

# The German Aesthetic Tradition

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## Baumgarten, Mendelssohn

Alexander Baumgarten

Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) towering presence at the end of the eighteenth century tends to throw a shadow backward in history, eclipsing many of the less forceful and original thinkers. The situation is no different in philosophical aesthetics. Although Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment* – unlike the 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* that received little friendly attention until Reinhold's *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* (Letters on the Kantian philosophy) of 1786–7<sup>1</sup> – created a fanfare on the philosophical scene (some slight delay in reception notwithstanding), it did not emerge from out of the blue. Kant had already reacted against previous, albeit more modest attempts to ground a philosophical aesthetics – attempts, however, that ultimately failed to establish an aesthetic paradigm to serve as a starting point for productive elaborations or dissent for future generations.

The pre-Kantian philosophical aesthetics were not meant to be a break with the dominant philosophical system, namely, that of Leibniz and Wolff. Instead, they should be considered elaborations of it that *nolens, volens* helped to undermine the foundations that they labored to strengthen.<sup>2</sup> When Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) introduced the plan for aesthetics as a new philosophical discipline with its own name, he did so in order to prop up the traditional rationalist metaphysics by making it more encompassing. Yet Baumgarten's attempt to consolidate rationalism turned, under his hands, into a critical

endeavor. Aesthetics, intended to be an extension of a rationalist worldview, became more and more independent, until finally the rationalist metaphysics were discredited and aesthetics remained behind as a survivor. Therefore, in order to understand Baumgarten's and Mendelssohn's projects, it is necessary to briefly outline that philosophical system that they adhered to and planned to amend by their writings on aesthetics.

In 1735, the young Alexander Baumgarten published his *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Philosophical meditations on some requirements of the poem), which appeared in Latin, as did almost all of his writings, and in which he identified a theory of sensibility labeled aesthetics as a desideratum. Here we find for the first time in the history of philosophy the notion of aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline. Yet the meaning of the term is far from our understanding of aesthetics as a philosophical investigation of art and a theory of beauty and ugliness. Baumgarten's aesthetics refers to a theory of sensibility as a gnoseological faculty, that is, a faculty that produces a certain type of knowledge. Aesthetics is taken very literally as a defense of the relevance of sensual perception. Philosophical aesthetics originated as advocacy of sensibility, not as a theory of art. Yet without a positive valuation of the senses and their objects, art could not have achieved philosophical dignity but would have remained with the lesser ontological status that traditional metaphysics had assigned to it, compared to rationality.

The aesthetics of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn can be considered an undertaking to claim epistemological relevance for sensual perception. This was no small task, since Descartes (1596–1650) had just renewed the Platonic devaluation of the objects of the senses in favor of a rationality cleansed of sensibility.<sup>3</sup> The Cartesian mathematization and rationalization of cognition entailed a certain impoverishment of reality by excluding the evidence of sensual perception that could not be elevated to a general principle. Descartes had explained his rejection of aesthetic cognition by claiming that it consists of value judgments that are not methodical but merely subjective. Sensibility's epistemic force was considered weak after Descartes, although Leibniz (1646–1716) took the first step away from purely mathematical cognition. Moreover, that part of the Christian tradition that insisted on the mortification of the flesh was still largely unchallenged and received new vigor in the eighteenth century in the form of Protestant Pietism.

Leibniz rested his philosophical system on a theological basis, namely, the assumption of the world as *creatio Dei*, a creation of God. Therefore, the world can be nothing but a well-ordered unity in which the structures of reality are identical with the laws of rationality, as they are predominantly expressed in logic, physics, and mathematics. This logico-ontological equivalence, as it is sometimes called, is not a simple mirroring of reality in cognition. Instead, Leibniz assumes a hierarchy of cognitive levels that range from largely unconscious perceptions to complete comprehension. He develops this system of cognitive differentiation in several of his writings that provide the foil for the aesthetic attempts of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn.<sup>4</sup> Leibniz distinguishes on a first level between cognitions that are obscure and those that are clear. Obscure cognitions are such that do not become fully conscious and of which we therefore have no concept. They are so-called *petites perceptions*, too obscure to allow for the recognition of their object. Leibniz mentions the noise of the ocean as an example, since we cannot attribute the overall noise to the breaking of the individual waves. Clear cognition, however, is conscious and allows for the recognition of the object. But clear cognition subsumes under it a whole spectrum of cognitive achievements that become ever more complete. The lowest level of clear cognition divides itself into confused and distinct cognitive insight. We call a cognition clear and confused if the object possesses a multitude of (sensible) features, but we cannot list them separately. We do know they exist, but we would fail in an attempt to list them one by one. In opposition to this level, a clear and distinct cognition is able to enumerate all features of the object and give a complete definition of it. Leibniz splits the distinct cognition again into adequate and inadequate, as well as into symbolic and intuitive. Somewhat simplified, we can take him to say that these higher levels of cognition are purely rational, most of them are rare achievements for human beings, and the very highest level, adequate and intuitive knowledge, is reserved for God who possesses a complete and instantaneous knowledge of all features of the object.

What concerns us in the present context is the level of clear and confused cognition. If this sounds paradoxical, it is important to remember that a clear cognition achieves only the recognition of an object, but that it does not exhaust its elements in an analytic procedure. We are aware of the complexity of the object, although we cannot separate and enumerate its elements. This cognition is rich,

multifaceted, lively, even emotionally charged. It involves responses of like and dislike, and Leibniz locates both art and beauty on this level of cognition. But aesthetic judgments necessarily have to remain unjustifiable statements of emotional response. In a famous pronouncement on art, Leibniz states: “We sometimes comprehend in a clear manner without any doubt whether a poem or a picture is well made or not, because there is an I-don’t-know-what (*je ne sais quoi*) that satisfies or repels us.”<sup>5</sup> It is not only that a vague *je ne sais quoi*—a phrase that was to become very important in British eighteenth-century aesthetics, as can be found for example in William Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty* in which several references are listed<sup>6</sup>—is responsible for our liking or disliking of works of art; beauty in general exists solely for the incomplete human cognition. It is a precondition for our valuation of an object as beautiful to have a merely confused idea of it and to be unable to transform it into a distinct idea. Beauty therefore is a by-product of flawed human cognition; in God’s mind beauty is absent. God’s cognition is instantaneous, that is, without sensible elements and, thus, devoid of the category of beauty. This is the point where Baumgarten’s reevaluation sets in. His aim is to convince us that confusion of perception is not exclusively negative and privative but, rather, a unique mode of cognition that carries its own richness, complexity, and necessity.

As we have seen, Baumgarten is the philosopher who in the middle of the eighteenth century begins to advocate aesthetics as a new philosophical discipline and who coins the name that soon was to designate it as an independent field of inquiry. After Baumgarten concluded his treatise on the philosophical requirements of the poem with the call for aesthetics, he continued to lay the groundwork for his publications on aesthetics of the 1750s. In his book on metaphysics of 1739, he devotes a noticeable amount of attention to what he calls sensual or aesthetic cognition, and he also takes up this cause in a series of letters published as a kind of philosophical journal under the title *Aletheophilus* (Friend of the truth). In 1742, Baumgarten became the first philosophical teacher ever to lecture on aesthetics, and out of these academic courses grew his two-volume *Aesthetica* of 1750 and 1758. Partly because these publications were written in somewhat forbidding Latin, his direct influence on contemporary philosophy and literary theory remained limited. Indirectly, however, his ideas soon acquired a certain influence. This was due to a publication of Baumgarten’s student G. F. Meier, who in 1748 printed his German

treatise *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* (Foundations of all liberal arts) that was based largely on his teacher's lectures and quickly popularized Baumgarten's ideas.

Alexander Baumgarten defines aesthetics in the first paragraph of his *Aesthetica* as follows: "Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thinking analogous to reason) is the science of sensual cognition."<sup>7</sup> Baumgarten packages quite a few things into this definition, and he basically spends the rest of the *Aesthetica* elaborating on the different elements of this opening statement. The most important thing to be noted is that his aesthetics is the combination of a twofold approach to the subject. Aesthetics is considered to be a science of sensual cognition, as well as a theory of art. The general aim for Baumgarten is to establish the latter by means of the former, although the relation of the two moments is not always as clear as Baumgarten thinks it might be. It should also be mentioned that both in respect to terminology and in terms of structure, the *Aesthetica* is committed to the traditional rhetorical system that it frequently challenges but that is nevertheless taken to be the common horizon of author and readers. That is to say that Baumgarten's elaboration on the stages and elements of aesthetic truth is modeled on the production stages of a public speech (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio*) as taught by rhetorical treatises. And yet in Baumgarten's view, the rhetorical model, as was recently renewed by the Swiss literary critics Bodmer, Breitinger, and others, stands in need of expansion since it is limited to the linguistic arts and can provide no direct assistance for composers and painters.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its emphasis on the senses and their cognitive value, Baumgarten's aesthetics must not be regarded as an intentional break with, or even an intentional critique of, the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff. Its primary interest seems to be the strengthening of the rationalist system by including neglected elements that should ultimately serve to further the cause of rational cognition. Baumgarten argues that sensual cognition is essential for rational cognition: "The major inferior faculties of cognition, namely the naturally developed ones, are required for beautiful thinking. They are not only simultaneously possible with the higher natural ones, but they are required for them as a precondition (*sine qua non*)" (*Aesthetica*, §41). In anonymously published lecture notes, a student reports Baumgarten stating that in order to improve reason, aesthetics must aid logic.<sup>9</sup> With



Leibniz, Baumgarten assumes that some of our cognition is obscure while some is distinct; that is, cognition at one end of the spectrum is entirely without concepts and thus without rational justification, while at the other end it rests on complete conceptual knowledge. Between these two extreme forms of cognition some mediation must be found, for there is no direct way from the obscurity of the unconscious *petites perceptions* to rational cognition. The connecting link between the two Baumgarten claims to have found in the confused cognition of sensuality:

[It is said that] confusion is the mother of error. My answer to this is: it is a necessary condition for the discovery of truth, because nature does not make leaps from obscure to distinct thought [*ubi natura non facit saltum ex obscuritate in distinctionem*]. Out of the night dawn leads to daylight. We must concern ourselves with confused cognition so as to avoid errors in large numbers and to a large extent that befall those who ignore it. We do not commend confusion, but rather the emendation of cognition insofar as a necessary moment of confused cognition is mixed into it. (*Aesthetica*, §7)

It is the primary aim of the science of sensual cognition to aid the faculties of logical cognition. In order to do so, the unique modes of sensual cognition need to be investigated. But to claim relevance for sensual perception as an unavoidable element of all cognitive procedures was not an easy task. Not only did Baumgarten have to struggle against the devaluation of sensuality that runs through the history of Western philosophy from Plato onward and is a dominant motive in the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz, but he was also moving against the headwind of religion. Protestant Pietism gained more and more influence during Baumgarten's lifetime and argued for a break with the Catholic medieval tradition according to which the glory of God shines forth from the splendor of the world. For Pietism, one's relation to God was to be purely inward and nonsensual. Yet Baumgarten's new science of sensual cognition was determined not to regard sense data merely as stimuli for higher and more advanced processes of cognition but, rather, to consider it an independent form of cognition itself.

In fact, the logician who neglected sensory moments was considered a philosopher manqué, an incompletely developed human being who lacks the fullness of existence. Baumgarten (and even more so his

student G. F. Meier) pitched against the dry logician the *felix aestheticus*, the successful aesthetician, who combines attention to and love for the sensory world with the faculty of rational cognition.

Sensual cognition must not be seen as a faulty or incomplete rational cognition but, rather, as an independent faculty. Baumgarten argues that to comprehend an object obscurely, confusedly, or indistinctly is not a failure, and must thus be considered a specific achievement of the soul (*Metaphysica*, §520). If a representation is not distinct, it can only be sensual for Baumgarten. Therefore, the inferior cognition is a sensual mode of cognition (*Metaphysica*, §521). Although it is not rational itself, the fact that it is a faculty of cognition makes it analogous to rational procedures. Baumgarten thus defines aesthetics as the art of thinking analogous to rationality (*ars analogi rationis*). This mode comes to human beings as part of their instinctive heritage, and as such it is something that does not yet set us apart from animals. This so-called natural aesthetics, however, needs practice in order to develop its potential. Properly trained, natural aesthetics can be transformed into the art of beautiful thinking, a term that we shall have to return to (*Aesthetica*, §47). Such training for the *felix aestheticus* depends as much on repeated exercises, as prescribed by the rhetorical system, as on familiarity with aesthetic theory. Baumgarten concludes that practical exercises need to be supplemented by theory, and theory in turn must be brought down to a practical level by means of exercises (*Aesthetica*, §62).

Inferior cognition does entail a lack of rationality, but it does not entail a lack of truth. In a rather bold fashion, Baumgarten states that aesthetic cognition does indeed have its own truth claim. He argues that there are several levels of truth that coincide with the levels of cognition. A metaphysical truth seems the equivalent of an intuitive and adequate cognition, that is, something that is restricted to God. As far as man is concerned, his rational insights produce a truth that Baumgarten labels logical. The third truth is the result of confused cognition, namely, aesthetic truth (*Aesthetica*, §423). Baumgarten elaborates on how he understands aesthetic truth by situating it between falsehood and the certainty we achieve through correct employment of our rational faculties. Aesthetic truth for Baumgarten seems to come rather close to the rhetorical conception of truth, namely, probability. In the rhetorical tradition, an argument was true if it was convincing,

probable, or more likely to be true than other contenders for truth, but it did not have to agree with the substance of the object as the philosophical *adaequatio*-theory demanded. An argument would be deemed probable if we hold something to be true without having any logical proof for this belief. The object of aesthetic truth, Baumgarten writes, “is neither certain nor is its truth perceived in full light” (*Aesthetica*, §483). This kind of truth strays a good way from the traditional philosophical conception of truth as correspondence of mind and reality as the system of Leibniz advocates it and to which Baumgarten clearly subscribes at other times.

Although logical truth, and logical truth only, can provide us with certainty, it pays a high price for it. Much like Nietzsche, Baumgarten regards logical truth to be an impoverished abstraction, that is, a movement from concrete instances to a general concept. The multitude of concrete sensual experiences carries with it a sense of fullness, vibrancy, and liveliness that gets lost in abstraction. Therefore, Baumgarten famously concludes: “But what is abstraction if not a loss?” (*Aesthetica*, §560). We are to think of abstract logical truth as somewhat pale and somewhat lifeless in comparison to the probability that the aesthetic faculty provides. Aesthetic truth, in opposition, celebrates “richness, chaos and matter” (*Aesthetica*, §564). The term chaos, however, does not indicate that Baumgarten considers aesthetic truth to be unstructured, devoid of recurring elements or without necessary conditions. Instead, he proposes three criteria according to which the unique perfection of sensual cognition can be judged. The first of these moments is richness of imagination, which means that an aesthetic idea is the more perfect the more individual elements it contains. Complexity of content becomes elevated to a characteristic of aesthetic perfection. In Leibniz, confused cognition had little value attached to it, but in Baumgarten it encompasses a redeeming fullness and complexity that we find pleasurable. An aesthetic idea, though, does not merely have to be complex to be perfect. Baumgarten defines the second characteristic of aesthetic perfection as magnitude of imagination. In this, the mere sensual complexity is linked with the notion of relevance and, thus, to a form of judgment that is no longer purely sensual. Rather traditionally, Baumgarten argues that aesthetic ideas are more satisfying for us if they pertain to more relevant matters, that is, if a narrative tells about the lot of humans instead of that of animals or if pictorial representations depict historical scenes instead of flowers. The third

and final element in Baumgarten's list is that of clarity of presentation, which is a traditional rhetorical ideal.

The most interesting of these characteristics is certainly that of richness of imagination. We can understand it to express the fact that aesthetic perception and aesthetic truth consist of an ever-renewed contemplation of the multitude of elements contained in the aesthetic object without our being able or willing to unify them under a concept. But what remains confused also remains rich. Baumgarten, with this elevation of confused richness, obviously points forward toward Kant and his important notion of the aesthetic idea.

As has been pointed out, the aim of an aesthetic theory for Baumgarten is to aid in the perfection of sensual cognition. Perfection of sensual cognition, however, is defined as beauty. Conversely, imperfection of aesthetic cognition is ugliness. Art as the manifestation of the beautiful therefore aims to represent the purposeful unity and harmony of the world. In this, Baumgarten subscribes to the classical *pulchrum* theory that regards the universe as a beautiful creation and every beautiful object as a mirroring instance of the whole. Representation in the form of mirroring is an idea that Baumgarten takes from Leibniz's *Monadology* that rests on the assumption of a coherence of subject and object, that is, the logico-ontological equivalence. Later we will see that the notion of the aesthetic monad also recurs in the writings of Adorno. The aesthetic representation of the larger unity in one beautiful object is what Baumgarten labels "thinking beautifully" (*pulchre cogitare*).

With this definition we have come full circle and find ourselves again at the point where we started the analysis, namely Paragraph One of the *Aesthetica*. Aesthetics, as we recall, was defined not only as the science of sensual cognition but also as the theory of liberal arts, an inferior cognition, the art of thinking beautifully, and the art that is analogous to rationality. Thus, the opening sentence contains, in the form of brief parenthetical definitions, the arguments that the many hundreds of paragraphs that follow elaborate. Some of the definitions, as has become clear, are obliged to the traditional rhetorical system and to the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff, whereas others break away from these traditions and open new paths of inquiry into the unique status of aesthetics as a philosophical project.

As has been demonstrated, Baumgarten's aesthetics takes a double approach to its subject matter, namely, as a theory of sensual perception

and as a philosophy of art. Philosophy of art, however, has to be understood in a wider sense than usual so that it can encompass the theory of production of art, that is, those elements that Baumgarten incorporates from poetics and rhetoric. True art, and that means good art, depends on the application of rules that the science of art and beauty is to develop. With this proposition, Baumgarten exerted some influence on the *Regelpoetiken* (regulative poetics) of the eighteenth century that continued the Baroque tradition of M. Opitz and others until they were displaced by the *Geniepoetik* (poetics of genius) that flourished with the Storm-and-Stress movement in Germany.

Yet another important factor in Baumgarten's theory of aesthetics is his inclusion of emotional aspects into the process of cognition. His notion of "aesthetic enthusiasm" reunites artistic emotionality and cognitive achievements that had been opposed to each other since Plato's criticism of artistic inspiration (*mania*) as an interference with rationality. One of Baumgarten's arguments implies that the aesthetic effect allows us to tap into memory resources no longer available to voluntary recollection. Without having to stretch this theory too far, we can find its repercussions in Marcel Proust's notion of the *memoire involontaire* that is set in motion by sensual experiences and contains an equally unique mode of cognition.

Turning to our three aspects under which we want to consider the contributions of the individual writers, namely the ontological, the epistemic, and the practical functions attributed to art and beauty, we shall first consider Baumgarten's response to the ontological question. His answer to "What is art?" is nowhere stated explicitly, yet can be inferred easily from the argumentation. An object of art, it can be concluded, is one that, better than other objects, represents the purposeful unity and the beauty of the world. This ontological stance is rather conservative and limits itself to restating the familiar positions of the metaphysical theories of Leibniz. Questioned about the cognitive value of art, Baumgarten repeats the ontological argument in somewhat different form, but he also adds an important new element. Certainly we can learn from a work of art that the world is created beautifully and that harmony prevails in it. Yet this is a rather abstract truth. Aesthetic truth, on the other hand, shelters the immediacy of experience in all its individuality, richness, and complexity. The truth of art can

thus be pitched against logical truth – a criticism of rationality that is taken up by romanticism and brought to prominence by aesthetic theories of the twentieth century. The truth of art for Baumgarten is not a mere preparation for logical truth, nor, even more importantly, is it accessible by means of logic. The truth of art remains sensual, unconceptualized, or, as Adorno would later call it, nonidentical.

Closely related to this argument are the statements on the practical value of art. If we ask what exactly art can do, Baumgarten's answer seems rather straightforward, but it undercuts itself. Baumgarten justified the need for an aesthetic theory with the argument that it helps to make the transition from unconscious and obscure cognition to distinct cognition. A theory of confused cognition as a theory of sensuality thus aids rationality. But this answer creates more problems than it solves. If the aesthetic truth is independent from the logical truth, it can also not be reduced to the latter's handmaiden. The practical purpose of art is not to train our aesthetic sensibilities in order to leave them behind for more rational conduct. More likely, the repeated encounters with art help us to become more well-rounded human beings who are able to balance sensuality and rationality, aesthetic immediacy and abstract cognition. Aesthetics might have been meant to be a prop for the perfection of rationality, but it emerged as a lively critic of it. After Baumgarten, however, aesthetics no longer defended its usefulness by reference to its helpfulness for logical modes of thought. Instead, it presented itself both as independent of and even productively opposed to rationality.

With Baumgarten, aesthetics takes a great step toward its independence as a philosophical discipline. While Baumgarten was mainly concerned with the aspect of *cognition*, Moses Mendelssohn contributed essays exploring the unique *pleasure* man derives from the aesthetic object.

### Moses Mendelssohn

Whereas Alexander Baumgarten embodies the rationalist side of mid-eighteenth-century aesthetics, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) represents the emotive side. Together these two thinkers sum up the aesthetic tendencies of this century in Germany. Much like Baumgarten, Mendelssohn is an adherent of the rationalist metaphysics

of Leibniz and Wolff, and consequently, his aesthetic writings share many features with those of Baumgarten. There is little need to restate these principles of Baroque philosophy since Mendelssohn takes them for granted, possibly to an even larger extent than Baumgarten. He, too, assumes a hierarchy of cognitive achievements in which little cognitive value is attributed to sensuality, whereas rational cognition is considered devoid of sensuality. Arguing in the Platonic tradition, Mendelssohn states that beauty as a sensual phenomenon is part of the realm of change about which ultimate truth statements cannot be made due to its ephemeral character. The volatile nature of beauty thus has to be separated from rational cognition. Our judgment of the beautiful – Kant will later argue this point vehemently – is therefore not a judgment that holds true for everyone by virtue of its adherence to undeniable principles of reason (cf. *Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten* – Affinity of the beautiful and the good).<sup>10</sup>

The elevation of sensuality, beauty, and works of art to cognitive respectability, however, is not Mendelssohn's primary concern. Of higher importance to him is the pleasurable sensation that the perfection of art and beauty induces.<sup>11</sup> Mendelssohn's aesthetics constitutes the link between the rationalism of the Leibniz/Wolff system and the aesthetics of classicism as advanced by Goethe, Schiller, W. von Humboldt, and others. Insofar as his writings emphasize human perfectability and art's contribution to the aesthetic education of man leading to the well-rounded human being, they anticipate in several respects classical anthropology and art criticism. Therefore, it appears justified to label Mendelssohn's an aesthetics of perfection, albeit one that changes the focus from the perfect universe of the rationalist metaphysicians to the classicists' teleological improvement of man.

Mendelssohn explicates his ideas on aesthetics in a number of essays, as well as in an exchange of letters with Friedrich Nicolai and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. His most relevant aesthetic texts are *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (Letters on sensations, 1755) and its sequel *Rhapsodie, oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen* (Rhapsody, or addenda to the letters on sensations, 1761), *Über die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (On the main principles of the beaux arts and liberal arts, 1757), and *Über das Erhabene und Naïve in den schönen Wissenschaften* (On the sublime and naïve in the liberal arts, 1758). Most relevant might be the first essay in which Mendelssohn develops his basic ideas, which he later elaborates and modifies only slightly.

The *Letters on Sensations* are modeled in form and diction on Shaftesbury's (1661–1713) *The Moralists or A Philosophical Rhapsody* of 1709. From Shaftesbury Mendelssohn takes the notions of creative genius and the work of art as an organic totality, but largely discards Shaftesbury's moralistic tendencies. Mendelssohn agrees with Baumgarten that the sensation of beauty rests neither on an obscure nor on a distinct cognition, but on a confused one. That said, he leaves epistemological concerns behind to turn toward the psychological ramifications of art and beauty.

Beauty – this is an idea Mendelssohn repeats throughout his writings – depends on an easily comprehensible unity of the manifold in sensual perception. The beautiful object therefore must neither be too small nor too large (originally, this is the Aristotelian notion of εὐσϋνοπιτον, i.e., that which can be visually grasped at once) because if too great in size, an immediate comprehension of its unity will be impossible, whereas if too minute, the object will lack in variety of elements – a theory that Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) in his 1764 *History of Ancient Art* also proposed.<sup>12</sup> This reduction of beautiful objects to a human scale not only comprises a classical thought in itself, but also indicates a clear break with the traditional *pulchrum* theory, according to which the cosmos is a beautiful entity. The universe is much too large to be sensually comprehended, and thus it disqualifies itself as an object of beauty: “This infinite universe is no visibly beautiful object. Nothing deserves this name that does not enter our senses all at once” (*Letters on Sensations*, 51).

Whereas this humanization of the beautiful marks a break with traditional notions of beauty, Mendelssohn's debunking of Gothic architecture that results from the same argumentation is perfectly in keeping with the taste of the age. The eighteenth century at large regarded the Gothic period as inharmonious and tasteless, although this valuation goes back in its essence to Vasari's attempt to establish the superiority of the Renaissance artists by discrediting their precursors.<sup>13</sup> Mendelssohn, too, subscribes to this judgment by arguing that Gothic cathedrals fail as architectural objects because their endless detailing, that is, the manifold, cannot be perceptually unified and thus remains scattered, random, and dissatisfying. Not until Goethe and Herder and the essay *Von deutscher Baukunst* (On German architecture) of 1772 by the former – who made a point of emphasizing the “complete, great impression” consisting of “a thousand harmonizing details” in Gothic



architecture<sup>14</sup> – did this derision of the Gothic style come to an end. Ironically, it was soon celebrated by the romantics as a genuine and superior German contribution to art.

Another break with the aesthetic tradition can be detected in Mendelssohn's separation of beauty and perfection. Although he subscribes to Leibniz's theorems that beauty consists in perfection of sensual perception, truth in logical perfection, and the good in man in moral perfection, he no longer equates every expression of perfection with beauty. In fact, there are distinct instances where a perfect form, that is, one that fulfills its *telos*, is outright ugly. Picture the human body suggests Mendelssohn, and he takes up an argument that can already be found in Xenophon and Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* (42; 5). If it is perfectly formed, we admire its beauty, but such beauty is merely external, because the body as a whole also possesses an inside that repels us:

The beauty of the human form, the pleasant colors, the curved features that enchant in his face, are only as if molded into the exterior shell. They only last as long as our senses. Underneath the skin terrible forms lie hidden. All vessels are intertwined seemingly without order. The entrails balance each other, but without harmony. Much manifold, but nowhere unity. Much activity, but nowhere ease in activity. How much the creator would have failed if beauty had been his only aim!" (*Letters on Sensations*, 59)

The world at large and man are indeed perfect creations for Mendelssohn, who, like Leibniz, could not envision a more perfect universe. Yet perfection does not express itself any longer as beauty: The universe because of its size and man considered as a biological creature fail to satisfy our sense of beauty, since it does not grant us aesthetic pleasure to ponder the cosmos or man's intestines. Mendelssohn here advances the same argument that Edmund Burke had put forth when he declared that functional perfection ("fitness") is not the cause of beauty, a theory that had originated with Socrates. Burke uses the same example of the inner organs of man as fit, but not beautiful.<sup>15</sup>

Mendelssohn distinguishes three sources of pleasure; the first stems from the unity of the manifold and is called beauty, the second is the unanimity of the manifold called perfection, and the third results from the improvement of our physique and is called sensual pleasure.

Ideally, aesthetic pleasure contains all three elements, but practically, only works of music have achieved this aim for Mendelssohn, who nevertheless hopes for the discovery of new forms of art that will result in the same unified pleasure for the other senses. The sensation of perfection produces a feeling of bodily ease and relaxation, a “pleasant affect” that consists of a harmonious nervous tension and a stimulation without fatigue. In *Rhapsody*, Mendelssohn adds that sensual pleasure not only improves our bodily condition but leads to a harmonious play of all human faculties. While the pleasure of viewing a painting here comes dangerously close to that of eating a cake, Mendelssohn nevertheless advances the fruitful idea of the harmonious play of faculties caused by aesthetic cognition. Moreover, he distinguishes between the perfection of the object and the perfection of its representation in the subject. This important differentiation allows for a beautiful representation of objects that fail to be perfect themselves: “This artistic representation can be sensually perfect even if the object of it would be neither good nor beautiful in nature” (*Main Principles*, 431). Although Mendelssohn insists on the perfection of aesthetic representation as a necessity, the distinction between artistic representation and the referential object to which an independent aesthetic value can be assigned also takes the first cautious step in the direction of representations, both without recognizable object and without beauty.

Mendelssohn was also the first German philosopher to devote significant attention to the concept of sublimity that had already been discussed in Britain and France for a couple of decades. He defines the sublime as the sensual expression of an extraordinary perfection, as well as beauty of such enormous dimensions that it cannot be sensually comprehended all at once. Although it remains unclear how we should judge something to be beautiful first in order to move from there to the realization that we fail to encompass it and consequently have to classify it as sublime, Mendelssohn insists on the beautiful element in the sublime object. Sublimity produces a divergent complex of emotions in us due to the pleasure that results from its beautiful aspect and the frustration caused by our failure to grasp it in its entirety. Unlike Edmund Burke, however, Mendelssohn regards sublimity not as inciting terror but admiration and, thus, associates it with an ultimately positive emotional response. Most future philosophers, however, insofar as they deal with the concept of the sublime, will refer back to Kant’s

concept of it and disregard the contributions of Mendelssohn. His notion of the naïve, on the other hand, clearly influenced Schiller's definition of naïve art. He defines as naïve the simplistic representation of a beautiful and noble soul. Thus, the naïve is restricted to the representation of man and his actions, although these have to be of relevance. The representation itself will hide more than it reveals, and therefore it conforms to the rhetorical style of *genus humilis*, yet without weightiness of its object, the naïve collapses into the ridiculous (cf. *On the Sublime*).

Another influential feature of Mendelssohn's writings is his attempt to classify the individual forms of art according to a semiotic system, distinguishing the different art forms according to the signs they use. He follows the French philosopher Jean-Baptiste Dubos (1670–1742) by basing painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and dance on natural signs that are determined by their affinity to the represented object, whereas poetry and rhetoric depend on arbitrary signs without any connecting element between sign and signified (except for the rare onomatopoeic instance). This conception was taken up and modified in the writings of both Lessing and Herder and might very well be the first attempt at a semiotic theory of art in German.

Interesting as these ideas may be, Mendelssohn's main importance nevertheless is to be found in his undertaking to secure greater autonomy for art. While Baumgarten labored to gain acceptance for the cognitive aspects of beauty and art, Mendelssohn did the same for art's emotional elements. And whereas Baumgarten's theory led to a strengthening of the *Regelpoetik* (poetics of rules), Mendelssohn emphasized pleasure over regulations. With this, he contributed significantly to the paradigmatic shift from an aesthetics of production to an aesthetics of reception and a general psychological aesthetics that reached its epitome in the writings of Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–1793).

This tendency toward greater autonomy of the aesthetic sphere was aided further by Mendelssohn's concept of *Billigungsvermögen* (faculty of approbation) that must be considered a direct precursor of Kant's notion of "disinterested pleasure."<sup>16</sup> Mendelssohn, who in turn was preceded by Shaftesbury and his notion of aesthetic sensation as "disinterested love," as well as by Dubos's concept of *plaisir pur* (whether he knew of Winckelmann's notion that the reception of art must be "cleansed of all intentions" is hard to assess), distinguished

between three faculties of the soul, the faculty of cognition, the appetite, and the faculty of sensation (after 1785 called faculty of approbation). The third faculty handles aesthetic perception that is removed from both rational cognition and appetite as a form of pleasure without desire. Finally, Mendelssohn argues for greater autonomy of art by separating art and morality, to some degree, by allowing for the artistic representation of morally wrong acts because of their emotive potential. These morally reprehensible acts do not serve only as negative examples in art; they are artistically good and valuable elements:

The stage has its own morality. In life nothing is good that is not grounded in our perfection; on the stage, however, everything is good that has its ground in the most forceful passions. The reason of tragedy is to incite passions. Therefore, suicide is theatrically good. (*Letters on Sensations*, 94)

This is not to say that art does not fulfill ethical purposes for Mendelssohn, since it does so without a doubt. And yet its subject matter is free from regulation; and it is this freedom that allows art to contribute to man's betterment. Mendelssohn's psychological aesthetics of perfection ultimately underwrites an anthropological model that unites the sensual perfection of art with the perfectability of man. As art is no longer the result of successfully applied rules, the original creator, that is, the genius, moves to the forefront of the discussion. Works of art are created by the man of genius, who is characterized for Mendelssohn by his perfection of all faculties and their harmonious interplay (*Main Principles*, 433f.). But art does not only originate in perfection; it also stirs its recipient toward it: "The soul does not only enjoy the contentment of its body as a spectator, as it responds to the perfection of an object with serenity; rather, through sensual pleasure it gains no small degree of perfection by which the pleasurable sensation is enlivened in turn" (*Rhapsody*, 392f.). Art turns into a means of aesthetic education – a notion that plays a significant role in Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* and in Goethe's bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Mendelssohn has a clear picture of man's perfection: "The perfection of man consists – despite the ridicule of those who despise wisdom – next to the well-being of the body in a cleansed reason, in an upright heart and in a fine and tender sense for true beauty, or in a harmony of the lower and upper faculties of the soul" (*Briefe über Kunst* – Letters on art, 166).

Mendelssohn's main interest with respect to aesthetics does not lie with its epistemological nor with its ontological aspects but, rather, with its psychological element. Therefore, it is hardly surprising if he does not explicitly address the question of what a work of art is in opposition to nonartistic objects. We can nevertheless deduce an ontological definition: A work of art is the perfect (or at least properly idealized) representation of an object that does not have to be beautiful in itself and that causes us pleasure. This definition is somewhat weak and due to the shift in its definition of art from an objective feature to a subjective response – a move that Kant will shortly thereafter radicalize. The problems of this subjectivization will be discussed in the context of Kant's approach that is altogether more sophisticated and well thought out.

Mendelssohn does, however, attribute a practical function to art, namely, its potential to move man toward perfection. With this, art becomes an indispensable tool in all education that has little choice but to become aesthetic.

Epistemologically, Mendelssohn's theory remains weak, since it does not attribute any unique cognitive function to art. It results from a skepticism regarding the cognitive approach to art that tends to eclipse the emotional aspect. Since Mendelssohn considered it his role to emphasize the contentment produced by encounters with aesthetic perfection, the subordination of the epistemological moment is likely to have been the price Mendelssohn had to pay. Between Baumgarten's emphasis on cognition and Mendelssohn's stress on aesthetic psychology and human perfectability, the realm for aesthetic investigation was largely staked out.

Baumgarten and Mendelssohn are a farewell and an annunciation. Their aesthetic theories are committed to the metaphysical rationalism of the eighteenth century, and yet they undermine its foundations involuntarily. But because they adhere to the rationalism of the Leibniz/Wolff system, they do not achieve the autonomy necessary to establish aesthetics as an independent discipline in philosophy. Both thinkers open vistas for the idealists, but they do not advance strong aesthetic paradigms. The age of aesthetic paradigms in philosophy only begins with Kant.