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How the Better Reason Wins

Mendelssohn on Enlightenment

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Abstract: This paper considers Mendelssohn's attempt at a definition of Enlightenment in terms of Bildung, comprising the theoretical element of the enlightenment of reason with the practical requirements of culture. To avoid a possible dialectics of enlightenment, where the very methods one uses to enlighten harbour the seeds of new blindness, Mendelssohn advocates considering the lively connections between people, the role of traditions and personal relations in the formation of an individual self, and the connections we should have to our past, present, and future. Thus, his essay from 1784 can be read as an apt defence of a dialogical notion of freedom within the Enlightenment era.

Keywords: culture, Bildung, Enlightenment, public and private use of reason, freedom of speech

Though recognized as an important philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn is more often than not quickly dismissed as a mere rationalist who could not stand up to Kant. That he was actively engaged in the search for a proper Enlightenment[1], that his very involvement is a case in point for the benefits of the Enlightenment's main projects themselves, and that his position is richer than immediately meets the eye, is often overlooked. But there is good reason to think that he is *the* epitome of the very movement. His very existence demonstrates *in actu* to his contemporaries what it means to accept the force of the better reason without consideration of the speaker's religious orientation. He was – even though only as an

1 In the following, "Enlightenment" with a capital E references the period and intellectual endeavor; "enlightenment" in small caps references Mendelssohn's theory of it as an integral part of *Bildung,* self-formation.

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adjunct[2] – member of the Berlin Wednesday Society (BWS); a secret circle devoted to explore the limits, possibilities, and obligations of the Enlightenment and its proponents. Mendelssohn's opinion was highly valued, his style of criticism witty bordering on sharp-but-to-the-point; quite some of the issues discussed at the BWS, such as prejudices, lack of orientation, and also the 'natural' contempt for 'infidels', he could understand firsthand, and make the difficulties and mistakes underlying these issues comprehensible for others.[3] This intimate relation with the pitfalls of the Enlightenment proves pivotal, since its unfolding in a complex process had to be dealt with cautiously, in order to avoid throwing out all securities and traditions at once, leaving the thus enlightened empty-handed, groping for any sense of belonging and security. David Friedländer (another adjunct of the BWS) expresses quite befittingly the delicacy that even the most ardent discussant felt around these sensitive topics: "Doubt is the indispensable condition of any improvement of understanding *(Erkenntniß),* of all progress of spirit, all education *(Bildung),* of enlightenment. All analyses of such a kind could only be watched with a certain timidity *(Scheu)* in those days, almost like an enigma – so that such analyses could only be done in circles of close friends."[4]

In contrast to the still common assumption that Enlightenment only pertains to reason, Mendelssohn and the members of the BWS sought to include human sensibility and emotionality, as well as its members' social traditions and sensitivities. Enlightenment must encompass the whole human being. And this is why the process of Enlightenment had to develop at a cautious pace. In the long run, the improvement of old prejudices might be beneficial – but if introduced too quickly, the desired results will bring with them a slew of aversion, unease, and probably new myths just as harmful as the old ones. To avoid such a dialectics of Enlightenment, in which the very own methods to enlighten harbor the seeds of new blindness, Mendelssohn advocates to consider the lively connections between people, the role of traditions and personal relations in the formation of an individual self, and the connections we should have to our past, present, and future.

Same as his colleagues, Mendelssohn treats the issue of Enlightenment as a battle against prejudice. One important means in this battle is the freedom of

2 Cf. letter from Biester to Mendelssohn (1783), in: Mendelssohn (1972–) 13, 96–97 (cited below as JA).

3 Biester accordingly wrote in his obituary: Mendelssohn had shown that "any human being from any people could do right and could please God!", JA 23, 19–26, here 26.

4 Friedländer, D. (1814), Editor's Introduction, in: Mendelssohn, Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele, 5th ed., Berlin, X; cit. Lohmann (2011), 95.

speech. But in contrast to others, he first seeks to develop the foundation of the Enlightenment in its essential relation to self-formation *(Bildung)* before considering the obligations that spring from an improved understanding of ourselves and our world. This methodology showcases the true humane shape of the overall project: for Mendelssohn, the "vocation of the human being" determines "measure and goal" of Enlightenment in general, as well as the application of its means.[5]

In what follows, I will first discuss Mendelssohn's particular stance within the debate on Enlightenment (section 1), and then show how the fight against prejudices (section 2) and the freedom of speech (section 3) figure in his overall theory of the formation of a self and of a society.

1 Self-Formation

The discussion about scope and goal of the Enlightenment starts with a footnote. In a contribution pertaining to the legality and necessity of civil marriage, BWS member Johann Friedrich Zöllner asks 1783: "*What is Enlightenment?* This question, which is nearly as important as: *what is truth,* should be answered before we even start the process of Enlightenment! And yet have I not found an answer to it!" In the same year, the physician Johann Carl Wilhelm Möhsen presents on "What is to be done for the enlightenment of our fellow citizens?"; 1784 followed by Zöllner's "What does to enlighten mean?" and Christian Gottlieb Selle with "What is Enlightenment? When does someone deserve to be called 'enlightened', and when does he count towards the mass of the unenlightened?"[6] The most notorious echo to these questions can be found in Kant's famous essay on Enlightenment; the other reply came from Mendelssohn.[7] Both were published in the proceedings of the BWS, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, in 1784. Both thinkers agree that Enlightenment contains more than the reasonable treatment of scientific questions. Mendelssohn even treats enlightenment as a sub-case of self-for-

5 A first draft concerning this issue can be found in Pollok (2010), ch. 1 & 4; however, it seems that there are still several misgivings about Mendelssohn's role in the discussion concerning the Enlightenment that moved me to reconsider my take.

6 Cf. Pollok (2010), 427 with further references, and Keller (1896), 67–94.

7 These presentations are reprinted in Hinske (1977). It is important to note that both essays were not prize essays for the academy, and that both authors did not know about the other's work until publication. Both the editors of JA, 6.1, XXVII, and Hinske (1981), 88, note only slight corrections of the vote before publication. A comparison of the manuscript (which is the vote itself) and the publication in the *Monatsschrift* (facsimile in Hinske 1977, 444–451) show no changes.

mation *(Bildung)*, stressing that the improvement of one's thinking must happen in tandem with a clarification of one's ethical and social commitments.

> Self-formation, culture, and enlightenment are modification of social life; effects of industriousness and of the attempts of all of humanity to improve their social state. [...] The more the social state of a people is brought into harmony with the vocation of man by art and industriousness; the more *self-formation*[8] do these people have. Self-formation consists in *culture* and *enlightenment*.[9]

With this announcement, Mendelssohn defines *Bildung* as the overarching term that is specified through a closer inspection of its constitutive two elements. The vocation of the human being, i. e. the harmonious development of the sensible and rational, as well as the ethical and social aspects of humanity, serves as the framework. The human striving for happiness is the motivational factor. "Indeed I think that a human being is called to develop all the powers of their physical and spiritual nature; to exercise and perfect themselves in, for instance, wit and imagination, as well as in all the arts of beauty[10] and embellishment of their body, as well as of their soul."

Mendelssohn's stress on self-formation gives voice to a general tendency of his time – instead of natural development, or biological concepts such as irritability[11], he situates it as an essential part of the human vocation in the development, cultivation, and ultimately formation of different capacities – biological aspects, cultural and intellectual talents – into a harmonious whole. This formation has to happen within and in exchange with the individual's society, the affective dimensions of being, as well as the surrounding (and internalized) traditions and orientations of faith. "Self-formation" in this sense is not a natural process, but relies on the development and honing of human capacities. Mendelssohn calls this a "purpose"[12]. The German *"Vorsatz"* relates this closely to intention, and stresses the willful aspect. Human self-formation is at the same time appropriation and limitation. In *Jerusalem* (1783) this is "education" and "rule/(self-)government";

8 It becomes clear here that self-formation has an almost too individualistic ring to it. But for Mendelssohn, it clearly pertains to the formation of self as an individual as well as being part of a nation or a people.

9 JA 6.1, 115.

10 The original reads *Künsten der Schönheit,* which could be understood as a nod towards the fine arts. However, Mendelssohn immediately adds *Verzierungen des Leibes*. It is thus more likely that *Künste der Schönheit* refers not to those of high-brow art, but the ones of the body, or at least of external features only; cf. his letter to Hennings, Nov 11, 1784, JA 13, 236.

11 Cf. Pollok (2010), 442.

12 JA 13, 235.

now, in his essay "On the question: What does to enlighten mean?", Mendelssohn tries to put it more succinctly. "Self-formation", after all, is never a possession, but a way of life.[13]

Culture and enlightenment Mendelssohn takes to be the practical and theoretical dimension of self-formation, respectively. "It seemed to me that enlightenment pertains more to the theoretical, culture more to the practical [dimension] [...] Enlightenment is directed at the theoretical; towards cognition, the disposal of prejudices. Culture, in contrast, is oriented towards morals *(Sitten)*, sociability, the arts, the do's and don'ts *(Thun und Lassen)*."[14]

Every person has a universal and individual dedication *(Widmung)* to develop and must perfect their respective predisposition. However, only the universal task can be explicated. How we fulfill our individual vocation is, in contrast, never completely explicable. But to foster Enlightenment, an *Aufklärer* such as Mendelssohn had to offer a bit more than a universal rule.

For one, he holds that a certain resistance by the environment, other agents, or even some internal antagonism within the agents themselves is helpful in achieving a higher level of perfection. As he spells out earlier in his aesthetic writings, humans rarely enjoy mere harmonious beauty, but appreciate what challenges them and their feeling of satisfaction and safety.[15] Humans need something to work off from – they need a counterpart in order to shape themselves.[16] The more varied the challenges, the more capacities we train. Harmony is a constant dynamic, capturing both personal and social aspects of our lives.

The process of perfecting oneself does not even end in this life, but it rather continues beyond one's death: "Everything in a human being tells of their eternity."[17] Every human activity has therefore a super-individual and super-temporal quality. This metaphysical, or even religious aspect in Mendelssohn's image of the human being shows quite clearly that the German Enlightenment has never been equivalent to a fundamental secularization. While I discussed Mendelssohn's theory of immortality elsewhere[18], here I will take note of the social and individual implications of his idea of perpetual improvement through adversity, which will determine the further explication of both enlightenment and culture as well as their interplay.

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13 Cf. Zammito (2002), 29.

14 This is also in the letter to Hennings on Nov 27, 1784, JA 13, 235, 237; cf. Altmann (1982), 14–15.

15 Cf. Pollok (2019).

16 Cf. Hinske (1981), 97–99.

17 JA 6.1, 42 (Notes on Abbt's Amicable Correspondence).

18 Pollok (2010), ch. 5, id. (2012), id. (2013) and id. (2018a & b).

Mendelssohn defines enlightenment as rather limited, albeit with both an external and internal dimension: Enlightenment pertains to "reasonable cognition (object[ively]) and capability (subj[ectively]) of reasonable deliberation about issues of human life, depending on their importance and their influence on the vocation of the human being"[19]. This theoretical side thus concentrates on knowledge and cognition (content and process). However, by referencing the dependency of cognition on the human vocation, Mendelssohn already gestures in the direction of culture. Whenever we consider and measure the realm of reasonable cognition, we are contemplating enlightenment; but whenever we think of its actual application, we need to take culture into account. The concrete realization and application of thought needs more than logical correctness; it touches on the situation of the acting individuals, their state, and relations to others and and their respective environment. To actualize the results of thought, we need to master the respective modes of execution that are fitting to the particular situation at hand. A poorly executed thought counts not just as insensitive, but is theoretically poor as well. Mendelssohn calls this aspect of the realization of thought a consideration of morals and beauty. Against common perception[20], Mendelssohn is indeed interested in the intersubjective, social aspect of enlightenment – which he calls "culture".

The concept of culture is, same as *Bildung,* just a "newcomer"[21] – and even Mendelssohn himself is sometimes ambivalent or imprecise about its usage. Bollenbeck mentions as the earliest references of this term (in Mendelssohn's usage) the respective entry in Walch's *Philosophical Lexicon* from 1775, nine years prior to Mendelssohn's essay. "Culture signals the improvement of a thing, which is achieved through helpful support and effort *(hülfreiches Zuthun und Bemühen)*. One describes both organic and inorganic things as cultivated if they were brought into a more perfect state than their natural one has been. One cultivates agricul-

19 JA 6.1, 115.

20 For instance, Zöller (2013), 159–61, who treats Mendelssohn quite fairly, but does not see him paying attention to society in the same extend than Kant.

21 JA 6.1, 115/313. The history of the usage of "culture" in German philosophy begins with Pufendorf's reference to the Latin *cultura animi;* or the *vita cultura* to leave the *status naturalis*. Velkley (2002), 15, stresses the inner direction against any form of "natural barbarism", may it be in reference to Cicero's teleological concept of education or otherwise. In his letters to Hennings, Mendelssohn calls it a "stranger in our language", an "ambiguous word" (Nov 17, 1784, JA 13, 234–235). As Bollenbeck (1994) correctly points out, Mendelssohn did of course not come up with the modern notion of culture just on his own. But he did start to use it quite prominently in the debate, and is a key reason for its popularity afterwards. Cf. also my discussion of Herder's concept in comparison to Mendelssohn in Pollok (2010), ch. 5.

ture, plants, flowers, humans, etc."[22] Mendelssohn limits his version of culture to the human being alone and ultimately stresses the distinction between culture and nature much more than Walch's entry did. Hence, he does not think so much of the concept gleaned from the Latin root *colere* (conditioning, maintenance, preservation), with its concentration on the perfection of flora and fauna, nor the social meaning of "folk-spirit"[23]. Instead, Mendelssohn's usage is closer to the Latin *excolere,* focused on perfecting or refining, in combination with another dimension of *colere:* adoration, and therewith, dutiful and venerate maintenance as a sacred duty.[24] Culture in this sense: as the practical dimension of enlightenment, is an act guided by the reasonable cognition of perfection, and aims at a continual heightening of said perfection *in actu*. "Culture always requires the conditioning of something in light of a purpose. The application of labor to achieve a certain end seems to be something deliberate *(scheint etwas vorsätzliches zu seyn);* enlightenment does not presuppose the concept of deliberation."[25] We may think of something just for the sake of it; once we *do,* we act with an end in mind, may it be as vain as it could get. Culture includes the arts and sciences, but also manners and mores; culture limits the scope of enlightenment, but also functions as the enabling condition of the realization of the fruits of cognition.[26]

It seems a bit inconsistent, though, when Mendelssohn then declares that the human being *as* a human being isn't in need of culture[27] – if culture is really nothing more than an external addition, it could be understood as the final 'polish' on our concepts that we just employ to make them seem more easily digestible. Then, the truly Rousseauian primitive would indeed not be in need of it, since he only cared about the things themselves, not their appearance. Maybe Mendelssohn was thinking about culture here as the social condition of cognition: not the practical realization of thought (that even a human being just for herself needs to accomplish to get anything done), but the way in which something is realized, which might be mostly due to social conventions. When you consider yourself in isolation, you might just care about 'not being hungry anymore' – but in company, you want to satisfy your hunger in a way that nobody is staring at you disgustedly.

22 Walch, Philosophisches Lexicon 1, 1536, cf. Bollenbeck (1994), 312, and Pollok (2010), 448, fn. 178.

23 Velkley (2002), 13, in connection to Rousseau's use of the concept; the appropriate notion in both French and English would not be Culture, but Civilization, cf. Bollenbeck (1994), 47–52.

24 It is also in this sense that he interprets religious education, as discussed in *Jerusalem*. The church may educate, but only through "love and beneficence" (JA 8, 114), not by coercion.

25 JA 13, 235.

26 Cf. JA 6.1, 115; JA 13, 235.

27 JA 6.1, 116.

Most of the time, however, Mendelssohn does not stick with this understanding of culture as mere "social polish", but considers the broader scale of practicability and its various modes in human forms of sociability. Ultimately, the distinction between culture and enlightenment is rather artificial – it is hard to come up with any valid and realistic distinction as one distinction constantly leads back to the other, and vice versa. Consequently, Mendelssohn sees their interdependency as their dominant feature: *only* where proper enlightenment rules can we discern an appropriate level of culture – but also, without any knowledge of the conditions of the realization of cognition, there is no real knowledge, either. Enlightenment and culture are two sides of the same coin; in their perfection they designate the adequate and total orientation of both thought and action towards an increase in perfection. In short, where there is only theoretical, but no social progress, there is no *Bildung;* and hence, there is *neither* enlightenment *nor* culture.[28] This also indicates a certain aesthetic dimension of self-formation: merely intellectual perfection alone is of no use for human beings, but to enable the complete development of all human faculties it must be comprehensible and shareable. The Platonic ideal of the unity of beauty and truth as true perfection comes to the fore here, but with a distinctively intersubjective flavor: only in exchange with others can we become ourselves – hence the necessity of culture.

The overarching term self-formation is thus a *functional* term that indicates the harmonious interplay of enlightenment and culture. Any attempt at societal change via education or publications has to pay heed to this harmony as well.

Any philosophy of Enlightenment or *Bildung* must hence consider the fair conditions for its realization. The constitutive elements for such an enlightened citizenship reach inward, for a personal ethics, as well as outward, toward an appropriate habit that supports the harmonious development of oneself and everyone else within society.

Some of the members of the BWS envisaged the movement of the Enlightenment to start from an enlightened middle class – from there, it could spread upwards and downwards without causing too much uproar. Thus Friedrich Gedike argues that a universal enlightenment would be desirable, but in the end not realistic: too different are the subjective and objective[29] conditions under which different people live. In contrast, Mendelssohn strongly favors the necessity to allow *everybody* access to the sources and means for education and change. Implicitly, Mendelssohn expects anyone to make use of their intellect once they are set free

28 Cf. JA 8, 110–112.

29 As 'objective', he lists "place, time, status, sex"; Keller (1896), 85, cf. 86–87 (Wloemer) and 88 (Irwing).

to do so. He himself was an extraordinary example for this – even though, sadly, this cannot be said for the majority of people, as we still constantly witness.

2 Dialectics of self-formation: How far can Enlightenment go?

Mendelssohn employs a concept of Enlightenment that is simultaneously static and dynamic. Similar to Kant, he distinguishes between an era of Enlightenment and an enlightened era. But to actually clarify the difference, and the respective directions of each kind, we need to look at Mendelssohn's vote on Kant's essay for the BWS: "The state of (being in the process of) enlightenment is sometimes better than the state of being enlightened. Our reactive powers[30] slow down once there is no resistance anymore. Our drive for truth loses its spur *(Sporn)*, and the common principles misconceive reason, their very source, and stop being reasonable themselves. Without our struggle against prejudices reason herself turns into frosty imitation, and the drive to originality leads back into prejudice and superstition."[31]

This explains why enlightenment will not automatically be successful if employed shortsightedly. Mendelssohn and his colleagues could witness this first hand. Why, they ask, is 'enthusiasm' (used pejoratively: *Schwärmerey*) still prevalent today, even though Frederick the Great supports the freedom of the press? Could it be that our attempts at Enlightenment lead to its very opposite, so that those we aim to enlighten cling the harder to their beloved beliefs, may they be superstitious and full of prejudices?

In his short piece: "Should we work against enthusiasm by satire or through 'public connection' *(*äußere Verbindung*)*?"[32], Mendelssohn[33] considers Shaftesbury's 'test of ridicule' as a way of dealing with prejudice and enthusiasm. We should not, he advises, approach anyone with satire and ridicule but rather direct

30 Mendelssohn uses the word *Federkraft* to allude to a coil that is more powerful when it is wound up.

31 JA 8, 227.

32 JA 6.1, 137–141; Berlinische Monatsschrift, 1785.

33 An earlier, interesting attempt at a clarification is Thomas Abbt's notes for a prize essay by the Patriotic Society in Basel, 1763 – which Mendelssohn might have known by 1780. Abbt treats prejudices as legitimate motivating grounds for the execution of civil duties (ibid., 151–152, 169–170), and only in an appendix considers the eventual removal of all such beliefs, cf. Pollok (2010), 452.

them amicably towards the mistakes of their attitude.[34] He is quite aware of the impact of publicly implemented truths which he only hinted at with the notion of 'culture' in his Enlightenment essay. Only a cultured way of dealing with them takes into account that the erasure of prejudices has to be conducive of critical thinking and self-esteem. There has to be an encompassing notion of a functioning society first (culture), before we can find appropriate ways to implement change. We need to know the fundamental factors of social life, such as the specifics of human life, cognition, and moral consciousness, before we can ever hope to clear up certain misconceptions. Mendelssohn clearly intends to avoid radical enlightenment for the sake of preserving a functioning public. Similarly to Friedrich Schiller in the *Aesthetic Education* (1794), Mendelssohn thus prepares the grounds for self-critique *while* society continues to function. Hence, he has to attribute the means of change to other areas, be it art or the theatre, or the safe discussion among 'secret societies' – all understood as a preparation for the ability to publicly discuss the implications of liberal thought.

Mendelssohn never forfeits self-determination in religious matters. No one could be allowed, he argues, to force others into "happiness", not even with the best possible reasons.[35] Any such externally forced development is mere coercion, prone to make the thus 'enlightened' fall back to her previous ways, full of resentment. Self-formation, instead, needs real insight, backed up emotionally, and a feeling of responsibility for one's own actions as well as a consideration of the educational level of one's peers. Mendelssohn can allow religion to *support* the state in order to bring people together.[36] Religion may use its most impressive and emphatic means to introduce people to noble principles and attitudes; it can showcase the duties towards others and the divine. Religion might even be capable of showing how service to the state is akin to godly service; that the order of a state could represent divine order and justice, and that "being benevolent is God's highest and most holy will; and that true knowledge of the divine could not leave any trace of hate in the soul"[37]. But the church cannot coerce their members into feeling or seeing this.[38] Clerical rights encompass only 'imperfect' rights that not include the right of

34 JA 6.1, 140.

35 Cf. ch. 9 in Guyer (2020). For the creation and impact of *Jerusalem,* Altmann's seminal Mendelssohn biography (1973) and his work on Mendelssohn in general are still irreplaceable.

36 *Jerusalem*, JA 8, 112.

37 Ibid.

38 With his strict denial of an ecclesial right in *Jerusalem,* Mendelssohn anticipates the later discussions of a "civil union" in the BWS; see in particular Biester's "Proposal not to burden the clergy with the execution of marriages" (*Berlinische Monatsschrift* II, 265–276), in which he argues against the clergy's supposed "addiction to rule". Biester still also wants a "state church"

coercion; they pertain to the area of human internality[39] and ought to stay there. What Mendelssohn fails to reflect fully in respect to faith-oriented education is the issue of psychological coercion, which has proven to be as powerful as it is harmful to the members of a faith. But a discussion of this aspect would lead too far away from Mendelssohn's discussion of the issue at hand.

Neither state nor church can ever fully control the realm of conviction (and feeling). Enlightenment understood in Mendelssohn's sense of *Bildung* requires an awareness of one's own and others' emotional stance, level of education and development, and an understanding of freedom as an enabling condition for autonomous actions. There are articles of faith – similar to some prejudices – that are not available for external reform, but must be accepted as not being at anyone's disposal but the agent herself. The ultimate motion of complete Enlightenment is, in this sense, radically individualistic: the individual makes the move herself, or not at all.

The BWS approached the question regarding the when and how much of enlightenment from a pragmatic side. Mendelssohn's considerations regarding prejudices must be considered before this background; not in the least did quite a few members of the society support some form of censorship[40], some arguing that the general populace could not be burdened with too many hurtful and bothersome discussions they ultimately wouldn't even understand, others trusting the self-censure of authors, who should just 'know' the boundaries of propriety. Mendelssohn, however, positions himself clearly against both of these ultimately paternalistic positions. It is not within the power of the enlightenment agents to decide what the individual is supposed to think – real enlightenment has to come from the individual's own thinking and decision. No single institution could decide which content (and in which way) should become accessible to whom. Consideration of the individual is crucial for a genuine enlightenment, in which no group serves completely as the brains or walking-carts of another. In his vote from December 26, 1783, Mendelssohn reasons accordingly: "Even though it is true (which I don't fundamentally question) that certain prejudices, once they became national, should be spared – according to the circumstances – by any upright person; still the question remains: Should the limits of such be determined by *laws and censors*, or, like the limits of *wealth, gratitude [Erkenntlich-*

(Staatskirche) which seems to mix up those two spheres again. Cf. Zöllner (1783) who also asks the question "what is Enlightenment?".

39 JA 8, 115.

40 Cf. Hinske (1981), 89.

keit], and *honesty,* by every individual?"[41] Mendelssohn himself is unsure here how to implement norms guiding these changes that could not also be used for the suppression of dissenters. As we will see later (section 3), he did try to come up with some procedural rules to avoid such a perversion.

Earlier, in the third of his *Philosophical Dialogues* (*Philosophical Writings,* 2nd edition, 1771) he criticized Voltaire's parody of the theodicy in the *Candide* along the same lines. Still in one of his last works, the *Sache Gottes* (1784/1785), he returns to this topic of radical enlightenment and asks rhetorically: "What do you call the brattish boy who smashes the cripple's crutch just because he himself has not need for it?"[42] In the same vain do the proponents of the Enlightenment not have any right to get rid of those "crutches" (i. e. prejudices) that they themselves no longer need. Even popular and maybe somewhat simple-minded systems should not be ridiculed, since we could destroy something others deem to be very valuable and helpful in their process of enlightenment. "Our notions need to be refined, not completely redone"[43] – and this refinement should be done with respect and care.

Enlightenment as a public movement can thus not consist in a reckless abolition of prejudices, since that would disrespect the very agents it addresses. True Enlightenment must consider the conditions for *Bildung,* which includes the requirements of culture. Enlightenment as *Bildung* has to be humane in order to not twist the truths themselves, and allow for their autonomous application by each member of society. The reference to autonomy should always be counteracted with a reference to culture and society, though. Autonomy for Mendelssohn (who could not yet have known Kant's conception of it) references the humane and intersubjective aspect of human agency as well.

3 An intersubjective tool: publicity

The antidote to any subconsciously effective influences is publicity, including the protection of one's opinion.[44] Opinion Mendelssohn understands in a wide

41 JA 6.1, 111.

42 JA 3.2, 237 (§ 57).

43 JA 3.1, 237.

44 The public outled of the BWS was the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. This medium did not allow a glimpse into the actual discussions, but rather into its later stages. Most of the published votes are still more an offer for further discussion than a scholarly, final treatment of an issue. On this cf. Hellmuth (1982). It should be noted that Mendelssohn, next to Nicolai and Dohm, is always

sense, as what we can make public, but also what pertains to our inner direction and values – which, as we have seen above, he wants to safeguard from the reach of both state and church. No public institution has a right to our opinion – but it can have a right towards the *form* that this opinion takes in public.

In his *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn had already argued against the binding force of a faith. If certain matters of spiritual faith were poured into immovable clerical laws, any rational critique of them would henceforth be impossible, akin to blasphemy. Only a church which allows for discussion and does not bind the inner feelings of its members will not revert into despotism. "Tie faith to symbols, opinion to mere words, while being as modest and yielding as you wish; just fix these articles once and for all: woe then the wretched soul if he comes one day late and finds something to criticize in your modest, refined words! He is a killer of freedom! Onto the stakes with him!"[45] To avoid the lure of such misguided witch hunts, Mendelssohn seeks the authority of a continual intrareligious discussion.[46]

Such a marketplace of human felicity should be ruled by the law of the better reason through its *public* defense. Mendelssohn's notion of *Bildung* thus becomes an appeal for an open culture of discussion, for practiced tolerance and acceptance. The participants in said discussion might even belong to different faiths: anyone should have the freedom to participate – as Mendelssohn participated, as a Jew, in the BWS. A citizen must know the binding rules for such a discussion, as this act enables freedom from repression, argumentative transparency, traceability, and willingness to compromise. To include others, we need to think and talk clearly, and write comprehensibly. Since Enlightenment as a social project is meant for all, it has to reflect on the respective roles of all participants. Each of these roles is – and again this is an effect of the philosophy of overall perfectibility – limited and oriented by its contribution to the optimal development for all.

Fundamental is Mendelssohn's universal claim that "enlightenment that is interested in the human being as the human being must be *common (allgemein)* without consideration of status."[47] It aims at theoretical insight, but must not be exclusive. Had Mendelssohn developed a political theory from this, this would indicate the equal accessibility to education and any further form of qualifica-

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and clearest against any form of censorship; cf. Nehren (1994), 107. Irwig, for instance, affirmatively cites Mendelssohn's idea that the "guidance towards eternal truths" is a thing of "providence", not of politics – but then quickly stresses that the state's "censors" were appointed to guide Enlightenment into its proper direction, cf. Keller (1896), 87–88.

45 JA 8, 202.

46 Cf. Pollok (2014).

47 JA 6.1, 117.

tion (apprenticeship etc.), as well as the freedom of the press (and all forms of public expressions of opinion). As it is, there is no explicit theory, but a rather vague demand that we perfect our theoretical knowledge, as well as a call for "enlightenment concerning the human being as a citizen"[48], which is (in contrast to the theoretical version) "modified according to *status* and *profession*. The human vocation once again sets its measure and goal."[49] This clearly pertains Mendelssohn's earlier reflections on culture which consider humans in respect of their social nature, "in which all practical perfections have any worth only in respect to their contribution to social life"[50]. Here, the human being gains a symbolic dimension, as the individual acts (or better: is *supposed* to act) as if it represented all human beings. This, for Mendelssohn, also includes the society that human beings form – and thus, the individual becomes a representative of a supposed general will. Once again does some version of universality form a regulative norm for the realization of perfection. Even if this version of Enlightenment (a/k/a "culture" in Mendelssohn's books) is limited by "status and profession" of its addressees, it has a universal aim. It promotes a more specialized knowledge fitting to each status and profession, and therewith, knowledge that is oriented by practical needs. Knowledge in this sense has a clear reference to the concrete circumstances[51] and requirements of each individual life, even if its underlying and orienting idea is that of universal goodness and fittingness.

Mendelssohn is well aware that any limitation of the means to access this knowledge can always lead to a misuse of power – and is hence very clear that any form of education shall be open to all. This explains why he does not support Gedike's idea that Enlightenment should develop out of the middle class. It may be that such a development might be more peaceful; but Mendelssohn prefers a model of Enlightenment that supports the initiative of all its members. If someone from a lower class (like he himself as a Jew) wants to educate themselves, they should be allowed to do that.[52] Enlightenment, and with it, education, ultimately transcends all classes, oriented by the vocation of the human being, not the vocation of an individual as a cog in the social machine.

Mendelssohn's notion of a society remains a bit bland; instead of offering concrete political ideas, he rather stresses the responsibility of the individual for

48 In this sense, Mendelssohn should have used "culture" here, not "enlightenment".
49 JA 6.1, 116 (emph. in orig.).
50 Ibid.
51 Cf. Hinske (1981), 102.
52 It still is striking that Mendelssohn does not extend this thought towards women, as his own education of his daughters shows.

themselves and their immediate surroundings. In the end, as he writes to Hennings on November 27, 1784, it should be up to the individual, the *"Aufklärer"* (i. e. the person who supports and furthers the enlightenment), to what extent they can improve their surroundings (in particular as far as the removal of prejudices is concerned): "The decision must be theirs, and no public institution should set a measure or goal."[53] The practicability of such a standpoint is limited; however, it is indeed hard to fathom how a public institution could set the limits of its own overcoming. This seems to be also the main reason why Mendelssohn (and other *Aufklärer*) focused on the freedom of speech and opinion. As Mendelssohn already discussed in *Jerusalem*, freedom of speech is the basic form of political participation. It should – within certain limits – be open for everyone. It is this freedom that could avoid dictatorship and anarchy alike, and whose beneficial effects are crucial for the practical aspect of philosophy as *Weltweisheit*. Mendelssohn mentions this already in his 1763 *On Evidence*, as a creative and fruitful result of the principle of "friction", of dissent and opposition in the fight for the best argument in a living society. "In every republic the spirit of opposition is not only a necessary result, but oftentimes also a beneficial support of freedom and general welfare. Not every republican has the ability to lead [*das Ruder zu führen* – to control the helm, A. P.], or to advise the helmsman; but freedom demands that everyone voice their opinion, as inconsistent as it may be, so that nobody could come to the conclusion to cloak their own mere will [*Eigenwillen* – the idiosyncratic will, A. P.] as a wise resolution to force onto one's fellow citizens."[54] Freedom of speech does not distinguish between classes, and, in and by itself, does also not distinguish between good and bad opinion. Not being able to voice one's opinion freely might, as Mendelssohn sees it, convince people of the correctness of their opinion (since it never needed to be tested by others) and hence lure them into trying to impart it on others not as opinion, but as legislature. To think by oneself and for oneself, but then also to voice and communicate said thoughts is thus a fundamental necessity for freedom. Whether one is qualified to a certain opinion cannot be decided before, but only *after* a public discussion.

Mendelssohn also wants to apply this kind of public discourse to philosophy, so that nobody feels forced into following a certain creed out of mere ignorance of the alternatives, and without ever having the freedom to test out other

53 JA 13, 237.

54 JA 2, 296. Given our current political situation, it is fairly clear that Mendelssohn could not quite imagine how modern social media as virtual marketplaces of all kinds of convictions work, nor how they excel at influencing a populace without ever having *any* fair reason on their side.

thoughts for themselves. "Since not everybody has the ability to test all doctrines of philosophy *(Weltweisheit);* it is still better that they judge according to their baser insights than that they acknowledge some philosophical pope and blindly go wherever he desires to lead them. Who bemoans such freedom has despotic intentions themselves and is a dangerous citizen in the republic of philosophy."[55] In his vote "On the freedom of speaking one's mind", Mendelssohn is even more direct: "If anyone's freedom to speak one's mind should be limited, then it must be done by brute *force,* not *reason*."[56] In the abovementioned discussion of Möhsen's "What should be done for the enlightenment of our fellow citizens?", Mendelssohn is very clear that freedom of speech could never have – at least in the long run – truly damaging effects.[57]

For such an encompassing version of the freedom of speech to work, however, there need to be better guidelines for how to foster a public discourse.

Inspired by Kant, Mendelssohn here also considers the differentiation between the need for public obedience while in service, but private freedom of opinions (and faith). Ernst Ferdinand Klein had already formulated a need for a distinction between 'subordination' and the 'freedom to think [for oneself]' in his anonymously-published essay "Concerning the Freedom of thought and of the press. For princes, rulers, and writers"[58], thus prefiguring the frame of reference for both Mendelssohn's and Kant's essays.

The combination of both limitation and freedom should ultimately lead to a safe state, and the realization of the human vocation. Accordingly, in his vote "Public and Private Use of Reason", Mendelssohn distinguishes between "professional affairs" and "extra-professional affairs" *(Berufsgeschäfte und Außerberufsgeschäfte)*[59] Philosophy serves as mediator and guardian in the exploration of the border area between these two spheres by developing the criteria for a distinction between these two to solve possible conflicts. Mendelssohn distinguishes between opinions guided by private preferences and those that pertain to society and its functioning. When in office, we are bound by the interests of said public and would infringe on its freedom if we allowed ourselves to follow our private interests, or private conception of reasonable decisions. Such a wrong-headed display of "thinking for ourselves" would turn into obstinacy, hindering the con-

55 JA 2, 296–297.
56 JA 6.1, 123.
57 Cf. Keller (1896), 80. However, as discussed in sec. 2, this freedom of speech should not end in mere ridicule.
58 Klein (1784), 326. He explicitly addresses "Fürsten, Minister und Schriftsteller".
59 JA 8, 225–229, here 228.

tinuation of the society we were sworn in to protect. Coming to the same result as Kant[60], Mendelssohn thus requires anyone in "professional affairs" to be reasonable, but to also obey what the office requires.

How then is public criticism possible? Mendelssohn delegates this to the "extra-professional affairs"[61], which equals Kant's conception of the "public use of reason". According to the list of addressees Klein mentions in the title of his essay, Mendelssohn does not only consider writers, but also ministers/secretaries and teachers: all branches of "extra-professionalism" that include a distinctive public outreach. With this, he clearly addresses the danger of institutional standstill to the "living tradition" – here in the public sphere, but in clear reference to the "living tradition" that religions ought to establish as well (see part 2). In this sense, we follow Erlin's characterization based on Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem:* "social knowledge is only valid when it constitutes a direct response to the empirical challenges of communal life."[62]

Establishing institutions is always connected with a responsibility that transcends an individual life-span: institutions have their effect on later generations whom we shall not bind to "dead laws", i. e. regulations that do not answer to vital interests anymore.[63] The institution of the "freedom of speech" by itself, however, does not establish a system of checks and balances inherent to the system. Hence, we need to allow the development of such checks *through public discourse* as a test of opinions for their truth and worth. Finding reliable criteria for a fruitful and just change of society is problematic, in particular concerning the change and transformation of existing institutions by the members of said society themselves, as we might all just secretly indulge our private interests. As long as the private use of reason is strongly regulated and limited, quick changes of public institutions are impossible. We can see here that Mendelssohn, as unhappy as he might have been with the then-current institutions, was not willing to sacrifice public safety and continuity for a revolutionary change of institutions and the limitless freedom of speech of anyone at any time. His thoughts concerning possible areas of conflict, and how to solve them, point into the very same direction. In the essay on Enlightenment, Mendelssohn considers the conflict between the human being as a human being (and an individual) and as a citizen, and between an "essential" and "extra-essential" *(wesentlich und außerwesentlich)* vocation. "The essential vocations [sic] of the human being concern their *being-there*

60 Klein also mentions this with reference to Frederick the Great, cf. Klein (1784), 326–327.
61 JA 8, 228.
62 Erlin (2002), 92; cf. Pollok (2014).
63 Cf. Erlin (2002), 93–95.

[*Daseyn*, but not with the Heideggerian connotation, A. P.], the extra-essential concern their *improvement (Besserseyn);* the former create perfection, the latter beauty; and when both are not sustainable at the same time, then the former need to take precedence."[64] In cases where extra-essential aspects of the individual's vocation collide with essential vocations of the citizen, the solution of said conflict is easy enough to see and accept.[65] More crucial, however, are those cases where individual and societal essential vocations collide. In the essay, Mendelssohn states about such cases: "Unhappy is the state that must confess that a human being's essential vocation cannot harmonize in it with a citizen's essential vocation, that the enlightenment which is indispensable to humanity cannot extend to all classes in the realm without the constitution being in danger of perishing. *Here philosophy shall remain silent! [Hier lege die Philosophie die Hand auf den Mund!]* Necessity may prescribe laws or, rather, forge chains that are to be laid upon humanity in order to humiliate it and keep it constantly stifled."[66]

To be sure, with his exclamation – put in italics – Mendelssohn did not support dictatorships by asking philosophy to remain silent, but rather appeals to philosophers not to try to reason where not reason herself, but brute force is in full power. "Necessity" in this particular case is not an impartial necessity, but the accidental necessity of such an inhuman state that needs to "humiliate" mankind in order to stay afloat.[67] Whenever philosophers are not in the position (mostly because of their *Berufsgeschäfte*) to criticize those methods, they should also withstand the temptation to explain and rationalize these inflictions. Given an essential breach in basic rights, no amount of explanation is ever going to be sufficient to make it right.

The battle against prejudices requires individual responsibility and culpability: once we put our reasoning out there in the market of ideas, it develops a force to be reckoned with, and which we can only truly control at its source. Hence it is essential to be on safe rational ground from the get-go. Enlightenment entitles and necessitates to voice one's opinion. However, we do need to be aware of the effect of our statements. But this is, in and of itself, no sufficient tool to secure

64 JA 13, 236–237.

65 We should note – as Mendelssohn does not – that a constant set-back of all extra-essential individual vocations will also be detrimental to the development of a living culture and to the human vocation at large. So, even here a solution of a conflict can only be temporary and must be used for a re-shaping of society at large to finally include the extra-essential aspects as well.

66 JA 6.1, 117 (emph. mine); cf. Mendelssohn (1997), 315–316.

67 On this cf. also my detailed discussion of the trope Mendelssohn uses in Pollok (2010), 459–460. Concerning the voices assuming that Mendelssohn is here indeed supporting the idea of opportunism, cf. Albrecht (1983), 145–146, and Berghahn (2001), 95.

and safeguard the fulfillment of the human vocation within a dictatorship. How, then, can such a system be transformed into an enlightened society and just political system? In the first place, Mendelssohn develops a program of responsibility, differentiation, and restraint. There is more to his theory, though. In other notes related to the – far more visible – essay on Enlightenment, Mendelssohn furthers the idea of a distribution of responsibility, stressing the *communicative* character of such active versions of Enlightenment.

In his *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn asks how teachers, employed by the state and hence ordained with the duty to present certain contents in their lectures, can and should act if such a content ran detrimental to their personal convictions. There are two rather obvious options: teachers could either ignore their qualms and continue to fulfill their duty, or they could renounce their job without making a big fuss about it. Mendelssohn also considers whether it would be worthwhile (and within the bounds of the personal and public duties of the bearer) to connect the resignation with a public plea for one's case – and concludes that none of these options should be neglected outright[68], even if the latter would require a functioning public sphere in order to be fruitful. It is clear that Mendelssohn never loses sight of the specific circumstances of a situation, nor the varying backgrounds of the agents: some might hold back from making a political statement because they feel the pressure of other obligations. We are never quite in a position to look down on a seemingly cowardly decision: "Whoever fancies himself of never having spoken any differently than what one thought, has either never thought at all, or prefers – for this moment – to boast with an untruth which his heart contradicts."[69]

In the third part of his vote on Kant's essay, Mendelssohn goes a step further and develops a somewhat pragmatic strategy for fruitful dissent, oriented by the principles of reasonableness and publicity. Here, he further investigates a fourth option that allows for the public use of reason *while* being on the job: showing dissent in *Berufsgeschäften* – to stay with the example: as a teacher – *without* giving up one's job, nor disrupting all working conditions in a harmful way, but such that the dissent paves the way for more thought about the issue, and finally the possibility of peaceful change.

What are, Mendelssohn asks, the options for a teacher *(Volkslehrer)* to improve society while in office? And he tests a radically new idea of personal responsibility in public professions: "Even when in office, a teacher will be quite justified to contradict those principles on which he was hired, and therewith

68 Cf. JA 8, 139.
69 Ibid.

introduce *innovations*."[70] So even if the office itself cannot be designed to reinvent itself – the people making up those offices can very well start such a process without necessarily making their own office impossible. This right for dissent Mendelssohn connects with three requirements that coordinate the public and private use of reason:

1. The reform-willing teacher has to justify – in a way that others can follow the line of reasoning – what exactly they plan to change, and why. This formulates the requirement of making explicit, concrete, and reasonable suggestions, oriented towards a specific point of improvement.
2. Said teacher must bear the legal consequences of the innovation. In this sense can a reform be legally permissible, even though it seems to break the contract which the teacher signed with the community (the *"Gemeine"*, as Mendelssohn has it) – the direction of change remains on social beneficence (what the institutions were developed for in the first place), not for personal gain.
3. The deviation from the previous norm itself has to fulfill three criteria (which the teacher, of course, has to test first). "1) I must be convinced that [the innovation] is for the best even for the opposition[71], and that these would finally approve of my act once they had gained further insight. 2) If said insight does not happen, and my opposition keeps insisting on my keeping our contract, then I must be willing to abstain from my plans, and shall not presume my right to force my view onto them. 3) Finally, I must firmly commit myself to accept my responsibility for all consequences and dangers that follow from the realization of my innovation, endure [all liability for] recoupment and penalty, contempt and persecution, and that I will not allow a third party to suffer under it."[72]

70 Ibid., 228–229 (emph. in orig.).

71 Mendelssohn uses *Gegentheil*, which is ambivalent.

72 „1) Ich muß überführt seyn, daß es zum Besten des Gegentheils selbst geschehe, und [diese] bey besserer Einsicht mein Verfahren billigen werde. 2) Sobald diese bessere Einsicht nicht erfolgt, und von Seiten der Gegenparthei auf Haltung des Vertrags gedrungen wird, so muß ich willig seyn, von meinem Vorhaben abzustehen, und mir nicht das Recht anmaßen, ihr meine Einsicht aufzudringen. 3) Endlich muß ich die feste Entschließung haben, alle Folgen und Gefahren der eingeführten Neuerung, Schadloshaltung und Bestrafung, Verachtung und Verfolgung über mich ergehen, und keinen Dritten darunter büßen zu lassen" (JA 8, 228–229).

On closer inspection we can see that these three rules[73] point towards the importance of communication, the rational traceability of reasoning in the process of improvement of institutions, and, finally, toward a clarification of responsibilities. The innovator, first of all, must not just think for themselves, but in the place of anybody else, in particular their adversaries. Even those must principally be able to support said innovation. The innovation must be clear and comprehensible. We should also assume (since Mendelssohn develops these rules in reference to the freedom of speech), that such an attempt must be made publicly, which should counteract mere power-play or revenge.[74]

In case the innovator does not argue well enough and cannot convince their adversaries, secondly, they need to take a step back. No innovation shall be forced. In terms of communication, this entails that the innovator is aware of this option from the start, and includes it into their very first attempt to convince their adversaries. A cautious, sensitive communication about the specifics of the innovation, a public consideration of the pros and cons that already includes – and answers to – the fears of the opposition: these are all valuable tools for a reasonable process. As enthusiastic as we might be about our plans, the *law* is still on the side of those who honor a contract. The public discussion of an innovation, however, should show how it purports the better reason. Any beholder of a contract must be willing to listen to an innovator, and must be willing to allow for changes, should said innovator be able indeed to to convince their adversaries of the better reasons.

The third and last requirement is the strictest, and implies the furthest reaching consequences for the innovator. Ultimately, it puts all responsibility squarely on the innovator's shoulders, maybe even up to an unbearable degree. Not only should the innovator have the hindsight to foresee all possible consequences, but they also must be capable of personally standing up for all of them. While it does make sense to ask for a certain commitment to one's cause, this requirement seems to go too far – who would dare to take up such steep responsibilities? Then again, the publicity of the undertaking could ease this burden, as others who observed the innovator commit should also not be reckless if they indeed have to hold the innovator accountable. However, Mendelssohn did not formulate this explicitly in his vote.

73 Mendelssohn seems to assume that these rules have already stood the test of (limited) experience, as his reference to those teachers that "we all have on our thoughts" (ibid., 228) shows.
74 In far too many cases adversaries are from the get-go not willing to even listen to a better argument just to have an excuse for the persecution of their enemies.

Kant[75] as well as Hennings[76] seem to have sensed the problematic potential here, as they both argue against too much weight on the innovators' shoulders. In his vote on Möhsen, Mendelssohn himself used a rather different tone in his plea for a completely unrestricted public use of reason.[77] There he held that enlightenment in its progress might bring disruptive changes, but overall would always – seen in the long run – benefit humanity. Now we see him treading more carefully, with more attention to detail and realizability. His formulation seems more akin to avoid short term disruptions and misguided developments: after all, his requirements necessitate any innovator to be mindful of possible consequences. But all caution aside, Mendelssohn ultimately wants prejudices and clogged institutions either to change or disappear. His mostly rhetorical question to Möhsen whether there are any historical examples for harmful consequences of enlightenment[78] attests to that.[79]

Mendelssohn's thoughts on the practicability of enlightenment in process are in tune with his involvement in the BWS. Public critique needs rigorous, harmonious, argumentative preparation if it wants to be effective. A secret society[80], once it found a proper way of dealing with prejudices, must make these public, and give all necessary reasons for their findings, as well as general advice to the populace. Thus Mendelssohn approved of the society's secrecy only up to a point: it should offer a safe haven for the discussion of like-minded people who need to think issues through in an environment that allows them to calmly weigh the benefits and dangers, reformulate the boundaries, and capture the mistakes early on.

Mendelssohn was mostly concerned about the humane conditions of politics, less the actual development of political strategies for change as such. Culture and enlightenment together should form the essential foundations from which the individual could find ways of engaging in the overall process and never lose

75 Cf. for instance Kant's lecture on pragmatic anthropology *(Menschenkunde)* from 1781/82 (AA 25, 882–883; cf. 1048): the harm of not correcting a mistake is certain; but the possible benefit of such a correction is uncertain. "No benefit can endure other than that which comes from truth, and hence we cannot and must not gain any benefit from the dissemination of deceit" (ibid., 883). This is more extreme than what Mendelssohn had in mind, who does not reference deceit *(Betrug)*, but restriction *(Zurückhaltung)*.

76 In the aforementioned letter, here JA 13, 241–242.

77 Cf. Keller (1896), 81, in particular points 3 and 4.

78 Ibid., 80–81.

79 I refer to Ursula Goldenbaum's essay in this volume (Goldenbaum 2020). It is indeed wrong to assume that Mendelssohn had no interest in history.

80 Cf. Nehren (1994), 105, with further references.

sight of society at large. His concept might not be completely unified. However, he offers interesting means to formulate and receive critique, practice civil courage, and trust in the balancing power of an all-encompassing education through self-formation and reasonable communication. Only in active and fair dialogue, so Mendelssohn, can we ever hope to achieve a human society that realizes the essential ideas of the vocation of the human being. This realizes them. This is true Enlightenment indeed.

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