NO RELIGION
WITHOUT
IDOLATRY

Mendelssohn’s Jewish Enlightenment

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Introduction

True Judaism is no longer found anywhere. Fanaticism and superstition exist among us to a most abhorrent degree. Were my nation not so stupid, it would stone me on account of my Jerusalem, but people do not understand me.

—Mendelssohn

This book has a direct and an indirect topic. Its immediate subject matter is Moses Mendelssohn’s conception of enlightened Judaism; its indirect topic is the very possibility of enlightened religion. Drawing conclusions concerning the possibility of enlightened religion in general on the basis of the analysis of one historical episode may seem far too ambitious, even misguided on principle. “All religion is positive and particular. Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular,” George Santayana famously said. However, having a religion is one thing, analyzing it another. It may be the case that a person cannot simultaneously confess more than one religion, although I will also qualify this statement in a moment. But at least the related monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and the different confessions within these have enough in common to be named “religions” and also to justify some generalization. Moreover,
the work of Mendelssohn itself is a comparative study of religions. His presentation of Judaism is primarily based on a comparison of religions according to one criterion: their closeness or distance to idolatry—as he conceives it—on the one hand and to “natural religion” on the other. His touchstone is the nature of religious symbols. These can be understood as “symbols” that signify by convention only and that merely help to recall the religious content intended. According to this understanding, the ascription of holiness to the body of the symbol itself is idolatry: holiness is necessarily transcendent. But a symbol may also be considered sacred in itself in some sense, such as are sacraments, icons, and holy sites. In this case, a religious service may in some sense be a genuine religious experience, an encounter or communication with the divine that is not only transcendent but also present in some way and degree in the symbols. Religions can be allocated in the span between these opposite ends. Mendelssohn’s discussion of Judaism thus also draws the coordinates by which not only Judaism, but all comparable religions can be located.

Mendelssohn’s perspective is semiotic, and he concentrates on religious practice. Concentrating on religious practice is an alternative to the focus on theology on the one hand and on belief on the other. Mendelssohn excludes from his discussion all codified confessions of faith, as well as the beliefs of the practitioners. These are all attempts to fix in precise formulas something that by its very nature is allusive and changing in time. Mendelssohn rather concentrates on religious practice that comprises a form of life, the fulfillment of precepts, rites, and objects (sites, symbols, ritual articles). Practices are often communal, and they involve no intellectual subtleties. Practice, therefore, builds and preserves a community, and avoids useless intricacies. It also avoids an inquisitorial invasion of people’s private, unclear, and changing thoughts. For Mendelssohn, it is also the preferred way to study religion.

Nevertheless, religious practices are not severed from faith. They are meaningful acts testifying to the beliefs of the practitioner. Therefore they imply and exclude some notions of God. This is displayed in the discussions over religious practices since the Hebrew prophets’ criticism of animal sacrifice. To say that some practice is or is not adequate implies a rudimentary theology. Participating in such practice
therefore expresses some beliefs, but even more it shapes them. “The hearts follow the deeds,” is an old observation. Religious communal practice thus provides a privileged access to religion, as Mendelssohn understands it. Concentrating on religious practice from this perspective means that Mendelssohn studies religion as a symbolic system. Semiotics, so I argue, is also the foundation of Mendelssohn’s general philosophy. Mendelssohn’s philosophy of religion is an integral part of his general philosophy, and both are rooted in semiotics.

The intimate dependence of religion and idolatry on the interpretation of religious symbols is manifest in an inscription on the pedestal of the Kornmarkt-Madonna in Heidelberg (1718). This statue shows the Holy Virgin as queen of heaven with baby Jesus on her arm. The inscription (in Latin and German) reads:

Non statuam aut saxum sed quam designat honora.
(Honor neither statue nor stone but what they designate.)
Noch Stein noch Bild noch Säulen hier das Kind und Mutter lieben wir.
(We love here not stone nor image nor columns but child and mother.)

Whereas the inscription does not testify to a poetic talent in either language, it may claim priority on the paradox that became famous through René Magritte’s “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (written under a picture of a pipe). But whereas Magritte’s picture strikes us as paradoxical, the inscription of the statue does not. The difference consists in this: No matter how blurred the distinction between picture and depicted may be, no pipe smoker is likely to mistake the picture for a real pipe or try to feed it with tobacco and light it. The case is different with the statue of the Madonna. The real Madonna is currently not existent in space and time. The real duality of the pipe and its picture, and the duality of actions involving them, does not exist here: only the picture is present; its referent is not, and there is no observable difference between the overt behavior of a practitioner who intends the absent, real Madonna—although he physically turns to the statue—and an idolater who intends the statue...
itself. Moreover, we believe that a practitioner does not intend the statue only because we understand symbols and symbolic action. In contradiction to ordinary activities, worship is meant to be essentially different from what it appears to be. It appears to be an adoration of a statue; in fact it is the adoration of an absent divine person that is different from the statue in its very nature, although it resembles it in its assumed appearance. According to Catholic doctrine, the honor paid to the statue or other representations is referred to the divine person depicted, the prototype. This is also what the inscription expresses. The problem is that whether the practitioner intends the sculpture itself or the divine person, whether he “honors” the former but “adores” the latter (as he should) or adores the sculpture itself (as he should not), does not show in his or her overt behavior. It is not even clear that the practitioner understands the subtle theological distinctions between giving honor, worshiping, and adoring. The ambiguity inherent in religious symbols and the lack of an observable difference between the commanded and forbidden worship is the reason for the inscription on the pedestal: it reminds practitioners and observers that the marks of reverence visibly directed towards the sign should refer in intention to the real object of reverence—the thing signified. A similar move to adding the inscription to the statue was undertaken by Hermann Cohen in his discussion of animal sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem: The Israelite who watches the ritual, so Cohen comments, looks up above priest and altar to God. One wonders how Cohen knows that the Israelite is looking up to God when his gaze is fixed on the concrete demonstration of the ritual, which, so it seems, offers God food and scent that are known to please him and dispose him graceful (Genesis 8:21). Cohen and the German inscription on the pedestal of the statue in Heidelberg use the indicative mood in the sense of an imperative.

And yet there is an important difference between the threat of idolatry in Christianity (especially Catholicism) and in Judaism. The Madonna and Jesus were once both (also) visible human beings, hence of human likeness that may be depicted. However, God himself cannot be perceived by the senses in principle. A picture of God is hence a theological misconception, and according to Catholic doctrine, God himself (“God-Father”) should not be represented in statues that are venerated.
in religious service. This very difference between the permissible and even recommended use of pictures of the Madonna and Jesus (“Pictures are the books of the ignorant”) and the forbidden use of a picture of God is mutatis mutandis the dividing line between the Christian and the Jewish notion of idolatry. Judaism rejects the idea that God may become also human or a human also divine. In Judaism only the unique invisible God is worshiped and adored, and therefore all pictures are forbidden. And yet Judaism too knows some of the problems mentioned. Ritual articles, especially Torah scrolls and articles containing passages of the holy text (phylacteries, mezuzot), should be treated with special reverence; some are even considered sacred and venerated. Here too distinctions between respect, veneration, worship, and adoration, as well as between the physical script, the text in some particular language, and its meaning, are necessary.

This ambiguity concerning the addressee and the nature of worship cannot easily be dissolved. Moreover, religious ceremonies (consecration) confer a special status on religious symbols and sites, and irreverence towards them is a religious offense (blasphemy). It seems that the ambiguity of the symbol is especially due to the similarity to the divine personae represented, and yet the idea to substitute conventional symbols for iconic representations immediately strikes us as inadequate, and it often forms part of a critique of (traditional) religion. Consider Christian Wolff’s (1679–1754) elaboration of the meaning of the crucifix and a Jewish medieval critique of the phylacteries. First Christian Wolff:

[I]t is understood that a perspicuous sign should be introduced, so that we may remember our general purpose the whole day.

Since the meaning of artificial signs (as are those of which we speak here) is arbitrary (see Ontologia, §958); everybody may introduce for himself signs ad libitum. The ancient Christians used the sign of the cross, to remind themselves permanently that Christ was crucified (according to the admonition in 2 Timothy 2:8) and that they should conduct a life worthy of a Christian, and therefore, in preparing an action, one should observe what befits a Christian. Hence, those who condemn the sign of the cross as a superstitious rite, err greatly. Similarly, the image of the crucified Christ that is continually exposed to your look in
a room can be given the meaning of the general purpose. The same meaning can be given to words written in golden letters: “What are you doing?” And why not also to the form of a snuffbox or some other object, which is frequently used during the day, especially if you wanted to conceal the meaning?

Now the medieval Jewish source:

When asked why [they don’t put on phylacterys] they respond, “Tefillin (Phylacteries) are only intended to be ‘a reminder between your eyes’” (Exodus 13:9). Since they are intended as a reminder, it is better to mention the Creator with our mouths several times a day. That is a better and more fitting reminder!

Now, these particular symbols were evidently suggested in order to exclude the possibility that they be ascribed inner religious value. But a snuffbox is so mundane and strange to any religious practice that the suggestion to use it as a religious symbol sounds blasphemous. Language, on the other hand, is the best-known system of purely conventional signs. “What’s in a name? / That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” However, the fact that Christianity did not forsake symbols or Judaism ritual articles or Islam holy sites speaks for itself. Religion evidently needs symbols that are not merely conventional but partake in some way and to some extent in the divine nature they purport to represent.

The very nature of religious practice implies explicitly or tacitly some presence of the divine. It makes little sense to address a God in prayers who does not listen to them in principle, or to perform ceremonies of which he takes no notice. As an act of communication with the divine (and a fortiori as an action that influences the divine), a religious practice is at the same time also a religious experience: it is an encounter with the divine. In the human world this encounter takes place in the symbol that unites the corporeal nature of a worldly object and its non-material meaning and referent. I believe that the following suggestion of Gerardus van der Leeuw captures the essentials, although it is formulated in very emphatic language:
In the cult man speaks and acts, but also God. This can only happen when divine and human action assumes form, when it becomes visible, audible, tactile. And this is possible only by means of a tertium quid which is of this world, but sanctified and removed from this world. We name this tertium quid: symbol. Not in the attenuated, modern sense of the word, but in the genuine, ancient sense: two realities coincide in the symbol, God and Man encounter each other.

Religious practice may be a religious experience because the Holy is present in it. In order to be “visible, audible, tactile,” the Holy must be material, present in some sense in an object or an event, and at the same time it must carry a meaning that transcends its material nature; it thus becomes a symbol.

Looking back at the suggestions above, we can see that the various religious conceptions mentioned may be characterized by their understanding of symbols: from the understanding (which is not part of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim lore) that a material object is itself the deity to the conception that nothing worldly is sacred and that religious symbols are merely conventional signs by which we express and communicate thoughts about the transcendent Godhead. However, many symbols in extant religions are on neither of these opposite ends but somewhere in between them. In fact, these religions themselves are clusters of practices and symbols in which myth and idolatry, enlightenment and abstract signification are intertwined. This is not merely a contingent state of affairs. In this book I suggest that a mixture of myth and enlightenment is inherent to religion. No religion without idolatry.

I discuss the different kinds of symbolic signification in more detail in the body of the book. Here I wish only to emphasize that the ambiguity of religious symbols does not correspond to different kinds of symbols, for example, pictures and language. The very same symbol (the material object, or the “sign-vehicle”) can be understood in different ways. Following Peirce, we can distinguish three major kinds of signification: the “symbolic,” in which the sign is purely conventional (e.g., the Hindu-Arabic numerals or punctuation marks); the “iconic,” in which the signifier resembles the signified (i.e., an architectural model, a statue of the Madonna); and an “indexical,” in which the sign is directly
connected to the signified (e.g., “natural signs”: smoke signifies fire; the symptom an illness, a part a whole, the relicts the deceased saint). Most signs will feature more than one kind of signification. A photograph, for example, is certainly “iconic,” but it is also “indexical” because it is produced by a process in which the object photographed is involved as a causal agent. If, moreover, we consider the conventions leaving their imprints on a photograph and on its observation, then we may say that they also involve a conventional signification. The equivocal nature of the sign implies that it can be interpreted according to these different modes by the same person at different times, or by different persons both at the same and at different times. Because the same object or action can signify in more than one way, the very same observable religious practice can be understood differently by different practitioners or observers. Moreover, the same person can understand his own practice in different ways at different times. A practitioner may not even be aware of the distinctions between different modes of signification of the sign he is using and, if asked, would smoothly move from one mode to the other. When we point to the sign-vehicle, that is, the material body or action—say, a cross—and demonstrate its proper use in a ceremony, we do not resolve the ambiguity.

We should therefore complement Santayana’s statement that it is impossible to have a religion that is no religion in particular with the statement that a person can believe in more than one particular religion within a very short time span. Certainly, as a rule, a believer will not simultaneously be Christian and Jewish or Moslem but stick to the traditions of one religion only, but it is not certain that all practitioners of the “same” religion understand their practice in the same way, nor that a practitioner will not believe at some point something that he or she will deny at another time. It is not even clear that at the same time a person will consistently interpret a religious symbol in one definite way and not mix different conceptions. It is the fact that the very same sign-vehicle (the sensuous object or practice serving as a sign) can signify in different ways that makes it possible to practice without making up one’s mind on the alternatives involved, and hence also not choosing between them. What is here said of one person holds a fortiori for a community.
These suggestions concerning the role of “symbol” in religion are here offered in my name (although they rely strongly on predecessors). Nevertheless, I believe that they largely coincide with Mendelssohn’s views. In a nutshell, Mendelssohn’s thesis is this: Jewish religious law is a “ceremonial law,” and ceremonies are a “living script,” meaningful, transient acts that disappear after their performance. Permanent signs are conducive to idolatry. This is so because people might fail to properly distinguish between the sensuous sign, a physical object (the sign-vehicle), and the signified itself; that is, they attribute properties of the signified to the sign. This may lead to the veneration of the signs and thus to idolatry. The full argument for this seemingly strange thesis is found in Mendelssohn’s works in general philosophy, in a survey of his views on language and signs in general in the second part of his *Jerusalem*, and in his biblical commentary where his semiotics is applied to explain idolatry. I gave above an example for the semiotic characterization of idolatry: If a particular statue is believed to be more than a material object that signifies by similarity or convention, if it is believed to have intrinsic metaphysical properties or to be itself holy, or if one acts in a form suggesting that it is, then the sign (the “signifier”) is attributed properties of the signified; and this is idolatry in Mendelssohn’s terms.

There are of course also Jewish examples, and Jews were in fact accused of idolatry because of the respect or veneration or adoration they show to the Torah scroll. By the criterion mentioned, God’s message is holy but not the spoken or written or thought words themselves. Here again we should distinguish between the sign-vehicle, the sounds, the scroll or the book, and the sentences in some particular language on the one hand and the meaning, the content represented on the other. However, the difference does not show in the representation used: the same object may be seen by one person as nothing but a material sign-vehicle of the content and considered holy by his co-practitioner. It is not clear that an observer of their overt behavior and words could tell the difference between their views. Both show the same respect to the Torah scroll (overt behavior); one intends the holy content, the other the scroll itself. Mendelssohn’s philosophy of Judaism and idolatry is hence rooted in semiotics. This, however, does not at all square with the received view of Mendelssohn’s philosophy. My own understanding of Mendelssohn’s
philosophy—and my esteem for it—differ so much from the received view that I want to first briefly report Mendelssohn’s reputation and discuss its reasons.

The reputation of few persons has changed so radically as Mendelssohn’s. Once the “German Socrates,” he is now considered only a shallow popularizer of philosophy. Once called “Rambaman” and compared to “Rambam,” to Maimonides himself,

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10 three generations later even the founder of modern orthodoxy, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88) slandered him as a destroyer of Judaism. Hermann Cohen, certainly a liberal, acknowledges Mendelssohn’s historical accomplishment but criticizes his “theoretical weakness,” although his own philosophy of Judaism is clearly an elaboration of Mendelssohn’s ideas.12 Less surprising is that Mendelssohn’s work was condemned by Rabbi Moses Sofer (“Chacham Sofer”) (1762–1839), perhaps the most influential leader of Jewish “ultra-orthodoxy” in the nineteenth century.13

In modern scholarship, Mendelssohn’s philosophy of Judaism is considered an inconsistent project, doomed to lead to the abolishment of Judaism. Julius Guttmann concluded his impressive concise presentation of Mendelssohn’s philosophy of Judaism with the statement that there is an insurmountable duality in Mendelssohn’s thought. It is the duality of natural religion and Judaism, of a universal system of beliefs that depends on reason alone and, therefore, common to all human beings, and a particular Jewish religion, that depends on revelation. Mendelssohn the enlightener cannot accept that eternal life and felicity will be the heritage of Jews only, excluding all other human beings irrespective of their merit. Instead, Mendelssohn maintains with other enlighteners that whoever upholds the basic principles of natural religion (belief in one God, providence, and the immortality of the soul, including reward and punishment), and lives morally, deserves felicity here and in the hereafter. But if so, what was revelation, what is Judaism good for? And yet at the end of Jerusalem, Mendelssohn does not advocate a unified religion of reason but the toleration of a plurality of particular religions, and even maintains that not unity but diversity is
the purpose of providence. But if so, what is the office of universal reason and natural religion? Sound reason and revelation work towards the same end, and therefore “what Mendelssohn gives here to revelation, he evidently must take off reason,” says Guttmann. Suggesting that Mendelssohn’s trust in reason dwindled in his late years allows Guttmann to turn the blatant contradiction between universal reason and particular revelation into a development from the former to the latter. With this move Guttmann also acknowledges Mendelssohn’s personal sincerity in spite of the inconsistent final product. More recent scholarship did not improve on this assessment. Alexander Altmann, the foremost Mendelssohn scholar in recent decades, did not think much of Mendelssohn’s Jewish philosophical project. Mendelssohn’s views were held together, so he tells us, more by “personal convictions and loyalties” than by internal consistency.

However, Mendelssohn advances one decisive argument for adhering to Judaism and the commandments in spite of universal reason and natural religion: the ceremonial law renders Judaism a safeguard against idolatry. The ceremonial law consists in transient actions. It is a “living,” not a written, script, and, moreover, it prohibits representations that lend themselves to idolatry. On the other hand, it also does not depend on a codified doctrine, which, due to the imperfections of language, is in principle inadequate to express metaphysical and religious truth. There is no contradiction between the assertion that natural religion suffices for eternal felicity and the recommendation of a special form of life that guards this very religious truth from corruption.

The core of Mendelssohn’s philosophy of religion is hence a philosophy of representation or semiotics that is applied both to religious practice (ceremonies) and to theology. The ambiguous nature of religious symbols is the reason for idolatry, and the imperfection of language is the reason for the uncertainty of metaphysics and a fortiori theology. Natural language was formed in the contexts of everyday practices with sensible objects. When applied to the metaphysical realm, which by definition is not accessible to the senses, language necessarily turns metaphorical and unreliable. Metaphysics is, therefore, irremediably uncertain and, when in conflict with sound reason, most probably in error. I already mentioned that a critique of linguistic and other representations
is also the core of his philosophy of Judaism. Moreover, I argue below that Mendelssohn’s entire philosophy, from his philosophy of mathematics to his philosophy of Judaism, revolves around semiotics. This and his reliance on common sense give coherence to his thought in all the different areas of study.

Mendelssohn’s unique contribution, which distinguishes him from other critics of idolatry, consists in that he did not criticize this or that religious practice as idolatrous, or this or that theolegoumenon, but rather examined the (semiotic) principle by which they are all formed. In its tendency and ambition, Mendelssohn’s philosophy is indeed comparable to Maimonides’ project; in fact their critiques of idolatry and superstition are analogous. However, on the basis of his semiotics, Mendelssohn developed a general theory of religion and idolatry, whereas Maimonides offered only circumstantial explanations for individual idolatries and precepts. Based on these fundaments, Mendelssohn’s philosophy of Judaism—and of religion in general—can be defended and, in fact, still deserves contemporary interest.

Most readers of Jerusalem ignored Mendelssohn’s semiotics or glossed over it. They also ignored the commentary on Exodus where this semiotics is applied to explain idolatry. Therefore also the discussion of idolatry in Jerusalem was not understood. Alexander Altmann decisively dismissed it, and later commentators followed Altmann:

Mendelssohn’s “hypothesis” that “the need for written signs was the first cause of idolatry” is the least substantiated of all theories he ever advanced. (Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study, 546)\(^\text{17}\)

With this disregard for Mendelssohn’s semiotics, and with his classification as a Wolffian rationalist, the way to understanding his philosophy in general and his philosophy of Judaism in particular was blocked. In this book I attempt to show that—interpreted from the semiotic perspective—Mendelssohn’s philosophy of common sense is consistent and his philosophy of religion highly enlightening. Mendelssohn’s general philosophy was also misunderstood. One reason for the disregard for it may lie in the sweeping acceptance of Kantianism in the years following Mendelssohn’s death. In Kant’s conception, Mendelssohn...
belonged to the “Leibniz-Wolffian” philosophy. In his own judgment, Kant not only refuted this specific philosophy but also proved that its “dogmatic metaphysics” consisted of judgments that cannot be argued to be either true or false. Later historiography followed suit and adopted Kant’s view of the “prehistory” of Kant’s “critical philosophy.” It seems to me that this picture is utterly wrong. It can first be doubted whether Kant really proved that he has definitely overcome both “dogmatic metaphysics” and “skepticism” and that “[t]he critical path alone is still open” (CpR B 884). Of course, this question cannot be discussed here. However, I argue here that Mendelssohn was not a “dogmatic metaphysician” at all but developed his own version of philosophy of sound reason or “common sense.” This shows not only in specific epistemological discussions but also and above all in the respective functions he ascribed to sound reason and metaphysics: it is sound reason that determines truth; metaphysics is called upon only to further buttress the judgments of common sense. Moreover, Kant paid little attention to semiotics in general or to philosophy of language in particular. Kant and the historiography of philosophy in the tradition of Neo-Kantianism therefore had no interest in Mendelssohn’s semiotics and, more generally, contributed to the decline of interest in it. In various respects, Kantianism hence significantly contributed to the lack of understanding for Mendelssohn’s philosophy.

It is, however, also no wonder that Mendelssohn has the reputation of a Wolffian. Mendelssohn earned the name “the German Socrates” with his Phaedon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele of 1767. He did not translate this Platonic dialogue but adapted it to the dominant philosophy of the time, Wolffian metaphysics, which he used also in other writings. Mendelssohn often referred to himself as a follower of this school. And yet readers cannot ignore his repeated advocacy of common sense or sound reason and his reservations concerning metaphysics as such. Scholars wished to attenuate this inconsistency and suggested that at first Mendelssohn was a Wolffian metaphysician but that he grew ever more skeptical regarding metaphysics and more inclined to common sense.

However, Mendelssohn’s major philosophical work, Morgenstunden (Morning Hours), mainly presents metaphysical proofs for the existence

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of God in Wolffian style and yet was written a few months before Mendelssohn’s death; he was hence a “metaphysician” to the end of his life. But in this very work we also find his most vivid partisanship for common sense. The thesis that a change in Mendelssohn’s philosophical views can explain the seeming inconsistency of adhering first to Wolffian metaphysics and then to common sense simply does not square with obvious facts.

How can Mendelssohn philosophize in the Wolffian framework and yet not be a dogmatic metaphysician? The answer is metaphilosophical and concerns the role of metaphysics in Mendelssohn’s thought, of philosophy in human life. Mendelssohn welcomed metaphysical underpinning of his commonsensical views. But he never made the acceptance of a truth dependent on metaphysical demonstration, or relied on it to guide his conduct. This is the domain of common sense. In case of conflict between metaphysics and common sense, he trusted the latter. The seeming inconsistency in Mendelssohn’s philosophical views is resolved once we realize that he indeed upholds both “sound reason” and Wolffian metaphysics but that he attributes to them different functions and clearly determines the relative priority of “sound reason” in cases of conflict between them. Mendelssohn philosophizes to buttress positions he already holds independently of metaphysics, to fend off the critique of skeptics, and to lend his thought a systematic, axiomatic structure. A good example is the existence of God. Mendelssohn maintains that the existence of God can be known by everybody, educated or not, by means of sound reason alone. Nevertheless, he invests much effort in metaphysical (Wolffian) proofs of the existence of God. Whether or not the proofs are successful, Mendelssohn’s belief in the truth of the proposition does not at all change. This, so I argue below, is the root of his disagreements and misunderstandings with Salomon Maimon, for whom theoretical reasoning alone determines truth and conduct.

Salomon Maimon, for some time supported by Mendelssohn, embodies in all respects a radical alternative to Mendelssohn: in general philosophy, in philosophy of religion and particularly of Judaism, finally also in his way of life. In philosophy, Mendelssohn follows common sense in his epistemology and philosophy of language, whereas Maimon combined in a unique way rationalism with skepticism. They are op-
posed also in their ways of life. Mendelssohn was a well-to-do, respected member of the Jewish community and also of the non-Jewish enlightened circles; Maimon, a clochard, living outside of all community, later on the premises of his non-Jewish benefactor and buried in the Jewish cemetery in disgrace. They also clearly differ in character. Mendelssohn was renowned for his kindness and amicability; Maimon, for his offensive behavior and ingratitude towards benefactors. These differences bear on the very different conclusions they draw from their similar views on religious practice: Mendelssohn grants Judaic traditions trust reserved to “familiar” informers; Maimon demands rational proofs. Mendelssohn is willing to accept religious representations as adequate to humans, although not to their referent; Maimon does not, and he rejects, moreover, all merely symbolic action. Mendelssohn brings into consideration human needs; Maimon maintains that all conventional religious practice implies at least anthropomorphism if not idolatry and superstition. To him the only legitimate religious practice is genuine religious experience, and this can be attained only in pure intellectual apprehension. Knowledge is also a religious experience. Finally, conceiving God not only as an “idea” that can never be reached but also as an idea that merely expresses a human “drive,” not an objective reality, undermines also this concept of religious experience. The controversy between common sense, religion (religious practice), enlightenment, and community on the one hand (Mendelssohn) and strict philosophy, Enlightenment, autonomy, and aloneness on the other (Maimon) cannot itself be adjudicated by philosophy, which is here not objective but partisan. This is rather the choice of a way of life en bloc. However, elaborating the alternatives is certainly the task of philosophy, and this is what I attempt to do in this book.

In conclusion, I argue that religion consists in the tension between Enlightenment and myth or idolatry. In a religious community, these interdependent poles may be represented by more and less enlightened and idolatrous members of a community. This structure of a community often corresponds to the ambiguity in its practitioners’ minds, who either combine idolatrous and enlightened views or consciously or unconsciously waver between them. It is therefore that I qualified at the beginning of this introduction my agreement with Santayana: As a rule,
people do not endorse more than one codified confession, but within the same confession they may and do hold beliefs that, upon analysis, prove incompatible, or quickly switch back and forth between such views.

In the appendix, I attempt to apply this view to one episode that is of special concern here. I juxtapose Mendelssohn and Alexander Altmann, the foremost Mendelssohn scholar and biographer in the twentieth century. I show that they are mirror images of each other: Mendelssohn enlightens religion; Altmann reinvests Enlightenment with mystery (idolatry in Mendelssohn’s view) to revive religion. Both hence combine enlightenment and idolatry but with opposed tendencies. No wonder that Altmann is very close to Mendelssohn and yet shows no understanding for his semiotic critique of idolatry or for its philosophical underpinnings.

I will now briefly outline my argument as it unfolds in the book. In the first chapter, I elaborate Mendelssohn’s general philosophy of common sense and his skepticism concerning metaphysics. I argue that Mendelssohn’s preference for practices as adequate representations of belief is supported by his linguistic skepticism. He distrusts the ability of language to adequately represent and to help generate truth transcending commonsense knowledge of the empirical world. Language, so Mendelssohn believes, arises in everyday practice of humans, and when applied to abstract concepts is necessarily metaphorical and ambiguous. Knowledge derived from long chains of arguments in natural language is not reliable without additional immediate support. Metaphysics is therefore dubious beyond the first steps in which propositions are almost direct inferences from commonsense knowledge.

In the second chapter, I portray Salomon Maimon, Mendelssohn’s younger protégé, as an alternative to Mendelssohn. Maimon is a strict rationalist. In fact, he accepts only logical inference as true: neither presuppositions nor conclusions are completely transparent to reason and therefore cannot be known to be true. Objectively true and certain are logic, pure metaphysics, and, to a lesser degree, arithmetic but not even geometry, and even less so physics. These are severe demands on truth,
and Maimon is therefore skeptical concerning most purported human knowledge: with him strict rationalism and skepticism are two sides of the same coin. Maimon also develops a philosophy of language that is the exact opposite of Mendelssohn’s in Jerusalem: he does not proceed from names referring to objects of experience and show how abstract terms develop from these by metaphors but, on the contrary, claims that the most abstract and general concepts (categories) come first and that names of individual objects are constructed from these by specification. Language is not necessarily metaphorical but can be rendered adequate to philosophical purposes by exact definitions. With these alternative epistemologies and philosophies of language, we have the foundations for their opposite philosophies of religion within (Jewish) Enlightenment.

Readers who are not interested specifically in epistemology, philosophy of language, or metaphysics, but only in philosophy of religion, can skip these chapters and begin with the third chapter, keeping in mind that, in spite of his opposite reputation, Mendelssohn is a commonsense philosopher and skeptic in metaphysics and that the basis of this skepticism and of his philosophy in general is his semiotics. He therefore conceives of religion in two ways. On the one hand, there is “natural religion,” which is common to all people and consists of simple, almost self-evident truths that do not require long chains of arguments. It consists of three short propositions: God is the creator of the universe; there is afterlife; and there is providence. Religions, however, say much more than this, and whatever is said beyond immediate or almost immediate truths is either dependent on authority (revelation) or requires arguments (natural theology). Natural religion is dependent on experience and common sense. Revealed religion is dependent on tradition. The truths revealed must also be transmitted to the next generations that did not witness revelation. The differences between these kinds of truths and their respective dependence on language are studied by Mendelssohn (chapter 3).

Belief in revelation and skepticism concerning language are contrary to each other since the lore is couched in language. Mendelssohn mitigates this opposition in emphasizing that the Bible itself uses descriptions of a “language of action.” The “language of action” is a form

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of expression that uses gestures, mimickry, ostension, and spoken language. Following influential contemporary philosophers, Mendelssohn argues that such language of action is the primordial language from which our merely spoken and written language developed. Later languages are more refined and subtle but therefore also too speculative and their reference often uncertain. In key episodes (e.g., the bond between God and Abraham) the Bible reports that God and Man used the language of action, not only spoken language. This prevents the application of linguistic skepticism to the foundations of revealed religion: What God and Man expressed on such occasions is unambiguous. And since the Bible reports and describes these actions, our understanding of this text is least liable to misunderstanding. The basis of religious life should therefore be natural religion and religious practice (analogous to the language of action) (chapter 4).

Religious ceremonies that are as it were a residual of the primordial language of action have not only the advantage of their clear meaning and reference, but also of their transitory character. Once performed, they are over and gone and leave nothing behind. This is crucial to forestall idolatry. Whether an object (e.g., a site) is ascribed holiness and gives occasion to religious service, or whether the very practice itself imubes as it were the objects involved with holiness (e.g., in the case of ritual articles), in both cases their very permanence facilitates idolatry. Similar considerations apply to language. Spoken language vanishes as soon as the pronunciation of the phrases ends. Written language endures. Mendelssohn studied in depth the foremost biblical case of idolatry, the sin of the golden calf, and developed a comprehensive theory of idolatry, as the adoration both of objects and of linguistic signs (chapter 5).

As an antidote to idolatry, Mendelssohn recommended the “ceremonial law” of Judaism, a “language of action” of sorts, which, allegedly, uses conventional signs only and, once performed, leaves no objects behind that would lend themselves to idolatry. Moreover, the ceremonial law also positively contributes to religion: It serves as the social bond of the community; it enables a unity of action without imposing monolithic thought; it prompts reflection on and instruction in religious truths (chapter 6). Mendelssohn’s presentation of Judaism is a reform
project rather than a description of extant Judaism. He passed in silence phenomena in Judaism that answer his criteria of idolatry such as veneration of religious articles and sacred sites, texts, or the Hebrew letters, or the understanding of prayer in magical terms (chapter 7).

Furthermore, drawing on some scattered observations of Mendelssohn, I argue that religious practice need not necessarily be judged as adequate or inadequate to its divine referent but may be considered as an adequate or inadequate human response to the divine. Thus, for example, beauty and goodness may be considered as responding to divine perfections, not as representing them. From this perspective, a religious symbol may be conventional and yet subject to constraints: it must share the value—but not other properties—of the perfection it purports to address. This significantly changes the criteria of adequacy. A practice judged inadequate in respect to God may pass for an adequate human response to him.

In support of Mendelssohn’s position, I also emphasize the epistemological role of accepting the religious community into which one is born as into a family: it explains trust, and this in turn strengthens belief in one’s own tradition. I also develop an interpretation of the nature of the ceremonial law and religious service that can be justified according to Mendelssohn’s criteria (chapter 8).

In the last chapter, I argue in my name that religion consists in the tension between myth and enlightenment, and that it ceases to exist when coinciding with either of these extremes. Practitioners whose views are more enlightened or more mythical consider one another as foes, but in fact each side is essential to the existence of the other, and the existence of both is essential to the subsistence of the community. No religion without myth and enlightenment; in short: no religion without idolatry. Religious symbols cannot signify in a purely conventional manner; an iconic or indexical manner of significations must also obtain.

I consider finally the entrenchment of the controversy between Mendelssohn and Maimon in a more comprehensive framework. I argue that they assume opposed positions vis-à-vis worldly life. Mendelssohn’s values “all natural impulses, capacities and powers” (which are human finite representations of the divine infinite “highest perfection”); Maimon’s values strict “reason” only. Mendelssohn is a committed member
of his community to which he irrevocably belongs as to his family; Maimon lives for himself, and community is to him a voluntary association based on a contract that can be terminated at any time—and in fact he did terminate his membership in the Jewish community. The corresponding values are loyalty and trust on the one hand, independence and loyalty to pure truth on the other. The corresponding drawbacks may be lesser consistency on the one hand and the confinement of human life to reason alone on the other. Mendelssohn’s and Maimon’s respective positions form clusters of attitudes to many facets of human life. The choice is between these clusters en bloc and depends on what forms of life are historically possible, as well as on our scale of values and on what form of life we wish to endorse.
Mendelssohn’s philosophy of religion depends on an argument on what can and cannot be known. It is therefore necessary to elaborate his basic epistemological and metaphysical views prior to a discussion of his views on religion. Mendelssohn’s reputation has been that he is the last representative of the Leibniz-Wolffian school and his Morgenstunden a summary of its metaphysics and of “dogmatic rationalism” in general. Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason marks the end of this “dogmatism.” However, Mendelssohn also advocates “commonsense” philosophy, which is incompatible with so-called dogmatic rationalism. The resolution I suggest is that the function of both these philosophical orientations is different. Common sense determines what is true, what false. Metaphysics attempts to systematize true knowledge (produced by common sense), base it on first principles, and defend it against skeptics. Metaphysics is of secondary importance compared to common sense.

As a “dogmatic rationalist,” Mendelssohn is supposed not to restrict knowledge to the realm of sense experience (as Kant did) but to maintain that we can know objects of sense experience as they are “in themselves” (and not merely as they appear to us) and that we can also know objects that are in principle not within the reach of our sense experience: metaphysics should therefore be possible as a science. So much for our preconception. In what follows, I argue that the very opposite is true. Mendelssohn believed in common sense and was a skeptic about
metaphysics. This has consequences: In cases of conflict between the judgments of common sense and metaphysics, common sense has the last word. Mendelssohn also considers the reasons for the difference in the reliability of entirely theoretical disciplines such as metaphysics and mathematics. His answer is pathbreaking also for the discussion of religion: the difference lies in the symbolic means of the various disciplines. This idea tightly connects epistemology as well as religion to semiotics.

The “Wonderful Harmony” between Deduction and Experience

In 1763 Mendelssohn won the Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences prize for his essay “On Evidence [i.e., perspicuous apodictic truth] in Metaphysical Sciences,” in which he claimed that metaphysical truths are “capable, to be sure, of the same certainty but not the same perspicuity as geometrical truths” (JubA 2, 272; Dahlstrom, 255). Moreover, twenty years later, in his Jerusalem, Mendelssohn said of himself that he was “perhaps one of those who are the farthest removed from that disease of the soul” called skepticism (Jerusalem, 66–67). The affirmation of strict knowledge in metaphysics and the negation of skepticism suffice, so it seems, to qualify Mendelssohn not only as a rationalist philosopher but also as opposed to skepticism.

The commonplace that Mendelssohn was a “rationalist” in this sense has never been doubted. It has rather been repeated innumerable times in subsequent scholarship. Nevertheless, readers could not ignore his partisanship for common sense. Some of them concluded that in later years Mendelssohn changed sides from rationalism to common-sense philosophy or that he was an empiricist in psychology and aesthetics and a rationalist in logic and metaphysics. Others maintained that since common sense itself is a faculty of reason, the difference between these persuasions is not so great. The former suggestion is at odds with Mendelssohn’s writings; the latter waters down “rationalism” to a simple use of reason. True, with Tetens, Mendelssohn maintains that it is the same faculty that is active in “common sense” and in speculation or metaphysics, but this does not remove their differences.
“Rationalism” means that all truth is, in principle, based on logical truth. In Mendelssohn’s time, this was understood to mean that all truth can be reduced to identical or partially identical propositions: “AB is AB,” “AB is A,” “AB is B.” This conception was best expressed in Leibniz’s principle “praedicatum inest subjecto”—the predicate is contained in the subject. Mendelssohn endorses this conception of truth:

Each individual proposition . . . is true if, on the basis of a consideration of the subject, it can be intelligibly explained either absolutely or under certain assumed conditions that the predicate is part of the subject. (JubA 2, 302; Dahlstrom, 283)

This metaphysical notion of truth (as God knows it) has little to do with epistemology. It does not teach us what criteria justified true belief must satisfy. Consider, for example, Mendelssohn’s words at the very beginning of his essay on “evidence”:

The certainty of mathematics is based upon the general axiom that nothing can be and not be at the same time. In this science each proposition such as, for example, “A is B,” is proven in one of two ways. Either one unpacks the concept of A and shows “A is B,” or one unpacks the concepts of B and infers from this that non-B must also be non-A. . . . In fact, since geometry lays nothing else as its basis than the abstract concept of extension and derives all its conclusions from this single source . . . there is no doubt that all geometric truth . . . must be encountered all tangled up in it. (JubA 2, 273; Dahlstrom, 257)

There has never been a geometry book that begins with a concept of extension and derives all theorems by its analysis. On the contrary, Euclid’s Elements, to which Mendelssohn repeatedly refers, begins with definitions of elementary objects, introduces axioms and postulates, and then constructs more complex objects and proves theorems about their properties. It is a synthetic, not an analytic, science; it proceeds by means of constructions and diagrams, not by means of concepts and their logical analysis. This, however, is immaterial to Mendelssohn’s project. Already Leibniz was cautious to write that predicatum inest subjecto refers to the concepts “as God understands them.” But in most cases this also
remains God’s prerogative. We humans know most of the few true propositions we know at all in a different way. However, there is no contradiction between both claims. We know a true geometrical proposition, say, that the sum of the internal angles of a triangle equals two right angles (Euclid, *Elements*, I, 32), by means of the synthetic construction of a diagram and the application of the definitions, axioms, and postulates. But that this proposition is true means that the predicate “equals the sum of two right angles” is somehow contained in the concept of a triangle, although we humans do not see how—evidently because we do not understand these concepts as God does.

The duality of truth and our knowledge of truths does not coincide with the difference between God and man. There are also true propositions that we humans know both logically and empirically. Consider for example the “first law of nature,” the supreme maxim for all our actions (and note that for Mendelssohn imperatives can be immediately derived from propositions):

Make your intrinsic and extrinsic condition and that of your fellow human being, in the proper proportion, as perfect as you can. (*JubA* 2, 317; Dahlstrom, 297)

This maxim can be formulated on the basis of experience: “Simply consider human beings’ actions and omissions, their diverse inclinations and passions, amusements and worries and abstract the one thing on which they all ultimately agree” (*JubA* 2, 316; Dahlstrom, 296). “The same natural law,” says Mendelssohn, “can be proven a priori from the mere definition of a being with free will” (*JubA* 2, 317; Dahlstrom, 297). The very same law of nature is hence arrived at in both ways, and the difference between its empirical or metaphysical justifications lies simply in the “degree of their insight” (*JubA* 2, 316; Dahlstrom, 296). In spite of the entirely different logical and empirical ways of reaching the conclusion, the maxim itself is precisely the same, and Mendelssohn twice formulates verbatim the same principle in the contexts of the relevant discussions (*JubA* 2, 317, 318; Dahlstrom, 296, 297).

But the same maxim can be derived also “by the most irrefutable reasons” in a third way:
As soon as one assumes that a God, who cannot act without the wisest intentions, has produced the world, no proposition in Euclid can be proven with more rigor than this one, that the cited law of nature must be the will of God. (*JubA* 2, 318; Dahlstrom, 298)

This “wonderful harmony,” the coincidence of the result reached by analysis of the concept of a free agent, or by abstraction from behavior of people, or finally from the concept of God in natural theology, shows in this case that the way of experience, “bottom up,” reaches the same result as the way of deduction, “top down.” This is no exception.

Infinitely many additional basic definitions, or also correct experiences, can be premised in this way, leading us all on a sometimes shorter, sometimes longer route to the same result. In this wonderful harmony one recognizes the truth! . . . For the all-seeing eye, the whole of nature is one painting, the sum total of all possible knowledge is one truth. (*JubA* 2, 321; Dahlstrom, 300)

This is a very optimistic view of human knowledge and reason. Its practical import is the confidence that a well-established empirically known truth is, in fact, a logically necessary truth (even if we cannot infer or prove it as such), and that it will harmoniously integrate with other true propositions, logical and factual, metaphysical and empirical, to form a comprehensive worldview.

**Systematic Reason, Metaphysics, and Common Sense**

The “wonderful harmony” between all parts of our knowledge irrespective of the experiential or deductive way on which they were established, shows that “the sum total of all possible knowledge is one truth.” It teaches us not only that God created a world governed by reason but also that it is accessible to our reason, even though in most cases not deductively. Moreover, human reason is one and the same in all the different forms of its employment. The reason governing syllogisms is not different from the reason that argues inductively, and it is also the
same in those forms of reasoning called “common sense” or, better, sound reason. The differences rather lie in the means reason employs and in the degree of the explicitness and systematicity of the arguments. Most of our knowledge is generated by common sense.

Descartes opens his *Discourse on Method* with reference to this faculty: “Good sense [bon sens] is of all things, the most equally distributed among men”; it is “the power of judging properly and of distinguishing truth from falsity [la puissance de bien juger, et distinguer la vraie d’avec le faux].” Mendelssohn, too, defines bon sens as proficiency in distinguishing truth from falsity (*JubA* 2, 325; Dahlstrom, 303).

Sound reason works in the entire range of human knowledge and is not confined to reasoning. Mendelssohn also conceives sense perception as involving “unconscious inferences.” This shows in perceptual illusions. When we see a tower from afar we see it as round. We then judge that the tower is round. This may be an error. The tower may be square and only appear round from afar. Such mistakes in judgment are based on “incomplete induction”; in fact they are “mistakes in logical inference.” We infer from the sameness of two sensual impressions the sameness of the objects, from the sameness of the signs that of the signified. Of course, we are not conscious of such inferences. They are repeated so often, and our habits were formed so early that the inferences are automatic and not consciously executed but become “quasi-immediate sensations” (*Morgenstunden* 3.2, 30–32). However, commonsense judgments are not really “immediate sensations,” nor do they display unmediated inferences (e.g., *cogito ergo sum*); they only so appear because they are quick and effortless. But there is all the difference in the world between *cogito ergo sum*, which cannot and need not be further explicated, and the commonsense inference “where there is smoke there is fire,” or, analogously, the inference from the existence of the world to the existence of its creator. The latter judgments may be even quicker than the first (which belongs to professional philosophy and is rarely considered in daily life), but they involve a notion of causality that is not at all “evident,” although in daily life we constantly apply it.

Mendelssohn’s idea can be explicated thus: In principle, there is only one human reason, and whether it is called “reason” or “common sense” depends on whether or not it is applied systematically and what means
are used. The lower degrees of explicitness and clarity are reached when only natural language is used. This is called “common sense.” Explicit, reflective arguments are called “reason,” and they apply at least some specific terminology, often also formal arguments or mathematical representations. Judgments of common sense are implicit logical inferences; arguments “in form” explicate them. This is Mendelssohn’s view of common sense from the first to his last publication. It is the difference in the kind of language used and in the dependence on formal arguments that was not taken into account by later readers and facilitated the misunderstandings of Mendelssohn’s philosophy.

In his early Verwandtschaft des Schönen und Guten, Mendelssohn writes:

In respect of bon sens, we are fully convinced that its judgments may be analyzed into syllogisms; bon sens is well-trained reason. Reason and bon sens operate according to similar rules; the former slower, such that we become aware of the middle terms, the latter so fast that of the whole succession of concepts we retain nothing but the beginning and the end. (JubA 2, 183)

And at the end of his life, Mendelssohn still maintains the same view: “Sound human reason (gesunder Menschensinn; gesunder Menschenverstand) and reason (Vernunft) flow both from the same source, they are one and the same faculty of knowledge. The latter proceeds slowly[,] . . . whereas the former rushes as if winged to the goal” (JubA 3.2, 50). Building on the Leibnizian hierarchy of “confused” and “clear” representations, Mendelssohn also concludes that “sense” and “reason” do not differ essentially but only gradually.

Having a sensation, [sound] human reason proceeds in quick pace and hastens forward and does not waver because it fears to fall. Reason, on the other hand, taps around with the staff before it dares take a step; she totters the same way, indeed more carefully, but not without fear and trembling. Both may lose their way, both may stumble and fall; but if this happens, then at times it is more difficult for reason to get back on its feet. (Morgenstunden, JubA 3.2, 33–34)
Analogously, we judge beauty by a “sense” of beauty without adducing arguments, and we judge morality by our “conscience,” a sense of “right and wrong.” On principle such arguments could be spelled out—and so they in fact are in the specialized disciplines of aesthetics and moral philosophy. Mendelssohn, therefore, analogously introduces the term *sense for truth*.

A refined taste in no time finds what sluggish criticism only gradually casts light upon. Just as quickly, conscience decides and the sense for the truth judges what reason does not reduce to distinct inferences without tedious reflection. (*JubA* 2, 325; Dahlstrom, 303)

Note that the question does not at all arise whether “reason” and common sense reach the same conclusion. This is clear, because common sense is not different from reason. But if so, what is then the role of systematic thought and what the contribution of specialized disciplines like metaphysics and natural theology?

In his last publication, Mendelssohn brings an enlightening analogy:

I am an ardent admirer of demonstrations in metaphysics, and firmly convinced that the main truths of natural religion are as capable of apodictic proof as any proposition of mathematics. Nevertheless, even my conviction of religious truths is not absolutely dependent on metaphysical arguments such that it must stand and fall with them. . . . Petrus Ramus raised many doubts concerning the axioms and postulates of Euclid, but remained nevertheless completely convinced of the truth of Euclid’s *Elements*. (*An die Freunde Lessings*, *JubA* 3.2, 197)

The important distinction introduced here is between knowing a fact and systematically proving it from the axioms of reason alone. These are different projects, as I will now elaborate. The truths of mathematics are established on the basis of mathematical axioms and postulates; these are accepted presuppositions in the relevant mathematical theory or discipline. In addition to such disciplinary principles, we have philosophical principles that are universal (e.g., the laws of logic or metaphysical principles). Philosophers may engage in the justification of disciplin-
ary presuppositions on the basis of philosophical universal principles. However, as philosophers, they accept the body of mathematics as valid, whether justified philosophically or not.\textsuperscript{10} Thus for many centuries philosopher-mathematicians attempted to prove that exactly one straight line connects two points and that it is the shortest between these points, although the cynics provoked them with the observation that this is known to every dog chasing prey.\textsuperscript{11} To know the fact is the business of sound reason in mathematics, a so-called mathematical common sense; to prove the fact from first principles—that is, on the basis of logic and metaphysical principles only—is the business of philosophy.\textsuperscript{12} Although mathematicians did not yet succeed in proving these propositions in Mendelssohn’s time, nobody doubted the truth of the geometrical propositions dependent on them, least of all Mendelssohn.\textsuperscript{13}

It also follows that what is “sound reason” in one context may be “theoretical reason” in another and vice versa. Consider again the question whether the straight line is the shortest line between two points. In choosing our way from one place to the other, we take the straight rather than the zigzag or curved path without further thought. On the basis of Euclid’s \textit{Elements} it can be proven that a zigzag line between two points is longer than the straight line. This is mathematical common sense. But that a \textit{curved} line is longer than the straight line between the same points is not proven by standard means and, therefore, not part of this mathematical “common sense.” It belongs to everyday “common sense” by which we live, and, in mathematics, it belongs to “theoretical reason” that goes back to mathematical or philosophical first principles.\textsuperscript{14}

Similar considerations are valid in religion. Whenever possible, Mendelssohn wishes to demonstrate truths of religion philosophically, but their truth and a person’s knowledge that they are true do not depend on these philosophical underpinnings. I believe—says Mendelssohn—that the evidence of natural religion is as brightly obvious and as incontrovertibly certain to unspoiled human reason that has not been led astray, as any proposition of geometry. Mendelssohn quotes a story of a Greenlander who pointed to dawn and said, “See, brother, the young day! How beautiful must be its author!” And he ascribes to this “natural, foolproof conclusion” the same “evidence” as to a geometrical demonstration.\textsuperscript{15}
So what do we need demonstrations of reasons for? From Mendelssohn’s very early writings to the very last we find one and the same answer: such demonstrations are helpful when common sense is attacked by skepticism and sophistry, by an “Epicurus or a Lucretius, a Helvétius or a Hume.” Once criticized by the skeptics, refined metaphysical arguments are called for to reinstall truth:

At bottom, the material is always the same,—there endowed with all the raw but vigorous juices which nature gives it, here with the refined good taste of art, easier to digest but only for the weak. (Jerusalem, 95)

This is so in general philosophy, in natural theology, and also in practical philosophy (JubA 2, 313; Dahlstrom, 293; JubA 2, 328–29). It is because of confusion of common sense by superstition, clerical deceit, and sophistry that philosophy is called upon to rectify what sophistry has spoiled. Its purpose is to restore our peace of mind that was disturbed by sophistry. It should produce an ordered series of reasons and consequences that can be easily recalled when needed and reaffirm the basic truths of natural religion required for tranquility (Phaedon, JubA 3.1, 81). Rigorous demonstration of the truths already known by common sense helps to refute the skeptic, but in finding truth it is inferior to common sense. In his Phaedon, Mendelssohn argued for the immortality of the soul in an “exoteric” fashion, using “merely bon sens” and avoiding the “esoteric” jargon of the Leibnizians—with no loss of substance.

If a conflict arises between reason and common sense, there are two lessons to remember. First, since they are but different forms of applying the same reason and both normally lead to truth, it must be possible to resolve the conflict. Second, in cases when a quick decision is necessary, trained sound reason is to be preferred. Mendelssohn recommends his method of “orientation” for cases of conflict between philosophical reasoning and common sense. This simply means looking for the last point of agreement and carefully checking every step from there on. Carefully inspected, error will be detected. In most cases common sense should be preferred, unless there is not only a perfect demonstration to the contrary but also an explanation why common sense came off track.
This is also the lesson of Mendelssohn’s metaphysical epitome, the *Morgenstunden*. Mendelssohn there narrates an allegorical dream in which a group is guided in the Alps by a young, coarse native of moderate intelligence and a gaunt woman of “enthusiastic physiognomy.” At a crossroad, the guides head in opposite directions, leaving the group undecided whom to follow. An elderly lady representing reason (as such) comes by and reassures the hesitant wanderers that their guides, common sense and speculation, disagree at times but only for a short while and for trifling reasons. She usually decides in favor of common sense. So does Mendelssohn. Moreover, reason must “speak most decisively in favor of speculation if I am to abandon common sense.” Finally, reason must also explain the error of common sense if he, Mendelssohn, should follow it, but not vice versa. The *onus probandi* is not equally distributed, because common sense is in principle more reliable than metaphysics (*Morgenstunden*, JubA 3.2, 81–82). With the same arguments and wording, Mendelssohn supported “friends of common sense who attacked the Bishop” (Berkeley) and were not led astray by the “subtleties” of speculation.21

Mendelssohn’s partisanship for common sense is likely to be misunderstood and was often misunderstood, both sincerely and not. As we have seen, the dilemma is not between reason and another faculty, different in kind, or between reason and belief or faith.22 Rather, it is the alternative between well-established knowledge both practical and theoretical and a gapless logical proof *ex principiis*. This duality of truth and philosophical justification, common sense and philosophical reason, the independence of certainty from demonstration from first principles, has important implications for Mendelssohn’s philosophy. Mendelssohn did not believe in religious, moral, or metaphysical progress in the sense of extending our positive knowledge. Religious, moral, and basic metaphysical truths are accessible at all times to people with common sense. But Mendelssohn did believe in refinement of arguments. Truth and knowledge may remain unchanged, but demonstrations change. Our ancestors were not less pious or moral than we are, nor did they know fewer metaphysical truths. In fact, “new metaphysical truths, if you wish, were not invented since centuries. . . . In order to say something entirely new, you must almost say nonsense (*Ungereimtes*)” (JubA 7, 45–46). But the arguments for the truths we know may be refined in history.
When presenting in his *Phaedon* Plato’s true doctrine of the immateriality of the soul, Mendelssohn replaced Plato’s arguments with modern ones, be it to pay tribute to “the taste of our times,” or because Plato’s demonstrations “seem, to us at least, so shallow and bizarre that they hardly deserve a serious refutation.” “But I cannot decide,” he wrote, “whether this follows from our better insight into metaphysics or from our bad insight into the philosophical language of the ancients” (*JubA* 3.1, 8). Whatever the answer concerning the ancient philosophical arguments may be, the doctrine itself that the soul is immaterial (and therefore immortal) did not at all change. Another example clearly shows what Mendelssohn had in mind when he mentioned the difference in language used to express or demonstrate a doctrine. Arguing that mathematical truth is a priori, Mendelssohn first refers to Plato’s doctrine of learning as “recollection” in the *Meno*, then to “more recent philosophers” (Leibniz and followers) and their principle that “No new concepts that have not already been in the mind enter there by learning”; finally he refers to “oriental sages” who maintain “that the soul grasped the entire world prior to this life but then forgot everything when it entered this world.” The oriental and the modern views are one and the same, believes Mendelssohn. The moderns “have merely removed the mystical aspect that lends it [the oriental view] so absurd an appearance” (Dahlstrom, 258–59; *JubA* 2, 275–76).23

The same reservation concerning progress in metaphysics, perhaps with a differently inclined prejudice, is repeated in the preface to the *Morgenstunden*. Mendelssohn reflects there on the decline of the Leibniz-Wolffian school, he admits that his philosophy is no longer “the philosophy of these times,” and he modestly suggests that “better forces,” especially Kant, should undertake the reformation of metaphysics (*JubA* 3.2, 4–5). Whether he thought that this time, too, it is more fashion than real progress that makes his arguments seem outdated, or indeed meant what he said, in any case he did not refrain from publishing the book, hence did not believe that his arguments were wrong or worthless. The truths of metaphysics have been well known for centuries thanks to common sense, and it is only their specialized demonstration from principles that changes in history.

Moreover, common sense is superior to metaphysics in yet another respect. Although they are not strict, commonsense arguments for the...
existence of God are more persuasive than philosophical demonstrations. Whereas strict metaphysical demonstrations are “the fortresses that protect a country against enemy [i.e., skeptics’] attacks,” they are “not the most comfortable and pleasant places in which to live.” Commonsense knowledge of God—say, the arguments from the beautiful design of the world or from its purposiveness—give us “the sweetest comfort, the most refreshing consolation as well as the very fire and animation of knowledge that transfers into the capacity to desire and occasions decisions that break out into actions,” and this, after all, “should be our foremost purpose in contemplating divine properties” (JubA 2, 313; Dahlstrom, 293). Mendelssohn returns to this topic in his Jerusalem. He distinguishes there between “reasons that motivate the will” and “reasons that persuade by their truth” (JubA 8, 110; Jerusalem, 40), but the arguments of common sense fulfill both functions. He ascribes to them the power of geometrical demonstrations, and at the same time they also motivate to action.

The result of these elaborations is simple, and it contradicts Mendelssohn’s reputation. Mendelssohn was not at all a “rationalist” who trusted pure reason only and suspected that the senses and everyday knowledge deceive us. On the contrary, he trusted “sound reason” in everyday life, in the sciences, and in natural theology. In judging truth, metaphysics is inferior to sound reason. Metaphysics serves two purposes: its main purpose is to fend off the attacks of the skeptics; its second purpose is the explication and systematization of knowledge of common sense.

This result raises a question. If sound reason is so successful, why is metaphysics—which applies the same reason in a more systematic way—inferior to it? Whence the errors in metaphysics? And why can also common sense fall into error?

Common sense can err either when it transgresses the limits of its competence or when it is purposefully deceived. Truth and certainty of our commonsense knowledge are not in doubt as long as it judges within the respective domains, that is, in the sphere of our experience or by means of an appropriate symbolic system, as in mathematics. In metaphysics, however, we have no specialized symbolic means but depend on natural language. However, natural language reflects our experience with physical objects in our immediate environment, whereas metaphysics
deals with objects that are in principle not in the realm of our experience. Our language as well as the body and models of our everyday knowledge are adequate to the empirical world and exactly, therefore, may be inadequate to metaphysics. This is similar and yet different in the sciences. In cosmological matters, for example, the uneducated views of the man in the street, also called commonsensical views, may be misguided. But they can be corrected by science on the basis of new empirical knowledge and the employment of specialized means of scientific research. In science we remain in the domain of experience. This is different in metaphysics. Although metaphysics deals with objects that are essentially different from those of everyday practice, we nevertheless apply to both the same means of natural language. There is no special philosophical language adequate to its specific enterprise. Mendelssohn does not formulate the general conclusion arising from his discussion of this topic, but his following discussion of the difference between mathematics and metaphysics leaves little doubt about it: The difference between reasoning in everyday life (including natural theology), in mathematics, and in the sciences on the one hand and metaphysics on the other does not lie in the organ of thought (it is reason in all these cases) but in the material and symbolic means on which they depend.

The Superiority of Mathematics to Metaphysics, Essential and Arbitrary Signs, Possible and Real Objects

What, then, are the means employed in the various disciplines? Mathematics uses “real and essential signs” (reelle und wesentliche Zeichen). These “agree in their nature and connection with the nature and the connection of the thoughts” (JubA 2, 281; Dahlstrom, 264). In geometry the simple and composite signs correspond to simple and composite objects (lines and figures). It is therefore that in geometry nothing can be represented in abstracto, but everything is represented in concreto. The sign of the class of triangles is itself an individual triangle (JubA 2, 282; Dahlstrom, 265). In arithmetic and algebra the simple signs—numbers, letters, and combinative signs—are arbitrary. “Yet in the composite signs and formulas and equations, everything is determined [i.e., not