

Willi Goetschel

Introduction to Mendelssohn's "The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision"

Published in the May 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, the flagship journal of the German Enlightenment, Mendelssohn's essay "The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision" is a meditation on the deadlock between materialist and idealist positions. Alexander Altmann has characterized the essay as a prelude to Mendelssohn's later and more direct response to Jacobi's attempt to dismantle Spinoza's philosophy, which Jacobi claimed was at the heart of Mendelssohn and Lessing's Enlightenment project.¹ And indeed, Mendelssohn's essay's deftly argued point deals a deadly blow to Jacobi's reductively sensualist position and its reliance on sense-certainty. Yet, Mendelssohn was equally far from any idealism that turned a blind eye to the powerfully pulsating life of the senses, which, as the foundational agents of perception, not even an idealist outlook could explain away without jeopardizing the epistemological foundation in which it grounded.

While the essay must certainly be seen in the context of the Spinoza Dispute, it would be a mistake to understand Mendelssohn's thought as apologetic or in any way defensive or "explanatory." Rather, we necessarily fail to grasp the critical thrust of Mendelssohn's thinking if we miss how its trajectory is profoundly committed to the philosophical questions that elude the jurisdiction of any one particular school of thought or persuasion. Mendelssohn is a thinker of the in-between, interested in what eludes the firm grasp of any philosophical approach, whether rationalist, empiricist, sensualist, materialist, or idealist. In this, his affinity with Lessing and Kant goes deeper than is usually recognized. Under closer examination, "The Statue" formulates a philosophical position that resonates strikingly with a number of critical concerns that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* articulates.

For the reader of Mendelssohn's *Morgenstunden*, the use of an allegorical dream as a literary device does not come as a surprise but suggests that the argument's mode of presentation is already part of the argument. Its performative character indicates the need to compensate for what conventional modes of writing lack: a reflection on the terms of their argument's

presentation. The literary staging of the dream addresses and brings into play the performative character of a writing mode that recovers the dialogical impetus of Platonic composition without falling prey to pretense and mimetic imitation. This dream also serves as the literary prototype for another dream published a year later in 1785 in Mendelssohn's *Morgenstunden* that offers an allegorical discussion of the conflict between speculation and common sense (*Gemeinsinn*) and how reason might best orient itself by choosing between these equally one-sided guides; a discussion to which Kant responded in 1786 with his "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" Unless that dream was the prototype for the "The Statue": Given the temporal proximity of the composition of the two dreams, it is difficult to ascertain which one came first. It is not unlikely that they were conceived simultaneously. In any case, if they are not twins they certainly ought to be considered siblings, in keeping with the metaphorical field of kinship Mendelssohn uses in this essay to address the relationship between the five senses. In both texts, the dream visions serve to explore a question that eludes conventional metaphysical as well as empiricist discourse and instead requires a mode of thinking and writing that moves past their limits. In other words, in Mendelssohn's terms, we need to move past Berkeley as well as Locke. With regard to the issues at stake in the Spinoza Dispute between Mendelssohn and Jacobi, this move suggests that upon closer examination, Spinoza figures silently in Mendelssohn's essay as a philosopher whose exceptional mode of thinking bears affinities with Mendelssohn's. Implicit but suggestive, this family resemblance bears a philosophically bold streak that outmaneuvers Jacobi's pedestrian mix of philosophical reductionism and ulterior fundamentalist motives.

Mendelssohn, on the other hand, used the Spinoza Dispute primarily as a stepping stone, a pretext for illustrating his own position. Trying to reduce the thrust of his late thought to an apologetic stance would mean assimilating it to a narrative of the history of philosophy we can no longer afford to entertain if we wish to appreciate the critical impulse of his philosophical project. To do so, we will also need to revisit its relationship to Kant's thought, and move past the blockade imposed by the claim that there is a deep divide between their respective projects, a claim that the epigonal succession wars for Kantian legitimacy momentarily enshrined in so many narratives of the history of philosophy.

If we are ready to move beyond this blockade, a view opens that allows us to appreciate the affinity with the critical Kantian commitment to move

beyond the rock of empiricism and the hard place of an unreconstructed rationalism. Mendelssohn's essay is situated exactly at this point, where it critically exposes Jacobi's claim to have overcome philosophy for a higher level of faith as profoundly flawed, a claim Mendelssohn shows to rest on doctrinal commitments that do not stand up to closer scrutiny. On Mendelssohn's analysis, Jacobi's commitments ultimately reject not only any attempt to stay the course of reason and sound human understanding, but also any genuine sense of faith and religion. Mendelssohn's careful maneuvering here resonates with the reservations Kant laid out in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and it will be Hegel who settles the scores with Jacobi once and for all. Exposing the latter's claims as empty-headed right from the start, Hegel in the opening chapter of his *Phenomenology of Mind* rehearses the fallacies of Jacobi's recourse to sense-certainty with merciless exactitude. In this context, it is Mendelssohn – rather than Fichte and the emerging forms of post-Kantian Idealism – who captures the critical spirit Hegel will seek to reinstate, albeit differently. Unless one reads Mendelssohn's project as profoundly resonant with the Kant that German Idealism was eager to abandon, an adequate grasp of Kant's project remains impossible, and Hegel's indebtedness to Mendelssohn underappreciated.

Mendelssohn's argument about the irreducibility of the apparatus of sense data processing to any one particular sense as a unifying organ that could translate all the other senses' idioms or dialects into one universal language not only mirrors Kant's insight that phenomena can only reflect the noumena behind them, which would otherwise remain inaccessible as such to the direct grasp of our understanding, it also pushes the question of the irreducible unity of our minds and souls to a level where Jacobi's claims are silenced as epistemologically naïve, half-baked, and void. For Jacobi operates with notions of faith and religion that on Mendelssohn's view reveal themselves as epistemically flawed because they are derivative of the same rationalism they so fiercely seek to reject – and not just because of their barely contained antisemitism.

The argument of Mendelssohn's "psychological-allegorical dream vision" suggests a genealogical nexus of the kinship among the senses with genetic variation substantial enough that individuation of the sundry siblings refuses reduction to an underlying schematism. Rather, the interplay between the senses relies on a protocol that has its analogy in translation. Mendelssohn highlights the elusive but decisive animating principle that

we are used to defining as mind or soul, which serves as the agency for producing the synesthetic experience we call life, which an automaton can only imitate. Since it lacks the harmonizing agency that renders its parts a genuine whole, Mendelssohn suggests, we can only understand the mind's or soul's working in terms of analogical or allegorical reasoning – or imagining. The result of Mendelssohn's thinking comes close to, if it is not functionally identical with, Kant's notion of the idea and necessary proposition as presented in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, although Mendelssohn's theorization does follow a different line of argumentation. Otherwise different in many ways, Kantian thinking shows itself here to be surprisingly continuous with Mendelssohn's. Just like Kant and unlike Jacobi, this is where Mendelssohn has his argument end.

As tempting as it is to track the trajectory of Mendelssohn's argument further with regard to the question of the deadlock between speculative and empiricist thought and how the limits they mark necessitate an alternative approach that does not discard both modes of thinking, as Jacobi suggested, but instead builds on them without allowing its own agenda to be circumscribed by them, we have laid enough groundwork to now discuss how this amounts to a theory of translation in its own right. For a continuous reflection on translation does not only guide Mendelssohn's discussion of the limits of materialist empiricism and idealism, or "mechanical philosophy," as he calls it, on the one hand, and idealist philosophy on the other, it also gains importance of its own as Mendelssohn assigns to the act of translation a formative role front and center in the epistemological process.

For Mendelssohn avails himself of the paradox that has challenged philologists, critics, and philosophers ever since people began to reflect on the problem of translation. Articulating critical insights that will later be explored most explicitly by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, Mendelssohn stakes out in this essay a theoretical framework that makes it possible for translation to come into view as a foundational act in the process of cognition. Mendelssohn recognizes that translation takes place at the interface of transmission and transaction, and that it is not defined by the two poles between which it mediates; rather, translation itself partakes of the very agency that gives the two poles their meaning. Whatever this agency or mediating power may be, it is what underlies the process or act that constitutes the nexus or relation that makes translation possible – and with and through it, meaning. Mendelssohn's essay suggests that this is

what we tend to call the soul: the *je ne sais quoi* that sustains the process of translation, but that we cannot pinpoint in any form or way, neither in materialist nor idealist terms; the kind of apriori that precedes our powers of cognition and that we ultimately need to postulate, as Kant's wording has it.

Just as the signified cannot be extricated from the sign that signifies it, the original cannot be obtained otherwise than by way of translation. There is no original, no primordial script to be retrieved, because any retrieval would be a construal by way of translation. Equally, Mendelssohn gestures towards the recognition that all conceptual constructs are nothing but kinds of translation, or what we now call *metaphor* via detour through the Greek word for the Latin *translatio*. Thought is then, on Mendelssohn's view, itself translation; translation, more exactly, that produces a text that relies on the original of sense perception, which is processed, i.e. translated, into a knowledge that is metaphorical in nature. Concepts derived from our senses are just that: translations into the idiom – Mendelssohn calls it a dialect or vernacular – of whatever sense thinking elevates to its guide and primary translator, i.e. interpreter, of its sense perceptions.

Connecting seamlessly to his discussion of the "living script" in *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, published a year earlier, Mendelssohn's essay develops the theory of translation further by moving from hermeneutic concerns to more broadly epistemological and metaphysical issues. Returning to *Jerusalem*, we can now recognize how the problem of translation was already at play in this earlier discussion whose theological-political dimensions have far broader implications than just the mechanics of sense perception.

Refraining from inventorying and cataloguing the metaphors that the various senses provide, translations and metaphors are for Mendelssohn just that: ephemeral notional bridges whose systematization yields only second-order observations that, in and of themselves, do not establish any form of truth that could be abstracted from the particular scene of the epistemological process from which they arise. Unlike Sulzer, who held that "the development of reason depends very much on the perfection of the metaphorical aspect of languages" and therefore called for a dictionary of metaphors,² Mendelssohn's approach to metaphors is more reserved and puts less emphasis on the cognitive gain of metaphors. For Mendelssohn, metaphors remain translations that lose any bearing outside the specific context in which they operate and gain their meaning. In contrast to Sulzer

and later Blumenberg, for Mendelssohn – and Derrida – the problem with an inventory of metaphors is that it operates under the assumption of a metalanguage that any proper notion of translation must reject.

Because Mendelssohn sees metaphors as free from any expectation or epistemological pressure, his approach allows them to be used with a greater degree of poetic freedom than would be granted in the kind of discursive regime proposed by Sulzer or for that matter Blumenberg, who seem to ascribe to them stable semantic functions. Remarkably, it is Mendelssohn's approach that figures the poetically self-constitutive function of language against any form of lexical subsumption under categories or any other scheme of classification. Theorizing translation as an act of interpretation, Mendelssohn highlights the relational function that cannot abstract from the source and target, but refuses prioritization of one over the other. Rather, Mendelssohn's approach is to theorize translation as a form of second-order observation that is once removed from the object of first-order observation. Abstraction is thus not a higher or more authentic level of reasoning, but simply a translation into another idiom whose validity hinges on the epistemological task at hand. Mendelssohn indicates as much in the penultimate paragraph of the essay, where he argues that while translation can be illuminating, it should not be mistaken for an explanation:

But to tout this way of comparing the sensual with the suprasensual – of translating and representing it visually – as explanation is the same as trying to grasp wit with one's hands or see reason through one's spectacles.

In other words, analogy – i.e. “comparing” or *Vergleichung*, literally reducing to sameness – is the crux of identity thinking, without which thinking cannot operate, but whose unmitigated rule we must not mistake for an explanation. What we are left with is the incomparability of matter and mind, and yet the necessity to negotiate our epistemological needs across their divide. We cannot explain mind with exclusive recourse to matter and sensation, nor the latter two through the former alone. But the fact that we can translate, though not reduce either side to any form of identity with the other, suggests not only that translation occurs at an interface and is not further reducible to either mind or matter, but also that translation is always an act of interpretation that constitutes rather than merely transmits its meaning.

For Mendelssohn, script is alive when we heed its call and translate it into action, just as our sense data lead us to thinking as long as we recog-

nize their guidance is our own translation and grasp that our thinking articulates its thoughts with the help of metaphors that we take from the language of our senses. Translations, then, are only as good as their ability to reflect the limits of the terms, i.e., foundations, on which they are based on either side of the bridge that enables translation – a bridge whose arch transports meaning as it rests on either side of the divide that defines it: another metaphor for the function of the relationship translation presents. This relational interplay of transaction, Mendelssohn seems to suggest, is the moment from which meaning springs, a meaning that shares the beauty of the automaton when it is in motion, but evaporates to an effect of illusion when it comes to a halt, as if the mind had left the body.

But while mechanical movement – even perfected to illusion – betrays the mind of a designer, it does so only to an audience that translates such motion back into an illusion of a holistic experience it projects into the graceful turns and sounds it so appreciates, if only as dream, vision, or dream vision. In Mendelssohn, the need for translation is not just a linguistic but also an epistemological necessity. Translation is what makes understanding possible both linguistically and cognitively. Singular and relationally defined, the act of translation is for Mendelssohn a reminder both of the power of reason and of its limits, where the idiomatic in its singularity releases its dialectical force. But it does so only as long as we remember that there is no universal idiom, dialect, or language – or as Derrida would say: no metalanguage. The dialectical, in other words, is a reminder of the irreducibility of the idiomatic character of language whose meaning depends on translation into what can only be another language, idiom, or dialect. Meaning, i.e., translation, is for Mendelssohn dialogical.

Notes

- 1 Jub A 6.1, XIX.
- 2 Johann Georg Sulzer, "Anmerkungen über den gegenseitigen Einfluß der Vernunft in die Sprache und der Sprache in die Vernunft." In: Sulzer, *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften* (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1773), 166-198, 191f.