than merely a means. A third group insists that Mendelssohn actually attempted to sever the connection between art and morality altogether.²⁰⁷

In part one of this chapter, I reconstruct Mendelssohn’s responses to Rousseau on the value of the arts and attempt to reconcile these competing views. I argue that Mendelssohn was taken with Rousseau’s arguments and indeed became something of a moralizer about art, but only for a limited period from around late 1755 to mid-1756. After that time, he transformed into a liberal patron of the arts, offering a plausible alternative to Rousseau’s spartan ethic while retaining a significant role for morality.

Rousseau’s challenge and Mendelssohn’s initial response

Rousseau’s attack on the arts is bound up with his general skepticism about reason and progress. He argues that human beings were happiest in the state of nature for two primary reasons: first, the needs and desires of natural humans were limited to what they can attain through their natural powers. Second, natural humans tended to act virtuously toward each other automatically – to the limited extent this was necessary for them – because of their innate natural feeling of pity, which Rousseau held (along with the desire for self-preservation) to be the foundation of all virtue. When human beings left the state of nature and began cultivating the arts and sciences, they increased

²⁰⁵ Deditius, *Theorien*, 6.

²⁰⁶ Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 27; Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 53-57; Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 228.

²⁰⁷ Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, 326-329; Hammermeister, *German Aesthetic Tradition*, 18-19.

the range of human desire beyond what is attainable by all. This led some people to subjugate others in order to satisfy their expanded desires. Even as these wealthy people became able to satisfy more and more desires, they amassed an ever increasing number of unsatisfied wants. They ended up enslaving themselves through their dependence on the less fortunate, and neglected true virtue through the pursuit of these unimportant forms of satisfaction.

As Mendelssohn recognized, Rousseau does not believe that humans should attempt to return to the state of nature. But Rousseau is very skeptical of the powers of both reason and art to improve virtue. According to him, reason has a role to play in ethical development, but only as a guide to the proper expression of natural feeling. If treated as an end itself, reason simply expands desire and leads to corruption.

The core of Mendelssohn's response, which remains consistent throughout his writings, occurs in an early undated fragment written sometime in 1755. It runs as follows: "If satisfaction were the highest good, Rousseau would be right. But the law of nature binds us not only to be satisfied, but chiefly to make ourselves more perfect."²⁰⁸ In other words, Rousseau erred when he claimed that humans would be happier simply if they could satisfy more of their desires, even if the content of those desires were purely animal. Because increasing our perfection and that of those around us is the highest good, we are actually ethically compelled to cultivate ourselves.

So, although he was right that cultivation expands human need, Rousseau was wrong to think that needs are inherently corrupting, for "every need is a drive toward

²⁰⁸ *JubA*, 2:8.

perfection" and "all objects of true pleasure extend our being." We must only take care not "to make a part of our needs into the purpose of our being," and instead recognize that "all together in an agreeable harmony make up our perfection."²⁰⁹ Mendelssohn does not specifically discuss art in the fragment, and it seems that this initial response is agnostic about whether art has purely instrumental value, or value in its own right.

Mendelssohn the moralizer

By October 1755, Mendelssohn had reworked and expanded these notes into a polished essay, which was published in early 1756 under the title "Sendschreiben an den Herrn Magister Lessing in Leipzig" ["Missive to Master Lessing in Leipzig"]. In this essay Mendelssohn gives an argument for his denial of Rousseau's claim that human good consists in satisfaction of the mere greatest *proportion* of desires:

One knows that the satisfaction of our true needs constitutes our duties. But how little of this is known to the natural man! Nutrition, rest and intercourse are, according to Rousseau's admission, his only needs and even these he satisfies through a blind drive, without an inner conviction of the rightness of his action; (what a wretched gift is freedom without reason, without the inner certainty of the rightness of our path!).²¹⁰

In addition to satisfying desires, it is inherently good for human beings to know the reason behind their desires. "Natural man has no feeling of human dignity, of true morality, or of the general love of order and perfection."²¹¹ Gaining this feeling requires cultivation, and that carries with it an expanded range of objects recognized as a good,

²⁰⁹ *JubA*, 2:7.

²¹⁰ *JubA*, 2:100.

²¹¹ *JubA*, 2:94.

as well as a corresponding desire for those objects. An abandonment of the state of nature was therefore necessary for the true happiness of humanity.

In this work, Mendelssohn also strongly emphasizes the importance of love and desire for human development:

The will is a capability of the soul to strive after certain concepts, or to turn its original power to beloved objects. Pleasure determines this capability. We find a desire²¹² for perfect forms, so that we turn our attention to them... All human inclinations, all desires and the most hidden drives have no other power on the soul except insofar as they represents to it the form of a good, of a perfection, of an order – and whatever is not grounded on this can be attributed neither to a wild nor to a cultivated person.²¹³

This is a clear endorsement of the Platonic view that love and desire generally aim to satisfy our fundamental need for greater perfection. Mendelssohn denies Rousseau's claim that the feeling of pity is the foundation of virtue, for "pity is grounded on love, love is grounded on desire [Lust] for harmony and order. Where we see perfection, there we wish to see it grow; and as soon as a defect expresses itself, displeasure at it arises in us, which we call pity."²¹⁴ And love itself is no mere feeling, for it always purports to have perfection, a rational property, as its object. He concludes, "True love, considered in its whole extent, is the motivation, means, and purpose of all virtue."²¹⁵

Now, it might seem that the arts deserve a central place in human life simply because they provide pleasure and can be the object of love.²¹⁶ But it is not so clear that Mendelssohn accepts this conclusion. He reiterates his earlier claim that no aspect of our

²¹² "Lust," connotes both pleasure and desire.

²¹³ *JubA*, 2:86.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *JubA*, 2:91.

²¹⁶ Beiser seems to draw this conclusion, *Diotima's Children*, 228.

perfection should be allowed to suppress the others or be “unjustifiably enthroned.”²¹⁷ Much of Rousseau’s argument, he explains, would have been acceptable if only it had been restricted to corrupted society and a corrupted taste that gets the proper order of human perfections wrong.²¹⁸ So, what is the proper order? In the earlier fragment, Mendelssohn had flatly denied any significance to bodily perfection, writing: “The needs of our body, insofar as they only belong to our body, do not pertain to us.”²¹⁹ He tempers this claim somewhat in the “Sendschreiben,” insisting only that the perfections of the soul are most important, followed by the preservation of the body.²²⁰ Next are

the innocent pleasures of the senses... Music, painting, fine foods, drink... [and] the marvelous works of nature and of art are mild gifts of our gracious Father, which compete [sich wetteifernd bemühen] to enlighten our soul with a heavenly joyfulness, and spur on its powers when it is exhausted, so that it can work with redoubled industriousness at the great purpose of creation... Finally [in the order of perfections], we should alternate these delights with certain bodily exercises.²²¹

It is not surprising that Mendelssohn places beauty below the development of intellectual perfection; he had argued for the same in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. But this is nonetheless a remarkably weak defense of the arts in two senses: First, Mendelssohn places sensible beauty virtually on par with “bodily exercise.” Second, he treats both art and beauty here merely as pleasant diversions from the striving after the

²¹⁷ *JubA*, 2:89.

²¹⁸ *JubA*, 2:93.

²¹⁹ *JubA*, 2:8.

²²⁰ *JubA*, 2:89-90.

²²¹ *JubA*, 2:90.

“great purpose of creation,” in which the arts themselves seem to play no role. Thus, he appears to assign the arts only a weak instrumental value.²²²

In an essay published about the same time in a short-lived journal called *The Chameleon*, Mendelssohn does argue that “the purpose of poetry is to make you more human, to implant in you the blessed feeling of virtue and love of mankind.”²²³ This suggests he thought poetry, at least, plays a somewhat larger role in ethics than he had admitted in the “Sendschreiben.” But even here, that role is limited to the instrumental support of distinctly known virtue. For example, Mendelssohn suggests, comedy aims to make the errors of human beings laughable, while tragedy aims to make them terrifying, both so that the audience will strive to avoid these errors.²²⁴ It is true that poets strive to arouse the passions, but this means that the audience must assess their works critically in order to draw the proper lessons from them.²²⁵ “Beware of standing by slick and poisonous descriptions.... it is just as easy for many poets to mock virtue as to exalt it to the stars, if they have no further intention than to display their art.”²²⁶ Here Mendelssohn seems at least as worried about the possible corrupting effects of art as he is sanguine about its role in implanting a love of virtue.

²²² Later in the essay, Mendelssohn does draw attention to development of aesthetic sense when he invokes Socrates, his chief example of a virtuous person. “He has the most tender feeling; he knows the magic of music and of innocent poetry; he displayed as much genius as taste in the statues [of the Graces] which he sculpted” (*JubA*, 2:95). But in the context of the discussion, this seems almost an afterthought.

²²³ *JubA*, 2:116.

²²⁴ *JubA*, 2:119.

²²⁵ *JubA*, 2:117.

²²⁶ *JubA*, 2:116-117.

The conservative Mendelssohn articulates his critique of the arts most forcefully in an unfinished and unpublished fragment of disputed date titled *Briefe über Kunst* [*Letters on art*]. This work, consisting of two mostly finished letters and an outline and plan for four (including the two written), is notorious in Mendelssohn scholarship because it contains some rather astonishing attacks on art, especially music. Goldstein declares that it is “nearly unbelievable” that the contents of this work had come from “the mouth of Mendelssohn,”²²⁷ though his authorship has never been doubted. Because the dating of this work is not known with certainty, its corresponding place in the development of Mendelssohn’s thought is also disputed. Let us first consider the content of this work and then return to these questions when we are in a position to resolve them.

While Mendelssohn does not mention Rousseau’s name in *Briefe über Kunst*, it is plainly meant as a response to the Genevan philosopher. Nearly the entire work, both the two completed letters and the outline, is specifically devoted to the issue of the proper role of the arts and sciences in human life. Mendelssohn begins the *Briefe über Kunst* with a reiteration of the view about the highest good stated in the other pieces on Rousseau: “The perfection of men consists, in spite of all the ridicule from the despisers of wisdom, in a righteous heart, and in a fine and sensitive feeling of true beauty, or in the agreement of the lower powers of the soul with the upper.”²²⁸ But as in the other works, Mendelssohn does not wish to give the arts a place of their own in the highest

²²⁷ Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 72.

²²⁸ *JubA*, 2:166.

human good. Instead, he writes “the most fundamental truths are indeed convincing and undeniable by their very nature, but they are not persuading. They rule the understanding, but not the sentiments, the drives, and the inclinations. Truth must borrow soft fire and divine persuasiveness [Suade] which drives into the mind, rules the inclination, animates dry arguments with the fire of sentiment and lets the sentiments themselves break out in to decisions and action.”²²⁹ In other words, beauty, art, and the lower faculties serve to prepare the mind for morality as it is known distinctly, and it makes the truths expressed by the upper faculties *effective* for our limited minds. As in the essay for *The Chameleon*, the value of art is limited to lending “fire” to the truths of virtue, which itself is known only through the intellect. Mendelssohn does add that “One must already feel the advantages of the graces if he is to be ruled by them,”²³⁰ but it is not clear whether this claim pertains to art or just beauty generally. In any case, it too gives beauty no more than an instrumental purpose in ethical development.

Developing the arts and sciences certainly contributes to our perfection, Mendelssohn explains, but emphasizes that “they are a means to blessedness – but nothing more than a means.”²³¹ He then develops this point into a remarkable view about the condition under which the arts and sciences can contribute to human happiness:

One misses the true intention, when one stops with [the arts and sciences], and sees them for the purpose after which we strive. And what else do those do, who tear a single science, a single art from the connection, and dedicate their whole

²²⁹ *JubA*, 2:168.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *JubA*, 2:166.

life to it and it alone? What do they do, besides improve some of their powers of the soul miraculously, while as it were suppressing the others? ... [Such a person] has taken a means for the end. He has made science more perfect, not himself. Our Theophrast [Lessing²³²] once named such a one a sacrifice for the human race; I would rather call him a sacrifice for his pet science... Only those parts of the arts and sciences which reciprocally influence each other also have an influence on the happiness of human beings.²³³

Mendelssohn seems to be arguing here that those who focus on a single art or science end up missing the highest good, improving neither themselves nor the rest of humanity. Art as means to human improvement, it seems, is not itself part of that end. In order to make this point absolutely clear, Mendelssohn launches into a scathing attack on instrumental music:

Nowhere has the separation of art and science led to greater extravagance than in relation to music [Tonkunst]. The purpose of this invaluable art is to make the effects of poetry, the furtherance of our happiness, more lively and fierier in our minds. If a song to the praise of God, wisdom, or virtue is sung with the requisite energy, and animated as it were by an accompanying instrument, then it reigns unauthorized over our sentiments... The exaltation becomes general, we are as it were torn against our will, and accompanied on the way to happiness by joy and ecstasy. That is the true purpose of music. But here there are also boundaries, which music must not be exceeded if music is to stay true to its calling [Bestimmung]. And my God! in what alleyways has one become lost! Music has been torn from the side of poetry and treated as a particular science. Its boundaries have been endlessly broadened, instruments upon instruments invented, melodies upon melodies concocted that aren't led by anything understandable [die keinen Verstand zum Führer haben], but are a mere jingling of sounds which flatter the ear. One has attempted to please the senses without improving the understanding, without improving the heart, and without the intention of making us happier. The way music [Musik] now appears before our eyes, it is at best an idle diversion, like those unfortunate games which throw a great part of humanity into ruin. The wise, on the other hand, see with chagrin that the boundaries have been exceeded, that the ears are all-too-accustomed to empty, incomprehensible sounds, and that on this account one barely notices the words anymore... the song alone fills our ears, the words sneak by

²³² A reference to Lessing, as discussed below.

²³³ *JubA*, 2:166-167.

unremarked... Through its supposed progress music has therefore lost its dignity, its calling [Bestimmung], and its true use.²³⁴

In an outline for the complete series of letters that follows the fragment, Mendelssohn adds that music without poetry immediately affects only the body, so that “if it is separated from poetry it has no use in morality.”²³⁵ He also extends his argument to cover the other arts, lamenting the lost age when “painters could also be philosophers” and faulting the development of the arts for requiring “more skill, but less spirit.” Art has exchanged its main purpose, the promotion of human virtue, for self-serving ends, he explains. Mendelssohn even signals his intention to respond to several objections to this view, including the opposing view that music in and of itself can contribute to the improvement of virtue,²³⁶ but does not actually provide any response before the work trails off. Mendelssohn’s overall attitude toward art in this piece could not be clearer: its purpose is to support, but not be a part of virtue, and it derives all of its value from this supporting role. As soon as it is separated from explicit and distinct incitements to virtue, it becomes an idle and destructive force in human life. At the time he wrote the *Briefe über Kunst*, at least, it was fair to say that Mendelssohn totally subordinated the arts to the demands of a rather austere morality.

Mendelssohn, patron of the arts

By late 1756, Mendelssohn was espousing a very different attitude toward the arts. Along with his new friend Friedrich Nicolai, at this time he even forcefully argues

²³⁴ *JubA*, 2:168-169.

²³⁵ *JubA*, 2:173.

²³⁶ *JubA*, 2:170-171.

against Lessing that the purpose of tragedy is not to improve morals, but to arouse the passions (see Chapter 3 for a full discussion of this correspondence). And his main work on the fine arts, the 1757 *Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* [*Observations on the sources and connections of the beautiful arts and sciences*], gives a very different account of art than what one would expect from the author of *Briefe über Kunst*. The *Betrachtungten* opens with the lines:

The beautiful arts and sciences are for the virtuoso an art, for the connoisseur [Liebhaber] a source of pleasure, and for the philosopher a school of instruction. In the rules themselves, which the artist led by his genius exercises, and the critic abstracts through analysis, lie hidden the deepest secrets of our soul.²³⁷

Unlike in the previously discussed essays, Mendelssohn now seems to recognize that the feeling of beauty is an essential and important part of the human soul, one that merits particular investigation by philosophers. He goes on,

Beauty is the unauthorized ruler of all our sentiments, the ground of all our natural drives, the animating spirit that transforms speculative knowledge of truth into sentiment, and urges on to active decision. It enchants us in nature, and the genius knows how to imitate it in the works of art with happy success. Poetry, rhetoric, beauties in figures and sounds work into our soul through the various senses, and master all of our inclinations.²³⁸

The first sentence is familiar from the *Briefe über Kunst*,²³⁹ with some important differences. In the works described in the previous section, Mendelssohn had credited art only with *supporting* virtue, while itself remaining distinct from it. Here, by contrast, beauty and sentiment are described as forms of truth – something into which truth can be transformed. And by calling beauty “the ground of all our natural drives,”

²³⁷ *JubA*, 1:167.

²³⁸ *JubA*, 1:167-168.

²³⁹ See *JubA*, 2:168, quoted above.

Mendelssohn is implicitly taking issue with Rousseau. He had already argued that human happiness and the highest good consists in an increase of perfection; now he finally connects this view to beauty, the sensible apprehension of perfection, of which “natural man” is capable even prior to the development of art and science. The last part of the passage, as well as the overall work, show that Mendelssohn is happy to admit all of the arts as contributing to this beauty.

Indeed, one of Mendelssohn’s main goals in the *Betrachtungen* is to explain how art fits into the overall striving for perfection that is characteristic of human life. This comes out in his answers to the opening questions of the work: Granting that Batteux was right to say that the fine arts should aim to please through their imitation of nature, why does nature please us to begin with? And why does its *imitation* please us?²⁴⁰

The key to both questions is that both nature and its artificial imitation are highly perfect.²⁴¹ Nature pleases because it is the maximally perfect creation of an absolutely perfect God, and more directly because its law-governed structure satisfies the definition of perfection. Imitations of nature please us because they reflect this perfection for the senses.²⁴² This imitation need not slavishly follow every detail of nature,²⁴³ a point already made by Wolff and Baumgarten. Rather, it aims to mimic the underlying perfect *structure* of nature, i.e. that each part has a law-governed place in the whole, at least as

²⁴⁰ *JubA*, 1:169.

²⁴¹ *JubA*, 1:169-170.

²⁴² *JubA*, 1:170-171.

²⁴³ *JubA*, 1:171-173.

judged by the senses. As Wolff taught, art represents a *possible* world in this sense,²⁴⁴ not necessarily the *real world*. Because truth is an expression of perfection, art also represents truth about possible worlds, confusedly. Here Mendelssohn returns to the old idea that the artist is a creator whose powers are similar to the divine creative power, only lesser in degree.

Mendelssohn's rationalist predecessors had attempted to specify *when* deviations from actual nature were justified in artistic representations: namely, when the deviation serves to increase the perfection of the whole.²⁴⁵ Mendelssohn basically agrees, but expresses the thought a bit differently:

What [nature] has strewn into different objects, the artist collects into a single perspective, forms a whole out of it, and exerts himself to represent it just as nature would have if the beauty of this object had been its sole intention... [Artists] aim to depict a certain subject as God would have created it if more important purposes had not prevented him... The artist must raise himself above common nature, and because the imitation of beauty is his only end, he is everywhere free to concentrate it in his works, so that they move us more strongly.²⁴⁶

In this passage, Mendelssohn plainly gives art a unique role in the expression of perfection and aesthetic truth. Although his principle is very similar to the earlier rationalists' criterion in a practical sense in that it focuses on the beauty of the whole work, he also emphasizes the maximal perfection of the actual world as posited in rationalist theology and cosmology. Why would Mendelssohn desire this emphasis?

One possible explanation has to do with an objection commonly levied against

²⁴⁴ For the rationalists, a "world" was not simply a collection of propositions, but a whole structured entity. "MUNDUS (Universum, $\pi\alpha\nu$) est series (multitudo, totum) actualium finitorum, quae non est pars alterius" (Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* §354).

²⁴⁵ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§24-25.

²⁴⁶ *JubA*, 1:173.

rationalist aesthetics in 20th century literature.²⁴⁷ The admission that art could be more beautiful by representing a *non*-actual world than the actual world, the objection runs, means that the actual world is not the most beautiful, and hence not the most perfect, since beauty is just perfection. But that contradicts the fundamental rationalist idea that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds.

Now, it may seem that Mendelssohn's restatement of the principle of imitation only more deeply entangled rationalism in this problem. But in fact, the objection is doubly fallacious. First, due to fundamental constraints on compossibility posited by Leibniz, only the world as a whole, not any of its parts, can be maximally perfect. For this reason, a work of art can represent a *part* of a possible world as being more perfect or beautiful than it is in the actual world, without threatening the status of the actual (whole) world as maximally perfect. Second, beauty is not equivalent to perfection in general, but only to sensible perfection, the perfection of phenomena. Thus what we *sense* to be more perfect may not *actually* be more perfect, a point Mendelssohn makes repeatedly in both the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* and the present essay. With this in mind, we can see that Mendelssohn's formulation actually *addresses* the objection rather than falling prey to it. He is careful to include the cognitive limitations of artists (i.e. that they work through confused sense), and distinguish between parts and wholes. If anyone had been worried by the fallacious objection, Mendelssohn's explanation may have satisfied where earlier explanations did not.

²⁴⁷ E.g., Alessandro Costazza, *Genie und Tragische Kunst: Karl Philipp Moritz und die Ästhetik des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Lang, 1999), 409; Hans Feger, "Logik ohne Dornen: Zum Zusammenhang von wissenschaftlicher Methode und sinnlicher Erkenntnis im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert." *Daphnis* 22 (1993), Republished online at <http://hans-feger.de/pdf/publikationen/Logik-ohne-Dornen.pdf>, 58-59.

In sum, Mendelssohn understood the fine arts as sensible representations or imitations of possible worlds, worlds which may deviate from the actual world through beautification or idealization. This theory is designed to give the artist a real share in the creation of perfection, not just a role supporting some distinctly known “great purpose of creation.” Though he never altered this general view even in the 1771 edition of his essay on the arts, it would come under pressure from the problem of tragedy, which is discussed in the following chapter.

In the *Betrachtungen*, Mendelssohn also treats pure instrumental music as a science in its own right – something he had expressly warned against in *Briefe über Kunst*. Music is in fact one of several basic types of art, Mendelssohn explains, whereas song is theorized as a compound art – a combination of poetry and music. Despite his strong attack on pure music in *Briefe über Kunst*, there is not even a trace of the idea that pure music is inherently problematic or corrupting in the *Betrachtungen*. Mendelssohn simply appropriates instrumental music under the general rubric of the fine arts, explaining that it imitates the passions and is capable of its own perfectly sensible structure.²⁴⁸ In a letter to Lessing written shortly after the publication of the essay, Mendelssohn even explains that music can represent concepts through association, something he vigorously denies in *Briefe über Kunst*.²⁴⁹

Mendelssohn does not explicitly raise the question of what role art ought to play in human life in the *Betrachtungen*, although his overall attitude toward art there is

²⁴⁸ *JubA*, 1:174-176.

²⁴⁹ *JubA*, 11:143.

clearly more positive than and inconsistent with the view expressed in *Briefe über Kunst*. He does, however, work out a correspondingly liberal approach to this larger issue in the fragment titled “Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten,” written between 1757 and 1763. There Mendelssohn accuses Rousseau of presenting the issue unfairly, of “collecting together everything evil of which the arts and sciences have ever been accused, and concluding from this that they corrupt morals.”²⁵⁰ It is true, he admits, that art has tended to corrupt morals in some cases, but “even more often luxury has spoiled the beautiful arts.” A corrupt people can also turn even the best goods, like “freedom and heroic virtue” into vices. So the philosopher must investigate first what (positive) effects the arts and sciences *might* have, before surveying the negative effects they actually *did* have in certain cases.²⁵¹

In order to address the question of the *potential* good of art, Mendelssohn invokes the highest good, just as he had in his other works on Rousseau. Following Socrates’ analogy to a well-ordered Republic, Mendelssohn claims that “the perfection of man consists in the perfection of his single powers and abilities, and in their agreement with the whole.”²⁵² This formulation is subtly but important different than that in the “Sendschreiben” and *Briefe über Kunst*. According to those works, the perfection of human beings consists solely in the proper *harmony* of powers with each other. Here Mendelssohn retains the importance of harmony, but also emphasizes the importance of the development of powers individually. Mendelssohn suggests that each individual

²⁵⁰ *JubA*, 2:182. Mendelssohn made similar claims in the earlier *Sendschreiben*. See *JubA*, 2:93.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *JubA*, 2:182.

must decide for him or herself how this harmony and development is best achieved: “All duties to ourselves reduce to the law: be just to yourself! In this connection each rational person must ask themselves the question that Rousseau wanted to answer for entire nations. If the cognition of the beautiful can lead me away from the love of the good, then perhaps I can develop my taste at the cost of my morals – and I [would be] unjust to myself.”²⁵³ By the same token, if a person honestly believes that beauty would not corrupt her, then it can take a rightful place of its own in her life.

Toward the end of the essay, Mendelssohn emphasizes the unity of beauty and perfection known through the intellect. “Judgments [of taste] can be resolved into rational and distinct grounds, but as they present themselves in the soul they are fully distinguished from the effects of distinct arguments. They are phenomena, which relate themselves to the reasons into which they are resolved like colors to the angles among which the light beams refract: according to appearance of an entirely other nature, but at ground they are just the same.”²⁵⁴ While he is not fully explicit, his overall view seems clear enough: beauty cannot be endorsed unconditionally because it belongs to phenomena, but neither can it be considered inherently corrupting, because it is one way that we participate in the perfection of the world. To deny this part of ourselves without good reason (e.g. a sincere worry that it would corrupt me) would be to needlessly rob ourselves of a share in the highest good.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ *JubA*, 2:184.

Reconciling the two Mendelssohns, and the place of the *Briefe über Kunst*

Not surprisingly, commentators who view Mendelssohn as a moralizer (especially Deditius) tend to focus on the *Briefe über Kunst*, while those who see him as a supporter of the arts tend to downplay that work. Of critical importance in this dispute is the dating of *Briefe über Kunst*. According to Goldstein, the work predates the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* and represents an immature view that Mendelssohn soon abandoned. According to Braitmaier, Deditius, and Bamberger, on the other hand, *Briefe über Kunst* was written in mid-1758, well after the *Betrachtungen*. This would place the work squarely within Mendelssohn's early but mature thought about art, making it much more likely to represent his settled view. I will argue that both of these dates are incorrect, but let us first consider the case for them in turn.

Goldstein finds the views expressed in *Briefe über Kunst* so reactionary and so unparalleled that he concludes it must be among Mendelssohn's earliest works.²⁵⁵ Indeed, *Briefe über die Empfindungen* seems directly at odds with *Briefe über Kunst* in three important ways. First, the attack on music in *Briefe über Kunst* seems directly opposed to Mendelssohn's attitude toward that art in the 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, where he writes: "Divine music [Tonkunst]! You are the only [art] which surprises us with every kind of pleasure. What a sweet confusion of perfection, bodily pleasure, and beauty!"²⁵⁶ In this passage, Mendelssohn seems to treat music (*instrumental* music, as the rest of the passage makes clear) as valuable in its own right, not merely on account of its use in

²⁵⁵ Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 73.

²⁵⁶ *JubA*, 1:85.

supporting the songs of an austere ethic. He also decisively attributes intellectual and sensible pleasures to music, not merely bodily pleasure as he had argued in *Briefe über Kunst*. Second, in *Briefe über die Empfindungen* Mendelssohn claims that “the purpose of tragedy [and poetry in general] is to arouse passion,”²⁵⁷ not merely to serve as a vehicle for teaching moral truths. Finally, while Mendelssohn does not explicitly discuss the value of art in *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, his overall attitude is clearly liberal, not reactionary. Palemon often uses very positive words and descriptions when discussing art, and never advises Euphranor to beware of its potentially harmful effects – as it seems the author of *Briefe über Kunst* surely would have. Since the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* went through two further revisions (1761 and 1771) with no relevant changes to these passages, it seemed to Goldstein that *Briefe über Kunst* must be simply a product of Mendelssohn’s early thought which he quickly left behind.

Bamberger supplies the most complete argument for the 1758 dating. Against Goldstein, he argues that “Mendelssohn always allowed the arts to contribute to [human] happiness.”²⁵⁸ Further, to show that Mendelssohn had held a similar conservative view of instrumental music elsewhere around the same time as his favored dating, Bamberger points to Mendelssohn’s 1757 comment on an early draft of Lessing’s *Laokoon*:

Music can simply be connected to poetry; in fact according to its first calling [Bestimmung] it served to support poetry. For that reason, the art of music is never taken to such excess as when it creates a disadvantage for poetry, and we

²⁵⁷ *JubA*, 1:94.

²⁵⁸ Fritz Bamberger, introduction to *JubA*, vol. 2, XXXI.

rightly criticize the newer music because its affectation does not agree with any harmonious poetry.²⁵⁹

Neither point is convincing. While it is true that Mendelssohn always gave the arts *some* role in promoting human happiness, the issue is precisely *what* role. There is a clear difference between making art *merely* a means to the end of virtue, as Mendelssohn did in the “Sendschreiben” and *Briefe über Kunst*, and giving art a value in its own right, as he did in his *Betrachtungen* and “Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten.” As for the passage from *Laokoon* comments, it establishes that music is rightly criticized *insofar as it creates a disadvantage for poetry*. This presupposes that the music was intended to be joined to poetry to begin with – in other words, the topic of this passage is song, not pure instrumental music. In that sense, this point exactly corresponds with Mendelssohn’s explanation in the *Betrachtungen* that song is a *compound* art in which *poetry* takes precedence over music. In other words, when the principles of poetry conflict with the principles of music in a song, the principles of music must yield.²⁶⁰ The passage in *Briefe über Kunst*, by contrast, explicitly targets *instrumental* music in general.

Bamberger next provides his positive case for the 1758 dating. First, following Braitmaier, he draws attention to a reference to a certain “letter” in Mendelssohn’s November 1757 missive to Lessing: “Herr Nicolai can certify that I will shortly resign from the beautiful sciences. But before that, I want to write a letter in which I will freely pronounce my thoughts on the beautiful sciences. I don’t repudiate all of them, but I

²⁵⁹ *JubA*, 2:147, as quoted by Bamberger at *JubA*, 2:XXXII.

²⁶⁰ *JubA*, 1:184.

want to make a choice for myself."²⁶¹ Bamberger (ironically following Goldstein) surmises that the letter mentioned in this passage is the first of an exchange of letters on art, which Nicolai reported he had begun with Mendelssohn in order to discuss issues raised in the 1757 publication of the *Betrachtungen*. The series was originally intended for publication, but according to Nicolai only two letters were ever completed, one by Mendelssohn and one by himself. The letters were subsequently given to Lessing and then, as far as Nicolai knew, lost. Nicolai reports that the authors used Greek pseudonyms, assigning "Theophrast" to Lessing – whom they hoped would join in the correspondence. He did not, and Nicolai reports that the plan was cut short because of Lessing's return to Berlin around June of 1758. In a letter to Mendelssohn of April 1758, Lessing also refers to "your letter on the essence of the beautiful sciences" in connection with his assigned name "Theophrast." Since Mendelssohn refers to "our Theophrast" in *Briefe über Kunst* (see above), Bamberger (now following Deditius) concludes that "the letter" mentioned twice in the correspondence is the same as the *Briefe über Kunst*. In his retrospective Nicolai does get his own purported pseudonym in what is purported to be *Briefe über Kunst* wrong, but Bamberger attributes this to a slip of memory. After all, Nicolai in fact reported two different pseudonyms for himself on the two much later occasions when he wrote about this episode ("Eudemon" in 1791; "Kalophil" in 1800 – but Mendelssohn had actually addressed the letters in *Briefe über Kunst* to "Agathocles"). From all this, Bamberger concludes, agreeing with Deditius, that the first

²⁶¹ *JubA* 11:166.

letter of *Briefe über Kunst* was written around March 1758, and the second around “May or June” 1758.²⁶²

This account hinges on the idea that *Briefe über Kunst* is identical to Mendelssohn’s contribution to the unfinished planned correspondence with Nicolai and Lessing. But that is not likely to be the case for several reasons. First, Nicolai reports that he and Mendelssohn had each written only one letter in their planned exchange, but *Briefe über Kunst* contains two mostly finished letters by Mendelssohn and none by Nicolai. Second, the *Briefe über Kunst* fragment contains an outline for four letters, all clearly expressing Mendelssohn’s own views. Bamberger admits that this outline was probably not written after the two letters, since that would not have allowed time for “a free engagement with the opinions of his correspondents” between the time of the second letter and Lessing’s return to Berlin, both around June 1758. On this point Bamberger is correct, but it seems even more unlikely that Mendelssohn would have drawn up such an outline before he had received replies from Nicolai, as Bamberger suggests. Prior to receiving these replies, which were never written, Mendelssohn could not have known what form the four letters should take. Again, *Briefe über Kunst* has every appearance of being a work planned and executed by a single author. Finally, neither the finished letters, nor the outline for the additional two contain anything about “the essence of the beautiful sciences,” nor do they discuss the beautiful sciences (poetry and rhetoric) at all except in connection to music. Thematically, *Briefe über Kunst* has far more affinity to the issues raised in Mendelssohn’s other responses to Rousseau than

²⁶² Bamberger, introduction to *JubA 2:XXXII-XXXIV*.

they do with the majority of the theory discussed in the *Betrachtungen*, which Nicolai had reported as being the spark for the planned correspondence.

There can be little doubt that Nicolai and Mendelssohn began collaborating on a correspondence about the “beautiful arts and sciences” in late 1757 to early 1758. But the only positive evidence *specifically* identifying *Briefe über Kunst* as part of that correspondence is the name “Theophrast.” And this is weak evidence indeed. Lessing had left Berlin for Leipzig in late 1755, and Mendelssohn had become close with Nicolai by early 1756. The two friends could have devised the nickname Theophrast for Lessing at any time before his return, and for any reason (Nicolai was especially thrilled with Mendelssohn’s use of Greek names in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, so this is not implausible). Most likely, then, *Briefe über Kunst* is a work entirely distinct from the 1757-1758 planned correspondence on the beautiful arts and sciences.

So, when was *Briefe über Kunst* written? We know that the “Sendschreiben” was completed in late 1755, and despite Goldstein’s claim that *Briefe über Kunst* is *sui generis*, it actually has much in common with this other work. Both are responses to Rousseau, and both share many of the same themes: that the highest good consists in a formal harmony of powers, that corruption occurs when one part of human nature is allowed to dominate others, and that the arts play at most a supporting role as a means toward ethical development. Now, Mendelssohn did not hold these views (at least not in such strict form) when he wrote the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, which, for example, lacks any admonitions about the corrupting influences of art. And as we saw, he did not hold them in the *Betrachtungen* (1757) or the “Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten” (1757

or later). Thus *Briefe über Kunst* was probably written around the same time as the “Sendschreiben” – sometime between late 1755 and mid-1756. To deny this implausibly entails that Mendelssohn oscillated repeatedly between two very different worldviews.

But even on this interpretation, we must accept two changes of attitude: one between the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* and the *Briefe über Kunst*, and one between the *Briefe über Kunst* and the *Betrachtungen*. Why would Mendelssohn have changed his mind, and why did he change it back? To the first question, Mendelssohn most probably became temporarily convinced by part of Rousseau’s argument soon after he wrote the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. While it is true that he never agreed with Rousseau’s overall skepticism about reason, he was certainly taken by Rousseau’s paean to virtue. This comes out in his December 26, 1755 letter to Lessing: “I can only disagree with Rousseau in very few places... if Rousseau had only not denied all morality to cultivated people!”²⁶³ But perhaps the best evidence of Mendelssohn’s infatuation with Rousseau’s thought is the content of the works in question themselves. What else but Rousseau’s *Discourses* could have led him to adopt such a stark view of the arts?

Mendelssohn’s view likely began to soften in 1756 through his discussions with his new friend Nicolai, whose views the *Briefe über Kunst* were probably at one time meant to address. One can see an almost guilty self-reproach as Mendelssohn began to recognize his own change of heart in August 1756:

We read poetry, Herr Nicolai reads his own drafts to me, I sit on my critical judge’s chair, admire, laugh, approve, and criticize until night falls... I’m rather

²⁶³ *JubA*, 11:27.

getting an idea of becoming a *bel esprit*. Who knows whether I might sometime write a verse? Madame Metaphysics may forgive it.²⁶⁴

By the end of 1756, the change was complete, as shown most clearly by Mendelssohn's alliance with Nicolai against Lessing's claim that the purpose of drama is to improve morals (see Chapter 3). There was no longer any barrier preventing Mendelssohn from taking a more liberal view of the role of the arts in human life. In sum, Mendelssohn was indeed a moralizer who subjugated the arts to an austere ideal of virtue – but only for a short time in his early career, under the influence of Rousseau. His settled view is best represented by the *Betrachtungen* and “Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten.”

Part 2: Key points in Mendelssohn's theory of fine arts

In Part 1 of this chapter, I argued that Mendelssohn meant to grant the arts a legitimate place of their own in human life. In this part, I briefly sketch out Mendelssohn's view of the arts themselves in order to flesh out that claim. Mendelssohn's *Betrachtungen* was the first German work to include an account of each of the fine arts: music, painting, poetry, rhetoric,²⁶⁵ architecture, and dance.²⁶⁶ While an analysis of each art is beyond the scope of this dissertation, certain general features of his account are of broader importance.

First, Mendelssohn is careful to treat each type of art as an explainable modification of art in general (as described above). The arts are distinguished by the

²⁶⁴ *JubA*, 11:55.

²⁶⁵ Presumably, rhetoric is included because it was considered one of the classical “ars liberalium,” the art of things made with the mind. This is a bit awkward within the new scheme of “fine arts and beautiful sciences,” since (following Batteux) these disciplines aim to please, but rhetoric differs from poetry in that it aims primarily to persuade.

²⁶⁶ In this originality claim I am following Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 66.

type of “signs” they use for representation, as well as the type of objects best suited to be represented through them. Music, painting, architecture, and dance make use of natural signs in that they are actually similar, in some sense, to the objects they try to represent. Such arts belong to the “schöne Künste” (*beaux arts*). Poetry and rhetoric make use of arbitrary signs in that they succeed in representing their objects only by linguistic convention; these arts fall under the “schöne Wissenschaften” (*belles lettres*). The arts which use natural signs are categorized according to their characteristic sense modality, the arrangements of their signs (simultaneous or successive), and the perfections typically associated with them. For example, music is experienced through hearing, arranges its signs both simultaneously (harmony) and successively (melody), and is capable of perfectly representing “the passions of the human soul which can be cognized through [musical] sounds,”²⁶⁷ as well as formal qualities of order and agreement that are common to other arts. Mendelssohn makes extensive use of Hogarth’s theory of the beauty line in describing the perfections of the visual arts.

Mendelssohn also provides an explanation of what he called the compound arts, e.g. song, theater, and opera. Each of these arts, he explains, has one of the basic types of art as primary. For example, in theater the primary art is poetry, even though it also contains elements of dance (movement and gesture broadly speaking). In song poetry is also primary, even though it also involves music. Because he conceived of the compound arts as combinations of the simple arts, Mendelssohn realized that he needed a general rule to adjudicate among potentially conflicting principles of the underlying

²⁶⁷ *JubA*, 1:176.

simple arts. This approach, which orders principles and then allows exceptions to the less important when a conflict arises, is a standard rationalist strategy first developed by Wolff and used extensively by Baumgarten in his theory of poetry. As an overall adjudicating rule, Mendelssohn suggests that the principle of the “primary art” should always take precedence over the principles of the other secondary or “helping” arts when there is a conflict. Only when a *particular* principle of the primary art conflicts with more *general* principles of the helping arts, in such a way that the composition of arts impossible, should the rule of the main art should be excepted.²⁶⁸

Unfortunately, while Mendelssohn’s rule of the primacy of the primary art fulfills a theoretical requirement, it fails utterly as a rule for creating compound arts. For, it entails that *any* rule of the primary art should, if at all possible, take precedence over *all* rules of the secondary arts in a compound work. But that is implausible. Compound works such as song and opera are typically products of compromise among all their various aspects, with no one part universally taking precedence. Perhaps there is some other, more nuanced principle that Mendelssohn could have invoked here. Or perhaps song, theater, and opera (etc.) deserve their own categories – but in this case it is not clear how Mendelssohn would have characterized them.²⁶⁹

More broadly, Mendelssohn’s rather rigid characterization of the fine arts seems to be a product not only of his personal views (e.g. his need to give poetry precedence in song), but also of the early rationalist tradition. Along with Wolff and Gottsched’s

²⁶⁸ *JubA*, 1:183-184.

²⁶⁹ For another criticism of Mendelssohn on the compound arts, see Deditius, 32; 44.

prescriptivism and intellectualism (see Chapter 1, Part 2) came a certain rigidity in *which* rules were held to be those appropriately operative in the specific arts. Wolff and Gottsched saw these rules as flowing from more or less fixed “species” of works (even though Gottsched was deeply aware of the historical development of art forms), just as the essential principles of an organism were thought to follow from its species-essence. Gottsched, for example, organizes his *Versuch einen critischen Dichtkunst* [*Essay on a critical poetics*]²⁷⁰ according to different types of poetry (lyric, epic, tragic, etc.) and lays down rules for each. This kind of categorization is also present in Baumgarten, but he tends to treat them more as conventional categories that can differ in degree, rather than fixed essences.

As far as poetry goes, Mendelssohn tended to align himself with Baumgarten’s less rigid approach. For example, in one letter he chides Lessing for too rigidly observing the classical categories of drama.²⁷¹ On the other hand, he does occasionally find fault with art for not conforming to the standards of their purported kind. For example, he criticizes the poet Karschin for misunderstanding the concept and proper execution of the ode.²⁷² Nonetheless, Mendelssohn does not seem strongly committed to this form of criticism. When accused by Hamann of criticizing according to an arbitrary standard of “the novel,” Mendelssohn quickly clarified that he did not put stock in such judgments, but was judging according to the way Rousseau himself intended to express

²⁷⁰ Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1751).

²⁷¹ *JubA*, 11:99.

²⁷² *JubA*, 5.1:586.

(possible) truth aesthetically.²⁷³ Most likely, Mendelssohn would have retracted his criticism of Karschin's odes if he had been made aware of an alternative explanation for their apparent disorder. Nonetheless, this method of criticism is problematic, and Mendelssohn would have done well to justify and explain his use of it, especially given the way he divides the fine arts in general.

Art and nature

Another significant commentary on art appears in a series of Mendelssohn's *Literaturbriefe* reviewing C.F. Flögel's *Einleitung in die Erfindungskunst* [*Introduction to the art of invention*].²⁷⁴ In these essays, written in late 1760, Mendelssohn distinguishes art from 1) making in general; 2) science; and 3) nature. The first two distinctions mostly follow long-established rationalist tropes. But Mendelssohn's comments on art and nature are both original and deeply influential.

Flögel held that art can be understood in three ways: most generally, it is the process or product of making or bringing forth something; more specifically, art is the making of something that nature would not produce on its own; and most specifically or strictly, it encompasses productions that are "not scientific," namely music, dance, painting, and sculpture – those productions designated as *schöne Künste* (beautiful arts). According to Flögel, poetry and rhetoric are in the strictest sense not arts because they belong to the *schönen Wissenschaften* (the beautiful *sciences*). In his review, Mendelssohn points out that this supposedly sharp distinction between the *schönen*

²⁷³ *JubA*, 5.1:450. This exchange is discussed further in Chapter 4.

²⁷⁴ Carl Friedrich Flögel, *Einleitung in die Erfindungskunst* (Leipzig: Meyer, 1760).

Wissenschaften and the schönen Künsten rests on an artifact of translation: “Schöne Wissenschaften” is simply a rendition of the French *belles lettres*, which suggests neither the concept of “science” nor any sharp contrast with the “arts.” Thus Mendelssohn writes, “I’m amazed that... from these words [Flögel] wants to show that art and science are [fundamentally] different.”²⁷⁵ In his own essay on the fine arts, Mendelssohn had argued that the *differentia specifica* of the schönen Künsten (*belles lettres*) is that they make use of artificial rather than natural signs. But they do not differ from the schönen Künsten (*beaux arts*) *qua* art.

Mendelssohn also points out that Flögel wrongly ignored part of Aristotle’s original definition: art is not simply making, but making *cum recta ratione* (with right reason), i.e. creation according to proper principles. Yet Mendelssohn himself does not exactly agree with the Aristotelian definition of art, because he thinks it is too one-sided. He writes instead:

One calls the collection of theoretical propositions [Erwägungssätze] which agree with the certain cognition of a thing science, but the collection of practical propositions [Ausübungssätze] which agree with the carrying out of an end is called art.²⁷⁶

“Erwägungssatz” is Wolff’s translation of *propositio theoretica*, which according to his *Logica* is a theorem, while “Ausübungssatz” is his translation of *propositio practica*, which is the statement of a problem to be solved. Wolff himself had made broad use of these concepts – for example, to establish principles and solve problems in architecture in his *Architectura civilis*. As Mendelssohn further explains, “Art relates to science as the

²⁷⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:316.

²⁷⁶ *JubA*, 5.1:317.

solving of a problem relates to a theorem. The former teaches what is to be done if a certain purpose is to be achieved, and the latter what is attributed to a certain subject under this or that condition."²⁷⁷ He concludes, "In this sense there are as many arts as there are ends which one can seek to carry out."²⁷⁸ Thus, Mendelssohn considers art to be a body of facts – facts about *how* to effect a given end – that is itself independent of particular human ends. The Aristotelian definition is valid, but only if we consider art subjectively, as a certain kind of knowledge about these facts (called a skill) that allows us to produce things "with right reason."²⁷⁹ This passage is a clear demonstration that Mendelssohn hewed to the standard rationalist view that the *ends* of art may be freely chosen, but that there are objectively correct *means* for achieving the chosen end. These rules are the embodiment of the art itself.

Mendelssohn explains the final and most interesting distinction between art and nature in the following way:

For the realization of any end a series of actions and alterations is required that are the means to this aim; and insofar as they all agree as means to their end, they are also connected among each other. Besides this ideal connection, however, there is also a physical connection, according to which these means themselves can belong together as effects and causes; and in this lies the whole secret to be explained! When an end is achieved through such means that stand only in the first [ideal] connection, it is a work of art; but if they stand not only in the first, but also in the second [physical] connection, or to express myself more distinctly, when the means, through which an end is achieved, not only harmonize with this end, but are also connected among themselves in such a way that one is the efficient cause of another, then the obtained end is a work of nature....

²⁷⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:317.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The means the artist used to create the Laocoon all agree with his overall intention, but among themselves they do not stand in any further connection, and all the things that he carried out in the completion of his artwork followed merely arbitrarily from one another [i.e. with respect to each other]. That's why one says this Laocoon is no work of nature, but a work of art. – But the plant that's growing here? This one can consider in a double aspect. One looks either at the excellent harmony of all means to a single purpose, and says, the growth of the plant is proceeding extremely artificially, or one considers the means to the growth as they are physically connected among each other as effects and causes, and says just as rightly, the growth of the plant is a work of nature. You see from this that the natural actually does not exclude the artificial. All works of nature are at the same time artificial in the highest degree. But by contrast one calls those things entirely artificial which are not natural, and which arose through voluntary means, insofar as they agree to a [common] end.²⁸⁰

While Mendelssohn is certainly more dogmatic about the existence of natural purposes, this still amounts to an account of nature and art essentially equivalent to the one Kant would publish over 30 years later.²⁸¹ The account, though certainly due to Kant's expression of it, became extremely influential in the era of German Romanticism and Idealism. Furthermore, Mendelssohn, unlike Kant, recognized the immediate practical implication of this theory for artists:

The beautiful arts and sciences have the aim to please. The virtuoso must therefore apply all means which lead him to this goal. Now when we notice the effort to please all too distinctly, and therefore more the agreement of the means to the end as their natural connection among each other, we say it is too artificial [gekünstelt]. But if the artist connects his means – setting aside their agreement to the end – among each other in such a way that they flow unforced from each other, then we say rightly, he knew to conceal the art, it is all *nature* in his works.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ *JubA*, 5.1:318-319.

²⁸¹ Kant refers to the distinction between works of art and “natural organisms,” but this is clearly what Mendelssohn has in mind even if he did not use the term “organism.”

²⁸² *JubA*, 5.1:319.

Chapter 3: Tragedy

As we saw in previous chapters, Mendelssohn held the following four theses:

1. Pleasure is the intuition of perfection.
2. Art should aim to depict a thing not as it is, but rather as it would be “if the beauty of this object had been nature’s sole aim”²⁸³
3. One with correct (or “good”) taste feels pleasure at objects in which perfection really (and not merely *apparently*) outweighs imperfection.
4. Art has ethical value because it instills in us a love of perfection.

Tragedy seems to be a decisive counterexample against each of these. It gives us a profound pleasure despite depicting great suffering and misfortune, which are certainly imperfections. Tragic poets generally do not idealize; in fact, they usually choose more misfortunate objects than those familiar from ordinary life. Yet tragedy was traditionally considered one of the highest—if not the highest—forms of poetry, so one could hardly claim that people who enjoy tragedy did so only out of bad taste. Even Gottsched, the strictest of the rationalist aestheticians, made no attempt to deny the pleasure and value of tragedy. How Mendelssohn responded to these challenges is the subject of this chapter.

Account of tragic pleasure in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*

Mendelssohn first raises the problem of tragic pleasure in his 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. In the eighth letter, he has Euphranor, the foil for Mendelssohn’s view, argue against Palemon, Mendelssohn’s spokesman, as follows:

Even you, Palemon! How often has that painting which is displayed in my father’s chamber not far from the entrance delighted you? It is of a ship, threatened by destruction from all sides. The foaming waves crash ceaselessly

²⁸³ *JubA*, 1:173. This claim was published shortly after the conclusion of the correspondence on tragedy, which is discussed below.

against its fragile structure, which [seems to] rush to be engulfed by the flood. The oarsmen labor futilely; sweat runs down their faces in vain. The ship falters. Now it will be knocked over and sunk into the abyss. How grimly everyone who sees unavoidable death before their eyes struggles with their exhausted hands! ... And this sight pleased you, Palemon? You called it beautiful? It is true, you admired the master who knew to imitate nature so skillfully. But was that all? Admit it, Palemon! You would have been less pleased if the danger had not been depicted in the highest degree. ... And you find pleasure in it? Shouldn't the unhappy thought that these men are subjected to such misfortune horrify you? How does this rhyme with your theory? Consider it well, Palemon. Suppose we remembered in every moment that our fear is [merely] an artistic deception; then this comforting thought can indeed alleviate our pain, but the object itself can for that reason offer no pleasure. At the representation of a tragedy we remain, not attending to this comfort, more and more melancholic, more and more sad, and this sadness, this melancholy, has unspeakable charm for us. Even the most cheerful youth gladly gives up his joy, and crowns the poet who possesses the terrible skill to bring him to tears.²⁸⁴

In the conclusion to the *Briefe*, Euphranor admits that he learned of this objection from Dubos, for whom pleasure derives from the subjective activity of the mind in considering extraordinary objects, regardless of the moral content of those objects. By way of response, Mendelssohn explains how tragic pleasure is rooted in perfection after all. Whenever we seem to take pleasure in imperfection, Mendelssohn explains, the pleasure is actually grounded in either the skill of the performers, or pity. (This account does not yet grapple with the sublime, which is discussed in Chapter 5). Pleasure in skill, a bodily perfection, is generally connected to spectacle, e.g. tightrope acts, performances with swords, and Roman gladiator fights. In these cases (especially the last), we can take pleasure purely in skill even if we feel no pity for the performers. Pleasure in tragedy, by contrast, is characteristically based on pity. Pity, Mendelssohn claims, is “the only unpleasant sentiment which charms us, and that which is known as

²⁸⁴ *JubA*, 1:74.

fear in tragedies is nothing but a pity that suddenly overtakes us, for the danger does not threaten ourselves, but the person for whom we feel sorry.”²⁸⁵ But why does this pity please, and what does it have to do with perfection? As Mendelssohn explains, pity is

a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant sentiments... [specifically] the love of an object which is connected with the concept of misfortune, of a physical evil, that happened to it undeservedly. Love is grounded in perfection, and the concept of an undeserved misfortune makes the innocent loved one more dear to us and increases the worth of his excellences. This is the nature of our sentiments. When some bitter drops are mixed into the honey-sweet skin of pleasure, they improve the taste of pleasure and double its sweetness.²⁸⁶

One common view of pity at the time, generally identified with Hobbes but also endorsed by Shaftesbury and Gottsched, is that pity arises when I observe the misfortune of another and then imagine that I could suffer the same fate.²⁸⁷ This makes pity a form of self-love. As the passage shows, Mendelssohn did not accept this view. Instead, he largely followed Wolff,²⁸⁸ who taught that love is grounded in the perfection of the object loved. And, according to Wolff, I share in the pleasures and pains of one I love, with the latter being the feeling of pity. If this is true, it follows that pity always presupposes love of another, and thus always involves a perception of perfection and a corresponding pleasure. As Mendelssohn explains in the passage, pity is always connected to love, so that it always has a pleasurable aspect. Further, he plausibly claims that this pleasurable aspect will be felt more strongly when it is contrasted with the *misfortune* that gives rise to pity. But this explanation raises a new problem: If pity

²⁸⁵ *JubA*, 1:110.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ This view of pity stems from Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html>), Book II, §8, 1386a.

²⁸⁸ *Metaphysik*, §448, §449, §461.

always contains something pleasurable grounded in perfection, why does it often feel just painful when those I love suffer? And what makes tragic drama different, so that the pity involved in it *is* pleasurable?

According to Dubos in his *Critical Reflections*, tragedy is pleasurable simply because it is moving. While unpleasant passions are involved, these remain “as it were on the surface of the heart” through our realization that the depiction is fictive.²⁸⁹ But this answer will not do for Mendelssohn for two reasons. First, he had rejected Dubos’ purely psychological account of pleasure, insisting that it must be explained through the perception of perfection. Second, as Euphranor points out, if we focus on the fictional nature of the depiction, our pleasure is actually destroyed. So, Mendelssohn attempts a different answer. First, he argues that pleasure cannot result when the perception of the misfortune and the perception of perfection are directly opposed:

When the melancholical remembrance of that wretched person... arrives at the concept of a present happiness, we pour out friendly tears; tears that are the height of all joys. Why? The concept of a past imperfection no longer quarrels against the concept of present perfection. Both can exist with each other, and that makes us more sensitive to the feeling of pleasure... If this present fortune were not complete, if some pestering circumstances remained, which presently still pain us, this would rub out a part of our joy, and noticeably reduce its degree.²⁹⁰

Now, this much seems true enough. But what does it have to do with tragedy, which by its nature often has no such happy resolution? Both Aristotle and more recently Addison had pointed out that the best tragedy leaves the hero suffering at the

²⁸⁹ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 1:25.

²⁹⁰ *JubA*, 1:110.

end.²⁹¹ In fact, it seems that this explanation implies either that tragedy *should not be* pleasurable, or Mendelssohn did not understand what tragedy is!

Fortunately, we can at least rule out the latter possibility based on the final example Mendelssohn provides in the *Briefe*:

If such a thing (as in a tragedy) happened in reality it would be unbearable, because our displeasure at the misfortune would far exceed the pleasure that arises from love; but it pleases on the stage nonetheless. For the remembrance that it is nothing but an artistic deception alleviates our pain to some degree (see letter 5), and leaves only so much of it remaining as necessary to give our love the required fullness."²⁹²

So, Mendelssohn agrees that the pity of tragedy is pleasurable only insofar as we realize that its object is fictional and illusory. This realization supposedly reduces the painful aspect of pity by the perfect amount, making the overall sentiment highly pleasurable. However, this explanation is dubious. Why would the realization of illusion reduce displeasure by just the right amount, while not also reducing our pleasure in the equally illusory perfection? It seems Mendelssohn is faced with a dilemma: either we believe the depiction is truthful, which would simply make us upset (as he admits), or we notice that it is not, in which case the perfection, the pity, and the overall sentiment would be severely reduced, as Euphranor had pointed out in his ship example. One possible reply is that once we notice the play is fictional, we no longer believe that anyone *actually* suffered, but we may continue to believe that people *ought* to be as good and virtuous as those depicted. In other words, in a play any real suffering is false, but

²⁹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>), §13, 1453a; Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *Spectator*, ed. George A. Aitken (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1898), No. 40, 1:204-206.

²⁹² *JubA*, 1:111.

the ideal perfection depicted, as ideal, need not be. Yet this does not really solve the problem. For the characters need not be ideally good and virtuous for the play to produce tragic pleasure in us. Indeed, according to the traditional view, tragic characters should be neither extremely virtuous nor extremely base, but something in between.²⁹³ Further, as Mendelssohn claimed, even a *small amount* of imperfection tends to reduce pleasure when it is “directly opposed” to the perfection of the loved person. Of course, in tragedy, the hero is typically subject to a *large* amount of misfortune. Mendelssohn’s explanation here is just not adequate.

Plato’s ethical challenge to tragedy

Nor had Mendelssohn yet faced the full brunt of the issue. Beyond the psychological-metaphysical challenge of tragic pleasure lay another, even thornier ethical problem. Although Mendelssohn tackled the general claim that the arts corrupt morals elsewhere (see Chapter 2), his reply does not seem directly applicable to tragedy, at least not without further explanation. According to that reply, the basis of the goodness of art and its edifying character lay in its perfection – but the nature of tragedy, it seems, is to depict imperfection. This is perhaps why Plato singles out tragedy again and again in his critique of art, saying that the “weightiest charge” against tragic imitation is that it makes us into less virtuous people:

If you consider... that when in misfortune we feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that this feeling which is kept under control in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets;- the better nature in each of us, not having been sufficiently trained by reason or

²⁹³ It is likely that Mendelssohn did not accept this view in relation to his ideal of the *best* tragedy (discussed below); however, he would not have denied that such “middle characters” can successfully produce tragic pleasure.

habit, allows the sympathetic element to break loose because the sorrow is another's; and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying anyone who comes telling him what a good man he is, and making a fuss about his troubles; he thinks that the pleasure is a gain, and why should he be supercilious and lose this and the poem too? Few persons ever reflect, as I should imagine, that from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves.²⁹⁴

As we saw, Mendelssohn ultimately views the value of aesthetic phenomena as being grounded in an ethical value: promotion of the love of perfection, which is the highest good. But how can tragedy do this? Why should we not insist, with Plato, that the only ethically defensible poems are encomiums to the gods and the state, which serve explicitly to promote the love of perfection?

Mendelssohn was aware of two existing responses to Plato's challenge from the earliest days of his career. The first comes from Aristotle, who had claimed that tragedy "through pity and fear effects the proper catharsis of these emotions."²⁹⁵ The concept of catharsis is not well explained in Aristotle's surviving works, but he seems to mean at least that tragedy tends to free us from the aspects of the passions that are ethically problematic in life, whereas Plato had claimed that tragedy merely indulges us in and enslaves us to these passions.

The second response comes out of the modern German rationalist tradition, under the heavy influence of the French mode of drama.²⁹⁶ In his seminal 1730 work *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst [Essay on a critical poetics]*, Gottsched argued that

²⁹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>), 606a.

²⁹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, §6, 1449b.

²⁹⁶ Mendelssohn would also have known Shaftesbury's justification of tragedy: that by depicting the misfortunes of the great, it blunts the blind drive of ambition for tyrannical power inherent in all people, making them more risk averse and contented. Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001) 1:135.

tragedy should be understood as a moral fable which aims to communicate a central “moral principle”.²⁹⁷ Specifically, it shows the audience how terrible misfortune can result from a bad action or a flaw of character, so that they will strive to avoid these flaws and actions. In this way, he gave tragedy a straightforward, morally edifying purpose.

However, in a 1729 speech entitled “Dramas, and particularly tragedies, are not to be banned from a well-ordered republic,” Gottsched offers a somewhat different account of the ethics of tragedy.²⁹⁸ He begins by citing agreement with Aristotle’s idea of catharsis, which he notably understands as the bringing of passions “into their appropriate limits.”²⁹⁹ Although he claims explicitly that “a tragedy... is a didactic moral poem... an allegorical fable that has a central lesson as its end,”³⁰⁰ his actual description of tragedy in this work focuses more on its effect on the emotions. “Tragedy is a picture [Bild] of cases of misfortune that the great of the world encounter, and which is either borne by them heroically and steadfastly, or nobly overcome. It is a school of patience and wisdom, a preparation for misery, an encouragement to virtue, a chastisement of vice.”³⁰¹ A good tragedy must be well-constructed so that it arouses the passions, a necessary condition for engaging the audience and producing catharsis. This is in fact the advantage of tragedy over history and other veridical representations: Through

²⁹⁷ Gottsched, *Critische Dichtkunst*, “Anderer besonderer Theil,” Kapitel X, §11, §15.

²⁹⁸ This speech was almost certainly given around the same time the *Versuch* was being written, so the difference in his views here is rather mysterious.

²⁹⁹ Johann Christoph Gottsched, “Die Schauspiele und besonders die Tragödien sind aus einer wohlbestellten Republik nicht zu verbannen” in *Ausführliche Redekunst: nach Anleitung der allen Griechen und Römer, wie auch der neuern Ausländer* (Leipzig, Bernh. Christoph Breitkopf, 1739), 662.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

poetic ornamentation and license the poet makes “one see, as it were, the living colors [of the things depicted] before one’s eyes.”³⁰² Gottsched specifically points out that tragedy can show us characters acting nobly in the face of misfortune: “I admire [bewundere] such heroes. I revere their perfection. I conceive a noble purpose to imitate them, and feel a secret ambition to become no worse than them.”³⁰³

It would be pointless to argue that tragedy doesn’t succeed in improving people’s morals, Gottsched continues, for the very same could be said of distinct moral lectures. “It takes thousands of preparations, experiences, examples, and encouragements to it, before a vicious person lets go of his [evil] way. It’s enough that a tragedy contributes something – in fact, very much – to that.”³⁰⁴ And unlike a boring sermon, tragedy ends up affecting people for the good even if they are only after pleasure. “They seek only charm [Anmuth], and find use; they strive for sweets, and find the nutritious food hidden beneath.”³⁰⁵

Notably, Gottsched recognizes that in some tragedies a truly virtuous person ends up suffering while an evil person does well. In such cases, Gottsched claims, at least for well-constructed tragedy “innocence is always represented as triumphant, and evil as damnable. And even if the former appears unhappy and the latter happy, both still appear in the beauty and ugliness appropriate to them.”³⁰⁶ On this point Gottsched returns to the “moral lesson” view, writing that through tragedy one should learn “it is

³⁰² Gottsched, “Die Schauspiele,” 664.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Gottsched, “Die Schauspiele,” 667.

³⁰⁵ Gottsched, “Die Schauspiele,” 668.

³⁰⁶ Gottsched, “Die Schauspiele,” 667.

better to suffer innocently than become great and fortunate through vice."³⁰⁷ Overall, his view is ambiguous between the "moral fable" and the "ennobling effect on the passions" approaches. And, Gottsched does not explain what it could mean for a suffering person to be depicted as beautiful (etc.), if beauty is sensible perfection but suffering is (generally sensible) imperfection.

Gottsched revisited the issue of depicting the unresolved suffering of the virtuous and unresolved fortune of the vicious in a speech given in 1751.³⁰⁸ There, he offers three reasons why such depictions ought to be permitted on the stage. First, following Addison,³⁰⁹ he explains that because tragedy is an imitation of nature, it ought to be a true reflection of the actual world, not of "an idealized world, let alone a Platonic Republic."³¹⁰ In the actual world, of course, we often see virtuous people suffer while vicious people become wealthy and powerful. Second, while he insists that in the actual world vice *eventually* leads to misfortune and virtue *eventually* leads to reward, this often takes place on a timescale of "weeks, months, or years." As a strict adherent to the traditional three unities of drama, Gottsched believed that the stage may only depict a single action taking place "over a 12 or 15 hour period."³¹¹ Thus, tragedy is not the right sort of representation to show every resolution of virtue and vice. Finally, he argues that

³⁰⁷ Gottsched, "Die Schauspiele," 666.

³⁰⁸ Johann Christoph Gottsched, "Ob man in theatralischen Gedichten allezeit die Tugend als belohnt, und das Laster als bestraft vorstellen müsse?" in *Gesammelte Schriften von Johann Christoph Gottsched*, ed. Reichel (Berlin: Gottsched-Verlag, 1906), 6:265-284. To demonstrate to his princely audience for this speech how well he understood the issue, Gottsched included the following amusing verse in this work: "Die Tugend betteln geht, der Tor in Kutschen sitzt / Viel stolzer als sein Ross, dass sie mit Kot bespritzt" (6:276).

³⁰⁹ Addison, *Spectator*, No. 40, 1:205.

³¹⁰ Gottsched, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:278.

³¹¹ Gottsched, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:281.

natural moral sentiment causes people to love virtuous characters despite, and even more strongly in their suffering, while vicious people are naturally hated, and all the more so if they enjoy good fortune.

The first two of these arguments is extremely problematic. As Aristotle had pointed out, tragedy need not depict the world only as it is, but may also show it as it ought to be. This view had not only liberated aestheticians (including the rationalists) from advocating the slavish copying of nature, but it also formed the basis of Mendelssohn's ideal of art, as described above. The second argument is based on an extremely weak assumption (the necessity of the three unities) that was about to be decisively challenged by the *Sturm und Drang* movement. While Mendelssohn tended to accept the three unities, he was more allowing of exceptions (Shakespeare's plays, e.g.) and would never have based the justification of tragedy on such a dogmatic claim. The third point about natural sentiment is perhaps more promising, but it is left undeveloped, and Gottsched does not explain how this idea might or might not be compatible with his original view that tragedy is a moral fable which depicts a central moral lesson.

Mendelssohn first touched on the ethics of tragedy in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. In the ninth letter, Euphranor points out that our revulsion to unvirtuous fictional characters is resolved into pity only at the moment when they commit suicide. Since pity only arises out of love, if we previously found a character to be morally repugnant, then it seems we must end up loving and approving of him or her precisely

because of the suicide. Euphranor thinks that this gives us reason to believe suicide is morally permissible, and that the character who commits the act is virtuous.³¹²

In his reply, Palemon makes clear that he will have none of this. Suicide is no demonstration that a character has acted in a *truly* virtuous way. For, “The stage has its own³¹³ morality. In life nothing is morally good that is not grounded in our perfection; on the stage, however, it is everything which has its ground in strong passion. The purpose of tragedy is to arouse passion. Therefore suicide is theatrically good.” Indeed, “the poet must carefully conceal the debate about true morality” lest her stirring depictions of immoral acts become repulsive. “Our pity, which had barely begun to raise itself, would change into repulsion in the mirror of true morality.”³¹⁴

In this passage, Mendelssohn clearly denies that our feeling of pity at a fictional suicide is any indication that suicide is actually virtuous. But the pity nonetheless indicates that we have love for the character, so at least for the time we are considering him *as* perfect. And if the deed is not *actually* perfect, why do we even *consider* it to be? Mendelssohn’s answer is simply to insist that the love involved in pity is always based on the positive, perfect properties of the character. He offers the following example: as a condemned prisoner is being marched to execution, everyone feels anger and hate toward the deed and cheers on the proceedings. But as the executioner draws near, everyone begins to pity him and even wants desperately to see him freed. The reason must be some small amount of love we feel for his person, contrasted with the imminent

³¹² *JubA*, 1:79-80.

³¹³ Mendelssohn originally has “besondere;” this is changed to “eigene” in the 1761 edition.

³¹⁴ *JubA*, 1:94-95.

onset of physical evil. Just as the execution itself is not the primary source of pleasure, neither is the suicide in Euphranor's objection.³¹⁵ The immoral act simply brings out our latent love for the other, perfect aspects of the character.³¹⁶

Mendelssohn's claim that "the stage has its own morality" has often been read as meaning that Mendelssohn radically liberated tragedy from any dependence on ethics or ethical accountability.³¹⁷ But the text simply does not bear this out. Certainly Mendelssohn is rejecting Gottsched's account of tragedy as moral fable. But this does not entail that tragedians ought to disregard all ethical considerations when creating their works. Nonetheless, it is important for Mendelssohn to clarify what he means by "the stage has its own morality," and exactly how he understands tragedy to relate to ethics. He would work through these questions in his subsequent correspondence with Lessing.

³¹⁵ *JubA*, 1:111. According to Wolfgang Ranke, *Theatermoral: moralische Argumentation und dramatische Kommunikation in der Tragödie der Aufklärung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), Mendelssohn thinks that "in the theater we don't react to the suicide *as* suicide, but as... a sign of regret [Reue]" (28). In other words, such immoral actions on the stage have a functional or instrumental value in the drama – they help us see and feel the strength of the characters' passions (29). Ranke's argument that Mendelssohn accepted such a functional role for immoral actions is persuasive, but his suggestion that Mendelssohn thinks this is the *only* basis for our affective reaction is too strong and unsupported by the text.

³¹⁶ This passage also shows that Mendelssohn was fully aware of, and indeed addressed, the worry that "it is possible to take pity on an imperfect or even evil character when they suffer greatly" (Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 209). It is therefore unlikely that this consideration would have induced Mendelssohn to downplay the importance of pity in tragedy, and in any case (as discussed further below) he never did downplay the importance of pity (cf. Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 208-209).

³¹⁷ Altmann, *Frühschriften*, 153; Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 93; Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 210 (though he thinks Mendelssohn later changed his view); Ranke, *Theatermoral*, 33-34; perhaps Hammermeister, *German Aesthetic Tradition*, 19 – he does allow that "art... fulfills ethical purposes" but does not coherently explain how this is so in the case of tragedy. Goldstein reads "the stage has its own morality" narrowly, to mean simply that "the morally good is not without further [condition] also theatrically good" (26). This is not a very plausible interpretation, as no one had held the view Goldstein is having Mendelssohn deny. Goldstein also takes issue with Mendelssohn's attribution of morality to the stage, calling it incoherent (*Moses Mendelssohn*, 27), but he later provides a somewhat more nuanced reading of Mendelssohn's view about tragedy and ethics (31-34).

The correspondence on tragedy with Lessing and Nicolai

Around October of 1755 Lessing moved from Berlin to Leipzig, leaving Mendelssohn to develop his friendship with Friedrich Nicolai, a critic and publisher. In mid-1756, Nicolai wrote to Lessing to ask his opinion of an essay he had recently written, titled *Abhandlung vom Trauerspiele* [*Treatise on tragic drama*].³¹⁸ This letter would end up sparking a lively and important correspondence about tragedy, mostly between Lessing and Mendelssohn. Because Nicolai's essay itself was "unter der Presse" at the time of writing, Nicolai initially supplied Lessing with only a summary of his main points, of which two were most significant. First, Nicolai argues that the purpose of tragedy is neither the purification of the passions nor the improvement of morals. He complains that this turns tragedy into "a school of virtue," a view he falsely attributes to Aristotle³¹⁹ – though as we saw, it really applied to Gottsched and his followers, as well as many adherents of the classical French school of drama.³²⁰ This attitude explains,

³¹⁸ Friedrich Nicolai, *Abhandlung vom Trauerspiele* in *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und freyen Künste* (Leipzig: Dyck, 1757), 1:17-68.

³¹⁹ Nicolai, *Abhandlung*, 22.

³²⁰ The proximate cause of the misreading was Nicolai's reliance on M. C. Curtius's German translation of the Aristotle's *Poetics*: *Aristoteles Dichtkunst* (Hannover: Johann Christoph Richter), 1753. In Aristotle's crucial definition of tragedy, for the passage more literally rendered "through pity and fear [tragedy] effect[s] the proper purgation of these emotions," Curtius had supplied "by means of fear and pity [tragedy] purifies us of the errors of the represented passions" (12). What remains at the level of emotional response in the original became under Curtius's pen a means for us to avoid practical error caused by excessive feeling. However, even if the view that tragedy is a school of virtue is not correctly attributed to Aristotle, it certainly applies to Gottsched's view in his *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*. In addition, many influential French writers of recent generations also endorsed this view. See Corneille, *Oeuvres des deux Corneille (Pierre et Thomas)*, ed. Charles Louandre (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1853), 345; Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 1:354-358; and Jean Racine, preface to his *Phèdre & Hippolyte* (Barbin, 1677) (as cited by Dubos, op. cit., 357), who writes that for the ancient Greeks "the theater was a school where virtue was taught no less well than in the schools of the philosophers."

writes Nicolai, why “so many German tragedies are so terrible.”³²¹ Instead, he argues, the purpose of tragedy should be to arouse the passions – the more strongly, the better.³²² Second, Nicolai argues that the passions most effective in moving the audience are not only fear and pity, as Aristotle held, but also *Bewunderung* – admiration or wonder. In fact, Nicolai held that the proper aim of one type of tragedy (which he terms “heroic”) is to arouse admiration.³²³

In his first letter of the correspondence, Lessing expresses disagreement with Nicolai’s central claim. The purpose of tragedy, he claims, is to improve morals, and the arousal of the passions is the *means* by which it achieves this end. He also denies that the arousal of any emotion other than pity should be essential to tragedy. Lessing goes so far as to say that “fear and admiration aren’t [even] passions, as I understand them.”³²⁴ He claims that these emotions are to be explained as dependent *modes* of pity: We feel fear in a tragedy at the sudden onset of pity, while we feel admiration at its resolution. That is, Lessing thinks that we begin to feel admiration for someone when we stop feeling sorry for them because we begin to pay attention to their good qualities instead.³²⁵ Lessing is motivated to defend the essentiality of pity for tragedy precisely *because* he thinks that arousing pity is the surest means (proper to tragedy) of promoting virtue in

³²¹ Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (München: Hanser, 1970), 4:58. I will generally cite the correspondence on tragedy from this source because the *Jubiläumsausgabe* does not contain the complete correspondence among all parties.

³²² Nicolai, *Abhandlung*, 19.

³²³ Nicolai, *Abhandlung*, 38-39.

³²⁴ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:161.

³²⁵ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:178.

the audience. For, as he famously claims, “the most pitying person is the best person, the most well-disposed to all social virtues and to every kind of magnanimity.”³²⁶

Mendelssohn’s entry into the debate consists largely of a forceful defense of the role of admiration in tragedy. He calls on Lessing to “apologize” to admiration, which he says is no derivative emotion, but an independent passion that is “grounded in uncommonly good properties.”³²⁷ While he does not go so far as to argue explicitly that arousing admiration is the only or even the primary goal of the tragic poet, he does refer to admiration as “the mother of virtue.”³²⁸ By this, he means that the feeling of admiration for one who is virtuous leads us to imitate that person, which makes us more virtuous. He even chides Greek tragedy for “never having brought admiration-worthy characters onto the stage,” at least not any “who would deserve admiration from the side of his morality.”³²⁹ Mendelssohn’s emphasis on admiration is entirely new in his thought, for as we saw, Mendelssohn had recently argued that tragic pleasure is based on pity alone. Lessing’s reduction of fear to a form of pity is even taken from Mendelssohn’s *Briefe über die Empfindungen*.³³⁰

While Mendelssohn does not directly address the issue of the end of tragedy in his initial reply, he had already endorsed the view that “the end of tragedy is to arouse

³²⁶ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:163.

³²⁷ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:168.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:169.

³³⁰ *JubA*, 1:110, quoted above. Since there is no other extant evidence, the proximate cause of Mendelssohn’s interest in admiration most likely arose out of personal conversations with Nicolai, which are unfortunately lost to history (cf. Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 209). However, he was certainly influenced by Gottsched, who (see above) had specifically endorsed admiration in tragedy in his “Trauerspiele” speech.

the passions" in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, and he would continue to resist Lessing's position throughout at least most of the correspondence. Since Mendelssohn was united with Nicolai on this central issue, and because the two were working together closely throughout the correspondence, it will be helpful to see how Nicolai understood the role of ethics in his treatise.

Although in his letter Nicolai perhaps gave Lessing the impression that he was completely unconcerned with the effect of tragedy on the virtue of the audience, his *Abhandlung* itself gives a very different perspective. There, Nicolai is careful to clarify that tragedy at least shouldn't go *against* morality. Although the poet can represent actions driven by passion or prejudice – as are disallowed by true morality – he cannot let this aesthetic depiction "conflict" with true morality.

He must represent such disallowed action in such a way that either they flow from good but not rightly applied motivations, or through strong passion, so that the acting person could be excused, so that we sooner feel sorry for the person who committed the act than want to represent them as a model for ourselves. Otherwise [the poet's] tragedy would be not only damaging, since it would seem to justify improper principles, but it would also fail in its highest purpose, namely being moving, since the audience will constantly revolt against him, and would want to have nothing of these actions that go against the principles which are implanted in them by nature.³³¹

As Nicolai goes on to clarify, poets need not always represent the virtuous as rewarded and the vicious as punished, but they will *in fact* miss the highest end of tragedy, the arousal of the passions, unless they represent the virtuous as worthy of love and the vicious as repulsive in the way he described. Otherwise, he explains, we will be unable to sympathize with the characters, and our feeling will be destroyed by the

³³¹ Nicolai, *Abhandlung*, 28.

unbearable contradiction between our idea of good and the evil of the characters.³³²

Nicolai plainly takes Plato's challenge seriously, and there are even clear echoes of Gottsched's discussion of undeserved suffering. In a sense, Nicolai connected the explanations Gottsched provided in his speeches: the poet must represent the vicious person as ugly even in his fortune, etc. *because* we are naturally inclined to hate vice; if the vicious person is depicted as beautiful then this will conflict with our natural feeling.

In sum, Nicolai insists that moral considerations must be a *constraint* on good tragedy, even if the improvement of morals is not its *purpose*. From a practical perspective, this means that a morally edifying effect is neither necessary nor sufficient for good tragedy. A playwright need not make moral edification a goal while creating, but must only be careful to avoid encouraging people to become *immoral*. The critic ought not disapprove of a work simply because she cannot say what it contributes to morals, but may still attack it on grounds that it is actively harmful to the virtue of its audience. Despite these limitations, Nicolai held that both artists and critics must be mindful of morality because our affective response to a drama depends deeply on our moral judgments.

Nicolai's view, while certainly plausible as far as it goes, does not seem a good response to Plato's challenge. He agrees with Plato that art should not be harmful to morals, but fails to address Plato's central claim that tragedy is *inherently* damaging to morals – not just in this or that case, but in general. Already in his first letter, Mendelssohn attempts to get beyond Nicolai's view by intimating an account of how

³³² Ibid.

tragedy can contribute *positively* to morals – namely, by arousing admiration. Does this mean that Mendelssohn thought a morally edifying effect is indispensable to good tragedy? If so, would he have to concede that improving morals is the end of tragedy after all? Answers to these questions must wait for the end of the correspondence. Mendelssohn also seems to have become dissatisfied with the psychological account of tragic pleasure he had provided in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, possibly for the reasons noted in the above section. In any case, he had discovered that pity alone could not explain what he took to be most ethically inspiring and aesthetically pleasing in tragedy. Let us now continue to consider the development of the debate.

The debate continues

In his first letter to Mendelssohn (his second of the debate), Lessing defends the role of pity against Mendelssohn's favored sentiment of admiration. Pity is more suitable than admiration in improving virtue, he argues, because many of the heroic qualities which we admire in characters do not, and indeed ought not, produce imitation in real life. For example, we admire the obstinacy of Cato—but only because Cato is a virtuous man; we do not and ought not attempt to imitate this obstinacy in general.³³³ Lessing argues that in order to produce imitation and thereby to improve virtue, admiration requires a distinct cognition of the perfection to be imitated. "How many have this cognition? And where it's lacking, doesn't admiration remain unfruitful?" he

³³³ Later in the same letter, Lessing disavows the part in which he made this claim, but it is taken up by Mendelssohn nonetheless. The example of Cato is almost certainly borrowed from Gottsched's "Trauerspiele," 664.

asks.³³⁴ Pity is more suited to improvement, he claims, because it betters everyone immediately and regardless of their understanding.

In his reply, Mendelssohn writes that he will explain why admiration sometimes induces a desire to imitate and other times does not. However, he is primarily interested in clarifying Lessing's claims about the necessity of distinct cognition for imitation. All our judgments are either based on confused, intuitive cognition or distinct, symbolic cognition, Mendelssohn explains. He uses this distinction to reiterate and clarify his earlier claim that the stage has its own morality:

Theatrical morals do not belong in the court of symbolic [i.e., distinct] cognition. If the poet, through his perfectly sensible discourse, can convince our intuitive cognition of the dignity and disgrace of his characters, then he has our approval. We gladly obscure the distinct rational argument which opposes itself to our illusion, just as we put ourselves into another climate, into other circumstances, and among other men by means of illusion, in order to feel the strength of the [poetic] imitation really forcefully.³³⁵

Now, writes Mendelssohn, while only distinct cognition gives us truth with certainty, the sensible (clear but confused) cognition characteristic of drama often has more influence on our will. Mendelssohn notes that he has "newly come upon these thoughts," most likely from (re)-reading Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*.³³⁶ Thus, even if we recognize that a property like stubbornness is not truly virtuous, we can still admire it.

³³⁴ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:175.

³³⁵ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:181. The beginning of this passage shows that Mendelssohn had not, as Beiser claims (210), changed his view about the relation between the drama and morality from his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. See also Mendelssohn's essay "Anweisung, wie junge Leute die alten und neuen Dichter lesen müssen" ["Notice on how young people ought to read the old and new poets"], a critique of Rousseau, in which Mendelssohn makes the same claim again (*JubA*, 2:117-119). "Perfectly sensible discourse" refers to Baumgarten's definition of a poem (actually, "perfect sensible discourse") in his seminal 1735 work *Reflections on poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), in which the term "aesthetics" was first introduced.

³³⁶ See Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §669.

“Away then with the distinct recognition of the worthlessness of a stubborn hero!” he exclaims.³³⁷ This knowledge ought to disturb neither the feeling of admiration nor the momentary intention to imitate. If all goes well cognitively, the distinct realization that imitating (say) heroic stubbornness is inappropriate in a given situation will preclude a person from actual imitation. But, Mendelssohn admits, those who lack this distinct knowledge may be moved to action by their feeling of admiration alone, even if the behavior depicted is unvirtuous in truth. This is simply unavoidable, due to the *confusion* of poetic cognition: as confused, it represents appearances, not reality as such, so by nature it can be deceiving. As he reminds Lessing, “You mustn’t think that your pity has an advantage to my admiration here. Even pity can bring us to do unvirtuous things if it is not ruled by reason, by cold symbolic reason, which one must entirely ban from the theater if one wants to please.”³³⁸

Mendelssohn does not seem troubled by this outcome. He even writes that it is precisely because tragedy does not depict morality as it is known distinctly that its end cannot be the improvement of morals.³³⁹ In a sense, this claim is a non-sequitur, for Lessing had always maintained that tragedy should improve morals by means of the passions, not by means of depicting true morality. But taken more charitably, Mendelssohn seems to be allowing that the effect of moral improvement is completely dispensable in tragedy after all. This “new thought” seems to sidestep Plato’s challenge,

³³⁷ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:181.

³³⁸ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:182.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

but it makes Mendelssohn's overall position puzzling and leaves unclear why Mendelssohn has been so concerned to defend admiration in tragedy to begin with.

Lessing next pens a comprehensive rebuttal to Mendelssohn's new apparent radicalism. He begins by questioning the idea that a work which primarily aimed at admiration would be a tragedy at all. Citing Aristotle's *Poetics* §14, he notes that tragedy does not produce every kind of pleasure without distinction, but rather a certain kind of pleasure, namely one involving pity.³⁴⁰ A work which aims primarily at arousing admiration is not a tragedy, but an epic. The letter then turns to straightforwardly ethical considerations. First, as Mendelssohn himself admitted, not everyone recognizes the supremacy of the intellect over feeling in ethical matters. If tragic drama can really induce people to behave in unvirtuous ways, "then it must be one of the first duties of poets to arouse admiration only for truly virtuous actions. For if they were allowed to give even unvirtuous actions the varnish of admiration, then Plato would have been right in wanting to banish them from his Republic."³⁴¹

To this problem Lessing offers Mendelssohn the following palliative: "Just because wine often leads to stupid bickering, that [doesn't mean] it shouldn't [serve to] cheer the human heart."³⁴² By analogy, just because tragedy sometimes fails to promote virtue does not mean that its purpose is not to promote virtue. Of course, Lessing's argument about the duty of the poet actually does not go any further than Nicolai had in his *Abhandlung* – that poets must avoid arousing admiration for vicious actions does not

³⁴⁰ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:185.

³⁴¹ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:189.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

imply that the purpose of tragedy is to improve morals. But Lessing has certainly noticed the tension in Mendelssohn's view, and is challenging him to consider whether he really thinks it is acceptable for a poet to depict action in a way that goes against morality.

Lessing argues further that Mendelssohn has failed to explain the mechanism by which admiration in tragedy *might* function to improve morals, even if that is not its end. If a person refrains from imitating a theatrically but not actually admirable action, Lessing notes, then it is the person's intellect, not the sensibly cognized tragedy which produces this effect.³⁴³ And, Lessing points out, if the viewer unwittingly happens to imitate a virtuous action without knowing that it is virtuous, it seems he has not really done anything virtuous at all.³⁴⁴ In other words, Mendelssohn's theory seems to commit him to the view that only intellectual knowledge can really improve morals, while the stage can contribute nothing.³⁴⁵

Lessing goes on to reiterate the particular ethical value of pity. Only the arousal of pity, he thinks, can produce the right kind of moral effect, for "even suppose that the poet makes me pity an unworthy object, namely by means of false perfections, through which he seduces my intellect in order to win my heart. Nothing comes of it if only my pity is stirred up, and as it were becomes accustomed to being stirred up more and more

³⁴³ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:188.

³⁴⁴ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:189.

³⁴⁵ This may be what Lessing originally had in mind when he wrote (above) that admiration requires a distinct cognition in order for it to be imitated; i.e. he may have meant "to be imitated in accordance with morality."

easily.”³⁴⁶ Lessing cites one final difference between pity and admiration. Pity is a universally virtuous passion, Lessing believes, so that any exercise of it will improve a person’s general virtuousness. Admiration, on the other hand, is more suited to arouse a desire to imitate particular behaviors in particular cases. Perhaps it is suited to induce people to practice certain difficult physical tasks, he speculates. In support of this view, Lessing points out that no one would want or expect a tragedy to increase a person’s disposition to admire *in general*.

In his reply, Mendelssohn opens by writing that he is “mostly, but not entirely in agreement” with Lessing,³⁴⁷ but in fact the agreement is somewhat hard to see. He takes issue with Lessing’s claim that tragedy must aim primarily at arousing pity in order to be tragedy at all:

Here you’ve taken a prejudice as a shield which I’ve often heard you yourself attack. On what is this artificial distinction [between the tragedy and the epic] based? In view of the works of nature, it’s been determined in the last century that they haven’t been divided by their master [Nature] into any particular and separate classes.³⁴⁸

The passage shows that Mendelssohn had a very liberal view of natural forms and tended to resist artificial conventions, but it seems weak against Lessing’s objection nonetheless. Even if there is no natural division between tragedy and other forms of poetry, it might be instrumentally helpful to put dramas into conventional classes into order to understand their distinctive histories and ways in which they ought to be

³⁴⁶ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:189-190.

³⁴⁷ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:195.

³⁴⁸ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:195-196.

constructed to produce the best effect. And intuitively, it does not seem that a drama in which we simply admire several characters is helpfully thought of as a tragedy.

Fortunately, Mendelssohn finally provides an example of a tragedy which aims at arousing admiration, and explains precisely how it ought to function. As it turns out, he is not concerned with the admiration of physical prowess, but of moral goodness.

Tragedy is the best vehicle for arousing moral admiration in the following way:

The hero must value the moral good incomparably higher than the physical good. If pain, chains, slavery, and death collide with a duty, then he must not delay in rushing over to these evils in order to keep his innocence unblemished. This inner victory of the divine soul over the body enraptures us, and puts us into an affect which no bodily pleasure approaches.³⁴⁹

Mendelssohn cites the example of Orestes, who had submitted himself to be executed in place of his friend Pylades in Euripides' drama *Iphigenia in Tauris*. "These are perhaps the only characters of the ancients that arouse a true [moral] admiration," Mendelssohn notes.³⁵⁰ The depiction of moral goodness even at the cost of physical suffering is Mendelssohn's tragic ideal,³⁵¹ the element which make tragedy best from both the aesthetic and ethical standpoints. He is on solid ground here, as *Iphigenia in Tauris* is also the most frequently cited example in Aristotle's *Poetics*. And all this is perfectly consistent with his earlier view from the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, where he had even

³⁴⁹ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:197.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ Braitmaier also uses the term "tragisches Ideal" to refer to Mendelssohn's attitude here (*Geschichte*, 260).

suggested “undeserved physical evil” in particular makes the perfection of the hero appear more brightly to us.³⁵²

This tragic ideal does not, however, constitute a wholesale replacement of Mendelssohn’s earlier view that explained tragic pleasure through pity alone. Mendelssohn does not and would never claim that all tragedy *must* conform to the formula specified above, nor does he ever claim that pity is relatively unimportant in tragedy or that admiration is necessary and indispensable to *all* tragedies. Mendelssohn makes this clear in his last letter of the correspondence, in which he writes, “I would therefore advise a poet that he should seek to arouse both pity and admiration in his tragedy. If he asks which of these affects should rule, I for one [für meinen Theil] would not grant any preference to pity. [But] at the same time admiration without pity is cold, as Nicolai noted about Canut.”³⁵³ In the end, Mendelssohn seems to think that pity is indispensable to tragedy, but that admiration is also needed if the work is to rise to the highest level of art.³⁵⁴

Beyond *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Mendelssohn has in mind especially the “heroic” 17th-century French tragedies of Corneille.³⁵⁵ Thus, despite all of his alleged radicalism

³⁵² Mendelssohn was certainly influenced by Addison, who wrote: “A virtuous Man (says Seneca) struggling with Misfortunes, is such a Spectacle as Gods might look upon with Pleasure: And such a Pleasure it is which one meets with in the Representation of a well-written Tragedy” (*Spectator*, No. 39, p. 199). Addison does not develop this thought especially clearly, however. Mendelssohn would approvingly cite the same passage from Seneca in connection with tragedy in his *Rhapsodie* (*JubA*, 1:196).

³⁵³ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:222.

³⁵⁴ Cf. Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 208-209.

³⁵⁵ As Braitmaier also suggests, *Geschichte*, 271. Mendelssohn specifically cites Corneille’s 1639 play *Cinna* (*JubA*, 11:197), in which a character suffering because of treasonous crimes she has committed

and tendency toward liberating the stage from moral considerations, Mendelssohn's ideal of tragedy is in a sense deeply conservative. Unlike Lessing, he takes French classical drama as a model, and thinks that the *best* tragedy *directly depicts* moral perfection in the face of evil.

The remainder of Mendelssohn's letter, which includes some important attached fragments,³⁵⁶ has two goals. First, Mendelssohn aims to explain, in response to Lessing's objection, the general mechanism by which tragedy in general can contribute to morals. Second, Mendelssohn attempts to provide a new view of tragic pleasure that will accommodate the claims he had made about the overarching importance of passion in tragedy. We will take these in turn.

Good tragedy unavoidably presents a confused version of morality, Mendelssohn insists, for whenever it attempts to present true morality it becomes cold and lifeless. And this means tragedy will sometimes give people unvirtuous motivations, whether from admiration or pity. But this unfortunate outcome does not mean that tragedy can play no role in moral improvement. To explain how it can, Mendelssohn develops a somewhat original³⁵⁷ theory of moral motivation. Beginning from the Leibnizian compatibilist tradition, he posits that the quantity of motivation (the greatest of which at a given time actually determines the will) is "composed out of the amount of good (*m*), how distinctly we perceive it (*p*), and inversely with the time

decides to accept the consequences and confess; upon doing so she is pardoned and she and her friends granted estates by Augustus.

³⁵⁶ These would serve as the basis for much of the 1761 *Rhapsodie*.

³⁵⁷ The idea of including time in the calculation is original, but also not well defended. Overall, Mendelssohn's theory is indebted to Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* sec. XVI, "Facultas appetitiva."

needed for the contemplation (t). Thus the quantity of motivation = mp/t .³⁵⁸ As a result, a perception is more motivating when we can grasp it quickly. But perceptions grasped quickly must be more confused and even obscure, because we do not have the time to analyze their parts. Nonetheless, if t becomes “extremely small,” it begins to dominate the also diminished p .³⁵⁹ In this way a confused perception can be more motivating than a distinct one. For example, Mendelssohn thinks this can account for why people are afraid of cannonfire even when they know it cannot hurt them, and how practice allows people to perform complex tasks like speaking and playing music smoothly and effortlessly.³⁶⁰

Becoming virtuous, Mendelssohn continues, is not a matter of acquiring purely theoretical knowledge, because virtue involves acting well. A person who only has symbolic cognition of the good will not be able to resist sensible inclinations to vice, for these inclinations are generally intuitive and can therefore have an outsized impact on the will, in the way just described. On the other hand, a person who only has intuitive cognition lacks full certainty, can be deceived by examples without proof, and cannot recall the good as well when it is not sensibly present. Mendelssohn concludes that only

³⁵⁸ *JubA*, 2:149.

³⁵⁹ *JubA*, 2:150.

³⁶⁰ “Through practice... each capability in our mind becomes a skill. A skill consists in a capacity to bring about something so quickly that we don’t have to be as conscious of everything as we once were. In every action a series of concepts is needed which agrees with a series of voluntary motions in the body. The closer this series of concepts is bound together, that is, the more similarities, relations, and connections we perceive within it, the more quickly [these concepts] follow each other, that is, the more quickly the imagination passes from one to the other. Practice or habituation allows us to see more connections between the concepts in the series. If we practice enough, we can reach a point where the connection of concepts happens so quickly that it is no longer distinct; and then the capability has become a skill.” (*JubA*, 2:151).

a person “who connects the symbolic and intuitive cognitions of the value of virtue, who has made the lower powers of the soul agree with the upper, is perfectly virtuous.”³⁶¹ He defines “moral sensibility” as the ability to quickly represent “the true or seeming good which is to be met with in the object.” This ability can be improved by allowing us to see more of the good in a thing more accurately and more quickly. And, Mendelssohn explains, fictions, including tragedy, often serve as better exercise than reality, because they can be made more interesting and made to seem more probable than actual events, and they can be “cleaned up” of irrelevant and distracting elements. In this way tragedy can contribute to the improvement of morals.

The core idea behind Mendelssohn’s new account of tragic pleasure is the principle of imitation:

Reason... attributes a great and worthy thing to the objects of a tragic drama, *if it is only capable of a greater degree of imitation by means of its lively representation...* Therefore you mustn’t exclude any particular passion from the theater. As soon as the imitated passion can convince us intuitively of the excellence of the imitation, then it deserves to be performed on the stage. Even hate and revulsion can... please on the stage, because it is enough if the imitated passion convinces us that the imitation is similar to its archetype.³⁶²

Mendelssohn’s view here evokes the theory of the Swiss aestheticians Bodmer and Breitinger, who for decades had defended an extremely permissive interpretation of the principle of imitation.³⁶³ However, it is important to see that Mendelssohn has not suddenly shifted to a kind of formalist view. After all, he had just defended the value of

³⁶¹ *JubA*, 2:153.

³⁶² Lessing, *Werke*, 4:196.

³⁶³ See especially Johann Jakob Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst, worinnen die poetische Mahlerei in Absicht auf den Ausdruck und die Farben abgehandelt wird* (Leipzig: Orell, 1740), 95-99, where he espouses essentially the same view of tragic pleasure that Mendelssohn is endorsing here. Nonetheless, Bodmer and Breitinger agreed with Gottsched that tragedy should be understood as a moral fable.

depicting admirable moral victories in tragedies, so such a shift would be utterly incoherent. Instead, according to Mendelssohn, the formal imitative aspect of the tragedy plays a very specific role in the pleasure we get from it. "The best means of convincing us intuitively of the value of the imitation [i.e. similarity to reality] is if unpleasant passions are aroused in us by means of the illusion... That is why all unpleasant affects please us in imitation."³⁶⁴ This similarity of the imitation to reality is, according to Mendelssohn here, the *only* basis for our pleasure in the *imperfect aspect* of the tragedy. He insists that a "second judgment – that these [depicted] affects are only imitated – must immediately follow the affect; because otherwise the unpleasant sentiment, which flows from the affect, would grow greater than the pleasant sentiment, which is an effect of the imitation" (ibid). So in and of themselves, Mendelssohn still thinks, perceptions of imperfection are displeasurable.

In sum, Mendelssohn holds the following views at this point in the correspondence: 1) that tragedy *can* be morally edifying by improving the audience's "moral sensibility"; 2) that the most moving and best tragedy succeeds because it arouses admiration through the morally positive content it depicts; and 3) that we only get pleasure from the perfect aspects of a tragedy, whether material or formal. Nonetheless, he did not back down from his earlier claim that the end of tragedy is not to improve morals, nor from his claim that tragedy might be moving while *harming* morals. While not strictly inconsistent, these views are deeply in tension. If it is possible and desirable that tragedy be morally edifying, then why – despite the concerns of Plato

³⁶⁴ *JubA*, 2:155. "Illusion" is the taking of the sensible appearance for reality.

and Rousseau – insist that it *need* not be? Perhaps Mendelssohn intended claim (3) to be a defense against these concerns, since it bars people from taking pleasure directly in imperfection. If so, this defense would fail, since (as Mendelssohn well recognized) people can become deeply immoral simply by learning to ignore the negative aspects of things.³⁶⁵

Lessing admits being convinced by Mendelssohn's theory of motivation and its relation to art. But he cannot accept Mendelssohn's account of how imperfection can give rise to pleasure. He has a better idea:

Now surely we're agreed, dearest friend, that all passions are either intense longings or intense repulsions? And also that at every intense longing or repulsion we are conscious of a greater degree of our reality, and that this consciousness cannot be other than pleasant? Consequently, all passions, even the most unpleasant, are pleasant qua passion. And I certainly don't need to tell you that the pleasure which is connected to the stronger determination of our power can be so infinitely outweighed by the displeasure we have about the object... that we are no longer conscious of [the pleasure].³⁶⁶

This passage shows that Lessing fully agrees with Mendelssohn's view that the imperfect object depicted is displeasurable in and of itself. He also agrees that so long as we take the perceived imperfection to be real, displeasure will predominate. But rather than locating the pleasurable aspect of fictional imperfection merely in the quality of imitation, Lessing locates it in the subjective reaction to the depicted imperfection, the feeling of revulsion. When we recognize that we are not perceiving reality, the

³⁶⁵ I have in mind Mendelssohn's example of the Romans, who (Mendelssohn says) took pleasure in gladiator fights by focusing on the skill of the combatants while suppressing their pity (*JubA*, 1:109).

³⁶⁶ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:201-202.

displeasure at the object disappears and we are left only with the pleasure involved in our passionate moral repulsion.

While this view is certainly indebted to Dubos's idea that the passions as such are inherently pleasurable, the background assumptions are importantly different. Dubos had thought that the passions are pleasing simply because they present the mind with a multitude of ideas to occupy it, and he identified the mind's state of being occupied with the feeling of pleasure.³⁶⁷ For Lessing, the passions are pleasing because of their connection with the "appetitive" faculties of inclination and revulsion. Because these faculties are proper to us as human beings, their exercise counts as a "reality" or perfection, and it is because we notice their activation through our sentiments that we feel pleasure. Lessing concludes his letter with an unpersuasive counterexample to Mendelssohn's imitation theory.³⁶⁸

In a brief reply, Mendelssohn concedes that Lessing's explanation for why imperfection pleases in tragedy is superior to his own, and that the quality of the imitation is not the best explanation in this case. "It's too bad that fine observation was

³⁶⁷ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 1:4-9.

³⁶⁸ Lessing's attempted counterexample runs thus: Suppose I see a beautiful woman beckoning to me from afar. This vision creates all sorts of pleasant affects in my mind. Suddenly, I discover that she is just an excellent artistic illusion; there is really no beautiful woman at all. According to Mendelssohn's view, Lessing points out, this separate judgment would make me even more happy, because excellent imitations are supposed to produce pleasure. But of course, this is not the case; I actually experience disappointment and sadness (Lessing, *Werke*, 202-203). The example is unpersuasive because it is still plausible that the skillful imitation would give me some pleasure in this case. Disappointment and displeasure may predominate, but there the imitation may provide a small pleasurable aspect nonetheless.

unknown to me when I wrote my *Briefe über die Empfindungen*," he admits.³⁶⁹ In the next and final letter of the correspondence, dated 14 May 1757 (more than eight months after Nicolai's first letter to Lessing), Mendelssohn sums up and restates his view of tragedy in light of the prior correspondence. The summary is divided into "agreed" and "disputed" points; however, it is clear that all of the points represent Mendelssohn's own views, and they are only labeled as "disputed" when Mendelssohn has some reason to think that Lessing is not in full agreement. The summary was also written by Mendelssohn and Nicolai together (apparently with Nicolai writing part of the first half and Mendelssohn writing the second), but since even minor disagreements between the two are explicitly noted, we may assume that the general view is Mendelssohn's own.

Mendelssohn begins the summary by restating Lessing's suggestion about the source of pleasure in imperfection, but makes clear that he intends this to supplement, not replace, his previous view.³⁷⁰ "The imitation itself contributes to this obscuring [of the objective imperfection], if it is perfect, not the least because it increases the quantity of sensible pleasure."³⁷¹ In other words, at least *some* of the pleasure we get from a depiction of imperfection relates to the formal quality of imitation in the work.

³⁶⁹ Lessing's view here has a clear provenance in Wolff, who had explained that the displeasure we get from the imperfection of an object is moderated and reduced by the pleasure we get from our *recognition* of the imperfection, since the ability to recognize it is a subjective perfection which we perceive confusedly (*PE*, §519). The novelty here is the idea that pleasure can actually *predominate* if the displeasure is removed – something that happens when we realize that our representation does not depict reality. Ironically, that novel aspect came from Mendelssohn (influenced by Dubos), who neglected to connect it with the Wolffian doctrine.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, 2:273-274.

³⁷¹ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:214.

Next, Mendelssohn clarifies the role of various passions in tragedy. If, as Mendelssohn held, tragedy is meant “to arouse the passions,” how are we to make sense of the privileged role of pity and (if Mendelssohn has his way) admiration? To answer this, Mendelssohn offers an expanded concept of pity.³⁷² He points out first that the intuitive consideration of our own misfortune can take on various modifications depending on our relation to it. Various modes of misfortune can feel different to us, and we have attached various words to these various feelings: displeasure, sadness, sorrow, fear, desperation, shock, horror, etc.³⁷³ And as the intuitive consideration of *others’* misfortune can take on just the same modifications, Mendelssohn reasons, there must be just as many variations of pity. Thus “there is a pitying fear, a pitying desperation, a pitying shock, yes, even a pitying wrath, etc.... just as there is sadness, fear, shock at the representation of our own imperfection. Pity as the general name encompasses all modifications of displeasure in itself, which we feel about the displeasure of another.”³⁷⁴ This expanded view of pity allows for consistency with Mendelssohn’s claim, all the way back in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, that pity is the *only* negative sentiment which pleases.

³⁷² Here Mendelssohn explains pity in general as the “the intuitive consideration of the misfortune of another” (Lessing, *Werke*, 4:216). Although this definition does explicitly include love, and would seem to include hate and even Schadenfroh (see *Metaphysik*, §458), it is more likely that Mendelssohn is being sloppy here and unlikely that he changed his view. In his 1761 *Rhapsodie*, a work derived largely from this correspondence, he clearly states that pity is based on love (*PS*, 2:5; for the 1771 edition see *JubA*, 1:395).

³⁷³ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:216-217.

³⁷⁴ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:217.

Commentators are certainly wrong to say that Mendelssohn – at the end of the correspondence, anyway – permitted all passions unconditionally in tragedy.³⁷⁵ As he writes, those “unpleasant passions, whose exercise is not even considered a reality, must be kept entirely away from the stage or depicted as ugly. As for example envy, etc. and all affects which consist in a displeasure about the perfections of another.”³⁷⁶ These also do not count as pity, because they relate to the other’s misfortune in some way other than sharing or participating in it. Here, for the first time, Mendelssohn concedes somewhat to Lessing and explicitly endorses Nicolai’s view that tragedy must not be *opposed* to morals or promote immorality.³⁷⁷ Also left entirely out of Mendelssohn’s analysis of pity is admiration. This is because admiration does not relate to misfortune at all, but to extraordinary perfection. In this way Mendelssohn finds a way to include a multitude of passions under the umbrella of pity, while retaining a separate place for the sublime sentiment produced by his ideal of the best tragedy.

Mendelssohn’s view of tragic pleasure at end of the correspondence is best understood as a compound view. We get pleasure in tragedy from 1) the formal quality of the imitation (verisimilitude), which is a perfection;³⁷⁸ 2) the internal structure of the

³⁷⁵ This commonly held view goes hand in hand with the idea that Mendelssohn radically liberated drama from ethical considerations. Thus Hammermeister’s view that for Mendelssohn the “subject matter [of drama] is free from regulation” is false (*German Aesthetic Tradition* 19), as is Goetschel’s similar but proto-Kantian-tinged reading (103), as well as Ranke’s claim that Mendelssohn was “not at all interested in the problem of setting boundaries for such manipulation of moral feeling” (42).

³⁷⁶ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:215-216.

³⁷⁷ This is why Lessing describes this final letter of the correspondence as “eine Art von Kapitulation” (Lessing, *Werke*, 4:213).

³⁷⁸ Certainly Mendelssohn also thought that we get pleasure in recognizing the perfection of the artist through his or her work, but this does not come out explicitly in this correspondence. This idea first appears in an early summary of his *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (*JubA*, 1:531) and comes out fully in

play, i.e. the greatness of action depicted and how the parts relate to each other, which is a perfection; 3) the extraordinary perfection of the characters, especially their moral perfection, which gives us a feeling of admiration; and 4) a reflexive perception of the exercise of moral disapproval, a perfection, which gives rise to the various forms of pity. Depictions of suffering and misfortune tend to enhance or produce each of these pleasures, which explains their importance in drama. And, all of these sources of pleasure are intuitions of perfection having at least some objective basis, preserving the rationalist theory.

In the remainder of the summary, Mendelssohn develops a new explanation for the end of tragedy and its place in ethics. Aristotle's view that tragedy serves to purify the passions, he writes, is false. For according to Mendelssohn, to purify the passions means "to turn the strong desire, which is connected with [the passions] away from [merely] seeming-goods, and to remove the excessive from them which is opposed to natural law."³⁷⁹ However, as he had already argued, arousing pity and other passions does not have this effect. The exercise of pity may help us feel the misfortune of others more strongly and deeply, but it must be "ruled by reason" if excess is to be avoided.

Following this, Mendelssohn attempts to determine the end of tragedy:

I call the faculty of the soul for detesting vice, loving virtue, and feeling displeasure at the physical imperfections which are connected with virtue in a subject, *moral taste*. The aim [Absicht] of tragedy will therefore be to exercise this moral taste through a beautiful and lively imitation. Through the term "beautiful" I understand a single, complete and great action; but through

his 1758 essay *Betrachtungen über das Erhabene und das Naïve in den schönen Wissenschaften* [*Reflections on the sublime and the naïve in the beautiful sciences*].

³⁷⁹ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:220.

“lively,” that it should be capable of being dramatically arranged and performed.³⁸⁰

Presumably, moral taste (apparently an iteration of “moral sensibility,” above) is like taste in that it involves judging the perfection and imperfection of things through sense. But it is also more specific than general taste, because its judgments involve moral objects, feelings, and concepts. A work of art having a certain (very general) form, and which aims to exercise this capacity in us is tragedy.³⁸¹ This definition seems promising, but Mendelssohn immediately turns it to a very unexpected use: “How easily this definition can be reduced to the principle of our dear Nicolai, I don’t have need of explaining. Yes, nothing but affects are capable of exercising this moral taste. Tragedy must therefore arouse the passions, but not *purify* them.”³⁸² (Despite Mendelssohn’s assurance, this does need explaining, which will be done momentarily).

The explication of “beautiful” at the end of the passage is important, because it explains how a tragedy can offer ideal beauty in a sense even though it depicts misfortune and suffering. A “single, complete” plot gives the work a unity bound by a theme, while its greatness, which encompasses the movement of the plot sufficient to interest us and bring out our passions,³⁸³ is its diversity. Thus the beauty of tragedy consists in perfection after all, though this only applies to the formal or structural

³⁸⁰ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:221.

³⁸¹ For a contemporary account which locates the ethical value of art (in general) in something like the exercise of moral sentiments, see Noël Carroll, “Art and the Moral Realm” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 130-140, and his “Art, narrative, and moral understanding,” in *Aesthetics and Ethics* ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 140-143.

³⁸² Lessing, *Werke*, 4:221.

³⁸³ On this see Nicolai, *Abhandlung*, 30. The topic of greatness is largely passed over in the correspondence between Mendelssohn and Lessing.

elements of the work itself (not simply *qua* imitation, but also in its own right). Indeed, it consists in a kind of ideal perfection, for this sort of clean and easily comprehensible structure, even if it contains misfortune and suffering as depicted objects, is to be expected only from a well-constructed drama—not from the contingencies of history and actual life.

At the end of the summary, Mendelssohn explains how tragedy, with its exercise of moral taste, can help promote ethical improvement: “Both admiration and pity can exercise moral taste... Pity moves our heart, admiration moves our soul. The former teaches us to feel, the latter to think sublimely [erhaben denken]. The former lets us feel sorry for our unlucky friends, the latter to rush to help even with danger to our life. But all these effects are merely the second aim of tragedy.”³⁸⁴

So, what does Mendelssohn mean when he says his view entails that the end of tragedy is to arouse the passions (Nicolai’s “principle”), but that tragedy also has positive moral effects - which are however only its “second aim?” At first glance, this may seem to amount to nothing more than the theory Lessing had espoused from the beginning, according to which tragedy should aim to improve morals *through* the arousal (but not the purification) of the passions. There is, however, one all-important difference: Lessing thought that the exercising and arousal of pity *alone* is sufficient to improve virtue, because “the most pitying man is the best man.” Mendelssohn disagrees. As he had explained in an earlier letter, becoming virtuous involves neither feeling nor intellect alone, but the two working together in harmony. Tragedy, or at least

³⁸⁴ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:221-222.

aesthetically good tragedy, affects only the sensible half of our moral being, our “lower power” for cognizing the good. While this is an important and worthy exercise which we can demand from good tragedy, we ought not expect that this alone could improve virtue.³⁸⁵ We can hope with good reason that it ultimately will, but that cannot happen without a corresponding improvement in the distinct, intellectual knowledge of the good.

This explains why improvement in virtue can only be the “second aim” of tragedy: any effect on virtue is dependent on other conditions that have nothing to do with tragedy itself. In sum, Mendelssohn is forging a middle path between two extremes. On one side is Gottsched, who thinks that tragedy ought to teach a lesson about morality as it is known distinctly. On the other is Lessing, who thinks that the increase in feeling produced by tragedy alone will improve morals. Mendelssohn is just as interested in championing the rational basis of morality against the encroachment of pure feeling as he is in liberating tragedy from Gottsched’s aesthetic moralizing. That he manages to do this while retaining both a generous aesthetic dimension as well as a moral aim for tragedy is no small feat.

Now, one might ask how Mendelssohn can claim that the “aim” of tragedy is to exercise moral taste, while simultaneously denying that the purpose of tragedy is to improve morals. While the exact meaning of the term “purpose” in the context of tragedy is unfortunately never discussed in the correspondence, Mendelssohn seems to

³⁸⁵ On this point, I am in an agreement with Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, 2:252 and Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 35. However there is no reason to suppose that the moral improvement which is a possible effect of tragedy must be understood as an “unintentional effect” (Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, 2:259).

have thought that 1) the agreement of a work with its purpose determines how good it is; and 2) a critic rightly evaluates a work in relation to its conformity with its purpose. Thus, if the purpose of tragedy were to improve morals, then a work which failed to do so would be *ipso facto* a defective work and criticizable for that reason. But that cannot be true, Mendelssohn thinks, because moral improvement depends on conditions outside and independent of tragedy. The purpose or aim of tragedy is thus to *provide for* moral improvement by exercising moral taste, but not directly to improve morals. Mendelssohn certainly only came to this view at the end of the correspondence, but it does seem to be his settled opinion.

Now, there is another theory, besides Lessing's, to which Mendelssohn's seems almost identical (and with better reason): Aristotle's. Aristotle also thought that tragedy could play a role in ethics by modifying the passions, but never claimed, despite the misreading by Nicolai and others, that tragic drama should be a "school of virtue" which alone could improve morals. Instead, he, like Mendelssohn, thought that virtuous action must ultimately be ruled by reason, not mere feeling. Aristotle's theory differs from Mendelssohn's primarily in the *mechanism* by which the passions of tragedy are supposed to affect us. For Aristotle, the arousal of passion leads to their catharsis, while for Mendelssohn, the arousal of the passions merely leads to an increase in our disposition to feel them. Now Mendelssohn, possibly due to Nicolai's error, seems to have misunderstood the meaning of catharsis (generally translated into German as "Reinigen," "purifying"). There is little reason to think Aristotle took catharsis to improve our ability to *discern* true perfections from false, which is an intellectual

capability. More plausibly, Aristotle meant its effect to remain at the level of the emotions. If this is granted, then the difference between Mendelssohn's view and Aristotle's comes down to whether tragedy contributes to virtue by increasing or decreasing the passions. But this would be a dispute most easily settled by empirical investigation, not armchair theorizing. Perhaps Aristotle even meant that catharsis could both increase or decrease the disposition to feel emotion, bringing them to an appropriate mean from either inadequacy or excess. Indeed, this is how Lessing would interpret Aristotle years later in his 1767 *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*.³⁸⁶

Mendelssohn's response to Plato's challenge can be summarized as follows: If we are to be virtuous, we must act rightly. To act rightly requires not just that we have theoretical, distinct knowledge about which acts are right, but also good moral taste, i.e. the right sorts of immediate emotional responses, when we encounter moral situations in life. In order to have the right sorts of emotional responses, we need to exercise our faculty of moral taste, which involves the whole range of passions. Since real life generally does not present a sufficient amount of suitable exercise for us, we need to make use of fictions, particularly tragedy, which exercise the most important passions: pity (in all its forms) and admiration. On this point Plato's encomiums and praises of the gods are insufficient, for they cannot effectively arouse pity. Overall, the universal need for moral exercise outweighs the contingency that this very exercise will lead some people astray in particular cases.

³⁸⁶ Lessing, *Werke*, 4:595. Arguably, this is also what Gottsched intended in his 1729 speech, but he does not explain sufficiently what he means by "die Leidenschaften... in ihre Schranken bringen." ("Die Trauerspiele," 663).

Perfectly virtuous heroes and the art of tragedy

The new account of the ethics and pleasure laid a foundation for a theory of tragedy, but something more explicit still needed to be said about the relation between tragedy and ideal beauty: As mentioned above, if art aims to idealize nature, what room is left for an art form that self-consciously aims for the opposite? Mendelssohn took up this issue in a short essay inspired by Lessing's 1759 review of Wieland's drama *Lady Johanna Gray*. In his review, Lessing had poked fun at Wieland for making all of his characters "dear and pious" and suggested that Wieland was not able to present the characters "in action, according to life," which prevented the work from being "of the most moving kind."³⁸⁷ In his response of a month later, Mendelssohn takes up Lessing's point and generalizes it, asking "why is it expressly required of the poet [as opposed to the painter to depict] a mixture of moral evil?"³⁸⁸ The immediate reason, Mendelssohn surmises, is that the depiction of a perfectly virtuous person is just too easy for the poet to accomplish. "I conclude from this that poetry, considered as a fine art, has an entirely different ideal beauty than the moral perfection of the characters."³⁸⁹ Now, "the purpose of drama is... to arouse social [gesellige] passions,"³⁹⁰ which are presumably the kind which give rise to the proper exercise of moral taste. These passions are produced in us by works which "represent the actions and inclinations of people according to life."³⁹¹

³⁸⁷ G. E. Lessing, letter 63 in *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (Berlin: F. Nicolai, 1759), 1:243-244.

³⁸⁸ *JubA*, 5.1:98.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ In the same passage, Mendelssohn indicates that the purpose of drama is also "to represent actions and inclinations of people according to life." This is taken from Lessing's original review, and Mendelssohn does not elaborate.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Although this characterization seems entirely opposed to idealization, Mendelssohn simply redefines the term “ideal”: now the “ideal beauty” of drama lies precisely in its aptitude for arousing these “social passions.”³⁹² A perfectly virtuous hero, if actual, would be worthy of our love and admiration, but in a drama they simply fail to be moving or even interesting. The sense of “ideal” here is no longer that the content must exceed nature, but rather that the work itself is suited to its end of arousing the “social passions.”³⁹³

Of course, this just pushes the question back a step: why are less than perfect characters so much more interesting, moving, and difficult to write than perfect ones? Why does even Mendelssohn himself admit to preferring stories about Achilles or Othello to those about Aeneas or Cato? Part of the answer is that mixed characters “provide more opportunities for action”³⁹⁴ – a perfectly virtuous character is unlikely to get into very much trouble from which he must extricate himself. But Mendelssohn’s main reason begins from his idea that imitations of perfection only produce their intended effect when the illusion is so good that it seems real. While painters can directly depict lifelike images through their medium, Mendelssohn explains, the poet’s route to effective illusion runs through the passions aroused in the mind – “only these are mightier than the senses.”³⁹⁵ Since verbal descriptions of perfectly virtuous heroes

³⁹² *JubA*, 5.1:99.

³⁹³ It might be objected that this sense of “ideal” is no longer objective but at most relational. However, even his original definition of ideal beauty from *On the sources and connections of the beautiful arts and sciences* is relational, simply because it pertains to phenomena. The artist always creates what *seems* ideal to the human senses, not what is strictly ideal from the perspective of distinct knowledge.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:100.

can only rarely arouse the passions, they will rarely seem real, which makes them, again, ineffective in arousing the passions. In other words, Mendelssohn seems to think – plausibly – that verisimilitude and the arousal of the passions are mutually reinforcing, so that they stand or fall together. Perfectly virtuous heroes are problematic on both counts because they are rare and somewhat implausible to begin with, and they also are not inherently well-suited to arousing passions through action, which prevents the illusion from taking hold. Thus, they are rarely appropriate objections of poetic depiction.

In an important clarification and swipe at Gottsched (see above), Mendelssohn adds that the poet should not aim to mix evil in with good simply because good and evil are often mixed in nature. He reaffirms the poet's freedom to beautify and idealize, and notes that heroes often exceed nature in wisdom, bravery, and beauty.³⁹⁶ Perfect virtue is only excluded because it does not rhyme with poetry's purpose of arousing passion, not because it is an idealization.

Mendelssohn might be charged with inconsistency here. After all, he held in his correspondence with Lessing that great perfection is capable of arousing admiration – according to him the most powerful of all the passions. But the inconsistency is only apparent. Even in the correspondence, he had explained that admiration does not result simply from great perfection, but from a great and unexpected perfection. We must at least be uncertain that the character will perform the admirable action, which means we cannot have seen them as perfectly virtuous to begin with. Indeed, as Mendelssohn

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

mentions in another *Literaturbrief* of around a year later, the only way a perfectly virtuous character can be made to work in a drama is the audience is made to pity him on account of deep suffering.³⁹⁷

Later developments in the *Rhapsodie*

Much of the *Rhapsodie*, an addition to the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* which Mendelssohn included in his *Philosophische Schriften*, is largely a restatement of the results that had been reached in the correspondence.³⁹⁸ The most significant addition is Mendelssohn's introduction of the concept of "mixed sentiments," an attempt to generalize the lessons he took from the consideration of pity. In the 1761 edition, Mendelssohn limits himself to explaining why sentiments involving some displeasure are often more appealing than those involving pleasure alone: "The mixed sentiments have the special property that, although they are not so pleasant [angenehm] as pure pleasure [Vergnügen], they nonetheless push deeper into the mind, and also seem to remain there longer. What is merely pleasant soon leads to satiation, and finally even to disgust... on the other hand the unpleasant which is mixed with the pleasant fastens our attention and averts the all-too-early satiation."³⁹⁹

³⁹⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:248. In the same work, Mendelssohn also wrote of his discovery of some thoughts about perfect heroes similar to his – in Shaftesbury's *Charactericks*. He quotes the English philosopher at great length, translating into German except for the famous culminating line, "in a Poem, whether Epick or Dramatick, a compleat and perfect Character is the greatest Monster; and of all poetick Fictions not only the least engaging, but the least moral and improving" (*Characteristicks*, 3:161f).

³⁹⁸ Mendelssohn emphasizes his expanded concept of pity in a passage that Lessing would quote in full in his 1767 *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (*PS*, 2:4-5; Lessing, *Werke*, 4:577-578). Mendelssohn also explains his theory of motivation (discussed above) in greater detail, without significant change.

³⁹⁹ *PS*, 2:7.

In the 1771 edition, there is a decided shift in emphasis regarding the concept of mixed sentiments. Although Mendelssohn retains this idea of mixed sentiments as being both pleasurable and displeasurable,⁴⁰⁰ he now emphasizes the subjective vs. objective (or representation vs. object) aspect of the phenomenon.⁴⁰¹ As he had “discovered” in 1770, a representation could be subjectively pleasurable *qua* representation even as its object is inherently displeasurable (see Chapter 1, Part 3). “Imperfect, evil, and defective things, according to this explanation, generally always arouse a mixed sentiment which is composed from a displeasure at the object and a pleasure at the representation.”⁴⁰² As this passage shows, a “mixed sentiment” is still fundamentally a representation that includes pleasurable and displeasurable aspects, but it is obvious from the order, length, and evident enthusiasm in the text that Mendelssohn now sees the subjective/objective angle as the most interesting and important instance of this phenomenon.

How significant is this change in Mendelssohn’s view, and why does Mendelssohn add this material only in the 1771 edition, when the idea was plainly given by Lessing and acknowledged by Mendelssohn in the last letters of the 1757 correspondence on tragedy? To the second question, the idea of the object/representation distinction was actually already present in the first edition of the *Rhapsodie*, but without the full conceptual apparatus and generalization of the second. In his striking example

⁴⁰⁰ Beginning at *JubA*, 1:394.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Bamberger, “We may discuss both editions of the *Rhapsodie* together, because the revised version in no sense breaks new ground, thus it is no different [from the original].” (Introduction to *JubA*, 1:XLII). This error perhaps led to the only significant defect in the *Jubiläumsausgabe* – its omission of the 1761 first edition of Mendelssohn’s *Philosophische Schriften*.

⁴⁰² *JubA*, 1:386.

of the pleasure “even the wise” might take in viewing the aftermath of a bloody battle,

Mendelssohn writes in the first edition:

As soon as the evil is no longer considered as an object of our choice, countless motivations come together which entice us to view it. Not only are many good things mixed in with it, but our imagination can arrive at thousands of delighting representations through contrast; and even if both did not occur, the cognition of the evil itself, and the lively repulsion from it, is a perfection of the human being, and must necessarily provide pleasure for him. We abhor the imperfection, but not the cognition of it; we flee from the evil, but not from our power to recognize and damn it.⁴⁰³

This example is retained in the second edition, but Mendelssohn alters the explanation:

In all such cases it is obvious that our disapproval, our revulsion pertains more to the object than to the representation. Every representation stands in a double relation; once to the thing, as the object of [the representation] of which it is a picture or impression, and then again to the soul, or the thinking subject, of which it constitutes a determination. Many representations, *qua* determinations of the soul, can have something pleasant about them, even if at the same time *qua* pictures of objects they are accompanied by disapproval and revulsion.⁴⁰⁴

The two explanations have essentially the same content, but the first edition is more casual and straightforward, while the second is less persuasive but more technical. This illustrates how Mendelssohn began to see the phenomenon of mixed sentiments within a new and more rigorous conceptual framework. Thus, the expansion in the 1771 edition represents a refinement and generalization of an earlier point whose full importance Mendelssohn had not fully recognized. Mendelssohn himself, who was always very open about changes in his view, describes the change in the preface to the 1771 edition: “In the *Rhapsodie*, the doctrine of mixed sentiments is further discussed, better explained, and applied to many particular cases and appearances in common

⁴⁰³ *PS*, 2:15.

⁴⁰⁴ *JubA*, 1:384.

life."⁴⁰⁵ This too, indicates that the change is a refinement and expansion, not a monumental shift.

Nonetheless, the change may have more radical implications for Mendelssohn's theory of tragedy. It may seem that the 1771 emphasis on subjective pleasure is the culmination of a slow march toward subjectivism that began when Mendelssohn first doubted his objectivist account in the 1755 *Briefe*. The more the subjective source of pleasure is emphasized, the less any objectively determinate properties of the aesthetic object seem to matter. In the 1771 *Rhapsodie*, Mendelssohn even goes so far as to explicitly repudiate his original disagreement with Dubos from the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*:

Thus [in the *Briefe*] I unjustly criticized Dubos for saying that the soul strives only to be moved, and should also be moved by unpleasant representations. This is true [at least] in the most exact sense, since motion and stirring, which are brought forth in the soul through unpleasant representations, cannot be other than pleasurable in relation to the subject. Yet pleasure has just as little as the will anything other than a true or seeming good as its ground – but this good need not always be sought in the objects outside of us.⁴⁰⁶

While this is not *arbitrary* subjectivism, according to which no general reasons at all can be given for why one person finds a work pleasurable while another does not, it is subjectivism nonetheless. For, according to this view, an object need not have any particular properties in order to produce pleasure in us, nor do we need to perceive some perfection in it – we simply need to be disposed to react to it in a certain way. Mendelssohn insists that this reaction must display our own apparent perfection if we

⁴⁰⁵ *JubA*, 1:231.

⁴⁰⁶ *JubA*, 1:389.

are to feel pleasure, preserving a link between pleasure and perfection – but again, the properties of the object itself seem to have become unimportant.

Mendelssohn next explains that our reaction to tragedies often depends on the observer's degree of cultivation: "The gruesome objects of nature that delight uncultivated people are too violent for more sensitive and better-educated minds. They [the latter] sympathize too vividly with their fellow creatures, set themselves in the place of their passions, feel their pain as their own, and the pleasantness of the representation is thereby weakened too much."⁴⁰⁷ He goes on to claim that more cultivated people are only able to take pleasure in such events when they can put some sort of distance between themselves and the imperfection – whether spatial, temporal, or the distance of fiction.⁴⁰⁸ Fictions are particularly helpful here, because a cultivated audience can use their knowledge of the illusion to "control" the emotional distance between themselves and the imperfect objects. By oscillating between suspension of disbelief and recognition of the object's illusoriness, well-cultivated people can achieve a pleasurable sort of middle ground between sorrowful sympathy and indifference. Uncultivated viewers who are taken in fully by the illusion will miss the better pleasure of sympathy and instead react just as if the depiction were real. Being uncultivated, they may even laugh due to being overwhelmed by the represented events. Such laughter should count as praise for the poet because it is evidence of the effectiveness of the illusion.⁴⁰⁹ Again, it

⁴⁰⁷ *JubA*, 1:390.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁹ *JubA*, 1:390-391.

seems that the particular properties of the subject, not of the object, determine the feeling of viewer.

Subjectivism at the descriptive level, however, need not translate into subjectivism at the normative level. Mendelssohn had recognized the former even in the description of the Roman taste for bloodsport from the 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. Since that time, he gradually came to recognize the pervasiveness of differences in taste, and how subjectivity universally affects our reaction to works of art. In the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsodie*, he admits explicitly that imperfect objects can please. But that does not mean he abandoned all objective *standards* of what constitutes *good* tragedy, i.e., of the sort that produces *good* pleasure. What are these standards? There is no reason to think that he ever backed away from those he had enumerated at the end of the 1756-1757 correspondence: verisimilitude, internal structure and coherence, depiction of great moral perfection, and propensity to exercise moral taste or arouse pity (see above). These are the properties – at least *partly* objective – in which we *ought* to take pleasure. Even in the correspondence, he had implied that people might take pleasure in negative passions: envy, Schadenfroh, and so forth. At that time he advised the poet to exclude these passions from tragedy, and there is no reason to think he changed his view in the 1771 *Rhapsodie*. The creep toward subjectivism is real, but it occurs only on the descriptive plane, not the normative.

Chapter 4: Genius

Genius is an ancient concept. Plato apparently held genius to be a supernatural and divine source of inspiration for the poet. In his *Ion*, he has Socrates suggest that “beautiful poems are not human, not even *from* human beings, but divine and from [the] gods,”⁴¹⁰ and in the *Apology* that “not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration.”⁴¹¹ To take Socrates at his word here would be scandalous for rationalist aesthetics – one of its most important and influential forebears attacking the rational basis of art and defending its supernatural origin! Despite this affront, rationalists were slow to take up the challenge of explaining genius in more favorable terms. By the early 1760s the French and English, and of course the rising *Sturm und Drang* in Germany, had devoted much more ink to the subject than the German rationalists. Mendelssohn himself never wrote a free-standing essay on genius, but he addresses the topic in several reviews, particularly those by J. G. Sulzer (the Wolffian whose work on pleasure had also stimulated Mendelssohn to write the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*), J. J. Rousseau (which led to a bitter dispute with Hamann, the founder of *Sturm und Drang*), and F. G. Resewitz (a little-known but interesting thinker). These reviews are best understood within the context of existing thought about genius in the mid 18th-century.

In a review of April 3, 1760 written for the periodical *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* [*Letters concerning the newest literature*], Mendelssohn helpfully sketches out the

⁴¹⁰ Plato, *Ion*, trans. Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 534e.

⁴¹¹ Plato, *Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>), 22c.

current theories of genius which were most influential in his own thought. He laments the fact that the idea of genius, “which is [now] constantly in the mouths of our art critics,” was entirely neglected by Wolff and covered by Baumgarten “only with his usual brevity.” “As far as I know,” he goes on, “besides [Baumgarten] no one but Dubos and Trublet have written on this material; the former more critically, the latter with more wit, but neither one philosophically enough.”⁴¹² Before delving into Mendelssohn’s writings on genius, it will be helpful to review Dubos, Trublet, and Baumgarten – both to set the stage for the debate and to see why Mendelssohn considered the work of the French insufficiently philosophical.

The Inadequacy of Existing French Thought on Genius

Dubos’ influential definition from his *Critical Reflections* runs as follows: “Genius is an aptitude, which man has received from nature, to perform well and easily that which others can do but indifferently, and with a great deal of pains. We learn to execute things for which we have a genius with as much facility as we speak our own mother tongue.”⁴¹³ Beyond this basic definition, however, the French writers (Dubos in particular) had developed a remarkably rich collection of general observations about genius. These observations would form a sort of common basis, a largely agreed-upon concept of genius, for all the great 18th century debates about it. They can be summarized as follows:

⁴¹² *JubA*, 5.1:166.

⁴¹³ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:5.

1. Novelty

According to Dubos, it is the privilege of the genius to produce new and even revolutionary⁴¹⁴ works, while those lacking genius are left to be mere copiers and imitators.⁴¹⁵ Dubos is careful to say, however, that novelty does not absolve the genius of the general artistic requirement to imitate nature. "A man of genius views and considers nature, as imitable by his art, with a different eye from those that have no genius... a painter of any genius lays hold of some instance untouched by his predecessors, and embellishes it with circumstances drawn from his own imagination, which give it the air of a new subject."⁴¹⁶ While a genius can discover something interesting even about the most trite-seeming objects, they do so not through flights of fancy, but by actually following nature *more* closely or directly than their predecessors.⁴¹⁷

2. Psychology

Dubos describes genius as a kind of "fire" or "enthusiasm," and likens its exercise at the moment of creation to a kind of drunkenness.⁴¹⁸ (The Dionysian, it seems, was alive and well even in the early 18th century). But both he and Trublet recognize another aspect of the genius psychology as well: a genius has the ability to perceive deeply, to understand how objects are constructed beyond the surface apparent to the non-genius. The genius digests these insights and organically reorganizes them into a

⁴¹⁴ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:137.

⁴¹⁵ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:41-46; Nicolas Charles Joseph Trublet, *Essays upon several subjects of literature and morality*, trans. anonymous (London: J. Osborn, 1744), 194.

⁴¹⁶ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 1:182.

⁴¹⁷ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 1:187-188.

⁴¹⁸ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:13.

new form.⁴¹⁹ Notably, the French did not have much more to say about the precise psychology of genius and how it relates to the faculty of reason.

3. Natural genius vs. cultivated taste and rules

Dubos understood genius as something distinct from, but also importantly moderated by taste. Genius is inborn and a gift of nature, but as it is a kind of raw power it must be cultivated and developed if it is to be effective in producing great works.⁴²⁰

Trublet explains that while genius can produce “a variety of good thoughts,” labor and cultivation are needed to bring them into good order.⁴²¹ Those with genius but no taste end up creating enigmas that displease us.⁴²² Both Dubos and Trublet recommend the study of examples, both in nature and from the great masters, as the best way to develop taste.⁴²³

On the other hand, genius was considered a necessary condition for the production of good art no less than taste. A poet must follow his genius if he is to produce works of any value, writes Dubos.⁴²⁴ Importantly, Dubos insists that genius is a more essential ingredient in a work than adherence to rules. Without genius, a work that strictly follows rules will be disagreeable, while a work of genius *can* be successful even

⁴¹⁹ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:62; Trublet, *Essays*, 193-194.

⁴²⁰ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:4, 6, 32, 63.

⁴²¹ Trublet, *Essays*, 2, 230-231.

⁴²² Trublet, *Essays*, 225. This is a Platonic view, as evident in this remarkable passage: “as time went on, the poets themselves introduced the reign of vulgar and lawless innovation. They were men of genius, but they had no perception of what is just and lawful in music; raging like Bacchanals and possessed with inordinate delights-mingling lamentations with hymns, and paeans with dithyrambs; imitating the sounds of the flute on the lyre, and making one general confusion; ignorantly affirming that music has no truth, and, whether good or bad, can only be judged of rightly by the pleasure of the hearer” (*Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laws.html>, 700d).

⁴²³ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:33; Trublet, *Essays*, 192.

⁴²⁴ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:3.

if it breaks many rules.⁴²⁵ Dubos downplays the value of rules when he claims that they are only general guidelines which can work from afar. Yet remarkably, he also ties rules directly to genius when he claims that only a genius is in a position to properly understand and make use of rules in the creation of art.⁴²⁶

4. The scope and products of genius

For Dubos, genius was an extremely broad concept that covered all sorts of activities in all areas of life, from writing to rhetoric to the command of armies. However, it would be a mistake to think that Dubos failed to see any special significance of genius for art – after all, he devoted a full volume of his work on poetry and painting to the concept. Only a genius in the arts, writes Dubos, is capable of producing works with “life” whose parts are all brought together into a unified whole.⁴²⁷ A true genius makes the parts of a work themselves measured and appropriate to their subject – not too frosty but also not bombastic.⁴²⁸ Trublet, perhaps being more permissive, emphasizes the importance of the whole still more, claiming that “that aspect of his work which is excellent [the whole] cannot be destroyed by that which is indifferent, or even that which is bad in them.”⁴²⁹

5. The genius vs. the critic

Dubos and Trublet leave little doubt as to whether they think the genius or the critic is more important and valuable in the production of art. Both see the genius as

⁴²⁵ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:10.

⁴²⁶ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:4.

⁴²⁷ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:13, 45.

⁴²⁸ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 1:236.

⁴²⁹ Trublet, *Essays*, 120.

superior, because she is creative and actually carries out the work, while the critic serves the merely negative purpose of pointing out errors.⁴³⁰ Critics “may straighten the tree, but they cannot render it fertile.”⁴³¹ But what exactly is the proper relation between the genius and the critic? Here Dubos does not say enough, and Trublet is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, Trublet defends the right of the critic, writing “this principle that criticism is an easy thing may be very properly turned upon authors themselves, and they may be told that the less glory there is in perceiving some sort of faults, the more shame there is in committing them.”⁴³² He also argues works and their creators should be judged on their merits, i.e. “from the degree of perfection there is in his work compared with those of the same kind,” not according to “the degree of genius supposed in [its maker].”⁴³³ Yet at the same time, Trublet claims that geniuses do not and ought not accommodate their creations to the public taste (leaving unclear whether this is distinct from the critic’s taste).⁴³⁴ Further, a genius’s work is not to be judged according to correctness, or adherence to rules.⁴³⁵

6. Tendency toward a more radical view

All of the above observations were largely uncontroversial and accepted by all parties. While the French view was generally moderate in its insistence that genius must be tempered by rules and cultivation, there are occasional glimmers of a more radical

⁴³⁰ E.g., Trublet, *Essays*, 71-72.

⁴³¹ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:62.

⁴³² Trublet, *Essays*, 87.

⁴³³ Trublet, *Essays*, 114.

⁴³⁴ Trublet, *Essays*, 338.

⁴³⁵ Trublet, *Essays*, 345.

stance that originated in England. In one place, Dubos quotes Addison⁴³⁶ suggesting that Homer and the great Greek poets were “never disciplined and broken by rules of art.”⁴³⁷ They often created verses that could seem extravagant and absurd by themselves, but they were nonetheless able to combine them into a sublime whole in some inexplicable fashion. While Dubos himself does not pursue this thought further,⁴³⁸ Addison had claimed in the same article that some few geniuses “draw the Admiration of all the World... by the meer Strength of natural Parts, and without any Assistance of Arts or Learning.”⁴³⁹ Later, he claims Shakespeare as a modern example of such a genius. “Our inimitable *Shakespeare* is a Stumbling-Block to the whole Tribe of these rigid Criticks. Who would not rather read one of his Plays, where there is not a single Rule of the Stage observed, than any Production of a modern Critick, where there is not one of them violated? *Shakespeare* was indeed born with all the Seeds of Poetry... produced by the spontaneous Hand of Nature, without any Help from Art.”⁴⁴⁰

Although Mendelssohn does not mention it, he was probably also aware of a recent, and even more radical development in English thought on genius: Edward Young’s 1759 *Conjectures on original composition*. In that work, Young vigorously defends both a strong preference for originality in art, as well as the rights of genius against what he considered to be stifling rules. “Rules, like Crutches, are a needful Aid to the lame,

⁴³⁶ Dubos, *Critical Reflections*, 2:409.

⁴³⁷ Addison, *Spectator*, No. 160, p. 2:377.

⁴³⁸ Thus Dubos, like Shaftesbury, was no representative of the *irrational* power of genius, as Herman Wolf claims in his *Versuch einer Geschichte des Geniebegriffs in der deutschen Ästhetik des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg: 1923. Reprint: Kraus Reprint, Nendeln/Liechtenstein, 1973), 1:24, 55.

⁴³⁹ Addison, *Spectator*, No. 160, pp. 2:376-377.

⁴⁴⁰ Addison, *Spectator*, No. 592, pp. 8:162-163.

tho' an Impediment to the strong."⁴⁴¹ Even more strikingly, he assigns transcendent powers to the genius: "A *Genius* differs from a *good Understanding*, as a Magician from a good Architect; *That* [the former] raises his structure by means invisible; *This* [the latter] by the skilful use of common tools. Hence Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something Divine."⁴⁴² Perhaps Mendelssohn does not mention these English works only because he was interested in *explanations* of genius, and Young's view in particular entails genius cannot be explained.

From this background we can identify three points that would have especially interested Mendelssohn. First, to what extent can the use of rules be defended from the claims of genius? Mendelssohn raises this question explicitly in his 1759 review of Wieland's *Johanna Gray*: "To our knowledge art critics have still thought very little about how to distinguish the boundaries of rules and genius from each other."⁴⁴³ Second, how should the competing claims of the art critic and the genius be adjudicated? That is, if the genius's work is not to be judged according to its adherence to rules, how can a critic claim to judge it with any kind of universal validity? Third, is the psychology of genius to be compared to a disorderly and chaotic force, whether natural or supernatural, something that needs reigning in by practice and taste, or does it rather serve to instill order and form? Mendelssohn recognized the threat that the radical claims of genius posed to the project of rationalist aesthetics. If genius makes rules irrelevant, then the

⁴⁴¹ Edward Young, *Conjectures on original composition* (London: A. Millar, 1759), 28. Young does, however, concede that some geniuses do require learning and cultivation develop properly (31).

⁴⁴² Young, *Conjectures*, 26-27.

⁴⁴³ *JubA*, 4.1:376.

whole project of developing a science of aesthetics is doomed. If the critic must always defer to the genius, then criticism itself becomes at best a pointless exercise. And if genius itself is just a raw power of nature – or worse, a divine gift – then reason could lose its authority over the aesthetic domain altogether. Dubos and Trublet’s work is “insufficiently philosophical” because they gave ambiguous answers to all of these important questions.

Baumgarten’s philosophical, but all-too-brief account of genius

According to Baumgarten, genius is “a certain proportion of [the power of] the mental faculties.”⁴⁴⁴ Although Baumgarten does not elaborate much on the proportion that constitutes genius – other than to say that it involves a high degree of many of the faculties – his account is nonetheless broadly significant. For, in defining genius this way, he is attempting to explain it in terms of his already well-established and rationally grounded faculty psychology. If his view is correct, then genius would be nothing transcendent or supernatural, but simply a rare proportion of ordinary human abilities that allow a person to accomplish unusually great things. If vindicated, this approach would effectively answer those who attempt to place genius beyond the realm of criticism by assigning it transcendent or radically *sui generis* powers. As we will see, Mendelssohn was generally sympathetic toward this type of explanation, and he did some work toward elaborating on it.

⁴⁴⁴ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §648.

Mendelssohn's early comments on genius

Mendelssohn's work on genius is primarily contained in several *Literaturbriefe* written between 1760 and 1764. There are, however, a few important scattered comments from his earlier writings. In the 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, he addresses the role of rules in artistic creation, writing that "Rules are preparations, by means of which the poet sets himself and the object to be depicted into a condition in which its beauties can be shown in their most powerful allure. During the execution [of the work], he must guard against having [the rules] too distinctly before his eyes. He must engage his whole attention only with the beauty of the whole. The rules should work only as it were from a distance on his imagination. In this way they can replace the lack of an extraordinary genius, and teach the poet what his genius was perhaps to small to invent."⁴⁴⁵ The comment is ambiguous: it limits the effectiveness of rules even while suggesting that they can, at least to some extent, stand in for the author's natural genius.⁴⁴⁶ This ambiguity can be resolved by recognizing that Mendelssohn viewed those rules as one and the same, "which the artist led by his genius exercises, and the critic through reflection abstracts."⁴⁴⁷ In other words, the genius is *in principle* replaceable by rules because a great genius applies the same rules naturally and unconsciously which a lesser or non-genius can learn explicitly. At the same time, it may be practically impossible for a person to learn through explicit instruction those rules which the genius

⁴⁴⁵ *JubA*, 1:55.

⁴⁴⁶ In the 1771 edition Mendelssohn has "Alsdenn können sie das geringere Genie dem grössern an die Seite setzen, und den Dichter das lehren, was sein Geist vielleicht zu klein war, zu erfinden" (*JubA*, 1:247). This makes it more clear that the difference between genius and art is a matter of degree, and a lesser genius can use rules to make for some of what he or she lacks compared to a greater genius.

⁴⁴⁷ *JubA*, 1:167.

follows instinctively and unconsciously. As Mendelssohn explains in a fragment written between 1757 and 1763, “He who has received no taste from nature [i.e., no genius] will grasp the rules of beauty as Sanderson [grasped] Newton’s theory of colors – as rational grounds, not as phenomena. But just as the judgments of the soul mix into the sentiments through long, repetitious practice and improve sensible judgment, in the same way the rules of beauty can purify and improve taste.”⁴⁴⁸ So, Mendelssohn thought that explicit knowledge of rules could improve art, but he did not have the wildly unrealistic expectation that this knowledge could actually serve as a replacement for genius in all cases.

And Mendelssohn clearly conferred a special value to genius. In the 1756 “Sendschreiben eines jungen Gelehrten zu B.,” he suggests that flaws in the parts of a work can actually help draw attention to the beauty of the whole, but successfully executing this technique is reserved for the greatest artists, like Homer. “Perhaps,” he suggests, “this is because an all too careful working-out seems to betray more labor than genius.”⁴⁴⁹ This theme of downplaying the appearance of effort appears repeatedly in Mendelssohn’s works⁴⁵⁰ and shows that he admits something irreplaceable in the works of genius. In his 1757 treatise on the sublime, Mendelssohn claims that “the genius and extraordinary abilities of the artist”⁴⁵¹ as evident in the work make up a kind of sublimity which we perceive with wonder. Still, though genius is irreplaceable in a

⁴⁴⁸ *JubA*, 2:185.

⁴⁴⁹ *JubA*, 1:532.

⁴⁵⁰ E.g., *JubA*, 1:171, 5.1:319.

⁴⁵¹ *JubA*, 1:206.

sense, it need not be understood as something supernatural or irreducible to common elements of psychology.

Mendelssohn took an opportunity to defend genius against the overly pedantic view of artistic production championed by Sulzer in his *Kurzer Begriff aller Wissenschaften* [*Brief concept of all the sciences*].⁴⁵² In that work, Sulzer claims that in an ideal republic of letters, no one should be allowed to write without having first studied the entire corpus of the ancients “repeatedly and with effort.” “What about a Shakespeare?” Mendelssohn objects. Why should we allow those who cannot think for themselves, even if they had gone through the ancients in this way? “Genius can replace a lack of examples, but lack of genius is irreplaceable.”⁴⁵³ The final statement at the end is not nearly so radical as some have claimed.⁴⁵⁴ Just because genius *can* replace a lack of examples does not mean it *ought* to, or more importantly, that examples could not improve it further. And as we saw, that genius is irreplaceable in the production of art was already firmly established by the French.

The review of Sulzer’s *Analysis of genius*

Mendelssohn first discussed genius at length in his April 3, 1760 review of Sulzer’s *Analysis of genius*,⁴⁵⁵ the first work to address genius from the Wolffian perspective which Mendelssohn broadly shared. Sulzer accepts the basic modern view

⁴⁵² Johann Georg Sulzer, *Kurzer Begriff aller Wissenschaften und anderer Theile der Gelehrsamkeit, worinnen jeder nach seinem Inhalt, Nutzen und Vollkommenheit kürzlich beschrieben wird* (Leipzig: Johann Christian Langenheim, 1759).

⁴⁵³ *JubA* 5.1:89.

⁴⁵⁴ E.g., Wolf, *Geniebegriffs*, 1:131.

⁴⁵⁵ Originally *Analyse du génie*; translated as *Entwicklung des Begriffs vom Genie* in Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:307-322.

of genius as “what brings forth all great deeds and all masterly works in the arts and sciences, and through which a very few men tower over the great mass of others, and become the wonder of all times.”⁴⁵⁶ In true Wolffian fashion, he announces his intention to “analyze the concept of genius like a chemist” and trace the phenomenon to its ground both in the body and especially in the soul, which “gets to the heart of the matter.”⁴⁵⁷

Sulzer explains first that genius “requires” the mental capacities of “attention, reflection, imagination, wit, memory and judgment” in order to carry out its work. Segreff sees this list of mental capabilities as evidence that Sulzer had an overly intellectual view of genius (63). But this is incorrect, because none of these faculties are *characteristically* intellectual, and the imagination is even characteristically *non-*intellectual (i.e., sensible). The real purpose of Sulzer’s enumeration, and his whole analysis, is not to make genius something entirely intellectual, but rather to explain it in terms of rationalist psychology. Just as he had announced at the beginning of his treatise, Sulzer hoped to reduce genius down to a complex of concepts already understood.

Sulzer writes next that genius “is not its own property of the soul, different from the others; rather it rules the others... It is as it were that in relation to the powers of cognition, which is temperament or humor in relation to the power of desire.”⁴⁵⁸ Mendelssohn approves of this latter claim, which he traces back to Baumgarten’s

⁴⁵⁶ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:307.

⁴⁵⁷ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:307.

⁴⁵⁸ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:308.

definition of genius (above).⁴⁵⁹ In a more narrow sense, explains Mendelssohn, genius involves “a certain proportion of cognitive powers which agree in such a way that a man who possesses them can perform certain things exceptionally.” (ibid). Mendelssohn’s subtle improvement relates the cognitive powers to particular productive ends, an important feature of genius Baumgarten had neglected.

Sulzer next enumerates the qualities which he believes constitute a happy proportion of faculties in general. First, genius requires liveliness of spirit, which is the power to bring forth many fruitful ideas. This encompasses both sharp-sightedness, the ability to discover a variety of concepts connected to any given thing, and wit, through which the ideas are developed and similarities and dissimilarities discovered. Second, genius requires a “thoroughness of judgment... in order for the magnitude of these relations to be valued correctly.” Above all, Sulzer argues, the judgment of a genius is directed toward those relations which best bring out a maximal “effect of the whole” through a “noble simplicity” of elements.⁴⁶⁰

Thus far, Sulzer’s theory amounts to little more than a claim that the genius possesses all of the already enumerated mental capabilities at a very high degree. But the next quality he describes is more significant. Sulzer claims that genius additionally requires a certain presence of mind, or *contenance*, “which if necessary moderates the fire of the imagination and holds it back from extravagance; but primarily provides the soul with freedom to direct its attention to all sides, in order to oversee the object as a whole.”

⁴⁵⁹ *JubA*, 5.1:167; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §648.

⁴⁶⁰ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:314.

Thus, at least in Sulzer's initial formulation, *contenance* includes both a negative or restraining, as well as a positive or enabling aspect. Those lacking in this presence of mind will be carried away by their emotions and be rendered unable to stay focused on the ultimate end of the work, even if they possess the other requisite capabilities.

As Sulzer explains his idea of "presence of mind" further, he seems to shift away from his initial formulation. He begins to write of *contenance* mostly as a means for correcting errors, and something opposed to the "fire" of creation. "The work of an artist who always works with fire can perhaps boast of gleaming and sublime strokes, but in the whole it would certainly contain errors. Whatever passion it may be, it always brings forth false judgments." Significantly, Sulzer views *contenance* as something detached from the creative process itself, a process which Sulzer describes as decidedly nonrational: after "ordering and arranging everything" according to a plan, he explains, the artist "elevates and impassions himself, and puts himself into a holy rage, through which the presence of the divinity inspiring him announces itself. But upon this storm steadiness must follow, and with calm soul he must go back over what he brought forth in his attack of enthusiasm, he must investigate whether he did not drive his heat beyond the boundaries prescribed by reason." Sulzer even endorses Horace's recommendation that a poet should put off the publication of a work for nine years so that, with the benefit of *contenance*, all errors can be removed.⁴⁶¹

While Mendelssohn approves of *contenance* as an essential aspect of genius, he wants nothing to do with Sulzer's detailed explication of the concept. Sulzer did not

⁴⁶¹ Sulzer, *Schriften*, 1:316-317.

make the best use of this idea, he writes, expanding it too much into the realm of circumspection or prudence [Besonnenheit]. Such a property “transforms the creative genius... into a correct and error-free being, who remains always the same and shrinks from any reproach or scorn.”⁴⁶² He rejects Sulzer’s endorsement of Horace’s nine-year prescription. It is laudable to improve one’s work, but not to aim fastidiously at the removal of every error – and in any case these corrections have nothing to do with genius. Quoting Trublet, Mendelssohn claims that “errors and offenses to taste are unavoidable in a work of genius” and that “the greatness in a work could not be brought out so successfully without the errors.” Indeed, the same point had also been made by pseudo-Longinus⁴⁶³ and by Baumgarten.⁴⁶⁴

Though he constantly tries to downplay his differences with Sulzer, Mendelssohn actually has a completely different idea of how *contenance* should be understood: namely, as the constant mastery of reason over the passions even in the most heated moment of creation. As he explains:

The genius must be master over his enthusiasm; reason must rule in the disposition of his abilities, and even in the storm of passions not lose the wheel... This property is that, I reckon, through which genius becomes capable of the sublime; for everything that he brings forth in this disposition of mind will have the character of quiet majesty in itself... A man who drives before himself the greatest events and wildest passions happily and with a self-conscious greatness, like Addison’s angel did with his storm clouds, is in my opinion the most perfect mortal, and nearly exceeds the boundaries of human ability.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² *JubA*, 5.1:170.

⁴⁶³ Longinus (pseudo), *Longinus On the sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 127-129.

⁴⁶⁴ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §24.

⁴⁶⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:170.

Remarkably, Mendelssohn's explanation places reason at the very forefront of the creative process itself.⁴⁶⁶ Perhaps, he suggests, the passionate representations of a genius only *seem* inspired and supernatural to lesser spirits because we lack the rational control and other cognitive abilities that they possess. But is this really a plausible counterpoint to Sulzer's Dionysian "holy rage" and "divine inspiration?" Mendelssohn does not explain exactly how reason rules over the passions in this sense, nor does he develop this idea further in the present essay.

He does, however, return to this theme several years later, in his 1764 *Literaturbrief* on Karschin's odes. Based on her work, Mendelssohn surmises that Karschin believes the ode to consist in a "beautiful disorder." "But," Mendelssohn points out, "the true critic recognizes a higher order in the ode, which is indeed hidden, but which ought never be neglected."⁴⁶⁷ Mendelssohn explains that while the ode does not follow any temporal, spatial, or logical order, it ought to follow the order "of the inspired [begeisterten] imagination. The concepts in an inspired imagination achieve the highest degree of liveliness – just in this way and in no other must they follow each other in an ode."⁴⁶⁸ Following the law-governed associative order of the fiery imagination, the odist skips over the less lively elements of her thoughts, even if they

⁴⁶⁶ Kant's view here (*Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:312) is much closer to Sulzer's than to Mendelssohn's. Indeed, despite Goldstein's claims (*Moses Mendelssohn*, 16-18), there is no meaningful sense in which Mendelssohn's particular views on genius look forward to Kant's. What Kant shares with Mendelssohn, mainly the distinction between genius and taste, was already well established before Mendelssohn wrote anything about genius.

⁴⁶⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:586.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

would help a reader connect this series of thoughts together. This is the cause of the *apparent* disorder in an ode.

Mendelssohn continues:

Since the application of a plan to a poem, and thus also to an ode, is no work of inspiration [Begeisterung], but of contemplation [Nachdenken] and reflecting reason [überlegenden Vernunft], the plan of the ode must create unusual difficulties for the poet, for here reason must think [überdenken] which path fiery inspiration would take. One must establish through thinking and rational inference [Nachdenken und Vernunftschlüsse] which ideas will be the most lively, and in which order they will follow each other according to the laws of the imagination. The poet must therefore set himself in both constitutions at once, he must think and feel [nachdenken und empfinden], and one can easily see what difficulties this must make for him. If, entirely without a plan, he leaves himself to the stream of inspiration and invents, then he will indeed be able to bring forth a series of very lively concepts, but this series will seldom make up a whole, seldom have a subject and only through chance have the necessary unity and appropriate brevity...⁴⁶⁹

Mendelssohn seems to reject poetic inspiration altogether when he claims that the poet need only *understand* the course the imagination *would take*, but the second part of the passage suggests that this understanding can only be gained by attending to immediate first-person feeling.⁴⁷⁰ Yet, Mendelssohn admits that for some subjects, particularly “vigorous emotions,” the felt-emotion can immediately express itself in a poem without “art.” In this case “mere nature fulfills all the needs of art.” Still, for more moderate subjects, such as “hope, thanks, quiet joy, etc., nature without the guiding

⁴⁶⁹ *JubA*, 5.1:587.

⁴⁷⁰ This is certainly a rejection of Bodmer and Breitinger’s explanation of poetic inspiration which denies any role to reflection: “When [the poet] is heated in this way, the words as it were grow on his tongue, he describes nothing but what he sees, and speaks nothing but what he feels, he will be driven by the passions, not unlike a madman who is beside himself, and must follow wherever the madness leads him.” (*Die Discourse der Mahlern*, Bibliothek älterer Schriftwerke der deutschen Schweiz 2.2 (Frauenfeld: J. Hubers, 1891), 1:96.

thread of art is a very disagreeable [misliche] guide."⁴⁷¹ Mendelssohn does not explain why he makes an exception for more "vigorous" subjects; worse, it is not clear whether by "art" Mendelssohn means specific knowledge of rules, mere experience with existing art, or just the use of reason in general. His view here is unfortunately murky.⁴⁷²

It is clear, though, that Mendelssohn accepted Dubos' distinction between natural genius and studied art. For Mendelssohn, learned art and reasoning have a formal, high-level planning role, while genius and feeling bring forth the material of creation. This explains why genius without art tends to create unformed monstrosities that are beautiful in some parts but not as wholes. Now, how does this square with his idea from the review of Sulzer that reason is an essential, indeed the ruling part of genius itself? As we saw, the separation between a non-rational, productive genius and a rational, corrective capacity is precisely the view Mendelssohn had found so troublesome in Sulzer's essay.

To answer this question, we must recognize again that for Mendelssohn, feeling itself is just confused reason. His distinction between genius and art must be understood as one of degree, between highly distinct knowledge of rules (generally learned discursively) and more confused knowledge, which allows us to find similarities and distinctions without knowing the reasons underlying them. Thus reason is already operating confusedly even in someone with no distinct knowledge of aesthetic rules.

With this in mind, we can think of *contenance* as a certain proportion of mental faculties

⁴⁷¹ *JubA*, 5.1:587.

⁴⁷² The undated essay "Gedanken vom Ausdrucke der Leidenschaften" contains further discussion of poetic inspiration, but does not meaningfully clarify its relation to reason and reflection. See *JubA*, 2:261-265.

(following Baumgarten's definition) in which *more distinct* thoughts constantly have mastery over the *less distinct* thoughts. Insofar as the more distinct thoughts do not rise to the level of learned rules, they remain a part of genius. Mendelssohn can indeed accept both the distinction between genius and art, and the idea that a ruling reason is an essential part of genius itself.

The battle with Hamann

Mendelssohn had been interested in the writings of Rousseau ever since Lessing asked him to translate his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in 1755. While he often disagreed with Rousseau's doctrines, he had the greatest respect for him as a writer and philosopher. For this reason, he explains, he began to read Rousseau's novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* with the highest expectations. Unfortunately, these expectations were not to be met. When he had finally digested the massive work, he was so disappointed that he was moved to write not one but five critical *Literaturbriefe*, despite his periodical's official policy of reviewing German works only.

Mendelssohn's critique of *Julie* consists of three general points. First, he attacks Rousseau for using his novel as a vehicle for espousing distinct philosophical arguments. Rather than including a lot of action, which should be the lifeblood of a story, Rousseau's is filled with long and tedious moral speeches. The philosophy contained in these orations may have some value in itself, but Mendelssohn thinks its connection to the story is clumsy and ineffective. Mendelssohn even speculates that the speeches were written separately and then clumsily transplanted into the novel.

Rousseau's work shows a lack of invention in that he did not bother to make his ideas sensible and felt, rather than merely thought by the reader.

Second, Mendelssohn complains that the characters' expressions of passion are wildly out of proportion with what the reader could surmise to be their actual feelings. Not only does this make their hyperbolic pronouncements unnatural, but it also prevents the reader from feeling any sympathy for them. "[Rousseau's] passions chase off the imagination of his reader. They are already in the clouds, before the reader feels the slightest desire to climb up with them." Mendelssohn heaps scorn on Rousseau's *Affektensprache*, calling it "hair-splitting, affected, and bombastic." "He who does not know a sentiment treads with difficulty on the approximately right part of the heart which appeals to this sentiment. Through proclamations and hyperbole one indeed becomes violent and exuberant, but does not move the heart. And I must admit that my heart remained ice-cold even through all the infatuated clamor of St. Preux. I could not even read it without aversion, for what makes a claim to sentiment must either arouse the sentiment or be distasteful."⁴⁷³

Third, Mendelssohn attacks the characters, especially St. Preux and Julie, for being unnatural and wildly implausible. St. Preux is supposed to be a philosopher, yet he is really nothing more than unvirtuous fool. And nothing seems to have bothered Mendelssohn more than Julie's famous death scene. Far from seeming on the verge of her demise, "at every moment one doubts whether she is even sick." Instead, Julie is animated and engaging in long and inappropriate casuistic pronouncements.

⁴⁷³ *JubA*, 5.1:373.

Mendelssohn points out, “If I am to admire the fortitude of Julie, along with her more-than-Socratic courage with which she awaits death in her final hours, then Julie must be depicted as a mortal... I have to *perceive* the passion of her spirit and its triumph over the plague in her body... but [instead] Julie exceeds the sphere of humanity.” Mendelssohn diagnoses this as an example of excessive beautification,⁴⁷⁴ a fault he had pointed out in other contexts before.⁴⁷⁵

On the last two points, Mendelssohn admits freely that he is not familiar with every “affectionate sentiment” that might exist in nature. But, he argues, such familiarity is not necessary for the critic. “In nature there can be many things which are unnatural in imitation. Before nature can serve the virtuoso as a guiding thread [Richtschnur], it must first itself be subjugated to the rules of aesthetic probability.”⁴⁷⁶ After chronicling a few of the most egregious examples of extravagance in *Julie*, Mendelssohn declares, “I believe that all these commotions are possible in nature. But who would [want to] describe everything that’s possible in nature?”⁴⁷⁷ This somewhat carelessly phrased statement would soon be bitterly satirized by Hamann.

Mendelssohn sums up his review by condemning *Julie* as “boring.”⁴⁷⁸ Regardless of the beautiful thoughts it might contain in places – and Mendelssohn does praise some

⁴⁷⁴ *JubA*, 5.1:382.

⁴⁷⁵ Particularly his rejection of perfect heroes in tragedies, discussed above.

⁴⁷⁶ *JubA*, 5.1:373.

⁴⁷⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:378.

⁴⁷⁸ *JubA*, 5.1:368-370.

aspects of the work, like the character of Wolmar⁴⁷⁹ – to bore the reader is the greatest sin in a work that self-consciously aims to arouse the passions.

Shortly after this review had been published, the editors of the *Literaturbriefe* forwarded a provocative anonymous response to Mendelssohn, who immediately guessed that it was written by Hamann. He published Hamann's letter, along with his own "anonymous" reply, complimenting himself for successfully imitating the mood of the original. "In addition to the irony, he has at the same time even affected the obscure and oracular writing style,"⁴⁸⁰ Mendelssohn says of himself. Evidently, Mendelssohn was confident that his response to Hamann was more than adequate. As I will argue, while Mendelssohn did effectively respond to some of Hamann's points, he failed to recognize a more fundamental threat lurking in the background.

In his "Abelaerdus Virbius," Hamann spares no rhetoric in expressing his negative attitude toward art criticism, and especially rationalism. He intentionally leaves his points suggestive and underdeveloped, wishing his "remarks, doubts, questions, suspicions, and insights," written "in the tone of inspired taste" to be more than a match for Mendelssohn's "sufficient reasons."⁴⁸¹ Repeatedly comparing criticism to a form of death⁴⁸² opposed to the life of creation, Hamann tries to debase the value of the critic. He ridicules the rationalist idea that art represents universal truths sensibly: "The most powerful errors and truths, and the most immortal beauties and deadliest errors of a

⁴⁷⁹ *JubA*, 5.1:372.

⁴⁸⁰ *JubA*, 5.1:441.

⁴⁸¹ *JubA*, 5.1:442-443.

⁴⁸² Hamann uses phrases such as "totden Kunstrichtern," "Leichengepräg," "das Heiligthum der Verwesung."

book are invisible, like the elements, and those concern me least which one can set in *appearance* [Augenschein]."⁴⁸³ Here "appearance" is a reference to phenomena, the perfection of which rationalists understood as beauty; Hamann thinks art represents reality more directly. As a result, rationalist aesthetics is irrelevant to actual creation. Geniuses [witzige Köpfe] "are more supporters than true knowers of the beautiful sciences,"⁴⁸⁴ Hamann claims wryly.

Beyond the rhetoric, Hamann raises a variety of substantive objections to Mendelssohn's review and to his general project of criticism. Most specifically, Hamann accuses Mendelssohn of failing to recognize a distinction between the dramatic and novel forms, and thus of judging *Julie* according to a false standard. "Perhaps Rousseau saw more deeply into the true nature of the novel"⁴⁸⁵ than Mendelssohn could fathom, and imbued his work with a particular kind of dialog for which he had a "special gift."⁴⁸⁶ Hamann also attacks the related standard of aesthetic probability, the belief in which he calls "superstitious." "A humble observer of nature and society will take to heart the expression of one of the ancients... *Incredibile, sed verum*. Thus a kind of *improbability* might easily belong to the cultivation [Urbaren] of a story [Geschichte] and an aesthetic *probability* to the beauty of a poem."⁴⁸⁷ In the cryptic passage which follows, he also suggests that even such general principles ought not be applied strictly, but rather

⁴⁸³ *JubA*, 5.1:447.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:443.

⁴⁸⁶ *JubA*, 5.1:446.

⁴⁸⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:444.

according to their sense, as understood through a sort of divine lens.⁴⁸⁸ This echoes Dubos's remark that only one who is already gifted with genius can truly understand and properly make use of principles in aesthetics, while placing genius itself squarely in the realm of the supernatural.

The central thrust of Hamann's critique, however, is his attack on the idea that reason does and ought to play the sovereign in artistic representations of the passions. This attack consists of several steps. First, Hamann accuses Mendelssohn of judging *Julie* according to empty abstractions rather than his own feelings. "On account of your own certainty you would rather avoid every all-too-general conclusion [drawn] from your sentiments about the value of a book... [for my part] I'm not learned enough... to be able to analyze the essential concept of a novel, and not creative enough to invent it, not eloquent enough to make a chimera seem likely."⁴⁸⁹ Second, Hamann argues that real love, in particular, stands beyond all analysis and rational criticism. Nothing could be more natural than that St. Preux, the philosopher, is made into a fool by his passion. "A philosopher in love cannot possibly be anything but a foolish creation in our eyes... [for] love, like death, makes philosophers into idiots."⁴⁹⁰ Love cannot be understood through reason; it must be lived and experienced in the concrete. "If only a pair of black eyes could work enough wonder on your ice-cold heart, sir, to transform it into a blossoming

⁴⁸⁸ "Man sollte aber nicht so wohl mit den Buchstaben dieses Grundsatzes prahlen, sondern vielmehr zeigen, daß man auch den Sinn desselben und die Kraft der Anwendung besäße, oder *Funken* von dem, was man in allgemeinen Ausdrücken bis in den Himmel erhebt" (ibid.).

⁴⁸⁹ *JubA*, 5.1:443.

⁴⁹⁰ *JubA*, 5.1:445.

springtime,"⁴⁹¹ then Mendelssohn might perhaps understand this. If he did, he would see that all his complaints about excess and extravagance in Rousseau's characters' expressions of love are futile and misguided. His heart would not have been left "ice-cold," as Mendelssohn himself had put it in his original review.

Hamann next broadens this same line of attack. With the aid of some anti-Semitic epithets that cut through Mendelssohn's flimsy anonymity, he ridicules the claim that some objects are unsuitable for aesthetic depiction. "Who is this aesthetic Moses, the citizen of a free state, to prescribe weak and wretched principles (which say there: you shall not grasp *that*, you shall not taste *this*, you shall not touch *that*. Many things in nature are impure and mean for an imitator – including everything that's *possible*, don't let yourself be overcome with desire!)." ⁴⁹² The polemic culminates in the conclusion that reason should play at most a subdued role in aesthetic matters. Reason has no right to constrain the emotions or their expression: "How could reason wish to proscribe the passions? Why do you [Sie] want to subject the firstborn affect of the human soul to the yoke of circumcision [Beschneidung]? Can you [du] play with it as with a bird? Or bind it with your [deinen] rules? Don't you [Sie] see that in this way you tear down the only lighthouses that can serve as guides for both you and others?" ⁴⁹³

Mendelssohn's reply is comprehensive, but its central point is that Hamann is dead wrong to think that the rationalist critics judge works on the basis of abstractions. Rather, even they judge works first according to feeling and sentiment, and only then,

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² *JubA*, 5.1:446.

⁴⁹³ *JubA*, 5.1:447.

post facto, supply abstract reasons which attempt to account for and explain these feelings. “If the aesthetic magician wants to show me his miracle, then his first miracle must be to secure my belief... He must either enchant my *sentiments*, or I am incredulous. He may even foam and cry: *I see apparitions rising up from the earth!* I must see them myself, or I’ll believe they only inhabit his head [es geht in seinem Gehirne um].”⁴⁹⁴ Only then, after she has already *felt* incredulity, does the critic “have a right... to bring mistrust into [the author’s] secretive arts” (ibid.) and attempt to analyze where and why the illusion went wrong.

Mendelssohn explains what he finds so repugnant about Hamann’s defense of Rousseau in the following passage: “See! I was in a magical world, where I grasped nothing, found little plausible, and was supposed to believe everything all the more strongly. My spirit was not sufficiently prepared for this sublime ecstasy, in which we see what no eye has yet uncovered, grasp with our hands where there is nothing—hear, taste, believe—and are ashamed to ask: *why?*”⁴⁹⁵ The primary objection here is not that Hamann lacks articulable *reasons* for his high estimation of *Julie*. Rather, Mendelssohn is arguing that it is incoherent for Hamann to claim he is somehow deficient for not *feeling* a certain way upon reading *Julie*. Only with respect to this observation does Mendelssohn complain that Hamann refuses to provide any reasoned explanation of his perspective.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ *JubA*, 5.1:450.

⁴⁹⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:450-451.

⁴⁹⁶ For a somewhat different perspective on these points, see Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 238-239. Mendelssohn would later directly attack Hamann for failing to defend his views with reasons. In his

Although Mendelssohn does not directly address Hamann's objection to his claim that some objects are unsuitable for aesthetic depiction, it is straightforward to reconstruct a plausible response. Hamann had rather offensively compared Mendelssohn's "prohibitions" on aesthetic depiction to those of Jewish dietary law, implying that they are both arbitrary. But whatever account might be given about Kashrut itself, its prohibitions are different from Mendelssohn's proposed aesthetic boundaries in two salient ways. First, the prohibitions of Kashrut are categorical, while Mendelssohn's proposed restrictions are relative to human sentiment and feeling. Mendelssohn does not claim there is anything wrong with extravagant outbursts per se. It is only insofar as they do not convince readers of the characters' underlying passions and stimulate their interest that their claim to being represented artistically is dubious. This alone would make them non-arbitrary, provided we assume some affinity among human sentiment. Second, Kashrut has to do only with reality, not fiction. Since we know that Mendelssohn was generally very permissive about which *natural* objects merit artistic representation, it is reasonable to restrict statements about the representational unsuitability of some objects to fictions. While real objects can always be depicted in various ways, *fictional* objects have no real existence independent of the way in which they are depicted. For this reason, if a *fictional* object is tasteless and uninteresting, then quite plausibly it ought not be represented aesthetically at all. Notwithstanding this subtlety, Mendelssohn could not help but include an ironic jab at

review of Hamann's "Urtheil des Geschmacks," Mendelssohn writes that it is "better not to judge at all, than to bring out judgments without reasons" (*JubA*, 5.1:564).

Hamann's "microscopic" style: "Does nature have no objects that are more worthy of imitation than mold?"⁴⁹⁷

Mendelssohn next turns the tables on Hamann, accusing *him* of judging according to abstractions. Of course there is a difference between a drama and a novel, he concedes. But that simply means that there is a generally "novelish [romanhafte]" way of expressing truth, not some *sui generis* "true nature of the novel." Since the novel form is conventional, it has no nature in itself – unless of course Rousseau created this nature *ex nihilo* through his supposedly divine power. Since (presumably) Rousseau cannot really do this, the "true nature of the novel" cannot be anything but an abstraction. It is far more legitimate to demand, as Mendelssohn does, that the novel be judged according to the general aim of all art, namely, to represent rational truths aesthetically.⁴⁹⁸

Mendelssohn also admits that the critic cannot rightly forbid lovers from expressing their love how they wish, but that doesn't make every possible expression worth reading about.⁴⁹⁹ Mendelssohn ridicules Hamann for assuming that he cannot understand any language but the critical.⁵⁰⁰ The irony here is especially rich because, even while Hamann accused Mendelssohn of having an "ice-cold heart" and not truly understanding love, Mendelssohn was busy exchanging *Liebesbriefe* with his fiancée in Hamburg, with whom he had fallen in love less than six month prior! (She had blue

⁴⁹⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:452.

⁴⁹⁸ *JubA*, 5.1:450.

⁴⁹⁹ *JubA*, 5.1:451-452.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

eyes, not black). So, unbeknownst to Hamann, Mendelssohn was actually in the *best* personal position to know that one need not speak with the excess and extravagance of Rousseau's characters in order to feel and express real passion. By implication, Mendelssohn again accuses Hamann of judging according to abstractions – this time by assuming that a critic must judge according to some self-alienated ideal of “the critic's role” instead of according to his own lived feelings.

Mendelssohn's response culminates in a parable about Socrates, which he borrows from Hamann's own *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* [*Socratic Memorabilia*].⁵⁰¹ “It is true,” Mendelssohn writes, “*Socrates* the sculptor clothed the Graces in order not to expose their naked charms to every unchaste eye; but if I can draw conclusions from the works of philosophy to the work of the artist; he will have clothed but not hidden the fair beauties. The gown must let the stature, the agility and the free swing of the limbs shine through without envy, so that the eyes of the spirit enjoys what is removed from the fleshly eyes.”⁵⁰² The message of the parable is clear: Hamann is wrong to exclude reason altogether from aesthetic matters. By means of feeling and passion alone, creation remains raw, and if not distasteful, then at least not as pleasurable as it could be otherwise. By cutting out reason, Hamann wrongly denies aesthetic experience to one essential part of our humanity.

No doubt as a result of Hamann's obscurity and thinly-veiled hostility, Mendelssohn was uncomfortable providing his usual careful and deliberate analysis of

⁵⁰¹ Mendelssohn had reviewed this work, mostly favorably, in *Literaturbrief* 113, 19 June 1760 (*JubA* 5.1:200-206).

⁵⁰² *JubA*, 5.1:452.

the issues dividing them. This is truly unfortunate, for it meant that Mendelssohn never adequately engaged with the real core of Hamann's views, even though he easily parried the *Stürmer und Dränger's* clumsy attacks on rationalism. Hamann's deeper view is only hinted at in the "Abelaerdus" essay in the famous line, "all the aesthetic thaumaturgy in the world is no substitute for immediate feeling, and nothing but the hellish journey of self-knowledge paves the way to our apotheosis."⁵⁰³ In the *Aesthetica in nuce*, a later essay which Hamann basically addressed to Mendelssohn, the implications of this pronouncement become clearer: Hamann does not think art ought to represent universal truths at all. Rather, he thinks that art is primarily an expression of one's individuality, which transcends all universal principles. His attack on abstraction also becomes more sophisticated in this later work. He does not simply accuse rationalists of judging *according* to abstraction. Instead, he suggests that their *use* of abstraction in deriving aesthetic rules has actively *corrupted* feeling.⁵⁰⁴ This is a far more cogent objection than anything found in "Abelaerdus." Yet in his review of the *Aesthetica in nuce*, Mendelssohn, frustrated by the obscure style and doubtless annoyed at the author's lack of basic civility, limits himself to criticizing Hamann's obscure and extravagant style and does not attempt to address these concerns. The debate had come to a sadly premature end.

Overall, while Mendelssohn defended a coherent view of the relation between genius and rules, he failed to support, let alone defend, his thesis that explicit and

⁵⁰³ *JubA*, 5.1:448.

⁵⁰⁴ Johann Georg Hamann, *Hamann's Schriften*, ed. Friedrich Roth (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821-1843), 2:281-286.

discursive knowledge of rules tends to improve the creation of art.⁵⁰⁵ Even if Hamann is wrong to say that abstraction *corrupts* feeling, it might still be useless for improving it. Nor is it enough to say that feeling is confused reason, for it does not follow directly from this that by *analyzing* that feeling, making it more distinct and bringing it under rules, we can someday hope to “surpass the ancients” in the actual creation of beautiful art.

Mendelssohn’s response to Resewitz’s *Versuch über das Genie*

In 1755 a certain intellectual society was founded in Berlin. Its theme was coffee and billiards, and every four weeks one of its number would present a paper they had written. Among its illustrious members were Lessing, Nicolai, the great mathematician Leonhard Euler, Mendelssohn, and a theologian and philosopher by the name of Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, who had studied under Baumgarten and Meier in Halle. In this society, Nicolai reports decades later, Resewitz’s work *Versuch über das Genie* [Essay on genius] first came to light.⁵⁰⁶ The essay, which was presented in two parts, was subsequently published in a (now) little known series of Nicolai’s personal imprint entitled *Sammlung vermischter Schriften zur Beförderung der schönen Wissenschaften und Künste* [Collection of various writings for the advancement of the beautiful sciences and arts]. Mendelssohn, in turn, published reviews of each part of the work in the *Briefe, die neueste*

⁵⁰⁵ See *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (JubA, 1:54-55); “Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten” (JubA, 2:185); *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften* (JubA, 2:325).

⁵⁰⁶ This information is based on Nicolai’s retrospective report in G. E. Lessing, *Briefwechsel: Zweiter Theil*, vol. 28 of *Gotth. Ephr. Lessings sämtliche Werke* (Carlsruhe: Bureau der deutschen Classiker, 1825), 371-372. Cf. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Portland, Ore.: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998), 74.

Literatur betreffend [Letters concerning the most recent literature], a periodical that he ran with Lessing and Nicolai.

Versuch über das Genie, Part 1

In this first half of his essay (“*Versuch 1*”), Resewitz explains that genius is a special quality responsible for the aesthetic value of the best art. He worries, however, that this concept is not well understood, and might be wrongly invoked in order to inflate the value of mediocre works. Since artists themselves think of genius as a feeling – “a fire, an inspiration, an I-know-not-what” – the philosopher needs to step in and provide a distinct analysis of the concept to prevent this sort of abuse.⁵⁰⁷ In *Versuch 1*, however, Resewitz says little that had not already been argued by Dubos and Trublet. He even seemed infected by the same ambiguity about the role of rules in the creation of art. On the one hand he writes that “the knowledge of the rules of proportion still provides no knowledge of the true bearing, light, expression, and appropriate contrast in a painting, etc... These rules do not make up genius, they don’t even develop it, rather they merely teach the genius – which is already there and which already works – the correct and harmonious composition of his work.”⁵⁰⁸ But he claims immediately afterward that great artists often break rules, “either to sacrifice them to a more important rule or to bend them so that they better apply to the present case,”⁵⁰⁹ which of course sounds like an endorsement of rules in artistic creation after all. Indeed, Resewitz

⁵⁰⁷ Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, *Versuch über das Genie* in *Sammlung vermischter Schriften zur Beförderung der schönen Wissenschaften und Künste* (Berlin: F. Nicolai, 1759-1763), 2:131-133.

⁵⁰⁸ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 2:155.

⁵⁰⁹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 2:155-156.

goes on to admit explicitly that rules are necessary but not sufficient for the creation of art.⁵¹⁰

In his largely neutral review of this work, Mendelssohn correctly recognizes the ordinariness of the essay, and only takes issue with Resewitz's claim that genius does not apply to the "higher [i.e., intellectual] sciences" because work in these sciences lacks passion and fire.⁵¹¹ According to Mendelssohn, all sciences require a good use of the understanding to properly address their objects. Since (following Baumgarten) genius is a certain proportion of the mental faculties, all objects of creation and cognition should have a genius particularly suited to them. For the sciences, Mendelssohn suggests that there is a genius for each kind of cognition in the Wolffian scheme: a historical genius (who is unusually capable of knowing particular facts), a philosophical genius (who knows the reasons for these facts unusually well), and a mathematical genius (who is unusually capable of knowing the relations among quantities).

Versuch über das Genie, Part 2: First half

In the second and far more interesting part of the essay ("*Versuch 2*"), Resewitz's goal is to explain what he considers to be the most essential aspect of genius – its ability to invent [das Genie der Erfindung]. He goes on to vigorously defend the novel thesis that genius, especially insofar as it invents, consists specifically in a great power of intuition. This, along with claims toward the end of the work that human beings are capable of an intuition of God and the souls of others, has led commentators to read

⁵¹⁰ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 2:156.

⁵¹¹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 2:136-137. This claim is retracted, possibly due to Mendelssohn's influence, in the second part of Resewitz's essay (3:19).

Resewitz as a *Stürmer und Dränger*, i.e. as one who agrees with Hamann that intuition can provide us with direct insights into the supernatural.⁵¹² Yet this reading does not hold water, for Resewitz was no enthusiast. As we will see, his views about intuition begin from the works of the rationalists Wolff and Baumgarten, and he constantly strives to retain as much of the rationalist view as possible, even while attempting to get beyond it in a very specific way. Of course, this makes Mendelssohn's extremely critical review of the work even more interesting. Why was Mendelssohn so wary even of Resewitz's qualified panegyric to intuition? And what is the real target of his criticism? Is it right to say with Rosenthal that Mendelssohn "decisively attacked" Resewitz's "unphilosophical mixture of cognition and sentiment?"⁵¹³ As I will argue, things are not nearly so straightforward. Resewitz's view turns out to be quite nuanced, and many of Mendelssohn's objections fail to stick because Resewitz's position is in many ways not so different from Mendelssohn's own.

In this section, I consider and reject several possible explanations for Mendelssohn's negative appraisal of Resewitz's work. I argue that the primary target of

⁵¹² Baeumler writes that for Resewitz, intuitive cognition is "an analog of the divine," although he admits that he reads this "between the lines," for "Resewitz does not declare it" (*Das Irrationalitätsproblem*, 237). While Beiser does not quite make this claim, he suggests that Resewitz is a representative of "the new claims of genius," which he directly associates with supernatural cognitive powers (*Diotima's Children*, 231-232). Resewitz does try to strain the boundaries of rationalism, but his acceptance of its core psychological concepts, his evident concern with the rationalists' cognitive boundaries in the first place, and his views about revelation place his thought far closer to rationalism than any type of enthusiasm.

⁵¹³ B. Rosenthal, *Der Geniebegriff des Aufklärungszeitalters (Lessing und die Popularphilosophen)*, Germanische Studien Heft 138 (Berlin 1933. Reprint: Kraus, Nendeln/Liechtenstein, 1967), 81. In the secondary literature, only Braitmaier gives credit to Resewitz's position, writing "Einen Teil des Richtigen trifft er, wenn er das Genie in die anschauende Erkenntnis setzt" (*Geschichte*, 2:189). I agree that there is something compelling about Resewitz's essay that is deserving of a serious response, though it is certainly not the most philosophically rigorous of works.

Mendelssohn's criticism, at least insofar as it is good criticism, is Resewitz's idea that a form of intellectual intuition can lead us to novel intellectual truths.

The second part of Resewitz's *Versuch 2* can be divided roughly into two halves. In the first half, Resewitz argues that genius consists in intuition. He begins with a strange question: why, he asks, are those who cannot understand the distinct truths of mathematics called stupid, even though we immediately forgive others who don't bother to learn and understand metaphysics? The answer, Resewitz claims, is that the truths of mathematics are capable of being represented through simple intuitions, while the truths of metaphysics are not. Thus, those who are incapable of mathematics must lack a great capacity for intuition.⁵¹⁴ Resewitz is presumably interested in stupidity because Baumgarten had defined stupidity as the opposite of genius, i.e. as a lack of the proportion of mental faculties which make up genius.⁵¹⁵ Thus, by means of a kind of ordinary language argument, Resewitz hopes to give us *prima facie* reason for thinking that stupidity consists in lack of intuition, suggesting that genius consists in a great power of intuition. But what did Resewitz mean by 'intuition'?

Part of the answer is clear from the beginning of the work. Following Wolff's standard definition, Resewitz writes that intuition is a direct and immediate representation "of the thing itself," or, as he often puts it, a representation of something *in concreto*.⁵¹⁶ Intuitive cognition is contrasted with symbolic cognition, in which we substitute a sign for the thing itself, generally in order to facilitate abstract thought.

⁵¹⁴ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:6-7.

⁵¹⁵ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §578.

⁵¹⁶ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:8.

Mendelssohn accepted this explanation of intuition as well, though as part of an expanded definition: “one calls a cognition intuitive when the object of the same is either immediately present to our senses, or represented through such signs which allow us to see the ideas of the designated more distinctly than the signs themselves.”⁵¹⁷ This expansion allowed for imagination, especially as induced vividly by poetic discourse, to count as intuitive cognition. Resewitz seems to have accepted the expanded definition as well, writing that the “easiest and most visible intuitive cognition... [is one that] least requires signs.”⁵¹⁸

In the remainder of the first half of *Versuch 2*, Resewitz attempts to establish a sharp contrast between abstract, symbolic thinking and intuitive thinking. Abstract thinking, he writes, operates symbolically on words instead of things. Those inclined to this type of thinking are able to churn out an infinite variety of empty and useless concepts by means of a “mechanical” process. This process can produce ideas that seem novel, but which in the end, like the doctrines of medieval scholasticism, have no relation to reality and are ultimately without value. Those with a high degree of intuitive cognition, on the other hand, build up their objects from experience, and “create *in concreto*” rather than in the abstract.⁵¹⁹ Intuition ensures both a relation to reality, and real value and significance for all products of art, writes Resewitz. Since genius is what

⁵¹⁷ *JubA*, 1:170. The latter part of the definition is due to Baumgarten (*Metaphysica*, §620). The entire discussion containing Mendelssohn’s most explicit definition of intuitive cognition (as quoted), was deleted from the 1761 edition of the essay on the fine arts and replaced with a discussion of the closely related sensible cognition. Yet Mendelssohn’s view seems not to have changed, as is evident from other passages in the 1761 work. See *PS*, 1:89, 101, 181 or *JubA*, 1:431, 443, 491 for the largely unchanged 1771 edition.

⁵¹⁸ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:18.

⁵¹⁹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:27-28.

gives value to works (as he had argued in the first part of his essay), he concludes again that genius consists in intuition. That explains, he says, why students of art cannot merely memorize rules; they must also study a variety of great examples and also watch their masters work.⁵²⁰

Now, the attack on excessively abstract and mechanical thinking is relatively uncontroversial, and Mendelssohn himself immediately endorses it in his review.⁵²¹ In fact, Mendelssohn had long held the same position. In a review of another work written more than year previously, he had approvingly cited Bacon's comment about abstract scholastic system-building: "They are like spider webs: indeed fine, but also useless."⁵²²

But Mendelssohn seems much less sanguine about Resewitz's claim that the proper contrast to mechanical and scholastic thinking is intuition. In his review, he disparagingly attributes to Resewitz the view that "the pictorial [bildliche] or intuitive cognition is the only means of grasping, discovering, and inventing truth, of becoming a genius."⁵²³ This is something of an exaggeration on Mendelssohn's part. Resewitz plainly does give credit to some abstract thinkers, writing "The more these [excessively abstract thinkers] deserve our ridicule and censure, the more fame those true philosophers deserve who are capable of bringing truths, which are in and for themselves abstract... to the sentiment of their fellow citizens, without harming their distinctness and correctness... who collect together abstract truths out of intuitive cognition, and then

⁵²⁰ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:23-25.

⁵²¹ *JubA*, 5.1:482. Seemingly unaware of this passage and much of Mendelssohn's work, Costazza claims that Mendelssohn is guilty of viewing aesthetic creation as following precisely the kind of mechanical process that Resewitz attacks here (*Genie und Tragische Kunst*, 55).

⁵²² *JubA*, 5.1:311.

⁵²³ *JubA*, 5.1:481.

know how to bring them back to intuition."⁵²⁴ To this Mendelssohn responds that abstract thought need not be brought back to intuition in order to be valuable and the product of genius. Was Meier more of a genius than Baumgarten just because he supplied examples for the system of aesthetics that Baumgarten had developed? What about Newton's discovery of the laws of motion, and Leibniz's invention of calculus? Did they have less genius than those who applied their theories to particular cases?⁵²⁵ Indeed, Resewitz himself admits elsewhere that the ability to see the universal in the particular requires and displays more genius than the ability to supply a particular for a given universal.⁵²⁶ And according to standard rationalist psychology, the former (the cognition of the universal in the particular) is a straightforwardly intellectual, non-intuitive cognition derived from the distinct analysis of an originally confused intuition.

From all this, Mendelssohn concludes that either Resewitz is operating with an excessively broad definition of intuition – one that really includes more abstractly-oriented cognitive faculties – or he is inconsistent and does not really think that *intuition* is the specific essence of genius.⁵²⁷ This is a fair point. Resewitz, however, has yet to provide his more detailed analysis of intuition, which Mendelssohn considers in his next *Literaturbrief*.

In the end, writes Mendelssohn in the first half of his review, "all the observations brought out by [Resewitz] prove at most that an *unfruitful* cognition,

⁵²⁴ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:13.

⁵²⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:483-484.

⁵²⁶ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:12.

⁵²⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:483-484.

whether it is singular or universal, indicates a lack of genius."⁵²⁸ Yet this gloss does not seem to capture Resewitz's position at all. Resewitz had pointed out that purely abstract thought can indeed be highly fruitful in the sense that it leads to a great variety of novel ideas, which often take on the (false) *appearance* of genius. He never complained that this sort of thinking was unfruitful, but rather 1) that it proceeded mechanically, which left its products without life and passion; and 2) that works created in this way often bore no relation to reality. And it does seem quite plausible both 1) that the way to avoid both of these pitfalls might be to focus on something like intuition rather than words and abstractions, and 2) that by exercising this power in a very high degree, one could achieve the opposite of lifeless, unnatural works – in other words, lively works that connect deeply to nature—works of genius. Thus Mendelssohn's summing up of Resewitz's position is at best uncharitable.

Versuch 2, second half: the nature of intuition

The second half of Resewitz's *Versuch 2* consists of an analysis of the cognitive power of intuition and a discussion of its possible objects. It is meant primarily to elaborate on, rather than argue for Resewitz's claim that genius consists in intuition. Nonetheless, the extreme range that Resewitz attributes to intuition would, if correct, certainly become at least an important aspect of genius. This is where, according to Mendelssohn, Resewitz assigns to genius inappropriately transcendent powers. Unfortunately, as I will argue, this ends up being an extremely messy dispute without a

⁵²⁸ *JubA*, 5.1:484.

clear resolution, and does more to exhibit an unmet challenge to Mendelssohn's view than to shed light on it.

Resewitz begins by describing the act of intuition in this way:

The more relations, connections, and modifications one views in an object, the more various cases one thinks about it, the more perspectives one can see in it – thus the more genius one has to work on that object.... He who has cognized an object intuitively must have seen it according to its position, according to the particular turn [Wendung] of his soul, and according to the turn [Wendung] of the object itself, or so that I might more tersely and completely express myself, according to his individuality and the individuality of his object.⁵²⁹

The idea that viewing an object as an individual amounts to seeing it according to many determinations, relations and connections stems from Wolff and Baumgarten, both of whom held that the individual is *ens omnimode determinatum*, a thing determined in every way.⁵³⁰ Resewitz explains that all mental faculties, including distinct and abstract thinking, should be utilized in gaining a fuller understanding of a thing's determinations. He emphasizes that in order to best consider a thing in its individuality, we must "frequently return from intuition [of the particular cases] to abstraction" although we "should not remain there, but rather return from the latter to the former" in order to see each thing "in its true light and natural position."⁵³¹

Mendelssohn, too, accepted the idea that intuition characteristically represents individuals, especially beginning in his 1761 *Rhapsodie*, where he claims that intuition represents the "particular, determinate, and real."⁵³² He also agreed that an intuition

⁵²⁹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:36.

⁵³⁰ Wolff, *Ontologia*, §227; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §148.

⁵³¹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:43.

⁵³² *PS*, 2:62; *JubA*, 1:422.

would be fuller and more satisfying if it encompassed more “relations and connections.” For example, he had described part of the enjoyment of beauty in the 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen* as follows: “Through the intuition of the whole [following an analysis of the parts], the parts will lose their bright colors, but they will leave behind traces which explain the concept of the whole, and give the pleasure which arises from it a greater liveliness.”⁵³³ For Mendelssohn, however, this process primarily makes the subsequent cognition of the whole more *sensible*, i.e. more “extensively clear.” (As Baumgarten had explained, the cognition of a thing is more extensively clear when its clarity is based on more determinations or notes of the thing, without regard to how well we perceive those notes).⁵³⁴ Being “sensible” has only to do with the degree of clarity in certain aspects of the perception and is logically independent from its being “intuitive.” So, it seems that Mendelssohn would have agreed that perceiving an object according to more of its relations and determinations is in some sense a “greater” or more effective cognition, but perhaps he would not have agreed that this is explained by that cognition being more *intuitive*. Unfortunately, his exact position here is not clear from his review.

In any case, Resewitz does provide a reason to think that the kind of cognition he has in mind is not just more sensible, but also more intuitive: namely, its focus on individuality. For Resewitz, intuition does not simply focus on *any* determinations and relations, which might be general or particular, but specifically on those that make up the object’s individuality. Looking at things in this way, he thinks, can guarantee the

⁵³³ *JubA*, 1:54 (unchanged in subsequent editions).

⁵³⁴ See the Appendix for further discussion of this concept.

novelty characteristic of genius. "One's intuition cannot be perfectly the same as the intuition of others, but must in certain respects be one's own, consequently new in relation to the others, and consequently flow from one's own source."⁵³⁵ In other words, if I begin by considering something in its fullness, along with many of its varying aspects which I grasp on the basis of my own beliefs and experiences, then my artistic representation of that thing cannot but be original. And this focus on individuality seems to qualify the cognition as *intuitive* even in Mendelssohn's sense. Indeed, Mendelssohn does not seem to take issue with the claims Resewitz makes in this part of his essay. He instead reserves his condemnation for the next section of the *Versuch über das Genie*, in which Resewitz further expands the notion of intuition. Based on the texts, the exact direction of this further expansion and Mendelssohn's criticism of it might seem to take several forms, which I next discuss in turn.

Does Resewitz try to introduce a transcendent form of intuition?

One might think that Mendelssohn is keen to attack Resewitz because Resewitz's intuition amounts to a special mental faculty, one radically different in kind from reason. But this cannot be right, for Resewitz makes very clear that he considers his intuition a form of reason, and not something that transcends it. This comes out in his rather strange leading example of the exercise of intuition, that of Frederick the Great's genius for battle and statesmanship in creating a plan for war. Resewitz employs a long series of rhetorical questions to describe his example, which he takes to show that: 1. Frederick's imagination and wit take their command from his reason; 2. his plan

⁵³⁵ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:36.

depends on his rational insight into the connection of the various elements involved in it; 3. this insight alone is the “inexhaustible source” of all the means for war-planning which his genius invents and connects toward his intended purpose; 4. most importantly, he claims that Frederick’s thought is no less a form of reason because it operates on individual things (troops, weapons, terrain, and so forth) with all of their manifold properties and relations. Rather, the fact that his reason can operate on such concrete objects specifically explains Frederick’s genius for warfare.⁵³⁶ Resewitz concludes that intuitive cognition is rational in the wide sense, i.e. it is a perception of the universal principles in things.⁵³⁷

This example is dubious for two reasons. First, it is not very plausible that Frederick would or could consider every troop and position in its individuality, instead of abstractly (as numbers, levels of force and resistance, etc.). Second, even if Frederick does perform some kind of intuitive survey, it is not clear that this act could be responsible for his production of the plan. These problems notwithstanding, it is very clear that Resewitz does not intend his intuition to transcend reason, and his subsequent, more detailed analysis of intuition bears this out.

Is Resewitz trying to argue for the possibility of a perfect induction or a perfectly distinct intuition?

According to Baeumler, one of (and indeed the main) goal of Resewitz’s work is to defend the possibility of a perfectly distinct intuition, i.e. a “perfect induction” in

⁵³⁶ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:41.

⁵³⁷ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:42.

which we would actually immediately intuit the universal law in a series of particulars.⁵³⁸ Resewitz does seem to argue for this possibility in some places. He begins with a claim that intuition can be intellectual. For Wolff and Baumgarten, he explains, the object of aesthetic cognition⁵³⁹ is strictly speaking sensible cognition, not intuitive cognition.⁵⁴⁰ But they also held that art is perceived through intuition, and the pleasure it gives us is based on the intuition of its perfection. Thus they concluded, explains Resewitz, that intuition is to be classed with the lower, sensible faculties, and excluded from the intellectual faculties.⁵⁴¹

But who proved, Resewitz asks, that the “higher faculties” deal only with generalities, or with “so-called intensive distinctness? Who really has a greater understanding? The one who grasps a universal truth distinctly, or the one who surveys it just as distinctly in thousands of connections, in thousands of different individual [aspects], and sees it as it were in a lively and effective way? Is the reason that connects universal truths more excellent than that which seeks out, finds, and sees the connection of this truth as it really is in nature...?”⁵⁴² Resewitz’s claim that intuition is a form of reason is neither new nor controversial,⁵⁴³ but his apparent claim that intuition can be perfectly distinct appears very radical.

⁵³⁸ Baeumler, *Das Irrationalitätsproblem*, 237-238.

⁵³⁹ With respect to Wolff, I mean the cognition of art objects like buildings; Wolff’s work actually predates the concept of aesthetic cognition, which was invented by Baumgarten.

⁵⁴⁰ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:38.

⁵⁴¹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:39.

⁵⁴² Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:40.

⁵⁴³ This is true not only in the sense that (for rationalists) intuition contains only rational content, but also in the deeper sense that rational truths inherently depend on the relation between the part and the whole. This is because “metaphysical truth” (on which all propositional truth ultimately depends) is

“Intensive distinctness” (actually “intensive clarity”) is Baumgarten’s term for cognition which primarily aims to discover the principles underlying a narrower set of determinations (i.e., greater distinctness), and is opposed to “extensive clarity.” According to Baumgarten, there is an inherent tradeoff in these capabilities, so that if we want to achieve greater distinctness, we need to abstract from the intuition of the object as a whole, and deal more with abstract rather than concrete universals. But Resewitz seems to deny this when he claims that a person with genius might understand a truth “just as distinctly” *in concreto* as in the abstract.⁵⁴⁴ A person capable of this would achieve a kind of intellectual intuition akin to a “perfect induction”: a distinct apprehension of a universal truth within the immediate intuitive cognition of one or several individuals. Resewitz terms this type of intuition an “intuition of the understanding.”

Mendelssohn disagrees that such a cognition is possible for human beings on two grounds. First, he writes that even if an intuition could be maximally distinct, such a cognition would not have beauty as its object, for beauty is essentially a sensible or confused phenomenon. This is best illustrated by the fact that mathematical truths, which are intuitable by Resewitz’s own admission, cannot be beautiful – this is, presumably, because mathematical objects are intellectual, not sensible.⁵⁴⁵ But Resewitz has a ready response to this objection. He could simply concede that mathematical

an expression of perfection, and perfection is an agreement of the parts with the whole. See Wolff, *Ontologia*, §499, §503; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §89, §94.

⁵⁴⁴ Baeumler (*Das Irrationalitätsproblem*, 236) and Costazza (*Genie und tragische Kunst*, 80) view Resewitz as the “truest follower” of Baumgarten, but in this critical respect he went beyond anything Baumgarten had dreamed of.

⁵⁴⁵ *JubA*, 5.1:487-488.

truths cannot be intuited *in the right way* after all, simply because they are not truths about individual things. This would leave Mendelssohn begging the question, for it is at least *plausible* that a fully distinct intuition could contribute to our experience of beauty, provided that the object of this cognition were an individual. And even if Mendelssohn is right to say that beauty is essentially sensible, Resewitz may still be right to say that intuition, which on his view can take both sensible and intellectual forms, is most essential to and characteristic of genius.

Second, Mendelssohn argues that “abstraction is indispensable to the most complete induction” because “we cannot distinguish anything without the help of abstraction and therefore cannot learn anything even from a complete induction [of intuited individuals] alone.”⁵⁴⁶ That is, in order to perceive the universal in an individual, we need to abstract from its individual properties simply because of our inherent cognitive limitations. But to the extent that we abstract from the thing’s individuality, we no longer consider it intuitively, *in concreto*, but rather as a representative of a kind to which we have attached a name to represent it in thought. And this kind of cognition is symbolic, not intuitive. While higher beings may be able to perceive universals with relatively less use of symbolic cognition, Mendelssohn writes (clearly echoing Baumgarten⁵⁴⁷), “we must be content with the part [of knowledge]

⁵⁴⁶ *JubA*, 5.1:490.

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§6-9 and especially §557.

granted to us, and make use of abstraction and symbolization [Bezeichnung] as well as we can."⁵⁴⁸

While Mendelssohn seems correct on this point, Resewitz himself heavily qualifies his original claim to the point that he seems to agree fully with Baumgarten and Mendelssohn anyway. As he writes, "Induction is the intuition of the understanding; the greater it is, the richer is the intuition, the more one *approaches* the intuition of the universal in all particular cases; the more extensive [ausgebreiteter] and greater is the understanding."⁵⁴⁹ This seems more like the commonly accepted idea that we can approach but not achieve a perfectly distinct intuition of a universal. Thus when Resewitz wrote "just as distinctly [as in the abstract]" above, he plausibly meant merely that one could *strive* to give an intuition the same distinctness as an abstraction, not that one could *actually* achieve this.

Resewitz does occasionally speak of a person having "achieved" the intuition of a conceptual truth, but explains what he means as follows: "As long as the understanding as it were rests above this survey [of many particulars, as particulars], or returns from abstraction to this survey, thus far it cognizes the universal concept and its truth intuitively."⁵⁵⁰ This sounds more like a description of a cognition that involves both intuitive and conceptual elements – a symbolic grasp of the universal combined or juxtaposed with an intuitive survey of the individuals – not a "perfect induction" or „perfectly distinct intuition." In the end, the disagreement between Mendelssohn and

⁵⁴⁸ *JubA*, 5.1:490.

⁵⁴⁹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:44, emphasis added.

⁵⁵⁰ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:43.

Resewitz on the possibility of a “perfect induction” seems to be more rhetorical than substantive.

The substantive disagreement: How far can rational intuition extend?

Beyond the “intuition of the understanding” Resewitz posited yet a higher form of intellectual intuition. He describes this higher cognition as an intuition of the connection of universal truths—an “intuition of reason,” named after reason’s characteristic role in cognizing the connections among universal truths. This kind of intuition is intended to fill a very specific role in Resewitz’s psychology. As he explains, intuition grasps things in their individuality, so normally an object “must either be brought before the senses, or be depicted through the imagination, if one wants to achieve an intuition of it.”⁵⁵¹ Does it follow from this that we cannot gain intuition of ourselves, other souls, and God? Remarkably, Resewitz answers that we *can* have intuitions of these things after all, “just not in the perfection, distinctness and certainty which we are able to achieve in relation to sensible objects.”⁵⁵² He explains that we can achieve an intuition of these objects by collecting information from sources that *are* available to sense and imagination. Because an “intuition of reason” intuits the connections among truths, we can build up an intuition of our own soul through self-reflection in conjunction with theories of psychology. And, he claims, we can also attain an “intuition of reason” of God and other minds.

⁵⁵¹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:51.

⁵⁵² Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:53.

To achieve these intuitions, we have two methods at our disposal. First, by observing uncontroversially intuitable effects of invisible causes – in the case of God, this is especially the wonderful in nature – we gain a sense of what the Creator or the invisible cause is like.⁵⁵³ Second, we can compare the thing we wish to intuit to something already sensible, and then think of the magnitudes of its properties as being appropriately increased, even to infinity. For some objects, like fantastical poetic descriptions of eternity and the creation of worlds, this latter path is the *only* way to reach intuition.⁵⁵⁴ Even though no object is of the same kind as God, Resewitz points out that all finite things share some similarity with the divine, so this method can contribute even to an intuition of God.

Resewitz also claims in one isolated passage that revelation can help lead us to the “highest and best intuitive cognition of God.”⁵⁵⁵ He describes revelation carefully as consisting only in “[Christ’s] great and divine actions and motivations, which give us as it were a history of God and the Jewish people, things that we could discover ourselves only very defectively.”⁵⁵⁶ Thus it seems that miraculous and supernatural aspects of revelation played a relatively small role in Resewitz’s personal intuition of God. Nonetheless, by including revelation, he certainly left room for a more enthusiastic interpretation of his theory.

⁵⁵³ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:54-57.

⁵⁵⁴ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:54-56.

⁵⁵⁵ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:58.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Resewitz next compares the intuitive consideration of God to the abstract in the following way:

If I represent the omnipotence of God as a power to bring forth everything possible, then indeed I have a correct concept of omnipotence: yet this concept will not by any means have power over my soul. Nor will it make as lively an impression on my heart, than when I intuitively survey the uncountable works of God's hands from the greatest to the smallest, seek to grasp them in a blink, and in this way awaken in my soul an admittedly obscure and non-pictorial [unausgemaltes], but nonetheless great and thrilling picture [Bild] of his power... the former leaves my soul empty, the latter enriches it with uncountable and manifold modified representations which have mastery over it; the former is only a shadow, the latter gives us as it were a picture [Bild] of the majesty of the divine, and raises our soul from the dust to the intuition of [God's] majestic throne.⁵⁵⁷

The tension between the pictorial nature of ordinary intuition and this kind of intellectual intuition is clear even from Resewitz's strained invocation of a non-pictorial picture or impression [ein unausgemaltes Bild]. As Resewitz correctly surmises, it will be objected that this sort of intuition does not really allow one to represent the object intuitively, that it "does not actually paint for me a picture of the object itself."

Remarkably, Resewitz concedes the point: "This is true, I admit it."⁵⁵⁸ Nonetheless, we must just be content with whatever cognition of these objects we can achieve, he writes.

The intuition of the effects of God, or of another object whose inner powers cannot be intuitively perceived by us, does not cause any painted picture [ausgemaltes Bild] in us of its properties from which these effects flow: but it impresses in us an indeterminate, partly obscure, partly confused [undeutliches] picture of them, which fills our whole soul through its greatness, and at least through its power as a whole [qua totum] (since its parts remain undeveloped), thrills [erschüttert] all of our sentiments, and touches the foundation [fundum] of the soul; and this picture with all its powerful impressions, although it is obscure, is what we call the intuitive cognition of such an object whose inner

⁵⁵⁷ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:56.

⁵⁵⁸ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:62.

nature cannot be open to us. And nonetheless such an imperfect and obscure picture [Bild] of God, or one of his properties, effects a thrill, amazement, the feeling of our own powerlessness, in short, all the greatest and entirely indescribable sentiments.⁵⁵⁹

Baumgarten had described the “foundation of the soul” as its lowest part, which consists of obscure representations and subconscious feelings.⁵⁶⁰ So, Resewitz seems to be saying that we can build up to an intuition of supersensible objects, but such an intuition will remain at the level of a mostly obscure yet powerful feeling, lacking the clarity characteristic of sense perception.

Against this, Mendelssohn argues that Resewitz’s idea that an intuition is “the cognition of the thing *in concreto* together with its effects, accidents, changes, and relations” deviates from the usual definition of intuition.⁵⁶¹ Though he isn’t especially clear, Mendelssohn seems to be pointing out that an intuition is supposed to be an *immediate* cognition, not one assembled from various sensible and intellectual properties known about the object. And Resewitz’s admission that the cognition resulting from the synthetic process he describes would be *confused* suggests that such a cognition, if possible, would be better classified as *sensible* than *intuitive*. Yet this initial gloss faces a difficulty: it was widely accepted, including by Mendelssohn, that it is possible for us to achieve intuition through a process of imaginative mental synthesis in *some* cases – particularly in the paradigm case of poetry, where we achieve an imaginative intuition of imagery produced by words.

⁵⁵⁹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:63.

⁵⁶⁰ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §511.

⁵⁶¹ *JubA*, 5.1:488.

To this it might be objected that Resewitz's "intuition of reason" is not like poetic intuition. Poetry produces sensible intuitions which are *more clear* than the words used to represent them. By contrast, Resewitz is suggesting that we can achieve a highly *obscure* intuition which seems less clear than the underlying "data" used to generate it. This is true in a sense, but not in a way that affects Resewitz's idea. For one, *at the moment* when we achieve this intuitive feeling of God or the souls of others, it presumably *is* more clear than the thoughts which led up to this intuition. The supposed intuition, after all, would be of such strength that it would tend to take over our attention and fully obscure our previous thoughts, a phenomenon described by Baumgarten.⁵⁶² In addition, the thoughts that precede Resewitz's intuition are not well characterized as signs, like the words on page. These thoughts do not *signify* the object of the intuition as much as *suggest*, collectively, the intuition to our minds.

Mendelssohn's complaint must not be, therefore, that Resewitz's synthetic intuition is strictly impossible. He rather has something more specific in mind – namely, he thinks that there is a barrier of sorts between this synthetic mode of intuition and the intellect. As he writes, the intellect must always operate symbolically:

Without the help of language we humans cannot achieve any distinct cognition or use of reason... our cognition becomes lively and fiery, but also confused, as soon as we survey a number of notes at once, and if we wish to distinguish them, then we must separate them and assign to each a particular sign or name, out of which symbolic cognition arises. As soon as we return our glance to the thing and abstract from the signs, then the notes become confused among each other, the universal mixes with the particular, the essential with the contingent, and distinctness vanishes.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶² Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §529.

⁵⁶³ *JubA*, 5.1:488.

In other words, even if the kind of intuition Resewitz describes is possible, it cannot contribute to distinct cognition, which yields intellectual knowledge.

This passage is remarkable for two reasons. First, less than a year earlier Mendelssohn had claimed that we *could* achieve at the least a very basic level of distinctness without the use of language.⁵⁶⁴ Indeed, this seems to be a requirement of his rationalist theory of the origin of language which he had offered in response to Rousseau's challenge some years earlier.⁵⁶⁵ It would be a somewhat shocking reversal if he now held, with Hamann and Herder, that language is a prerequisite for *any* exercise of intellect whatsoever. Did he feel so threatened by the possibility of *any* intuitive use of intellect that he reversed himself? That seems implausible, but we must set aside the issue for now.

Second, it seems that, again, Mendelssohn has failed to meet Resewitz's actual view.⁵⁶⁶ For Resewitz never claimed that *unaided* intuition could achieve distinct cognition. As he made clear, he intended his intellectual intuition to be a synthesis of various pieces of information, many of which, as he explicitly claimed (above), require frequent "return" to distinct symbolic cognition. Resewitz's point is not that intuition can give us an entirely distinct intuition of God or other souls – in fact he explicitly denies that. Rather, Resewitz wants to say that we can achieve *some* kind of intuition of

⁵⁶⁴ *JubA*, 5.1:340-341.

⁵⁶⁵ See "Sendschreiben an den Herrn Magister Lessing in Leipzig," *JubA* 2:104-109.

⁵⁶⁶ It is not entirely clear whether this part of Mendelssohn's review is aimed at Resewitz's "intuition of reason." However, Mendelssohn's central claim here that the intellect cannot be intuitive seems directly relevant.

the connection among metaphysical truths, which he thinks can amount to a mostly obscure intuition of unsensed individuals.

Responding to Resewitz's purported intuition of God, Mendelssohn next admits that although the "empirical cognition of God" (i.e. in the way Resewitz described) has "some value,"

one must also consider that all the experience in the world cannot give us a concept of *omnipotence*. He who can do this or that still can't do everything, and experience never proves more than that God can do this or that. If the concepts of omnipotence are to be awakened in me, then I must silently think the symbolic proposition to myself: *He who can create this and that from nothing can also bring everything possible forth from nothing*. The intuition of divine works does not give us any concept of the divine properties, but only awakens us to conclude the same [logically]... We must therefore give every cognition its worth, and not assign more to the empirical than it has fact has.⁵⁶⁷

At first glance it seems that Mendelssohn has missed the point here as well. In the passage (above) which Mendelssohn himself cites in his review, Resewitz never claimed that the purpose of the intuition was to give us a *distinct concept* of God's omnipotence, nor would he agree that the point of his intuition is to *prove* anything at all. Further, consider what Mendelssohn himself had written (and recently republished) in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, as a recommendation for experiencing intellectual pleasure:

In short, think over everything that the naked eye, the telescope, reason and the senses have made known about the world. Consider the reasons... which prompt us to see our world-system multiplied in a myriad of fixed stars, and our home here on earth multiplied across innumerable planets [Kugeln]... gradually climb up the chain which fastens all beings to the throne of God, then swing yourself up with bold flights to the universal relation of all these parts to the immeasurable whole. What a heavenly delight will suddenly race over you!⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁷ *JubA*, 5.1:491.

⁵⁶⁸ *JubA*, 1:52.

The similarity with Resewitz's description is remarkable. Is Mendelssohn guilty of inconsistency in addition to misunderstanding?

Looking at Mendelssohn's criticism more closely, however, we can see that the target of Mendelssohn's critique is not the possibility of a synthetic, confused cognition that is intuitive to some degree. After all, he freely admitted in his review that a similar sort of cognition (which he calls "empirical") is possible and even "has some value."⁵⁶⁹ Mendelssohn denies only that such an intuition could yield *novel*, distinct concepts of God's properties. For example, we must already have the concept of omnipotence from intellectual considerations if it is to be involved in our intuition of wondrous nature. That this was his concern comes out even more clearly in the passage which immediately precedes the above:

Perhaps geniuses have an advantage here, and can feel with the understanding? No one who does not [actually] possess that means can decide this. I must therefore leave the question unanswered. But this much is certain: according to that presupposition, it can be understood what a true genius recently wanted to assert: namely, that one could, in a condition of fiery sentiment, better *feel* newer truths about God and his properties than could be *proven* with the help of frosty reason. Our author [Resewitz] has a similar thought on this topic.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁹ The phrase "has some value" is an ironic play on Klopstock's "admission" that the "cold metaphysical" way of considering God "could be useful" (*Klopstocks sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Göschen, 1839), 9:157).

⁵⁷⁰ *JubA*, 5.1:490. Herman Wolf claims that this passage shows Mendelssohn admits the *possibility* that some people are able to "feel new truths" (*Geniebegriiffs*, 140). Taken in context, however, it is clear that Mendelssohn is only being cautious; the sense of "possibility" he endorses is obviously extremely weak.

Resewitz as proxy for Klopstock

The reference in this passage to “a true genius” is highly significant. It points to Resewitz’s description of Klopstock,⁵⁷¹ and the idea of “better feeling than proving novel truths about God” comes from Klopstock’s 1758 essay “Von der besten Art, über Gott zu denken” [“Of the best way to think about God”].⁵⁷² In that short essay, Klopstock had, like Resewitz, attacked what he called the “cold metaphysical” consideration of God. He described the “highest level” of thinking about God in terms similar to Resewitz, as “a condition of the soul in which so many thoughts and sentiments affect it all at once and with such strength that what occurs in it would exceed every description.”⁵⁷³ Consequently, wrote Klopstock, “out of the throng of these quickly running thoughts, these thoughts of such exact determinations” we can “extract some in coldness [Kaltsinn] and bring them into brief propositions [kurze Sätze]; what new truths about God would be among these!”⁵⁷⁴

While Klopstock does not invoke the concepts of rationalist psychology, the process he has in mind is clear enough. We can, he claims, arrive in two steps at novel truths about God. First, we put ourselves into a certain state of profound feeling by opening our mind, as it were, to a vast number of “thoughts and sentiments” about the divine. Once we are in this state, we will be able to “extract” some propositions from it and thereby attain new, distinct knowledge about God. Mendelssohn’s main target here

⁵⁷¹ Resewitz, *Versuch*, 3:29.

⁵⁷² Klopstock, *Werke*, 9:155-161. I am indebted to Rosenthal (*Geniebegriff*, 70) for this important reference.

⁵⁷³ Klopstock, *Werke*, 9:160-161.

⁵⁷⁴ Klopstock, *Werke*, 9:160.

therefore seems to be this view of Klopstock's, and he reads Resewitz as adopting Klopstock's view and then attempting to explain it in terms of the standard rationalist psychology. Was this fair? Although Resewitz praises Klopstock highly several times in his essay, he never explicitly references that particular work (though its influence is apparent), nor does he decisively and explicitly endorse the idea that intuition can directly *discover* new distinct truths not accessible to reason. Instead, he constantly emphasizes the *use* of distinct and analytical cognition in achieving an intuition, not (explicitly) the possible use of intuition in *producing* novel distinct truths.

Still, there are several reasons to think that it was not unfair of Mendelssohn to attribute Klopstock's view to Resewitz. The entire *Versuch 2* is ostensibly about the genius's power of invention (though that thread seems to get lost rather quickly in Resewitz's muddled prose), and Resewitz does not *deny* that intuition can produce novel truths. In fact, as we saw, he strongly identifies intuition with novelty and the production of new, individually conditioned representations. And it must be remembered that Mendelssohn had heard Resewitz present his work orally and almost certainly discussed it with him in person. Significant misunderstanding on a point left tacitly open in the published work is unlikely. In the end, whether or not it was unfair for Mendelssohn to ascribe Klopstock's view to Resewitz, there is certainly a deep issue at stake here: whether novel truths can be discovered through intellectual intuition. Where Klopstock had merely asserted this possibility, Resewitz perhaps went some way toward establishing it on the basis of rationalist psychology.

On the possibility of intuition yielding novel truths

In order to evaluate the dispute between Mendelssohn and Resewitz here, we need to revisit the concept of intuition. As we saw, intuition was understood by both Mendelssohn and Resewitz in two ways: one, as a *manner* of cognition which represented “the things themselves” more immediately and distinctly than signs; and two, as a type of cognition having a characteristic *object*, namely individuals rather than abstractions. Resewitz begins plausibly enough with the idea that we can generate non-symbolic cognitions out of a mixture of intuitive and symbolic cognitions. This way of thinking involves a combination of feeling and imagining *inspired* by discursive propositions, but accompanied by a constant return to individuals, and an avoidance of the use of the discursive signs in thought. In other words, we can arrive at an intuition by proceeding in our thought according to the usual *manner* of intuition. This much is consistent with Mendelssohn’s views and examples. Resewitz, however, seems to think that a thought generated in this way can yield a completely novel intuition in its *objective* sense, i.e., a novel representation of something robustly *individual*. Because an individual is determined in every way, if we were able to achieve such a cognition, we might be able to derive novel intellectual truths from a subsequent analysis of it.

Both in the review and later in his 1763 prize essay *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften* [*Treatise on evidence in the metaphysical sciences*], Mendelssohn emphatically rejects this latter possibility. According to both works, intuitions are only and always given confusedly to sense. While we can make these given intuitions more distinct through intellectual analysis, the intellect cannot add

anything new or produce novel intuitions in the objective sense.⁵⁷⁵ Thus Mendelssohn's description of contemplating God and nature *is* different from Resewitz's after all. For Mendelssohn, the intellectual content of this contemplation, even if intuitive in some sense, can include only what the intellect had previously discovered through its analysis of originally sensed intuitions. Resewitz, following Klopstock, seems to think that a similar sort of contemplation, through its return to (intellectual) intuition, can actually produce intellectual content within radically novel intuitions, and subsequently yield new intellectual truths.

While Mendelssohn's took a firm position on this issue, he never entirely clarified the relation between the two meanings of intuition. That is, he never explained exactly why or how non-symbolic representation, and exclusively non-symbolic representation, can directly represent real individuals. According to rationalist doctrine, the individual does not transcend universal law but is simply an entity that is completely determined through universal laws. Standardly, intuition perceives such an individual clearly but confusedly. And it is uncontroversial that we can also achieve a clear but confused cognition synthetically, by combining information from various sources. So what exactly bars such a synthetic cognition from being a cognition of a novel individual? Why could not novel intellectual truths be derived from this contemplation? Why should it not be possible, in other words, that a representation which proceeds in the usual *manner* of intuition, i.e., avoiding signs, could yield the

⁵⁷⁵ *JubA*, 2:274-276.

usual *object* of intuition, i.e. the representation of a concrete individual? Mendelssohn does not seem to provide answers to these questions.

It might be suggested that a synthetic cognition like Resewitz's "intuition of reason" can contain no more content than its constituent parts, so it could never generate a representation of an individual not already given to sense. But it is essential to rationalism that the mind is an active faculty – a *vis representativa*. It is inherently able to discover truths that go beyond the given (an obvious example being the development of mathematics). Much more would need to be said about why it does not have a similar power with respect to the intuition of individuals.

Another way to resolve the difficulty might be to invoke the *genetic* aspect of intuition, a factor which was not clearly distinguished from its other properties during the debate. Perhaps it is *essential* to intuition (in the sense of having the individual for its object) that the representation *originate* entirely from sense, and not at all through abstract intellectual considerations. This would indeed bar Resewitz's intellectual intuition, if only by something of a fiat. But Mendelssohn does not actually make this claim, and it is not clear how he would have defended it. As it stands, it is hard to see how Mendelssohn's denial amounts to much more than a bare assertion. Although Resewitz also failed to give a fully convincing argument for his view, the possibility he suggested needed a more careful treatment from Mendelssohn.

We can best sum up the significance of this unfinished debate by returning to a much earlier dispute between Resewitz and Mendelssohn. In 1756, Resewitz had objected to Mendelssohn's argument against the rationality of suicide partly on the

ground that distinct rational argument could never dissuade someone actually contemplating the act.⁵⁷⁶ Mendelssohn had responded by dividing the *theoretical* issue of the morality of suicide, with which his argument was concerned, from the *practical* issue of how best to prevent people from taking their own lives. Theoretical arguments, he admitted, were not moving, and he implied that others could step in and provide more sensible, persuasive, and moving works to help prevent suicide now that he had established the rightness of that end.⁵⁷⁷ But Mendelssohn's reply here presupposed a distinction between the ends of philosophy and poetry, something it seems Resewitz would have denied. The latter's development of intellectual intuition was in part an attempt to make poetry, qua *rational* instrument, no less important for the *discovery* of truth than abstract analysis. While Mendelssohn did not appreciate the full implications of this idea in their exchange, and both the original treatise and the review were messy and inconclusive, their discussion nonetheless marked one of the first debates over intellectual intuition and the significance of returning philosophy to intuition. These ideas would reach a culminating point in the Romantic era some 40 years later.

Additional comments on genius

Beyond the three major reviews covered above, Mendelssohn offers us only a few more scattered comments on genius. In his review comparing editions of Lichtwer's fables, Mendelssohn writes that "genius alone [without taste] brings forth great but formless beauties, and no one has ever seen a fully developed piece come from a mere

⁵⁷⁶ This led Altmann to claim that Resewitz "seems to have had an aversion to abstract reasoning" (*Moses Mendelssohn*, 81). That assessment is unfair and simply not supported by the text.

⁵⁷⁷ *JubA*, 11:48.

genius, in which a master could have found nothing to polish." He goes on to reiterate a claim he had made in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*: "But no distinct cognition of rules! This is perhaps of entirely indispensable use for a healthy genius. Just as a body is healthier the less it feels the natural life processes which occur in it, it may also be better for a genius when he does not feel too distinctly everything that happens in him. – But taste is the more necessary for genius... without taste one will never be able to complete a work which completely meets all its ends."⁵⁷⁸ As in the *Briefe*, Mendelssohn's warning against the distinct cognition of rules is not an attack on rules per se.⁵⁷⁹ Rather, it is a *psychological* rule of thumb: if one is too intent on following specific rules, then one will as a matter of fact tend to lose sight of the whole, which must always be the true end of the work. Far from rejecting rules, Mendelssohn's point here is that *lack* of knowledge of them (i.e. lack of taste) will produce an equally serious defect – failure to create a coherent whole. The correct, middle path is indicated in Mendelssohn's *Rhapsodie*, where he explains how one can transform abstract knowledge of rules into a kind of second nature, a skill, through practice, experience, and reflection.⁵⁸⁰

In his review of Hamann's works written a few months later, Mendelssohn expands a bit on the relation between taste and genius. Genius, he writes, measures everything according to its own power, without considering how it will be received by others. If it happens that the artist presupposes no more than readers know, the result

⁵⁷⁸ *JubA*, 5.1:530.

⁵⁷⁹ Nor is there any evidence that Mendelssohn meant set up an opposition between "natural" and "conventional" rules, as Segreff holds (*Moses Mendelssohn*, 66), or between rules pertaining to the object and rules pertaining to our subjective response, as Rosenthal believes (*Geniebegriff*, 83).

⁵⁸⁰ *JubA*, 1:417-419.

can be a wonderful easiness. But where it flies beyond the reader's understanding (a particular problem with Hamann's style), "it becomes obscure, and where it is left to its fire, extravagant and confused." Taste, by contrast, teaches us to direct our powers to the minds of readers, in order to produce works "about which the least [reader] thinks *no less*, and the most enlightened [reader] thinks *far more* than what is written." Nothing is more likely to "seduce" a writer like Hamann away from this middle path than "the desire to make one's own way, in order to be an Original."⁵⁸¹

Yet, in a 1765 Literaturbrief on the works of J.E. Schlegel, Mendelssohn seems to cast away his wariness about genius. "With taste, reason, and critique one can become a very good poet, but one does not thereby possess any poetic genius. Now, in a poet I regard genius more highly than taste, reason and critique..."⁵⁸² Wolf sees this as evidence of Mendelssohn's inchoate radicalism, an admission of the absolute right of genius against rules.⁵⁸³ However, the rest of the sentence reads, "... namely, if I am supposed to be choosing and not finding all excellent properties together."⁵⁸⁴ "Choosing," of course, is a reference to the first step in Mendelssohn's prescription for aesthetic enjoyment described in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*.⁵⁸⁵ Mendelssohn's point here is simply that genius deserves the most attention *at the initial and superficial stage of*

⁵⁸¹ *JubA*, 5.1:558-559.

⁵⁸² *JubA*, 5.1:652.

⁵⁸³ Wolf, *Geniebegriiffs*, 140.

⁵⁸⁴ *JubA*, 5.1:652.

⁵⁸⁵ *JubA*, 1:54.

choosing among various objects. It does not necessarily merit the greatest weight in the *enjoyment* of art works, which constitutes their purpose. So, there is nothing truly radical here at all.

Chapter 5: The sublime⁵⁸⁶

“Even if the author’s principles aren’t good for much, his book is still unusually useful as a collection of all the happenings and perceptions which philosophers must accept without argument in the course of these investigations... [and] no one will better know how to use them than you.”⁵⁸⁷

With this comment, Lessing presented to his friend Mendelssohn a copy of Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. By all accounts,⁵⁸⁸ Lessing did not underestimate the impact Burke’s work would have on Mendelssohn’s thought. But what exactly was this impact? It is commonly thought that Burke’s treatment of the sublime pushed Mendelssohn toward a decisive break from his early Wolffian perfection-aesthetic and toward the supposedly “emotionalistic” aesthetic of the sublime in his later writings.⁵⁸⁹ In this chapter, I challenge that reading. Just as Lessing expected, Mendelssohn vehemently resisted Burke’s general theory of the sublime even while accepting his examples and observations as uncontroversial data. Burke induced Mendelssohn to flesh out his view rather than to transform it, and under this influence Mendelssohn developed a plausible but incomplete theory of the sublime.

The initial clash

When Mendelssohn first read Burke’s *Enquiry*, he had already written his own treatise on the sublime, *Betrachtungen über das Erhabene und das Nüve in den schönen*

⁵⁸⁶ I wish to thank Reinier Munk and the Center for Jewish Philosophy of the Faculty of Philosophy, VU University Amsterdam for organizing and supporting the Mendelssohn Colloquium at which I first presented a version of this essay.

⁵⁸⁷ *JubA*, 11:178.

⁵⁸⁸ E.g., Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, 146, 171; Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 34, 38; *JubA*, 1:400.

⁵⁸⁹ Bamberger, introduction to *JubA*, 1:XLII-XLIV. For an opposed reading which broadly concurs with my own, see Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 221-224.

Wissenschaften (hereafter *Das Erhabene*).⁵⁹⁰ In that work, Mendelssohn claims that a thing is sublime which “is capable of arousing wonder through its extraordinary degree of perfection,” and that the sublime in the arts specifically⁵⁹¹ “consists in the sensible expression of such a perfection that arouses wonder.”⁵⁹² Since Mendelssohn understood beauty as sensible perfection, he basically took the sublime to be the extraordinarily beautiful, although the requirement that it produce wonder meant that it must be novel and presented suddenly or unexpectedly.⁵⁹³

In explaining the sublime as an extreme form of beauty, Mendelssohn was attempting to give a theory of the sublime which made it *in principle* amenable to rational analysis. Of course, as he had already argued concerning beauty in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, we do not find the analysis of the beautiful or sublime itself pleasurable, since pleasure is intuitive and the intuition of a manifold is necessarily confused for human beings.⁵⁹⁴ As in the case of beauty, pleasure in the sublime would occur only at its sensible apprehension.

In Burke’s work, Mendelssohn encountered both a background theory of aesthetics and a view of the sublime radically opposed to his own. Where Mendelssohn attempted to give an account of the beautiful and sublime primarily based on the

⁵⁹⁰ The work was pending publication. See Mendelssohn’s letter to Lessing, 25 October 1757, *JubA*, 11:164.

⁵⁹¹ In this early treatise Mendelssohn does not seem to consider natural sensible objects, but there is no particular reason to exclude them from sensibly expressing some great perfection.

⁵⁹² *JubA*, 1:193-194.

⁵⁹³ *JubA*, 1:196.

⁵⁹⁴ *JubA*, 1:50.

rational property of perfection in the object,⁵⁹⁵ Burke denied perfection any role.⁵⁹⁶ He focused instead on the emotional effects that certain objects produce in us, which effects he held were simple and unanalyzable.⁵⁹⁷ While Mendelssohn, following Boileau and pseudo-Longinus, takes the paragon case of the sublime to be the Biblical “let there be light” and chooses examples of the sublime involving feelings of amazement, soaring elation, deep despair, or pity, Burke’s examples focus on pain, fear, danger, darkness, rawness, and disorder. In Burke’s view, “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.”⁵⁹⁸ Burke also holds that the sublime differs from the beautiful in kind, and although in his view the sublime is based on terror, he nonetheless sets the sublime above the beautiful in its effect on us as well as its general significance.⁵⁹⁹ These stark differences in perspective initially led Mendelssohn to admit to Lessing, “Perhaps I do not properly grasp [Burke’s] thoughts, because it is still unknown to me what he understands by beautiful and sublime.”⁶⁰⁰

Despite the incongruity in their attitudes and favored examples, the two philosophers shared a more fundamental view about the sublime as we actually experience it: Both agreed, as Boileau had influentially put it, that the sublime is something “extraordinary and marvelous that strikes us... and makes a work elevate,

⁵⁹⁵ This is not to say that the subjective act of cognizing the object does not also come into play. But for Mendelssohn, the pleasure of the sublime nonetheless requires some basis in the perfection of the object, (*JubA*, 1:193).

⁵⁹⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), §3.10.

⁵⁹⁷ “Pain and pleasure are simple ideas, incapable of definition,” Burke, *Enquiry*, §1.2. For Mendelssohn’s explicit rejection of this idea, see his 1758 commentary on Burke at *JubA*, 3.1:237.

⁵⁹⁸ Burke, *Enquiry*, §2.2.

⁵⁹⁹ Burke, *Enquiry*, §3.27, §1.7.

⁶⁰⁰ *JubA*, 11:182.

ravish, and transport us.”⁶⁰¹ Experience shows that both Mendelssohn and Burke’s favored examples of the sublime could be powerfully moving in just this way, producing a feeling at least somewhat wonder-like, as well as a sort of pleasurable thrill in the body. Thus the objects of their respective inquiries are not really so different as it might seem. But Burke’s account, unlike Mendelssohn’s, places the sublime in the realm of fundamentally unanalyzable passions, outside the jurisdiction of reason. This was not lost on Mendelssohn, who quickly came to recognize the significant threat that Burke’s theory posed – not just to rationalist aesthetics, but to the project of Enlightenment rationalism in general. Certainly it was true, as Mendelssohn complained, that Burke was unfamiliar with Wolffian philosophy and did not give direct arguments against it.⁶⁰² Yet Burke’s vivid descriptions of actual emotional experience are compelling in their own right, and they required a response.

Mendelssohn had already addressed this empiricist perspective to some extent in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, but Burke pressed his case much harder than Euphranor,⁶⁰³ particularly with respect to the role of negative passions and experiences characteristic of the terrible sublime.⁶⁰⁴ For Burke, our greatest and most profound

⁶⁰¹ Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Oeuvres de Boileau* ed. M. Amar (Paris: Lefèvre, 1824), 3:10.

⁶⁰² *JubA*, 11:181.

⁶⁰³ Euphranor is the youthful character in the correspondence who defends a sensualist/emotionalist perspective on aesthetic pleasure.

⁶⁰⁴ Euphranor does raise the issue of pleasure in terror in the eighth letter: “It is no more the beautiful nature; no! The fearsome, terrible nature. And you find pleasure in it!” (*JubA*, 1:74). But, perhaps because of particular example chosen – of a depiction of sailors trying to resist terrible nature, rather a direct experience of terrible nature – Euphranor lets Palemon get away with an inadequate explanation, namely, that “Every painful delight of which pity has no part grounds itself on nothing but the skill of the performing person or animal” (*JubA*, 1:108). As discussed below, Mendelssohn recognized the inadequacy of this response in 1756.

pleasures arise from fear, darkness, rawness, and pain. But in the Wolffian tradition, the feeling of pain is explained as the intuition of imperfection, fear and other negative emotions as modifications of pain, and darkness as a cognitive imperfection. In other words, these emotions arise from the consideration of disorderly objects whose parts are not governed by rules of the whole. That they could be pleasurable, as Burke not only claimed but also vividly described, seemed to run directly counter to rationalist psychology. Mendelssohn's first task, therefore, was to reconcile Burke's descriptions of these seemingly negative pleasures with his own view that pleasure is the intuition of perfection.

There are in general two ways to read Mendelssohn's attempt at reconciliation. First, one could read Mendelssohn as accepting the Burkean sublime objects and psychology largely on Burke's terms. On this reading, which I will call the "weak" reading, Mendelssohn handles the Burkean sublime entirely through his new theory of "mixed sentiments."⁶⁰⁵ According to that theory, we can take pleasure even in imperfect objects because the positive activity of our minds involved in considering them counts as a subjective perfection. So, even though a massively raw mountain or a threatening storm might be highly imperfect in itself, we can still take pleasure in viewing it simply because it provides an occasion for vigorous mental activity.⁶⁰⁶ The "aesthetic illusion" created by artistic representations of such objects further distances us from the objective

⁶⁰⁵ Mendelssohn credits Burke's *Enquiry* as the inspiration for his new theory (*PS*, 2:17-19), but Mendelssohn had already begun to discuss sentiments involving a mixture of pleasure and displeasure in his various treatments of tragedy (see Chapter 3).

⁶⁰⁶ For this reading, see Bamberger, *JubA*, 1:XLIII-XLIV. Bamberger regards this development as a great improvement in Mendelssohn's theory.

imperfection, so that we are left free to enjoy our subjective activity.⁶⁰⁷ Such a subjective-tending view about the sublime is plausibly understood as an anticipation of Kant's full-blow subjectivism.⁶⁰⁸

According to the other reading, which I will label the "strong" reading, Mendelssohn retained the core of his original view that pleasure in the sublime is primarily based on great objective perfection. He sought ways to account for Burke's examples and observations within the framework of the rational-perfection theory. The strong approach does not exclude the theory of mixed sentiments from partially explaining the feeling of the sublime, but it retains the idea that the sublime is always based on an extremely great objective perfection. In the remainder of the paper, I defend the strong reading against the weak reading on both exegetical and substantive grounds.

The early response to Burke

The unpublished *Anmerkungen zu Burkes Enquiry*, written in 1758, clearly illustrates Mendelssohn's struggle to preserve his basic view in *Das Erhabene*. Through a series of reflections claimed to be written down "as I thought of them,"⁶⁰⁹ Mendelssohn first attempts to explain Burke's concept of the sublime by suggesting that it may be a more specific category, namely the so-called "sublime in the passions."⁶¹⁰ But this suggestion is implausible, because Mendelssohn's examples of "sublime in the passions" involve third-person depictions of strong passions, e.g. those aroused by seeing Jocasta

⁶⁰⁷ Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 36.

⁶⁰⁸ E.g. Bamberger, introduction to *JubA*, 1:XLVII.

⁶⁰⁹ *JubA*, 3.1:253.

⁶¹⁰ *JubA*, 3.1:238.

in *Oedipus Rex*. Therefore he does not account for the more immediate, first-person passions evoked by a threatening storm or an overhanging mountain peak. This idea is also unhelpful, because it does nothing to account for the imperfection allegedly lying at the basis of these examples. Fortunately, by the time he had reached the conclusion of his commentary, Mendelssohn had hit on an improved response, which runs as follows:

Some representations are primary-sublime, insofar as they present wonder-worthy perfections, but others are merely secondary-sublime, insofar as they cause the representation to affect us more strongly, and suddenly rush over us, or insofar as they manage to achieve in some mechanical fashion a thrill in the outer limbs. For since the sudden enrapture of attention in the soul is connected with a thrill in the outer limbs of the body, they must reciprocally bring forth each other, as was noticed about all effects and causes in animal nature. As in my treatise [*Das Erhabene*], I would seek the originally sublime solely in wonder. The secondary- sublime, or the means of encouraging of the sublime, I would ascribe to all representations, which are terrible, wild, raw, monstrous and such like, and at this opportunity [if I were now to write a treatise on the sublime] I would make use of the excellent comments of our author [Burke], and seek to connect them with my general principles.⁶¹¹

At least in this commentary, then, Mendelssohn does not consider Burke's sublime to be a new, separate, and independent kind of sublime. Instead, he aims to subordinate the Burkean concept to his own. The sorts of things Burke takes to be sublime are according to Mendelssohn only *means* for promoting the Mendelssohnian "primary" sublime, and they work in two ways: by "framing" the object so that it produces a greater psychological effect, and by directly causing the same physical effects which are normally produced directly by the mind when we contemplate something "originally sublime." The idea that the bodily effects of the sublime could be produced directly was actually suggested by Burke in his discussion of terror, which Mendelssohn

⁶¹¹ *JubA*, 3.1:252.

praises.⁶¹² Along with the first part of the strategy, this opens up a way for Mendelssohn to explain how the Burkean examples are significantly *related* to the sublime, without admitting them as being sublime in their own right. Mendelssohn concludes the passage by suggesting that the value of Burke's "excellent comments" lies in the "use" to which they could be put in promoting the sublime in the sense of unusually great perfection, i.e., the sublime according to "my general principles."

Mendelssohn had already begun to carry out this strategy in the course of the commentary. He writes, "Greatness seizes our attention and holds it fast to an object. The raw and monstrous arouse fear [Schrecken] and astonishment [Erstaunen]. The uneven in the small parts draws our attention away from the parts and turns it to the whole. The straight line pleases only in sublime buildings, by which occasion they indicate inattention to outer ornamentation. The sudden transition from light to darkness, and the reverse, arouses amazement."⁶¹³ Thus, one important and plausible way of promoting the sublime qualities of an object involves drawing attention to its qualities, its wholeness, or the perfections it represents. This idea is not new - Mendelssohn had already employed it in his original treatise⁶¹⁴ to explain the requirement of novelty and the value of poetic devices such as incomplete inferences

⁶¹² Burke, *Enquiry*, §§4.2-5; *JubA*, 3.1:248.

⁶¹³ *JubA*, 3.1:247.

⁶¹⁴ Baumgarten had also used a similar strategy to explain the wonderful (*Reflections on poetry*, §46).

and sequences of one-syllable words,⁶¹⁵ but thanks to Burke he was able to conceive of these enhancing elements much more broadly.

The exact way in which astonishment and fear can enhance the primary-sublime requires more explanation. On Mendelssohn's view in *Das Erhabene*, "[The sublime] fastens our attention through [its] novelty... in such a way that we linger on it a while, without wandering to other objects, and when this lasts for a time, it becomes a condition of the mind called astonishment [Erstaunen]."⁶¹⁶ Since astonishment is an effect of the sublime, and "everything in animal nature" must "mutually bring forth each other," whatever can serve to cause or promote this astonishment will *promote* the sublime. But being *astonishing* itself is neither necessary nor sufficient to make something sublime. As for fear [Schrecken], Mendelssohn holds that it shares important features with wonder, specifically its sudden onset and its production of trembling and related bodily effects.⁶¹⁷ For these reasons, the fearful can support and enhance the sublime, but again, fear itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for the sublime. As Mendelssohn goes on to explain, only perfection can produce the wonder characteristic of the primary-sublime. Fear, as such, is always produced by the cognition of imperfection. If we consider these affects separately and in themselves, the one is pleasurable and the other displeasurable.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ *JubA*, 1:199. The use of such devices in the sublime was recommended by pseudo-Longinus (*On the sublime*, 99-107).

⁶¹⁶ *JubA*, 1:196.

⁶¹⁷ *JubA*, 3.1:251.

⁶¹⁸ *JubA*, 3.1:251-252.

Still, one might ask how what is frightening can be sublime at all on Mendelssohn's view, given that the former feeling has its basis in imperfection and the latter in great perfection. Mendelssohn does write in his commentary that the unpleasantness of fear disappears in imitation.⁶¹⁹ But it does not follow from this that for Mendelssohn *only* artistic imitations can be sublime.⁶²⁰ A more complete answer, which can also account for the sublime in nature, is that the sublime object need not be perfect and imperfect in the same sense, or perhaps more importantly, need not be presented in a way that brings imperfection to the fore. As Mendelssohn explains, in the sublime "the pleasantness is an effect of the perfection, which can lie either in the thing itself, or in the way in which it is represented."⁶²¹ To take one often-used example, our perception of a hero's virtue is actually enhanced through our fear and pity at his suffering – not because the suffering itself is a perfection, but because the shock of his pain provides a contrasting background which calls to mind and brightens the hero's virtue.⁶²² The more Burkean case of fear for our own personal destruction can be understood in a similar fashion, except that the fear comes first temporally. For example, we are initially terrified and shrink back from the stormy sea, but if we are able to contemplate it a bit, we may then begin to notice its perfection, i.e. the powerful yet law-governed motion of the waves and peaks. The perfection rushes over us suddenly because it defies our

⁶¹⁹ *JubA*, 3.1:252.

⁶²⁰ Segreff, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 35-36.

⁶²¹ Mendelssohn to Abbt, 9 March 1761, *JubA*, 11:202.

⁶²² E.g., Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:110.

expectations, and then it shows itself more clearly against the background of the frightening destructiveness.⁶²³

Now, Burke had also made a distinction between the frightening aspect of the sublime and the *merely* frightening, and likewise for other passions associated with the sublime. He writes, “if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person... they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of the passions. Its object is the sublime.”⁶²⁴ For Burke, the distinction between the frighteningly sublime and the merely frightening is *subjective*, that is, based on the sum of our feelings and attitudes toward the object, rather than on the properties of the object itself. If our fear becomes too “noxious” or the pain becomes too severe, the object cannot appear sublime, but if these feelings are moderated then the object will seem sublime to us. Since for Burke these passions are unanalyzable, they need not have any constant or universal relation to the observed object itself. This differs markedly from Mendelssohn’s *objective* view, according to which the frighteningly sublime distinguishes itself from the merely frightening through the great sensible perfection contained in the object.

⁶²³ This view also comes out later in the 1761 edition of *Briefe über die Empfindungen*: “The imperfect, considered as imperfect, cannot possibly be pleasurable. But since nothing can be absolutely imperfect, but good is always mixed with evil, one can bring to bear the habit of abstracting from evil, and turning one’s attention to the good, with which it is connected” (*PS*, 1:141-142).

⁶²⁴ Burke, *Enquiry*, §4.7.

Burke also claims in his *Enquiry* that darkness and obscurity greatly contribute to the feeling of the sublime.⁶²⁵ This raised a further problem for Mendelssohn, because what is obscure furnishes us with no information about the object's perfection, and also creates a sensible uniformity that he claims we find tedious or even disgusting.⁶²⁶ To some extent, obscurity can serve to frame and contrast with a great and more clearly perceived perfection, playing a role similar to fear and astonishment in Mendelssohn's theory. For example, as Mendelssohn writes in the 1771 edition of *Das Erhabene*, an artist might obscure the boundaries of an object with a blinding gleam – not because the obscurity itself is sublime, but because it makes the object seem immeasurably great, enhancing the sublime effect.⁶²⁷ But this response seems ineffective against the examples Burke provides in his own discussion of darkness: the “dark woods” and the “dark part of the hut” supposedly employed by druids and Native Americans in their religious rituals. In these cases the darkness seems central to the object, and they seem to draw their sublimity directly from their mystery and obscurity.

Unfortunately, Mendelssohn does not provide any comment on this section of Burke except to say that it is “incomparable.”⁶²⁸ Nonetheless, there seems to be a ready rationalist reply available to him. Baumgarten had insisted that the perfection (or “greatness”) of the sublime need not be in the object itself, provided that the object is presented in such a way as to produce great and perfect thoughts, and Mendelssohn had

⁶²⁵ Burke, *Enquiry*, §2.3.

⁶²⁶ “Uniformity, meagerness, fruitlessness is unbearable to taste” (*JubA*, 1:172). See also *JubA*, 1:398.

⁶²⁷ Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:459.

⁶²⁸ Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.1:241.

endorsed the same view in the original *Das Erhabene*.⁶²⁹ This seems to exactly capture the intended effect of the darkness in pagan temples: to emphasize the feebleness of the petitioners, encouraging them to think of the greatness and perfection of the gods without distraction. The darkness itself is not sublime, but it does encourage appropriately acculturated observers to think sublime thoughts which have been associated with the obscure object. If there were no such great thoughts to think – if the darkness were not encountered within the context of religious doctrine and ritual – then it would be annoying or perhaps frightening, but not sublime.

The sensibly immeasurable and the later response to Burke

Although it seems clear enough that Mendelssohn initially defended his early view against Burke, it is possible that this strong reaction later gave way to acquiescence. Beginning with the 1761 *Rhapsodie*, Mendelssohn begins to connect the sublime closely to what he terms “the sensibly immeasurable.” To a large extent this shift was certainly due to Burke, who had included several sections on “Vastness,” “Infinity,” and “The artificial Infinite,” although other, less clear influences must have been at work as well.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §203. See also Baumgarten’s German commentary on that section, in Bernhard Poppe, *Alexander Baumgarten: Seine Bedeutung und Stellung in der Leibniz-Wolffischen Philosophie und seine Beziehungen zu Kant. Nebst Veröffentlichung einer bisher unbekanntten Handschrift der Ästhetik Baumgartens* (Leipzig: Robert Noske, 1907), 163. For Mendelssohn’s endorsement, see *JubA*, 1:197.

⁶³⁰ Likely sources are Richard Addison, *Spectator*, Nos. 412-413, pp. 6:76-87, and Johann Jakob Bodmer’s 1741 *Kritische Betrachtungen über die poetische Gemälde der Dichter* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1971), 211-215. But these works were known to Mendelssohn from the time of the *Briefe* (he refers to the *Spectator* in a 1756 essay, *JubA*, 1:534), and his 1758 commentary on Burke does not evince any particular interest in the infinite or the sensibly immeasurable. Abbt emphasized the infinite in his letter to Mendelssohn on the sublime, (7 March 1761, *JubA*, 11:198-199), but Mendelssohn received the letter after he had completed the first edition of the *Rhapsodie*. And Abbt’s evidently poor understanding of Mendelssohn’s previously published views in that letter suggests that they had not conversed extensively on the subject. It is also puzzling that Mendelssohn neglected to work the

Burke's legacy becomes even more apparent in the 1771 reworking of *Das Erhabene*, in which Mendelssohn directly borrows many of Burke's suggestions for depicting the immeasurable in art.⁶³¹ In this later edition, Mendelssohn also drops his explicit claims that the sublime differs from the beautiful only in degree.⁶³²

One might read this as evidence that Mendelssohn had adopted an entirely new "mark" of the sublime, now explaining it through the mental effort required to apprehend the infinite rather than through the objective property of perfection.⁶³³ This weak reading would have Mendelssohn providing a subjective, psychological basis for explaining why, for example, a mountain range is sublime but Gothic architecture is merely ugly: namely, only objects immeasurable in either extent or internal goodness can be sublime, because only such objects offer the mind the right kind of kind thrilling activity. It would bring Mendelssohn much closer to Burke, who had also explained the pleasure of the sublime through the exercise of our faculties.⁶³⁴ And it would also lend weight to the idea that Mendelssohn's theory merely anticipates Kant's, since Kant takes up the idea that the mathematically and dynamically infinite are the marks of the sublime.⁶³⁵

immeasurable into *Das Erhabene* until the 1771 edition, even though the concept is discussed in the 1761 edition of his *Rhapsodie*.

⁶³¹ Mendelssohn, *JubA* 1:455-458, cf. Burke, *Enquiry*, §§4.11-12.

⁶³² Mendelssohn, *JubA* 1:193, 210.

⁶³³ Bamberger claims that under the influence of Burke, Mendelssohn accepted "the dissolution of the sublime from the concept of perfection and its equivalence with the 'immeasurable'" (introduction to *JubA*, 1:XLIV).

⁶³⁴ Burke, *Enquiry*, §§4.6-7

⁶³⁵ E.g., Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 148, 152-153; Sommer, *Geschichte*, 134.

But this reading is mistaken. For one, Mendelssohn explicitly endorses the objective perfection view in a letter to Abbt written just after the *Rhapsodie* had gone to the printer: “An unexpected perfection lies at the basis of everything sublime in the beautiful sciences.”⁶³⁶ More importantly, Mendelssohn does not equate the sublime with the sensibly immeasurable, as this reading requires. Instead he carefully distinguishes them. Consider the key passage from the *Rhapsodie*:

The great world-ocean, a far-extended plain, the uncountable army of stars, the eternity of time, every height or depth which tires us, a great genius, great virtuous people whom we admire but [whose virtue we] cannot attain, who can behold these without shuddering, who can proceed to consider them without a pleasant dizziness? This sentiment is composed from pleasure and displeasure. The greatness of the object provide us with pleasure, but our inability to comprehend its boundaries mixes this pleasure with some bitterness, which makes it all the more charming... If the great object offers no manifold for us to consider in its immeasurableness, as the still sea, or an unfruitful plain not broken by any objects, then the dizziness is transformed at last into a kind of disgust at the uniformity of the object, the displeasure wins out, and we have to turn away from the confused sight of the object.... On the other hand, the immeasurability of the world structure, the greatness of a genius worthy of admiration, the great sublime virtuous one, are just as manifold as great, just as perfect as manifold, and the displeasure which is connected with its consideration is grounded on our weakness; for that reason it offers an unspeakable pleasure of which the soul can never be full.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁶ Mendelssohn to Abbt, 9 March 1761, *JubA*, 11:202. Admittedly this statement is restricted to the “beautiful sciences” – strictly speaking, fine arts which make use of artificial signs – but the whole correspondence treats the sublime in general.

⁶³⁷ *PS*, 2:10-11; *JubA*, 1:398. Here Mendelssohn is also specifically taking issue with Bodmer, who had claimed that greatness of extent in itself produces the sublime feeling of “Bestürzung und Stille,” and that manifoldness (required for perfection) is antithetical to this greatness. Consequently, according to Bodmer, the most moving great objects are a clear sky and a still ocean. See Bodmer, *Kritische Betrachtungen*, 212-218.

According to Mendelssohn, then, while we can get *some* pleasure from an immeasurable object simply from its vastness,⁶³⁸ that is not enough to produce the sublime feeling.⁶³⁹ In order to attain the “unspeakable pleasure” of the sublime, the thing must be “just as manifold as great” and “just as perfect as manifold.” And Mendelssohn’s most explicit published judgment of Burke’s work follows soon after in the text:

[Burke] assumed that the principle ‘the intuitive cognition of perfection provides pleasure’ is a mere hypothesis, and the least experience which seemed to contradict this hypothesis was for him reason enough to reject it. But one who is convinced that this principle of sentiments is no hypothesis, but an established and unshakeable truth, cannot be made wrong by any experience, no matter how much it seems to present the opposite. He will consider the matter further and find the most exact correspondence between reason and experience, which is often hard to find, but is nonetheless always there.⁶⁴⁰

Later, in describing the additions to *Das Erhabene* in the preface to the 1771 edition of his *Philosophische Schriften*, Mendelssohn explains that the feelings of the sublime, great, and strong “approach the thrilling and fearful, and are therefore related to each other as far as that goes. From this it can be grasped why the sublime is often accompanied by the fearful, and tends to be supported by it.”⁶⁴¹ Mendelssohn evidently retained his early view that the great and strong are not themselves sublime, but can

⁶³⁸ Mendelssohn never adequately explains the source of this pleasure in mere vastness. Most likely, he would have held it to be a combination of 1) pleasure in the exercise of our faculties, before they are completely exhausted; and 2) a similarity with the actual sublime insofar as the object is immeasurable. Because of this similarity, the vast object will be associated with the sublime in the imagination and produce a similar feeling, much as artificial depictions of the immeasurable do. See the quotation from the Preface to the 1771 edition (below) for evidence supporting this idea.

⁶³⁹ Cf. Henry Home’s similar view of the matter in his 1761 *Elements of Criticism*: “But, though a plain object of that kind [i.e. of vast size] be agreeable, it is not termed *grand*; it is not entitled to that character unless, together with its size, it be possessed of other qualities that contribute to beauty” (ed. Rev. James R. Boyd, New York: A. S. Barnes & Burr, 1863, §212). Apparently, Mendelssohn did not read this work until 1763 (letter to Iselin, 5 July 1763, *JubA*, 12.1:15-16).

⁶⁴⁰ *PS*, 2:18; *JubA*, 1:400-401.

⁶⁴¹ *JubA*, 1:231-232.

serve to support it by producing similar emotions and bodily effects. Further, the deletion of the claims that the sublime differs from the beautiful only in degree in this edition does not show that Mendelssohn abandoned the perfection aesthetic with respect to the sublime. It rather indicates his new recognition that the sublime is a more *specific* phenomenon than the extremely sensibly perfect in general, as he had previously claimed. Accordingly, in the 1771 edition Mendelssohn amends his earlier definition of the sublime to the following: "One could say in general that each thing, which is or seems immeasurable according to the degree of its perfection, is called sublime."⁶⁴² Clearly, Mendelssohn understands immeasurability here more as the ultimate source of his so-called "secondary-sublime," the one ingredient (in addition to great perfection) perhaps *required* to produce a feeling strong enough to earn the label of sublime. While the appearance of immeasurability may be a necessary ingredient of the sublime, it is not sufficient; objective perfection is also fundamentally required.

Nonetheless, the view that the sublime characteristically appears to be immeasurable gives rise to other difficulties, because sensible immeasurability and sensible perfection seem incompatible in three different ways. Cognitively, it seems that the totality and thus the perfection of an apparently immeasurable object cannot be sensed, precisely because the object is too great for our senses to grasp. Metaphysically, it seems that some objects need not have sensible perfection in order to arouse the feeling of the sublime: e.g., what perfection do the scattered "uncountable army of stars" offer to the senses? And psychologically, our inability to grasp the immeasurability is a

⁶⁴² *JubA*, 1:457-458. See also *JubA*, 1:193-194.

subjective imperfection. So why do we find the sublime so wonderful and pleasurable - even more so than the merely beautiful? Although Mendelssohn does not address all of these issues thoroughly, we can reconstruct plausible responses from the limited text.

The cognitive problem of the sublime as sensibly immeasurable yet sensibly perfect

As a preliminary matter, the notion of perfection must be made somewhat more explicit. Perfection is the agreement of a variety or manifold to unity, according to general rules of the whole.⁶⁴³ “Unity” here need not be essential, as in the case of monadic souls, but can also be accidental and relational, as in a work of art.⁶⁴⁴ It is best understood as the “togetherness” or “belonging-together” of the manifold.⁶⁴⁵ A painting, for example, has perfection to the extent that its various parts (its manifold) are sensed as belonging together (its unity) in a way that is explained chiefly through common universal principles of the whole (i.e., harmony). The principles of a particular painting flow from the fact that the whole represents something – a person, a thing, an idea, an event, etc.⁶⁴⁶ In this way, its various sensible parts fit together in such a way that they all contribute to a single whole representation.⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴³ For perfection as agreement of the manifold to unity, see Wolff, *Ontologia*, §503; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §94. For the requirement that this agreement must be determined by general rules or laws of the whole, see Wolff, *Ontologia*, §505; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §95. That Mendelssohn shares this view is evident from his *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (*JubA* 1:59-60, 113, 118), his *Über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (*JubA* 1:171), and his *Rhapsodie* (*JubA* 1:384-385).

⁶⁴⁴ Wolff, *Ontologia*, §528; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §98.

⁶⁴⁵ On this see e.g. Wolff, *Ontologia*, §532.

⁶⁴⁶ Baumgarten called this *something* which all parts agree in representing the *theme* of the work (*Reflections*, §66). See also Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, §512 and Aristotle, *Poetics*, §8.

⁶⁴⁷ The “affirming notes” which Mendelssohn claims constitute perfection in the *Rhapsodie* (*JubA*, 1:384-385) should be understood as affirmations with respect to the principles of the whole. In this way his explanation conforms closely to Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s.

Now, the whole of a sensibly immeasurable object cannot be sensed, by definition. How then is it possible for us to cognize the extent to which the parts are governed by principles of the whole? This is the cognitive problem of the immeasurably sublime, which Mendelssohn discusses in the following passages:

The immeasurable, which we indeed consider as a whole, but cannot grasp [umfassen] arouses likewise a mixed sentiment of pleasure and displeasure—in the beginning, a thrill, and when we proceed to consider it, a kind of dizziness.⁶⁴⁸

[Vast objects] have something adverse for well-brought-up minds who are accustomed to order and symmetry, since the senses finally perceive their boundaries, but can grasp [umfassen] them and bind them into an idea only with difficulty. – When the boundaries of this extension are posited ever further, they finally disappear for the senses entirely, and then the sensibly immeasurable arises. Sense, which perceives something belonging together, roams about, seeking to grasp the boundaries, and loses itself in the immeasurable.⁶⁴⁹

Precisely what Mendelssohn means by “considering” an immeasurable object as a whole without “grasping” it is not entirely clear. The following explanation, taken from the original (1755) *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, is one possibility:

Even this immeasurable All [the whole universe] is not a visibly beautiful object. Nothing deserves this name that does not fall clearly to our senses all at once. For that reason one only says that the world-structure is beautiful when the imagination orders its main parts into the same harmony in which reason and perception teach it to be ordered outside us. If this happens, then one perceives just the general relations of the parts of the universe to the whole, and the beautiful achieves the required magnitude in the imagination which it lacks in nature. The power of the imagination can as it were limit every beauty between the appropriate bounds, since it expands or contracts the parts of the objects until we can grasp [fassen] the required manifold all at once.⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁸ *PS*, 2:10; *JubA*, 1:398.

⁶⁴⁹ *JubA*, 1:456. This was added into the 1771 edition.

⁶⁵⁰ *JubA*, 1:51.

Such a view, if applied to the sublime as sensibly immeasurable, is highly problematic. For the sublime is by its very nature *more* vast even than anything we can imagine, and if it is brought down as it were to human scale and captured as a smaller and inadequate whole in the imagination, it certainly loses most of its grand effect. But there is good reason to think that this does not represent Mendelssohn's considered view about the sublime. In the 1761 edition of the *Briefe*, Mendelssohn added the following to this passage, immediately after "to our senses all at once:" "Indeed, the immeasurable, which exhausts our soaring imagination in reaching its boundaries, has its own charm, which occasionally surpasses the pleasure of measured beauty; but we can only call the world-structure beautiful in its actual sense [im eigentlichen Verstande] when the imagination... [etc]." ⁶⁵¹ This addition suggests that Mendelssohn meant to introduce a distinction between the beautiful "strictly speaking," which requires us at least to be able to imagine the whole, and the rather different experience of sublimity, which is not to be characterized in the same way. This does not entail that Mendelssohn now intends to sharply distinguish the beautiful from the sublime; in fact, we know from a review he published around the same time that he did not. ⁶⁵² More plausibly, he means to signal that his analysis of beauty as presented in the *Briefe* was to be restricted to objects either perceived or imagined as wholes, and that the sensibly immeasurable requires a further explanation.

⁶⁵¹ *PS*, 1:17-18; *JubA*, 1:243.

⁶⁵² "[Curtius] did not notice that the boundaries of the beautiful and the sublime really lose themselves in each other, for the highest degree of beautiful arouses wonder" (*JubA*, 5.1:352).

Moreover, the passages directly concerning the immeasurable in *Rhapsodie* and *Das Erhabene* (above) make no explicit mention of this forced imagining of a whole. In fact, in the *Rhapsodie*, Mendelssohn denies that we can grasp [umfassen] the whole of a sensibly immeasurable object – but this grasping [fassen] of the whole is precisely what the imagination was said to do in the *Briefe*. And, his talk of sense “roaming about, seeking to grasp the boundaries, and losing itself in the immeasurable” in particular seems distinctly opposed to the mere imagination of a whole. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Mendelssohn did not intend his idea about imaginative grasping to apply to the sensibly immeasurable.

What then does Mendelssohn mean by “considering” an immeasurable object “as a whole?” One plausible possibility is that in considering an immeasurable object we confusedly posit *principles of some whole* that give harmony to the manifold, rather than forming an inner sensible image of the whole. Since perfection only requires agreement of the manifold according to principles of the whole, we can perceive it (at least confusedly) without actually sensing or imagining the totality itself. This reading is suggested by Mendelssohn’s claim that we seek to form an idea on the basis of what we sense as “belonging together” in the immeasurable manifold. This “belonging together” would provide a basis for positing common principles flowing from some vast whole that exceeds our perception and even our imagination.

Even though they are to some extent produced on merely subjective grounds, such confusedly posited principles of the whole have a definite basis in the whole object as it really is. This is because the parts of an object, at least to the extent that it is perfect,

really do reflect the properties of its whole. As a result, my reading of Mendelssohn's view here does not amount to a subjectivistic "free play" theory, where the object simply gives us occasion to exercise our mental faculties in a certain way. Nor does it amount to a radical departure from the standard rationalist view. According to Wolff, Baumgarten, and also Mendelssohn himself, the principles of the whole are never merely "given" to the senses as something over and above the manifold. Even in the standard case when all the parts of the thing can be grasped together by the senses, the principles must be posited through reflection, by dialectically comparing the manifold to the purported whole.⁶⁵³ In the case of the immeasurable, we cannot grasp the whole at all, but we are still able to dialectically compare the parts with common principles of the whole, which we suppose are governing them.

Now, it may still be objected that the pleasure we take in the sublime consists precisely in the fact that the object transcends any principles that we might posit as governing it.⁶⁵⁴ True, a sensibly immeasurable object goes beyond our cognitive capacities in two ways: first, not all of its manifold is available to us, and second, any principles of the whole which we posit are highly confused and insufficient, since we form them on the basis of incomplete information. But it does not follow that the pleasure we take in these objects is *due to* the transcendence of the object as compared to our understanding of it. Rather, the pleasure is plausibly construed as flowing from whatever imperfect degree of understanding of the object's perfection we have, along

⁶⁵³ Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, §§257-260, *Metaphysik*, §136; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §626; Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:51.

⁶⁵⁴ Beiser raises this objection without resolving it: "The pleasure of the sublime seems to arise precisely from our *incapacity* to grasp the object as a whole" (*Diotima's Children*, 219).

with the feeling at every passing moment that the object offers yet more perfection to our continued contemplation of it. In this case “the source of pleasure is just as inexhaustible as before.”⁶⁵⁵ We then lose ourselves in the object and its as-yet inaccessible but hoped for further perfection – almost as we fall in love with a person, where our pleasure is based not only on the good that we explicitly recognize but also on further perfection of which we currently have only the slightest intimation.

The metaphysical problem of the sublime as sensibly immeasurable

The problem of why apparently imperfect but very massive objects provide pleasure had bothered Mendelssohn from the beginning of his aesthetic career. In the eighth letter of the *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, Euphranor raises the example of the pleasure we take in experiencing massive, dizzying heights and depths.⁶⁵⁶ Palemon does not adequately respond to this example, and in the essay “Sendschreiben an einen jungen Gelehrten zu B.” published anonymously by Mendelssohn in 1756, he admits that Palemon was “criminally negligent” in not addressing the cases of “people... wondering at great and immeasurable objects.”⁶⁵⁷ His tentative suggestion in that essay – that these objects make up in diversity of perfection what they lack in unity⁶⁵⁸ – could not really have satisfied him. Perfection, for one, is not a mere aggregation of unity and diversity but a certain relation of diversity to unity. And sheer diversity is in any case insufficient to explain the pleasure, because excessive diversity is also a feature

⁶⁵⁵ *JubA*, 1:399.

⁶⁵⁶ *JubA*, 1:83-84.

⁶⁵⁷ *JubA*, 1:534.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

of what we consider ugly, as he already had argued in the *Briefe* and indeed repeated in the very same "Sendschreiben."⁶⁵⁹

Ironically, Burke himself led Mendelssohn to a new explanation. Although the Irish philosopher had rejected the role of perfection in aesthetics, he felt he needed to explain why we only take some things to be single vast objects, even though "the eye generally receives an equal number of rays at all times."⁶⁶⁰ Burke argues that only a single unified object, rather than many distinct objects, can produce the right kind of "uniform labour" and "attention" needed to experience the sublime. In his commentary, Mendelssohn responds: "If it is true that a number of small objects without unity scatter the imagination, where it otherwise will be made busy through unity in the manifold, the consequence is entirely easy to draw that unity in manifold or sensible perfection is the source of the pleasant sentiment."⁶⁶¹ But Mendelssohn is being a bit too quick here. The whole of a vast object may indeed contain some shared principles through which we perceive it as a single vast unity, even though at the same time no principles of the whole govern the order and arrangement of the parts. For example, it is true that we would perceive a massive garbage heap as a unity because of some shared properties in the manifold – say, a common teleological origin and close spatial proximity – but that makes the heap perfect only in the slightest degree. For the specific parts and arrangement of the garbage heap are just arbitrarily thrown together without much basis in universal principles of the whole. Simply because there must be *some* objective basis

⁶⁵⁹ *JubA*, 1:58, 1:530.

⁶⁶⁰ Burke, *Enquiry*, §4.10.

⁶⁶¹ *JubA* 3.1:249.

for our perceiving a thing as one unified vast object does not mean that that object has much perfection.

Yet Mendelssohn's explanation seems much more plausible if we restrict it to natural objects. In nature, the principles that result in a particular arrangement of parts largely overlap with the principles that govern the unity of the object: both are just the universal laws of nature. In other words, we perceive the object as one because of some perceived similarity in the manifold which is due to the laws of nature, and those same natural laws are also responsible for the specific existence and arrangement of the parts. In this way we can perceive the reasons for the disposition of the parts through the principles of the whole, which is just to perceive the perfection of the object.

But what exactly is the *focus perfectionis* of such an object, that is, the unity in which all the various laws of nature seem to agree in relation to our senses? The perfection of fine art objects primarily consists in the arrangement of the parts of a work such that they all together contribute to the sensible representation of some one thing.⁶⁶² This same explanation holds in the case of natural objects: the unity of these majestic natural objects consists in the fact that they represent the lawful power, vastness, and order of nature – in other words, nature itself – in especially grandiose fashion.⁶⁶³ Although a vast mountain range is chaotic in some sense, it is also orderly in that nature “conspired” through its laws to produce a multitude of massive peaks and crags. It is

⁶⁶² See the Appendix for discussion of this claim.

⁶⁶³ Like Wolff and Baumgarten, Mendelssohn held that perfection is the order which exemplifies metaphysical truth, which is basically the unified lawfulness of the variety in nature (*JubA*, 1:384-385).

plausibly the order, not the disorder, which we behold with wonder.⁶⁶⁴ Of course, while all objects obey the laws of nature, only some reveal them to our senses in such spectacular fashion.⁶⁶⁵ On this basis, artificial objects can be sublime either insofar as they represent this natural sublimity (as in a poem or painting), or insofar as they are actually similar to it (as in architecture).

Still, some sublime objects seem difficult to square with this explanation. The starry night may seem to be a vast canvas scattered with points of light in which there is no apparent exhibition of power or order. But perhaps our wonder at the heavens requires that we view these points of light as representing something substantially grand and massive, and not as subjective sense-data, mere points of light. In any case, while these or similar replies were surely available to Mendelssohn, he does not make them explicit.⁶⁶⁶

There also seem to be cases where we take pleasure in massive violence and disorder. In the *Rhapsodie* Mendelssohn writes the following:

Lisbon, destroyed by an earthquake, charmed an uncountable multitude people who wished to have a look at the terrible devastation. After the bloodbath at ... all of our citizens rushed onto the corpse-sown battlefield. Even the wise, who would have gladly given their lives to prevent this evil, waded through human

⁶⁶⁴ Bodmer, by contrast, saw the violent (das Ungestüme) as source of pleasure in the sublime that is sharply distinct from beauty. But he did not consider the possibility that the violent per se is not the cause of our pleasure. Further, Bodmer's own view is incomplete, because he claims that the ground of the pleasure we get from the violent is located in the object (*Kritische Betrachtungen*, 155), but never adequately explains what this ground is.

⁶⁶⁵ Importantly, this does not require that we understand natural laws to have a teleological ground. Cf. Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:270.

⁶⁶⁶ Cf. Bodmer, *Kritische Betrachtungen*, 223-224 for an earlier discussion about the source of pleasure in the starry night.

blood after the fact and felt a thrilling delight at the consideration of the terrible site.⁶⁶⁷

It is remarkable that Mendelssohn even admits such a scene could cause a feeling of pleasure. But he is careful to explain that the object of this “thrilling delight” is not the external thing being considered, but rather a specific aspect of the self: “The cognition of the evil, and the lively revulsion against it, is a human perfection, and must necessarily provide one with pleasure. We detest the imperfection, but not the cognition of it; we flee the evil, but not the faculty for cognizing it, and condemning it.”⁶⁶⁸ Moral condemnation is not merely pleasurable as a subjective activity, but also as a perfection which we perceive reflexively in ourselves. Thus, the explanation remains within the *objective* perfection aesthetic. The sublime object here is not the devastation, but the seemingly limitless power of moral disapprobation we perceive in ourselves.

The psychological problem of the sublime as sensibly immeasurable

The psychological problem is a consequence of Mendelssohn’s theory of mixed sentiments, first published in the *Rhapsodie* of 1761 but conceived in 1758.⁶⁶⁹ According to this theory, the pleasure or displeasure we feel from our own perfection or imperfection mixes with that of the object under consideration, creating a complex overall sentiment. In the case of the immeasurable, our inability to fully grasp the object is a cognitive imperfection which we find frustrating, and in the case of the sublime, the perception of

⁶⁶⁷ Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:383 (ellipsis in original). This passage underwent some minor changes from the earlier edition, cf. *PS*, 2:14.

⁶⁶⁸ *PS*, 2:15. For a less clear expression of the same idea in the 1771 edition, see Mendelssohn, *JubA* 1:385-386.

⁶⁶⁹ See note 23 above.

our own weakness in relation to the object is a further source of displeasure.⁶⁷⁰ As a result, the pleasure we take in the sublime involves displeasure at our own inadequacy. What then is the source of the superlative character of the sublime?

Some commentators have suggested that Mendelssohn's "moment of subjective displeasure" is an anticipation of Kant's three-moment phenomenology of the sublime from his *Critique of Judgment*.⁶⁷¹ According to Kant, the subjective displeasure we take in our own *apparent* inadequacy gives way to a higher feeling of pleasure at our own superiority over mere phenomenal nature, on the basis of our reason and the moral law within us. Kant writes, "Sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us (insofar as it influences us)."⁶⁷² Because Kant explains how the experience of the sublime culminates in great pleasure, these commentators see Kant's psychology as a completion of Mendelssohn's.

But Mendelssohn's view is an appealing theory in its own right. It, too, involves a "third moment" of pleasure, though it is directed back at the object instead of at the subject's rational power. "The displeasure connected with the consideration [of sublime objects] is grounded on our weakness; for that reason *they* [the objects] offer an

⁶⁷⁰ *JubA*, 1:398.

⁶⁷¹ Braitmaier praises Mendelssohn for coming closer to Kant's mature view than Kant himself had in his *Beobachtungen (Geschichte*, 2:173). Goldstein calls Mendelssohn a precursor to Kant in his psychology of the sublime, but criticizes him for not giving Burke's "moment of terror" sufficient due, a task completed by Kant (Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 148, 152).

⁶⁷² Translation from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 147 (*Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:264). See also Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:257 and 5:271.

unspeakable pleasure of which the soul can never be full."⁶⁷³ A sublime object seems great even at first glance, but when we compare it to our own inadequacy (which we soon feel upon contemplating it), the object appears even more magnificent.

Of course, just because it is the object, not our subject, which *seems* to carry us away, it is possible that the ultimate source of our pleasure may actually be within us, as Kant claims,⁶⁷⁴ for we are often mistaken about the objects of such highly confused emotions.⁶⁷⁵ But there are nonetheless some considerations which lend Mendelssohn's theory greater plausibility. Kant's explanation of the sublime requires too much acculturation and reflection,⁶⁷⁶ and the sublime often feels too overwhelming to be based on even unconscious reflection about ourselves. If it were, then it seems we would experience a relative diminishing of wonder at the object itself, and feel a kind of lording over it. But this runs counter to experience.⁶⁷⁷ Mendelssohn's description of the sublime

⁶⁷³ *JubA* 1:398, emphasis added.

⁶⁷⁴ Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:262.

⁶⁷⁵ Indeed, Bodmer had already suggested yet another third moment in his analysis of pleasure in "das Große": "Dazu kömmt denn die darauf folgende Betrachtung, welche die Wiederkunft seiner wirksamen Kräfte bey ihm verursacht, wenn sie ihm vergewissert daß er in diesem unermeßlichen Ganzen beständig im Wesen ist, und wenn er vornehmlich den Grund und Ursprung, warum alles ist, und in welchem alles dieses ungemessene Ganze enthalten ist, bey sich ermißt" (*Kritische Betrachtungen*, 230).

⁶⁷⁶ "Without the development of moral ideas, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime will appear merely repellent to the unrefined person" (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 148 (5:265), translation by Guyer and Matthews). It is possible, however, that this opinion is not essential to Kant's theory. In any case, Mendelssohn seems more correct to say that universal appreciation (even among the uncultured) counts as strong evidence that something is sublime (*JubA*, 5.1:349-350). To some extent this is an empirical question, for which Kant cites only the flimsiest of evidence.

⁶⁷⁷ One does on occasion sense a certain superiority when viewing certain sublime objects, but this seems to pertain more to a superiority of vantage rather than a superiority over the object itself. Accordingly, the feeling of superiority is characteristic of views from mountain summits but not of the night sky, etc.

object as “pressing us back into the dust”⁶⁷⁸ seems much more accurate: the object is all-encompassing, we feel ourselves to be nothing in relation to it, and the implicit comparison makes the object seem all the more awesome and wonderful.

⁶⁷⁸ Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:398. This thought is borrowed from Bodmer, who had explained: “Dadurch wird zugleich alle Würcksamkeit des Gemüthes zu Boden geschlagen” (*Kritische Betrachtungen*, 229). Kant actually does consider this objection to some extent (*Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:263-264), but his reply is inadequate.

Appendix: On a few key issues in rationalist aesthetics

This appendix aims to clear up some common misunderstandings about rationalist aesthetics in general. The first misunderstanding has to do with the sense of perfection relevant to beauty. In his *Vernünfftige Gedancken von den Kräfften des menschlichen Verstandes* [*Rational thoughts on the powers of human understanding*] (first published in 1712), Wolff explains perfection as the agreement of a manifold to a unity or a whole, giving the following example: “One judges the perfection of a clock from the fact that it correctly indicates hours and their parts. [The clock] is composed out of various parts, and both these all together as well as their connection account for why the hands [and the clock as whole] correctly indicate the hours and their parts.”⁶⁷⁹ The explanation relates the parts of a thing - the weight, pendulum, and gears of the clock – to the whole by virtue of correct function or purpose, namely telling time. This is all well and good for an instrument like a clock, but the concept of correct function certainly fails as an account of beauty. For beauty does not involve any determinate function – a point made forcefully by Kant some decades later. Does this mean that rationalist aesthetics describes beauty inappropriately, and cannot even get off the ground?

Fortunately, correct function of the whole is only one way in which the manifold parts of a thing can agree with each other to make up a whole. Another way, far more relevant to beauty, involves *representation*: All the parts of a thing can fit together in such a way that the whole they constitute represents some one thing to us.⁶⁸⁰ For example,

⁶⁷⁹ *Metaphysik*, §152.

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, §8.

Wolff explains that a novel attempts to represent a possible world,⁶⁸¹ and Baumgarten claims that all the parts of a poem should represent a common theme.⁶⁸² Importantly, in these cases the whole is not given as something determinate over and above the parts, but rather stands in a reciprocal or dialectical relation with them. As in an organism, each in some sense explains the other: one can only account for the parts by referring them to whole, while at the same time the whole is constituted by the totality of the parts. For example, the representation of a possible world exists only through the parts of a novel, but the existence and arrangement of those particular parts is (or ought to be) explained by reference to the whole representation. Judging an art work according to rationalist principles therefore involves an *interpretation* of the relations between the whole and the parts.⁶⁸³ In this sense, the perfection of a work of art need not involve a predetermined concept of its whole. Despite the important role of interpretation, however, beauty still pertains to the actual existence of a harmonious relation between parts and whole in the object. It is not explained merely through a “free play of faculties,” the subjective act of producing various interpretations, as in Kant’s later view.

Another crucial difference between beauty and correct functionality has to do with the way in which these perfections are characteristically perceived. While correct functionality is typically judged with reference to explicit standards and measurements, beauty is characteristically perceived and judged (to a significant extent) through *sense*.

⁶⁸¹ *Metaphysik*, §571; see also §822.

⁶⁸² Baumgarten, *Reflections on poetry*, §66.

⁶⁸³ *Metaphysik*, §157.

Rationalists theorize sense as perception that is *clear* but *confused*, as opposed to the *clear* and *distinct* perception involved in explicit measurement and discursive explanation. This technical terminology is frequently misunderstood, so it is worth explaining in some detail. An obscure [obscura, dunkle, obscure] representation is one which we cannot distinguish from others, while a clear [clara, klare, claire] representation is one which we can distinguish from others. Clear representations are either distinct [distinctae, deutlich, distincte] or confused [confusae, undeutlich, verwirrt (occasionally), confuse]: distinct if we can clearly represent what the difference consists in and thereby explain it, and confused if we cannot. In the Latin, “confusa” connotes “fusing together,” expressing the “taking many as one” that is characteristic of sense perception.

Several further clarifications of these fundamental concepts are in order. First, although the categories of cognition apply to both logical concepts and perceptions, they do so in slightly different ways. A logical concept is clear if one knows how to apply it to individuals or other concepts, and distinct if one is *able* explain why it is correctly applied. Leibniz uses an example of a person who can “just see” the difference between real gold and fool’s gold, and the assayer who knows the tests which show the difference. The first person’s knowledge of the concept of gold (with respect to fool’s gold) is clear but confused, while the latter’s is clear and distinct. Clarity of *perception*, by contrast, has to do with what we are *presently* able to distinguish in perception. To take another of Leibniz’s examples, my perception of green paint is clear but confused: I can distinguish it from other colors, but I do not perceive what makes it green (e.g. that it is a

mixture of blue and yellow pigments). Even if I *know* this about the paint, so that my *concept* of this green paint is distinct, my *perception* of it is not because I do not actually separate out the pigments in my perception. Both concepts and perceptions can be involved in aesthetic experience – concepts especially in poetry – but it is important to keep these distinctions in mind.

Second, distinct or “intellectual” cognition is not, as is often assumed, the same as abstract cognition. Distinct cognition is *required* for abstract and discursive thought, because it identifies a difference which can then be applied to many things, but as Wolff and Baumgarten make clear, abstraction involves several other mental processes beyond distinct cognition. Distinct cognition can represent a universal difference *in concreto*, while abstract cognition is a derivative mental act that represents that universal *in abstracto*. Nor is distinct thought the same as *symbolic* or discursive thought, i.e. thought which makes use of symbols or words. In Leibniz’s original typology of ideas, the distinction between intuitive and symbolic thinking is orthogonal to the distinctions among clear, confused, and distinct, and this is made even more explicit in Wolff and Baumgarten. For Wolff, cognition is symbolic when we think of a discursive or symbolic description of a thing without thinking of the thing itself.⁶⁸⁴ Baumgarten more helpfully explains that in symbolic cognition, the sign is represented more clearly than the signified, and in intuitive cognition the signified is represented more clearly than the

⁶⁸⁴ *PE*, §289.

sign.⁶⁸⁵ This makes the difference between symbolic and intuitive cognition one of degree, notably allowing for intuitive cognition through the medium of poetry.

Finally, it must be emphasized that clear, confused, and distinct cognition are all *relative notions* which both differ in degree among each other and also admit their own degree. As Wolff explains, distinctness is clarity of notes (i.e., clarity about the determinations which make up the nature of a thing), while confusion is the lack of a further degree of clarity, i.e. an inability to represent the parts or underlying structure of a thing clearly.⁶⁸⁶ Thus clear but confused differs from clear and distinct only in degree. If we could distinguish or perceive clearly some of a thing's structure, we would be able to explain at least to some degree what makes it different from other things, and we would to that extent have a distinct perception of the whole. The more we distinguish in a thing, the more the perception of the whole is distinct; alternatively, the less we distinguish in a thing, the more the perception of the whole is confused (and the more the perception the parts obscure). In general, cognitions are not "absolutely distinct" or "absolutely confused," but instead both, in certain respects and to certain degrees. Since sense perception contains much (like colors and tones) which we can distinguish from others but not account for, it is characteristically clear but confused – but it also contains some distinct elements, like shapes or chord components for those with a practiced ear. As a result, rationalists call cognition that is *largely* clear but confused *sensible*, even though it generally contains some distinct elements. Cognition that is *largely* clear and

⁶⁸⁵ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §620.

⁶⁸⁶ Wolff, *Metaphysik*, §211

distinct is called *intellectual*, even though all such cognitions also contain something confused.

In his seminal 1735 *Reflections on poetry*,⁶⁸⁷ Baumgarten developed an extremely important extension to the standard rationalist typology of ideas: a distinction between *intensive* and *extensive* clarity. Intensive clarity is clarity of underlying determinations, and is therefore synonymous with distinctness. Extensive clarity, by contrast, is clarity of many determinations at the “surface” level, a clarity of breadth or extent. For example, a microscopic examination of the bone structure of a certain bird provides a very *intensively* clear (or distinct) cognition of that bird, while a close-up visual cognition of the whole bird under good lighting provides a very *extensively* clear cognition of it. Baumgarten put this distinction to great use in his aesthetics (a term he coined in the same work). First, he noticed that there is generally a tradeoff between intensive and extensive clarity in a perception: as we focus on the underlying determinations of a thing we lose the clarity of its extent, and vice versa. This is simply a plausible observation about human cognitive limitations. Second, while cognitions are in general to some extent intensively clear and to some extent extensively clear, beauty characteristically involves a high degree of *extensive* clarity – and is in this sense opposed to scientific works and discourse, which tend to emphasize *intensive* clarity.

Now, Wolff had thought the senses could only make badly, in an error-prone fashion, the very same judgments that the intellect could make distinctly – in other

⁶⁸⁷ Original title: *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* [*Philosophical meditations on some things concerning the poem*].

words, that they could only estimate what the intellect could measure. But, armed with his new distinction, Baumgarten argued that sensible cognition has its own advantage: it is capable of greater extensive clarity than intellectual cognition. Since the perception of beauty typically involves a much higher degree of extensive clarity (than, say, the perception of the correctness of a mathematical proof), sense cognition is actually much better suited to grasping beauty than intellectual cognition. This idea gave sense cognition a positive role in the apprehension of beauty, at least for beings like us with limited cognitive powers. Importantly, Baumgarten did not invoke any kind of new or sharp distinction between sense and intellect. As we saw, sensible or “clear but confused” cognition differs only in degree from intellectual or “clear and distinct” cognition. Sense perception, and the sensible apprehension of beauty in particular is simply clearer in certain respects, and more confused in other respects, than more intellectual modes of cognition.

Baumgarten’s aesthetics has been described as a “logic of the individual.”⁶⁸⁸ This is not incorrect, but it is potentially misleading in two respects. First, for Baumgarten the individual is not a transcendent or super-rational being. Rather, the individual is *ens omnimode determinatum*, a being determined in every way through the principle of sufficient reason.⁶⁸⁹ Second, aesthetics is not *strictly* a logic of the individual, but the logic of *complexes* of determinations taken together (and perceived confusedly). The individual is of particular interest in aesthetics precisely because it is determined in

⁶⁸⁸ Baeumler, *Das Irrationalitätsproblem*, 212, 224.

⁶⁸⁹ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §148.

every way, and therefore tends to contain more complex material than abstracta, which are in some ways indeterminate. So, aesthetics does not deal solely with individuals – but the individual is as it were the kind of object most suited to it.

Note on translations

All translations cited from non-English sources are my own.

Abbreviations

JubA	Moses Mendelssohn, <i>Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe</i> ed. F. Bamberger, L. Strauss, A. Altmann, et al. (Berlin, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann, 1929-1976)
PE	Christian Wolff, <i>Psychologia empirica</i> (hereafter PE), div. 2, vol. 5 of <i>Gesammelte Schriften</i> (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968)
PS	Moses Mendelssohn, <i>Philosophische Schriften</i> (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß, 1761)
Metaphysik	Christian Wolff, <i>Vernünfftige Gedancken Von Gott, Der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, Auch allen Dingen überhaupt, Den Liebhabern der Wahrheit mitgetheilet</i> (Halle, 1747)
EG	Johann Christoph Gottsched, <i>Erste Gründe der gesammten Weltweisheit</i> (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1762)

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