MOSES MENDELSSOHN

Philosophical Writings

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Introduction

Moses Mendelssohn, one of the most gifted and intriguing figures of the German Enlightenment, first published his *Philosophical Writings* in 1761, and in a revised edition in 1771. Only one essay ("Rhapsody") was newly written; the others, dating back to 1754, had already established his reputation as a thoughtful and effective writer on a variety of issues of pressing concern to his contemporaries. In the *Philosophical Writings* the reader will find: an explanation of the various sorts and sources of pleasure, a nuanced defense of Leibniz's theodicy and conception of freedom, an examination of the ethics of suicide, an account of the "mixed sentiments" so central to the tragic genre, a hypothesis about weakness of will, an elaboration of the main principles and types of art, a definition of sublimity and analysis of its basic forms, and, lastly, a brief tract on probability theory, aimed at rebutting Hume's skepticism.

Despite its rich range of themes, Mendelssohn's collection of six youthful essays does not lack for unity. Their common purpose is to demonstrate the continuing viability of a metaphysical framework shaped by Leibniz and Christian Wolff, especially for a topic – the nature and variety of sentiments – often neglected by that metaphysical tradition and treated with greater sensitivity by English and French authors. "Sentiment" stands here for an emotionally and hedonically charged human knowledge or awareness by way of the senses, one that can be "perfect or complete" when its object is something beautiful. In the Wolffian tradition, *cognitio sensitiva* is an inferior variant of cognition, the subject of an "empirical psychology" that is a division of a metaphysically grounded epistemology. Wolff himself admitted, however, that his system lacked a sustained treatment of this topic in regard to the arts, thereby opening the door for the work of Johann Christian Gottsched, Johann Jacob Bodmer, and Johann Jacob Breitinger, and, most famously, Alexander Baumgarten. Much of Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Writings* can be read as yet another contribution to this project.

Included with the *Philosophical Writings* is Mendelssohn's prize winning essay of 1763, "On evidence in the metaphysical sciences," of which Lewis White Beck has written: "No other single work gives so perspicuous a presentation of the Leibniz–Wolffian tradition."[1] Because of their historical significance for developments in the German Enlightenment, two short pieces – "On the ability to know, the ability to feel, and the ability to desire" (1776) and "What does 'to enlighten' mean?" (1784) – have also been included in the present volume. Moving beyond both Baumgarten's single-faculty (cognitive) theory and Johann Georg Sulzer's dual-faculty (cognitive and affective) theory, "On the ability" is a harbinger of theories developed by Johann Nicolaus Tetens and Kant. The final essay, which preceded by four months Kant's article on the same topic, is important for its identification of enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) and culture (*Cultur*) as complementary sides of education (*Bildung*), but perhaps even more so for its contention that the enlightenment of human beings and the enlightenment of citizens can be in conflict with one another.[2]

Mendelssohn's beginnings

The son of Mendel Heymann, a Torah scribe, and Bela Rachel Sara, Moses Mendelssohn entered the world on 6 September 1729 in the Dessau ghetto (Germany). As a youth, under the tutelage of the learned Rabbi David Fränkel, Mendelssohn studied the Bible and the Talmud and was introduced to Moses Maimonides's adaptation of Muslim Aristotelianism to the Jewish tradition. At the age of fourteen,

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[1] *Early German Philosophy: Kant and his Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 332. There is some warrant for the inclusion of the prize essay in the present volume since Mendelssohn contemplated publishing a revised version in the 1771 edition of the *Philosophical Writings*.

[2] Kant's essay "Reply to the question: what is enlightenment?" was completed before he had the opportunity to read Mendelssohn's piece. On the possibility of a conflict between the virtue of a good human being and that of a good citizen, see Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. III, ch. 4.

Mendelssohn followed Fränkel to Berlin. There his appreciation of Jewish medieval philosophy was profoundly enriched by his close relationship with the noted Maimonides scholar, Israel Samoscz. But two friends and mentors, Abraham Kisch and Aaron Solomon Gumperz, also opened up entirely new worlds to the precocious young man. Kisch gave Mendelssohn his first lessons in Latin, and through Gumperz, who helped him with French and English, Mendelssohn became acquainted with members of the Royal Academy of Sciences. More significantly, perhaps, Gumperz provided Mendelssohn with an important example of a Jewish intellectual capable of reaching out to other movements of European thought without forfeiting his own roots. During this period Mendelssohn developed an uncommon familiarity with the classic and modern texts that formed the horizon for the issues debated among his Christian colleagues. Mendelssohn's contemporaries could hardly have appreciated the unique blend of linguistic competences and knowledge of the history of diverse theological and philosophical traditions, including medieval Aristotelianism, that he was able to bring to this study. When Mendelssohn began to hit his stride in the essays contained in the present volume, he was able to make remarkably competent use of works by Sophocles and Plato, Horace and Virgil, Jean Baptiste Du Bos and Voltaire, Locke and Shaftesbury, Leibniz and Wolff (to name only a few of the authors cited by Mendelssohn from the four languages mentioned).

Through Gumperz, Mendelssohn made Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's acquaintance in 1754. Mendelssohn's senior by eight months, Lessing would become a lifelong friend and occasional collaborator (see their "Pope, A Metaphysician!" in 1755) and immortalize Mendelssohn as the model for the religious tolerance and good will of the protagonist in the dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise* (*Nathan der Weise*, 1779). For twenty-five years, until shortly before Lessing's death in 1781, the two would correspond with one another, leaving behind, among other things, a remarkable debate about the significance and import of the tragic genre.

The essays in the "Philosophical Writings"

Metaphysics, not literary theory, was the principal subject of discussion between Lessing and Mendelssohn during the early years of their friendship. Lessing initiated Mendelssohn into the public world of letters by publishing Mendelssohn's *Dialogues* (probably with some improvements of Mendelssohn's still halting command of German). Later revised (over Lessing's objections) and published in *Philosophical Writings*, the *Dialogues* is noteworthy for its critical and qualified endorsement of Leibniz's theodicy. The first two dialogues revive the argument that Leibniz's formulation of his metaphysics is seriously indebted to Spinoza's thought.[3] Mendelssohn argues not only that Spinoza articulated the basic notion of a preestablished harmony in advance of Leibniz, but that even his errors in denying divine and human freedom contributed essentially to Leibniz's ability to articulate the compatibility of freedom with the preestablished harmony. (Mendelssohn concludes the first dialogue by noting that Leibniz, "not merely the greatest, but also the most careful philosopher," did not acknowledge his debt for prudential reasons; p. 104.) In the third dialogue, after dismissing Voltaire's trivial criticisms of Leibniz's view that this is the best possible world, Mendelssohn notes some lingering difficulties with the doctrine. For example, in order for the divine intellect to choose to create this world as the best possible world, the possibility of this world must have presented itself as a definite whole to the divine intellect, even if this world is, indeed, infinite in some respects. However, if this supposedly best possible world is limited in some measure, then it is not clear why a more perfect world is not possible. As long as this possibility obtains, it is also not clear how God could ever have had a sufficient reason to choose this world. Though this difficulty remains unresolved in Mendelssohn's eyes, he does not consider it debilitating for the Leibnizian doctrine that this is the best possible world. Once God's existence and wisdom are countenanced, he contends, the conclusion that this is the best possible world is inevitable. The fourth dialogue presents Wolff's defense of Leibniz's doctrine of the identity of indiscernibles in the face of criticisms advanced by Voltaire and, more recently, André Pierre Le Guay Prémontval.

The response to Prémontval's recent publications points to an important historical dimension of the *Dialogues*. In its essay contests of 1747 and 1751, with Maupertuis as president, the Royal Academy had awarded prizes to essays that criticized the Leibnizian doctrine of monads and its alleged determinism. By taking issue with Prémontval and advancing a qualified endorsement of Leibnizian–Wolffian metaphysics in the *Dialogues*, Mendelssohn is countering an antispeculative tendency in the Royal Academy that was prominent among its French members.[4]

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[3] See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University, Alabama, University of Alabama Press, 1973), p. 52.

In early 1755 Mendelssohn became friends with Friedrich Nicolai who introduced him to Berlin's literary and scientific circles, in particular, the exclusive "Scholars' Coffee House." The essay "On probability" was first presented to this club. Nicolai was instrumental in, as Mendelssohn put it in a letter to Lessing, his "infidelity" to metaphysics and attempt to become a *bel esprit*.[5] Indeed, it was Nicolai's "Treatise on Tragedy" (1756) that prompted the memorable correspondence between Lessing and Mendelssohn on the tragic genre. For over two decades beginning in 1757 (until their friendship began to wane in later years), Nicolai would enlist Mendelssohn's help in producing three successive journals: *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* (*Library of Fine Sciences and Free Arts*; twenty-one articles by Mendelssohn appear in the four volumes of 1757–58, two of which resurface in the *Philosophical Writings*), *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (1759–65; Mendelssohn composed over 112 of the *Letters Concerning the Latest Literature*, which contained critical reviews), and *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (*General German Library*; only occasional short reviews by Mendelssohn between 1765 and 1775).

Nicolai clearly provided Mendelssohn with an important vehicle and stimulus, but he was already moving in this direction, as evidenced by his second publication, the letters "On sentiments," the first and longest essay in the *Philosophical Writings*. Yet, this exchange of letters, loosely modelled on the Third Earl of Shaftesbury's *The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody* (1709), also belies or at least qualifies Mendelssohn's remark about his infidelity to metaphysics. For the entire account of sentiments is framed by epistemological and psychological considerations which are themselves rooted in broader metaphysical conceptions of the nature of things and their perfection.

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[4] As a Jew, Mendelssohn never gained entry into the Academy though it, acting on a resolution moved by Sulzer, did propose his name in 1771, only to be vetoed by the king; for details, see Altmann, *A Biographical Study*, pp. 264–5 and 801–2. Forming part of the horizon for the issue discussed in the *Dialogues* is the argument made against Leibniz's account of divine freedom by Christian August Crusius (1715–75) in *Sketch of Necessary Truths of Reason* (*Entwurf der notwendigen Vernunft-Wahrheiten*) (Leipzig, 1745) which also contains a criticism of Wolff's attempts to model philosophy on mathematics.

[5] See the "Jubilee edition" of Mendelssohn's works, vol. 11, Letter 27, p. 55: "Madam Metaphysics may forgive me. She asserts that friendship rests on the identity of inclinations, and I find that, on the contrary, identity of inclinations may, in reverse, rest on friendship." For full information about the "Jubilee edition," see Further reading. Cf. also Altmann, *A Biographical Study*, p. 66. According to Altmann (p. 65), Mendelssohn met Nicolai in early 1755.

Thus the letters commence with an appeal to Baumgarten's definition of beauty as an indistinct representation of a perfection.[6] On the basis of this definition, the youthful and Epicurean-minded Euphranor contends that pleasure and rational analysis, like beauty and truth, are incompatible. The older Theocles responds by noting that what is wholly obscure (a whole without parts) is just as incompatible with pleasure and the experience of beauty as something wholly distinct (parts without a whole). Pleasure, Theocles submits, involves a clear but indistinct representation of a whole, and rational analysis of the parts can prepare the way for this satisfying perception of the whole. Moreover, rational analysis and insight into a harmony existing among the parts afford a kind of pleasure even when they do not, as in the case of God or sheer intellectual activity, lead to a clear and distinct representation of things.

Theocles accordingly distinguishes between the pleasure of sensuous perfection and that of intellectual perfection. The former is the pleasure of beauty in the sense of a unity of a multiplicity of things, capable of being taken in at a single clear but indistinct glance.[7] In other words, the beautiful object is experienced as a whole (therein lies the perfection of sensuous cognition), but it affords too many features for them all to be perceived distinctly. Conversely, for something to be beautiful, its parts cannot be so uniform as not to be perceived nor so diverse that no unity can be detected. While the pleasure we take in beauty thus rests upon the limitations of the human soul, the pleasure of intellectual perfection is based upon "a positive power of our soul," namely, an ability to grasp the purposive harmony of a multiplicity of things (p. 24). Moreover, inasmuch as these levels of pleasure (beauty and truth) are distinguished as different kinds of perfection of the same inherent cognitive capacity, there is a natural propensity towards them as goods. Theocles thus adds that pleasure and willing differ "only to a degree" (p. 29).

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[6] Alexander Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1750), Pt. I, Section 1, §14, p. 6: "Aesthetices finis est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis, haec autem est pulchritudo, et cavenda eiusdem, qua talis, imperfectio, haec autem est deformitas" ("The end of aesthetics is the perfection of sensuous cognition which, however, as such is beauty. To be avoided is the imperfection of sensuous cognition, which, however, as such is deformity"). Cf. Baumgarten's, *Metaphysica*, 7th edn. (Halle and Magdeburg, 1779), Part I, ch. 1, Section VII, §94, p. 26: "Si plura simul sumta unius rationem sufficientem constituunt, *consentiunt* (*übereinstimmen*), consensus ipse est *perfectio* (*Vollkommenheit*), et unum, in quod consentitur, *ratio perfectionis determinans* (focus perfectionis)" ("If many things, taken at the same time, constitute the sufficient reason for some one thing, they *agree* (*übereinstimmen* [=harmonize]); this agreement is the perfection (*Vollkommenheit* [=perfection or completeness]) and that one thing, in which there is this agreement is the *determining reason for the perfection* (the focus of the perfection)"). A representation is indistinct if the parts or multiplicity that it represents are not distinguished or delineated. Colors and sounds, for examples, are indistinct representations because they cannot be broken down into discrete parts or, in other words, analyzed into more basic components. Hence, they are also indefinable. See note 9. Alexander Baumgarten (1714–62) disciple of Wolff, is best known for giving the field of aesthetics its name with his *Aesthetica*, and was held in high esteem by Kant.

[7] Sulzer is Mendelssohn's apparent source for the definition of beauty as, objectively, a unity of a multiplicity of things and, subjectively, a clear but indistinct representation. The explication of this clear representation in terms of the ease with which a whole of things is perceived (cognized) was taken over by Sulzer from Louis Jean Levesque de Pouilly's *Théorie des sentiments agréables* (Paris, 1747). For a discussion of Mendelssohn's early critical consideration of Sulzer's position, see Altmann, *A Biographical Study*, pp. 56–7.

Euphranor is willing to concede that reason is not a killjoy, but he still contests the notion that "the basis of all pleasure is to be found either in perfection or in beauty" (p. 35). Euphranor raises two counterexamples to Theocles' thesis. In the first place, there are some typical cases ("love and wine") where, instead of regarding something as "pleasurable" because of its goodness, we call it "good" or "perfect" because of the sheer sensuous pleasure it affords us. In the second place, human beings often take a strange sort of pleasure in the representation of what are not mere imperfections, but utterly terrifying or ghastly sights ("vertigo-inducing heights" and "bloody slaughters"; p. 36). Without naming it as such, Euphranor has introduced the subject of the sublime.

Theocles responds by conceding that sensuous pleasures for the most part have more power over the soul than intellectual forms of enjoyment and that some sources of pleasure seem to be anything but perfections. But he is not willing to relinquish his basic principle that pleasure in all its forms corresponds to the representation of some perfection. An improvement in the state of one's body (typically, the achievement of some harmony among its parts) produces pleasure prior to thought. The soul then comes along and, without being able to oversee all this distinctly, will nevertheless have an obscure but lively "*representation of the perfection of its body*" (p. 46).

At this point, the account in the letters of the kinds and sources of pleasure is practically complete. There are three kinds of pleasure: sensuous pleasure, the pleasure of beauty, and intellectual pleasure. The sources of the pleasures are, respectively, some improvement in the condition of our bodies, some unity (sameness) among a multiplicity of parts or things, and some harmony in such a multiplicity.[8] The three kinds of pleasure correspond roughly to the threefold division of the most basic ways of cognizing (entertaining, representing) things, namely, obscurely, clearly, and distinctly. This division, the cornerstone of rationalist epistemology and psychology, is based upon levels of distinguishability. We are aware of something only *obscurely* when our perception of it and its makeup is not sufficient to enable us distinguish it from other things. Something is cognized *clearly but confusedly* when it is perceived as a definite whole (a unity of a multiplicity of things) and, hence, distinguishable from other wholes and reidentifiable, even though the things that make it up as a whole are not distinguished. Something is cognized *distinctly* (and not just clearly) when the things that make it up as a whole are distinguished, thereby allowing it to be defined.[9]

Left unaddressed by Theocles' account of the kinds and sources of pleasure is the second counterexample mentioned by Euphranor, namely, the example of so-called "mixed sentiments" or the pleasure that people take in the sight of something painful, terrifying, or ghastly.[10] Theocles turns to this lingering issue in the conclusion to the letters. He distinguishes between cases where sympathy is not involved (the tightrope artist) or even suppressed (gladiatorial bouts), and those where sympathy is aroused (tragic drama). In the former cases, we delight in someone's skill, and, in the latter, we feel affection for someone because of his virtue or innocence, qualities magnified by the misfortune facing him. Thus, in each case a perfection, the skillfulness or the quality of the person arousing our sympathy, remains the source of the pleasure we feel.

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[8] While all arts draw in one way or another upon these three sources according to Theocles, he claims that music alone draws on all three at once; see the Eleventh letter.

[9] Alternatively: something is entertained (thought, cognized, or represented) *confusedly* when its features are represented or perceived but not distinguished. Something is entertained *distinctly* when those features are distinguished. If the features are so dimly perceived that it is not possible to distinguish what is confusedly represented from other things, then it is represented *obscurely*. Cf. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, Pt. III, ch. 1: Psychologia Empirica, §510, p. 175: "Quaedam distincte, quaedam confuse cogito. Confuse aliquid cogitans, eius notas non distinguit, repraesentat tamen, seu percipit. Nam si notas confuse repraesentati distingueret, quae confuse repraesentat, distincte cogitaret: si prorsus non perciperet notas confuse cogitati, per eas confuse perceptum non distinguere valeret ab aliis. Ergo confuse quid cogitans quaedam obscure repraesentat" ("I think some things distinctly, some things confusedly. Thinking something confusedly, one does not distinguish its marks but nevertheless represents or perceives them. For if one would distinguish the marks of what is confusedly represented, one would think them distinctly; if one would not perceive straightaway the marks of what is thought confusedly, one would not have the power to distinguish what was confusedly perceived through them from other things"). Cf. ibid., §521, p. 180: "*Repraesentatio* non distincta *sensitiva* vocatur" ("A nondistinct *representation* is called *sensuous*").

[10] Another issue raised by Euphranor (see the Ninth letter) is the question of the justifiability of suicide. The bulk of the final three letters (Thirteenth–Fifteenth) are devoted to refuting arguments that there are conditions under which suicide is permissible. Cf. also Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1969), pp. 138–183.

Six years after the publication of the letters on sentiments, Mendelssohn revises his conception of mixed sentiments in "Rhapsody, or additions to the Letters on sentiments." Much as Kant does later, he distinguishes between the existence of an object and the act of representing or entertaining it, noting that, even if we would rather that the object did not exist, we can still prefer having the representation of it to not having it.

> Each individual representation stands in a twofold relation. It is related, at once, to the matter before it as its object (of which it is a picture or copy) and then to the soul or the thinking subject (of which it constitutes a determination). As a determination of the soul, many a representation can have something pleasant about it although, as a picture of the object, it is accompanied by disapproval and a feeling of repugnance. Thus, we must indeed take care not to mix or confuse these two relations, the objective and the subjective, with one another. (p. 132)

By sorting out these two relations, Mendelssohn solves what would otherwise be a problem for the theory that pleasure is always directed at or based upon some perfection. In the case of something terrifying or ghastly, the perfection that yields the pleasure is not in the object but in the subject. In other words, the recognition of the imperfection in the object is a perfection or, as Mendelssohn also puts it, "an affirmative determination of the soul" (p. 133).[11]

This explanation of the pleasure of mixed sentiments is valid, Mendelssohn adds, only as long as the object and the act can be distinguished. If the object is our own pain or misfortune or that of someone with whom we genuinely identify, then the distinction collapses and, with it, the pleasure. The peculiar advantage of the artistic medium lies precisely in its ability to sustain this distinction. Art is able to render the most terrifying or unjust events pleasant by imitating them in some medium (stage, canvas, marble) that both moderates the painfulness of the object and elevates the pleasure yielded by the affirmation of the subject's ability to recognize what is terrifying or unjust for what it is. In the case of the tragic genre, the situation is more complicated, to be sure. But in Mendelssohn's eyes, it nonetheless confirms this basic account of the pleasure afforded by mixed sentiments. Tragedy, he maintains, is based upon sympathy, "a mixed sentiment composed of love for an object and discontent at its misfortune" (pp. 141–2).[12] That love for the object involves two perfections, one on the part of the object and one on the part of the subject, each a source of pleasure that is enhanced by the pain and misfortune (imperfection) befalling the tragic hero.

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[11] In acknowledging this revision, Mendelssohn concedes that his criticism, in the letters on sentiments, of Du Bos' explanation of these mixed sentiments must be retracted: see pp. 136–7).

The sheer immensity of certain things or properties presents yet another wrinkle on the theory of mixed sentiments outlined above. In these cases the imperfection lies, not in the object as such, but in the subject, where it is joined, of course, with some perfection insofar as the experience is pleasurable.

> The unfathomable world of the sea, a far-reaching plain, the innumerable legions of stars, the eternity of time, every height and depth that exhausts us, a great genius, great virtues that we admire but cannot attain; who can look upon these things without trembling? Who can continue to feast his eyes upon them without experiencing a pleasant sort of dizziness? This sentiment is composed of gratification, and its opposite. The magnitude of the object affords us gratification but our inability to comprehend its boundaries adds a certain degree of bitterness to this gratification, making it all the more alluring. (pp. 144–5)

This theory of mixed sentiments leads to a further emendation of the account of pleasure in the letters on sentiments. Inasmuch as the soul's activity of representing things, even imperfections, constitutes a pleasure-inducing perfection of it, so its experience of pleasure cannot be that of a spectator, merely appreciating the improved condition of the body (as "On sentiments" suggested was the case for the most basic sorts of pleasures). Rather, the soul's pleasure must also stem from the reality that is added to it by "the harmonious engagement and exercise of the powers of sentiment and desire" (p. 140). This observation points to the importance of educating our sentiments.

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[12] This definition of tragedy is presented as a direct challenge to standard views that tragedy is based upon sentiments of terror and sympathy or fear and sympathy; cf. p. 142.

> We are called in this life not only to improve our powers of understanding and willing, but also to educate feeling by means of sentient knowledge and to raise the obscure impulses of the soul to a higher perfection by means of sensuous pleasures. When we neglect the latter, we act as contrary to the intentions of the creator as when we neglect the former. We only make ourselves miserable when we lack a sense of proportion, preferring the trivial to the important, the lesser perfection to the higher one, the passing moment to the lasting future. (p. 140)

The theory of mixed sentiments was initially developed to explain the special instances of pleasures, such as those afforded by the tragic genre and immense objects, that clearly involve some sort of imperfection and displeasure. But the finitude of human nature insures that mixed sentiments are not special instances, but in fact the rule, to which there is no exception. This consideration provides Mendelssohn with yet another opportunity to challenge Maupertuis and, in the process, elaborate the ethical import of mixed sentiments. In particular, the theory of mixed sentiments provides him with the means of contesting Maupertuis' project of computing sentiments in order to arrive at a so-called "sum of happiness," as though there were quantifiable units of sheer pleasure, and displeasure in every case diminished the sum of pleasure (see p. 148). Mendelssohn attributes this project to the revival of a refined Epicureanism that attempts to reduce the human being's highest good to pleasant sentiment rather than, "with the Stoics, looking for it in a state of harmony with nature or, with the modern philosophers, looking for it in the original drive for perfection" (p. 150). Mendelssohn accordingly adds that, while pleasant sentiments have a place in practical ethics, they have no place in theoretical ethics. "Perfection and not pleasant sentiment," he insists, "must be called 'the supreme ground of all free actions,' that is to say, 'the *highest good*' " (p. 151).[13]

Mendelssohn concludes "Rhapsody" by proposing a hypothesis to solve the problem of human evil or, as it might also be called, weakness of will (p. 158). "According to this hypothesis, one could thus say that the effective force of impulses is (1) proportional to the magnitude of the good that they strive for, (2) proportional to the magnitude of our insight, and (3) inversely proportional to the time required to consider this good" (p. 160). This proportion, he submits, explains how emotions ("nothing but indistinct representations, arising simultaneously in the mind, of some considerable good or evil") can be more powerful than rational insight into (a distinct concept of) some good (p. 161). The emotion "defeats" reason when the goods obscurely perceived by the emotion outnumber the goods distinctly perceived and/or when those emotional goods are perceived more rapidly than the rational goods (even though the former are perceived less distinctly and surely than the latter). One implication that Mendelssohn draws from this consideration is the vital importance of proficiencies or perfected habits, capacities to perform certain actions so speedily that we are no longer conscious of everything that we are doing in the process.

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[13] Mendelssohn's claim that perfection is the basis of ethics is rooted in a wider theological and metaphysical conception of perfection: cf. "The essence of God consists in perfection; it is the plan of creation, the source of all natural and supernatural events, the goal of all our desires and wishes, the guiding principle of our actions and omissions; it is the supreme principle in ethics, in politics, and in the arts and sciences of pleasure" (p. 154). This opposition to modern Epicureanism, even while Mendelssohn affirms the practical necessity of refined sentiments for ethics, is iterated in "On the main principles of the fine arts" and in the final section of "On evidence in metaphysical sciences" (pp. 169–91 and 295–306).

The next essay in *Philosophical Writings*, "On the main principles of the fine arts and sciences," returns, as its title suggests, to the ancient issue of the relation between painting and poetry, epitomized by Horace's line: *Ut poesis pictura.*[14] "Fine sciences," it bears noting, refers to writing that is fine or, more literally, beautiful (*schön*). By addressing this problem, Mendelssohn is taking issue with Charles Batteux, though Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1725) also becomes the object of explicit criticism. Batteux, the author of *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* in 1746 (translated into German by Johann Elias Schlegel in 1751), defended the traditional principle that the essence of all arts consists in the imitation of nature. Mendelssohn agrees with the attempt to locate a single principle but he rejects the notion that it is to be found in the difference between art and nature. Instead, after noting that nature is quite pleasing when it is not imitated, he asks what the beauties of nature and of art have in common, in relation to the human soul, that accounts for their being so pleasing to it. Rejecting an appeal to God's will as well as Hutcheson's attempt to invoke an aesthetic sense (in

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[14] "Poetry is like painting." Cf. the Greek lyric poet Simonides of Keos' formulation of the thesis: "poema loquens pictura, pictura tacitum poema"; for a brief overview of the history of this issue, especially among Mendelssohn's contemporaries and immediate forerunners in Europe, see Armand Nivelle, *Kunst- und Dichtungstheorien zwischen Aufklärung und Klassik*, 2nd, expanded edn. (Berlin and New York, de Gruyter, 1971), pp. 115–17.

Mendelssohn's view they are equivalent), Mendelssohn once again elaborates the basic theory that beauty is the perfection of a sensuous cognition, an awareness or knowledge that is not obscure, but indistinct. However, amplifying a point broached in earlier writings, he also stresses the underlying connection between desire and the pleasure of beauty as well as the mediating potential of beauty based on that connection. Every sentiment, Mendelssohn observes (and here the term "sensation" would be an even more appropriate translation), involves a degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, respectively corresponding to some perfection or its opposite, on the one hand, as well as to a love of the former and an abhorrence of the latter, on the other. To be sure, there is, as noted earlier, an intellectual pleasure in knowing something distinctly. But, according to Mendelssohn, this capacity to know something in all its distinctness can set in motion the soul's capacity to desire only by transforming that object of distinct knowledge into something beautiful. This claim plainly foreshadows the difference, later formulated by Mendelssohn, among the faculties of cognition, sentiment, and desire, but it also confirms their underlying complementarity. As the very perfection of sensuous cognition, beauty and, by implication, the arts have a mediating role to perform between what a person knows and what he or she desires (p. 169).

From the basic account of beauty as a form of pleasurable sentiment, Mendelssohn derives his main principle for fine arts and sciences. "We have now found the universal means of pleasing our soul, namely, the *sensuously perfect representation.* And since the final purpose of the fine arts is to please, we can presuppose the following principle as indubitable: the essence of the fine arts and sciences consists in an artful, sensuously perfect representation or in a sensuous perfection represented by art" (pp. 172–3). This sensuously perfect, i.e., beautiful representation is, Mendelssohn recalls, possible even where the object of the representation is neither good nor beautiful in nature. When, for example, the paradigm in nature is not beautiful, we delight in the imitation both for the artistry and for the realization that it is only an imitation. Indeed, in an obvious concession to Batteux and the tradition he represents, Mendelssohn notes the necessity of imitation in art and the advantage over nature that accrues to art precisely because it consists in imitation. The artist is not hampered, as nature is, by the need to pursue any purpose higher than beauty. This advantage, Mendelssohn adds, explains why study of the ancients can be more useful than study of nature. The ancients have already performed the necessary abstraction and idealization.

Mendelssohn does not pretend to have worked out an entire system of the arts. But the second half of "On the main principles" does contain a division of the fine arts and sciences, which turns on a difference between natural and arbitrary signs.

> They [the signs] are natural if the combination of the sign with the subject matter signified is grounded in the very properties of what is designated. The passions are, by virtue of their nature, connected with certain movements in our limbs as well as with certain sounds and gestures. Hence, anyone who expresses an emotion by means of the sounds, gestures, and movements appropriate to it, makes use of natural signs. Those signs, on the other hand, that by their very nature have nothing in common with the designated subject matter, but have nonetheless been arbitrarily assumed as signs for it, are called "arbitrary." The articulated sounds of all languages, the letters, the hieroglyphic signs of the ancients, and some allegorical images, which can rightly be counted among the latter, are of this type. (pp. 177–8)

On the basis of this division, Mendelssohn presents the following breakdown of "fine sciences" and "fine arts":

signs
- arbitrary: fine sciences
  - poetry (aim: to please)
  - rhetoric (aim: to persuade)
- natural: fine arts
  - hearing: music
    - succession: melody
    - juxtaposition: harmony
  - sight
    - succession: dance (movement)
    - juxtaposition (form)
      - surfaces: painting
      - bodies: sculpture architecture