Mendelssohnian Enlightenment and Women’s Contributions to Philosophy in the Late Eighteenth Century

Corey W. Dyck

When attempting to capture the concept of enlightenment that underlies and motivates philosophical (and political and scientific) developments in the 18th century, historians of philosophy frequently rely upon a needlessly but intentionally exclusive account. This, namely, is the conception of enlightenment first proposed by Kant in his famous essay of 1784, which takes enlightenment to consist in the “emergence from the self-imposed state of minority” and which is only possible for a “public” to attain as a result of the public use of reason, a privilege enjoyed by citizens and exemplified in the activity of the scholar (*Gelehrter*). That women, among other groups, did not hold the status of citizens and did not enjoy access to the institutions or training that might gain them recognition as scholars is apparently not a concern for Kant, as he notes that the enlightened condition is likely out of reach anyway for “by far the greatest part of humankind (including the entire fair sex)” (AA 8:35).[[1]](#footnote-1) For Kant, women have no part in enlightenment, neither as its principal propagators nor as its intended recipients, and this fact is apparently reflected in our philosophical histories of the period. Not only are the diverse forms of female intellectuality in the period assigned little significance—which is to be expected given the bias towards a highly specialized form of scholarly intervention in public debate—but even the topics on which women did publish, such as the theory of education, are categorized as of merely popular rather than philosophical interest, in spite of often being thoroughly informed by the philosophical views of the time.

All this leads one to wonder what a history of this period *could* look like when considered from the perspective of a different, more inclusive conception of enlightenment, and in this chapter I propose to conduct an experiment of sorts just along these lines. As opposed to Kant’s exclusionary conception, I will instead take that proposed by his distinguished contemporary, Moses Mendelssohn, as my starting point. In addition to offering a conception of enlightenment distinctive both for its wide scope and progressive character, Mendelssohn’s has the advantage, or so I will show, of bringing the manifold intellectual contributions of a diverse set of women into focus, though it does more than this in that it also reveals these women to actively and critically engage with key aspects of Mendelssohn’s and others’ philosophical views. To the end of showing how this is accomplished, I will begin with a consideration of Mendelssohn’s comparatively under-appreciated essay on enlightenment.

1. A Primer on Mendelssohnian Enlightenment

Mendelssohn’s essay, “On the Question: What does it Mean to Enlighten? [*Ueber die Frage: was heißt aufklären*],”[[2]](#footnote-2) appeared in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* in September 1784, in a response to the question which was posed in a contribution to the same journal in December 1783.[[3]](#footnote-3) Mendelssohn’s discussion begins by situating the notion within a constellation of related terms, namely, “*enlightenment*, *culture*, *education* [*Aufklärung*, *Kultur*, *Bildung[[4]](#footnote-4)*]” which he identifies as “new arrivals” in the German language. While the coinages may be novel, he denies that these terms designate completely new concepts (just as, he claims, a people might not have a term for ‘virtue’ or ‘superstitition’ but are not for that reason thought to lack them). In addition to their novelty, these three concepts have in common the fact that they designate “modifications of social [*geselligen*] life” or “effects of the industry and efforts of human beings [*Menschen[[5]](#footnote-5)*] to improve their social condition” (JubA 6.1, 115).

Mendelssohn next turns to a consideration of how these concepts are related, and he contends that they are closely interconnected; specifically, he claims that *Bildung* is the combination of culture and enlightenment. These latter are, in turn, distinguished inasmuch as the former concerns the *practical* and enlightenment the *theoretical*, though in both cases Mendelssohn considers objective and subjective expressions of the attainment of each, that is, respectively, what is produced or acquired through each and what sort of skills or habits might be developed in a subject enjoying this condition. So, culture can be understood either (objectively) as relating to goodness, refinement, and beauty in arts, craftsmanship, and “social mores [*Geselligkeitssitten*]” or (subjectively) concerning industriousness and skillfulness in arts and craftsmanship, and in the inclinations, drives, and habits relating to social mores. By contrast, enlightenment, at least on an initial pass, has to do (objectively) with the acquisition of theoretical cognition and (subjectively) with the skill to reflect rationally on all that which pertains to the concerns of human life.

Significantly, for Mendelssohn enlightenment, culture, and *Bildung*, are not all-or-nothing conditions but admit of degrees, where these depend on the extent to which enlightenment, culture, or state of *Bildung* agrees with the “vocation of the human being [*Bestimmung des Menschen*].” As we will see in a later section, what Mendelssohn understands through this phrase, popularised by Johann Joachim Spalding’s book of the same name, is the development of the human being’s distinctive capacities (including but not limited to cognitive capacities like the intellect and will). In any case, Mendelssohn does make clear in his essay that this vocations constitutes a standard against which human progress can be judged: “At all times, I set the vocation of the human being as the measure and goal of all our strivings and efforts, as a point towards which we must direct our eyes if we would not lose ourselves” (JubA 6.1, 115-16). A people, then, attains to a higher state of *Bildung* “the more its social condition is brought into harmony with the vocation of the human being through art and industry”; similarly with respect to culture, the more that inclinations, drives, and habits in social mores “in a people correspond to the vocation of the human being, the more culture is attributed to it” (JubA 6.1, 115). Enlightenment likewise comes in degrees, depending on the extent to which we become skillful in reflecting “on matters pertaining to human life, according to the standard of their importance and influence upon the vocation of the human being” (ibid.), though rather than pertaining to a *people* (*Volk*), as was the case with *Bildung* and culture, Mendelssohn claims that enlightenment primarily pertains to the individual (and only derivatively to a people or *Nation*; cf. JubA 6.1, 117).

By way of making this last claim more precise, Mendelssohn distinguishes between the human being’s vocation considered either as a human being or as a citizen (*Bürger*), which is to say considered in relation to life in a society. As he notes, the distinction is only relevant to enlightenment since “the *human being* as *human being* [i.e., considered as an individual] does not stand in need of *culture*, but does need *enlightenment*” (JubA 6.1, 116). This introduces a distinction between two sorts of enlightenment—that of the human being as human being and that of the human being as citizen—where the precise demands of the latter depend upon the “estate and occupation [*Stand und Beruf*]” of the individual in society, but those of the former pertains to the human being in abstraction from such differences:

The *enlightenment* that interests the human being as human being is *universal*, without distinction in terms of estate; the enlightenment of the human being considered as citizen is modified according to *estate* and *occupation.* (JubA 6.1, 117).

Accordingly, while enlightenment for Mendelssohn is understood, broadly, in terms of the accumulation of theoretical cognition and improvement of our capacity to reflect on the importance of matters in relation to our vocation, it is clearly the enlightenment of the human being *as human being* that is of foremost interest, where this pertains to improving ourselves in virtue of those dispositions and capacities we all have in common rather than with respect to that which sets us apart.

Yet Mendelssohn also recognizes that “[c]ertain truths that are useful to the human being as human being can at the same time be harmful to him as citizen” (JubA 6.1, 117), which raises the spectre of conflicts or collisions (*Kollisionsfälle*) between our vocations. In order to arrive at a comprehensive account of the possible conflicts and their potential remedies, Mendelssohn further distinguishes the “essential [*wesentlichen*]” and “accidental [*zufälligen*]” or “extra-essential [*außerwesentlichen*]” vocations or determinations (*Bestimmungen*) of each.[[6]](#footnote-6) Concerning the possible (and actual) conflicts between our extra-essential vocation as human beings and either our essential or extra-essential vocation as citizens, he calls generally for rules to be established to decide these cases (JubA 6.1, 117). More problematic are the conflicts that involve our *essential* vocation as human beings, and Mendelssohn considers what is to be done when these clash with our essential vocation as citizens and our extra-essential vocation as human beings. Concerning the former, which takes place when the regime fails to recognize that enlightenment is “indispensable [*unentbehrlich*]” for humanity “through all estates of the realms [*über alle Stände des Reichs*],” Mendelssohn rather cryptically asserts that in such cases philosophy should “lay its hand on its mouth [*Hier lege die Philosophie die Hand auf den Mund*!],” presumably lest, in publically disclosing the conflict, it forces the regime’s hand in imposing stricter measures to stifle enlightenment (JubA 6.1, 117).[[7]](#footnote-7) Concerning the latter conflict—that between the essential and extra-essential aspects of the human being’s vocation as human being—Mendelssohn cites as an example the case where truths that are salutary for humanity nonetheless tear down the “principles of religion and ethics.” Here Mendelssohn recommends that the virtuous would-be enlightener should “proceed with caution and forebearance, and prefer to tolerate prejudice” rather than run the risk of being driven out along with the truth, even as he recognizes himself that this maxim is ripe for abuse (JubA 6.1, 118).

In order to better appreciate the distinctive character of Mendelssohn’s conception of enlightenment it will be helpful to briefly contrast it with that of Kant, as elaborated in his famous essay: “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?” As is well known, Kant’s conception of enlightenment involves casting off the fetters through which one willingly subjects the use of one’s own understanding to the authority of others, that is, enlightenment “is the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority” (AA 8:35). While Kant enjoins us each to “[h]ave courage to make use of your *own* understanding” (ibid.), he proceeds to observe that it is rare for an individual to attain enlightenment, given the appeal of and habituation to letting others make decisions on one’s behalf; yet, he claims that it is less unlikely that a public (*Publicum*) should attain this, and it can do so through the freedom of its members to make public (*öffentlich*) use of their reason. This is, namely, a use of their reason apart from, and which does not interfere with, their occupation of a given office or profession, and which is exemplified, according to Kant, in the use of one’s reason “as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers” (AA 8:37). So, while we remain beholden to the guidance and censorship of others in the private exercise of reason in the context of the office we might occupy, no such constraints (ought to) obtain concerning reason’s public use, and provided that a people enjoys such freedom in the public use of reason, it is possible for it to achieve enlightenment, albeit only slowly given the difficulty in overcoming implanted prejudices (AA 8:36).

Kant’s essay would appear three months after Mendelssohn’s, in December of 1784, though he was apparently unaware of Mendelssohn’s response when he composed his own. This led him to wonder publicly in a footnote added to his own contribution, whether “chance may bring about agreement in [their] thoughts” (cf. AA 8:42). There are, no doubt, some initial similarities, such as in their respective distinction between the context of professional life and the extra-professional context,[[8]](#footnote-8) yet the differences are arguably more striking, three of which we might point out here.[[9]](#footnote-9) First, we have seen that Mendelssohn approaches the enlightenment through a wider perspective, as a “modification of social life,” and even if he will proceed to emphasize that enlightenment pertains to the human being considered as (individual) human being as well as as a member of society, it remains the case that for Mendelssohn enlightenment is enacted *within* society, and indeed would remain incomplete were this not the case inasmuch as culture relates to enlightenment as theory does to practice. Kantian enlightenment, by contrast, is enacted publically, but the fact that it consists in debate engaged by scholars does not suggest any corresponding social forum. Second, for Mendelssohn enlightenment itself, as consisting in the individual’s attainment of cognition and the development of our cognitive powers, can only be attained, by degrees, as a result of a gradual process of training and education. For Kant, however, enlightenment is the result of a spontaneous act of will or practical reason, and presumably either attained all at once or not at all, and which in spite of rarely being executed is nonetheless the function of a capacity that belongs to every human being as such.[[10]](#footnote-10) Third, and finally, Mendelssohn’s focus in his essay, as opposed to Kant’s, is squarely on the *enlightener*, that is on the individual who would, after attaining enlightenment, seek to guide others to the same. This much is signalled in the title of his essay—“What does it mean *to enlighten*?”—as it is in his discussion of how the enlightener should proceed when the enlightenment of others would conflict with the duties of the citizen.[[11]](#footnote-11) For Kant’s part, he allows that the example of the enlightened individual might inspire others and “disseminate the spirit of a rational valuing of one’s own worth and of the calling of each individual to think for himself” (AA 8:36), though such individuals are ultimately so rare, and prejudice so widespread, that the gradual enlightenment of a public instead is the best that can be realistically hoped for. As will soon become clear, these three distinctive features of Mendelssohn’s conception of enlightenment do not merely mark a difference of opinion between him and Kant but actually prove rather consequential as they happen to constitute three themes—the importance of culture for enlightenment, the necessity (and theory) of education, and the manner in which the enlightener should proceed when faced with prejudice—that were vigorously engaged by women near the turn of the 19th century.

2. The Culture of Enlightenment: Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin Varnhagen

As we have seen, Mendelssohn introduces a distinction between *Aufklärung* and *Kultur* in his “What does it mean to enlighten?” As it happens, Mendelssohn was challenged on precisely this distinction in a letter responding to his essay from the enthusiastic enlightener August Hennings (about whom more in the fourth section, below), who had rejected the distinction between enlightenment and culture as he understands culture to be just the cultivation in us effected *through* enlightenment (JubA 13 228). In response, Mendelssohn upholds the difference between the two, claiming that culture has “something intentional [*etwas vorsätzliches*]” about it, in contrast with enlightenment, a fact he takes to be confirmed in our ordinary linguistic usage; moreover, he claims that it is sometimes the case that enlightenment is the *effect* of culture rather than *vice versa* (JubA 13, 235).

This last claim points to an important feature of Mendelssohn’s discussion: as important as the *distinction* between culture and enlightenment is, he also takes pains to emphasize their crucial *inter*dependence (which is not limited to their mutual potential to produce one another). Not only does he compare the relationship between the two to that between “theory and practice,” as we have seen, but he also contends that they “stand in the most precise connection, even if subjectively they can very often be separated” (JubA 6.1, 116). Indeed, Mendelssohn assigns an indispensable role to culture in spreading and securing the gains of enlightenment, a service it yields by promoting the *sociability* of human beings through the refinement of manners and the expansion of opportunities for engagement and concourse.[[12]](#footnote-12) Culture likewise serves as an important check on enlightenment for Mendelssohn, making it important that both are cultivated at once. For instance, doctrines that pass as enlightened might nonetheless have the consequence of degrading public morals or fomenting the development of manners hostile towards concourse among individuals (even as they adopt the mask of “gentleness of spirit”).[[13]](#footnote-13) As he writes in the essay, “[w]here enlightenment and culture advance in equal strides, then they serve one another as the best means for preventing prejudice” (JubA 6.1, 118) a claim he re-iterates in his response to Hennings, with particular emphasis on the potential for the misuse of enlightenment: “[i]f enlightenment outstrips culture by too wide a measure, the former can of course become dangerous” (JubA 13, 237)

For Mendelssohn, then, the pursuit of culture is integral to the efforts to attain enlightenment, and it is for this reason that Mendelssohn also lays considerable emphasis on the importance of various forms of association. In the enlightenment essay, Mendelssohn had already indicated the importance of developing the culture of human beings with respect to their specific “estates and professions,” where the aim was to further association with one’s fellows *within* a given estate and profession, and where Mendelssohn seems to deny the need for the pursuit of culture insofar as it might involve the association across different estates (JubA 6.1, 116-17). However, in a subsequent essay, Mendelssohn thinks better of this as he recognizes the potential harms caused by the strict separation of the estates; so, after (re-)introducing a distinction between “offices [*Ämter*]” and “estates [*Stände*],” he continues:

What is useful for offices can be damaging for the estates, and vice versa. In large nations, where businesses are abundant, distinguishing them ever more carefully is convenient; but the estates must be brought into connection all the more as the distinction between offices inclines us to separate them. (JubA 6.1, 151)[[14]](#footnote-14)

When it comes to the types of associations that best promote this intermingling, Mendelssohn makes specific mention of “brotherhoods [*Brüderschaften*], orders, and guilds” which, whatever their precise purposes, have the common function of enabling sociability between estates in the pursuit of a shared end (JubA 6.1, 151).[[15]](#footnote-15) What is in any case clear is that Mendelssohn likely does *not* have in mind here the “reading societies” and other sorts of more formal learned gatherings, such as his own *Mittwochgesellschaft*. In addition to appealing to a rather more limited clientele, these groups contribute little to the refinement of manners given their focus on the delivery of lectures or the (dramatic) reading of poetry and plays. Indeed, this dependence on the written word strikes Mendelssohn as inconsistent with the sort of conversational intercourse that promotes culture; as he writes (in a rather different context in *Jerusalem*), “Everywhere there is the dead letter; never the spirit of lively conversation [*lebendige Unterhaltung*]” (JubA 8, 169-70; JRP 103)

An obvious example of the sort of (informal) association that conforms to Mendelssohn’s model would be the *salon*, an institution that flourished in Berlin (with some interruptions) beginning in 1780. What is particularly relevant about the salon in this context is that it frequently hosted individuals holding diverse social standing.[[16]](#footnote-16) One distinguishing feature of Berlin salons was that rather than being hosted by female members of the aristocracy, as was the case in France, they were often hosted by Jewish women. The two most famous “salons” of turn-of-the-century Berlin were those hosted by Henriette Herz (1764–1847) and Rahel Levin Varnhagen (later Fredericke Varnhagen von Ense) (1771–1833). Notably, Herz and Varnhagen were childhood friends, were both Jewish, and were also closely acquainted with Mendelssohn and his daughters, and it was Mendelssohn’s open house that served as a particular model and inspiration for their own.[[17]](#footnote-17) The intermingling of the estates within these salons run by Jewish women from families of means is perhaps unsurprising—their comparative wealth and (informal) education (particularly compared to women brought up in Christian families) meant that they had cultivation of manners combined with access to the highest social strata, even as their religion marked them as outsiders.[[18]](#footnote-18)

As one of the few quasi-public spaces in which women could directly engage with the contemporary culture and also employ their own agency, especially in creating and exploring different models of self-formation,[[19]](#footnote-19) the salon was an important feature of intellectual life in Berlin from the late 18th century onwards (even if it was frequently mythologized in subsequent accounts).[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, and in spite of the considerable differences in their respective gatherings (reflecting their own interests and particular talents), both Herz and Varnhagen can be understood as seeking to promote culture in the distinctly Mendelssohnian sense. In the case of Herz, her salon developed out of the regular gathering hosted by her husband, the philosophical physican and favourite student of Kant, Marcus Herz (1747-1803), in which a prominent and diverse clientele heard lectures and witnessed scientific experiments (which she also attended).[[21]](#footnote-21) Herz’s salon, which ran from roughly 1780 until her husband’s death, started as an alternative for those members of the younger generation in attendance with interests in discussing the latest literature, including the young von Humboldts (whom she taught the Hebraic alphabet), Schleiermacher, and the Schlegels (and it is here Friedrich met his future wife, Brendel Veit-Mendelssohn). Herz herself does not refrain from boasting that “at that time in Berlin there was no man or women who would later distinguish themselves [...] who had not belonged to this circle.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Significantly, she also emphasizes the fact that her “society” was a place where *spiritedness* (*Geist*) served to level all distinctions, and the resulting equalization yielded a sort of satire of courtly life, directed “against the whole class of the high nobility with its cold formality [*Formalwesen*].”[[23]](#footnote-23) The result, at least the intended one, was a group of like-minded individuals committed to the spirited and free exchange of ideas untainted by the sorts of prejudice (especially anti-Semitic) that held sway in broader society:

What is then to be wondered that amidst such social relations (or more accurately, mis-relations [*Mißverhältnisse*], a spiritual society presented itself, an opportunity which, in spite of the predominant prejudice against the Jews at the time, was eagerly snapped up by those who generally sought spiritual cultivation [*geistige Förderung*] down the path of a conversational exchange of ideas?[[24]](#footnote-24)

Varnhagen was rather more explicit about the purpose of her salon, particularly the first salon she hosted which ran from the early 1790s until 1806. Convening in her parents’ house over a simple service of tea, Varnhagen’s salon expressly had sociability as its goal. In a frequently-quoted passage in a later letter, she extols sociability (*Geselligkeit*) and its centrality for all human endeavours: sociability, she writes, is

[a]ctually the most human thing among human beings! The sum-total and the origin of everything moral! Without fellows, without companions for earthly existence, we would ourselves not be persons and ethical action, law, or thinking would be impossible without the assumption that another—the image of a person—is like us, that he is *what we are*.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The central value placed on sociability meant that during her first salon, the emphasis was on wide-ranging conversation and not dramatic readings or the presentation of lectures, which Varnhagen found distasteful.[[26]](#footnote-26) Varnhagen characterizes hers as a “free society,”[[27]](#footnote-27) and in order to ensure that it promoted the end of sociability, Varnhagen discouraged personal satires and mockery,[[28]](#footnote-28) but sought to ensure that “a productive good will” predominated.[[29]](#footnote-29) Varnhagen’s salon was especially notable for the wide intermingling between estates that it fostered. Among its guests (a number of whom overlapped with Herz’s salon) were artists and thinkers (including her brother, Ludwig Robert, and Jean Paul, among others), members of her family and Jewish friends, but also diplomats, officers, and nobility, with whom Varnhagen enjoyed an exceedingly casual *rapport*. An unwelcome and unpleasant baron who threatened to spoil the mood one evening was productively engaged by Varnhagen “simply and well, without apprehension or insincerity,”[[30]](#footnote-30) while Clemens Brentano reports that, concerning the higher-born guests, including Prince Louis Ferdinand (1772–1806), Varnhagen “does not care any more than if they were lieutenants or students [...] they would be equally welcome to her.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

In addition to realizing the kind of sociability essential to the promotion of Mendelssohnian culture, both Herz’s and Varnhagen’s salons represent a notable extension of Mendelssohn’s call for intermingling between the estates to include the concourse between the sexes.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is notable in this respect that both Herz and Varnhagen enjoyed an atypically casual relationship with members of the opposite sex. For Herz, this was partly the result of her husband’s benign unconcern for her, a circumstance that led to Herz having to delicately extricate herself from numerous entanglements with admirers.[[33]](#footnote-33) In Varnhagen’s case, she points to her unmarried status as removing an obstacle for her to engage with male guests more freely; this is suggested, for instance, when she equates the limitations of the state of marriage with those of membership in a specific estate: “an office or estate [*Amt oder Stand*] seems to me to be as restricting as a marriage.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

This interest in exploring the possibilities of refined, non-romantic concourse between the sexes is likewise behind the rather more experimental *Tugendbund* (compact of virtue), initiated by Herz and Wilhelm von Humboldt, and which included Alexander, as well as Carl von La Roche, and Brendel Veit-Mendelssohn, among others (some of whom were outside of Berlin and were personally unacquainted with Herz). The *Tugenbund* had as its purpose “reciprocal moral and spiritual [*sittliche und geistige*] development, and the exercise of love in effective works.”[[35]](#footnote-35) As the participans themselves attested, the *Tugendbund* itself had all the trappings of a formal society (Wilhelm von Humboldt refers to it as a *Loge* or lodge), complete with encrypted letters and a set of statutes,[[36]](#footnote-36) though in contrast with some of these other societies there were no hierarchies observed among those involved as the participants employing the familiar (*Du*) form, no matter the relative difference in standing, a circumstance that applied to new members as well as older ones. While the group struck some as a mere forum for half-disguised flirtatious oversharing and as a juvenile pursuit which Herz herself never outgrew (as was suggested by Varnhagen herself, who opted not to join),[[37]](#footnote-37) Herz did credit it for the inspiration of at least one “exercise of love in effective works,” namely, when she took in a child of Jewish beggars who were stranded beyond the gates of Berlin, though she regrets that her efforts to “raise [the child] to virtue” were ultimately unsuccessful.[[38]](#footnote-38) What is, in any case, important is that alongside the crucial role that Herz’s and Varnhagen’s salons had in the reception and development of early Romanticism, these experiments in sociability (including the *Tugendbund*) still have a foot in the 18th century as they serve as prime examples of institutions which fostered and indeed extended the kind of culture which Mendelssohn identified as vital for enlightenment.[[39]](#footnote-39)

3. Education as Vocation: Amalia Holst

Returning to Mendelssohn’s characterization of enlightenment itself, it will be recalled that the conception of the human being’s distinctive *vocation* (*Bestimmung*) plays a central role. With this phrase, Mendelssohn is obviously invoking a topic that is central to German philosophy and philosophical anthropology throughout the second half of the 18th century. As it was first raised by Johann Joachim Spalding in his treatise *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (first edition 1748), the question of what the vocation, or destination, of the human being was, concerned first and foremost what the human being might expect in the afterlife, primarily on the basis of a consideration of its complement of natural powers and dispositions.[[40]](#footnote-40) Mendelssohn was quite familiar with this famous work, as is evidenced by an exchange between himself and his friend Thomas Abbt on the topic published in 1764. There, Mendelssohn identifies the human being’s vocation as follows:

The *proper* vocation of the human being on this earth, which the foolish and the wise alike fulfill—albeit to a different degree—is hence the *cultivation* [*Ausbildung*] *of all faculties of the soul according to divine intentions*, since this is the aim of all their earthly work [*Verrichtung*]. (JubA 6.1, 20; EVM 250)

As we have seen, in the essay on enlightenment, Mendelssohn claims that our vocation, consisting in the development of our faculties, is “set as the measure and aim of all our strivings and efforts, like a point to which we must direct our eyes if we would not become lost” (JubA 6.1, 115-16). This account of the human being’s vocation *as human being* serves as a crucial frame for Mendelssohn’s corresponding conception of enlightenment, as it shows that what is constitutive of enlightenment is not the mere “acquisition of *information,*” in Kant’s subsequent dismissive formulation (cf. AA 8:146n), but rather the opportunity for the cultivation of the soul’s faculties that such acquisition affords.

Mendelssohn had additionally distingusihed between the vocation of the human being considered, on the one hand, as an individual human being and, on the other, as a citizen (*Bürger*) which is to say as a “member of a society [*Mitgliedes der Gesellschaft*].” With respect to the latter, the specific set of (cognitive) faculties and dispositions that a human being develops in their pursuit of enlightenment will differ depending on what standing or which profession they hold in a society, whereas the enlightenment that pertains to “the human being as human being” does not differ according to “*Stand* und *Beruf*” but pertains to universally shared cognitive capacities and interests (and, presumably, to the dismissal of prejudices to which we are naturally prone).[[41]](#footnote-41) Significantly, Mendelssohn thinks that the fulfillment of our vocation as human beings occurs at the level of the individual rather than of humanity as a whole, a fact made clear in the ensuing correspondence with Abbt.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In this context of the broader debate relating to Spalding’s *Bestimmung des Menschen*, Mendelssohn and his contemporaries focused on the question of what, if anything, followed from this claim with respect to our certainty in the existence of God and the afterlife. Yet, as might be clear, Mendelssohn’s particular conception of the human being’s vocation has as its distinct implication that education of some sort, through the development of our distinctively human, higher capacities, is necessary for all in order to fulfill this vocation. Given this, it is perhaps odd that Mendelssohn himself never devoted a treatise to education, though he was actively involved in a number of pedagogical projects, including the founding of the first public school for Jewish boys in Berlin,[[43]](#footnote-43) and counted a number of educational innovators among his friends and correspondents, including Johann Bernhard Basedow and Joachim Heinrich Campe. Mendelssohn does touch on the issue in a variety of contexts, however. For instance, in *Jerusalem*, in the course of a discussion of marriage, he contends that through the joint creation of a child, the parents undertake an obligation to educate it:

Whoever helps to beget a being capable of felicity is obligated, by the laws of nature, to promote its felicity, as long as it is not yet able to provide for its own advancement. This is the natural duty of education [*Erziehung*] which is, to be sure, only a duty of conscience. Still, by the act itself, the parents have agreed to assist each other in this respect, that is, to discharge together their duty of conscience. (JubA 8, 118-19; JRP 50)

Moreover, Mendelssohn’s final philosophical work, *Morgenstunden* is itself framed as a set of lectures derived from conversations had with his son, son-in-law (Simon Veit), and a family friend. While his son Joseph (born in 1770), and Bernhard Wessely (born in 1768), son of Aron Wessely, were fairly young at the time of the original morning conversations, the topics covered include a refutation of Kantian idealism, a refutation of Spinozistic pantheism, and a novel proof of God’s existence. This is perhaps less surprising, given that Mendelssohn’s children, including his three daughters, had by all accounts the benefit of a thorough education.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This connection between the conception of the human vocation in terms of the development of our higher capacities and the issue of education was clearly recognized by Amalia Holst (1758–1829), who in her self-identification as a “practical educator [*praktische Erzieherin*]” engaged in a thorough criticism of the philosophical foundations and applicability of modern educational theories. In her (anonymously published) *Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer modernen Erziehung* (*Observations on the Mistakes of our modern Education*) of 1791, she takes aim specifically at Basedow and Campe whose ambitious pedagogy sought to replace the emphasis on rote memorization of useless material with a wide-ranging education in the sciences, religion, and morality with the aim of training useful citizens. This was accomplished through the publication of textbooks, including model conversations between pupil and instructor as well as a wealth of visual aids, and through the use of (sometimes competitive) games particularly for the mastery of languages.[[45]](#footnote-45) While Holst shares Basedow’s and Campe’s reservations regarding the old methods, she charges them with an over-correction; so, while memorization had the effect of making students content with a superficial sort of learning that did not penetrate to its source,

modern education has fallen into the opposite error, [namely] it leads the pupil to the source [*Quelle*] too early, from which they can take as much as they want, but unused to this heady brew they become drunk at first and think themselves able to hold their own with anyone; but habituation soon dulls the effect and, as they still have no feeling for the truly beautiful and useful, they grow to neglect and despise them and rush to the next stream without ever bothering to return.[[46]](#footnote-46)

According to Holst, then, modern educational practices promotes the development of harmful drives and passions among students, including obstinancy (as in the above case), vanity and self-conceit (through competitive learning), and an imagination over-heated by the images of the divine presented in the textbooks. On this last point in particular, Holst approvingly cites “the blessed Mendelssohn” who had also denounced the inclination to render supersensible things sensible in the preface to his *Morgenstunden*.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Behind Holst’s criticisms of modern education lies a conception of the human being’s vocation similar to Mendelssohn’s, though Holst thinks that recognizing this has distinct implications for our pedagogical presuppositions and practices. So, she recognizes the importance of education for cultivating the child’s intellect and will, but contends that the wide range and abstract character of the topics treated by modern educators, as well as the reliance upon argumentation, are poorly suited to the stage of development of the child’s powers and dispositions. As she notes, these modern educators wrongly presume that their pupils dispose over distinct conceptions of the subject matter and seek to lead them to various conclusions through the use of long chains of inference they are unable to follow.[[48]](#footnote-48) Notably, Holst’s criticism here might even be extended to Mendelssohn’s own pedagogical activity with respect to his young audience in the conversations at the basis of the *Morgenstunden*, though she refrains from pointing this out herself. In any case, this has the effect of rushing the child’s maturation, forcing their intellectual development beyond its natural pace and leading to the generation of passions that they are poorly equipped to handle, a circumstance that leads Holst to compare children educated in the modern fashion to plants in a hothouse as they are forced to grow quickly and ripen too early.[[49]](#footnote-49) Holst chalks this failing on the part of modern educators up to their bent towards theory rather than practice,[[50]](#footnote-50) and to a neglect to observe carefully the children who they will be shaping.[[51]](#footnote-51) Had they done so, rather than “being unable to move quickly enough in teaching students in the elements of all sciences as soon as possible” they would instead have recognized the wisdom of their own advice that “with a child, the enlightenment of the understanding must be pursued only very slowly” and through “lessons that are accommodated to the capacities of the child.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

With Holst’s *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung* (*On the Vocation of Women for a higher Education*) of 1802, the implicit reliance in the *Bemerkungen* upon the conception of the vocation of the human being as consisting in the individual development of higher capacities becomes explicit. Early in the treatise, for instance, she claims that nature’s purpose with respect to humanity was “to endow us with enough dispositions and powers so that we can develop [*ausbilden*] them and thereby transition to a condition of culture.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Moreover, the right of every human being to education is directly a function of our duty to fulfill this purpose:

all higher education of the human being, and consequently also of women, must flow from the all-encompassing and true source, as a duty of humanity to develop all of his powers and to contribute to the well-being of the whole as an active member. Therefore the ennobling of ourselves, and co-operation in the great plan of the author of nature, is our purpose.[[54]](#footnote-54)

As should also be clear, Holst now makes the case for women’s right to education in particular, and indeed she does so in terms familiar from Mendelssohn’s essay on enlightenment. In doing so, she pointedly does not challenge the traditional conception of women’s vocation in terms of the threefold occupations of *Gattin*, *Mutter*, and *Hausfrau*, but she does banish these to what Mendelssohn would call the “extra-essential determinations” of woman’s vocation, emphasizing instead that women, as human beings, should also be recognized as entitled to enlightenment to the same extent as men considered as such. She writes that

[o]nly in the first obligation of human beings, which demands that we develop [*auszubilden*] all of our powers in the most beautiful harmony towards the highest perfection, will we all be free. Here we share in the same rights, and this duty binds us as well as men. Before we are man or woman, male or female citizen of a nation, husband or wife, we are human beings.[[55]](#footnote-55)

In this way, Holst appropriates the core distinctions in Mendelssohn’s account—between our vocations as human beings and as citizens, and between essential and extra-essential determinations—and the presumed priority of the former in each case in order to unlock the emancipatory potential of this conception of enlightenment for women. For his own part, Mendelssohn did not explicitly (or implicitly) exclude women from among the subjects of enlightenment; nonetheless, Holst now makes it clear that gender is to be considered among the human being’s ‘extra-essential’ determinations when it comes to the issue of our essential vocation as human beings: “[we] must, as thinking beings, completely abstract from what pertains to us as women [*ganz vom Weibe abstrahiren*], and merely consider ourselves as humans, that is, as perfectible beings.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

4. Elise Reimarus and the Advance of Enlightenment

The previous discussion, of course, raises the issue of how to act in cases of conflict between our interest in enlightenment and our duties as citizens of a state. Mendelssohn’s contention that deference should be shown to the regime in conflicts between what the regime deems to be central to its subjects and what reason determines to be essential to us as human beings proved to be controversial. Mendelssohn’s own view, of course, should be situated within the context of his *Jerusalem* and the strict exclusion of the state (and religion) from authority over matters of conscience, but even so among some of his friends, Mendelssohn’s position was taken to validate the toleration of harmful prejudice that stood in the way of the progress of enlightenment. In a letter in response to Mendelssohn’s essay, August Hennings (1746–1826), an envoy of the Danish court in Berlin and (later) Saxony, and an enthusiastic *Aufklärer*, denied the possibility of such a conflict, at least provided that our enlightenment as citizens is not to have any meaning:

The opposite of enlightenment is delusion [*Verblendung*], active or passive, barbarousness, or stupidity. In such a conflict, therefore, the human being would have to be misled by barbarousness or preserved in a state of unknowing. Here, God would be put in contradiction with Himself. He would have put a power into some just so that it could be rendered impotent or inactive in commerce with others. If it is not to come to that, then the constitution of the state [*Bürgerliche Verfassung*] must be unjust, and we could no longer call it the enlightenment but rather the delusion of the citizen. Thus, no conflict is possible (JubA 13, 228-9)

In response to this uncompromising approach to the progress of enlightenment—one that seeks the immediate eradication of all prejudice and denies the possibility of any abuse of enlightenment[[57]](#footnote-57)—Mendelssohn advises the need for forbearance and even toleration of prejudice, lest the would-be enlightener harms their own cause. Thus, he claims, the enlightener must “observe the time and circumstances carefully, and only raise the curtain in those respects in which the light would be salutary to the sick,” and even confesses that, if he had the power to uncover all prejudice “with a single stroke of the pen,” he would be loathe to do so (JubA 13, 237).

As it happens, the contrasting positions here set out by Mendelssohn and Hennings relating to how, and how fast, enlightenment should advance are only the late developments of an ongoing discussion on the topic between the two, a discussion that was notably also engaged by Elise Reimarus (1735-1805), an admirer and correspondent of Mendelssohn’s, and Hennings’ close friend and sister-in-law. Reimarus was a central figure in Hamburg intellectual life from the 1770s onwards, in no small measure due to the “tea table [*Teetisch*]” that she co-hosted (with Hennings’ sister, Sophie) and which counted Klopstock, Campe, and F. H. Jacobi among its guests, and provided a forum for discussion of leading literary and philosophical works, including plays by Lessing (who was, as it were, a corresponding member of the group).[[58]](#footnote-58) Reimarus’ own literary activity included works for the stage and pedagogical texts (including the sorts of model conversations criticized by Holst[[59]](#footnote-59)), though she would be best known for her involvment in the two major intellectual controversies of her time: the *Fragmentenstreit* (Fragment controversy), involving Lessing and a radical deistic text written by her father, and the *Pantheismusstreit* (Pantheism controversy), between Jacobi and Mendelssohn relating to the former’s report that Lessing had confessed himself a Spinozist. As is particularly evident in her correspondence relating to the former controversy, Reimarus developed and honed a distinctive and consistent position relating to the advance of enlightenment.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The Fragment controversy relates to a manuscript written by the orientalist and philosopher Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), entitled the *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen*

*Verehrer Gottes* (*Apology for the those who honour God rationally*) in which he, among other things, disputes the authority of Scripture as a source of revelation and outlines a conspiracy among Jesus’s disciples at the origin of Christianity. The manuscript came into Lessing’s hands in 1770 or 1771—and it is now thought that Elise Reimarus was the driving force in delivering it to him[[61]](#footnote-61)—and in 1774 he began publishing a series of “fragments of an unknown” from the manuscript, a circumstance made possible through his position as director of the ducal library in Wolfenbüttel (which exempted him from the censor). The first fragment (“On the Toleration of Deists,” 1774) elicited little in the way of response, a fact that disappointed Lessing. A series of publications in 1777 of the most inflammatory sections, along with his critical commentary (and an excerpt from his own *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, without identifying himself as the author), did provoke the opposition of orthodox Lutheran theologians with whom Lessing traded publications through to 1780, but which ultimately saw the manuscript confiscated, the exemption from censorship revoked, and Lessing forbidden to publish on theological topics (and at one point threated with further sanction from the imperial *Corpus Evangelicorum*).

Whatever Lessing’s intentions in stoking the controversy,[[62]](#footnote-62) Elise Reimarus’ interest was to strike a blow in the “fight against the repression of reason and human freedom”[[63]](#footnote-63) through the publication of her father’s radical views, which she shared (possibly even going further than him in some doctrines[[64]](#footnote-64)). Even so, Reimarus recognized from the outset that caution had to be exercised, not only because of her family’s potential exposure, but also and especially because proceeding too hastily might have the opposite effect. She reports in a letter to Hennings that in an early discussion concerning how best to publish the *Apologie*, she initially resisted publication altogether, given that in her opinion, “the making-known of certain things, and the dispelling of prejudices, always happens too early or too late.”[[65]](#footnote-65) It does not seem that Reimarus had any say in the matter in the end, as Lessing first attempted to publish the manuscript in its entirety before turning to the publication of fragments,[[66]](#footnote-66) but in any case Reimarus would defend Lessing’s eventual strategy to Hennings, who, unsurprisingly, advocated for a more straightforward way of proceeding. Foremost among Reimarus’ reasons for approval of the piecemeal strategy, is that the publication of the manuscript in its entirety would make it likely that the author would suffer the same fate as other radical thinkers, like Tindal, who stepped forward fully with their works, namely, that of being simply “printed, denounced, and forgotten.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Lessing has thus provided, through the faceless Fragmentist, the opportunity for the public’s durable engagement with the truth, rather than inviting immediate proscription from those authorities hostile to enlightenment.[[68]](#footnote-68) Against Hennings, who advocates for “the open, frank, heroic love of truth,” Reimarus thus prefers in these times of division, the “gradual undermining of the edifice” which, like the full-frontal assault proposed by Hennings, promises its eventual and total destruction, but bears a better chance of lasting success such that “no hope can remain for rebuilding it.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

What in any case becomes clear through Reimarus’ involvement in the Fragment controversy is that, like Mendelssohn, she thinks that the advance of enlightenment must be pursued cautiously and with a close eye on the general and local circumstances. Notably, Reimarus would come to share some of Hennings’ concerns in light of the uproar that resulted from the publication of the second fragment in 1777, conceding that they should have adopted the “direct route [*den geraden Weg*]” from the outset.[[70]](#footnote-70) Even in this distance-taking, however, her frustration should be understood as directed at Lessing’s own unhelpful interventions into the affair through his dissenting commentary, his insertion of his own disguised and highly “confusing” speculations, and the distracting sideshow of bitter polemics. In her later verdict, Reimarus realises that “a mask like Lessing’s is least suited to the truth,”[[71]](#footnote-71) and indeed, this disappointment is entirely a function of her worry that the best chance for the *Apologie* to have the desired effect on the public has been, as a result of the transformation of the controversy into a personal dispute, irretrievably lost.[[72]](#footnote-72)

And yet, despite also rejecting Hennings’ more extreme approach, which Mendelssohn pointedly characterizes as amounting to a “prejudice against prejudice,”[[73]](#footnote-73) Reimarus’ views on the advance of enlightenment are to be distinguished from Mendelssohn’s more concessive approach. This departure is evident in her role in connection with her activity relating to Mendelssohn’s new translation of the Pentateuch, for the advertisement of which a pamphlet was circulated in 1778.[[74]](#footnote-74) A rumoured ban of the translation on the part of the Jewish community in Altona precipated a discussion of prejudice and the limits of toleration among Mendelssohn, Hennings, and Reimarus. Mendelssohn, after floating an uncharacteristically intolerant query about whether state police might limit the proselytizing of a tolerated minority (which provoked a strong dissent from Reimarus),[[75]](#footnote-75) adopted the rather more characteristic position that prejudices should be tolerated, can often be corrected by other prejudices (in the way an initial reckoning error might be offset by a subsequent one), and indeed, may sometimes even be indispensable.[[76]](#footnote-76) At this juncture, Reimarus, who had been mediating the correspondence, intervened with a letter to Mendelssohn in which she expresses her agreement that prejudice is to some extent ineradicable, and concedes that Hennings’ position of a general crusade against prejudice is “chimerical,” but nonetheless stresses that the responsibility of combatting them remains:

But how? Not through fire and sword, but rather insofar as one exposes them, as much as possible, to the light of truth which they cannot bear [...]. If, then, I say: I wish to utterly uproot prejudices, I understand by this that one should strive as far as possible for distinct concepts, seek as far as possible the highest degree of truth and spread its light.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Thus, against Mendelssohn who, as Altmann has noted had long cherished the idea that “in certain instances prejudice might be preferable to enlightenment,”[[78]](#footnote-78) Reimarus contends that in spite of the unavoidability of prejudice, and in spite of some prejudices being harmless or even capturing some of the truth, it remains the task of the enlightener to proactively, but prudently, set themselves in opposition to them.

This policy of cautious but persistent advancement is evident in Reimarus’ activity in the Fragment controversy, though not only there. So, we have seen, her initial hesitation to publish the full *Apologie* had to do with her concern that the text would be decried and forgotten without effect, a concern that Lessing’s strategy successfully (initially, at least) mitigated.[[79]](#footnote-79) For Reimarus, then, the inclination was consistently in favour of putting the radical text in the hands of the public in a form in which it could most effectively do the work of dispelling the prejudices fomented by the defenders of organized (and revealed) religion. Yet, this attitude of cautiously but consistently advancing enlightenment can also be discerned in her activity in the context of the Pantheism controversy. Reimarus does not shy away from Lessing’s alleged Spinozism; rather, she greets Jacobi’s report with some relief since she had heard reports that he had inclined towards rather more “superstitious” practices in his last days, though she adopts the prudent course of action in submitting it to Mendelssohn who is better placed to judge “whether the public should be allowed to know it or not” (in his planned work on Lessing’s character) (JubA 13, 120-1). Reimarus also seems to relish her role as the arbiter of the (at that point private) debate between the two relating to the truth and nature of Lessing’s Spinozism, though she indicates later that Jacobi’s Lessing “seemed truer and therefore appealed more” to her.[[80]](#footnote-80) Even her shock at Jacobi’s publication of the correspondence between them and Mendelssohn can be explained through her disappointment, similar to that felt in the course of the Fragment controversy, that the inclusion of material relating to Lessing’s private interactions with his friends would distract from the larger issue of his Spinozism; thus, she felt a deep concern that “a contest over the truth [*Wettstreit um die Wahrheit*] [...] could now become a private quarrel [*Privatstreit*] in which only Lessings enemies and the enemies of truth might win.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

This view on the appropriate way to advance enlightenment arguably also informs Reimarus’ political thought, outlined in an unpublished manuscript thought to be written between 1789 and 1792.[[82]](#footnote-82) There, she identifies the jurisdiction of state authority as extending (only) to “external right,” or that aspect of those actions that might impinge on others’ action and omission, but rather than strictly separting this from the inner domain of conscience (as Mendelssohn does), such that political life might be insulated from (private) enlightenment, Reimarus instead emphasizes the necessity for the enlightened individual to guide and inform the policies of the state:

The *morally* and *psychologically* necessary conditions of a higher degree of political perfection are public consensus [*Uberzeugung*], lead by *Selbstdenker* who are morally-disposed [*moralisch gesinnte*], and a set of customs that are supported by rationality in policy and the rearing of children [*Kinderzucht*].[[83]](#footnote-83)

Given the indispensability of such active *Selbstdenker*, Reimarus claims that any enlightenment that is limited merely to the sphere of external action is “absurd and pernicious,” as “external freedom is only the means *of the internal* and a mere condition of moral culture.”[[84]](#footnote-84) On account of her conception of the relation between the spheres of morality and right, Reimarus is sometimes compared to Kant (either in terms of offering an alternative, Kantian view or alternative to the Kantian view[[85]](#footnote-85)). Without denying the appropriateness or the fruitfulness of such a comparison, it should now also be clear that there is also a relevant context (and important foil) for the development of her views in her engagement with Mendelssohn.

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, shifting focus to Mendelssohn’s conception of enlightenment has the effect of acknowledging the importance of diverse forms of (historically female) intellectuality and sociality, foregrounding philosophical topics of particular interest to women, and revealing women to be active participants in discussions of central importance to the Enlightenment. Indeed, we have seen that the women considered above did not content themselves with implementing Mendelssohn’s views but instead actively and critically engaged with them, frequently in ways that served to extend them to enhance their inclusivity (of women in particular). This was the case for Herz’s and Varnhagen’s efforts to expand women’s role in promoting the flourishing of culture (while also testing and revising the boundaries between the sexes), for Holst’s attempts to realise the emancipatory potential in the notion of the vocation of a human being as a human being and furnish it with an appropriately ambitious theory of education, and finally for Reimarus’ forthright account of the responsibility of the would-be enlightener to gradually but decisively persist in undermining the edifice of prejudice that stands in the way of enlightenment. It is, in retrospect, unsurprising that the conception of enlightenment framed by Mendelssohn, who like the women profiled here did not enjoy the privileges of citizenship nor regular access to the institutions of education, should have this distinctively inclusive character; what is surprising is that it has been and continues to be neglected by historians of philosophy and of the Enlightenment more generally in spite of this considerable virtue.[[86]](#footnote-86)

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2. All references to Mendelssohn’s works are to the *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. A. Altmann, et. al. Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1971ff (cited within the text as ‘JubA’ followed by volume and page number). I have also made use of the following translations (and abbreviations): [EVM] (with Thomas Abbt), “Exchange on the Vocation of Man,” trans. A. Pollok, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 39.1 (2018): 237-61; [MH] *Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence*, trans. D. Dahlstrom and C. W. Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); [JRP] Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. A. Arkush (Waltham: Brandeis UP, 1983). All other translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For background on this discussion, see James Schmidt, “The Question of Enlightenment: Kant, Mendelssohn, and the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50.2 (1989): 269-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are well-known difficulties in translating the German term *Bildung* (‘formation,’ ‘self-formation’). For simplicity’s sake, I have rendered it as ‘education’ here, though, I will opt to reproduce the German in what follows in order to distinguish it from terms like *Erziehung* and *Ausbildung* which conform better to the English ‘education.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I have opted throughout to render ‘*Menschen*’ as ‘human being’ rather than ‘man,’ though it goes without saying that it was typically intended only to designate males. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Notably, in a subsequent letter, Mendelssohn presents the distinction between essential and extra-essential in terms of the former relating to human *existence* (*Daseyn*) and the latter to human *well-being* (*Besserseyn*) (cf. JubA 13, 236). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A number of other alternative interpretations of this enigmatic claim have been canvassed; for discussion see A. Pollok, *Fazetten des Menschen*. *Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2010), 457-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This commonality may not be coincidental as some have traced the distinction to a common source; on this see A. Pollok, *Fazetten*, , 455-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a rather more detailed comparison of the two pieces, see W. Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 210-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For this, see P. Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 264-5. In a note in his essay “What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?,” in an apparent response to Mendelssohn’s discussion, Kant allows that (a specific form of) education can play a role in the enlightenment at the level of the *individual* but denies that it is as effective in bringing about the enlightenment of an *age* (cf. AA 8:146-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a detailed discussion of this, see A. Pollok, “How the Better Reason Wins: Mendelssohn on Enlightenment.” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68.4 (2020): 540-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for instance JubA 13.1, 235, where he attributes a hesitancy among a people to associate with others to a deficiency in culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See JubA 8, 131 ; JRP, 63: “wie Atheisterei und Epikurismus den Grund untergraben, auf welchem die Glückseeligkeit des gesellschaftlichen Lebens beruhet” (see also as well as JubA 8, 201-2; JRP 136-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Notably, Mendelssohn also identifies a class of profession or office that requires “vieljähriger Umgang mit Menschen aus allen Ständen” (cf. JubA 6.1, 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mendelssohn’s essay is itself a response to an essay published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* that called had ridiculded “*Schützengilden*” for serving little purpose in modern Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Petra Wilhelmy-Dollinger elevates this to a characteristic mark of Berlin salons “im Idealfall”; cf. *Die Berliner Salons: Mit historisch-literarischen Spaziergängen* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2000), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See for instance Julius Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz. Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Hertz, 1850), 123; and Wilhelmy-Dollinger *Die Berliner Salons*, 19 and 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. On these points, see Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 121-4, Wilhelmy-Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, 49, and Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen. The Life and Work of a German Jewish Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 26-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On this, see Anne Pollok, “The Role of Writing and Sociability for the Establishment of a Persona: Henriette Herz, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, and Bettina von Arnim,” in *Women and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, ed. C. W. Dyck, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See the literature cited in I. von der Lühe, “Biographie als Versuch über weibliche Intellektualität,” in *Jahrbuch für Frauenforschung*, edited by I. von der Lühe, A. Runge (J.B. Metzler: Stuttgart, 2001), 113n23 for critical perspectives on the “myth of the salon.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For an account of the founding of Herz’s salon, see Wilhelmy-Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, 61-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rahel Varnhagen, *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens für ihre Freunde*, ed. K. Varnhagen (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1834), vol. II, 616. See also Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen. The Life and Work of a German Jewish Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Karl Varnhagen, *Vermischte Schriften*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1876), 167-8, and Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See K. Varnhagen, *Vermischte Schriften*, 166-7, and R. Varnhagen, *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens*, vol. II, 462, respectively [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. K. Varnhagen, *Vermischte Schriften*, 168; cf. also Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. R. Varnhagen, *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens*, vol. I, 62-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. K. Varnhagen, *Vermischte Schriften*, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Quoted in Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. It is not clear, however, that Mendelssohn would not have welcomed this; thus, he favourably mentions, in his reply to Hennings, the French who have distinguished themselves in the pursuit of culture by promoting “conversation between human beings of all estates and *genders* [*Geschlechter*]” (emphasis mine; JubA 13, 236). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Hans Landsberg (ed.), *Henriette Herz. Ihr Leben und ihre Zeit* (Weimar: Kiepenheuer, 1913), 140-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. R. Varnhagen, *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens*, vol. I, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Landsberg (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 196-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Wilhelmy-Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For account see Fürst (ed.), *Henriette Herz*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Compare Thomann Tewarson, who also stresses both Herz’s and Levin’s “deep commitment to Enlightened Humanism” (*Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. “Ich sehe nunmehr, wohin meine Natur mich führet, meine ganze Natur, wenn ich sie unverstümmelt und unverfälscht betrachte; und ich will ihr folgen wohin sie mich führet” (Spalding, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 7th ed. (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1763), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. As Mendelssohn writes in his exchange with Abbt: “The lowest rank within each species has a similar vocation as the highest.” (JubA 6.1, 22; EVM 251). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See, for instance JubA 6.1, 36, 40, and 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. On this, see Britta Behm, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Transformation der jüdischen Erziehung in Berlin. Eine bildungsgeschichtliche Analyse zur jüdischen Aufklärung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Münster: Waxmann, 2002), 189-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Behn, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Transformation*, 165-75, for an account of the private education of his children. Mendelssohn’s efforts with his daughters in this respect stand in a regrettable contrast to the views on education expressed earlier in the course of his courtship of his wife; again, see Behn, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Transformation*, 133-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Robert Louden, *Johann Bernhard Basedow and the Transformation of Modern Education: Educational Reform in the German Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 12-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. A. Holst, *Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer modernen Erziehung von einer praktischen Erzieherin* (Leipzig: Müller, 1791), 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Holst, *Bemerkungen*, 90. For the reference to Mendelssohn, see MH xx; and Robert Louden, “A Mere Skeleton of the Sciences? Amalia Holst’s Critique of Basedow and Campe,” in *Women and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, ed. C. W. Dyck (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021), 86-7 on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. Holst, *Bemerkungen*, 27-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Holst, *Bemerkungen*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Holst, *Bemerkungen*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Holst, *Bemerkungen*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Holst, *Bemerkungen*, 37-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. A. Holst, *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung* (Berlin: Frölich, 1802), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Holst, *Bestimmung,* 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Holst, *Bestimmung*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Holst, *Bestimmung*, 2. Even so, Holst arguably violates this distinction in limiting her call for improved access to education “an die höheren Stände, und den Mittelstand” (*Bestimmung*, 68). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. As Hennings writes to Mendelssohn, “Misbrauch der Aufklärung verstehe ich so wenig als Dunkelheit des Lichts” (JubA 13, 229). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. On this, see Almut Spalding, *Elise Reimarus (1735-1805) The Muse of Hamburg: A Woman of the German Enlightenment* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2005), 177-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. For an example, see Spalding, *Elise Reimarus*, 231-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. In what follows, I am particularly indebted to Reed Winegar’s discussion of Reimarus, as presented in his “Elise Reimarus: Reason, Religion, and Enlightenment,” in *Women and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, ed. C. W. Dyck, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021), 110-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. On Elise Reimarus’ role in this, see Gerhard Alexander, “Wie kam Lessing zur Handschrift der Wolfenbütteler Fragmente?” *Philobiblon. Eine Vierteljahrsschrift für Buch- und Graphiksammler* XVI.3 (1972): 160-73, and Almut Spalding, “Der Fragmenten-Streit und seine Nachlese im Hamburger Reimarus-Kreis.” *Aufklärung* 24 (2012): 16, on the likely date of the exchange. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. On Lessing’s intended targets (the neologists) see H. B. Nisbet’s introduction to G. E. Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Wilhelm Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” *Neues Lausitzisches Magazin* 38 (1861): 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See Bertha Badt-Strauß, “Elise Reimarus und Moses Mendelssohn (Nach ungedruckten Quellen),” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* 4 (1932), 174-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Heinrich Sieveking, “Elise Reimarus (1735-1805) in den geistigen Kämpfen ihrer Zeit.” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 39 (1940): 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Along these lines, Reimarus praises the fact that Lessing’s original publication (quite contrary to his intentions) seems to have “aroused little distrust among the orthodox” (Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 204 and 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 212 and 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Quoted in Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London/Portland OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998), 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. For detailed presentation, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 368-420. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See his letter to Hennings of July 29, 1779, and Reimarus’ comments to Hennings in her letter of August 31, 1779 (both quoted in Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 388-90). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Quoted in Badt-Strauß, “Elise Reimarus und Moses Mendelssohn,” 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Altmann, p. 391. On this, one might see JubA 6.1, 111 and 139 (where Mendelssohn distinguishes the true from the false in prejudices). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. For Reimarus’ subsequent and wholly positive appraisal of Lessing’s manner of proceeding, see her letter to August Hennings, 12 March 1785 (in Wattenbach, “Zu Lessings Andenken,” 223). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Quoted in Sieveking, “Elise Reimarus (1735-1805),” 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Reprinted in Badt-Strauß, “Elise Reimarus und Moses Mendelssohn,” 185. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Winegar, “Elise Reimarus,” 120-4 and 130-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. See Spalding, *Elise Reimarus*, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Reimarus, *Versuch einer Läuterung und Vereinfachung der Begriffe vom natürlichen Staatsrecht*, §28 (in Spalding, *Elise Reimarus*, 513). [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Reimarus, *Versuch*, §29; Spalding, *Elise Reimarus*, 513. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. For the former see Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt, “Legality and Morality in the Political Thought of Elise Reimarus and Immanuel Kant,” in *Political Ideas of Enlightenment Women: Virtue and Citizenship*, eds. L. Curtis-Wendlandt, P. Gibbard, and K. Green (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 91-107, and for the latter see Winegar (“Elise Reimarus on Freedom and Rebellion,” in *Practical Philosophy from Kant to Hegel: Freedom, Right, and Revolution*, eds. G. Gottlieb and J. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. I am grateful to Anne Pollok and Charlotte Sabourin for their insightful comments on a previous draft of this chapter [↑](#footnote-ref-86)