FAITH, REASON, POLITICS

Essays on the History of Jewish Thought
III. Moses Mendelssohn’s Metaphysical Defense of Religious Pluralism

In a sense signification is to perception what the symbol is to the object symbolized. The symbol marks the inadequateness of what is given in consciousness with regard to the being it symbolizes.

Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and the Face,” in Totality and Infinity

Monothemism has a bloody history. It has become common to account for this bloodiness by contrasting monothemism’s exclusiveness with polythemism’s tolerance. According to Jan Assman, the root of monothemism’s intolerance lies in its untranslatability. For pagans, the gods of different civilizations could be identified with one another. This served as a form of “intracultural translation” that promoted tolerance. In contrast, Mosaic religion emphasized the existence of a single God and rejected all pagan gods. This served as a form of “intracultural estrangement” that bred hatred and violence.

But there is another side to monothemism. For in claiming the universality of religious truth, monothemism contains a strong foundation for human unity. In the wake of the Reformation and the Hundred Years’ War, many European philosophers sought to articulate a conception of

* I thank Matthew Balcer, Marcia Bann, Fred Beiser, Eddy Brenner, Wendell Diichrich, Paul Francs, Laurie Ginzle, Saul Oliven, Ronnie Peniello, and participants in the Judais studies faculty seminar at Brown University for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1 See Assman, Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monothemism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 73-74, The Price of Monolocalism (trans. Robert Seage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010)), ch. 8-9. (Hobbe Halbertal and Avshai Margaliot eloquently express the brief against monothemism: “Monothemism, in its war against polytheism, is an attempt to impose unity of opinions and beliefs by force, as a result of an uncompromising attitude towards the unity of God. Polytheism, by contrast, by its very nature includes an abundance of gods and modes of ritual worship, and so has room for different viewpoints and beliefs and therefore is pluralistic. This pluralism is not just the product of compromise, but is in fact an ontological pluralism that constitutes a deeper basis for tolerance.” Hobbe Halbertal and Avshai Margaliot, Ideology, trans. Naomi Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

monothemism that allowed for and indeed encouraged religious pluralism. Moses Mendelssohn, the great Enlightenment Jewish philosopher, is known for his eloquent plea for the political tolerance of religious difference.2 From his own lifetime until today, however, observers have questioned the sincerity of Mendelssohn’s commitment to religious difference on the basis of his metaphysics. Hence, in 1782, the military chaplain David Ernst Mörschel wrote to Mendelssohn charging him with being a Deist whose commitment to Judaism was insincere. This view has been recently restated by Allan Arkush, who claims that Mendelssohn’s defense of Jewish difference was distinguished and must be understood as an attempt to refashion the Jewish religion into a vehicle for the acculturation of Prussian Jewry.3

Emmanuel Levinas offers a different assessment of Mendelssohn’s achievement. Levinas sees a metaphysical basis for Mendelssohn’s commitment to both the universality of metaphysical truth and religious difference in Mendelssohn’s theory of translation: “But it was Mendelssohn who, in his idealist theory of religious revelation... reached beyond ethical humanism and respect for the person in others. He placed particular emphasis on the intellectual unity of humanity centered on the same truths, or on conflicting but always reciprocally translatable truths— which indicates the profound unity of human civilization. And does not that promise of conflicting truths constitute humanity’s life in common, or the very definition, or at least essential promise of the West?”4

Levinas’s comment is inchoate—he does not spell out what Mendelssohn’s theory of translation amounts to. I think that Levinas here alludes to Mendelssohn’s metaphysical defense of religious pluralism at the end of Jerusalem.

While some scholars have taken note of this argument, there has been little critical work analyzing it.5 I will argue that Mendelssohn’s...

---


5 In their anthology The Jew in the Modern World, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Rabinowitz present an excerpt from the end of Jerusalem with a note indicating that it contains "a call for religious tolerance and pluralism. The editors, however, attempt no explanation of this argument. See Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Rabinowitz, eds., The Jew in the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
defense of religious pluralism rests on his conviction that metaphysical
truths can be known but cannot be adequately signified in language.
In consequence, given the multiplicity of human languages, different
religious groups naturally signify metaphysical truths in diverse ways.
For Mendelssohn, multiple representations of religious truth help pre-
vent people from imagining that their particular religious symbols ade-
quately signify the unconditional. This is essential for preserving pure
monotheism, for when people come to think of their religious symbols
as adequate representations of the divinity, they come to view them as
divine. This, however, is the essence of idolatry.

An Enlightened Appeal for Religious Union
In 1782, Mendelssohn published a translation of Menasseh ben Israel’s
Vindication of the Jews (Vindiciae Judæorum)—a plea for the Jews’ read-
migration to England. He wrote an introduction to Menasseh’s piece, in
which he argued that no religious authorities, including Jewish ones,
have a right of excommunication. In 1783, Mendelssohn received an
anonymous response to his preface entitled “The Search for Light and
Right.” The Searcher noted with approval Mendelssohn’s rejection of the
coercive power of religion.7 But for the Searcher this coercive power was
the very basis of Judaism and what distinguished positive, historical
Judaism from Christianity. Was not the Sabbath violator to be stoned?
Did God not promise great temporal rewards to those who fulfilled his
law and destruction to those who violated it? While coercive power
was at the heart of Judaism, authentic Christianity was pure, rational
religion whose only commands were ethical duties and whose only co-

7 A. F. Cass, “Das Forschen nach Licht und Recht,” in Moses Mendelssohn: Gesammelte Schriften
Jiidischen Inhalts, ed. F. Rambler et al. (Berlin: Akademie, 1920), 8, 86, and “The Search for
Licht and Recht,” in Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible, ed. Mechthild
Gertel (Hanover: Brandes University Press, 57. The standard edition of Mendelssohn’s writings
is Gesammelte Schriften Jiidischen Inhalts (Hamburg: Dietz Verlag, 1990). In citing Mendelssohn subsequen
tly, I will give the German citation and then the English one.

6 Scholars agree that the anonymous Searcher was the journalist A. F. Cass. See Altmann, Moses
Mendelssohn, 529.

— 101 —

erice power was the individual’s conscience. By rejecting the coercive
power of Judaism, Mendelssohn was in fact rejecting positive, historical
Judaism. The Searcher interpreted Mendelssohn as espousing “a wider
sense” of Judaism, which was no different from enlightened Christian-
itv: “In the wider sense of the expression, the faith of your fathers is that
to which Christians lay claim. It involves worshipping the one sole God,
oberving the divine commandments (Gebote) given through Moses,
and gathering all peoples into a single flock under the universal sceptor
or Messiah proclaimed by the prophets.”

Given the identical content of enlightened Judaism and Christianity,
the Searcher encouraged an amalgamation of the two religions, which
would fulfill both religions’ messianic expectations: “In any event, the
foundation will be laid for seeing the fulfillment of the prophecy [jene
Weissagung] (for it is not just a dream) that before the end of days, God
shall be the universal shepherd (der allgemeine Hirte) and all His people
on only a single flock. Only the truth can lead to this—the truth, either
on your side or on ours or, if we step forward from both sides, perhaps in
the middle.”

Mendelssohn’s response to the Searcher was Jerusalem. Throughout
the second part of Jerusalem, Mendelssohn eloquently defends his faith
by arguing that Judaism, properly understood, involves no religious
correlation. At the end of Jerusalem, Mendelssohn takes up the Searcher’s
appeal for religious union: “There are some who want to persuade you
that if only all of us had one and the same faith we would no longer
hate one another for reasons of faith, of the difference of opinion; that
religious hatred and the spirit of persecution would be torn up by its
roots and extinguished; that the scourgic would be wrested from hypocrisyc
and the sword from the hand of fanaticism (Fanatizismus), and the happy
days would arrive of which it is said ‘the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard beside the kid’ (Isa. 11:6).”

But Mendelssohn is very wary of religious union and sees it as a
disguised way to fetter liberty of conscience: "Beware, friends of men, of listening to such sentiments without the most careful scrutiny. They could be snares which fanaticism grown impotent wants to put in the way of liberty of conscience. You know that this foe of the good has many a shape and form: the lion’s fury and the lamb’s meekness, the dove’s simplicity and the serpent’s cunning... it feigns brotherly love (Bruderliebe), effuses human tolerance (Menschenduldung) and secretly forges fetters which it means to place on human reason, so that it may hurl it back again unaware into the cesspool of barbarism, from which you have begun to pull it up.”

But why is religious union opposed to liberty of conscience? Mendelssohn claims that it is because people naturally represent religious truth differently: "Shall we say that all of you would think alike concerning religious truths? Whoever has the slightest conceit of the human mind cannot allow himself to be persuaded of this. The agreement, therefore, could lie only in the words, in the formula... None of us thinks and feels exactly like his fellow man (Nehmenmensch); why then do we wish to deceive each other with delusive words?"

It is an irreducible feature of the human mind that people will not think alike. Attempting to eliminate religious differences is an illusory endeavor in which vague, general formulas are used to paper over real differences. The different ways in which human beings naturally conceptualize religious truth seemingly explain religious diversity. But does this not contradict Mendelssohn’s conviction in the universality of religious truth?

It is important to note that Mendelssohn specifically doubts whether religious doctrines could be agreed on. This is not incidental, for he does not entertain similar doubts concerning doctrines in other disciplines—say mathematics. For example, in Mendelssohn’s day, Euclidean geometry was considered absolutely certain knowledge. This body of knowledge had remained, for all intents and purposes, the same from the days of Euclid himself. Mendelssohn was not disturbed by the fact there existed such a "unified geometry." It did not seem "contrary to human nature" that people should agree about such truths. Why then this difference between metaphysics and mathematics? Why do people naturally represent differently metaphysical, but not mathematical, truths?

For Mendelssohn, the subject matters of mathematics and metaphysics are fundamentally different. Mathematics is a science of quantity or magnitude, while metaphysics is a science of quality. These two realms are not, however, independent of each other, for each quality must have a particular quantity, and each quantity must be a quantity of some quality.

Since geometry is the main example Mendelssohn uses in discussing mathematical knowledge, I will focus on it. Geometry is a science of space. Geometrical knowledge comes from representing limits to space by drawing lines, planes, and points. From these sensible representations, one can derive mathematical truths by applying the logical principle of noncontradiction. Since geometry is a science of space, the sensible signs one uses are isomorphic with what one wishes to represent and, hence, are called by Mendelssohn "essential" or "natural" signs.

In contrast, metaphysical knowledge proceeds by the analysis of qualities. By analyzing qualities, one seeks to distinguish a thing’s intrinsic characteristics. This is an intellectual process that by its nature cannot proceed through the senses. So, there is a fundamental heterogeneity between thoughts (concepts) and the words one uses to signify concepts. In this sense, the signs that one uses must be what Mendelssohn calls "arbitrary" or "conventional."

In an influential paper, Arnold Eisen claims that Mendelssohn was deeply skeptical about the ability of thought and language to capture metaphysical truth. Eisen adduces two passages in Jerusalem that attest to Mendelssohn’s "skepticism" regarding our ability to know metaphysical truth. In the second part of Jerusalem, Mendelssohn notes that Judaism is unique in that it commands actions that call one to contemplate eternal metaphysical truths rather than formulate doctrines into dogmas of faith. Judaism’s avoidance of dogma points to our inability to know metaphysical truth and express it in language. Mendelssohn’s...
understanding of Judaism's opposition to dogma is summarized in the following passage: "I have sketched the basic outline of ancient, original Judaism such as I conceive it to be. Doctrines and laws, convictions and actions. The former were not connected to words or written characters which always remain the same for all men and all times amid all the revolutions of language, morals, manners, and of conditions words and characters which invariably present the same rigid forms into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them."14

As Eisen puts it, dogma uses words, which is problematic since "concepts are inherently elusive . . . and the translation of concept to language is always inexact and inadequate."15 On inspection, however, this interpretation does not seem to be borne out by this passage. Mendelssohn is focusing not on our inability to know metaphysical truth, nor on our inability to translate this truth into language per se. Rather, Mendelssohn is indicating that while words are rigid forms, their meaning changes over time with different usages. Committing eternal concepts to words risks misleading people, for as the meaning of a word changes, people's understanding of the concept can become distorted.16 Indeed, on reflection, it is clear Mendelssohn thought that we could know metaphysical truth. The central argument of the Prize Essay is that metaphysical truths allow of the same certainty as mathematical ones. His 1767 Phaedron offers rational proofs for the immortality of the soul. His 1784 Sache Gottes defends divine providence on rational grounds, and his 1785 Morning Hours presents new proofs for God's existence in light of Immanuel Kant's critique of rationalist metaphysics.17

A second passage cited by Eisen refers to Mendelssohn's argument against the practice of requiring teachers and priests to affirm their acceptance of doctrines of faith under oath. For Mendelssohn, belief cannot be coerced and must be based on rational conviction. The purpose of oaths, then, is to reinforce people in beliefs which they accede to rationally but do not always live by because of laziness. However, Mendelssohn does not deem employing oaths a worthy approach for affirming eternal metaphysical truths for the following reason: "The perceptions [Wahrnehmungen] of the internal sense [innern Sinnes] are in themselves seldom so palpable that the mind is able to hold on to them securely and give them expression as often as it may be desired."18

The "perceptions of the internal sense," which here refer to our metaphysical concepts, are not sufficiently "palpable." Eisen interprets Mendelssohn as affirming that metaphysical concepts are always subject to doubt. But Mendelssohn himself cautions the reader not to interpret him this way: "Dear reader, whoever you may be do not accuse me of skepticism or of employing some evil ruse to turn you into a skeptic."19

I think that Mendelssohn's aesthetic writings provide an important elucidation of his Intention. One of the central aesthetic concepts explored by Mendelssohn is the "sublime." Briefly, for Mendelssohn, sublime objects are objects that display internal complexity, but which cannot be perceived as units because of their enormity. Sublime objects include things that are gigantic in size, such as "the unfathomable world of the sea, a far reaching plain, or the innumerable legion of stars."20 However, Mendelssohn likewise notes that a living being can be sublime if she displays an enormous degree of power, genius, or virtue. For Mendelssohn, God is the paradigmatic example of a sublime being since, hard as we try, we can never grasp God's goodness, wisdom, or power, nor adequately represent God using signs or images. As Mendelssohn puts it: "As far as their nature is concerned, some things are so perfect, so sublime that they cannot be reached by any finite thought, cannot be adequately intimated by means of any sign [Zeichen] and cannot be represented as they are by any images [Bilder]. Among such things are God."21

---

14 Mendelssohn, Jena, B.160, and Jerusalem, 102; Arnold Eisen, "Moses Mendelssohn as a "Cassanor" (These)," AJR Review 15, no. 2 (1990): 264.
15 Eisen, "Moses Mendelssohn as a "Cassanor" (These)," 264.
16 Compare Mendelssohn's discussion of language in the Prize Essay: "The soul must constantly fix its attention on the arbitrary combination of signs [wechselnde Verbindung der Zeichen] and what is designated, a combination established at some point in the past. For this reason the slightest inattention makes it possible for thought to lose sight of the subject matter, leaving behind appear to be merely playing with words" (Mendelssohn, Jena, B.150; and Philosophical Writings, 270).
18 Mendelssohn, Jena, B.134, and Jerusalem, 66.
20 Mendelssohn, Jena, B.138, and Philosophical Writings, 144.
21 Mendelssohn, Jena, B.145, and Philosophical Writings, 202. Mendelssohn presents a similar point in his commentary on Kant: 38.22, where Moses asked to see God's glory and was permitted to see God's back, but not God's face. Mendelssohn comments: "For this is the limit of what it is possible for a created being to know of the essence of his glory, may it be blessed. Moses attained [more knowledge] than any other person. Before him and after him no person will reach his exalted.
CHAPTER THREE

For Mendelssohn, we can neither adequately grasp God's nature nor adequately express it in language. But how does this jibe with Mendelssohn's dogmatic conviction that reason can give us certain knowledge of metaphysical truth? While this is a complex issue, the outline of his position is clear: while we can know that God exists, is omnipotent, omniscient, all-good, and so on, given God's infinite nature and the finitude of our minds, we can neither fully comprehend God's attributes nor adequately express them in language.22

In sum, there are two reasons why human beings naturally express religious truth in multiple forms. First, because the signs used to express metaphysical truth are conventional. Second, because any signs used to depict God are necessarily inadequate. Mendelssohn assumes, however, that all religions agree in their basic metaphysical commitments. Mendelssohn's doctrine of "common sense" supplies the premise underlying this assumption.23

Common Sense and the Universal Knowledge of Metaphysical Truth

Mendelssohn's encounter with Cranz was not his first experience with attempts to convert him. As is well known, in 1769 Johann C. Lavater challenged Mendelssohn to refute Charles Bonnet's philosophical defense in attaining knowledge of God and an understanding of the ways and principles by which he guides his creatures. Refusing his challenge, Bonnet's vogue was the epistemology of God and knowledge of his ways essentially. This is impossible for all created beings" (Mendelssohn, AAH, 16:349).

22 There is a similar tension in Maimonides between his affirmation that God exists, is one, omnipotent, and is an intellect, and his doctrine of negative attributes. See Moses Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, trans. 5. Fina (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), pp. 1, 2 chapters Knowledge, ed. S. Rubenstein (Jerusalem: Mesorah Ha'Or Rishon, 1985), chapter 1, lines 7, 8. There is enormous debate on how to interpret Maimonides on this issue. See the classic discussion in Solomon Fleishman, The Limits of God's Knowledge According to Maimonides, (Jerusalem: The Institute of Advanced Jewish Studies, 1981). For an extensive study on this issue, see the classic discussion in Solomon Fleishman, The Limits of God's Knowledge According to Maimonides, (Jerusalem: The Institute of Advanced Jewish Studies, 1981).

23 Mendelssohn espouses the terms "healthy human understanding" (gevurah Meshencherenverstand), "healthy reason" (gevurah Vernunft), "healthy human sense" (gevurah Menschlichenverstand), "plain human understanding" (verdienst Meshencherenverstand), "straight sense" (Gerechte Sicht), and "sense.

fense of Christianity or convert. This put Mendelssohn in a bind, for he was loath to challenge the religion of the monarch under whose indulgence he was living.24

In his reply to Lavater, Mendelssohn declined to attack Christianity explicitly but implicitly took aim at Lavater's profession of faith. He presented Judaism as a tolerant religion of reason that only requires adherence to the tenets of universal natural religion for salvation.25 While not discussing Christianity explicitly, this account of Judaism was meant to lead the reader to compare Judaism favorably with Christianity, which demands belief in irrational dogmas such as the Incarnation and vicarious atonement for salvation, and which actively seeks converts.26 Mendelssohn thought Judaism's tolerant position a theological necessity, for making salvation dependent on accepting dogmas of a particular religion would violate God's power and goodness:

I therefore do not believe that the powers of human reason are insufficient to persuade men of the eternal truths which are indispensable to human felicity, and that God had to reveal them in a supernatural manner. Those who hold this view detract from the omnipotence or goodness of God, on the one hand, what they believe they are adding to his goodness on the other. He was, in

24 For a description of this encounter, see Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, chapter 3. In Prussia at the time there were several forms of civil status available to Jews. A small group possessed "general privileges," which involved the right to settle in any localities open to Jews, equality with Christians in economic transactions, and the right of children to inherit these privileges. A second group, the "protected Jew" or so-called Schonnepolen, were granted a right of settlement, but no right of mobility, and only one child could inherit their status. A third group were the extraordinary Schonnepolen, who, while having a right of settlement in a certain locality, could not transfer this right to any child. Despite Mendelssohn's literary fame, he died as an ordinary Schonnepol. Indeed after his death in 1786, his wife Fronter had to leave Berlin and apply for re-admission. See Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, 16:17.


26 Mendelssohn explicitly criticizes Christianity in his unpublished "Counter-Refutations on Bonnet." See Mendelssohn, AAH, 7: 90-106; idem, Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible, 14:30-
their opinion, good enough to reveal to men those truths on which their felicity depends, but not omnipotent or good enough to grant them the powers to discover those truths themselves. Moreover by this assertion one makes the necessity of supernatural revelation more universal than revelation itself. If, therefore, mankind must be corrupt and miserable without revelation, why has the far greater part of mankind lived without true revelation [wahre Offenbarung] from time immemorial? Why must the two Indies wait until it please the Europeans to send them a few comforters to bring them a message without which they can, according to this opinion, live neither virtuously nor happily?27

For God to deny salvation to those who have never heard of Christianity impugns His goodness (assigning him an arbitrary, satanic will) or His power (claiming that He had no power to save those unaware of Christianity). Making salvation contingent on the rational recognition of God and the dictates of morality does not by itself, however, solve this problem. For in making salvation dependent on rational metaphysical and moral knowledge, it seems that only intellectuals can be saved. Thus, Mendelssohn claims that to recognize the truths of natural religion, discursive reason is not needed—simple common sense is sufficient:

Now it seems to me that the evidence of natural religion is as clear and obvious, as irrefutably certain, to uncorrupted common sense [unverderbten, nicht gemiffleiteten Menschenverstanden] that has not been misled as is any theorem in geometry. At any station of life, at any level of enlightenment [Jeder Stufe der Aufklärung], one has enough information and ability, enough opportunity and power, to convince himself of the truths of rational religion [Vernunftreligion]. The reasoning of the Greenlanders who, as he was walking on the ice with a missionary one beautiful morning, saw the
dawn streaming forth between the icebergs and said to the Moravian: "Behold, brother, the new day! How beautiful must be he who made this" This reasoning, which was so convincing to the Greenlander before the Moravian misled his understanding, is still convincing to me.28

While European religious thinkers frequently dismiss their non-European counterparts as idolaters, given Mendelssohn’s account of common sense, it is not surprising that he finds much more reason in polytheism than Jews or Christians normally assume. Indeed, in his commentary on the Pentateuch, Mendelssohn takes a very broad view of polytheism. Commenting on the first of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2), Mendelssohn writes:

With regard to intellectual apprehensions, the children of Israel have no distinction or advantage over the other nations. All [nations] acknowledge the divinity of God. Even those who worship other gods admit that God most high is omnipotent [uberschaublich hochgedacht, weisheitsvoll begangen le'el elyon].24 This is what the Rabbis said: "They call Him, the God of Gods." In the same way the verse says, "For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations and ever incense and pure oblation are offered to my name [Malachi 1:10]. And it is possible that this is what the Psalmist meant when he wrote: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky


28 Mendelssohn, Jdd, 3:2: 197-98; idem, Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible. This is not the place to examine Mendelssohn’s conception of common sense in detail. For detailed discussion, see my unpublished dissertation, Meshab Gotlib, "The Ambiguity of Reason: Mendelssohn’s Writings on Spinoza" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2003), 135-37. Most recently, see Giton Frenkelshah, No Religion Without History: Mendelssohn’s Jewish Enlightenment (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 21-64.

29 Mendelssohn here follows Nahmanides’ comments on Exod. 20:3.

30 See Buber’s Talmud (Bereisheet B) Monash, 210. The full passage reads as follows: "R. Abba bar Rav Jose said in the name of R. Huna and others say R. Judah said in the name of Rav, ‘From Tyre to Carthage the nations know Israel and their Father who is in Heaven; but from Tyre westwards and Carthage eastwards the nations know neither Israel nor their Father who is in heaven.’ R. Shem b. Hiyya raised the following objection against Rav: ‘Is it not written, ‘For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations and ever incense and pure oblation are offered to my name’ (Mal. 3:10). He replied, ‘You, Shem b. Hiyya! They call him the God of Gods.’"
CHAPTER THREE

proclaims his handiwork [Psalms 19:2]: "There is no utterance, there are no words without their voice being heard [Psalms 19:4]." The meaning is that this speculation [i.e. recognition of God on the basis of physicotheology] becomes known in the world without utterance or word [i.e. through intellect alone]. For every utterance and word [matmar medibur] is only known to the speakers of a particular language, but the "declaration of the heavens and its handiwork" are understood to all human beings. 31

For Mendelssohn, even those nations that worship other gods acknowledge God's supreme dominion and omnipotence. An example will help illustrate Mendelssohn's view of the continuity between monotheistic and polytheistic religions.

Consider two images. First, God commands Moses to place in the Tabernacle the Ark of the Covenant, a gold box with two cherubs over it. Second, according to Mendelssohn, Indian "philosophers" affirm that the world is balanced on the head of a snake and that the snake rests on the back of a tortoise. 32 Mendelssohn claims that both of these images actually express one metaphysical truth—divine providence.

In claiming that the cherubs express divine providence, Mendelssohn relies on a Rabbinic tradition: "the [cherubs] shall face one another [Exod. 25:20]... but isn't it written, 'the cherubs stand on their feet and face the Sanctuary of the Temple' [uthem labapit] (Chron. II, 3: 13)?" 33 This is not a difficulty [lo kashia]. The first verse refers to when Israel performs the will of God [retzono shel makom], while the second verse refers to when Israel does not perform the will of God [retzono shel makom]. 34

In other words, the cherubs facing one another symbolize divine

protection, which is consequent on obeying the divine will, while the cherubs turning away from one another symbolize divine punishment, which is consequent on disobeying the divine will. 35 The cherubs thus symbolize God's providential governance of the world. 36

Mendelssohn notes that European readers frequently "laugh" at Indian cosmology describing the earth as balanced on a snake and a tortoise. In dismissing this cosmology, however, they act injudiciously, for this image actually contains a powerful symbol of divine providence. Here Mendelssohn relies on the then recently published work by J. Z. Hollwell, Reports from Bengal and the Empire of Hindustan. 37 According to Mendelssohn, Hollwell studied the sacred books of the Gentooos with a native Brahmin and so was able to discern their true meaning. Mendelssohn quotes Hollwell:

The Eternal spoke... thou Bittum [Hollwell glosses: power of preservation] protect and preserve, according to my ordinance, the things and forms created... Bittum transformed himself into a mighty boar [Hollwell glosses: symbolizing strength, according to the Gentooos, because, relative to his size, he is the strongest animal], descended into the abyss of Johala, and on his tusks brought up Murto [Hollwell glosses: the earth]—Then spontaneously there issued from him a mighty tortoise [Hollwell glosses: symbol of stability, according to the Gentooos] and a mighty snake [Hollwell glosses: their symbol of wisdom]. And Bittum put the snake erect on the back of the tortoise, and placed Murto upon the head of the snake. 38

31 Mendelssohn, JbA, 16:180 (my emphasis).
32 See ibid., 8:180, and Jerusalem, 114-15. Assessing the accuracy of Mendelssohn's depiction of Hindu doctrine is beyond the bounds of this article.
33 Bashi notes that the cherubs described in Exodus differ from those described in Chronicles. The Exodus cherubs were made of pure gold and were part of the Ark of the Covenant, while the Chronicles cherubs were only gold-plated and were placed on the ground. Despite these differences, the Talmud assumes that both sets of cherubs should be placed in identical positions (See Babylonian Talmud, Aked Bera, Bita 16a).
34 Ibid., 99a.
35 It should also be noted that in Babylonian Talmud, Yev. 54a-54b, there is a tradition that the cherubs did not simply face one another but rather sexually embraced one another, a more powerful symbol of divine love.
36 Mendelssohn, JbA, 8:180, and Jerusalem, 114. Mendelssohn does not cite the rabbinic source of his claim, nor does Altman's in his note.
37 The full title is Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Hindostan... or else the Mythology and Cosmology, Facts and Fancies of the Gentoo's, Followers of the Shaktah, and a Dissertation on the Monophysists, commonly, though erroneously called the Pythagorean Doctrine. The book was published in English in two parts. Part 1 was published in 1786, and pt. 2 in 1797. A German translation of pt. 1 appeared in 1788. See Altman's note in Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 225.
38 Mendelssohn, JbA, 8:180-81, and Jerusalem, 115.
The meaning of the Gentoo myth is that God creates the world (Marto) through his power (Bistru Vishnu), the boat and then governs it in accordance with a stable (the tortoise), wise (the head of the snake) law. This divine governance is providence. We are therefore confronted with a number of questions. First, given Mendelssohn's account of common sense, what is the source of religious error? More specifically, what constitutes idolatry? Second, while Mendelssohn's understanding of the relations among concept, sign, and metaphysical truth explains the fact of religious pluralism, it does not explain by what right it should persist. Arguing for the persistence of religious difference from its existence involves an illicit jump to "ought" from "is." In other words, while Jews, Christians, and Hindus may each have their own way of expressing religious truth, there is no apparent reason not to seek a universal religion that uses a single set of symbols. To solve these problems, it is necessary to turn to Mendelssohn's claim that multiple expressions of religious truth promote accurate knowledge of metaphysical truth.

The Value of Religious Diversity
Mendelssohn supplements his argument concerning the fact of religious diversity with a claim concerning its value: "Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of providence. . . . Why should we make ourselves unrecognizable to each other in the most important concerns of our life by masquerading, since God has stamped everyone, not without reason, with his own facial features? Does this not amount to doing our very best to resist providence, to frustrate, if it be possible, the purpose of creation? Is this not deliberately to contravene our calling, our destiny in this life and the next?" 39

For Mendelssohn, religious diversity is the "plan and purpose of providence." Altmann argues that Mendelssohn's claim is grounded in ideas that he formulated in an exchange concerning a work by Baron Karl Theodor von Dalberg. 40

In 1777, Dalberg published a metaphysical work entitled Reflections on the Universe (Betrachtungen über das Universum). In June of that year, Dalberg's admirer J. E. Grafen von Götz sent a copy of Dalberg's treatise to Mendelssohn for comments. Mendelssohn delivered his opinion on Dalberg's work in two letters—one to von Götz and one to Dalberg himself.

In the Reflections, Dalberg argues that the universal law governing the coexistence of things is their universal tendency to seek perfection by striving to assimilate to one another. For Dalberg, each individual thing has a number of qualities, which are partly alert and partly dormant. These qualities would persist in their respective states if not for the fact that things have a tendency to "sympathy" and "love," which inclines them to assimilate to one another. 41

Mendelssohn offers two criticisms of Dalberg. First, Mendelssohn notes that Dalberg's method is to seek "the simplest and most certain principles of existence" (die einfachsten und allergewissesten Grundstätte) and then, through comparison of these principles, to uncover the single most basic principle governing all things. Dalberg's contention that "assimilation" is this most basic principle is uncertain, however. The tendency to assimilation assumes difference—without difference there would only be identity (Einerleitheit) and so no striving for assimilation. But if difference is an irreducible part of phenomena, "manifoldness" (der Mannigfaltigkeit) would seem to be a coequal principle with any supposed tendency to "assimilation." 42

Second, Mendelssohn doubts whether the tendency of beings is, in fact, to assimilation. Mendelssohn distinguishes between "unity" (Einheit) and "identity" (Einerleitheit). While unity connects the manifold, identity cancels the manifold. The "unity" of reality is greater the more diverse the manifold and the "more intimately" (je inniger) it is connected. When the manifold is connected "harmoniously" (harmonisch), this unity becomes "perfection" (Vollkommenheit).

Mendelssohn shares Dalberg's teleological assumption that things strive for perfection. But whereas Dalberg thinks that identity constitutes perfection, Mendelssohn follows Leibniz in claiming that unity, or the "harmonious connection" of the manifold, constitutes perfection. 43

39 Mendelssohn, Judenth., II/202, and Jerusalein, 130.
41 See Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, 313-14.
42 Mendelssohn, Judenth., 12/2, 51. Altmann does not mention this criticism.
For Mendelssohn, what constitutes the "harmonious" connection of the manifold is the fact that all beings have a single final purpose, namely, the tendency to seek perfection. Insofar as finite beings represent the common drive to perfection uniting all beings, they themselves become more perfect. Thus, while for Dalberg the tendency of things is to real identity (d'bindung identität), for Mendelssohn the tendency of things is to an ideal identity—the universal recognition of the single purpose uniting all beings. 43

Altmann's claim that Mendelssohn's commitment to the metaphysical principle of "unity" underlies his defense of religious pluralism is unclear. How does a justification of religious pluralism follow from the idea that the tendency of all beings is to connect the manifold according to a common purpose? Assuming that there are many ways to represent the connection of the manifold, there still may be one way to represent that it is clearest, and hence one for which all thinking beings should strive. How then does Mendelssohn's commitment to the principle of "unity" entail the intrinsic value of many different representations of religious truth?

In the passage from Jerusalem cited above (see n. 39), Mendelssohn claims that religious diversity is the "plan of providence," and, as a good Lebanese, he considers providence a function of maximizing perfection. Famously, Gottfried Leibniz holds that God thinks many possible worlds and willing the most perfect one possible into existence. The most perfect world is, not surprisingly, the world with the maximum number of the most perfect beings. Perfection is a function of having the most perfect representations. Rational perfection involves having the clearest and most distinct representations of reality. 44

Providence is the law of governance that God uses to maximize the perfection of finite beings. Suffering, for example, is a divine prompt to perfect oneself, and on this basis Mendelssohn rejects the idea of eternal punishment. 45 Religious diversity reflects divine providence insofar as it helps assure proper representations of divine truth. In Mendelssohn's language, religious pluralism helps prevent idolatry.

In their book Idolatry, Halbertal and Margalit distinguish four senses of idolatry. Idolatry can refer to: (a) the worship of beings other than God; (b) incorrect representations of God; (c) intellectual errors; and (d) incorrect forms of worship.

As we have seen, Mendelssohn rejects the notion that the worship of beings other than God constitutes idolatry. In the Brur, he follows Nahmanides in claiming that the prohibition of worshipping other gods contained in the commandment "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3) applies to Israel alone. 46 Other nations are permitted to worship angels, heavenly bodies, demons or human beings, and even sensible representations of these beings as long as the worshippers recognize the supreme authority of God. 47 There is no intellectual reason to forbid the worship of everything other than God. 48

In Jerusalem, Mendelssohn explains the nature of idolatry. Idolatry

43 Mendelssohn, Jud. 12:2-3; Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, 214. 
44 Mendelssohn, Jud. vol. 3, 26: Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from his Writings, ed. and trans. Eda for perfection, the growing inner excellence, constitutes the destiny of all rational beings, hence nature, was conceived so that rational beings, progressing step by step toward spiritual awareness, may gradually become more perfect, feeling their happiness in inner growth.
45 For a more detailed discussion of Mendelssohn's reasons for rejecting eternal punishment, see
46 See Nahmanides' comments on Exod. 20:3; Halbertal and Margalit, Idolatry, 280-87.
47 See Mendelssohn's comments on Exod. 20:3, in Judah, 16:186, where he justifies his claim that Gentiles can worship other beings by recourse to the doctrine that "Gentiles were not prohibited from idolatry." As Jacob Katz and others have shown, this doctrine emerged from a Talmudic comment on Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 48b, which states that, "it is forbidden for a person to set up a partnership (d'bindung) with a Gentile lest the Gentile become obligated to swear an oath by his God. And the Talmud states, 'it shall not be heard on your mouth' (Exod. 20:13).
48 The implication of the passage was that in a business transaction a Jew was never permitted to require an oath of a Gentile. This put the Jew at a great disadvantage. The medieval sage Rabbi Isaac (some sources mistakenly cite Rabbi Isaac) was the author of authoritative sixteenth-century halakhic work the Shabbat Arukh, cites the Talmudic prohibition on making partnerships with Gentiles. But in his glosses to the Shabbat Arukh, Rabbi Moses Isserles writes: "there are some who permit partnerships with Gentiles to one time, since the Gentiles of our day do not worship other deities. And although they mention other deities [in their oaths], nevertheless, their intention is to the Creator of Heaven and Earth. The difference is that they associate [nativ_OC] the name of heaven with something else. And we do not find that one transgresses the prohibition of placing a stumbling block in front of the blind since they are not prohibited from idolatry." See Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, ch. 3, 20. 49 See Jacob Katz, Orthodoxy and Tolerance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 37-38, 162-81; David Novotny, Avot Aretz HaHakla: Halakhic Understanding of "Unity" (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1981).
50 See, e.g., Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Religionsphilosophie (Berlin: Voss, 1912), ec. 156.
51 See, e.g., Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Religionsphilosophie, ec. 156.
52 See, e.g., Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Religionsphilosophie, ec. 156.
53 See, e.g., Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Religionsphilosophie, ec. 156.
involves an incorrect representation of God, which culminates in substituting the symbol for God himself. Mendelssohn offers a genealogy of idolatry. As we have seen, arbitrary signs must be used to represent metaphysical concepts. Originally, peoples used living things to represent these concepts. Animals were the first things used. Thus, for example, the lion may have been used to represent God's power. Later, images of the living things were used. So, instead of using the actual lion to designate God's power, a statue of the lion may have been used. Eventually, metaphysical concepts were represented using written, imagelike symbols such as hieroglyphics. Idolatry stems from people coming to regard the signs "not as mere signs but as the things themselves." But how did the people become convinced that the sensible symbols of God were themselves divine? The reason is that people came to see the signs not as arbitrary symbols of divine attributes but as essential symbols. The symbols were taken to be incarnations of the divinity whose existence inhered in the symbols themselves.

God, in His goodness, could not allow people to go astray without help. As is well known, Mendelssohn thinks that God chose Israel as a bulwark against idolatry. God prohibited the Israelites from worshipping anything in addition to himself and from using sensible symbols to represent him. Instead, God instructed the Jews to perform actions (that is, the ceremonial law) to direct the individual Jew toward the contemplation of metaphysical truths. This was and continues to be an effective protection against idolatry, for unlike sensible signs, religious actions, which are "transitory," are clearly arbitrary and therefore can never be mistaken for essential symbols of the divinity. In this way, God chose Israel to be a light unto the nations, a preserve of pure monotheism.

49 Mendelssohn, Juda, 8: 173-74; idem, Jerusalem, 107-8.
50 Mendelssohn, Juda, 8: 177; idem, Jerusalem, 131.
The first recent discussion of Mendelssohn's theory of idolatry is Freudenthal, No Religion Without Idolatry, 125-144.
52 Mendelssohn, Juda, 8: 183-85; and Jerusalem, 117-19. See Funkhouser, Perspectives of Jewish History.

Eisen considers Mendelssohn's account of the law as a prophylactic against idolatry "painfully weak." He raises two important objections. First, Eisen claims that it is possible to understand how actual animals being used to symbolize the divine qualities might explain the move to idolatry—it is natural to assume that people might forget that the animals were symbols and come to worship them as divine themselves. But Eisen claims that it is far from clear "how most images or hieroglyphs, let alone a language of written letters, would have had that result." Second, Eisen claims that given that Mendelssohn thought that in his day all nations worshipped God and were not idolaters, it is unclear why the commandments should still apply. One might add to Eisen's questions the problem of how nations that had never heard of Israel or people who lived before Israel came into being would be protected against idolatry.

I suggest that, according to Mendelssohn, religious diversity plays a providential role in preserving monotheism. Idolatry arises from regarding one's own metaphysical symbols as essential, adequate signs of the divine. Religious diversity helps impress on people that any signs used to represent God are arbitrary and inadequate. In this way, the inclination to defile these symbols is weakened. This, I believe, is one of the central reasons that Mendelssohn opposes a union of faiths even if such a union were articulated in philosophical terms. The danger is that by unnaturally and arbitrarily designating a single set of symbols to represent God, people would come to imagine that God can be represented adequately. And since imagining that one can adequately symbolize God leads to fetishizing one's symbols, people would be led to idolatry.

It is important to note that Mendelssohn recognizes that the problem of idolatry is not limited to the use of images to represent God. He notes that the Pythagoreans used numbers to represent the divinity so that their signs would not be misinterpreted. However, this failed as people came to fetishize the numbers, "ascribing miraculous power to them." The same danger is clearly present when "written letters" are used.

54 Ibid., 256.
55 Mendelssohn, Juda, 8: 182; idem, Jerusalem, 117.
56 These certain kabaddas ascribe magical powers to the letter of the Torah assuming that the letters are incarnations of the divine potencies. 
It must be stressed that both of these divine stratagems for preserving monothedism (that is, the ceremonial law and religious diversity) are not foolproof. Mendelssohn notes that almost immediately after receiving the Torah, the Israelites worshipped the golden calf. 57 Similarly, simply recognizing the plurality of ways of representing metaphysical truth does not guarantee that one will not worship one's own representations. One may regard the other representations as deviant and seek to stamp them out. The idea, rather, is that given the human tendency to error and deception, these two stratagems aid individuals in avoiding idolatry.

In sum, Mendelssohn's account of the plurality of religious expression is not merely a statement of fact. Rather, religious pluralism is a value insofar as it protects against the tendency to distort religious truth by thinking that it can be represented perfectly adequately using sensible signs. In this way, religious diversity promotes human perfection. The potency of Mendelssohn's defense of religious pluralism derives from its unifying monotheism's doctrine of divine unity with the pagan notion of divine translatability.

Critical Appraisal

Mendelssohn's theory of religious diversity raises a number of problems. First, it seems to threaten religious "anarchy." If more representations of identical religious truths are better, this seems to encourage differentiation not only between religious groups but likewise within them. Apparently, the more religious groups divide and subdivide the better. But does not this potentially destroy the integrity of the positive religions that Mendelssohn strives so strenuously to preserve?

Second, does Mendelssohn's theory do justice to the unique features of positive religions? By explaining religious language as expressions of rational, universal religious ideas, he is not imposing on historical religions an artificial structure that masks the uniqueness of particular religious traditions and that threatens to level the historical diversity found within them? Recall the criticism leveled by the founder of neo-Orthodoxy, Samson Raphael Hirsch, exactly fifty years after Mendelssohn's death. In his Nineteen Letters on Judaism, Hirsch praised Mendelssohn's "brilliant personality" but complained that Mendelssohn "did not build up Judaism as a science from within itself." 58

Despite these reservations, it is worth noting an intriguing implication of Mendelssohn's theory. Maximum religious diversity is part of the providential design, which one must not frustrate. Therefore, one must not abandon one's religion without regard for that religion's future. The responsibility for maintaining religious diversity, however, seems to apply not only to one's native religion but to all religions. Hence, Mendelssohn's theory yields the result that every individual has a duty to foster the existence and rationality not only of their native religion but of other religions as well. 69

What impact did Mendelssohn's defense of religious pluralism have on subsequent religious philosophy? This is an extremely complicated issue, so I will limit myself to three observations. First, in the German philosophical world, Mendelssohn's theory was of little importance as most thinkers considered his commitment to speculative metaphysics out of date in light of Kant's critical philosophy. Second, many of Mendelssohn's disciples neither appreciated nor understood his master's theory. Thus, a mere thirteen years after Mendelssohn's death, his protégé David Friedländer cited Jerusalem extensively in his famous letter to Provost Abraham Teller in which he proposed merging Enlightened Judaism with Enlightened Christianity. Third, while many German Reform Jewish thinkers looked to Mendelssohn as having laid the groundwork for defining Judaism as ethical monotheism, Mendelssohn's defense of religious pluralism played little or no role for them. While these thinkers are quite diverse, many tried to justify separate Jewish religious existence by claiming Judaism's unique philosophical theology, a point that Mendelssohn rejected.

In the twentieth century, Jewish thinkers such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph Soloveitchik, and David Novak have, each in their own ways, offered Jewish theological defenses of religious pluralism. A detailed investigation of how Mendelssohn's defense of religious pluralism compares with recent Jewish theories of religious pluralism is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I would like to venture a few prelimi

57 Mendelssohn, Jdaa, 6: 185-86; idem, Jerusalem, 120; idem, Jdaa, 16: 327-341.
59 In pleading for religious diversity in Jerusalem, Mendelssohn is concerned with addressing Christian rulers such as Joseph II, who hoped for religious union as a way of facilitating the conversion of the Jews.
nary observations on the relationship between Mendelssohn’s theory and the thought of Heschel. Heschel was among the twentieth century’s most passionate defenders of religious pluralism. With his characteristic flair for the dramatic, Heschel called for the creation of a body called “The United Religions,” which would parallel the United Nations.60

The theoretical mechanics of Heschel’s defense of religious pluralism are remarkably close to Mendelssohn’s, although Heschel never mentions the great Maskil by name. Like Mendelssohn, Heschel stresses that all religions worship the same God, even citing the verse from Malachi (1:11) quoted by Mendelssohn.61 Heschel likewise notes that God transcends all religions and calls any attempt to identify God with a particular religion “idolatrous,” writing: “Religion is a means not an end. It becomes idolatrous when regarded as an end in itself. Over and above all being stands the Creator and Lord of history. He who transcends all. To equate God and religion is idolatry.”62 Like Mendelssohn, Heschel holds that God cannot be adequately described: “The ultimate truth is not capable of being fully and adequately expressed in concepts and words . . . the voice of God reaches spirit of man in a variety of ways, multiplicity of languages.”63

Finally, Heschel suggests that religious diversity is part of the providential plan and he rejects attempts to form a unified religion.64 But while Heschel follows Mendelssohn very far, he accepts the Kantian critique of Mendelssohn’s rationalist metaphysics, and this, to my mind, introduces an incoherence into Heschel’s position. According to Heschel, individual, emotional faith is the primary vehicle for belief in God.65 This faith is a distinctively private affair.66 At the same time, as we have seen, Heschel affirms that all religions worship the same God.67 But without a rational basis for belief in God, how does Heschel know that individuals from different religions worship the same God? Heschel, whose primary audience is Jewish and Christian, has a ready answer. This certainty comes from the fact that Jews and Christians both accept the Hebrew Scriptures. But this, of course, begs the question in relation to Muslims, who think that the Jews corrupted the Hebrew Scriptures and even more so for religions that do not accept the authority of the Hebrew Bible.

In sum, by acknowledging the difficulty in fully grasping God while affirming that God’s existence and attributes can be known through reason or common sense, Mendelssohn is able to present a robust defense of religious pluralism that embraces both the unity of all religions as well as the necessity of religious diversity. While contemporary theologians such as Heschel gravitate toward the skeptical side of Mendelssohn’s position, many are deeply uncomfortable with the dogmatic side. At the same time, many contemporary theologians do not want to dispense with the idea that all religions worship the same God, which is seen as key for making religion a basis for human unity. The question is: Can we affirm the common divine center of all religions once we abandon rational theology?

61 Ibid., 14. See n. 30 above.
62 Ibid., 15.
63 Ibid., 15.
64 See ibid., 16: “perhaps it is the will of God that in this age there should be diversity in our forms of devotion. . . . In this age diversity of religions is the will of God.”
66 “No Religion Is an Island,” n. 11: “in a world of conformity, religions can be easily leveled down to the lowest common denominator.”
67 Heschel elegantly puts it, “individual moments of faith are mere waves in the endless ocean of mankind’s reaching out to God” (“No Religion Is an Island,” n. 9).