EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Con-Textos Kantianos
ISSN-e: 2386-7655

DOSSER 1

Lessing's Influence on the Development of Mendelssohn's Theory of Mixed Sentiments

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https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.104298 Received: 30-07-2025 • Accepted: 18-08-2025

ENG **Abstract:** This article investigates the influence of Lessing on Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments. It takes as its point of departure Lessing's letter to Mendelssohn of 2 February 1757, which proposes that all passions, even unpleasant ones, can ultimately give rise to pleasure by making the soul aware of its own representational activity. The article first situates this principle in relation to Mendelssohn's standpoint in *On Sentiments* (1755). It then shows how Mendelssohn adapted Lessing's insight in his engagement with Burke, especially in response to the paradox of deriving pleasure from the misfortune of others. The analysis follows Mendelssohn's reception of Burke in the 1761 edition of the *Rhapsody*, and culminates in its 1771 edition, where he reformulates Lessing's principle to ground a more universal source of pleasure: not in the object itself, but in the soul's reflection on its own representational powers.
Keywords: imperfection, mixed sentiments, perfection, pleasure, reflection, representation.

How to cite: Genazzano, P. (2025). Lessing's Influence on the Development of Mendelssohn's Theory of Mixed Sentiments. *Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy*, 22, 101-109.

Introduction: Lessing's Letter of 2 February 1757

After Gotthold Ephraim Lessing left Berlin for Leipzig in October 1755, he began a fruitful epistolary exchange with his esteemed friends Friedrich Nicolai and Moses Mendelssohn. This correspondence, now known as the *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*, offers a deep investigation into the nature and aims of drama. The letters, written between August 1756 and May 1757, continue the philosophical conversations that had taken place in the Berlin salons between 1754 and 1755. Many of the themes they explore, such as the moral value of sympathy (*Mitleid*), also revisit arguments they had developed in their writings, including Mendelssohn's letters *On Sentiments* (1755) and Nicolai's *Treatise on Tragedy* (1757). Yet the correspondence does more than rehash prior debates; it also represents a meaningful advance in their respective aesthetic theories (Fick 2016, p. 148-159). Among the novel ideas introduced in the *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*, one stands out as especially decisive for the formation of Mendelssohn's aesthetic views: Lessing's account of mixed sentiments. In a letter to Mendelssohn dated February 2nd, 1757, Lessing articulates a psychological principle intended to explain the complex experience of mixed sentiments. In the letter, Lessing says:

> Surely, we agreed, dearest friend, that all passions are either intense desires or intense aversions? And also on this: that with every such desire or aversion, we become aware of a higher degree of our reality—and that such awareness can only be pleasant? Consequently, all passions, even the most unpleasant ones, are pleasant insofar as they are passions. (*JubA* 11, 105; my translation).[1]

On my reading, the central feature of Lessing's argument lies in his *reflective* account of the experience of mixed sentiments. On the one hand, every passion or sentiment takes the form of either desire for or aversion to an object, rendering the object a potential source of both pleasure and displeasure. On the other hand,

1 Citations of Mendelssohn's works and Lessing's letters refer to volume and page numbers in the *Jubiläumsausgabe* (henceforth *JubA*). Where an English translation is available, references follow Daniel O. Dahlstrom's edition of Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Works* (1997; henceforth *PW*).

the soul can also experience pleasure through reflection on its own spiritual activity. Within this psychological framework, an object may indeed evoke aversion due to its imperfections or negative qualities. Yet such imperfections do not preclude the object from indirectly becoming a source of pleasure: the aversion it provokes, insofar as the soul *reflects* on it, becomes a vehicle for pleasure (Altmann 1969, p. 134).[2]

Lessing's reflective principle for explaining the nature of mixed sentiments was an unexpected idea for his friend Mendelssohn. So striking was this principle that Mendelssohn reportedly delayed his response for nearly a month. As Mendelssohn explains in his reply, he chose to wait until he had fully grasped the potential implications of Lessing's proposal. In his letter dated March 2, 1757, he rearticulates the principle using his own Leibnizian terminology and expresses regret that he had not considered it earlier in his 1755 letters *On Sentiments*:

> I have not yet replied to your last letter. But do you know why? I must first know what use you intend to make of your very fine principle. You are entirely right. The capacity to love perfections and to abhor imperfections is a reality, and thus a perfection. Its exercise must therefore necessarily afford us pleasure. A pity that this fine observation was unknown to me when I wrote my *Letters on Sentiments*. (*JubA* 11, 108; my translation).

Given the significance that Mendelssohn seems to attribute to Lessing's "very fine principle," it is worth asking whether he, in fact, integrated this conceptual novelty into his own theory of sentiments. This article argues that he did. Specifically, I contend that Mendelssohn fully developed Lessing's reflective insight in the second version of the *Rhapsody*, published in the 1771 edition of his *Philosophical Writings*. I propose that Lessing's letter of February 2, 1757, acted as a decisive impetus for Mendelssohn's gradual recognition of a novel, reflective source of pleasure. This article contributes to ongoing debates on the trajectory of Mendelssohn's theory of sentiments, particularly its shift from an objective to a more subjective orientation. While Frederick C. Beiser (2009, pp. 196–243) expresses skepticism about this subjective shift, Anne Pollok (2006, p. XLIII; 2010, pp. 154–190; 2018) and Paul Guyer (1996, pp. 133–37; 2011; 2020, pp. 204, n. 2, 205–223) argue that by 1771 Mendelssohn embraces a subjective approach, discovering a "source of pleasure that is far more universal" (*JubA* 1, 389; *PW*, 136) than that explored in *On Sentiments*. By locating this source in the reflective dimension of subjectivity, he opens the way for a theory capable of accounting for pleasure even in mixed sentiments. This article reconsiders this turn through the lens of Lessing's principle, thereby shedding new light on a crucial aspect of the development of Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments.

To support this thesis, the article proceeds in five sections. The first section examines Mendelssohn's standpoint in the first edition of the letters *On Sentiments* (1755), establishing the conceptual background against which later developments must be understood. The second section addresses Mendelssohn's engagement with Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/59), as he had to draw on Lessing's principle in order to respond to the challenges posed by Burke. The third section analyzes Mendelssohn's attempt to integrate Lessing's principle in the 1761 edition of *Rhapsody*, revealing an emerging solution to the problem of deriving pleasure from imperfection. The fourth section explores how this solution is further developed in the 1771 edition of *Rhapsody*, where Mendelssohn elaborates a fundamental distinction between the objective and subjective side of representations. Finally, the fifth section offers a reflection on this revised framework, assessing Mendelssohn's claim that the pleasure grounded in the soul's self-reflection constitutes a "more universal source" (*JubA* 1, 389; *PW*, 136) of pleasure than that proposed in the letters *On Sentiments*.

1. Mendelssohn's Standpoint in the First Edition of the Letters *On Sentiments* (1755)

To some extent, Mendelssohn's expression of regret in his response to Lessing's letter of 2 February 1757 might seem merely a formal gesture of deference to his friend. However, the issue is far more complex. In my view, while Lessing's principle is in full continuity with Mendelssohn's letters *On Sentiments* and with the Leibniz-Wolffian school more broadly, it is nonetheless possible to discern a certain novelty in Lessing's formulation, particularly in his reflective explanation of mixed sentiments. To better grasp this novelty, it is necessary to consider Mendelssohn's point of departure in the 1755 letters *On Sentiments*.

Mendelssohn's point of departure in *On Sentiments* is Maupertuis's definition of pleasure (*plaisir*) and pain (*peine*). According to Maupertuis, pleasure is "any perception that the soul prefers to experience rather than not experience," while pain is "any perception that the soul would rather not experience than experience" (1974, p. 193; my translation). On this view, pleasure involves a desire for its object, while pain entails an aversion. This principle is for Mendelssohn one of the "most well-known and irrefutably proven principles of the doctrine of the soul" (*JubA* 1, 169; my translation), and also the "most general formula, which includes all

2 It should be noted that this letter from Lessing is a reply to Mendelssohn's treatise *Über die Herrschaft der Neigungen*, which was sent to Lessing in January 1757. Specifically, Lessing's critique is directed at the concept of illusion. The cited fragment serves merely as a preliminary consideration to his critique. For Mendelssohn, the pleasure produced by imitation consists in the intuitive knowledge of the concordance between the imitation and the original (*JubA* 1, 154). The immediate influence of Lessing can be observed in Mendelssohn's work *On the Sources and Connections of the Fine Arts* (1757), where he states that the pleasure derived from the concordance between imitation and original is merely a "simple perfection" that affects only the "surface of our soul" (*JubA* 1, 434). Although Mendelssohn had already partially revised his concept of imitation by 1757, it was not until the 1771 edition of his *Sources of the Fine Arts* that he made substantial changes to this concept in light of Lessing's letter (*JubA* 1, 423-424). While this principle is evident in the 1771 edition of *Sources of the Fine Arts*, the present article will focus on its role in the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsody*.

particular cases within itself" (*JubA* 1, 112; *PW*, 76). One of the aims of Mendelssohn's letters *On Sentiments* is to integrate Maupertuis's "general formula" into the broader Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophical framework, by arguing that the pleasure derived from perfection is rooted in the "positive power of our soul" (JubA 1, 60; PW, 18), or *vis representativa*. Accordingly, Mendelssohn explains Maupertuis's formula through the soul's natural tendency toward its own perfection. As he summarizes in *Rhapsody*, "the power of our soul, of each spirit generally, is originally oriented to the good and perfect, and that the choice of a spirit which is free could not possibly have anything but perfection as its sufficient reason" (*JubA* 1, 404; *PW*, 150).

At this stage, while Mendelssohn grounds pleasure in the soul's representational power, he does not yet consider the reflective dimension that Lessing's principle emphasizes. Yet it is possible to discern a feature in his account that comes close to Lessing's insight. In note (*l*) of the first edition of *On Sentiments*, this positive power is equated with the soul's perfection: "In our soul, then, the power or the striving to represent the world would be its perfection" (*JubA* 1, 118; *PW*, 90). This equation of the soul's *vis representativa* with its perfection comes strikingly close to Lessing's later psychological principle—so close that only a minor addition would be needed to arrive at it: namely, the idea that the soul can reflect upon its own representational powers and thereby take pleasure in them. That is to say, if the capacity to represent the world defines the soul's perfection, then the more reality it represents, the more perfect it becomes. It is precisely this expansion of the soul's representational power (understood as an expansion of its perfection) that can serve as a source of pleasure, insofar as the soul reflects on it. Given this proximity to Lessing's formulation, Anne Pollok has questioned whether he truly marks a departure from Mendelssohn's views. Specifically, Pollok has argued that Mendelssohn had already reached a comparable position in the letters *On Sentiments* and supports this claim by citing a letter to Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, in which Mendelssohn remarks that "the feeling of pain itself shows a certain degree of reality" (*JubA* 11, 48) (Pollok 2010, p. 182; 2018, p. 276).

Despite the conceptual closeness between the two friends, I argue that Mendelssohn, at least in the first edition of the letters *On Sentiments*, does not treat the soul's self-reflection as a source of pleasure in itself. While some of Mendelssohn's ideas appear to move in the direction of Lessing's principle, it remains crucial to emphasize the distinctive way in which Lessing develops his principle. In my view, while the metaphysical dimension of this principle was already implicit in Mendelssohn's equation of the soul's *vis representativa* with its perfection, Lessing's innovation lies in transforming this equation into a *reflective principle*. This very act of reflection, in turn, opens up a subjective dimension for explaining pleasure. It is no longer derived solely from the objective qualities of what is represented, nor from the soul's natural striving for perfection, but from the soul's reflection on its own representational powers. As Alexander Altmann (1969, p. 137) notes, although Lessing's insight does not constitute a radical break with the principles of the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophical school—and Mendelssohn himself had already equated the soul's degree of perfection with its *vis representativa*—the "shift of aesthetic perfection from the object to the act of the knowing subject certainly represents something new in Mendelssohn's thinking." The first time Mendelssohn found himself compelled to draw upon Lessing's new principle was during his reading of Burke's *Enquiry*.

2. Mendelssohn's Early Adaptation of Lessing's Principle in Response to Burke

Although Mendelssohn was intrigued by the novelty of Lessing's psychological principle, he did not incorporate it into his subsequent aesthetic writings. The first pages of *On the Sources and Interconnections Between the Fine Arts and Sciences* were printed as late as June 6, 1757, leaving only a narrow window for engaging with Lessing's idea. More significantly, the principle is absent from *On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Arts*, published in early 1758. This omission is unlikely to reflect disagreement or theoretical incompatibility; rather, it suggests that Mendelssohn saw no need to invoke Lessing's principle. In the first version of this treatise, the sublime was not connected to imperfect objects, but to those whose perfection elicits "admiration" (Pollok 2019). Since Mendelssohn did not address aesthetic experiences involving mixed or ambivalent responses, Lessing's principle, which aims to account for precisely such phenomena, would have been irrelevant to the concerns of these treatises.

It was not until Mendelssohn's engagement with Burke that he began to consider Lessing's principle. When Lessing sent Mendelssohn his copy of Burke's *Enquiry* on April 2, 1758, he included his own comments on the text. These annotations are divided into two main sections: the first addresses the concept of love (*Liebe*), and the second, the concept of hate (*Hass*). The notion of hate that Lessing drew from Burke's philosophical observations appeared to raise a fundamental problem—namely, why we derive pleasure from witnessing the misfortune or suffering of others. In his notes, Lessing articulated this problem in the following terms:

> Misfortune (*Unglück*) is imperfection—so can we also derive pleasure from imperfection? And does that mean that pleasure is not merely the contemplative recognition of perfection? I have no idea what to make of this (Lessing, *JubA* 3.1, 257; my translation)

As noted by the editors of Mendelssohn's collected writings (*JubA* 3.1, 444), it is indeed surprising that Lessing exhibits such perplexity regarding a mixed sentiment, particularly given that he himself, in his letter to Mendelssohn of February 2, 1757, had already given a principle aimed at elucidating such psychological phenomena. The fact that there already existed a principle to account for the pleasure arising from imperfect or negative objects is underscored by Mendelssohn. In his response to Lessing's observation, Mendelssohn states: "A sufficient response has already been given to this objection" (*JubA* 3.1, 257; my translation). Here, Mendelssohn is surely referring to one of the reflections that will serve him in drafting the review of the *Enquiry*. Specifically, Mendelssohn is referring to his commentary on Section XIII of the first part of Burke's

Enquiry, which dealt with the concept of "sympathy." The comments on this section of Burke's *Enquiry* start with an indication of great significance:

> What the author says on this point sounds rather paradoxical. Nonetheless, the observations he presents are correct. This gave me an idea—one that was, in fact, prompted by a certain letter from Mr. Lessing. (*JubA* 3.1: 239; my translation)

Before analyzing to what extent Burke's aesthetic observations on sympathy seem to be "paradoxical" to Mendelssohn, I would like to emphasize the reference to Lessing. In my view, there is no doubt that the letter to which Mendelssohn refers is Lessing's letter of February 2, 1757.[3] The reason to believe this is that immediately after mentioning the letter of Lessing, Mendelssohn reproduces in his own words the psychological principle that his friend had formulated in that letter. In this remark on the concept of sympathy, Mendelssohn makes an "essential distinction" between the imperfections of the body and the imperfections of the soul. According to Mendelssohn, we have aversion to the former imperfections both subjectively, insofar as there is an imperfection in the body, and objectively, insofar as this imperfection is an object of our consciousness. In turn, the imperfections of the soul are more complex. Although they are objectively repugnant, they become subjectively desirable; namely, insofar as they are apprehended through reflection. Indeed, the soul harbors no aversion to the reflection on the power to reject imperfections; on the contrary, it embraces it and takes pleasure in it. Following Lessing's "fine principle," imperfections are subjectively desirable because they engage the soul's capacity to reject them. In Mendelssohn's own words: "The representation of imperfections, inasmuch as it involves a recognition of limits, and insofar as it engages the soul's capacity to abhor imperfection, appears to be a perfection of the mind" (*JubA*, 3.1, 239; my translation).

There is an undeniable similarity between Lessing's principle and Mendelssohn's remark. Nonetheless, an important difference should be noted. In his response to Lessing dated March 2, 1757, Mendelssohn states that both the capacity to reject imperfection and the capacity to desire perfection are real faculties of the soul. In this sense, the mere activation of such a faculty (as something real) forms the basis for the experience of pleasure. However, in the passage cited above, he focuses exclusively on the pleasure arising from the soul's capacity to reject imperfection. Although the underlying principle that Mendelssohn articulates here is consistent with the one described by Lessing in his letter of February 2, 1757, it is plausible that Mendelssohn's emphasis on imperfection reflects the specific context of the *Enquiry*. In sections XIII to XV of his *Enquiry*, Burke investigates how it is possible to feel the pleasurable sentiment of sympathy in response to the misfortune of others, whether real or on the stage.

3. The Paradox of Burke's Concept of Sympathy

It is highly unlikely that Section XIII of Burke's philosophical *Enquiry*, which addresses the mixed sentiment of sympathy, would have escaped the attention of either Mendelssohn or Lessing. The notion of sympathy held significant aesthetic importance in both the letters *On Sentiments* and the correspondence concerning the *Trauerspiel* (Michelsen 1966). Despite their familiarity with the concept, Mendelssohn found Burke's account "paradoxical," even while acknowledging the accuracy of Burke's philosophical observations. In my view, this paradox arises from Burke's challenge to one of the most traditional explanations for the pleasure derived from witnessing another's suffering. Specifically, Burke rejects the Aristotelian notion that such pleasure stems merely from the fictional character of the suffering or from the spectator's awareness of being safe. Against these views, Burke contends that the sentiment of sympathy does not stem from rational reflection, but rather from the "mechanical structure of our bodies":

> It is a common observation, that objects which in the reality would shock, are in tragical and such like representations the source of a very high species of pleasure. This satisfaction has been commonly attributed, first, to the comfort we receive in considering that so melancholy a story is no more than a fiction; and next, to the contemplation of our freedom from the evils which we see represented. I am afraid it is a practice much too common in inquiries of this nature, to attribute the cause of feelings which merely arise from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds, to certain conclusions of the reasoning faculty on the objects presented to us; for I have some reason to apprehend, that the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as is commonly believed (Burke 2005, p. 44-45).

By rejecting the idea that the pleasure of sympathy arises from a rational detachment from the tragic scene, Burke appears to challenge the Aristotelian tradition, which interprets the aesthetic experience of

3 The editor of the *Jubiläumsausgabe* asks: "Is Mendelssohn here thinking of the 'subtle remark' in Lessing's letter of February 2, 1757, and his reply? After all, Lessing's question is already answered affirmatively in those texts [...] Perhaps the phrase 'a certain letter from Mr. Lessing' is meant ironically, since Lessing's doubts should no longer have arisen for him." (*JubA* 3.1, 444; my translation). In my view, this is not ironic. Although irony is not absent from the correspondence between Lessing and Mendelssohn, Lessing consistently assumed the role of authority. Mendelssohn's respect for Lessing is evident even in the early 1760s, when he states that he does not dare publish anything without Lessing's approval (*JubA* 11, 206). What is truly peculiar, is Lessing's disconcertment. As will be discussed later, this likely stems from the fact that, in that letter, he was focused on the issue of mixed sentiments, whereas in his comments to Mendelssohn, he addressed the concept of hate. While Lessing appears to shift his theoretical focus (from the topic of imitation and mixed sentiments to that of hate) this does not undermine the validity of my reconstruction. After all, it is Mendelssohn himself who now links Lessing's disconcertment to the problem of mixed sentiments.

tragedy as one that requires a certain distance from the represented suffering—a distance that allows the spectator to experience emotions such as pity and fear without being overwhelmed by them. This conception, which underlies the notion of catharsis, was influentially upheld in England by Addison in *The Spectator* (Boulton 2005, p. 44, n. 14). While Burke concedes that there is some pleasure in witnessing the distress of others insofar as it is imitation—"on that principle [we] are somewhat pleased with it" (Burke 2005, p. 47)—he considers this a superficial explanation. As he argues in Section XV, on the effects of tragedy: "I imagine we shall be much mistaken if we attribute any considerable part of our satisfaction in tragedy to a consideration that tragedy is a deceit, and its representations no realities. The nearer it approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power." (Burke 2005, p. 47). For Burke, harsh and true reality, not distance from it, seems to ground the aesthetic force of tragedy. But if he dismisses traditional frameworks as insufficient to explain the pleasure of sympathy and of tragedy, what conceptual resources remain to account for the complex nature of mixed sentiments?

According to his physiological framework, Burke constantly tends to reduce the causes of our sentiments to the "mechanical structure of our bodies," or to the "natural frame and constitution of our minds." The delight we have in the distresses of others emerges, according to Burke, "antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works to its own purposes, without our concurrence" (Burke 2005, p. 46). Burke does not offer any further explanation beyond these physiological arguments. However, what is most striking is that he even maintains that it is impossible to find a satisfactory reason to explain such an aesthetic experience: "No one can distinguish such a cause of satisfaction in his own mind, I believe" (Burke 2005, p. 48). The impossibility of such an explication seems to lie in that "we do not sufficiently distinguish what we would by no means chose to do, from what we should be eager enough to see if it was once done" (Burke 2005, p. 47). The failure to provide an adequate explanation for this aesthetic phenomenon, namely the delight in another's misery, was the subject of numerous criticisms in the reviews (Boulton 2005, p. xxiv) that emerged following the publication of the *Enquiry*. It is also noteworthy that Burke left this aspect unexplained in the second edition of his treatise.

4. Mendelssohn's Reception of Burke in the 1761 Edition of *Rhapsody*

If Burke's observations are correct (and according to Mendelssohn, they are) then it is reasonable to suppose that Burke's *Enquiry* poses a substantial challenge to Mendelssohn's own understanding of mixed sentiments. Burke not only argues that the causes of the pleasure associated with sympathy are ultimately inscrutable, but also explicitly rejects the idea that this pleasure arises from aesthetic distance, whether due to the fictional nature of the suffering depicted or the spectator's distance from it. Yet it was precisely these classical explanations that Mendelssohn relied upon in the conclusion of *On Sentiments*, where he sought to respond to the challenges posed by Jean-Baptiste Dubos's *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (*JubA* 1, 111-112; *PW*, 71).[4] It may well be for this reason that Burke's *Enquiry* had a nearly revolutionary impact on Mendelssohn. In the first edition of *Rhapsody* (1761), he acknowledges that, when writing the letters *On Sentiments*, he had only "a flimsy concept of the nature of mixed sentiments. But I only saw a flickering of the astonishing and myriad effects of them until I had the opportunity to read the splendid English work on the sublime and the beautiful for the *Library of Fine Sciences*" (*JubA* 1, 400; *PW*, 146). Nevertheless, with the humility that so often characterizes his thought, Mendelssohn admits his inability to uncover the systematic principles underlying the experiences so perceptively described by Burke:

> In no way do I flatter myself with having provided the psychological basis for all the experiences noted by the Englishman. Our sentiments have such depths that poking my eye in their direction is all too fatuous. I wish rather, by my effort here, to have encouraged a philosophical mind to undertake this worthwhile investigation. My friend still owes the world a translation that he promised to give of the English work along with emendations and notes. If only he would fulfill my wish! (*JubA* 1, 400-401; *PW*, 147).

The friend to whom Mendelssohn refers was none other than Lessing, who, by early 1758, had begun preparing a translation of Burke's *Enquiry* out of what he described as "pure idleness and boredom" (Lessing, *JubA* 11, 174). At the time, it was expected that Lessing would be the one to introduce Burke's *Enquiry* to the German intellectual world. Mendelssohn described his own notes on the *Enquiry* as "mere embryos of thoughts that a Lessing must first develop and improve. Perhaps he can also give regular form and breathe life into some of my monstrosities" (*JubA* 1, 253; my translation). Despite these early intentions, Lessing's translation was never published, and the preparatory materials have since been lost. Even so, the project seems to have lingered into the late 1760s. In a letter dated October 28, 1768, Lessing writes to his brother

4 On the one hand, Mendelssohn states that it is possible to feel pleasure in another's pain because we are not directly affected by it: "Sympathy is the only unpleasant sentiment that we find alluring, and the sort of sympathy that is known to us in tragedies under the name of terror is nothing but a sympathy that suddenly surprises us. *For the danger never threatens us ourselves but rather our fellow human being whom we pity*" (*JubA* 1, 110; *PW*, 73-4; my italics). On the other hand, Mendelssohn also asserts that the awareness that the misfortune is fictional is the reason we can feel pleasure: "How much more, then, must the theatrical presentation of innumerable episodes of ill fortune, to which someone virtuous succumbs, enhance our love for his perfections and make him worthier in our eye! Such a sight in nature would be unbearable for us since the displeasure over his undeserved ill fortune would far surpass the pleasure that springs from love. Yet, although this is the case in nature, it is nonetheless pleasing on stage. For the recollection that it is nothing but an artistic deception lessens our pain to some extent and leaves only as much of it as is necessary to lend our love the proper fullness" (*JubA* 1, 111; *PW*, 75).

Karl that he "had not, in fact, given up on the translation of the English work on the sublime and beautiful" (Lessing 1987, p. 558). As is well known, the first German translation of the *Enquiry* was carried out by Christian Garve and published in 1773 (Knapp 2022; Hlobil 2007).

Ultimately, it was Mendelssohn who took on the task of introducing Burke's Enquiry into Leibnizian philosophy. In addressing it, Lessing's principle became essential. In my view, this new reflective framework, fully developed in the 1771 edition of Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Writings*, offers a potential solution to the challenge posed by Burke. Already in the 1761 edition of the *Rhapsody*, Mendelssohn tentatively and somewhat unsystematically begins to apply Lessing's principle to the problem of how it is possible to derive pleasure from objects that, according to Maupertuis's nominal definition, ought to elicit only aversion. Although he had previously confessed his inability to explain the full range of experiences described by Burke, Mendelssohn appears to have found a path forward:

> Thus, the knowledge of evil itself, and the vivid abhorrence of it, are perfections of the human being and must necessarily afford him pleasure. We abhor imperfection, but not the knowledge of it; we flee from evil, but not from the capacity to recognize and condemn it. Since these are essential faculties of our soul, we must necessarily find pleasure in their exercise. (*JubA* 1, 571; my translation)

Although this passage is omitted from the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsody*, its underlying idea is fully developed there. Mendelssohn's engagement with Lessing's psychological principle is clearly evident in this earlier formulation, which closely echoes his response to Lessing's letter of March 3, 1757. In my view, this passage offers a compelling response to the challenge posed by Burke's *Enquiry*, particularly with respect to the difficulty of accounting for the pleasure experienced in the face of others' suffering. Mendelssohn's solution, as articulated here, rests on the claim that the soul derives pleasure not from the distressing object itself, but from its own resistance to imperfection. The object may be as unpleasant or flawed as one can imagine; nevertheless, the soul takes pleasure in reflecting on its own power to reject and condemn such imperfection. This aversion, as an expression of the soul's moral and cognitive powers, is itself a perfection; and it is this perfection that becomes the true aesthetic source of pleasure.

Lessing returned to Berlin in May 1758 (shortly after sending his personal copy of Burke's *Enquiry* to Mendelssohn) and remained in the city until the Russian-Austrian occupation in October 1760. The continuation of their discussion of the *Enquiry*, as well as the development of Lessing's new psychological principle within it, probably took place through personal dialogue during this period. Although the earlier passage may be viewed as Mendelssohn's first attempt to incorporate Lessing's principle into his own theoretical framework, it is not until the 1771 edition of the *Philosophical Writings* that this reflective principle receives a fully developed and systematic articulation. In the following section, I will attempt to reconstruct Mendelssohn's application of Lessing's principle in the 1771 *Rhapsody*.

5. Mendelssohn's Formulation of Lessing's Principle in the 1771 Edition of *Rhapsody*

Mendelssohn brings Lessing's psychological principle to full development in the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsody*. Between the earlier formulation in the 1761 edition and its mature expression a decade later, there is little direct evidence of Mendelssohn's continued engagement with Lessing's principle. This silence may be attributed to a clear shift in his philosophical focus during the 1760s. Lessing, in agreement with Mendelssohn, maintained that aesthetic concerns are characteristic of youth, suggesting that, with maturity, more serious and philosophical matters ought to take precedence: "You are indeed right: only a part of our youth should be devoted to the fine arts; we must practice more important matters before we die" (*JubA* 11, 168; my translation). Indeed, during the 1760s, Mendelssohn turned his attention to "Madame Metaphysik" (*JubA* 11, 55) temporarily setting aside aesthetic matters. The 1760s marked his rise as a prominent European philosopher, earning him the title of *Berliner Sokrates*. His fame was catalyzed not only by winning the 1763 prize of the Prussian Academy of Sciences for his essay *On the Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences* (1764), but also by his Wolffian interpretation of Plato's doctrine of the soul in *Phaedo, or On the Immortality of the Soul* (1767).

Mendelssohn's turn to metaphysics in the 1760s makes it particularly difficult to trace his continued engagement with Lessing's psychological principle during this period. Nonetheless, one key document offers insight for such a reconstruction: Mendelssohn's notes on his *Philosophical Writings* of 1761 (*JubA* 1, 223–226).[5] Likely written around 1770 in preparation for the second edition of his collected writings (published in 1771), these notes reveal a critical reassessment of the central idea presented in his earlier letters *On Sentiments*. Drawing on Maupertuis's definition of pleasure and pain (1974, p. 193), Mendelssohn had initially argued in *On Sentiments* that the soul prefers the representation of perfection over the representation of imperfection. This principle constitutes the first thought of Mendelssohn's preparatory work of *On Sentiments* (*JubA* 1, 127). In contrast to his early period, Mendelssohn now writes:

5 Mendelssohn acknowledges this difference in the preparatory notes for the 1771 edition of his *Philosophical Writings*, likely written around 1770. Although Mendelssohn does not explicitly mention Lessing in these notes, the principle he formulated is clearly discernible. In the letters *On Sentiments*, "I remained with objective perfection, which the soul perceives (during a sensual enjoyment). But I should have added that, through this harmonious, inner sensation, the faculties of the soul are also engaged in a manner beneficial to it, thereby establishing a subjective reality within the soul as well." (*JubA* 1, 225). Aside from Mendelssohn's preparatory work for the 1771 edition of his writings, there is no evidence of his engagement with Lessing's principle during the 1760s. For this reason, I must transition directly from his early reception of Burke to the articulation of Lessing's psychological principle in the 1771 edition of *Rhapsody*.

> Wrong! Aversion does not always concern the mere absence of a representation; rather, it sometimes targets the disapproval of the object itself. Imperfection is objectively bad and elicits disapproval, but subjectively, as a representation, it is a *praedicatum ponens*—and thus good. (*JubA* 1, 225; my translation)

The distinction between the object and its subjective representation as shaped by the influence of Lessing's reflective principle, is introduced by Mendelssohn at the very beginning of the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsody* (*JubA* 1, 383-89). Here, he notes that Maupertuis's nominal definition of pleasure and pain contains "a small error that deserves to be noted" (*JubA* 1, 383; *PW*, 131). According to this definition, "we would have to despise every unpleasant sentiment and wish to see it purged from our soul and destroyed" (*JubA* 1, 383; *PW*, 131). Yet ordinary experience demonstrates that this is not always the case. There are instances in which experiences that are inherently unpleasant and imperfect, and which the soul would ordinarily reject, nevertheless become sources of intense pleasure. Mendelssohn explains this apparent paradox by drawing a crucial distinction: "If we pay attention to ourselves, we notice that, in the case of some unpleasant sentiments, our disgust is not always directed at the representation but very often at the object of the representation" (*JubA* 1, 383; *PW*, 131). With this remark, he introduces a conceptual distinction between the object being represented and the representation itself, understood as a product and expression of the soul's activity and reality. Although this distinction is new in Mendelssohn's published work, it emerges precisely within the context of the problem of mixed sentiments and can be interpreted as a development of the "fine principle" Lessing had articulated in his letter of February 2, 1757.

To some extent, one can already discern a contrast between the formulation of Lessing's principle in the 1761 edition of *Rhapsody* and its 1771 edition. In the first version, Mendelssohn merely stated that the soul's aversion to an imperfect object, insofar as this activity enhances the soul's reality, constitutes a perfection and, as such, a source of pleasure. However, in 1771, Mendelssohn elaborates on this subjective dimension to make a fundamental distinction; namely, between the objective and subjective side of representations. In his own words: "Each individual representation stands in a twofold relation. It is related, at once, to the matter before it as its object (of which it is a picture or copy) and then to the soul or the thinking subject (of which it constitutes a determination)" (*JubA* 1, 384; *PW*, 132). On the one hand, the object causes in the soul a picture or representation. On the other hand, however, the notes of the object itself are "determinations" that the soul itself gives to the object. It is worth nothing that Mendelssohn explained the subjective determinations of the soul's representation in the second dialogue of his *Phaedo*. In this treatise, he says that "order," "harmony," and "regularity" of the world, all kind of relations that show unity in plurality, are "effects of the power to think" (*JubA* 3, 92). In the *Phaedo*, Mendelssohn neither discusses the phenomenon of mixed sentiments nor explicitly draws the distinction between the two aspects of representation. Nonetheless, it may be plausible to suggest that the thesis according to which the categories of the world exist as a representation of the soul subtly underpins this conceptual distinction.

Be that as it may, the distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of representation is best understood as a product of Mendelssohn's engagement with Lessing's reflective principle in his effort to account for the nature of mixed sentiments. Immediately following the passage in which this distinction is introduced, Mendelssohn remarks: "As a determination of the soul," whether this determination is positive or negative, "many a representation can have something pleasant about it although, as a picture of the object, it is accompanied by disapproval and a feeling of repugnance" (*JubA* 1, 389; *PW*, 132). Toward the end of these introductory reflections, Mendelssohn articulates what amounts to a new position:

> I have shown that the objective imperfection arouses no sheer discontent, but rather a mixed sentiment. On the side of the object and in relation to it, we feel, to be sure, discontent and disfavor in the intuitive knowledge of its deficiencies. But on the side of mind's projection, the soul's powers of knowing and desiring are engaged, that is to say, its reality is enhanced and this must of necessity cause pleasure and satisfaction. (*JubA* 1, 389; *PW*, 136).

Therefore, the soul experiences pleasure in two senses: theoretical and practical. On the one hand, it takes pleasure in the determination of an object's negative or positive qualities, since these determinations are affirmative predicates of the soul. The mere exercise of this cognitive faculty is, in itself, a source of pleasure. On the other hand, the soul may also take pleasure in its aversive response, insofar as such aversion activates its capacity to desire or to reject. In short, pleasure now arises from the soul's reflection on its own mental powers. It is striking that Mendelssohn considers himself to have discovered a "source of pleasure that is far more universal" (*JubA* 1, 389) than the one elaborated in *On Sentiments*. This marks a turning point in the development of his thought.

Up to this point, I have outlined Mendelssohn's reception of Lessing's reflective principle. This historical reconstruction has sought to trace the development of this new aesthetic framework, from Lessing's 1757 letter to the *Rhapsody* of 1771. In the next section, I will offer some systematic reflections on this principle, in order to assess whether it truly represents a "more universal" source of pleasure than that explored in *On Sentiments*—a universality that would stem from its ability to explain more adequately the phenomenon of mixed sentiments.

6. Self-Reflection of the Soul as a "More Universal" Source of Pleasure

Mendelssohn underscores a "more universal" source of pleasure, found in the reflective dimension of the soul's representations, by revisiting his earlier explanation of mixed sentiments in the letters *On Sentiments*. Specifically, he refers to the arguments presented in the conclusion of the letters, where he responded to

the challenge posed by Dubos (*JubA* 1, 109). Here, Mendelssohn addressed Dubos's position by invoking the concept of sympathy *(Mitleid*). He emphasized that the pleasure we experience when witnessing the suffering of others stems from a recognition of the moral perfection in the person who elicits our pity (*JubA* 1, 110).[6] On this basis, Mendelssohn's thesis could be preserved; namely, that the nature of the soul tends toward goodness and perfection.

The central issue is found in Mendelssohn's broader critique of Dubos. Against Dubos, he says that he "must never have distinguished the soul's pleasure from sensuous gratification and compared the former, in its element, with mere willing" (*JubA* 1, 107; *PW*, 71). As is particularly evident in the correspondence between Lessing, Nicolai, and Mendelssohn concerning the *Trauerspiel*, Dubos's theory is principally flawed in that it fails to relate aesthetic pleasure to the human will, a deficiency that renders his account somewhat amoral (Altmann 1969, p. 105). The core of Dubos's aesthetics was not to demonstrate that the soul strives toward perfection or the good, but rather to argue that it seeks only to be pleased and moved. Mendelssohn's position, by contrast, rests on the opposite premise; namely, that pleasure and the will differ only in degree, insofar as both are directed toward the perfection of the soul: the good. Accordingly, because "the determination of our power of representing" functions identically in both feeling and willing, "pleasure, just like the will, can have no other basis for motivation than a true or apparent good" (*JubA* 1, 107; *PW*, 71).

In light of his earlier critique and the fundamentally different standpoints, Mendelssohn's words to Dubos in the 1771 *Rhapsody* come as a surprise: "it was not right for me to criticize Dubos for saying that the soul longs merely to be moved, even it is to be moved by unpleasant representations." (*JubA* 1, 389; *PW*, 71). Mendelssohn argues in the following way:

> In relation to the mind's projection, the movement and stirring which is produced in the soul by unpleasant representations cannot be anything else but pleasant. To be sure, like the will, pleasure is based on nothing else but a genuine or apparent good. But this good may not always be sought in the object outside us, in the original picture. Even the deficiencies and evils of the object can, as representations, as determinations of the thinking projection, be good and pleasant. (*JubA* 1, 389; *PW*, 137).

While Mendelssohn upholds the central thesis of his theory of pleasure (that pleasure and will differ only in degree as both aspire toward perfection) he nonetheless draws a clear distinction. For this more universal source, the existence of the object is irrelevant; pleasure arises purely from the soul's reflection on its own reality and activity. However, although Mendelssohn continues to assert a difference of degree in this reflection, it is worth noting that in the annotations to the 1761 edition of his writings, he explicitly differentiates pleasure from will: "Pleasure should not have been compared to the will. [...] The desire with which pleasure is usually accompanied does not essentially belong to the enjoyment of pleasure" (*JubA* 1, 225).

This late distinction between the capacity to feel and the capacity to desire does not, however, undermine the thesis that these faculties differ only in degree. Rather, it serves to clarify the origin of pleasure. In *On Sentiments*, pleasure was seen as contingent upon both the perfection of the object and the soul's inclination toward that perfection. By contrast, the 1771 edition of *Rhapsody* locates the source of pleasure in the soul's reflection on its own activity. This shift signals a fundamentally different paradigm. The object's inherent qualities no longer absolutely determine its aesthetic value; rather, the pleasure it evokes arises from the way it moves the soul to reflect on itself, irrespective of the object's perfection or imperfection. Because this reflective account offers a more adequate explanation of mixed sentiments than the earlier theory of the letters *On Sentiments*, the principle can rightly be regarded as a "more universal" source of pleasure.

Final Remark

The development of Mendelssohn's theory of sentiments, particularly his account of mixed sentiments, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the influence of Lessing's "fine principle," first articulated in the letter of February 2, 1757. While Mendelssohn initially grounded pleasure in the soul's desire for perfection, Lessing's insight introduced a new reflective dimension: that even displeasure can give rise to pleasure when it results from the soul's reflection on its own representational powers. Mendelssohn's engagement with Burke sharpened the relevance of Lessing's idea. Faced with Burke's challenge to the aesthetics of perfection, Mendelssohn came to view Lessing's framework not merely as an explanatory tool, but as a philosophical necessity. In the second edition of *Rhapsody* (1771), this culminates in a fundamental shift: pleasure no longer depends primarily on the objective perfection of the experience or in the soul's desire for perfection, but arises from the soul's reflection on its own representational activity. Here, the distinction between the object and its subjective representation becomes central. Pleasure can arise even in the face of evil, so long as the experience engages the soul's capacities and prompts the soul's reflection on its own activity.

In light of the present reconstruction, the much-debated 'subjective turn' in Mendelssohn's theory of sentiments may be understood in more specific terms, adding a subtle refinement to the analyses of Frederick C. Beiser, Anne Pollok, and Paul Guyer. In the first edition of the letters *On Sentiments*, Mendelssohn clearly draws on a subjective element to account for the nature of sentiments; namely, the soul's natural inclination toward perfection. Yet this subjective component remains fully subordinate to the objective dimension of

6 According to Mendelssohn, sympathy "is nothing but the love for an object combined with the conception of a misfortune that befalls it; a physical evil for which it is not responsible. Love rests upon perfections and must afford us gratification, and the conception of an undeserved misfortune renders the innocent object of our love all the more precious and elevates the value of its merits." (*JubA*, 110; *PW*, 74)

perfection: it is the harmony and concordance of the perfect object that draws the soul toward it. In the 1771 edition of the *Rhapsody*, by contrast, the source of pleasure is no longer the object itself, but rather the soul's reflection upon its own representations. Although labeling Mendelssohn's later theory of sentiments a form of 'subjective aesthetics' may overstate the case because the object still retains a degree of influence, I would argue that it is nonetheless appropriate to speak of a *reflective turn*. This interpretive shift explains the nature of sentiments through the soul's capacity to reflect on its own representational and volitional powers, thereby rendering the theory more universal by encompassing mixed sentiments, a domain that Mendelssohn had not fully resolved in his 1755 formulation. As this article has sought to demonstrate, the origin of this reflective turn can be traced to Lessing's letter to Mendelssohn of February 2, 1757.

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