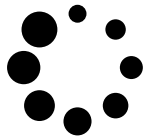


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Imagination and
Körperzustand:

illusion and play
in Moses Mendelssohn's
aesthetic reflection

by Salvatore Tedesco Mendelssohn

Aesthetics

Illusion

Play

Imagination

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Imagination and Körperzustand: illusion and play in Moses Mendelssohn's aesthetic reflection



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Abstract

The aesthetic reflection in the eighteenth century is deeply traversed by an experience perceived as capable of disrupting the disciplinary and cognitive system of early modernity: To feel the “own body,” that is, to feel its state of well-being or discomfort means to somehow modify from the inside the anthropological project of the Century of Enlightenment and to create the space and the lexicon of a modality of relationship (play, aesthetic illusion) that redefines the relationship with oneself and the context of construction of a future community.

Whereas “Knowledge” and “Will” articulate the same strategy based on the relationship between the spiritual activity of a subject and the semiotic properties of an object, the orientation towards the condition of one’s own body defines in the play and in the aesthetic illusion the space of an imaginative reserve which is above all a reserve of time and mode of construction for a future sharing.

Moses Mendelssohn’s thought constitutes the exemplary arrival point of an era of theoretical research that we are interested in investigating not only in terms of the solutions it has found for his time, but also in relation to the open problems, which continue to question our time.

Keywords [Mendelssohn](#) [Aesthetics](#) [Illusion](#) [Play](#) [Imagination](#)

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The philosophical and aesthetic reflection in the eighteenth century is deeply traversed by an experience perceived as capable of disrupting the disciplinary and cognitive system of early modernity: Feeling the “own body,” that is, feeling its “state” of well-being or discomfort – before and in a way different from the cognitive approach of a subject with an object or from the desire that moves towards that object – means to somehow enter the anthropological project of the Century of Enlightenment and to create the space and the lexicon of a modality of relationship (play, aesthetic illusion) that redefines the relationship with oneself and the context of construction of a future community.

In fact, where “Knowledge” and “Will” articulate, albeit in different ways, the same strategy based on the relationship between the spiritual activity of a subject (typically, to formulate it according to the terminology of Moses Mendelssohn: *geistige Bewegung der Seele* and *freie EntschlieÙung des Willens*) and semiotic properties [*Merkmale*] of an object, the orientation towards the condition of one’s own body (towards the *Zustand des Körpers*, as we will see, in the sign of Johann Georg Sulzer’s work) defines in play and in aesthetic illusion the space of an imaginative reserve which is above all a reserve of time and a mode of construction for a future sharing.

In this dynamic, which for example the aforementioned Sulzer tries to describe starting from the conceptual couple *Empfinden/Erkennen* (“feeling/knowing”), but which in fact would not be conceivable except as a *Bewegung*, that is, certainly, as a “theoretical dynamics,” but even before that as a movement of the body and soul, is profoundly inserted another decisive lexical graft, which acquires its most complete theoretical profile in the reflection of Johann Gottfried Herder: I mean the field of *föhlen*, of the tactile feeling, and therefore of its declination as *hinein föhlen* (“internal feeling”); *Geföhhl*, which means a thousand things but here I would try to render it as a “tactile feeling;” *Einföhhlung*, “empathy;” *Mitgeföhhl*, “to feel together,” “community feeling;” and finally

Familiengefühl, in which this feeling of community undoubtedly reveals a social dimension of identity.

In this sense, decisively rethinking the Leibnizian and Baumgartenian tradition, Moses Mendelssohn speaks of a *vis repraesentativa* which is in and of itself indeterminate, but which through the reference to the state of the soul [*Zustand der Seele*] and of the own body is determined as *Einbildungskraft* facing the past, *Empfindungsvermögen* adhering to the present, *Vorhersehungsvermögen* of the future.

But let's look at the theoretical complex a little more closely at this point. Referring to the two short writings *De anima* and *De DEO*, placed in the appendix to the famous *Philosophiae naturalis Theoria* by Roger Boscovich,¹ Moses Mendelssohn in the fifty-sixth of the *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*² proposes to take into account, together, the proximity and the difference between the laws of movement [*Gesetze der Bewegung*] of inorganic bodies and those brought about by the union of soul and body in the human organism, which causes

from certain spatial movements [*aus gewissen örtlichen Bewegungen*] in the external limbs to derive certain spiritual movements [*geistige Bewegungen*] in the soul; some in a necessary way, like sensations, others through a free choice, like the determinations of the will.

This is precisely the bipartition and parallelism between *geistige Bewegung der Seele* and *freie EntschlieÙung*

1 R.J. Boscovich, *Philosophiae Naturalis Theoria* (Vienna: Apud Augustinum Bernardi, 1758): 280-295.

2 M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1844): vol. 4, 566. The secondary bibliography on Mendelssohn is very rich, and ranges from historical-critical questions, to aesthetics and the theory of art, to ethics and philosophy of religions, and so on. In these notes - which obviously take into account the overall developments of that critical debate, from the "classic" studies by Fr. Braitmaier, *Geschichte der Poetischen Theorie und Kritik von den Diskursen der Malern bis auf Lessing* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1888-1889) and L. Goldstein, *Moses Mendelssohn und die deutsche Ästhetik* (Königsberg: Gräfe & Unzer, 1904), up to M. Albrecht, E.J. Engel, N. Hinske, eds., *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994), and M. Albrecht, E.J. Engel, eds., *Moses Mendelssohn in Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung* (Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), with particular reference to the large, still decisive monograph by J.P. Meier, *L'Esthétique de Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)* (Paris: Atelier Lille III, 1978), and for Italy refer in particular to the excellent work of L. Lattanzi, *Linguaggio e poesia in Moses Mendelssohn* (Pisa: ETS, 2002), and M. Mendelssohn, *Scritti di Estetica*, ed. L. Lattanzi (Palermo: Aesthetica, 2004) - we limit ourselves to refer from time to time to some texts by Mendelssohn himself, of which we will provide a quick theoretical framework for the purposes of our argument.

des Willens mentioned at the beginning, according to a cognitive procedure that is exercised on a “semiotically configured” reality, in which the knowing subject captures certain *Merkmale, notae characteristicae*, in fact we could say semiotic³ “representative marks” of the object, of the known reality.

In this phase, therefore, Mendelssohn theorizes a perfect parallelism between the sphere of knowledge and the sphere of the will, thus inscribing himself perfectly in that theoretical tradition of the so-called “German rationalism” which can be summarized in the positions of Christian Wolff’s *Psychologia empirica* or the psychological sections of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* – yet, in Mendelssohn’s particular thematic declension, the salient term is certainly *Bewegung*, that is the reference to a motility, of the body and of our representative faculty in relation to it, which in fact sets the whole system in motion.

The theoretical framework thus “photographed” by Mendelssohn in 1759 will undergo a rapid evolution, of which we will try to retrace some passages below. At the moment, we limit ourselves to referring to that decisive turning point entrusted by the author to a short private annotation in 1770,⁴ which Mendelssohn, critically returning to the path traveled by gnoseology in Germany in the eighteenth century, states that

Pleasure should not have been compared with will. That is an intimate awareness that representation “a” improves our state; the will, on the other hand, is a tendency of the soul to realize this representation.

The Leibnizian *affectus*, Baumgarten’s sensitive knowledge “capable of driving force,” is now definitely

3 Obviously I am referring in this way to a very long-term semiotic strategy in the theoretical discourse that interests us here. See, limiting ourselves here of necessity to mentioning the immediate context of reference, the occurrence of the term in the fifty-fifth M. Mendelssohn, *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, in *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929): vol.1, 565.

4 M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929): vol.1, 225.

characterized as pleasure, with the further clarification that this modality acts on (and therefore it is appropriate to say more precisely to the interior of) our state [*Zustand*] – we would perhaps say modernly on our “psycho-physical balance” – and is therefore to be considered in reference to our intimate awareness of ourselves, rather than continuing to refer to the scope of a cognitive relationship with some *external* object.

It is precisely here that we cross in a more articulated way the theories of Sulzer⁵ who, at the end of a long research path that we would define “psycho-physiological,” as well as at the start of a new season of German Enlightenment thought, definitively breaks the parallelism and the alliance between knowledge and will by contrasting, in the context of extensively understood “knowledge,” *knowledge* in the proper sense (i.e. the semiotic-representative relationship of a knowing subject with a known object) to a *feeling devoid of an object*, through which, in the strict sense, our sensory apparatus experiences itself, its own state of well-being or discomfort.

But let’s take a closer look at Sulzer’s argument, in which the eye performs the function of a real paradigm of the human soul.⁶ Our cognitive faculty, says Sulzer developing considerations that we can trace back to Christian Wolff, is structured in a way that is perfectly analogous to the sense of sight and that, in analogy to it, can be described on the basis of the laws of optics. Objects present themselves to our eye and to our cognitive faculty with a greater or lesser degree of clarity, the focus of our attention progressively focuses on every single element (imaginable as a physical point), leaving the rest of the representation in the twilight.

Therefore the objects are known through a process that allows to obtain a clear knowledge of every single component of the object, so as to finally have a distinct vision of the compound object; for this process to take place,

5 J.G. Sulzer, “Anmerkungen über den verschiedenen Zustand, worinn sich die Seele bey Ausübung ihrer Hauptvermögen, nämlich des Vermögens, sich etwas vorzustellen, und des Vermögens zu empfinden befindet” (1763), in *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften* (1773) (Hildesheim: Olms 1974): vol.1, 225-243.

6 *Ibid.*: 226.

however, adequate light is required, which allows the eye to perceive the object.

Conversely, when the light is so dazzling as to injure the eye, there is no longer any perception of the object, but the eye *feels* tactile, that is, in the manner of the darkest sense, itself, its own condition: “The luminous glow touches the ocular nerves in such a way that seeing is transformed into feeling;”⁷ this process represents in the best way for Sulzer the passage from the state of thinking [*Nachdenken*] to that of feeling [*Empfinden*]: the representation is no longer a representation of the object, but of my condition of pleasure or displeasure: “We do not feel the object, but ourselves. When it reflects, the intellect takes care of something that it considers to be placed outside of it; when it feels, the soul only takes care of itself.”⁸

In this way, however, at the very moment in which a fundamental distinction of levels and functions of the soul is created, a very precise relationship is established between knowing and feeling, in the sense that there is a proportionality between the degree of darkness of our knowledge and the strength of our “sensations” and that the “sensations” are aroused, so as to give rise to the transition from the state of thinking to that of feeling, when a certain idea arouses a crowd of other obscure representations.

The characteristic fact of Sulzer’s anthropological vision is that this obscurity of feeling is, in itself, an insurmountable *datum*: “We feel desire or aversion without knowing why: We are moved by forces we do not know.”⁹ Precisely from this state of affairs – we observe here in passing – the arts derive their origin and at the same time their function, destined to enter into a relationship with the darkest part of feeling and to turn it to the advantage of humanity.

The caesura between knowing and feeling theorized by Sulzer – it would be rather simple to argue – more than corresponding to a deepening of the eighteenth-century physiological discourse, more than opening a philosophical

7 Ibid.: 231.

8 Ibid.: 229-230.

9 Ibid.: 241.

question destined to be very influential, is in a certain way the symptom, the surface effect, so to speak, of a deep landslide destined to cross the whole thinking of the second half of the eighteenth century, that of the so-called *Popularphilosophie*.

In light of what has been seen in Mendelssohn's *Briefe*, that is, in light of the attempt to describe the "motions of the soul" along the lines of the laws of physical movement, it is striking that the distinction made by Sulzer undoubtedly places at the center of the analysis the *opacity*, the resistance of the body to thegnoseological strategies by which the body itself is crossed throughout the Leibnizian-Wolffian season, but the fact that this happens (and this precisely affects, and perhaps explains the intimate distrust towards Sulzer himself of many of the major protagonists of the *Aufklärung*), creating a static contrast between the state [*Zustand*] of the body and the faculty of knowledge.

Conversely, it is precisely the relational *dynamics* that remain at the center of Moses Mendelssohn's interests, as already exemplarily shown in his reference to Boscovich's theses on motor skills in the investigation of the physical body and the living organism. And it is precisely here that the space for reflection opens up for the concept of *illusion*, destined to become central in Mendelssohn's aesthetic reflection.

Mendelssohn's aesthetic thought, as it is actually quite well known, is very troubled and passes through different and sometimes quite intricate theoretical phases; all the more noteworthy is the fact that from the first theorizations to the definitive results, the link between an attempt at a rational description, even a *mathematization* of the relationship between physical movements and "motions of the soul," and the enucleation of the way to function of the aesthetic illusion.

It is in fact in the correspondence on the tragic with Lessing, and therefore already in the years 1756-1757, that Mendelssohn starts his reflection on the "*ästhetische*" or even "*poetische*" *Illusion*, which is considered the instrument through which the dramatic poet can give space - against Aristotle and his modern followers - even to the most violent

feelings, such as hatred or repugnance [*Abscheu*], on the condition that the reader and viewer are under the *aesthetic* effect of the illusion.¹⁰

Faced with the hesitations manifested by Lessing in the correspondence, Mendelssohn tries to organize the theme in a more extended form by articulating a short essay *Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen* (*About the dominion over inclinations*),¹¹ which starts from an attempt to mathematize the dynamics of motions of the soul, theorizing a direct proportionality between the kinetic force of motivation and the expected good, as well as between the kinetic force itself and the clarity of the representation that one possesses of it, while this force would be expressed according to an inverse proportionality in relation to the time necessary for the representation itself to take shape: “Quantity of motivation = good × clarity ÷ time.”¹²

On this Platonic theoretical basis Mendelssohn also explains the effect of illusion, saying that:

When an imitation bears so much resemblance to the original that our senses can be persuaded at least for a moment to see the original itself, I call this deception an aesthetic illusion. The poet must speak in a perfectly sensitive way; for this reason all his speeches must deceive us in an aesthetic way. For an imitation to be beautiful, he must deceive us aesthetically; at the same time the higher cognitive faculties must be aware that it is an imitation, and not nature itself.¹³

Mendelssohn therefore bases the anthropological effect of the aesthetic illusion on the *discrepancy* between sensitivity and intellect. The illusion is *aesthetic* and it is not a common deception when it is addressed *directly* to the sensitivity by involving the higher faculties only *indirectly*.

This discrepancy is first of all a temporal hiatus in the effect of the aesthetic representation:

10 See K.W. Segreff, *M. Mendelssohn und die Aufklärungsästhetik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Grundmann, 1984): 94.

11 M. Mendelssohn, “Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen,” in *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1931): vol. 2, 149-155.

12 *Ibid.*: 149.

13 *Ibid.*: 154.

It is easy to see that that judgment [that is, the aesthetic judgment] must precede, and that therefore the conviction about the similarity must be intuitive, that is, take place through illusion, while on the other hand, the conviction that it is not the original itself may come a little late, and therefore be dependent on symbolic knowledge.¹⁴

The argument itself is not fundamentally new, and to give a single example relating to a possible source, it is enough to recall Bernard de Fontenelle, who in the *Réflexions sur la poétique* of 1742 declares that our pleasure in following the painful events of a hero that we love, crying and consoling ourselves alternately for what we see, depends on our awareness that it is a fiction.¹⁵

What is new in Mendelssohn is the temporal scheme, and the theoretical framework in which it is inscribed, which is evidently influenced by the thought of Baumgarten, of which Mendelssohn becomes a continuer: While, so to speak, the awareness of the fictional character holds true in Fontenelle as an undoubtedly *presupposed* guarantee of “poetic” enjoyment, Mendelssohn is instead interested in the path that leads from the *touched* soul of the user to the aesthetic object, and in this path he discovers a double semiotic-cognitive modality, and precisely two different temporalities, which, however, are valid as the two necessarily coexisting stages for the realization of aesthetic pleasure.

Sensitive knowledge *intuitively* grasps an *identity* between original and copy where only the greater slowness of intellectual knowledge, due to its *symbolic* character, will be able to reformulate the relationship as a *similarity* of elements (intellectually) recognized as distinct.

Only in the temporal interplay between the two cognitive stages is aesthetic pleasure realized for Mendelssohn, which takes the form of the subsequent recognition of the *similar* in the imitative representation as *identical and different*. Identical for sensitivity and – with a short hiatus – different for the intellect. Aesthetic pleasure therefore allows

14 Ibid.

15 B.L.B. de Fontenelle, *Réflexions sur la Poétique* (Paris: M. Brunet, 1742): XXXVI.

us to penetrate into the human soul, indeed to say more precisely *within the motivational dynamic that governs the movements of the soul*, so as to relate sensitivity and intellect not for the purpose of a progressive “unveiling” of reality that destroys illusion and error, but on the contrary for the purpose of an enjoyment that finds its root in *imitation*, capable of emerging with particular evidence right in the case of the imitation of passions that are violent and painful,¹⁶ which would not only turn out to be such if they were experienced in reality, but which would be no less painful if we were simply faced with an “interpretative error” of our sensitivity destined to be rationally overcome.

In the same year 1757, one of the decisive writings of Mendelssohnian aesthetics, the *Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften (Reflections on the Sources and Connections of the Fine Arts and Sciences)*,¹⁷ added a further decisive element to this descriptive framework, clarifying that, from the semiotic point of view, intuitive knowledge concerns both the case in which the object is immediately present to our senses, and the case in which it is represented through signs [*Zeichen*] through which the ideas of the designated [*Ideen des Bezeichneten*] can be seen more distinctly than those of the sign.

The beauty of the aesthetic relationship (but by now Mendelssohn’s discourse – precisely through the reference to the designation process – strongly gravitates towards *artistic beauty*) therefore offers the example of a peculiar *transparency of the medium*, and it is right through the transparency of the sign that the object appears with an evidence that captures and sets in motion the faculties of our soul.

In the same years, in controversy with Reimarus, Mendelssohn will also return to the nature of the imagination and to the overall relationship of the faculties of the

16 M. Mendelssohn, *Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen*: 155.

17 M. Mendelssohn, “Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften,” in *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929): vol. I, 169.

soul, saying that – far from being considered a faculty in its own right – the imagination is rather a *modification* of the unique, original and in principle completely indeterminate representative capacity of the soul which however “through the state of one’s own and of one’s body [*durch ihren und ihres Körpers Zustand*],”¹⁸ is addressed and configured in specific ways, articulating itself precisely as *Einbildungskraft* facing the past, *Empfindungsvermögen* adhering to the present, *Vorhersehungsvermögen* of the future.

The famous statement of Baumgarten – according to which the individual soul represents the universe *propositu corporis* –¹⁹ is therefore changed in a decisive way by redefining the *position* of the body as *Zustand*, a *state* or more precisely a *condition* of well-being or malaise.

Let us pause for a moment to consider Mendelssohn’s path so far: The “aesthetic illusion” is clearly distinguished from mere “cognitive deception,” at the very moment in which the attention thus shifts one way in the direction of *internal* dynamics to our soul, that is towards the *play*, the balance of the faculties, present in our soul and set in motion by the aesthetic representations, and on the other hand it traces the dynamics of the relational movement between our soul and the aesthetic object, now more and more clearly distinguished from the cognitive one.

The brief note of 1770 to which attention has already been drawn testifies to a deepening of the first question – that relating to the internal dynamics of our soul – which would not be imaginable and would probably not have assumed that configuration without the openings on one’s own body and on his condition made possible by the almost contemporary theories of Sulzer.

Mendelssohn therefore writes:

Pleasure should not have been compared with will. That is an intimate awareness that representation “a” improves our state [*Zustand*];

18 M. Mendelssohn, “Rezensionsartikel,” in *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend* (1759-1765), 20 nov. 1760: 300 in *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991): no. 5, 1.

19 A.G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (1779) (Halle: Hemmerde, 1939): § 512.

the will, on the other hand, is a tendency of the soul to realize this representation. Pleasure is, so to speak, a favorable judgment of the soul on her real state; the will, on the other hand, is a tendency of the soul to achieve this state.²⁰

In this way, undoubtedly, Mendelssohn moves towards an overall redefinition of the “system of faculties” that distances him from the Wolffian tradition as well as from Baumgarten, his model, approaching that tripartite division between the cognitive sphere, the sphere of will and aesthetic pleasure that characterizes the second eighteenth century from the so-called *Popularphilosophie* to Kant. No less significant is that this occurs through a specific attention to *one’s own body*, and to the way in which the representative processes do not so much modify our relationship with reality on the objective side, as they redefine its internal resonance.

However, whereas precisely on this point Sulzer chose an “extremist” reading, speaking of a “feeling *devoid of an object*,” through which our body senses itself and not the object, and therefore sacrificed the understanding of the dynamic relationship to highlight the question of the *Zustand*, of the state/condition of the organ (remember what Sulzer says about the eye and sight), of one’s own body, of the soul vitalistically considered coextensive with the body, Mendelssohn never loses sight of the relationality, the dynamism of the framework of faculty.

It is perhaps also for this reason that his is the most significant figure in the entire German debate from Baumgarten to Kant.

Another short essay is dedicated to what has just been defined as the dynamics of the relational movement between our soul and the object, dating back to June 1776, in which, similarly to what we have just seen, Mendelssohn moves, so to speak, from “systematic reasons,” openly declared already from the title of the fragment: [*Über*

20 M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929): vol. 1, 225.

das Erkenntnis-, das Empfindungs- und das Begehrungsvermögen] On the faculty of knowing, of feeling and of appetite.

What six years earlier had been entrusted to an almost incidental note here instead – even if the writing is destined not to leave the private workshop of Mendelssohn's thought – acquires the characteristics of a system program:

Between the faculty of knowing and the faculty to appetite there is the faculty of feeling [*Empfindungsvermögen*], by means of which we feel pleasure or displeasure about something, we appreciate it, approve it, find it pleasant, or we despise it, blame it and find it unpleasant [...]. The end of the faculty of knowing is the *truth*; that is, as we possess a faculty of knowing, we strive to make the concepts in our soul accord with the qualities of their objects. The end of the faculty of hearing is the *good*; that is, insofar as we possess a faculty of feeling, we strive to make the objective qualities accord with our concepts of goodness, order and beauty.²¹

The truly innovative moment of this position lies in the clear distinction of areas between will and pleasure: The pleasure for a representation does not necessarily imply the desire for the object that underlies it.

Mendelssohn is above all interested in distinguishing two modalities of relationship with the object: In the cognitive relationship we modify our representations to adapt them to the truth of the object, in the case of the faculty of feeling we aim instead to harmonize the properties of the object with our own concepts of good, order, beauty, and the tool for this to happen is clearly identified in the aesthetic illusion. The peculiarity of the statute of aesthetic illusion is then the true core of Mendelssohn's discourse, when it is distinguished both from cognitive truth and also from the concrete modification of reality which the will aims at.

But there is more; Mendelssohn distinguishes two fundamental human attitudes, the first tending to truth, the second to *poetic invention* [*Erdichtung*]. If the first corresponds to the work of the faculty of knowing, the poetic

21 Ibid.: vol. 3, 1, 276.

invention will instead follow the intent of *keeping in exercise* [*in Übung zu erhalten*]²² the faculty of feeling. In the same days, another brief note²³ completes the Mendelssohnian description, noting that this “faculty to entertain oneself” [*Unterhaltungsfähigkeit*] (it is interesting how Mendelssohn tries to set the theoretical framework in motion even in proposing new names for a system of faculties perceived as in active transformation with respect to the Wolffian model) has an objective side (simplifying I would say the quantity and order of semiotic markers capable of “giving something to think about”) and a subjective side (the faculty itself and the ordering criteria it is able to set). The *beauty* will therefore reside in the harmony between the objective and subjective aspects of the new faculty, capable of arousing in us “in the contemplation of the object, the awareness of our strengths rather than our limits, and movement is pleasant.”²⁴

Conversely, that disharmony that comes from the excess of the object over our faculties will cause *dizziness*, and on a conceptual level it will give life to the *sublime*.

The conclusive synthesis of the *Morgenstunden*, in 1785, will insert the considerations that we have followed up to now into a much broader theoretical framework, without however further introducing profound changes; confirming and reformulating again the tripartition between the faculty of knowing, that of desiring and the “aesthetic faculty,” now redefined as the capacity of appreciation [*Billigungsvermögen*], Mendelssohn now distinguishes between two fundamental aspects of human knowledge, depending on whether one considers its *material* relevance or the *formal* configuration.

From the material point of view, that is, a given notion can be true or false; considered from this point of view, knowledge knows no degrees, truth is an “indivisible unity.”²⁵ It is quite another thing to consider knowledge as capable of arousing pleasure or displeasure, that is, as an object of

22 Ibid.

23 M. Mendelssohn, “Über objektive und subjektive Unterhaltungsfähigkeit,” in *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929): vol. 3, 1, 275.

24 Ibid.

25 M. Mendelssohn, “Morgenstunden,” in *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog; 1974): vol. 3, 2, 62.

the faculty of appreciation: precisely this can be defined as the formal aspect. And vice versa, this consists exclusively in evaluating, in comparison, in gradation, in plus and minus; moreover, every conceivable degree of this scale of values can be thought of “with the same truth,”²⁶ which is evidently a truth of the formal aspect of knowledge, a peculiar truth of aesthetic illusion.

Moses Mendelssohn’s thought, in its different phases and declinations, through the collaboration with Lessing and up to the final results of the *Morgenstunden*, constitutes the exemplary arrival point of an era of theoretical research that we are interested in investigating not only in terms of the solutions that he found for his time, but also in relation to open problems, which continue to question our time.

26 Ibid.: 63.

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