

“Interpreting Spinoza’s *Ethics* as a ‘System’: Moses Mendelssohn’s *Morning Hours* (1785)”

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It is in the critique of Lessing's "purified" Spinozism, whose essential argument is admittedly applicable also to authentic Spinozism, and not in the express critique of authentic Spinozism that Mendelssohn comes closer to knowledge of his own presupposition than in any of his other reflections.¹

I

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), the philosophical founder of modern Jewish thought, calls attention to Spinoza's *Ethics* in eye-catching ways at two prominent places in his philosophical writings. In his earliest book, *Philosophical Dialogues* (1755), his fictive interlocutors vindicate Spinoza, whom they take to be an atheist, by considering how Leibniz, their own philosophical authority, drew his key doctrine of pre-established harmony from Spinoza's "system." In his last book or pair of books, *Morning Hours* (1785) together with its sequel *To Lessing's Friends* (1786),² Mendelssohn—a lifelong Leibnizian—engages in a radical critique of Spinoza's "system," which he here construes as pantheism. Are Mendelssohn's two dispersed statements about Spinoza mutually consistent? Are they, in any case, consistent with Spinoza? These questions are complicit in the complicated coming into being and overall aim of *Morning Hours*. Focusing on them brings into view, as well, the fault-line in the foundations of Mendelssohn's synthesis of Judaism with modern philosophical thought.

¹ Leo Strauss, "Einleitung zu Mendelssohns 'Morgenstunden' und 'An die Freunde Lessings'," *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe* (27 vols. in 35; Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag / Günther Holzboog, 1971ff.), [henceforth JA] III.2 LXXI.

² *Morgenstunden* and *An die Freunde Lessings*, JA III.2 1-175 and 177-218.

At first glance, Mendelssohn's Spinoza critique in *Morning Hours* seems incidental to its overall aim. Most of the book's seventeen chapters are aptly described by its subtitle: "Lectures on the Existence of God." According to Mendelssohn's preface, the Lectures originated as early-morning home-schooling for his teenage son and two other young men. But Lectures 13-15 turn abruptly to a somewhat disconnected topic.³ Lecture 13 offers a general and, by its own lights, not necessarily original refutation of Spinoza's "system." Lecture 14 considers a "refined" or "purified" version of that "system," now construed as pantheism, which Mendelssohn divulges as having been quietly advocated by his late friend and soul-mate Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81), the well-known philosophical dramatist, critic and theological polemicist—hitherto widely assumed to have been a Leibnizian. Finally, Lecture 15 supplies a moral vindication of the "purified" Spinozism Lessing advocated, for its putative compatibility with the practical teachings of religion. The sudden and self-contained character of Lectures 13-15, along with Mendelssohn's announced private motivation for having formulated his Lectures in the first place, suggests the likelihood that his book might never have seen the light of day except for a pressing need to insulate Lessing's philosophical legacy from the shocking charge of closet Spinozism, understood as atheism.

Morning Hours thus points beyond itself—not only to Spinoza and Leibniz but also to Lessing and, in that way, to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), who first confronted Mendelssohn concerning Lessing's un-Leibnizian Spinozist leanings, in what came to be known as the Pantheism Quarrel. Jacobi reported having discovered Lessing's Spinozism in one-on-one conversations with him during the summer before his death. These Jacobi eventually published

³ These three Lectures, together with Mendelssohn's *An die Freunde Lessings*, are reprinted in *Die Hauptschriften zum Pantheismusstreit zwischen Jacobi und Mendelssohn*, ed. H. Scholz (Berlin: Reuther & Reuther, 1916; Waltrip: Hartmut Spenner, 2004), [henceforth Scholz] 1-44, 283-326.

in his *On the Doctrine of Spinoza's in Letters to Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), which, along with its follow-up *Against Mendelssohn's Accusations in his 'To Lessing's Friends'* (1786),⁴ was meant as a polemical corrective to Mendelssohn's account in *Morning Hours* and its companion volume. Still, Jacobi's corrective cannot be taken simply at face value: among other things, it is not free of self-promoting efforts on his part to usurp Mendelssohn as Lessing's presumptive spokesman and philosophical heir.

Jacobi first confronted Mendelssohn with his report of Lessing's Spinozism privately, in a cleverly underhanded way—by letters to a trustworthy third-party, who saw fit (as Jacobi expected she would) to act as go-between. The third-party was Elise Reimarus, daughter of the late Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), the notorious anonymous author of the so-called “Wolfenbüttel Fragments” (1774ff.). These were posthumous excerpts from Reimarus's unpublished *Apology or Defense for the Rational Worshipers of God*,⁵ a radical rationalist (or deist) critique of revelation-believing Christianity, of which his daughter was literary executor. Lessing serialized the excerpts as “Fragments of an Unnamed” and supplemented them with provocative comments of his own as director of the Ducal Library at Wolfenbüttel, Brunswick, where the “Fragments” had (he said) turned up. In Lecture 15 of *Morning Hours*, which is written as a narrated dialogue, Mendelssohn introduces as fictive interlocutor a longstanding friend and admirer of Lessing's⁶ who, while denying that Lessing had ever been a Spinozist,

⁴ *Über die Lehre des Spinozas in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn and Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen in dessen 'An die Freunde Lessings'*, reprinted in Scholz 45-282 and 327-64.

⁵ *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftiger Verehrer Gottes*. See Strauss's editorial Note to JA III.2 125.27-126.2 (at JA III.2 304.).

⁶ The interlocutor resembles Elise Reimarus's brother J.A.H. Reimarus, author of *Über die Gründe der menschlichen Erkenntniß und der natürlichen Religion* [*On the Bases of Human Cognition and of Natural Religion*] (Hamburg, 1787).

traces his theological heterodoxy to his editorial involvement with the “Fragmentist.”⁷ By inserting this last assertion inside a larger panegyric to the effect that Lessing’s heterodoxy was nevertheless perfectly compatible with exemplary devotion to Christian morality, Mendelssohn’s interlocutor both anticipates and cushions the blow of Jacobi’s imminent public exposé of Lessing as an outright Spinozist, i.e., atheist. For all that, Mendelssohn ends Lecture 15 by amicably correcting his interlocutor—and, indirectly, Jacobi—on the pertinent biographical detail. Mendelssohn, or rather his persona, quotes extensively from Lessing’s youthful fragment “The Christianity of Reason” (1753)⁸ as testimony that Lessing had been advocating “purified” Spinozism since long before his involvement with the “Fragmentist.”

In our day, the two leading Mendelssohn scholars Alexander Altmann⁹ and Leo Strauss¹⁰ disagree over Lessing’s alleged Spinozism and what Mendelssohn made of it. Altmann takes Mendelssohn at his final word in Lecture 15, to the effect that he had known about and respected Lessing’s advocacy of “purified” Spinozism all along. Strauss, however, has second-thoughts about Mendelssohn’s (or his persona’s) word. Finding in the literary incoherence of *Morning Hours* a systematic incoherence as well—the result, Strauss suggests, of Mendelssohn’s ongoing failure to reflect on his underlying presupposition—Strauss shows how, even so, the sudden and

⁷ “With the defense of the Fragmentist, Lessing also seems to have adopted his entire sentiment.” *Morgenstunden*, JA III.2 125.35-126.2; Scholz 30.

⁸ “*Das Christenthum der Vernunft*,” *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. K. Lachmann and F. Muncker (23 vols.; Stuttgart, 1886-1924), [henceforth LM] XIV 175-78; trans. Nis 25-29; see JA III.2 133-36.

⁹ *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1973); henceforth MMBS. See also Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr / Paul Siebeck, 1969); “Moses Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” and “*Lessing und Jacobi: Das Gespräch über den Spinozismus*,” in Altmann, *Die tröstvolle Aufklärung: Studien zur Metaphysik und politischen Theorie Moses Mendelssohns* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag / Günther Holzboog, 1982).

intense pressure of Jacobi's allegation of Lessing's Spinozism brought Mendelssohn closer than ever before to reflecting on that presupposition. In my subsequent comments on Lectures 13-15 of *Morning Hours*, I will spell out the differences between Altmann and Strauss more fully.

II

Lecture 13's refutation of Spinozism says nothing about whether Spinozism is to be understood as atheism or as pantheism—although its chapter heading mentions pantheism rather than atheism. The refutation itself boils down to three arguments. One argument points out an incongruity in Spinoza's basic notion of substance; the other two arguments point out incongruities that result even or especially if one accepts Spinoza's basic notion of substance. All three arguments seem meant to apply, by default, to both Spinozism as pantheism and Spinozism as atheism:

First, Spinozists are said to claim that “we ourselves” and the external world of which we are aware through our senses are not self-subsisting things but mere modifications of a single self-subsisting thing, or substance, which is infinite in both bodily extent (*extensio*) and power of thought (*cogitatio*). The one substance is also the same as God. Everything is, in short, one thing (*Alles ist Eins*); and that one thing is, in turn, everything (*Eins ist Alles*). Mendelssohn objects, however, that this conception of substance is a dubious departure from commonsense, an arbitrary overstatement. Spinoza confuses the self-subsistent feature of substance, its individuality vis-à-vis everything else, with its self-sufficiency, or non-dependence on anything

¹⁰ In addition to the previously cited “*Einleitung zu Mendelssohns ‘Morgenstunden’ und ‘An die Freunde Lessings’*,” JA III.2 XI-XCV, see, in general, Strauss's extensive editorial Notes to the texts of *Morgenstunden* and *An die Freunde Lessings*, JA III.2 275-334.

else. He trades on a semantic ambiguity. “Substance” in its plain meaning, as the self-subsistent, allows for the possibility of an indefinite plurality of substances. Only “substance” in its hyperbolic Spinozist meaning—as “that which is in itself and . . . whose concept does not need the concept of another thing from which it has to be formed”¹¹—leads to the ultimately untenable view that there can be just one, all-inclusive substance.

Second, then, Spinoza is said to follow Descartes in conceiving of the bodily attribute of the one substance simply as extension. Mendelssohn objects that extension, even when one adds to it the concept of impenetrability, can account for nothing more than the material common to all body. It cannot account for the form of this or that organized body—the pattern of its purposive movement or its rule-governed behavior *qua* individual organism. Extension as such neither moves nor engenders movement.

Third, Mendelssohn also objects that the mere power of thought, however infinite, cannot account for “goodness and perfection, pleasure and displeasure, pain and gratification, in general everything that belongs to our faculty of approval and of desire” (JA III.2 108.25-27). Thought as such neither approves nor desires, nor does it engender either approval or desire.

Now both Altmann and Strauss note Kant’s dismissive comment on what he calls the “maxim” or “artifice” informing Mendelssohn’s Spinoza critique here, namely, Mendelssohn’s stated inclination “to explain all the difficulties of the philosophical schools as merely semantic quarrels, or at least to derive them originally from semantic quarrels” (104.30-33). Kant counters crisply that

¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Def. 3.

in matters that have been quarrelled over for quite some time, especially in philosophy, at bottom it has never been a semantic quarrel, but always a genuine quarrel about things.¹²

Altmann defends Mendelssohn against Kant here by quoting a passage from Spinoza's *Ethics* which Mendelssohn himself quotes in Lecture 14 (121.8-12), to the effect that, in Spinoza's opinion at least, many disputes are indeed no more than verbal:

. . . many controversies originate . . . because human beings do not correctly explain their own mind or because they interpret another's mind poorly. For, in truth, while they are contradicting each other most, they are thinking either the same thing or different things, so that they impute to the other errors and absurdities which aren't there.¹³

Strauss, in contrast, quotes a further statement of Kant's concerning Mendelssohn's attempt to reduce a philosophical controversy to a verbal one: according to Kant, it "is as if [Mendelssohn] wanted to stop a tidal wave with a wisp of straw."¹⁴ What is at stake between Altmann and Strauss here is whether Mendelssohn is able to take the full measure of Jacobi's challenge within his own purview as a professed Leibnizian. Altmann does not see that Mendelssohn has much difficulty in doing so. Strauss, though, does. Mendelssohn's appeal to semantics, or more

¹² *Einige Bemerkungen zu Ludwig Heinrich Jakobs Prüfung der Mendelssohn'schen Morgenstunden* ["A Few Remarks on Ludwig Heinrich Jacobs's Examination of the Mendelssohnian *Morning Hours*"; IKW IV 481-85; the remark quoted is on 482]. See Strauss, JA III.2 LXX.

¹³ Pt. II, Prop. 47 Scholium.

broadly to commonsense, is, Strauss suggests, a sign of his implicit recognition that systematic argument per se fails to meet the challenges presented by theological disagreements in general, and Spinozism in particular, which are, after all, practical as well as theoretical challenges.

III

Lecture 14 consists of an imaginary dialogue between Mendelssohn and Lessing, on the fictive supposition that Lessing might have been present during Lecture 13's refutation of Spinoza and now speaks in his own defense as a Spinozist. What follows, then, is the fictive Lessing's rehabilitating or "purifying" of Spinozism, and Mendelssohn's subsequent reply.

The fictive Lessing (henceforth "Lessing") concedes the second and third of the aforementioned points of criticism, but not the first. That is to say, "Lessing" grants, with Mendelssohn, an indefinite plurality of actual things, each of which is a source of its own purposive movement. He also grants each actual thing's inherent ability to exercise approval, or choice of the best, alongside the bare "thought" or awareness embedded to some degree or other in it. Still, conceding these two points does not require "Lessing" to abandon the remainder of the Spinozist claim—Spinoza's denial of the "objective" existence of things, i.e., of their substantiality apart from their "representation" or concept in God (116.7). "Lessing's" argument here seems cribbed from the real-life Lessing's youthful fragment "On the Actuality of Things Outside God,"¹⁵ which raises the question of whether or how God may be said to have a concept of things actually existing outside His understanding, given that those actual things would have

¹⁴ Kant, *loc. cit.*, on Mendelssohn's "Über Freiheit und Nothwendigkeit" (JA III.1 343-350).

to correspond completely to the true and adequate concepts He has of them anyway. In Lessing's (and "Lessing's") language, God's concepts are the "archetypes" of actual things. That is, prior to their actualization, things exist in God's understanding as not-yet-realized possibilities whose realization in conformity with the laws of nature is, even so, altogether perspicuous to God. The question that "Lessing" raises, then, is: What is the basis for claiming that the actualized things, so understood, are "outside" God? Must not all the features or "predicates" (117.20 and 24) of those things insofar as we can in principle conceive or represent them—complete "with the infinite series of their successive modifications and variations" (117.13-15)—be present beforehand in God? And would not all this include, as a matter of course, whatever it is that makes for the difference between things *qua* merely possible and those same things *qua* actual—what the real-life Lessing calls "the complement of [their] possibility"? If so, would it not be both inconsistent and redundant to say that actual things, so understood, are *also* "outside" God?

Mendelssohn's reply is that there are "undeceptive signs that distinguish me as an object from me as a representation in God; me as an archetype [*sic*] from me as an image in the divine understanding" (117.36-118.16). The "most telling" sign of "my substantiality outside God, my archetypal [*sic*] existence," is my own, individual "awareness of myself, combined with complete ignorance of everything that does not accordingly fall within the circle of my thought." Given that God is the most perfect being, however, it follows that "the thought in God . . . which has a limited being as its object cannot, in [God], arrive at any individualized awareness, one torn-out-of-context, as it were [*keinen eigenen, gleichsam abgerissenen Bewußtseyn*]" (120.21-

¹⁵ "Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge außer Gott," LM XIV 292f.; quoted in its entirety in Strauss's editorial notes to JA III.2 116.6-15 and 117.8-118.18 (at JA III.2 302 and 302f.); trans. H.B. Nisbet in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), [henceforth Nis] 30f.

34).¹⁶ As in Lecture 13, so too here, Mendelssohn offers a commonsense rebuttal to the systematic argument attributed to (“Lessing’s”) Spinoza: each individual’s existential awareness of his own ignorance is both undeniable and irreducible—i.e., in Mendelssohn’s word, “archetypal.”

Altmann defends Mendelssohn’s rebuttal here, by merging its appeal to commonsense with Leibnizian systematics as follows.¹⁷ Things become actualized as a result not just of God’s knowing or thinking them, but also of His approving or choosing them. The full panoply of actual things is thus chosen by God as the best of all possible worlds. Yet this best of all possible worlds also includes things that are chosen for their being merely relatively best, i.e., better than other possible things, the latter having been knowingly rejected by God. Things chosen as relatively best, then, while known and approved by God, can never be part of God, in whom only the absolutely best can exist. Hence, Altmann concludes, the relatively best must exist “outside” God.

Strauss, however, notes in Mendelssohn’s rebuttal a radical inconsistency, of which Mendelssohn seems oblivious. In the passages just quoted, Mendelssohn inadvertently¹⁸ switches the location of archetypes from God to the individual human self. Suddenly the self is no longer an “image” of which God’s concept is the archetype, but vice versa: God’s concept of

¹⁶ The foregoing Mendelssohnian passages are cited by Strauss in JA III.2 LXXIF.

¹⁷ See MMBS 693f.

¹⁸ Altmann defends Mendelssohn’s apparent inadvertence as follows (MMBS 867 n. 35): “While Lessing applied the term *Urbild* [“archetype”] to the concept of a thing in the divine mind, Mendelssohn, who wished to differentiate between the intradeical and extradeical existence of things, called the extradeical, real thing *Urbild* and its ideal existence in God’s intellect by the term *Bild* (“image”). He thus reversed the traditional terminology without, however, intending to deny that the intradeical concept of a thing was in fact the archetype of the real thing. His unorthodox terminology is clearly designed to rebut Lessing’s argument, and should not be construed to have any further purpose.”

each individual self now becomes the image of which that self is the archetype. That this switch occurs without warning, and remains unaccounted for in any systematic way, indicates an unexamined presumption—or hidden presupposition on Mendelssohn’s part. At a minimum, the presupposition is that God and the human individual are equal in respect of being the site of archetypes. Theologically speaking, this equality is supported by, or at least consistent with, Mendelssohn’s view of God as not only a consummately understanding being, but also an unremittingly benevolent being, who creates and provides for human beings solely for their happiness *qua* rational individuals in this life and the next, rather than for, say, His own eternal glory and righteousness. I should add that, as regards the doctrine of God’s unremitting benevolence, Mendelssohn remains at variance with his philosophical authority Leibniz as well as with his best friend Lessing, who both defend the traditional theological doctrine of eternal punishments in hell, i.e., of inescapable punitive justice or vengeance in the wake of God’s righteous anger against human individuals.¹⁹ Be that as it may, Strauss adds that Mendelssohn’s hidden presupposition about the equality between God and the human individual also finds expression in unexamined statements in earlier books of his to the effect that God’s “rights can never come into quarrel and collision with ours”²⁰ and that each human individual is, in Mendelssohn’s words, a “citizen in God’s state” with, as it were, constitutional rights over against God.²¹ In these statements Mendelssohn is, to be sure, indebted to Leibniz, who also speaks of human individuals as citizens in the City of God²²—but, given Mendelssohn’s not-

¹⁹ See Lessing, “*Leibniz auf den ewigen Strafen*,” LM XI 461-87; Nis 37-60.

²⁰ *Jerusalem*, JA VII 127; trans. A. Arkush (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), 59.

²¹ E.g., *Phädon*, JA III.1 112f.; *Sache Gottes* §60, JA III.2 240.20.

²² E.g., *Système nouveau de la nature* §8, in *Philosophische Schriften*, ed. C. Gerhart (7 vols.; Hildesheim: Olms, 1960ff.), IV 479f; trans. R Ariew and D. Garber in *G.W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 145.

inconsiderable theological difference with Leibniz on the question of eternal punishments,²³ the debt is less a strictly theological one than it is a political-philosophical one. To make a long story short, Strauss concludes from all this that Mendelssohn's ostensibly metaphysical effort to secure the substantiality of things in general outside God turns out to rest on the unexamined presupposition of the autonomy of each human individual in particular outside God.

The difference between Altmann and Strauss at this point, then, has to do with whether Mendelssohn's confrontation with Lessing's putative Spinozism can be spelled out more or less adequately in terms of metaphysical argumentation (Altmann) or whether instead it collapses into theologico-political individualism (Strauss). This difference extends as well to how we are to understand Mendelssohn's practical vindication of Spinozism in Lecture 15 of *Morning Hours*.

IV

Mendelssohn vindicates Spinozism *qua* pantheism by saying that it differs from Leibnizian theism only by a metaphysical "subtlety" that has no effect on moral practice. It remains for me to consider this vindication in the light of the difference between Altmann and Strauss concerning the integrity of metaphysics as Mendelssohn understands it. Altmann's view, as found in his well-known biographical study of Mendelssohn, can be reduced to four points. I will summarize these and go on to compare Strauss's corresponding view briefly in each case. My reason for proceeding in this way is as follows. Altmann, as the final editor of Strauss's

²³ See also Strauss, "Einleitung zu Mendelssohns 'Sache Gottes oder die gerettete Vorsehung,'" JA III.2 XCVI-CX; first published in *Einsichten: Gerhard Krüger zum 60. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1962), 361-75.

extensive essay and editorial apparatus on Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* and *To Lessing's Friends* in the now-standard Jubilee Edition of Mendelssohn's collected works, had the advantage of close acquaintance with Strauss's argument while preparing his own Mendelssohn biography, whereas Strauss read Altmann's biography on his sickbed only six weeks or so before his death. He then wrote to Altmann:

If I were not ill, I might *conceivably* change my final judgment on the controversy in the light of what you say . . . , but as things are I must leave them more or less as I wrote them in 1936/37.²⁴

Strauss's comment is especially magnanimous in that Altmann more than once seems to be either glossing or controverting points Strauss makes, without directly acknowledging as much.²⁵ By concluding with what amounts to a list of comparisons between Altmann and Strauss, I mean to do no more (though perhaps no less) than point to the deeper issues connected with the founding of modern Jewish thought, in the light of an unresolved scholarly controversy bequeathed more recently.

In the first place, then, according to Altmann,

Only the pressure of Jacobi's report had forced Mendelssohn to attach importance to the Spinozistic leanings that Lessing had seemingly betrayed.²⁶

²⁴ Strauss's letters to Altmann of May 28, 1971 (in German), and September 9 and 15, 1973 (in English), may be found in Altmann's *Vorbemerkung*, JA III.2 vii-ix. The sentence quoted is from the letter of September 9, 1973.

²⁵ See, e.g., note 18, above.

Altmann, in other words, doubts that Mendelssohn took Lessing's Spinozist leanings all that seriously, except for the practical stakes involved. Strauss, on the other hand, is not so quick to separate the practical stakes here from the serious philosophical issues. For that reason, Strauss does not exactly agree with Altmann on the scope and limits of the practical stakes. The likely practical consequences of Jacobi's impending public charge of Lessing's secret Spinozism would include not only the gloating of Lessing's theological enemies as a result of Jacobi's public exposure of him as an atheist, but also Mendelssohn's personal humiliation as a result of Jacobi's documented insinuation that, notwithstanding their years of close friendship, Lessing had been deliberately reticent toward him in sensitive philosophical matters. But these consequences and how we are to understand them, Strauss suggests, have to do with the further question of who, Mendelssohn or Jacobi, had the better understanding of Lessing—and, of course, of Spinoza. Differently stated, Strauss holds that the practical stakes are bound up, as well, with an assessment of Mendelssohn's strictly philosophical merits as the philosophical founder of German-Jewish thought. This last is an ongoing theme of Strauss's overall investigation of the Pantheism Quarrel, in a way that it is not for Altmann. Altmann is more inclined to view the Quarrel in an antiquarian way. For Strauss, it is an ongoing theologico-political issue whose ripple-effects extend, for example, to his own *Sitz-im-Leben* as a Jewish exile (or expatriate or escapee) from the Germany of the mid-1930s,²⁷ where Jewish life and assimilation to German

²⁶ MMBS 694.

²⁷ Consider Strauss's contemporaneous (1937) preface to his unwritten book on Lessing (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band II: Philosophie und Gesetz—Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier [Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 1997], 606-607):

The present explication of Lessing's views is the attempt of an admirer, not a scholar; it is the fruit of hours of leisure, not years of labor. It is uncertain whether only years of scholarly labor earn one the right to an admirer's exposition. But certain it is that no one becomes a proper scholar without having been

life had been radically shaped by Mendelssohn's *oeuvre*. It is part of what the later Strauss had in mind when he described himself autobiographically as "a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament."²⁸

Second, Altmann says that Mendelssohn's interlocutor in Lecture 15

is presented as the spokesman of a view of Lessing with which Mendelssohn would have loved to identify himself, and with which he had identified himself before Jacobi intruded on the scene.²⁹

That is, in the wake of Jacobi's report of Lessing's Spinozist atheism, Mendelssohn himself could hardly agree with the fictive interlocutor of Lecture 15 who presents Lessing as a morally admirable adherent of religious rationalism like the Fragmentist, however he might wish to project this image to save Lessing's public reputation. Here Strauss agrees with Altmann, though on grounds that are not coextensive. Altmann takes Mendelssohn's appeal to Lessing's

an admirer at first and becoming an admirer over and over again. Scholars-in-progress have the obligatory privilege that only their leisure justifies their labor.

The foregoing justification is needed, and apt, simply for addressing the fact that its Jewish author, instead of tidying up his own doorstep, attempts to make a Christian-born philosopher's confrontation with Christianity more familiar to Jewish readers. Let it therefore be noted from the outset that, to be sure, much is altered in detail, but little in principle, if wherever Christianity is spoken of in the present writing, one thinks of Judaism. This manner of reading is requested of the reader who is so inclined, in the interest of the issues and therefore in his own interest. The author had a soft spot for wanting instead to turn his attention to a Jew. But despite searching in earnest among the apostate or suspect Jews of modern times, he found no one man with Lessing's spiritual freedom. In addition, the author was not unmindful of the obligation to be grateful which obliges the grown son of the German nation toward his nation, especially at this moment of taking leave of it.

²⁸ *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 1; cf. Strauss's references to Mendelssohn, 13f.

²⁹ MMBS 695.

youthful “Christianity of Reason” as a Spinozist document at face value—even though, as Strauss points out, there is nothing explicitly Spinozist in it. It looks to be a string of more or less Leibnizian aphorisms. The aphorism that most closely resembles a Spinozist thought³⁰ reads as follows:

With God, to envisage [*vorstellen*], to will and to create are identical [*eins*]. One can therefore say that everything God envisages, he also creates. [133.32-33]

Whether Lessing’s thought here—the identity of thinking and willing and creating in God—is Leibnizian or Spinozist, at least in the original or atheist meaning of the term, would depend on whether God is to be understood, on the one hand, as an intelligent being or, on the other hand, merely as the all-encompassing, all-producing substance, of which to speak as “envisaging” and “creating” would be to speak equivocally, at least from the viewpoint of commonsense.

“Purified” Spinozism—the view Mendelssohn discerns in Lessing’s aphorism (according to Altmann) or retrofits to it (according to Strauss)—consists in the eliding of those two alternatives: the intelligent “creator” of everything never actually lets go of anything. Altmann argues that Mendelssohn was correct in attributing this view to “Christianity of Reason” and calling it a species of Spinozism. Strauss, in contrast, finds the attribution doubtful:

Mendelssohn, making do with the limited resources at his command as a systematic thinker, instead projects a modified version of his own Leibnizianism onto Lessing.

Third, Altmann, like Strauss, sees a need to account for the rhetorical prominence Mendelssohn gives to his fictive interlocutor in Lecture 15, who promulgates the pre-Jacobian,

³⁰ Strauss cites *Ethics*, Pt. I, Prop. 17 scholium, on the identity of God’s understanding, willing and power.

morally salutary if not exactly true image of Lessing as a religious rationalist. For Altmann, that image, being at variance with the view that Mendelssohn himself promulgates at the end of Lecture 15 of Lessing as an advocate of “purified” Spinozist, nevertheless serves as an appropriate backdrop for contextualizing Lessing’s advocacy. “Christianity of Reason,” the document Mendelssohn cites in support of Lessing’s advocacy, belongs to a longer list of Lessingian writings that outspokenly defend views that had been unjustly vilified. The list includes not only the dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise* (1779), Lessing’s defense of providence in the face of the anti-Leibnizianism propounded by Voltaire’s *Candide*, but also the theological fragment “The Education of the Human Race” (1777, 1783), Lessing’s defense of revealed religion in the wake of the Fragmentist’s historical criticism of biblical revelation, as well as Lessing’s editorial defense of the “Wolfenbüttel Fragments” themselves. In short, Altmann understands Mendelssohn’s account of Lessing’s advocacy of “purified” Spinozism as being Mendelssohn’s enumeration of just another instance of Lessing’s lifelong “gallantry,”³¹ or moral high-mindedness. So far, Strauss does not disagree. Yet for a fuller understanding of what Mendelssohn does and does not attribute to Lessing’s high-mindedness, Strauss sees a need to probe the latter’s strictly philosophical dimension in its own terms as well, which Mendelssohn fails to do. In the light of the foregoing, Strauss’s Lessing turns out to be what one may call for the moment, for want of a better term, a histrionic philosopher rather than a simply “systematic” one, as Mendelssohn supposes. I shall say something more about this in connection with the fourth, and last, item on my list.

Finally, then, Altmann comments that Mendelssohn

³¹ MMBS 696f; cf. 577f.

stubbornly refused [*sic*] to recognize the significance of ‘Education of the Human Race’ in opening up new horizons beyond the concept of natural religion in which history had no place.³²

That is, Mendelssohn withheld his approval from whatever in Lessing did not fit with his own philosophical system. Here too Altmann and Strauss agree, except that Altmann speaks of Mendelssohn’s shortcoming here as at bottom moral—namely, Mendelssohn’s “stubborn refusal” to recognize something new and improved—whereas Strauss sees it as instead philosophical—namely, Mendelssohn’s presupposition that philosophy is necessarily systematic. Strauss emphasizes that Mendelssohn owes this presupposition to Leibniz, who calls attention to the fact that premodern philosophers do not equate philosophy with demonstrations, i.e., systems, whereas Leibniz himself speaks of his own philosophizing as “my system.”³³ We might say, then, that Mendelssohn owes to Leibniz the fact that he speaks and thinks of Spinoza entirely in terms of the latter’s “system”—a term Spinoza himself never uses, though we must immediately add that this term is nevertheless implicit in Spinoza’s way of arguing in the *Ethics*, and Strauss himself suggests that it is the be-all and end-all of Descartes’ *Meditations* as a founding-document of Rationalist philosophy.³⁴ In Mendelssohn’s case, however, the notion of philosophy as demonstration is subjected to an unavoidable tension that occurs throughout his lifelong attempts to merge Leibniz’s “system” with Judaism. On the one hand, Mendelssohn follows Leibniz *et al.* in holding that the so-called ontological proof of God eliminates the need, or even the possibility, of revealed truths. According to Mendelssohn, this is to be desired since

³² MMBS 698.

³³ See Leibniz, *Théodicée*, Preface, toward the end; Strauss, JA III.2 LXVI.

³⁴ JA III.2 LXIII.

revealed truths are not clearly and distinctly knowable, and so do not supply a firm theological basis for the Torah and Jewish practice, whereas at the same time they encourage superstition. On the other hand, however, the teaching of the Torah per se is not demonstrative, i.e., is not a “system.” This tension is what I earlier called the fault-line in the foundation of Mendelssohn’s Jewish thought. In *Morning Hours* and *To Lessing’s Friends*, Mendelssohn tries to overcome it by appealing to commonsense, i.e., by subordinating or orienting philosophy to commonsense.³⁵ But his failure to overcome it shows up in his failure to come to grips “systematically” with Lessing’s thought, on the one hand, and of course Spinoza’s, on the other. Strauss’s entire Mendelssohn *oeuvre* seems to be devoted to pointing this out. Altmann, by contrast, seems content to understand Mendelssohn’s Jewish thought more or less within the horizon Mendelssohn himself bequeathes.

³⁵ E.g., “Whenever reason lags far behind sound commonsense, or even deviates from it and is in danger of getting on the wrong track, the philosopher [*Weltweise*] himself will not trust his reason and contradict sound commonsense, but will prefer to impose a silence on it when the effort to lead it back to the beaten path and reach sound commonsense does not succeed for him. Let us attempt, therefore, to help reason out as far as we . . . can.” (*Morgenstunden*, JA III.2 79.38-80.9) “[O]nly after [Lessing’s] acquaintance with the Fragmentist does one observe in his writings, in all the essays that he wrote in defense [of the Fragmentist], the same calm conviction that was so emblematic of him, the same impartial distance from any skepticism, the same straightforwardness of sound commonsense in regard to the truths of the religion of reason.” (*Morgenstunden*, JA III.2 125.27-126.11) “Judaism consists uniquely and only in revealed laws of divine worship, and presupposes natural and rational conviction about the truths of religion, without which no divine lawgiving can take place. When I talk about rational conviction, however, and I am not in doubt about wanting to presuppose this in Judaism, then the discussion is not about metaphysical argumentation as we are used to carrying it on in books, not about pedantic demonstrations that all meet the test of the subtlest skepticism, but about the claims and judgments of a plain, sound commonsense, which looks things right in the eye and reflects calmly.” (*An die Freunde Lessings*, JA III.2 197.10-21)