Dissertation #9

Title: Die Religionsphilosophie Moses Mendelssohns (The Philosophy of Religion of Moses Mendelssohn)

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Executive Summary: The discipline that this dissertation belongs to is the history of philosophy. Its author - a graduate of the positive-historial / conservative Breslau Jewish Theological Seminary - attempts to give an overview of Moses Mendelsohn's philosophy of religion, of its intellectual roots and of its cultural context. Mendelssohn's own writings serve as the main primary source for the dissertation, though works by Enlightenment philosophers such as G. W. Leibniz as well as medieval Jewish philosophy are occasionally cited, too. In addition, extensive use is made of then-contemporary German historiography of philosophy. According to the author, with regard to his views on the function of religion and the nature of G'd, Mendelssohn, while also influenced by traditional Jewish thought, was primarily a typical and somewhat eclectic Enlightenment deist philosopher who nevertheless did advance a coherent and uniform worldview which was consistent over time and also unchanging in function of the audience: both his works directed at a Jewish public (often in Hebrew) and his writings for a general readership in German exhibit the same views. However, Mendelssohn's originality against the backdrop of Enlightenment deism lies in the positive role he accorded to real existing organized religion in general and to the revealed religion of Judaism in particular: considering the core principles of natural religion - in his view, monotheism, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul - to be accessible to human intuition and provable by human reason, Mendelssohn saw the beneficial task of the revelation of the Mosaic Law on Mt Sinai to consist in turning the Jews into a holy people characterized by obedience to the divine commandments and, thereby, into a people constantly reminding itself and humanity as a whole of the truths of natural religion.

Introduction (pp. 6 - 11)

In the introduction, the author puts Mendelsohn's whole philosophy in the context of his time and of the general history of philosophy, describes its main features and defines the topic of the dissertation: a subfield of Mendelssohn's philosophy, his philosophy of religion.

For the author, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) belongs to an intellectual current in 18th century German philosophy called Popular (Enlightenment) Philosophy (*Populärphilosophie*) whose main goal it was - following the ideas of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz - to spread general understanding, morals, and a rational form of religion (natural religion). Mostly disinterested in metaphysical speculation, those philosophers focused on questions connected to the attainment of eudaimonia / happiness, and their doctrines were especially marked by the tenet of the soul's immortality: the belief in the immortality of the soul was itself seen as the greatest source of eudaimonia.

Mendelssohn, as a philosopher (though not as a promoter of Jewish enlightenment) usually belittled together with other Popular Philosophers like Johan Jakob Engel, Johann Augustus Eberhard and Christoph Friedrich Nicolai who were all considered to have been eclipsed by Immanuel Kant, was however, so the philosophy historian Eduard Zeller whom the author approvingly quotes, a much deeper and more rigorous (*wissenschaftlich*) thinker. This is, according to the author who contradicts a late 19th century critic, not diminished by the importance Mendelssohn accorded to eudaimonia: since, in Mendelsohn's view, scientific or philosophic discovery - by satisfying human curiosity - was itself a major source of happiness.

The author characterizes Mendelssohn as an original and dynamic theorist in the discipline of the philosophy of religion, a field whose task he defines, citing the Protestant theologian Otto Pfleiderer, as striving to understand the complete phenomenon of religion - which must exist separately from social and political life - in a logical and systematic way, without relying on external authorities. Mendelssohn, so the author, fulfills this task: first of all, the core object of his philosophical investigation, Judaism, is a religion completely separate from the (gentile) state, without any authorities able to legally sanction Mendelssohn for his writings; secondly, Mendelssohn himself tried as much as possible to arrive at objectivity, constantly attempting to overcome every form of prejudice.

In this dissertation, the aim of the author is to present Mendelssohn's philosophy of religion based on primary sources and to show that it is a uniform system of ideas consistent across the various works Mendelssohn wrote for different audiences at different moments.

The Notion and the Objective of Religion (p. 12 - 14)

Citing from the collected works of Mendelssohn (usually only referring to a page number, but also explicitly mentioning an open letter to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and the major treatise *Sache Gottes*), the author presents Mendelssohn's concept of religion: based on three premises - G'd, providence and immortality - the goal of the various religious systems is to serve as the source of both virtue and eudaimonia/happiness.

With regard to virtue, even though religion is not needed to determine the content of our ethical duties (a task which moral philosophy can perform alone), it does nevertheless reinforce the commitment to those duties by making humans see one another not just as creatures of G'd but also as being created in his image and likeness, so Mendelssohn as read by the author. With regard to eudaimonia, it is promoted by religion through instilling in mankind the hope for a blissful existence in the afterlife.

The Source of Religion (pp. 15 - 23)

This chapter deals with the question to what extent either reason or revelation should be seen as the sources of religion in general and of the Jewish religion in particular.

In Mendelssohn's view, according to the author, mankind was at the beginning of its history able to ascertain the core principles of religion (including monotheism) via the human mind alone and it was only in the course of time that, ironically, the progress of material culture led to a backslide when the products of culture (such as drawings or statues) became objects of idol worship themselves. This original monotheism was, however, preserved by Abraham and, therefore, by the religious systems tracing their roots to him: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Nevertheless, Mendelssohn is not a "naturalist" and believes both in the possibility of revelation and in its ability to impart what reason alone is unable to attain. According to the author, the function of the revelation on Mt Sinai as described by Mendelssohn in his German treatise *Jerusalem* and even more clearly in his Hebrew commentary to the book of *Exodus,* is not to convince the Jews of the existence of one sole G'd (for this task, reason alone is sufficient) but to turn them into a holy people via the observance of the commandments. Commandments whose purpose may often be unintelligible in the case of many individual commandments but whose task as a whole it is to remind the people of Israel of G'd and prevent it from abandoning religion. However, the Mosaic Law is the obligatory path to eudaimonia for the Israelites only, while other peoples can - an idea, so the author, already expressed in Jehudah ha-Levi's *Kusari* and by Maimonides - also reach eudaimonia through other ways.

Miracles (pp. 24 -26)

For Mendelssohn, says the author, the miracles described in the Hebrew Bible are facts to be accepted literally and not to be reinterpreted in a rationalist way nor to be dismantled by historical-critical scholarship. Mendelssohn's views - mostly cited from his (public) correspondence with the Genevan naturalist Charles Bonnet - are contrasted with the rationalist "pre-ordained miracle" explanation of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides (the author references the *Guide of the Perplexed*) and presented as similar to theories put forward by the Enlightenment philosophers John Toland and Gottfried Wilhelm

Leibniz (the author quotes from Leibniz' *Theodicée* in the French original and cites then-contemporary historiography of philosophy).

Purpose and Meaning of Miracles for Religion (pp. 27 - 30)

In this chapter, the function of miracles in Mendelssohn's thought with regard to the justification of the edifice of (Jewish) Religion is described by the author. Miracles in general, like those performed by Moses in the wilderness, are said to play no role in legitimating the truths of religion which can mostly be attained via reason, anyway. Thus, the miracles of the Bible were not meant to reinforce the belief of the Jews in the prophetic gifts of Moses et al. but only to attend to the people's material needs.

Only the revelation at Mt Sinai is an exception to that general rule: it is constitutive for the emergence of the Jewish religion because the Mosaic Law itself is not graspable via reason alone, and the truthfulness of the revelation is warranted by the fact that a whole people was observing it. The only element of belief associated with it, is the belief of the Israelites in Moses' faithfulness of conveying G'd's teachings. For Mendelssohn, so the author, this revelation is an unassailable fact, making the Mosaic Law binding upon the Jews forever. The author explicitly objects to the philosopher (and editor of Mendelssohn's works) Moritz Brasch in whose view Mendelssohn "the apologist" has to be distinguished from the "philosopher of religion" who allegedly considered the precepts of Judaism to be, to some degree, expendable.

Value and Boundaries of Positive Religion (pp. 31-32)

Seeing only the Jews as bound by the revelation on Mt. Sinai, Mendelssohn - so the author quoting from Mendelssohn's collected works - accepts not just the existence of other "positive" (i.e. real existing) religions but views their existence as beneficial due to the effect their institutions have on promoting genuine morality and religiosity, especially among those less motivated by the forces of reason. The author contrasts Mendelssohn's attitude with that of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, referencing him via secondary scholarship by the liberal Protestant theologian Karl Schwarz, who considered "positive" religion to rank below the natural (or rational) religion advanced by deists: for Mendelssohn, unlike Lessing, positive religions do not depend on theological dogmas or doctrines but amount to a set of rites and norms of conduct only, nor does humanity rely on positive revealed religion, *contra* d'Alembert, as a source for answers to existential questions, since all core truths were already intelligible to reason alone.

The Church (pp. 33 - 36)

The term "church" is used by Mendelssohn to designate the institutions of any organized religion whatsoever, be they Christian, Jewish or Muslim. In Mendelssohn's view - as the author describes referencing Mendelssohn's collected works by page number without specifying the title of the books cited - no church has the right to enact laws but should only institute precepts which cannot be enforced by the state, with the exception of financial contributions or church taxes which the state may collect due to the high social value ascribed to churches in order to secure their continued existence. This, however, does not accord the state the right to intervene in the internal dealings of the church.

As the author points out, quoting from Mendelssohn's 1763 prize essay that won the Prussian Academy of Sciences essay contest, this doctrine of individual religious liberty secured against infringements coming from both the church and the state was a general principle for Mendelssohn destined to apply to every religion and not just a means to secure rights for his own Jewish coreligionists. That general rule notwithstanding, Mendelssohn considered it legitimate for the state to suppress atheism and "Epicureanism" - this bewildering (*befremdlich*) and seemingly intolerant stance the author plays down by drawing a parallel to similar views expressed by Locke and Rousseau (as usual citing from secondary literature) and by noting that, in practice, Mendelssohn never intended to punish anyone for atheist convictions but only for wrongful acts committed due to those beliefs.

The Value of Speculation On Religious Questions (pp. 37-8)

Even though, in Mendelssohn's view which the author considers to have been shaped by the Scottish school of common sense realism, the human mind could already arrive at the three core truths of natural religion (monotheism, providence, and immortality of the soul) through intuition and common sense, philosophical speculation and reason was also a way to reach those insights. Intuition must, however, be examined by reason to be relied on. On the other hand, philosophical speculation alone is often too slow and too timid in making discoveries. Thus, Mendelssohn saw both approaches as indispensable, since each of them alone was set to "stumble" and they were, therefore, needed to supplement one another.

Proofs for the Existence of G'd (pp. 39 - 46)

After having presented in the preceding chapter Mendelssohn's confidence in the ability of philosophical speculation to confirm the core truths of religion, in this chapter the author dwells on the particular arguments or proofs for the existence of G'd advanced by Mendelssohn.

Here a detailed overview is given of four different proofs for divine existence which were set forth by Mendelssohn who, so the author, considered each one of the arguments to be convincing in itself and saw in providing concomitantly various lines of reasoning simply a technique for better persuasion. As a source for Mendelssohn's thought in that regard, the author uses almost exclusively his last work *Morgenstunden* (1785) while occasionally providing some context by citing from the historiography of philosophy of his time (e.g. from Friedrich Jodl's *History of Ethics as a Philosophical Discipline*).

Two arguments - which the author considers to be simply two variations of one single line of proof - are classified by Mendelssohn himself as "proofs a posteriori". The first one infers the existence of G'd from the existence of individual consciousness, the second one - commonly called the cosmological argument - infers it from the existence of the outside world. In both cases, the underlying reasoning is that no contingent and inconstant entity can be thought of as existing without presupposing a first - eternal - cause that brought the former into being without itself having been created by an outside force in return.

The third proof is the "ontological" one: here the existence of G'd is seen as necessarily emanating from the possibility to imagine his existence. Because the divinity must be conceived of as containing all qualities of perfection and because existing is also a quality that pertains to perfection, G'd cannot be thought of, so Mendelssohn, without necessarily existing.

Lastly, a variation of Mendelssohn's second - cosmological - argument is seen by the author as a separate fourth proof, which is called the "epistemological-idealist" one in the dissertation. Everything that is real must necessarily be comprehended as real by some thinking subject. Because we know that all our knowledge of reality is limited, though, a boundless, all-encompassing intellect must necessarily exist that is able to discern the whole of reality. Mendelssohn saw this argument as an original one, but the author asserts that it had already been made by Leibniz in his *Theodicee* and, even before Leibniz, by the 17th century philosopher and theologian Ralph Cudworth.

This chapter ends with remarks of the author about two common arguments for divine existence which Mendelssohn did not employ: the teleological and the moral argument. With regard to the teleological proof for G'd, i.e. deriving G'd's existence from the fact that the world exhibits purpose and order, Mendelssohn did not resort to it probably due to having been influenced by Spinoza or the Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff both of whom saw this line of reasoning as unconvincing. As to the moral argument - the consciousness of moral autonomy lets us to assume a higher power embodying the ultimate good - the author sees it as contradicting the worldview of Mendelssohn for whom the core principles of ethics were a product of rational human self-interest and did, therefore, not necessitate a supernatural legislator. Nor did Mendelssohn want to divide the revealed Mosaic Law into a moral and non-moral part, so as not to denigrate the latter.

The Nature and the Properties of God (pp. 47 - 59)

Rejecting a view brought forward by the rabbi and historian Meyer Keyserling (1829 - 1905) according to whom Mendelssohn, like Rousseau (whom the author cites from secondary sources), denied the possibility of making affirmative statements about the nature and the qualities of G'd, the author claims that Mendelssohn did indeed advance a concrete vision of the divinity. Mendelssohn, so the author using Mendelssohn's 1763 prize essay (see above) as the chief source, explicitly opposed the negative theology of Maimonides who held that nothing can be said of G'd's qualities, and claimed instead that due to the perfection ascribed to G'd it was possible to positively assert the greatness and the goodness of the divine, his greatness consisting in omnipotence and omniscience and his goodness manifesting itself in a desire for justice and in the principle of providence. The author then discusses some further doctrinal consequences deriving from these principles with a particular focus on the problem of free will: according to the author, Mendelssohn's belief in divine providence and omniscience amounts to the denial of human freedom - a fact which Mendelssohn was not ready to acknowledge. At the same time, Mendelssohn - inspired by Leibniz, so the author - saw the actual world as the best of all possible worlds (due to the goodness of G'd) and all its evils were only a consequence of human moral deficiency and not even genuine evils: since even when plagued by suffering, each individual was still able to attain eudaimonia through virtuous comportment alone. Without connection to any sort of reward either in this life nor in the afterlife virtue becomes its own reward, even though Mendelssohn sees the popular belief in divine punishment and reward for sin as socially useful due to its impact on the morality of the masses (the author equates this with views voiced by Maimonides and Shaftesbury). The chapter ends with an account of how Mendelssohn tried to reconcile his insistence on human freedom with his belief in divine providence and omniscience: despite being pre-ordained in the divine plan, human action is nevertheless not futile but necessary to advance the good intended by G'd. This solution is described by the author as resembling the one given by Saadia Gaon in the fourth chapter of his *Emunoth ve-Deoth* and by Yehuda ha-Levi in the *Kuzari* V, 20.

The Immortality of the Soul (pp. 60 - 65)

In this last chapter, the author summarizes Mendelssohn's teachings on the issue of the immortality of the soul, using as a primary source his famous *Phaedon* (1767), guided by a 1880 PhD thesis by the otherwise unknown Friedrich Kampe on the relationship between Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* and Plato's *Phaedo,* and supplemented by additional scholarship from the field of general philosophy history and from the discipline of Jewish studies (citing a work of Jakob Guttmann on Saadia Gaon).

The author introduces this work by asserting that Mendelssohn - who wanted to give an actualized version of the Platonic dialogue that aimed at proving the immortality of the soul by partly restating Plato's arguments in a more modern fashion, partly giving new and better arguments - did not aspire to originality and himself freely admitted to have drawn upon work by Plotinus, Descartes, Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Hermann Samuel Reimarus.

Mendelssohn's argument for the soul's immortality in the first of the three parts of the dialogue, is based on the premise that destruction (of indivisible entities) is antithetical to the order of nature. Since the faculties of the soul - reason and volition - do not result from combinations of other forces, the soul's decomposition is inconceivable, making it impossible to turn it into nothingness. However, as already noticed by the scholar Friedrich Kampe, Mendelssohn did not take up Plato's ideas of reincarnation and transmigration. In the view of the author, Mendelssohn's aversion to reincarnation is best explained by the impact of the intellectual heritage of medieval Jewish philosophers, especially Saadia Gaon, who opposed this idea. Likewise, the opposition to the pre-mortal existence of the soul (a doctrine accepted by some in traditional Judaism) is described as being in line with views expressed by medieval rabbis like Rashi, Nachmanides and Ibn Ezra. The first part of the dialogue ends with reflections on the admissibility of suicide, where Mendelssohn respectfully distances himself somewhat from the denigration of the body and of corporeal existence in Plato's *Phaedo.*

In the second part, Mendelssohn gives proofs for the immateriality of the human soul, explicitly rejecting the arguments made by Plato to that end, preferring instead to rely on lines of reasoning proposed by Plotinus, as well as by - as the author contends citing the scholar Friedrich Kampe - Reimarus and the

philosopher Christian Wolff who, inspired by Leibniz, saw the experience of human consciousness as confirming the soul's nonmaterial nature.

The third and last part of Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* is even more influenced by Reimarus and - so the author quoting again from Friedrich Kampe - basically just a more elegantly written reiteration of the tenth essay in the latter's *Principal Truths of Natural Religion* (1755). Here Mendelssohn argues for the immortality of the soul based on the axiom of G'd's goodness because, in Mendelsson's view, human eudaimonia is unthinkable without immortality. In addition, denying immortality would eliminate all incentives for engaging in selfless behaviour risking one's life for others. Lastly, it would also contradict the core truth of divine providence if the experience of injustice and suffering in this world would not be overridden by a more blissful afterlife.

At the end of the dissertation, the author summarizes his views on Mendelsson's philosophy of religion: "An eclectic philosopher, in-as-much as he appropriated for himself the teachings of the Leibniz-Wolff school, of the Jewish religious philosophy of the Middle Ages and of the English deists, Mendelssohn nevertheless created a consistent and uniform system of thought. His stance on positive religion and on Judaism in particular - as he developed it in *Jerusalem* - has shown itself to us as completely in line with his religio-philosophical views, which he developed in his early writings." However, the author wishes to draw attention to one contradiction of which Mendelssohn was probably not aware: while denying the possibility of social progress for the human race in *Jerusalem*, in his earlier works - believing in the Biblical prophecy of universal peace in the *Book of Isaiah* - Mendelssohn was much more optimistic with regard to humanity's ability to reach in the future the highest stage of development.