Table of Contents

VOLUME II

IV. Developments in Philosophy, Ideology, and Religious Practice

PART IV

Developments in Philosophy, Ideology, and Religious Practice

Moses Mendelssohn's Humanism*

Michah Gottlieb

In his landmark book, *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor defines a secular age as one in which "the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing . . . falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people."[1] The story of how this possibility (which Taylor calls "exclusive humanism") became a widely available option is a long one, but for Taylor it winds through a crucial "intermediate form" that he calls "providential deism."[2] Providential deism, whose heyday was in the eighteenth century, is a complex phenomenon, but I would like to focus on one aspect of Taylor's treatment of it. For Taylor, providential deism is marked by what he calls an "anthropocentric shift."[3] Taylor sees this exemplified in the work of the early eighteenth-century English deist Matthew Tindal. In his *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), Tindal argues that our only duty to God is the promotion of human happiness. Tindal reasons that since God is absolutely self-sufficient, God could never require anything from us. God created the world from pure benevolence in order for human beings to be happy, and as such, the only service that God desires is the promotion of human happiness. Taylor bristles at this doctrine, noting that "an observer

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1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 19–20.

2 Ibid., 18.

3 Ibid., 221.

today looks with stupefaction on this pre-shrunk religion."[4] For Taylor, it is clear that both faithful Christians and exclusive humanists would inevitably reject providential deism. By identifying the goal of religion with happiness and seeing religious duty as a way of furthering self-interest, providential deists marginalized God's role in the individual's life. According to Taylor, this led to the abandonment of providential deism in two directions—faithful Christians rejected providential deism as insufficiently attentive to the role of grace and mystery in religion, while exclusive humanists took the small step of eliminating God as a superfluous hypothesis.

One of the most prominent eighteenth-century providential deists was Moses Mendelssohn. Taylor never mentions Mendelssohn, but I question whether God is so easily subtracted from Mendelssohn's humanism. To be sure, Mendelssohn makes worldly human flourishing a central concern, but he also considers religion a crucial means for attaining this end. For Mendelssohn, a proper appreciation of our finite humanity does not lead us away from God, but rather to recognition of the infinite divine. I will illustrate this by examining aspects of Mendelssohn's theology, ethics, politics, epistemology, and metaphysics. But before I begin, I present a couple of caveats. First, as I will be following a thread through different areas of Mendelssohn's thought, I will not be able to undertake a detailed analysis of particular texts. Second, there are other areas of Mendelssohn's thought that could contribute to this analysis, especially his aesthetics, but I will leave discussion of them to another occasion.

I. Theology

I begin with an important element of Mendelssohn's theology, namely his treatment of eternal punishment. While Mendelssohn sees himself as a proponent of Leibniz's enlightened theism, Mendelssohn emphatically rejects Leibniz's defense of eternal punishment.[5] For Mendelssohn, Leibniz

4 Ibid., 226.

5 Recent scholars debate whether Leibniz sincerely believed in eternal punishment. For a recent account of the debate including a strong defense of the sincerity of Leibniz's belief in eternal punishment, see Lloyd Strickland, "Leibniz on Eternal Punishment," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 307–331. Lessing famously defended the sincerity of Leibniz's belief in this doctrine and Mendelssohn apparently accepted Leibniz's sincerity, though Mendelssohn does not engage with Lessing's interpretation of what Leibniz meant. For

correctly stresses the centrality of divine goodness as a demand of reason.[6] But Mendelssohn claims that Leibniz does not appreciate the full implications of divine goodness on account of his feeling bound to uphold the Christian dogma of eternal punishment.

Mendelssohn thinks that a proper understanding of divine goodness leads to a different approach to human suffering. God's goodness implies that God is concerned with the happiness and perfection of every individual human being.[7] While Leibniz labels this view "a remnant of the old and somewhat discredited maxim, that all is made solely for man,"[8] Mendelssohn upholds this "discredited maxim" in an extreme way, claiming that God's goodness implies that God treats every individual human being as an end in themselves of infinite value whose happiness and perfection can never be sacrificed for the benefit of others.[9] For Mendelssohn, the only purpose of suffering is corrective, namely as a spur to the individual's own improvement. Hence God will only let an individual suffer as long as it helps her improve. For this reason, Mendelssohn deems eternal punishment unacceptable. Mendelssohn regards this as a traditional Jewish position.[10]

Lessing's interpretation of Leibniz's reasoning, see Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. Hugh Barr (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 37–60.

6 See Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, eds. Alexander Altmann et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Germany: Frommann-Holzboog, 1973) 3.2:95–103.

7 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:249–250 (#76); 7:71–73, 302; 8:189–190; 15.2:36–37 (commentary to Genesis 3:19; but compare *JubA* 16:115–116, commentary to Exodus 14:4); Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, ed. Alexander Altmann (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), 124.

8 See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 188–189 (#118).

9 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 7:71–73; 8:189–190; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 124. See Allan Arkush, *Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 49–52.

10 Mendelssohn quotes the medieval Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra (commentary on Exodus 34:7) who notes that punishment itself is also "a quality of God's infinite love." Also see Nahmanides's commentary, ad. loc. See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:188; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 123. Eternal punishment was a hotly debated issue within the Jewish community. Maimonides argued against it claiming that souls who did not merit eternal bliss would be annihilated, while Nahmanides defended eternal punishment. See Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna, Sanhedrin*, chapters 9 and 10; Maimonides, "Laws of Repentance," in *Mishneh Torah* (Vilna: Rosenkrantz, 1928), 8:1, 8:5; Nahmanides, *Writings and Discourses*, ed.

For Mendelssohn, a proper understanding of God leads to a recognition of the intimate connection between religion and happiness. Since an omnipotent, all-good God seeks our happiness and the development of our faculties, belief in divine providence instills confidence that no matter how bad things seem, things are happening for our benefit. This frees us from fear and allows us to feel at home in the world.[11] Furthermore, Mendelssohn claims that one of the biggest obstacles to happiness is the fear of death whose thought can "poison the enjoyment of life"[12] unless one goes through life in a "stupor," (*Betäubung*) never contemplating death.[13] Once eternal punishment is rejected, belief in the immortality of the soul allows us to live in constant awareness of our mortality while avoiding the despair that necessarily accompanies the thought of the perpetual possibility of death.[14]

So for Mendelssohn, belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good God promotes individual human happiness in this world.

Charles Ber Chavel (New York, NY: Shilo Publishing House, 1978), 473–504. For discussion, see Schwartz, "Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality," in *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993), 189–192. In the seventeenth century this debate was renewed in Amsterdam on a different basis with Saul Levi Morteira defending eternal punishment and Isaac Aboab attacking it. But unlike Maimonides, Aboab comes closer to Mendelssohn's position by affirming that sinners will eventually find their way to heaven. For a fascinating discussion of this debate, see Alexander Altmann, *Von der Mittelalterlichen zur Modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur Jüdischen Geistesgeschichte* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr-Siebeck, 1987), 206–248.

11 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:68. Also, see Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 5.1:191: "'In our time can one still say that the concept of a future life makes death terrifying for us? That in order not to fear death one must leave aside this prejudice? Or does not the most rational part of ourselves rather make the future the most consoling representations . . . ?" This passage is cited by Leo Strauss, "Einleitung zu *Morgenstunden* und *An die Freunde Lessing*," in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, lxi. Compare Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:255; Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 26.

12 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.1:115; 3.2: 235 (#52): "Whoever complains about evil suffered without comfort, regards his present life as his entire duration."

13 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.1:80, 115–116. To explicate this point, consider the question whether or not someone given a few days to live can truly enjoy their last remaining days. For Mendelssohn, the difference between having a few days to live and having a few decades is minor.

14 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 2:102.

II. Ethics

Mendelssohn thinks that every finite human being can know his ethical obligations independently of revelation. For Mendelssohn, ethical laws are rational, universal laws that follow from our nature as beings with intellect.[15] Briefly, the fundamental law of ethics, which can be derived from our universal drive for perfection, is "make your intrinsic and extrinsic condition and that of your fellow human being in the proper proportion as perfect as possible."[16] Our extrinsic condition refers to our body, while our intrinsic condition refers to our soul. Our obligation to seek the perfection of others derives from our desire for our own perfection. Since our perfection is a function of our representations of perfection, we seek to create a world in which we represent others as attaining perfection as well.[17]

For Mendelssohn, however, while human beings can know their ethical obligations through reason alone, morality requires knowledge of the teachings of natural religion for two reasons.[18] First, Mendelssohn argues that without belief in the immortality of the soul, the rational ethical law can become contradictory. He begins his argument by accepting Aristotle's definition of human beings as *Zoon Politikon*, that is, political animals. Mendelssohn interprets this to mean that without society a person can achieve neither safety nor perfection as perfection includes both culture and enlightenment, which cannot be achieved in the state of nature.[19] But for a society to be able to protect itself, it must have a moral right to demand that its citizens sacrifice their lives for

15 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 19:178–179; *JubA*, 15.2:26 (commentary to Genesis 2:18); Zev Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon on the Tree of Knowledge," in *Sephard in Ashkenaz: Medieval Knowledge and Eighteenth Century Enlightened Jewish Discourse*, eds. Andrea Schatz, Resianne Fontaine, and Irene Zwiep (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2007); Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 235, 295–299.

16 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 2:316; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 296.

17 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:405–408; 2:316–317; 19:179; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 151–154, 296–297. Paul Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (New York: NY, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30–32.

18 It would be instructive to compare Mendelssohn's discussion of the relationship between ethics and theology with Kant's but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

19 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:109, 116; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 40, 47; Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 15.2:26 (commentary to Genesis 2:18, "lo tov").

the state if the state requires this for its continued existence. According to Mendelssohn, without belief in the immortality of the soul one's life on earth becomes the "highest good."[20] But if the highest law of morality is to seek perfection and this world is the only place in which perfection can be achieved, one has an "exactly opposite right" (*ein gerade entgegensetzte rechte*) to preserve one's own life and so to refuse any request to lay down one's life for the state. Indeed, Mendelssohn goes so far as to claim that if one does not believe in the immortality of the soul, then one is within one's right, and perhaps one is even obligated, "to cause the destruction of the entire world if this can help prolong one's life."[21] But if one recognizes in this circumstance contradictory moral demands, this calls the rationality of morality into question.[22] Hence moral reason demands that we posit the immortality of the soul.[23]

Second, theological beliefs are needed in order to be motivated to act ethically. Mendelssohn notes that while people generally recognize that morality is binding, they often notice the suffering of the righteous and the prospering of the wicked, which can cause them to despair of morality. For it often seems that righteousness is an impediment to prosperity as the wicked person who takes moral short cuts is able to get ahead faster.[24] As such, benevolence can come to be seen as "a foppery into which we seek to lure one another so that the simpleton will toil while the clever man enjoys himself and has a good laugh at the other's expense."[25] While the wise man recognizes that benevolence is a crucial component of perfection and hence is its own

20 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.1:116.

21 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.1:117; 1:295–296; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 61–63.

22 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.1:117; 8:115; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 46.

23 See Arkush, *Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 58–60. In the introduction to the *Phädon*, Mendelssohn notes that this argument for the immortality of the soul is completely original. But while Mendelssohn claims that the argument can be elaborated by means of the strictest logic, he admits that in the *Phädon* he presents it in a more popular, less rigorous way. In particular, Mendelssohn does not explain the philosophical basis of our moral obligations. He also does not philosophically deduce the state's right to demand that we sacrifice our lives in times of danger. A number of questions arise from Mendelssohn's presentation. For example, assuming that one does not believe in the immortality of the soul and that one's life in this world is the highest good, is there a moral obligation to enter society given its right to demand that one sacrifice one's life?

24 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 14:193 (commentary to Ecclesiastes 9:10).

25 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:131; 14:193 (commentary to Ecclesiastes 9:10); Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 63.

reward, most people consider benevolence to be a sacrifice (*Verlust*) that demands compensation.[26] As they do not see this compensation in this world, they require the belief that this injustice is rectified in the next world to be motivated to act ethically.[27]

So for Mendelssohn, while as human beings we know our ethical duties through our *finite* intellectual powers, we need to believe in a providential God and in the immortality of the soul for this law to be coherent and for us to have the motivation to act ethically.

III. Politics

At the heart of Mendelssohn's political thought is his theory of individual rights.[28] Mendelssohn defines "moral right" as the authority to use goods to promote my felicity as long as this comports with the laws of justice.[29] Mendelssohn enumerates three goods that I have rights to: (1) my capacities; (2) the products of my industry; (3) my property.[30] For Mendelssohn, duty is derivative from right. If someone has a right to certain goods, I have a duty to respect her rights.[31]

Mendelssohn differentiates between perfect and imperfect rights. A perfect right is one in which "all the conditions under which the predicate belongs to the subject are invested in the holder of the subject."[32] In other words, in the case of a perfect right my right to my goods depends solely on my will. A right is imperfect if, "part of the conditions under which the right applies is dependent on the knowledge and conscience of the person who bears the duty."[33] For example, if a person needs money to buy food he has a right to this money from all people who can spare it. Similarly, anyone who

26 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:236–240. On the idea of benevolence as its own reward see *JubA*, 1:405–408; 6.1:38, 47; 8:111, 116; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 41, 47; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 151–154; Arkush, *Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 52.

27 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:236–240.

28 See Willi Goetschel, "Mendelssohn and the State," *Modern Language Notes* 122 (2007): 486–487.

29 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:114–115; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 45–46.

30 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:116; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 47. Mendelssohn adopts Locke's theory according to which I acquire property by mixing my labor with natural goods.

31 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:115; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 46.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

has surplus money has a duty to distribute it since beneficence forms an essential part of perfection. But the needy person's right to this money is imperfect since there are many poor people who legitimately have a right to beneficence and the rich person cannot aid them all. Mendelssohn calls such cases instances of a "collision" of duties.[34] Here it is up to the rich person to decide to whom to give the money. Perfect rights may be safeguarded through coercive force, but exercising imperfect rights depends on the discretion of the person petitioned.[35]

For Mendelssohn, the state's legitimacy depends on its capacity to help individuals achieve happiness and perfection.[36] People form the social contract to help them achieve perfection in a number of ways. First, by granting the state coercive power, the state is able to protect the individual's rights to their goods.[37] Second, since perfecting our intellectual and aesthetic capacities requires leisure time, living in a society is needed since in society people are more easily able to meet their basic needs through the division of labor.[38] Third, by granting the state the authority to administer imperfect rights such as distributing excess goods through taxation, poor people are more likely to attain the basic means needed to achieve perfection, while rich people who are forced to give to others progress towards perfection since benevolence is a crucial part of perfection.[39]

For Mendelssohn, I have the ability to alienate my perfect rights to many of my goods and I can be coerced if I seek to go back on my word.[40] However, Mendelssohn claims that my rights to certain goods are inalienable. Chief among these is my right to my convictions. Since my beliefs depend on rational conviction, it is impossible for me to transfer my right to my beliefs to another. Coercion can cause me to *say* that I have changed my beliefs, but it can never cause me to actually change my beliefs.[41]

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34 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:117–118; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 48–49.
35 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:117, 120–121; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 48, 52–53.
36 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 6.1:128–129; 16:405–407; 8:109; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 40.
37 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:110–114, 139–140; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 41–45, 72.
38 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:57; 15.2:26; 16:406–407.
39 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:116–117; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 47–48.
40 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:120–121; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 53–54.
41 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:129–130, 137, 164–165; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 61–62, 70, 97–98. Goetschel sees Mendelssohn's emphasis on the dignity of individual judgment, reflected in

Mendelssohn denies the church the right to any of the individual's goods. For Mendelssohn, religion is solely concerned with people's convictions since "religious actions without religious thoughts are mere puppetry (*Puppenspiel*), not service of God."[42] Since my perfect right to my convictions is inalienable, the church can never have the right to coerce my beliefs even if I agree to transfer this right to the church.[43] Furthermore, since God is all-powerful and absolutely self-sufficient, God has no need for any of my material goods.[44] Thus, the church can never have an imperfect right to any of my goods.[45] Mendelssohn still thinks that we can speak of duties towards God. But since God is self-sufficient and wholly beneficent, my duties to God do not involve new duties. Rather, my duties towards God involve my responsibility to promote my own perfection. Since acting ethically is a crucial component of perfection, Mendelssohn includes my responsibility to act morally in my duties towards God.[46]

But while my duty to God is identical with my duties to myself and to others, the church serves a critical role in helping me achieve perfection. One of the main ways that the church does this is through religious community. One may recognize one's moral duties intellectually and know that fulfilling these responsibilities is the best thing for one in the long run, but a person may be too depressed or too tempted by immediate sensual gratification to be sufficiently motivated to act correctly. A well-functioning religious community helps motivate individuals to promote their true perfection through what Mendelssohn calls "the magic power of sympathy." Mendelssohn writes that the religious community helps one "transfer truth from mind to heart" by "vivifying concepts which are at times lifeless into soaring sensations."[47] For example, in prayer one reaffirms one's conviction that God cares for us and seeks to create the conditions for our achieving perfection. By praising God's righteousness, justice,

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the *Phädon* as well. See Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 119–122.

42 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:113, 128; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 44, 60.

43 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:125–126, 129–130, 140–141; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 57–59, 61–62, 73–74.

44 On God not needing any service from human beings because of God's self-sufficiency, see Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:126–128; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 57–60. Mendelssohn cites Psalms 40:7: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, My ears you have opened."

45 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:125–126; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 57–59.

46 Ibid; *JubA*, 2:318–320; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 298–300.

47 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:141; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 74.

mercy, and charity we are inspired to imitate God and embody these qualities in our own lives. Through hearing the Bible read, divine providence is made vivid for congregants by their hearing stories about how the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer. And tales of God's mercy and forgiveness help keep people energized to constantly strive for perfection by nurturing hope that it is never too late to turn one's life around.[48]

So for Mendelssohn, belief in God helps the state achieve its purpose by helping motivate individuals to actualize their this-worldly capacities.

IV. Epistemology and Metaphysics

In *Morning Hours*, Mendelssohn sketches criteria for delineating the truth or falsity of thoughts. Mendelssohn divides thoughts into two major divisions. Thoughts may refer to possible or impossible things or they may refer to actual or not-actual things. Every actual thing is possible, and every impossible thing is not-actual but not every possible thing is actual and every not-actual thing may or may not be possible.[49]

Mendelssohn considers the distinction between possible and impossible thoughts. He notes that possible thoughts can be divided into three types: (1) concepts; (2) judgments; and (3) inferences. We can render judgments about the possibility or impossibility of concepts based on the principle of non-contradiction alone. With concepts that designate actual or not-actual things matters are more complicated. Mendelssohn claims that there are certain concepts that I know for certain designate actual things. Following Descartes, Mendelssohn holds that I know for certain that my own thoughts exist and I can therefore conclude that I exist.[50] But how can I know that my thoughts of objects actually existing outside myself designate real things? With the exception of the concept of God, Mendelssohn thinks that I must rely on my sense perceptions.[51]

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48 For more on this, including sources, see Gottlieb, "Aesthetics and the Infinite: Moses Mendelssohn on the Poetics of Biblical Prophecy," in *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Aaron Hughes and Elliot Wolfson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

49 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:11.

50 On Mendelssohn's acceptance of Descartes' *cogito*, see Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:44–45; 2:294, 309–310; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 275, 289–290; Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 26–27.

51 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:60.

But in light of the fact that I can never compare my thoughts with things in-themselves, how can I be certain that my thoughts of things that actually exist outside of myself are true? Rather than succumbing to skepticism, Mendelssohn offers a definition of truth that departs from the conventional correspondence theory. Mendelssohn continues to affirm that truth involves agreement (*Übereinstimmung*), but he redefines what this agreement consists of. Rather than understanding truth as the agreement between thoughts and the things themselves, Mendelssohn defines truth as agreement between the various representations of our different sense perceptions as well as agreement between the representations of different subjects, human and animal alike.

This view of truth yields important consequences concerning our knowledge of external objects. First, our knowledge of the external world is at best probable. The more agreement I find, the more certainty I have, but it is always possible that even if I find agreement among my senses after five tests, I will find disagreement when I test the next six times.[52] Second, our knowledge of external objects involves how I must think them rather than a correspondence between thoughts and things in-themselves. Given that things in-themselves lie outside of concepts, when considering things in-themselves, Mendelssohn notes that we "stand at the limits of knowledge and every step forward that we wish to take is a step into emptiness."[53] Mendelssohn concludes that, "When we say that a thing is extended and moves, these words have no other meaning than this: a thing has such an attribute that it must be thought of as extended and moving. Saying that A is or that A [must be] thought of [in a certain way] . . . is the same thing."[54]

52 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:15. Mendelssohn likewise applies the theory of probability to our knowledge of universal laws of nature such as gravitation or universal judgments such as that all people die. See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:21, 24–26. Compare Mendelssohn's attempt to specify how one determines degrees of probability in his early piece "On Probability." See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 235–247.

53 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:61.

54 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:57. See ibid, 87–88. Compare Mendelssohn's *Prize Essay* where he seeks to meet the skeptical challenge by distinguishing between "constant and variable (*beständige und verändliche*)" appearances. There Mendelssohn notes that constant appearances have their source in "the intrinsic essential constitution of our senses (*inner wesentlichen Beschaffenheit unserer Sinne*)" while inconstant appearances derive from "the incorrect position (*unrechten Standorte*) from which we regard objects." See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 2:284–286; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 266–268; Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 23–24.

As I mentioned above, Mendelssohn thinks that while we generally must rely on sense perception for our knowledge of external reality, there is one thing whose existence can be deduced from its concept alone, namely God. Kant famously criticizes the *a priori* ontological proof of God's existence, and in *Morning Hours*, Mendelssohn defends this proof against Kant's criticism.[55] At the heart of the ontological proof is the claim that since the most perfect being contains all the marks of perfection, and existence is a perfection, existence must be predicated of the most perfect being and so the most perfect being must exist.[56] Kant argues that this proof is based on a basic confusion, namely conceiving of existence as a predicate. Mendelssohn paraphrases Kant's position as follows: "Existence is no mere attribute, no expansion [of a concept], but rather is the positing of all attributes and marks of a thing. . . ."[57]

Mendelssohn is willing to grant Kant that existence is not a predicate but rather the positing of attributes in a real thing, but Mendelssohn does not think that Kant thereby deals a fatal blow to the ontological proof. Mendelssohn notes that contingent things may or may not exist—I can think of contingent things without positing their real existence. God, however, is not just the most perfect being, but is also a necessary being. Hence it is impossible for me to think of God without positing God's existence since the concept of a necessary being which does not exist is contradictory. Mendelssohn considers how "an opponent" (*Gegner*) might respond to this. The opponent asks: "The necessary being must actually exist because human beings can not think otherwise. . . . What guarantees that what *we must think as actual, actually exists* [emphasis Mendelssohn's]?"[58] In light of Mendelssohn's concept of truth, we have the answer. As Mendelssohn puts it: "What all rational beings must think so and not otherwise is true so and not otherwise. Whoever demands more than this conviction seeks something that . . . he can never attain a concept of. . . ."[59] Or, as Mendelssohn puts in his

55 See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 106–107.

56 For Mendelssohn's early formulations of this proof, see Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 2:300–301; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 281–283; *JubA*, 12.2:117–119. See Altmann, *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1981), 129–133.

57 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:152. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A592/B620–A602–B630.

58 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:154. See Altmann, *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History*, 133–137.

59 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:155.

Memoranda to Jacobi, "My credo is: what I cannot think to be true, does not trouble me with doubt."[60]

Regarding knowledge of the external world, Mendelssohn therefore distinguishes between two types of truth. First, there is what we might call "infinite truth," which involves full agreement between the mind and things in themselves.[61] This truth is God's alone. Second, there is what we might call "finite truth," which involves agreement among finite subjects. With finite truth we can make a further distinction between "probable" and "certain" truth. When our knowledge depends on *a posteriori* sense perceptions, the most we can attain is probable truth. Analytic propositions of pure mathematics and logic are certain, but do not tell us about actual existence.[62] In the case of God's existence it is possible to attain certain truth of actual existence through *a priori* concepts alone.[63] In sum, for Mendelssohn I attain finite truth when my representations agree with others' representations thereby forming a common world. When, however, my representations are idiosyncratic, not agreeing with the representations of others, I do not have truth.[64]

For Mendelssohn, then, it is ultimately impossible to give an absolutely conclusive answer to the skeptic. But trusting in "finite truth" is absolutely necessary for lived existence. Indeed, Mendelssohn notes that even "doubters nevertheless act in common life just like the great majority of human beings do who regard themselves as fully convinced of a considerable number of eternal truths."[65] If we did not believe in the existence of an external world we could

60 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:203; Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Alwill,"* trans. and ed. George di Giovanni (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 353. One might argue since we can doubt whether or not God exists it is not the case that we must think of God as existing. Mendelssohn's answer is that since *when I am reasoning correctly*, I must think that God exists, the only way to think God as not existing is to ignore this proof or to reason incorrectly. My doubting God's existence because I am unaware or fail to understand the ontological proof is no more valid than my doubting that a triangle's angles add up to 180 degree because I am ignorant of or fail to understand basic geometry. One could argue that there is a difference between recognizing that God's existence is a demand of reason and knowing that God, in fact, exists. Mendelssohn does not consider this difference to be significant.

61 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1; 2:306–307; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 247, 287–288.

62 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 235.

63 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 2:301; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 281.

64 Of course not all will agree with the ontological proof, but for Mendelssohn this is due to false application of logical principles.

65 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 1:160; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 233.

never act and without belief in God we could never be happy. The pragmatic necessities of life supply us the motivation to act on ideas that we accept to be true on the basis of probability and/or the "essential constitution" of our minds.[66]

In *Morning Hours,* Mendelssohn makes the argument that appreciating human finitude leads us to knowledge of God. Mendelssohn's argument grows out of his discussion of Lessing, which is useful to begin with. In attempting to rescue Lessing's reputation, Mendelssohn argues that Lessing espoused a form of pantheism that Mendelssohn calls "purified pantheism" or "refined Spinozism." Mendelssohn explains Lessing's reasoning for adhering to this doctrine as stemming from his view that the theistic affirmation of the existence of an extra-deical world fails to appreciate the full implications of divine omniscience.

As we have seen, Mendelssohn affirms that I know that I exist because I cannot doubt that I think and feel. Mendelssohn notes, however, that while Lessing accepts this reasoning, he does not thereby conclude that I exist as an individual. Rather, Lessing affirms that I only exist as a modification of divine thought. Mendelssohn explains Lessing's reasoning as follows: There is an intentional difference between thoughts, the thinking subject, and the object thought (*Gedanken, das Denkende, das Gedachte*).[67] As long as these three elements are in *potentia* they are distinct, but when the subject actualizes its capacity of thinking, the three elements come into the "closest connection" (*innigste Verbindung*). Beings consist of a sequence of marks or characteristics. While thought exists in the thinking subject's mind as a modification of its mental being, when a thought is an accurate representation of the object thought, the thought contains the identical marks as the object thought. Since God is perfect, God's mind is always active and God's thoughts always represent the world perfectly. What then, asks Lessing, could distinguish the actual world from the representation of it in the divine mind? One might claim that the actual world has the predicate "existence" added to it. But, answers Lessing, since God's knowledge of the world is perfect, God's knowledge of the world must include knowledge of this predicate as well. As such, God's representation of the actual world is indistinguishable from the actual world and so by the identity of indiscernibles, they must be the same thing. Lessing therefore

66 See Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 2:285–286; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 267–268.
67 Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 3.2:116.

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