VERBAL DISPUTES IN MENDELSSOHN'S *MORGENSTUNDEN*

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Thuet auf Worte Verzicht, und
Wahrheitsfreund, umarme deinen Bruder![1]

Throughout *Morgenstunden* Mendelssohn reveals a tremendous respect for language, both its power and its limitations. When Mendelssohn rejects Helvetius' cognitivist hypothesis (as we might dub it today) that language is a collection of empty, algebraic signs transposed and combined according to rules, he does so because such a hypothesis supposedly cannot explain the emotional and intuitive power of human language. Language moves us and it does so because it engages sentiments that cannot deceive; hence, "our universal notions and the words that represent them, must not consist merely in the knowledge of signs" (42). At the same time, thanks to language's limitations (its inherently limited ability to express philosophical ideas), it has enormous powers of misleading and beguiling. Thus, in Mendelssohn's eyes, linguistic ambiguities are at least partly responsible for the failure, shared by Wolff and Leibniz, to distinguish the different principles underlying the respective aims of knowing and approving. The fact that we tend to use the same words to express our approval of – i.e., to "applaud" (Beifallgeben) – the good and the beautiful as well as our recognition of the truth is, as he puts it, "an ambiguity of language" that philosophers must vigilantly attend to (71).

Yet as misleading as language can be for the philosopher, it is also the philosopher's element. Thus, after characterizing the debate among materialists, idealists, and dualists as a "verbal dispute" (Wortstreit), a feud over words (Wortfehde), Mendelssohn adds that our only recourse in this debate can be closer analysis of the language, since "language is the element in which our abstracted concepts live and breathe" (weben; so much so that

[1] Moses Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes,* vol. 3.2 of *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin, 1929–; Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Fromann/Holzboog, 1974), 124. Hereafter cited as *JubA* 3.2, followed by a colon and page number. All numbers in parentheses within the body of this paper refer to the page numbers of this *JubA* 3.2. Translations are from *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).

abandoning language amounts to surrendering one's spirit).[2] When he turns his attention to Spinozism, Mendelssohn speaks of how inclined he is "to explain all disputes of philosophical schools as mere verbal disputes [bloßeWortstreitigkeiten] or at least to derive them from verbal disputes" (104). Yet he also seems to regard the problem as inevitable, given the fact that these philosophical exchanges take place in a "region of ideas" so far removed from immediate knowledge that we make our thoughts known "only through the silhouette [Schattenriß] of words" and can recognize them "only with the help of this silhouette itself." Indeed, the slightest alteration in a "fundamental term" (Grundwort), he continues, leads to completely opposite consequences so that, should one lose sight of the point of departure, "one no longer disputes about words, but about the most important matters."[3] Though this conclusion points again to a difference between a verbal and a factual or even a principled dispute, Mendelssohn's reference to the importance of one's fundamental terms indicates language's integral role and, indeed, its power not only to mislead but to lead.

We might put Mendelssohn's point here in the form of a paradox (if only as mnemonic device): in one sense, language is powerful because it is weak. That is to say, at least for some reaches of philosophy, language's enormous power to mislead goes hand-in-hand with its feebleness as the conveyor of philosophical thinking. Yet for all its perils, language remains indispensable to the philosopher, the only means at the philosopher's disposal for working through the thicket of confusions produced by language. Indeed, when it comes to principles and disputes over them, we seem to be beholden to language more than we are when it comes to disputes over observable facts. Principled disputes are very much verbal disputes, but not purely verbal disputes as in a non-philosophical

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[2] *JubA* 3.2:61; "Die Sprache ist das Element, in welchem unsre abgesonderten Begriffe leben und weben. Sie können dieses Element zur Veränderung abwechseln, aber verlassen können sie es nicht, ohne Gefahr den Geist aufzugeben."

[3] *JubA* 3.2:104-5; "Wir schweben hier in einer Region von Ideen, die von der unmittelbaren Erkenntniß zu weit entfernt ist; in welcher wir unsere Gedanken blos durch den Schattenriß der Worte zu erkennen geben; ja blos durch Hülfe dieser Schattenrisse selbst wieder zu erkennen im Stande sind. Wie leicht ist hier der Irrthum! Wie groß die Gefahr, den Schatten für die Sache zu halten! Sie wissen, wie sehr ich geneigt bin, alle Streitigkeiten der philosophischen Schulen für bloße Wortstreitigkeiten zu erklären, oder doch wenigstens ursprünglich von Wortstreitigkeiten herzuleiten. Verändert die mindeste Kleinigkeit im Schattenriß: sogleich erhält das ganze Bild ein andres Ansehen, eine andre Physiognomie. So auch mit Worten und Begriff. Die kleinste Abweichung in der Bestimmung eines Grundwortes führt am Ende zu ganz entgegengesetzten Folgen, und wenn man den Punkt aus den Augen verloren, von welchem man gemeinschaftlich ausgegangen ist; so streitet man am Ende nicht mehr um Worte, sondern um die wichtigsten Sachen."

context where the difference between words and facts is putatively patent, i.e., not itself in question.

In this connection, it is not surprising that Mendelssohn – master translator that he is[4] – recognizes that languages are not all alike and, indeed, that linguistic analysis across languages (setting off an expression in one language against cognates in another language) can be put to the service of refining our concepts. For example, after posing the question what makes one of a pair of contradictory statements actually true, Mendelssohn cites the Epicureans' answer that it is by accident (von Ungefähr), i.e., by chance (Zufall). Mendelssohn relates how he once had a habit of translating every curious or strange word into the Hebrew language he first learned and that he found no Hebrew equivalent for these Epicurean terms. Looking for Hebrew words that, like these terms, signify something independent of human intention or causation, previous translators tried to convey their meaning with words like *destiny*, *providence* that stand for the very opposite of chance.[5] Mendelssohn then notes how the Epicurean answer conflates or passes over a difference that is evident in the German terms, namely, the difference between 'by accident' ('lack of intention') and 'by chance' (absence of an efficient cause).[6] These examples further confirm how fundamental linguistic analysis is to Mendelssohn's philosophical method, a linguistic analysis appreciative of the differences in languages and the intimate, historical dependency of the philosopher's own thinking upon language.[7]

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[4] Mendelssohn translated Plato, Shakespeare, Shaftesbury, Rousseau, among others.

[5] The line of translation is even more complicated since the translators were translating from the Arabic into the Hebrew, having "to dress the Greek concepts in Hebrew words" (*JubA* 3.2:89-90; griechische Begriffe in hebräische Wörter einzukleiden). These translators of Epicurus may have been Rabbi Joseph Albo or Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (see his *Kuzari*).

[6] A similar difference can in fact be found in Aristotle's distinction between *tuche* and *automaton* in *Physics*, Beta, 6, 197a36-197b36.

[7] Somewhat cautiously, Mendelssohn has an interlocutor suggest that the German language or, at least, Lessing's German alone has reached the point "where the language of reason can be combined with the most lively exhibition" (*JubA* 3.2:129). For another example of Mendelssohn's appreciation of language's sometimes confusing fecundity, see his treatment of the opposition of sublimity or loftiness and condescension where the German terms – *Erhaben, Herablassung* – drawn from contrasting physical senses can mislead one into thinking that these ethical properties cannot be combined "although the exact opposite is the case" (126-27). On the history of Mendelssohn's explicit treatments of language, see the groundbreaking work of Gideon Freudenthal; see, too, Daniel Dahlstrom, "Maimon and Mendelssohn on Language," in *Integrating Traditions: On Salomon Maimon*, ed. Gideon Freudenthal and Reinier Munk (Amsterdam: Springer, forthcoming).

In the following paper I examine more closely Mendelssohn's treatment of the linguistic make-up of certain philosophical debates and his tendency to cast some of them as purely verbal disputes. The importance of the issue for Mendelssohn can be gathered from his remark, already cited above, that he is inclined to explain "all philosophical debates as merely verbal disputes or at least to derive them from verbal disputes." Whether he gives in to this inclination or not, in the *Morgenstunden* he does characterize several such debates explicitly as verbal disputes or rooted in such disputes. Sometimes, however, it is also clear that the disputes are not purely verbal, raising the question whether Mendelssohn's characterization of them as verbal is a rhetorical smoke-screen of sorts. In any case, since a "verbal dispute" and a "merely verbal dispute" seem to mean different things in different contexts for Mendelssohn, the aim of this paper is to try to become clear about these different senses. I conclude with some summary ruminations about the rhetorical purposes of labeling a dispute "purely verbal."[8]

1. Idealism's linguistic confusions

The context of the first string of references to linguistic difficulties and verbal disputes is Mendelssohn's treatment of idealism in Chapters 6 and 7 of *Morgenstunden*. These chapters importantly provide the last elements of his discussion of the sorts of things we need to know before turning to the text's main task, namely, a scientific treatment of the concept of God. In them, Mendelssohn identifies three linguistic confusions besetting idealism.

a. Violating ordinary usage

Mendelssohn introduces the motivation for idealism by noting the distinction yet complementarity of objective and subjective orders of ideas as well as the possibility of the disruption of the soul's harmony with the world designated by that objective order. Drunkenness, madness, somnambulance, and illusion, among other things, confirm that this possibility is real. This real possibility raises the question of whether we have any assurance of knowing things objectively. To be sure, the more our senses agree regarding

[8] The topic is timely since the issue of what might reasonably count as a verbal dispute is itself complex and has recently regained a certain notoriety; see note 25 below.

an object, the firmer the basis of our conviction that it actually exists. "Still, there remains the doubt that the limited sphere of knowledge on the part of our senses in general might be the source of this common ground and thus occasion illusion. Perhaps the situation in which I find myself is alone responsible for the fact that I see and hear and feel, and thus regard as actual, things that merely transpire in me and have no objective reference outside me" (54).

At this point, Mendelssohn observes that the measure of assurance that we have of that objective reference is proportional to the agreement among humans and the agreement of humans and animals. The greatest assurance would come from evidence that beings higher than us and ultimately the "supreme intellect" also concurred (55). At this juncture Mendelssohn mentions the idealist for the first time, as he notes that establishing God's existence would be key to refuting the idealist.

By no means a solipsist ("egoist"), the idealist depicted by Mendelssohn agrees with the dualist in admitting the existence of other thinking beings ("spiritual substances") as well as the existence of distinct objective and subjective orders of things.[9] Their dispute is over the existence of substances outside them, substances that are "the prototypes [Urbilder] for sensory feelings and thought." In this connection, Mendelssohn's idealist raises the question: "But what sort of properties do you attribute to this substance? Are not all sensory properties that you ascribe to them mere modifications of what transpires in you yourself?" The idealist then follows up with a further challenge to the dualist, that of demonstrating that extension and movement, the alleged properties of substances, are something more than sensory concepts, alterations of the power of representation, of which we are conscious. Finally, supposing that those properties can be found somehow among our representational capacities, the idealist asks: "And how are you able to transpose these properties, as it were, from yourself and ascribe them to a prototype that is supposed to be found outside you?"[10]

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[9] *JubA* 3.2:55ff. Inasmuch as Mendelssohn attributes the acknowledgement of "spiritual substances" to the idealist, the label does not apply, strictly speaking, to Kant, though Mendelssohn may well have intended the phrase in a loose sense that extends to Kant, since Kant clearly countenances himself as the subject of mental properties and countenances, too, both objective and subjective orders. In any case, Mendelssohn's idealist is in the somewhat odd position of accepting spiritual substances but contesting material ones.

[10] *JubA* 3.2:57. The idealist's presentation of his position is tendentious, since no realist could accept the terms of the question, i.e., the notion that the properties of the substances, i.e., the prototypes (*Urbilder*),

At this juncture the dualist replies: "If this is the difficulty, then it lies more in the language than in the actual thing itself." This response, it bears noting, is not a diagnosis of the grounds of the dispute itself. To the contrary, the dualist identifies the linguistic nature of the difficulty and lays it at the feat of the idealist. Still, the response is misleading in another respect. For it is not so much the language itself but a certain misconstrual or misuse of the language that gets the idealist in trouble. For, in the very next sentence, the dualist points to what is meant by saying that a thing is extended, contending that "these words have no other meaning than this: a thing is constituted in such a way that it must be thought as extended . . . It is one and the same, according to the language as well as the concept, to be *A* and be thought as *A*" (57). Here, in contrast to some other instances cited below, Mendelssohn's dualist is tracing the position of the idealist not so much to an ambiguity inherent in language or in the words as in a failure to understand them, i.e., a failure to attend to what they – both idealist and dualist – say and, indeed, say perfectly well.[11] Or at least the idealist is in the awkward position of using the terms of the debate in a way that flies in the face of the very customary, common sense usage that she must presuppose.

b. Using words devoid of meaning

While the idealist claims that all properties are accidents of the soul, the dualist finds so much agreement among humans and, indeed, humans and animals that he considers himself justified in positing them in something outside him. In other words, for the dualist, the accidents of the soul are depictions, representations of and occasioned by the extension, figure, impenetrability, and so on of the material protoype. In Chapter 7 the idealist tries to turn the tables on the dualist by charging that it is the dualist who is guilty of linguistic confusion. According to the idealist, the dualist confuses or better, conflates, the terms 'do' and 'is' as though giving an account of the prototype's efficaciousness

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are the same as the properties of the mind, i.e., "alterations of the power of representation," or, in other words, the mental copies (*Abbilder*) or depictions (*Abbildungen*), merely transposed to the prototypes.

[11] Echoes of Wittgenstein's exhortation: "look and see" (*schau*) how we actually use words in everyday contexts; see, for example, Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), §66, §§109-24, esp. §109: "Die Philosophie ist ein Kampf gegen die Verhexung unsres Verstandes durch die Mittel unserer Sprache"; §116: "*Wir* führen die Wörter von ihrer metaphysischen, wieder auf ihre alltägliche Verwendung zurück."

suffices to way what it is. Challenging this conflation, the idealist proclaims: "But we want to know what this prototype itself is, not what it brings about" (59).

The dualist replies by charging that, if this is, indeed, the idealist's concern, then the idealist wants to know something that is not and cannot be an object of knowing.

> We stand at the boundary not only of human knowledge, but of all knowledge in general; and we want to go further without knowing where we are headed. If I tell you what a thing does or undergoes, do not ask further what it is. If I tell you what kind of a concept you have to make of a thing, then the further question "What is this thing in and for itself?" is no longer intelligible. And so from this point on philosophers have long tormented themselves with questions that are in principle unanswerable because they consist of empty words that convey no sense (60).

The implication of the opening sentence in this passage is the coincidence of knowing where we are headed and speaking intelligibly about it. More directly, Mendelssohn's dualist contests the intelligibility of differentiating between asking what something is and asking what it does or undergoes. The words of the former question, separate from the latter, are "empty" and, indeed, fatally empty for philosophers who fall prey to this fundamentally linguistic confusion. Mendelssohn's dualist thus turns the charge of linguistic confusion back on the idealist. In effect, the dualist charges, the idealist is supposing a distinction without a difference, i.e., the purely verbal distinction between saying what something is and saying what it does.[12]

c. The wall of mirrors

In Chapter 10 Mendelssohn again speaks of a linguistic confusion but unlike the two instances just glossed (a and b), he does so in a way that – at least prima facie – does not completely absolve the dualist. In the chapter, following the allegorical dream, Mendelssohn touts the advantages of inferring God's existence from one's own existence over inferring it from the existence of the material, mind-independent world. Though the presumption of this world's existence is overwhelming, the reasons for this presumption

[12] The argument here is woefully incomplete. On the one hand, to be sure, there is a long tradition of equating being with the power of making a difference (Plato); on the other, ordinary usage does on various levels distinguish between being and doing.

cannot rule out the possibility that it "rests upon a limitation of sensory powers common to all human senses, perhaps all animal senses, and thus is mere illusion" (83). Hence, the superiority of a proof from the presumption of one's own existence, a presumption that enjoys the greatest degree of evidence.[13]

There is, however, a ready rejoinder by the idealist, one that Mendelssohn has his idealist interlocutor articulate. After stressing that the idealist can countenance a distinction between truth and illusion, "between dreaming and waking, fantasy or fiction and truth," the interlocutor speaking for the idealist adds:

> The idealist denies merely the actual existence of an object that is supposed to serve as the prototype for these true depictions and, indeed, for this reason, because this prototype provides him with nothing more to think since he knows no way of making any representations of it beyond the depiction of it that is to be found in his soul. Meanwhile, from this representation of the world on the part of the idealist, everything must follow and be able to be inferred, that, in the opinion of the materialist and the dualist, follows and can be inferred from the actual existence of the object. The object [Objekt] provides the materialist and the dualist with no more predicates than the representation of the world provides the idealist (87-88).

The idealist's argument notably turns here on predication or, more precisely, on the supposed lack of a difference in the predicates assigned by the various epistemological positions to the material world. To predicate 'object,' 'actual existence,' or 'actually existing object' of the representation of the world as the sum of the known, true descriptions of it does not add anything to those descriptions and thus leads to no further inferences than those that the idealist can make. The same holds for 'prototype' (Urbild) as opposed to 'picture' (Bild), 'copy' (Abbild), or 'depiction' (Abbildung) – the other family of terms exploited by Mendelssohn from the outset of *Morgenstunden.* In a word, the word for the original, the protoype, adds nothing.

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[13] *JubA* 3.2:84; "For not even the most adamant doubter will likely be able to dispute that I am myself a mutable entity. If I am myself conscious that alterations proceed in me, then this is subject to no further doubt. With regard to myself, the subjective and the objective coincide, semblance and truth are not separate from one another. What I immediately feel cannot be mere illusion but instead must actually proceed in me and cannot be denied with regard to me myself, even to me as object. Hence, my existence as well as my mutability are beyond any doubt."

Mendelssohn lets the idealist press the case even further with the image of a wall of mirrors, each depicting the same item from its vantage point. Taking the mirrors as metaphors for human minds, the idealist contends that there is no way for them to determine whether the item represented is actually on hand or whether the divine artist has placed in each mirror its respective representation of the item. Mendelssohn has the idealist (anticipating Carnap) add that inferences from either supposition are the same.[14]

Mendelssohn's response at this point is to charge the disputing mirrors with arguing merely over words but he does not make the charge for the sake of abandoning the philosophical issue and deferring to common sense. As long as the mirrors countenance the same difference between truth and perspective, agreeing on what is constant (the truth) and what is changing (the perspective), further disagreement on their part is "mere grumbling over words" (eine bloße Wortzänkerey). This conclusion would seem to indict the dualist as well as the idealist, given the overriding agreement on the basic difference between truth and perspective, however differently it is couched. But Mendelssohn's subsequent presentation of the matter muddies the waters. On the one hand, seemingly taking back the ground that he has just given, he proceeds to insist that the agreement to this difference entails the affirmation of the existence of the prototype, "as the ground of their agreement." On the other hand, perhaps cognizant that this insistence settles the issue too quickly in the dualist's favor and cognizant, too, that the idealist has a point, Mendelssohn also adds the qualification that there can be no more to the prototype's existence than that agreement about the truth.[15]

Still, even with this last qualification, the charge that parties are grumbling over words appears to be little more than a sleight-of-hand. By no means is Mendelssohn explaining

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[14] *JubA* 3.2:87; "Let these mirrors come to dispute among themselves about whether the item that that they represent is actually to be found in the middle of the room or whether the artist who produced that depiction has also laid it in each one of them in keeping with the place where each stands. How will they settle this disagreement among themselves? Considered as mirrors, they can have and respectively attain nothing but the depictions of the item. Will they not be in a position, if they can think rationally, to draw precisely the same inference from their depiction as from the presupposed actual existence of the item? Must it not rather be for them utterly the same thing, the item, of which they can know and experience nothing further, whether it be on hand in the room or not?"

[15] *JubA* 3.2:88; "If these mirrors recognize that truth and perspective are found in their depiction and that the truth repeats itself and remains precisely the same in all, while the perspective, by contrast, is peculiar to each of them, will not further disagreement on their part be a mere grumbling over words? If they concede the agreement in the depictions, what justifies their denial of the prototype, as the ground of their agreement? Or, rather, what more can they still demand from this agreement of the truth, if they should recognize the existence of the prototype?"

their dispute away as a purely verbal dispute. He employs the charge, not to dismiss the disagreement but to set the mistaken philosophical position straight, to correct or rectify the interpretation. The fact that the dispute thus is not, as Mendelssohn elaborates it, a purely verbal dispute seems to fly in the face of the fear he expresses earlier in *Morgenstunden* (though he cites it as a quotation), namely, "the fear that, in the end, the famous quarrel among materialists, idealists, and dualists would amount to a merely verbal dispute, more of a matter for the linguist than the speculative philosopher" (61).

2. The arbitrariness of Spinoza's language: an impurely verbal dispute

Mendelssohn prefaces his treatment of Spinoza's philosophy with the remark, already cited, that he (Mendelssohn) is inclined "to explain all disputes of philosophical schools as mere verbal disputes or at least to derive them from verbal disputes" and with his insistence on the necessity of getting one's "fundamental terms" right (104). In keeping with these prefatory remarks, Mendelssohn proceeds to trace his initial disagreement with Spinoza to a verbal dispute over the meaning of the fundamental term 'substance'. Mendelssohn sketches Spinoza's basic idea that there can be only one substance ("since a substance must obtain on its own, subsisting for itself"), infinite in extension and thought, and he acknowledges the admirable, indeed, unassailable rigor of his derivation of the system from that fundamental idea (Grundidee). Given the flawlessness of the derivation, Mendelssohn investigates its basic ideas, framing the investigation precisely as an inquiry into whether his dispute with the Spinozist is purely verbal or not.[16]

Knowingly iterating a reproach made by several critics of Spinoza, Mendelssohn charges that Spinoza defines his fundamental term 'substance' quite arbitrarily. This arbitrariness steers him from the ordinary way of speaking of substances, not as utterly self-sufficient, but as subsisting for themselves and persisting through modifications.

> If Spinoza does not want to call these 'substances' on account of their dependence, then he is disputing only in words. If the difference in the actual thing is conceded, then one has to think up another name for the constancy of dependent beings so as not to let a difference (that resides in the actual thing) go unnoticed; and the quarrel is decided (107).

[16] *JubA* 3.2:106; "Thus, we have merely to investigate these fundamental ideas and see just how far they differ from our ordinary concepts, either in terms of the actual thing or merely in words."

Despite the arbitrariness of Spinoza's use of 'substance', i.e., its departure from ordinary usage (and, we might add, traditional scholastic usage), Mendelssohn strikes a seemingly reconciliatory tone in the last sentence of this passage. He is ready to let Spinoza reserve the term for the unique, infinite being, so long as Spinoza countenances the distinctiveness of what has been traditionally termed 'substance' and accepts a corresponding moniker for them.

In this discussion Mendelssohn is appealing to two different senses of a verbal dispute. On the one hand, by defining 'substance' as he does, Spinoza departs from ordinary usage. So, on a superficial level, one might merely object to this departure, taking ordinary usage as one's baseline and arguing that the term simply does not mean what Spinoza takes it to mean. On the other hand, without denying the force of this objection, Mendelssohn focuses on whether Spinoza in fact countenances what is normally understood by 'finite substance'. If Spinoza does acknowledge their reality as such (even if not in so many words), then the dispute between him and those who affirm a plurality of substances is, indeed, purely verbal.

But Spinoza in fact refuses to acknowledge the sort of independence that calls for affirming the existence of finite substances and, hence, the dispute is not purely verbal. Indeed, the very next criticism that Mendelssohn lodges against Spinoza's philosophy makes evident just how substantive the dispute is. Even if Spinoza's account of extension explains the source of matter in bodies, it fails – Mendelssohn contends – to explain their source of form and motion. Since that source cannot come from the whole (since the whole, on Spinoza's account, is motionless and unformed), the source must be found in the parts and "the parts must have their own existence apart from it [the whole]" (108). "If the parts did not, as Spinoza professes, have their separate existence and were merely alterations or manners of representation of the collective whole [Gesammten], then they could not have any other modification than those which flow from the properties of the whole. Whence the form in the parts if the whole provides no source for it?"[17]

When Mendelssohn turns to Spinoza's basic ideas of necessity and freedom, Mendelssohn again faults Spinoza for exploiting ambiguities of these terms. By calling

[17] *JubA* 3.2:108. See, however, the following words that Mendelssohn places in the mouth of the defender of a refined pantheism: "Spinoza also has all motion springing from something similar that he calls 'will,' although I do not know how to make his assertion on this point fully clear to myself" (*JubA* 3.2:114).

'freedom' only perfectly negative freedom (das System des vollkommenen Gleichgewichts) and then subsuming every motivation, ensuing choice, and result "under the wooly term 'necessity'" (unter dem vielschichtigen Worte Nothwendigkeit), Spinoza concludes that choice is necessary. But, Mendelssohn charges, Spinoza must concede that 'freedom' also signifies acting upon knowledge of good and evil or he is disputing merely in words.[18] As in the criticism of Spinoza's use of 'substance', Mendelssohn begins by contending that Spinoza uses a term ('freedom') arbitrarily, i.e., in an arbitrarily narrow sense, and then adds that, if he recognizes what is designated by the term in question, the dispute is purely verbal. Once again, however, the dispute is not merely terminological since Spinoza does not countenance a positive sense of freedom and all that it entails (according to Mendelssohn, "the distinction between good and evil, the desirable and undesirable, pleasure and displeasure, and so forth"). Where Mendelssohn sees an ambiguity in the word 'necessity' that can be removed by distinguishing physical and ethical necessity, Spinoza sees only a single, supposedly unadulterated necessity. The upshot of these differences is patent: Mendelssohn's dispute with Spinoza does not turn on words alone. Their dispute is what I dub – rather inelegantly, to be sure – "an impurely verbal dispute."

3. Theism and purified pantheism: a purely verbal dispute?

But what of the refined Spinozism, the purified pantheism that Mendelssohn takes up in Chapters 14 and 15? The purified pantheist concedes much of Mendelssohn's argument, most notably, the need to admit "the difference between truth and goodness, knowledge and approval" and to ascribe infinite force to the sole necessary being (115). Nevertheless, the purified pantheist sees no reason to admit any objective existence outside the divine intellect.[19] After all, the pantheist asks, insofar as God actually and truthfully thinks things, how can there be anything in the things that is missing from, i.e., independent of the thought of them? In other words, when it comes to the divine mind, "what is thought cannot be distinguished from the actual, true thought and, hence, is fully

[18] *JubA* 3.2:109; "Hingegen muß Spinoza aller seiner Gründe ungeachtet dasjenige, was die Deterministen Freyheit nennen, gar wohl zugeben, oder er streitet mit ihnen blos in Worten."
[19] *JubA* 3.2:116; "Who tells us that we ourselves and the world surrounding us have something more than ideal existence in the divine intellect, something more than God's mere thoughts and modifications of his primal force?"

one with it" and "the thought is an accident of the thinking being and cannot be separated from its substance" (116-17).

Mendelssohn's spokesperson for purified pantheism in this context maintains that, in order to refute this refined Spinozism, "it must be shown that the prototypes [Urbilder] outside God do not have the same predicates as the representations and images [Bilder] of them that are to be found in God" (117). But for theists and pantheists alike, the spokesman contends, "God's thoughts must be true and adequate to the highest degree and, hence, must have all the predicates that pertain to their objects [Vorwürfen]" (117). However, contrary to the purified pantheist's contention, Mendelssohn's theist does not accept an unrestricted identity of these two sorts of predicates. There are predicates pertaining to the protoype as prototype, i.e., the finite thing as such, distinguishing it from an image (representation, depiction) of it and thereby preserving the nature of its relationship to the image. According to Mendelssohn, 'conscious of one's limited consciousness' is one such predicate that is not the same for the protoype and an image or representation of it. Some finite substances are conscious of their limited consciousness, but the fact that the infinite intellect represents to itself finite substances with this consciousness of their limited consciousness does not entail that the infinite intellect is conscious of a limited consciousness of itself. Nor, for that matter, does it entail that divine intellect has a limited consciousness since its infinite intellect includes everything of which the finite being is conscious – with the exception of the consciousness of its limited consciousness of itself or, more simply, the consciousness of itself as limited, the consciousness that it is limited.[20]

Mendelssohn seems to recognize that he has not completely made his case here, that some will not be satisfied with his explanation and will continue to ponder why the divine intellect's lack of this predicate (i.e., 'having consciousness of one's limitation') does not

[20] *JubA* 3.2:118; "Das Bewußtseyn meiner selbst verbunden mit völliger Unkunde alles dessen, so nicht in meinen Denkungskreis fällt, ist der sprechendeste Beweis von meiner außergöttlichen Substantialität, von meinem urbildlichen Daseyn." This subject of this sentence can be read in at least two different ways, depending upon the sense of 'verbunden.' In my text, taking 'verbunden' as 'bound up with,' I read it as 'consciousness of one's limited consciousness.' But the subject could also be read as 'consciousness of oneself combined with lack of information' or simply as 'limited consciousness of oneself.' In that case, the argument would run as follows: the fact that the infinite intellect represents to itself finite substances with limited consciousness of themselves does not entail that the infinite intellect has a limited consciousness of itself. Nor, for that matter, does it entail that divine intellect has a limited consciousness at all since its infinite intellect includes everything of which the finite being is conscious.

amount to a limitation. An indication that he recognizes as much can be gathered from the fact that he has Lessing press the issue, as though the points just made are not trenchant, by asking: "Must something still be added to God's thought, if it is supposed to be actual outside God?" (118). After Mendelssohn recites the mantra that God's approval of the next best thing to Himself is efficacious, leading Him to produce an objective world, separate from his substance, Lessing remains unsatisfied and asks "But what does God add to His thoughts, to His representations of the best that they also become actual outside Him?" (119). Mendelssohn replies that he has already answered this question as much as he can. To the divine representation of finite minds (leaving aside other sorts of entities), what must be added is their consciousness of themselves, with the lack of information of everything that falls outside their limitations.[21]

Mendelssohn follows with one more argument, aimed specifically at establishing that finite minds (again, not just any entities) have their own substantial existence outside God. The argument, one that supposedly will easily convince the pantheist, is based upon the principle that no entity can actually divest itself or render external to itself (entäußern) any degree of its reality. God no more divests Himself of any degree of His divine reality in thinking of a limited being, Mendelssohn declares, than we divest ourselves of sensory impressions in representing to ourselves what it is like to be blind. The thought of a limited being in God does not attain in Him "any consciousness of its own, torn free, as it were" of the divine reality (120).

However, it is hard to see how this argument is supposed to convince the pantheist, let alone "easily." Indeed, if one does not already presuppose the independent existence of finite minds (the point at issue), the argument can be read as serving the pantheist's cause. Thus, the pantheist might well respond: "You're making my point for me; given the existence of a God infinite in mind and power, in the final analysis there can be no such thing as a finite substance with a consciousness of its own, 'torn free, as it were' of God."

Given the argument's placement in the text, it is tempting to think that Mendelssohn is fully aware of its tenuousness, perhaps uncomfortable with the fact that it is the best

[21] *JubA* 3.2:119; "Zur Vorstellung eines endlichen Geistes in Gott, muß das eigene Bewußtseyn, mit Unkunde alles dessen, so außerhalb seiner Schranken fällt, hinzukommen; so ist der Geist eine *außergöttliche Substanz*."

argument that he can muster. In any case, he abruptly turns from this last argument to ponder just how far apart from the purified pantheist he is. For the purified pantheist, (a) the visible world is actually on hand as a thought of God, representing the best combination of multiple finite beings, (b) the human being with its "separate, limited consciousness of itself, fully devoid of any information of what lies outside its limitedness," is among these thoughts, and (c) every good that we receive is an effect of the divine will that allows a part of that will to depend upon us. After reconstructing the key elements of purified pantheism in this way, a way that in Mendelssohn's mind secures religion and morality, he concludes: "Assume all this and I ask: in what now does the system defended by my friend differ from ours?" (123).

The difference turns on a subtlety, consideration of which is fruitless, since it has no practical consequences and rests on a difference in the image or metaphor employed to describe God's thoughts of the best connection of contingent things. To make this idea comprehensible, we are forced to have recourse to metaphors. Thus, the difference between the pantheist and the theist amounts to the difference between conceiving God's thoughts as a source that remains a source or as a source that has gushed forth into a stream. The problem, Mendelssohn immediately adds, is keeping a rein on the metaphors since they so easily lend themselves to misunderstandings that extend them beyond their boundaries and lead to "atheism or superstition." Instructively, Mendelssohn does not cite purified pantheism with this metaphorical excess. Yet, in a somewhat surprising turnabout, given his arguments for the system of theism and against the system of purified pantheism in the chapter, he concludes by faulting both systems with misinterpretation of the same metaphor.

> The systems still seem to be quite far from one another in their corollaries and yet at bottom it is misinterpretation of the same metaphor that one time transports God all too figuratively into the world, another time transports the world all too figuratively into God. Upright love of the truth immediately leads then back to the point from which one set out, and shows that one has merely become entangled in words. Renounce words, and friend of wisdom, embrace your brother (124)!

Both systems can be traced to respective mis- or, better, over-interpretations of the same metaphor, leading to "overly-subtle speculation" founded on a metaphor and thus, for all practical purposes, a purely verbal dispute.[22]

4. Mendelssohn's rhetorical strategy in "Morgenstunden"

If we track Mendelssohn's appeals to verbal ambiguities and verbal disputes through the course of the *Morgenstunden*, we see that the linguistic difficulties identified by him are by no means of one stripe. For the most part, his disputes with idealists and Spinoza are less than purely verbal disputes and the bulk of his argumentation, including the attention paid to ordinary usage and the terms of the arguments, is devoted to propping up dualism and theism respectively. At the same time, the fact that these disputes are not merely over words contrasts sharply with the dispute that turns out to be purely verbal by his own account, namely, the dispute between the theist and the purified pantheist. What underlies this rhetorical strategy? Vindicating Lessing could be one reason for this strategy. To be sure, Mendelssohn takes pains to argue that Lessing, despite being the spokesperson for this refined Spinozism, by no means endorses such a view. However, if one were successful in daubing or even smearing Lessing's name with the colors of this sort of pantheism, the difference between it and a conventional theist position is all but negligible, Mendelssohn contends, and certainly no threat to religion and morality. What better way to establish the innocuous, purely verbal dispute between theists and purified pantheists than to present their dispute on the heels of the account of the theist's impurely verbal dispute with Spinoza.

Recall the conditional terms in which the dispute with Spinoza is cast. The dispute is purely verbal only if Spinoza countenances what otherwise goes by the label 'finite substance' and a positive sense of 'freedom'. Mendelssohn's readers will immediately register, as he surely knows they will, that Spinoza does nothing of the kind. So (to iterate the conclusion reached above) this dispute, while perhaps having its origin in different uses of terms, is not strictly a verbal dispute. By contrast, the dispute between the theist

[22] *JubA* 3.2:133; "I have also shown in the course of my last lecture that purified pantheism could co-exist quite well with the truths of religion and ethics, that the distinction consists merely in an overly-subtle speculation that does not have the slightest influence upon human actions and human happiness, and that the distinction instead leaves in its place everything that can become practical at all and is of any noticeable consequence in the life or even the opinions of human beings."

and the purified pantheist, as Mendelssohn portrays it, could not be more a matter of words. Despite his patent proclivities for the theist position, Mendelssohn's ultimate, common sense conclusion is that the dispute between theists and purified pantheists, between himself and a position that Lessing would defend (if not adopt[23]), is a purely verbal dispute – more precisely, an idle dispute over the interpretation of the metaphor at the root of both systems.

However, much like the Allegorical Dream, characterizing these disputes as purely verbal raises the question of the extent of Mendelssohn's commitment to dualism and theism. (Insofar as the Allegorical Dream ends with common sense and reason alike besieged by speculation's followers, perhaps Mendelssohn devised the Allegorical Dream, too, as part of an apologetic for what critics take to be Lessing's reformed Spinozism and he calls "purified pantheism.") But it would plainly be overreaching to infer that Mendelssohn is anything but committed to metaphysical dualism and theism, when it comes to the standard alternatives (i.e., idealism and Spinozism, respectively). To be sure, before introducing his allegorical dream, Mendelssohn reminds his readers that metaphysicians do not shy from denying "what sound human understanding would never dream of doubting" (79) and, after mentioning what is denied by idealists, egoists, Spinozists, and sceptics, he expresses his doubt that "any of these absurdities has ever been seriously maintained." This rebuke accords with his suspicion, cited earlier, that "all philosophical debates [are] merely verbal disputes or at least . . . derive . . . from verbal disputes." But the rebuke is directed only at certain kinds of metaphysical speculation and this is harldly surprising since Mendelssohn clearly fancies himself to be a metaphysician (as evidenced by, for example, the opening paragraphs of the Preliminary Knowledge and of Chapter 6). Moreover, the only strictly verbal dispute, i.e., that between the theist and purified pantheist, is a dispute, not between common sense and speculation, but between two systems of metaphysics, albeit arising from different interpretations of a common, root metaphor.[24]

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[23] *JubA* 3.2:132-33; "I do not consider it necessary to beg his [Lessing's] spirit for forgiveness for engaging it in defense of pantheism. As I knew him, without being attracted to an error, he could zealously prop even it up if the reasons with which one wanted to contest it were not sufficient."

[24] Or, as Mendelssohn puts it in another context, "a difficulty merely with the words seems to have lurked, hidden and deviously, in the background, a difficulty that we perhaps for now lack (to avail myself of a similar, suspicious expression) the *facility* to discern" (*JubA* 3.2:144).

Concluding Ruminations

In many cases, we can fairly easily distinguish between factual and verbal disputes. A dispute over Mendelssohn's birthplace is typically a factual dispute, since the meanings of 'Mendelssohn' and 'birthplace' are relatively unambiguous. But it is easy to imagine a verbal dispute over where he grew up, e.g., in Dessau or in Dessau and Berlin, that turns on the different meanings assigned to "grew up."[25] The dispute is purely verbal since there is no disagreement about the facts of the matter, but only about the words used to describe the facts. This sort of dispute is plainly resolvable – albeit it is often easier said than done – by agreeing to use the expression in question for one specific meaning rather than other (i.e., in the present example, reserving the phrase 'grew up' for a person's pre-teens or for a period that includes both childhood and teens). While matters are more complicated in theoretical disputes, the purpose of a commonly accepted scientific language is precisely to minimize verbal disputes and facilitate research into the facts of the matter (physicists' dispute, for example, over whether light should be understood as a wave or a particle is not a verbal dispute[26]). Thus, in everyday life we recognize a rough-and-ready distinction between factual and verbal disputes, and considerable work in science is devoted to minimizing the latter and hopefully ensuring that disputes are genuinely about matters of fact.

Matters are not so straightforward in the case of philosophical disputes, however. Debates between idealists and realists, for example, typically cannot be resolved by pointing to some fact of the matter and they cannot because there is no ready way,

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[25] Mendelssohn left Dessau for Berlin when he was fourteen years old. In the eighteenth century the claim that a dispute in philosophy is purely verbal hearkens back to Leibniz, Bayle, and Hume, among others; see, e.g., "Appendix IV. Of some verbal disputes" in David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 312-23. For other classical statements of the issue of verbal disputes in philosophy, see William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian, 1970), esp. pages 41ff.; Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie,* 4 (1950): 20-40, and John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1973), 36-39. In recent years the issue of what constitutes a verbal dispute has regained prominence; see David Chalmers, "Verbal Disputes and Philosophical Progress," *Philpapers: Online Research in Philosophy* (2003); Eli Hirsch, "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10/1 (2005): 69-73, and David Manley, "Verbal Disputes," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8-15.

[26] See, for example, P. N. Kaloyerou, "The GRA Beam-Splitter Experiments and Particle-Wave Duality of Light," *Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and Theoretical* 39/37 (2006): 11541-66.

independent of the philosophical theory and language, to identify what the fact of the matter is. Since the philosophical issue in question precisely concerns the constitution or conception of facts, words, meanings, and the principles governing the relations among them, some mainline disputes about words are indissociable from comparable disputes about facts and vice versa.[27]

For some contemporary thinkers, talk of a purely verbal dispute comes naturally when the issue is metaphysical or epistemological, since these positions, when set off against our workaday uses of language, seem to be little more than dalliances of language on a holiday. From this vantage point, firmly rooted in one's baseline, ordinary use of language and/or the settled language of a science, the charge that a philosophical dispute is purely verbal is little more than a sceptical gesture, a way of expressing doubts that there is any genuine problem at stake, i.e., any issue that we can meaningfully discuss. (A dispute, for example, over whether falling tree limbs make sounds in the absence of anyone or anything to hear them may amount to a debate over the meaning of 'sounds'; disputes over whether an audience is a whole or an aggregate turns on the meanings of the terms designating the alternatives; disputes over the existence or non-existence of non-conceptual contents notoriously feed off different senses of 'content'.) A relentless strategy of resolving metaphysical or epistemological disputes into purely verbal disputes amounts to a way of arguing that both sides of a metaphysical and epistemological debate are victims of linguistic confusions that give way to idle speculations (like an "engine idling"), with no more grounding in the ordinary language of common sense or the commonly accepted, working language of a particular science than is enjoyed by Nordic myths, *Paradise Lost*, or *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. While Mendelssohn's philosophical proclivities ultimately lie elsewhere, he certainly gestures in this same direction when, as we have seen, he muses, dismissively, that all philosophical disputes amount to verbal disputes.

But talk of a verbal dispute can also be used to indicate a genuinely mistaken use of terms, that is to say, a mistaken use of words about a legitimate subject matter, grounded in ordinary usage and common sense. If, for competent, average users of a language, someone makes a claim in a way that violates their normal use of the terms in that

[27] See note 2 above.

language and the contradictory claim does not, then the latter claim enjoys some prima facie evidence. Here the challenge that the parties to the argument are arguing over words cannot be resolved by both parties agreeing to disagree or by deciding on a uniform usage. The decision has already been made and the point of saying that their dispute is over words is precisely to show which party is mistaken. Here, the charge that someone is disputing over words or, equivalently, that their dispute rests upon a misunderstanding of words serves as an argument for the correctness of a certain usage. In this case, if the dispute is over a philosophical claim, the charge that the dispute is purely verbal is tantamount, not to a dismissal of any such claim, but to an argument for the claim that, in the last analysis, can be endorsed by the competent, commonsensical users of ordinary language. Mendelssohn's criticisms of idealism and Spinoza utilize the charge of a verbal dispute to show that the dispute, while not purely verbal, is rooted in the idealist's or the Spinozist's confusion over the ordinary or proper use of the terms they employ. Once this usage is rectified, Mendelssohn seems to think, the proper metaphysical position – reason's reconciliation of common sense and speculation? – becomes evident.

The preceding paragraphs lay out two ways of leveling the charge that a philosophical disagreement is a verbal dispute, one that is dismissive of the dispute altogether, the other that denies the legitimacy of one side of the dispute and does so on the basis of the supposedly warped language used to articulate that side of the dispute. For convenience's sake, I refer to these charges as "dismissive" and "rectifying" respectively. Whereas the dismissive charge that a dispute is verbal is intended to challenge the dispute's legitimacy altogether, the rectifying charge is intended to expose how one party mis-describes a legitimate issue, articulating it in a philosophically misleading way.

Yet if a philosophical dispute is verbal under either charge, it is not purely verbal in the sense that there is no disagreement over the facts of the matter. To contend that a philosophical dispute is verbal either because it has no foundation in the idiom of common sense or because one side in the last analysis takes flight of that idiom is to grant that the debate is a matter of principle, a dispute not so much about facts as about the principles and the language of the principles governing what are the facts.

In this respect philosophical disputes are more akin to legal or political disputes or disputes over tradition, history, or ideology, where questions of principle mingle with

questions of fact. Here, too, determining to what extent the dispute might be purely verbal is arguably more complicated than in the case of science or quotidian life, given the strong possibility that not only the facts but also the principles are unclear or debatable and the language ambiguous. Not surprisingly, in such contexts, casting a dispute as verbal can be a rhetorical device, a negotiator's means of brokering or reconciling opposing parties. The suggestion that a debate is in at least some respects verbal becomes an invitation to the parties to the dispute to reconsider whether their differences amount to differing uses or interpretations of commonly shared terms (including root metaphors), uses or interpretations that leave the underlying principles intact. When Mendelssohn identifies the dispute between the theist and the purified pantheist as a purely verbal dispute, he is neither dismissing the issue in dispute altogether nor attempting to rectify the choice and use of terms by one party to the dispute. Instead he is trying to show that the dispute is less a matter of principle than it is a matter of interpretation, interpretation that entails no difference in principle, i.e., in the truths of religion and morality.[28]

[28] In Suarez' terms, the difference between theist and purified pantheist is a *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis* and, thus, the source of purely verbal dispute.

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