

No Feeling without Cognition. Moses Mendelssohn's
Analysis of Pleasant Sentiments in The *Briefe Über Die
Empfindungen*

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NO FEELING WITHOUT COGNITION. MOSES MENDELSSOHN'S
ANALYSIS OF PLEASANT SENTIMENTS IN
THE *BRIEFE ÜBER DIE EMPFINDUNGEN*¹
(1755)

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Abstract

Mendelssohn's second work, the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (*Letters on Sentiments*), has mainly to do with sentiments experimented by human subjects. Nevertheless, the generalist, broad scope of the title might bring about some confusion: the work is not devoted to sentiments in general, but to sentiments of pleasure in particular. Mendelssohn distinguishes between three different types of such sentiments: (i) the pleasant sentiments resulting from corporal processes; (ii) the pleasant sentiments emerging when contemplating beautiful objects; (iii) the pleasant sentiments inherent to knowledge. The aim of this work is to argue that, in Mendelssohn's analysis of pleasant sentiments, cognitive elements (namely, objectual representations, *Vorstellungen*³) are

¹ I would like to thank Professor Heiner Klemme for allowing me to discuss a preliminary version of the text within his *Oberseminar* at Martin Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg (January 2022). The accurate comments made by professors Klemme, John Walsh, Michael Walschots and by Daniel Stadler and Emanuel Lanzini (to whom I specially thank his attentive and constructive reading of the text) turned out to be very useful in improving the paper and giving it its final shape. I also want to thank Eric Sancho and Martí Bridgewater for their very accurate and helpful comments (both regarding the content and the form of the text).

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³ I say representations to be cognitive insofar they give information about the objects that constitute reality. As we will see, the kind of information that they provide is totally dependent on their degree of clarity: for Mendelssohn, real knowledge can only consist in the clear and distinct representations produced by the intellect. Sensations and images lack such precision: based on them, we manage to cognize some aspects of

indispensable for the experience of pleasure. In order to show that, I will pay attention to the explanation Mendelssohn gives for each type of pleasant sentiment to see what sort of mental representation is involved in every case. Therefore, the paper will be divided into 4 sections: after briefly contextualizing the *Briefe*, I will devote one section to each of the pleasant sentiments following Mendelssohn's exposition of them and a last section to a synthetic, general overview. The paper will be ended with some conclusive remarks on the extent to which Mendelssohn's analysis is innovative in regard to his German philosophical context.

Keywords: *Moses Mendelssohn, sentiments, cognition, pleasure, affects, representations.*

Introduction: background, structure and beginning of the dialogue between Theocles and Euphranor

The *Briefe über die Empfindungen* is a piece of epistolary literature, consisting of a total amount of fifteen letters between Theocles and Euphranor⁴. Theocles's role as a leading voice is clear. He writes eleven of the fifteen letters compounding the *Briefe* in a first series comprising letters three to seven, and then a second series comprising the letters ten to fifteen. In fact, both series arise in response to Euphranor's opinions and questions: it is therefore reasonable to consider Theocles's words as the main vehicle of Mendelssohn's own ideas⁵. The brief introduction both characters receive seems to attest to this hermeneutical approach. Theocles is presented as an English philosopher who is disappointed with the persuasive imagination [*verführerische Einbildungskraft*] and

reality in a less concrete, definite manner. Nonetheless, and to the extent that they stand for and give access to real objects, they can justly be said to be cognitive. In respect to this, we must not forget that two of Mendelssohn's main philosophical sources, Wolff and Baumgarten, considered sensibility and imagination to be part of the "lower cognitive faculty" [*facultas cognitiva inferior*]. See Wolff 1968, 20-165 [§29-232]; Baumgarten 2013, 201-240 [§519-650].

⁴ In the first, 1755 edition of the *Briefe*, Euphranor's companion is called Palemon; Theocles is the name given to him from the 1761 edition onwards; this paper is based on the 1771 edition (JubA 1, 233-334). I will use the acronym 'JubA 1, 10' to refer to Mendelssohn's works critical edition, the so called *Jubiläumsaufgabe*: Mendelssohn, M. 1971. *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Bd. 1). Berlin, Frommann-Holzog.

⁵ However, Euphranor's speeches are an important dialogical component that must not be underestimated at all: Euphranor is, no more and no less, the character setting the topics for discussion.

frivolity [*Leichtsinn*] of allegedly French origin that prevail in his country: such frivolity incites him to visit Germany, the homeland of Metaphysics and deep, speculative discussion. However, he is disappointed again after noticing that frivolity and vanity are also present in many German intellectual circles⁶. Euphranor is presented much more concisely as a young aristocrat entirely devoted to courtly issues. (JubA 1, 235-236)

Euphranor's reflections in the first two letters mark the beginning of the dialogue⁷. He seems not to share his friend's conviction that it is possible to control one's own sentiments by an insight [*Einsicht*] into the nature of pleasures [*Vergnügen*]. According to Euphranor, pleasant sentiments disappear when we reflect by using our reason [*Vernunft*] on them and attempt to trace the emergence [*Entstehung*] of pleasure in us⁸. Happiness [*Glückseligkeit*] involves enjoyment [*Genüsse*] which, in turn, results from the spontaneous, surprising sentiment that agreeable objects produce in us. As soon as we analyze enjoyment scientifically, Euphranor claims, it ceases to be a vivid experience and becomes a mere object of inquiry. From the young aristocrat's point of view, the case of beauty exemplifies the question paradigmatically. The pleasure resulting from looking at a beautiful face disappears when, instead of enjoying the nice image before us, we analyze the way the physical processes by which the eye, the lips or the nose function. Thus, beauty [*Schönheit*] must consist of an indistinct representation of a perfection [*undeutlichen Vorstellung einer Vollkommenheit*], In contrast to Theocles,

⁶ It is worth noting that at the beginning of the second dialogue within the *Philosophische Gespräche*, Mendelssohn speaks in almost identical terms. JubA 1, 13-14.

⁷ The words by which the first letter begins reveal Euphranor's flaws. Euphranor is tired of the obligations that bind him to the tumultuous court, preferring instead to indulge in the joys [*Freude*] of youth and jovial friendship. Deprived of such pleasures, Euphranor devotes himself to reflecting on the last letter that Theocles sent him, a seemingly less amusing task that, nevertheless, he should not neglect. As Euphranor puts it, "now I can pour myself freely into the arms of the muses and meditation" ("jetzt kann ich mich frey in die Arme der Musse und der Betrachtung wersen"; JubA 1, 237).

⁸ The young aristocrat considers reason to be a "killer" or "destroyer" [*Stöhrerin*] of pleasure.

then, Euphranor holds that expertise in sentiments is only acquired by living them with no intention of inquiring into them⁹ (JubA 1, 235-241).

Because of the central role that the notion of representation [*Vorstellung*] has along the whole dialogue, it is necessary to briefly refer to the Wolffian definition to which the Mendelssohnian approach is indebted. In the chapter on Empirical Psychology within his *German Metaphysics* (1719), Wolff analyzes the nature of thoughts [*Gedanke*] defined, in turn, as changes occurring to the soul. As Wolff puts it, a thought has always to do with external or internal objects, whether present [*gegenwartige*] or absent [*abwesende*]. All thought is *a thought about something* that stands before us, about something that we represent [*wir stellen*]: to the extent that they represent objects, thoughts can be justly considered to be representations of reality. It is based on how the objects that are contained in these representations appear to us that such representations can be distinguished and categorized. A representation is clear [*klar*] when one knows with certainty [*wohl wissen*] what the representation is about, that is, when the object A presented by the thought is clearly separable and distinguishable from other objects (B, C ...). When, apart from grasping [*bemerken*] the object A as a single and individual whole, we also grasp each of the parts [*Theile*] that make it up, the representation of A is clear and distinct [*deutlich*]: the more multiplicity [*Mannigfaltigkeit*] of parts we discover in A, the greater the distinction with which we gain a representation of it. The relationship between darkness [*Dunkelheit*] and confusion [*Undeutlichkeit*] is analogous to the link between clarity and distinction: when a certain thing A is not presented to us as a distinctly individualized unit, the representation of A is obscure; when the parts of A appear obscurely to us, it is confusing (Wolff 1983,106-120).

⁹ At the end of the passage, Euphranors summarizes his position as a “jovial moral” [*jugendliche Sittenlehre*]: living in accordance with such moral involves assuming happiness [*Glückseligkeit*] as the sole purpose of human life and looking for it by means of the spontaneous experience of pleasant sentiments. JubA 1, 237-238.

1. The pleasure resulting from the contemplation of beauty

Theocles corrects what he considers to be Euphranor's errors in letters three to seven. Along this first series of letters, Theocles introduces two of the three types of pleasant sentiments that will be featured in the whole *Briefe*: the pleasant sentiments emerging when contemplating beautiful objects (the so called "sentiments of beauty", *Gefühle der Schönheit*) and the pleasant sentiments inherent to knowledge. Sentiments caused by beauty are incompatible with the clear and distinct concepts defining knowledge because, when contemplating a beautiful object, the mind only apprehends the object as a whole and pays no attention to its multiplicity [*Mannigfaltigkeit*]. However, this does not mean that sentiments of beauty are caused by obscure concepts: if the experience of beauty was only driven by obscure concepts, it would be impossible to see the object as a determined unity, constituted by a plurality of notes or traits. Thus, the representations at stake must be "expansively clear" [*ausgebreitet klare Vorstellung*], so that the object appears to the mind as a clearly representable unity, but is formed by a diversity of obscure, undistinguishable traits¹⁰. Contemplating something beautiful thus requires limits [*Grenzen*] and, to that extent, a peculiar kind of clarity, which is named 'expansive' to differentiate it from the clarity of knowledge (that is, clarity conjuncted with distinction). In this respect, the intervention of the imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] is crucial:

"The imagination is able to confine the smallest and the largest object to the appropriate limits [...] until we are able to grasp the requisite manifold all at once."¹¹ (Mendelssohn 1997, 15).

¹⁰ It is important to note that the concept of expansively clear representation does not come from Wolff, but from Baumgartian. See for instance: Guyer 2014, 318-341.

¹¹ "Die Einbildungskraft kann [...] den Gegenstand zwischen die gehörigen Grenzen einzuschränken [...] bis wir die erforderliche Mannigfaltigkeit auf einmal fassen können" (JubA 1, 243). Mendelssohn introduces here an interesting distinction between (i) that which has limits and can be considered beautiful, and (ii) that which is immense and, having therefore no apprehensible limits, exceeds the scope of beauty. In connection with this, Theocles reflects on the extent to which the immense universe [*unermessliches*], unapprehensible as a whole because of its unlimited extension, can be said to be beautiful. According to Theocles, it can be said that *the structure of the universe*

The contemplation of beautiful objects by means of extensively clear representations involves four steps according to Theocles. (i) First of all, it is necessary to choose and focus the attention on an object (or set of objects; *Gegenstand*); (ii) by doing so, the subject senses the object [*sie empfinden*] and gains an “intuitive concept” [*anschauende Begriffe*] of it; (iii) when having such a concept, it is possible to reflect on it [*überdenken*] to see the relations and connections [*Verhältnisse und Beziehungen*] by which the parts give rise to the object as a whole; (iv) at this stage, the act of enjoyment [*genussen*] provoked by the unitary object finally occurs¹². When enjoying, Mendelssohn insists, the individual parts or traits become secondary and subordinated to the concept of totality [*Begriff des Ganzen*], that is, the representation of the object as a unity that the imagination produces after reflecting on it. Even though the plurality inherent to the object remains obscure, Theocles emphasizes that this obscurity is not the cause of the happy sentiment [*fröhlich Empfindung*]. Otherwise, creatures with a higher intelligence (with no sensible faculty nor obscure representations), could not have access to this happiness:

“Regarded as a determination of the mind and cut off from its fleshy companion, from sensual rapture, the pure gratification of the soul must be grounded in the positive powers of our soul and not in its incapacity, not in the limitation of these original Powers.”¹³ (Mendelssohn 1997, 19).

is beautiful when, based on the existing order between the components of the universe grasped by reason [*Vernunft*] and sensory perception [*Wahrnehmung*], the imagination takes such ordered parts of the universe and brings them together in a structured harmony [*Ebenmasse*]. When representing the structure of the universe in these terms, an invaluable source of pleasure [*Quelle des Vergnügens*] emerges which brings us closer to the privileged, provident position of God. JubA 1, 244-245.

¹² To put it more briefly, contemplation involves four different steps: (i) to choose [*wählen*], (ii) to feel [*empfinden*], (iii) to reflect [*überdenken*], (iv) to enjoy [*geniessen*]. JubA 1, 246-247.

¹³ “Die reine Seelenlust, als eine Bestimmung des Geistes betrachtet, und abgesondert von ihrer fleischlichen Begleiterinn, von der sinnlichen Wollust, muss in den positiven Kräften unsrer Seele, und nicht in ihrem Unvermögen, nicht in der Einschränkung dieser ursprünglichen Kräfte gegründet seyn” (JubA 1, 248)

Theocles claims that it is the soul's capacity [*Kraft*] to produce representations that is the real source of the pleasure: after producing a complex and complete representation, the soul becomes proud of its success and feels impelled to keep on producing representations. Such a progressive *modus operandi*, as Theocles puts it, is a sign of the impulse to perfection [*Neigung zur Vollkommenheit*] shared by all thinking beings¹⁴ (JubA 1, 242-249).

2. The pleasure resulting from knowing

The aforementioned notion of perfection becomes Theocles' second focus of analysis: the concept of perfection is key to singularize knowledge and its resulting pleasure from the contemplation of beauty. As seen, a beautiful object causes pleasure because it appears as a unity in plurality [*Einerley in Manigfaltigen*]. However, it retains a certain degree of obscurity and imperfection, insofar as we do not grasp each and every part of the object *per se*, but only as they relate to each other to constitute the object. The limited or "imperfect" perfection of beautiful objects is thus overcome by a superior and more genuine perfection: the one emerging when, by means of reason, we understand the function of each and every part of the object and their necessary harmony [*Übereinstimmung*] in constituting it¹⁵. From the 1761 edition onwards,

¹⁴ At this point, Mendelssohn criticizes the way J.G. Sulzer conceives this human tendency towards perfection in his work "Recherche sur l'origine des sentiments agréables et désagréables" (1751). Mendelssohn believes that, paradoxically, Sulzer has based this impulse to perfection on an inability or defect: for Sulzer, since the soul seeks rather objects that generate comprehensible concepts with a minimal effort [*Muhe*], its tendency toward perfection would be explained because, in perfect objects, the harmony of the whole synthesizes and "eliminates" the heavy multiplicity of features that requires a great attention of the mind to be grasped. JubA 1, 248-249. The notion of human tendency to perfection will be of great importance in Mendelssohn's later career: it will be the core of his enthusiastic review of the 1763 edition of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1748) by J.J. Spalding (*Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend*, 1764) and also a key theoretical element within his *Phaedon* (1767).

¹⁵ For Theocles, then, sensible beauty [*sinnliche Schönheit*] cannot be the main and vehicular purpose [*Zweck*] of divine creation. At most, sensible beauty can be seen as a trait God gives to the forms of things [*Gestalt der Dinge*] to offer a first source of

Mendelssohn clarifies the difference between the two strata by categorizing beauty as “sensible perfection” [*sinnliche Vollkommenheit*] below the “intellectual perfection” [*verständliche Vollkommenheit*] underlying knowledge (JubA 1, 250-251).

The difference between contemplating beauty and having knowledge becomes especially clear after Theocles following example. The British philosopher makes us suppose that a man puts his reason at work when looking at a fir. In that case, the leaves, the branches or the trunk will not remain obscure elements contributing to the whole that causes aesthetic gratification. Quite differently, each and every part’s function will be understood within the whole: leaves are said to realize photosynthetic processes; such leaves could not exist without branches sustaining and transporting the nourishment coming from the roots and transported through the trunk to them... In other words: comprehending the fir as a unity involves now having clear representations of its parts and, because of that, understanding that all of them are harmonically united to accomplish the same shared goal [*gemeinschaftliches Endzweck*], that is, making the fir a living, organic individual being. Indeed, the person capable of achieving such knowledge can even go a step further. The fir as a living unit is related to many others living unities: all of them are divine creatures, that is, constituent parts of the eternal harmony [*gegenseitiger Übereinstimmung*] presiding the divinely shaped universe. At this stage, the gratification [*Wollust*] resulting from uncovering the rational structure of reality is superlative and entails no imperfection¹⁶. From Theocles’s point of view, then, the scientific approach to the world (understanding the nature of an object and its place within the universe) is superior to the aesthetic one (JubA 1, 250-253).

In the last two letters of the first series by Theocles (letters six and seven), the British philosopher defends rational understanding and its

pleasures for rational beings, supposed to go a step further aesthetic gratification to understand the world rationally.

¹⁶ “Here you will attain intuitive knowledge of an authentic perfection, a pleasure that depends not on your weakness” (Mendelssohn 1997, 24) (“Hier erlangst du das anschauende Erkenntnis einer ächten Vollkommenheit; ein Vergnügen, das sich nicht auf deine Schwachheit, [...] stützt”. JubA 1, 253)

benefits in response to skeptics questioning the power of reason. The sixth letter has mainly an autobiographical interest: Theocles criticizes all-too-much technical inquiries (such as R-A.F Reámur studies on metals) and vindicates the philosophies of Leibniz, Wolff and Locke and their uncovering of basic metaphysical truths¹⁷. As Theocles puts it, these philosophers helped him to discover that, because God had created the universe rationally, all human creatures inhere an innate tendency to perfection [*Neigung zur Vollkommenheit*] which can only be accomplished by seeking moral virtue [*Tugend*] by means of rational deliberation¹⁸. The rational character of God's creation, that is, Providence [*Vorsehung*], is discussed in the seventh letter. God, omniscient and benevolent, looks always for the best and makes his creation as good as possible. Because of his infinite intelligence, God must create a world conformed by a series of events [*Begebenheiten*] in which every event is grounded [*gegründet*] by another event. In other

¹⁷ We must not forget that, as said in the prologue to the *Briefe*, Theocles is a British philosopher who decided to visit Germany so as to find there some philosophical truths that might help him overcoming the serious doubts and worries that he had. The testimony of his learning is as much dramatic as historiographically interesting to understand Mendelssohn's own progress in the study of philosophy: "Like hellish furies, cruel doubts about providence tortured me; indeed, I can confess, without skittishness, that they were doubts about the existence of God and the blessedness of virtue. At that point I was prepared to give rein to all vile desires I was in danger, like someone drunk, of reeling into the wretched abyss into which the slaves of vice slide ever more deeply with every passing hour. [...] Thanks be to those true guides who have guided me back to true knowledge and to virtue. Thanks to you, Locke and Wolff! To you, immortal Leibniz! I [...] Without your help I would have been lost forever... [...] Your immortal writings [...] steered me on the sure path to genuine philosophy, to knowledge of my very self and my origin." (Mendelssohn 1997, 27) ("Mich quälten, wie hellischen Furien, grausame Zweifel and der Vorsehung; ja, dir kann ich es ohne Scheu gestehen an der Dasein Gottes und an der Seeligkeit des Tugends [...] Jetzt stund ich in Gefahr, wie ein Betrunkener, in den unseeligen Abgrung zu taumeln, darinn die Sklaven des Lasters stündlich tieser gleiten. [...] Dank sei jenen Wegweisern, die mich zur wahren Erketnnis und zur Tugend zuruck geführet haben: Euch Locke und Wolff! Dir unsterblicher Leibniz! [...] Ohne eure Hilfe wäre ich auf ewig verloren. [...] Allein eure unvergängliche Schriften [...] haben mich auf den sichern Weg zur wahren Weltweisheit, zur Erketnnis meiner Selbst und meines Ursprung geleitet". JubA 1, 256)

¹⁸ For a precise and contextualized approach to Mendelssohn's moral intellectualism, see: Albrecht 2000.

words: the universe is said to be a perfectly organized structure, in which anything must be the cause of something else and nothing can exist without a cause grounding it¹⁹.

3. Corporal pleasure

After the first series of Theocles's reflections, Euphranor seems convinced that reflecting on the origin of pleasure does not mean giving up the real experience of pleasure. However, the young aristocrat ignores the incision by which the sixth letter was closed (Theocles suggested the existence of a third and final type of pleasure: that dependent on bodily satisfaction) and accuses his friend of unjustly neglecting sensitive pleasure [*sinnliche Lust*]. Young people, alien to adult seriousness and abstruse scholastic doctrines [*Schulmeinung*], enjoy [*genüssen*] a great multiplicity of purely sensual, mundane pleasures. This kind of pleasures evince how, contrary to Theocles's opinion, the experience of pleasure does not necessarily rely on the representation of sensible (realm of beauty) nor intellectual (realm of knowledge) perfections²⁰. In the ninth letter, in turn, the young aristocrat asks the English philosopher, a seemingly accurate defender of divine Providence, to help him refute the harmful reasons on the grounds of which some thinkers argue for the legitimacy of suicide [*Selbstmord*]. In short, the jovial Euphranor is terrified by the example of those who, old and exhausted, fall into spite [*Verzweiflung*] and only wish for death. Euphranor is specially worried by Charles Giddon's arguments for suicide²¹. From Gildon's point of view, since God created us to

¹⁹ Mendelssohn's indebtedness to Wolff in respect to the notions of world and order is specially clear under the light of the last of his *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755). See: JubA 1, 29-38

²⁰ By anticipating the core content of the *Rhapsodie, oder Suzätze an den Briefe über die Empfindungen* (1761), Euphranor points out that certain harmful or painful objects [*traurige*] can also be pleasant, such as a huge reef (as much spectacular as dangerous) or the recreation of bloody battles. Sometimes, nature acquires a terrible appearance [*schreckliche Natur*] that might please us. JubA 1, 268.

²¹ In his *Miscellaneous Works* (1695), published under the pseudonym 'Lyndamour', Gildon tries to justify the writer Charles Blount's suicide.

systematically seek out what is good for us, it is reasonable to consider suicide an acceptable option when nefarious living conditions prevent us from fulfilling the divine imperative²² (JubA 1, 265-275)

Following Euphranor's observations, Theocles first sets out his thesis on the third and final type of pleasant sentiments: sentiments resulting from bodily satisfaction. In the case of sensible pleasure, the English philosopher clarifies, soul and body are equally necessary for pleasure to emerge. Given that the intricate network of nerve connections keeps the different parts of the body [*Glied, Theil*] communicated, when a certain alteration [*Veränderung*] occurs in a body part, the effect is transmitted to the other limbs with more or less intensity. Suppose, then, that a sensitive object [*sinnliche Gegenstand*] pleasantly stimulates [*sanft gereizt*] a certain part of the body: thanks to the nervous network, the gratification emerging in the affected part will be distributed harmoniously, affecting therefore the whole body²³. Some experiences of sensitive pleasure makes the mechanics of pleasure proposed by Theocles plausible: this is the case for the relaxation caused by the wine after being ingested, or the comfort felt when the breeze blows gently during a sultry evening. As soon as this "general gratification" invades the body, the soul represents indistinctly such perfection or improvement [*Verbesserung*] of bodily condition: the soul, in short, generates an indistinct yet alive representation of the perfection that occurs in the body [*eine undeutliche aber lebhaftere Vorstellung von der Vollkommenheit*] (JubA 1, 276-283).

²² Following the *resumée* offered by Euphranor, Gildon draws on a mathematical analogy. Goods can be compared to positive quantities; evils, with negative quantities; and death, with no quantity (0). An individual can opt for death (0) as long as life offers him only negatively quantifiable evils (-1, -2, -3 ...). In these circumstances, friends should put aside their selfish desire to enjoy his friend's company and understand that his suicide is not at odds with the imperative that compels us to look for the best, since 0 is higher than any negative number. JubA 1, 273-274.

²³ Theocles calls this harmonic distribution of the sensory stimulus caused by the nervous network 'tone' [*Thon*], probably based on Santorio Santorio's *De statica medicina* (1725). JubA 1, 277-279.

4. Final overview: the distinction of pleasures based on their correlative representations

Once the three major typologies of pleasure have been differentiated, Theocles summarizes his theses regarding the nature of pleasant sentiments. As said, sensitive pleasure is based on the existing correlation between (i) the physical gratification that invades a certain limb and is subsequently extended to the whole body (ii) the sensitive representation of the bodily state that the soul generates. This resultant gratification is the third and last type of pleasure, different both from the pleasure resulting from beauty (based on the perception of unity in diversity; *Einerley in Mannigfaltigen*), and from the one depending on intellectual perfection (which involves the understanding of harmony underlying multiplicity *Einhelligkeit des Mannigfaltigen*). Therefore, each kind of pleasures is singularized by the mental representation on which it is based and the object the representation stands for:

1. Sensitive pleasure is produced by an indistinct yet vivid representation [*undeutliche aber lebhaftere Vorstellung*] of a perfection occurring in the body (a state of gratification emerging in a limb and transmitted to the whole body).
2. Pleasure caused by beauty requires of an extensively clear representation [*ausgebreitet klare Vorstellung*] of a perfection relative to the aspect or figure of physical bodies (the object appears to us as nice, agreeable unit)
3. Pleasure resulting from knowing needs a clear representation [*klare Vorstellung*] of the “highest perfection”, that is, the particular harmony relative both to each created being and to the universe that they all make up²⁴.

²⁴ At this point, Theocles considers music to be the only art capable of producing the three types of pleasure characterized in the *Briefe*: “The imitations of human passions; the artful combination of discordant tones: sources of perfection! The simple proportions within oscillations, the symmetry in the relations of the parts to one another and to the whole; the way it occupies the powers of the spirit in doubting, surmising, and predicting: sources of beauty! The tension of the vessels of the nerves harmonizing with every chord: a source of sensuous gratification” (Mendelssohn 1997, 48). (“Die Nachahmungen der menschlichen Leidenschaften; die künstliche

In the twelfth letter, Theocles clarifies the extent to which soul and body are coordinated to make sensible pleasure possible. In the human body, causes [*Ursachen*] and effects [*Würckungen*] remain so intricately intertwined that their functions can be reversed in some cases: given two objects O_1 and O_2 , it may be the case that O_1 is the cause of O_2 and, conversely, that O_1 turns out to be an effect produced by O_2 . This principle seems particularly valid with regard to the relationship between the bodily organs (seat of the movements transmitted by the nerves) and the brain (*Gehirne*, seat of the representations²⁵): it is as possible for nervous movements to induce a certain representation as for representations to induce the emergence of bodily movements²⁶. Consequently, just as sensible pleasure or improvement of bodily state enables an indistinct representation [*undeutliche Vorstellung*] of such improvement, representation can also cause sensible pleasure: it is when this second “causal order” is realized that one experiences an emotion or

Verbindung zwischen den widersinnigsten Übellauten: Quellen der Vollkommenheit! Die leichten Verhältnisse in den Schwingungen; das Ebenmass in den Beziehungen der Theile auf einander und auf das Ganze; die Beschäftigung der Geisteskräfte in Zweifeln, Vermuthen und Vorhersehen: Quellen der Schönheit! Die mi tallen Saiten harmonische Spannung der nervigsten Gesässe: eine Quelle der sinnlichen Lust!"; JubA 1, 280) The two last sources of pleasure do not appear in the 1755 edition, but only in the 1761 one and subsequents.

As Theocles puts it, Newton's genial contributions to Optics might help painting and drawing to get a similar degree of artistic perfection in the future: current efforts made by authors like P.Louis Bertrand Castel (*L'optique des couleurs, fondée sur les simples observations.*, 1740) and William Hogarth (*Analysis of Beauty*, 1753) are a good testimony of the difficulties that painters and drawers must face in that respect. JubA 1, 281-283. Mendelssohn's enthusiasm for music will be further developed in his future aesthetic writings.

Concerning Mendelssohn's musical interests, see: Lütterken 2000; Gerhard 1999.

²⁵ Mendelssohn seems to attribute something immaterial (the representations produced by the soul) to a corporeal entity (the brain). However, it should be noted that Mendelssohn does not claim that the brain “produces” representations, but that it is the “home” or “seat” [*Behalter*], that is, the bodily place where the processes correlating to the immaterial representations of the soul take place. JubA 1, 285.

²⁶ This would be the case for dreams [*Traume*] in which a variety of images [*Einbildung*] appear successively producing different sensations in the sleeping individual. JubA 1, 286.

affect [*Affekt*²⁷]. The dynamics of affects are clear: (i) whether the representation of a spiritual perfection [*geistige Vollkommenheit*], the memory [*Erinnerung*] of a past bodily gratification or any imagination [*Einbildung*], harmoniously stimulate the nerves connected with the brain; (ii) the resulting harmonic tension [*harmonische Spannung*] is communicated to the rest of the body; (iii) a pleasing affection [*angenehme Affekt*] invades us. Very importantly, representations of rational perfections and beautiful images can also stimulate brain fibers, extend by means of the nervous network, and give rise, in the end, to a pleasant sentiment. The example of the mathematician putting the letter to an end seems to corroborate this interpretation:

“The senses do not participate in the enjoyment [of the mathematician] to the extent that the mathematician laboriously advances from truth to truth. [...] If, however, [the mathematician] thinks all of a sudden about the chain of inferences he has made, if he thinks about how truths can be found united in the most perfect order, and how a truth follows from the rest and the rest from this one; what a sensitive pleasure will emerge in the brain and be transmitted to the rest of the body!”²⁸ (Mendelssohn 1997, 54)

²⁷ The Mendelssohnian link between affects and feelings occurs very similarly in Kant’s Anthropology. In Kant’s case, however, the notion of affect acquires a rather negative meaning: “passion [*Leidenschaft*] is a desire that makes us incapable of seeing the sum of all desires; affect is rather a feeling, which makes us incapable of consulting the sum of feelings” (Frierson 2014, 95). For the terminological complexity of the debate on feelings in Kant’s time, see: Nuzzo 2014, 88-107. The ambiguity and terminological complexity observed by Nuzzo are to a large extent also traceable in Mendelssohn’s account of pleasant sentiments: for instance, Mendelssohn refers to the enjoyment involved in feeling pleasure by using at least three different substantives (namely, *Genusse*, *Freude* and *Wollust*). I am deeply grateful to Professor Michael Walschots for his helpful comments concerning this topic.

²⁸ “Allein die Sinne nehmen an der Freude keinen Antheil, so Lange er von Wahrheit bis Wahrheit fohrschreitet. [...] Wenn er aber die Kette der Schlüsse, die er durchgearbeitet, auf einmal überdenkt, wenn er überschlägt, wie die Wahrheiten in der besten Ordnung Glied an Glied gehsestet sind, wie eine aus allen und alle aus einer fliessen; welche Fülle der sinnlichen Lust muss sich alsdann aus seinem Gehirne auf den ganzen Körper ergtessen” (JubA 1, 286) .

Conclusion

In Mendelssohn's account of pleasant sentiments as depicted in the previous sections, cognitive elements turn out to be indispensable. Whether obscure, expansively clear or clear and distinct, representations are a fundamental condition for pleasures to occur: each and every type of pleasure is defined specifically by a peculiar sort of representation about reality. In turn, the final reference to the twelfth letter of the *Briefe* has let us understand how representations can bring about a pleasant sensation to the whole body. Mendelssohn says nothing about how mental, immaterial processes can cause the stimulation of corporeal, nervous fibers: we must therefore assume that representations, as changings or movements occurring to the soul, induce physical movements in some unclarified way. Be that as it may, Mendelssohn dialectical strategy can be seen as a particular expression of what Wolff considers to be Rational Psychology: after all, his main purpose is to give an account, to offer an explanation of the types of pleasant sentiments experimented by humans. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that Mendelssohn main psychological theses in the *Briefe* are traceable in Wolff. This is the case for: (i) the fundamental link between the experience of pleasure and the psychic representation of some kind of perfection; (ii) the classification of such psychic representations according to the binomials "clear/obscure" and "distinct/confused"; (iii) the consideration that the essential or defining trait of the soul is its force to represent the world; or (iv) the belief that the soul seeks by definition that which perfects it, that is to say, that which increases its essential representative force²⁹.

The relevant Wolffian background of the *Briefe* is also key to understand Mendelssohn's links with one of the most important Wolffians of the context, namely A.G. Baumgarten³⁰. It is from

²⁹ The exposition of these theses offered by Wolff in his *German Metaphysics* (1719) was certainly read by Mendelssohn. See: Altmann 1973, 29.

³⁰ It is important to note that Baumgarten's reception of Wolffianism is relevantly singularized by the strong Pietistic atmosphere presiding his formative years (see for instance: Fugate and Hymers 2013; Goldenbaum 2011). To that extent, Baumgarten can be said to achieve a peculiar "connubium" between two mostly antagonistic

Baumgarten that Mendelssohn takes the concept of “extensive clarity” and the clear differentiation between representations grounding the contemplation of beauty and representations involved in scientific inquiry³¹. At this point, one might rise justly the following question: if Mendelssohn takes the crucial concepts and theses of his approach from Wolff and Baumgarten, do the *Briefe* contain anything innovative and original? As it seems to me, Mendelssohn’s innovations in the *Briefe* are subtle but cannot be neglected at all. Mendelssohn’s indebtedness to Wolff and his accolades is unquestionable from a *material* point of view³². Notwithstanding, the *form* of Mendelssohn’s very first works from 1755 (the *Briefe* and the *Philosophische Gespräche* as well) evince a crucial departure from Wolffian, scholar tradition. Systematic exposition ceases to be the main issue at stake: although concepts must preserve the rigor and clarity that Wolff and Baumgarten gave them, their depiction in an elegant, nice manner turns out to be as much as relevant³³. In this respect, Theocles’s status and character is fundamental: the leading character of the *Briefe* is no German, but an English philosopher aiming at concurring German speculative circles.

At first, it might seem that such a rhetorical detail has little importance. However, characterizing Theocles as a British is no coincidence: according to the testimony offered by Mendelssohn’s son, Josep, the amusement provoked by his reading of *The Moralists* (1709) by Shaftesbury determined crucially the literary form of Mendelssohn’s first works from 1755 (Altmann 1973, 39). In a context in which British

intellectual poles. Regarding the complex influence of Pietism on Enlightened philosophers at Halle, Baumgarten’s *alma mater*, see: Hinske 1989.

³¹ For Mendelssohn’s Baumgartian background on this issue, see: Cataldi Madona 2011.

³² For Wolff’s great influence on eighteenth century German philosophers, see: Gerlach, 2001.

³³ Regarding the hermeneutical difficulties resulting from Mendelssohn literary approach to philosophy, see: Goetschel 2011, 21-37. Very interestingly, Goetschel suggests that “While Mendelssohn is usually read as an author of straightforward texts, his texts resist easy translation. This resistance is integral to his writing and it is by encouraging the reader to work through this resistance, I argue, that Mendelssohn’s texts elicit a critical move of rethinking the terms of philosophy in critical fashion. Critical not exactly in the way Kant would define the term but with sufficient affinity that we could nevertheless speak of a certain family resemblance.” (Goetschel 2011, 22).

philosophy began to gain presence within the German lands³⁴, Mendelssohn discovered new ways of rendering ideas and developing discussions. Such less systematic modes of exposition contribute to a more dynamic and fluid thinking, characterized by the complex interplaying of multiple sources and philosophical perspectives³⁵. The case of the *Philosophische Gespräche* make the question very clear. As Mendelssohn puts it, Spinoza, a forerunner of the Leibnizian prestablished harmony, must be corrected under the light of Leibniz's ingenious philosophy; however, Leibniz made some mistakes as well, so that reading both his acutest critics (such as Pierre Bayle) and his supposedly greatest accolades (namely Christian Wolff) is key to fulfill the philosophical gaps that Leibniz left³⁶. The importance of resourcing to different philosophers can also be traced in the *Briefe*, where Leibniz, Wolff and Locke are presented as equally important influences on Theocles:

"Thanks to you, Locke and Wolff! To you, immortal Leibniz! I [...] Without your help I would have been lost forever... [...] Your immortal writings [...] steered me on the sure path to genuine philosophy, to knowledge."³⁷

The formal novelty of the *Philosophische Gespräche* and the *Briefe* set very favorable conditions for the developing of philosophical innovations. Such innovations are still weak in the *Gespräche*: its dynamic philosophical dialogue is still a germen, a seed to blossom in forthcoming works and to give rise to relevant, non-Wolffian nor

³⁴ For a general overview on the influence that British philosophers had on German Enlightened thinkers, see: Kuehn 1996, 252-273.

³⁵ In regards to the multiplicity of philosophical sources that Mendelssohn had access to in Berlin (from 1743 onwards), see: Altmann 1973, 21-29; Feiner 2010, 17-34 and 35-55.

³⁶ The *Philosophische Gespräche* are a genuinely fascinating *opera prima*. As it seems to me, this very first work by Mendelssohn is a nice, stylish testimony of the state of German philosophy by the time Mendelssohn begins his career. This historical significance moved me to offer a Catalan translation with a preliminary study that may serve the reader aiming to find out more about the *Gespräche*: Mendelssohn, M. 2022 (forthcoming). *Diàlegs filosòfics*. Barcelona, Anuari de la Societat Catalana de Filosofia, XXXIII. For a recent interpretation of the work's historical significance, I also recommend: Dyck, 2018.

³⁷ For the full citation, see note 16.

Baumgartian thesis. Nonetheless, this seed appears to grow just a few months afterwards, that is, by the time the *Briefe* are written and published. Mendelssohn devotes a whole work to reflect on feelings [*Empfindungen*]. As it seems to me, Mendelssohn's autonomous and detailed treatment of feeling anticipates the threefold faculty scheme depicted in the unpublished work *Über das Erkenntnis-, das Empfinden- und das Begehungsvermögen* (1776). Mendelssohn's following statement from his *Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen den Schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (1757) attests to the fact that, in contrast to the traditional Wolffian distinction between cognitive and appetitive faculties, this threefold division between knowledge, feeling and desire is already at stake in his very first philosophical works from the 1750's:

"Beauty is the self empowered mistress of all our sentiments, [...] the animating spirit which transforms speculative knowledge of the truth into sentiments and incites us to active decision."³⁸ (Mendelssohn 1997, 169-170)

As much early as 1755, Mendelssohn takes feeling to be a peculiar psychic phenomenon deserving an autonomous treatment apart from knowledge and volition. However, the "autonomizing" of feeling is not the only innovation occurring in the *Briefe*. As Ursula Goldenbaum puts out very acutely (see Goldenbaum 2011), Mendelssohn's analysis of pleasure involves a crucial rehabilitation of corporeal lust alien to Baumgarten's approach to pleasure. From Mendelssohn's point of view, corporal pleasure is as much worth of explanation as the pleasure inherent to knowledge since they both result from the same psychic process, namely, the mental representation of a perfection. In fact, the Mendelssohnian concept of perfection [*Vollkommenheit*] also entails a non-negligible novelty with respect to the Wolffian one, namely, the differentiation between "sensible perfection" [*sinnliche Vollkommenheit*] and "intellectual perfection" [*verständliche Vollkommenheit*]³⁹. Because of

³⁸ "Die Schönheit ist die eigenmächtige Beherrscherinn aller unserer Empfindungen, [...] der beseelende Geist, der die *speculative Erkenntniß* der Wahrheit in *Empfindung* verwandelt, und zu *thätiger Entschließung* anfeuert." (JubA 1, 166-167; my emphasis).

³⁹ I am deeply grateful to Emanuel Lanzini for his helpful comments concerning this topic.

such subtle innovations, it is clear after all that the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* contain thesis and concepts going beyond Wolff and Baumgarten. Both his formal and material originality make the *Briefe* a genuinely interesting work, a subtle and smart expression of Mendelssohn's philosophical skills and, to that extent, of Mendelssohn's significance for the developing of post-Wolffian Enlightened philosophy.

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