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The Step into Existence: Reasoning toward God in Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours*

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ENG **Abstract:** This article offers a detailed analysis of Moses Mendelssohn's novel proof of God's existence as developed in chapter 16 of his philosophical testament, *Morning Hours*. The paper reconstructs the logical structure of the argument, situates it within Mendelssohn's broader philosophical outlook, and explores its far-reaching implications. It also investigates the possible historical sources and conceptual affinities of the argument. While some scholars have read Mendelssohn's argument as a version of Berkeleyan idealism, others highlight its cosmological or anti-idealist dimensions. The article concludes by assessing the philosophical significance and limits of Mendelssohn's approach, arguing that it offers a compelling, if ultimately contestable, attempt to reconcile finite cognition with metaphysical realism through the postulation of an infinite intellect.
Keywords: Mendelssohn – Common Sense – Speculation – Infinite Intellect – Self.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The Step into Existence. 3. First Part of the Proof: Incompleteness of Self-Knowledge. 4. Second Part of the Proof: The Ontological Status of the Knowable. 5. Concluding Remarks. Bibliography.

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1. Introduction

Throughout his entire intellectual career, Moses Mendelssohn remained a staunch defender of the philosophical proofs for the existence of God. Convinced of their validity—at least of some of them[1]—, he did not hesitate to ascribe to them a degree of certainty comparable to that of mathematic reasoning.[2] From early texts such as the *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences* to his philosophical testament, *Morning Hours*, Mendelssohn continuously reexamined these proofs and reflected upon them, seeking not so much to innovate as to refine, clarify, and make them more accessible. Still, this did not prevent him from offering new versions of traditional proofs. One such version appears in chapter 16 of *Morning Hours*, where he presents an argument that invites us to ask whether it should be seen as a mere reformulation or as a genuinely original proof not previously proposed. The reflections that follow aim to address this question, among others.

At the same time, Mendelssohn was acutely aware that religious conviction cannot rest solely on philosophical proofs, nor can it derive its "existential" certainty from them. A philosophically uninstructed mind may come to believe in the existence of a supreme being through more basic, elementary, even "sensible" types of inference, i.e., ways of thinking rooted in immediate experience rather than in reflective

1 For a comprehensive examination of Mendelssohn's treatment of the proofs for the existence of God, see Altmann (1982). As Altmann observes (p. 135), Mendelsohn defends the two major types of argument that the Leibniz-Wolff-Baumgarten school regarded as valid: the ontological or a priori argument and the cosmological or a posteriori argument. This commitment to tradition does not preclude him from introducing substantial modifications to both, as we shall show in greater detail with regard to his version of the cosmological argument. Mendelssohn's treatment of the ontological argument—which will not be discussed here—as well as its implicit confrontation with Kant's critique, has received in recent years considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the works of Rovira (2017) and Lang (2021). Rovira argues that Mendelssohn's version of the ontological argument successfully eludes Kant's objections and refutes them conclusively, whereas Lang takes the opposite view, contending against Rovira. Rovira, however, offers a rejoinder to Lang in a more recent contribution (Rovira 2023).

2 See, for example, the following passage from *Morning Hours* (Mendelsson 2011, p. 56): "In the doctrine of God there is a speculative part which, I think, can be treated with all the rigor of the scientific method. Here as well, with the evidence appropriate to pure mathematics, concepts can be unpacked and analyzed into their simplest characteristics and relations." See also *On Evidence* (Mendelssohn 1997, p. 280) and *An die Freunde Lessings* (Mendelssohn 1971, p. 197).

thought.[3] And precisely because of their simplicity and directness, such types of inference can often be more persuasive and existentially compelling. One might think, for example, of the experience of awe before the vastness of nature, the admiration of its dynamic structure, or the sense of providence in the sequence of life events (Mendelssohn 1971, pp. 292-293). In fact, as Mendelssohn himself openly acknowledges, his own religious conviction rests on such basic discernments, which are less conceptually refined, perhaps, but all the more compelling and conducive to action.[4]

It is in this second kind of inference—more immediate and persuasive, though less subtle and complex—that the human spirit finds its proper dwelling and rest. Philosophical proofs, by contrast, do not offer a comfortable habitation. Instead, their role is rather defensive: to articulate the basic certainties of common consciousness about the divine in precise and compelling conceptual terms.[5] For Mendelssohn, indeed, this is the task, not only of the proofs of God's existence, but of philosophy as such: to translate the dicta (*Aussprüche*) of common sense into rigorously argued concepts, thereby confirming and protecting them against skeptical critique.[6] Thus, philosophical speculation does not generate belief *ex nihilo*; it strengthens the convictions we already hold, making them explicit and conceptually articulated, while also purging them of potential prejudices and confusion.

This defensive role of philosophical reasoning becomes particularly important when our basic convictions are called into question in the name of philosophical vigilance itself. It was precisely in such a cultural climate that Mendelssohn developed his philosophical outlook. As Frederick Beiser has noted, in late eighteenth-century Germany speculative reason was increasingly perceived, not as a safeguard of moral and religious certainty, but as a destructive force that actively undermined it (Beiser 1987, pp. 1-3). In a sense, reason had begun to turn against itself: instead of reinforcing our fundamental beliefs, it was deployed to question them under the banner of critical inquiry and the fight against prejudice, yet often resulting in doubt and perplexity. For Mendelssohn, philosophy's task in such a context is to defend basic certainties against the excesses—and potentially corrupting effects—of subtle speculation, by countering with arguments no less rigorous and refined. The subtler the attack, the subtler the defense must be.[7]

This helps illuminate some of the distinctive traits of the novel proof of God's existence that Mendelssohn presents in Chapter 16 of *Morning Hours*, which he describes as a proof based on the incompleteness of our self-knowledge. It is admittedly an abstruse and somewhat obscure argument, although Mendelssohn presents it simply as a reworked version of the argument *a contingentia mundi*.[8] As I will argue, this very subtlety is not incidental, but a deliberate response to the subtle and often corrosive challenges of unrestrained metaphysical speculation. In this respect, the argument should not be understood merely as a philosophical defense of the existence of God, but more broadly as a defense of our basic "sense of reality" itself—embodied in sound common reason—, which was coming under attack from the growing culture of systematic doubt and *Zweifelsucht*.

To substantiate these claims and clarify how Mendelssohn's proof fulfills this role, I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I will briefly examine Mendelssohn's much-debated conception of the relationship between common sense and philosophical speculation, and I will attempt to redefine the role of the proofs of God's existence within that framework. My central claim is that, for Mendelssohn, the function of such proofs is not merely to demonstrate the existence of a particular being or entity, but rather to facilitate the mind's transition to objective reality itself and to effect the so-called "step into existence", which, according to Mendelssohn, is philosophy's most difficult task (one from which other disciplines are largely exempt). On the basis of these preliminary clarifications, I will turn to a detailed analysis of the argument presented in Chapter 16 of *Morning Hours*. In the third section, I will examine the first part of the proof, where Mendelssohn argues for the incompleteness of our self-knowledge and for the existence of an unlimited reality that, though elusive,

3 See *Jerusalem* (Mendelssohn 1983, p. 95) and *An die Freunde Lessings* (Mendelssohn 1971, pp. 197-199).

4 See *An die Freunde Lessings* (Mendelssohn 1971, p. 198); see also On Evidence (Mendelssohn 1997, p. 293): "These kinds of proof, meanwhile, possess far greater eloquence than the demonstration itself. By their liveliness they make a much greater impression in the mind, awakening the soul to dynamic decisions and producing the practical conviction that should be our foremost purpose in contemplating divine properties."

5 See the following passage from *On Evidence* (Mendelssohn 1997, p. 293): "The demonstrative kinds of proof are the fortresses that protect a country against enemy attacks. For peaceful inhabitants, however, they are not the most comfortable and pleasant places in which to live. If someone does not have to contend with an adversary and overcome some subtle doubt, he finds in the method of knowing the creator from the beauty, order, and purposes of nature the sweetest comfort, the most refreshing consolation, as well as the very fire and animation of knowledge that transfers into the capacity to desire and occasions decisions that break out into actions."

6 Regarding this topic, see the illuminating observations by Freudenthal (2012, p. 31).

7 See the following passage from *An die Freunde Lessings* (Mendelssohn 1971, pp. 198-199; italics mine): "Wir müssen die metaphysischen Subtilitäten, deren man sich bedienet um uns zu mißleiten, gegen die Wahrheit halten, vergleichen, untersuchen und prüfen, und, wenn sie die Probe nicht bestehen, *durch noch feinere Begriffe zu verdrängen suche*n."

8 The argument has been curiously overlooked by commentators, perhaps due to its somewhat cryptic character, and the interpretations it has received are quite varied, if not outright divergent. The first critical analysis of the proof from a Kantian standpoint was carried out by Ludwig Heinrich Jakob in 1786 in his *Prüfung der Mendelssohnschen 'Morgenstunden'*. For L. W. Beck (Beck 1969, pp. 338-339), the argument places Mendelssohn very close to Berkeley in asserting that nothing exists unless it is actually thought by a mind, and in concluding from this that there must exist an infinite intellect (= God), despite Mendelssohn's explicit rejection of idealism. For Altmann (Altmann 1982, pp. 143-144), the argument expresses the unifying power of the mind, by virtue of which the plurality of existing beings constitutes a unity, a theme also addressed in the *Phädon*. Dyck (Dyck 2011) situates the argument within the broader polemic against idealism that runs through *Morning Hours*, interpreting it as the decisive refutation of idealism. The most detailed and penetrating analysis of the argument is undoubtedly that offered by Gideon Freudenthal, who interprets it as grounded in the consciousness of our mortality, thereby locating Mendelssohn somewhere between rationalism and the Romantic *pathos* of finitude, as later developed in thinkers such as Schleiermacher (Freudenthal 2018).

is nonetheless internal to us. This allows him to affirm, without dogmatism, the existence of an inexhaustible dimension of being, while remaining within the bounds of immanent self-certainty. In the fourth section, I will consider the second part of the argument, in which Mendelssohn exposes the contradictions inherent in the idea that actual reality is per definition knowable and intelligible, and argues that everything that exists must be actually known and represented by an infinite intellect, thus concluding that God exists. Finally, in the concluding remarks, I will assess the philosophical merit and broader significance of Mendelssohn's novel proof.

2. The Step into Existence

In the introduction, I have noted a distinction in Mendelssohn's thought between a basic and pre-reflective certainty of the divine, and a conceptually developed one, which includes, for instance, the rational proofs of God's existence. This distinction is part of a broader tension that runs throughout Mendelssohn's work: that between common sense (also referred to as "sound human understanding", "human sense", and so on) and speculation (also referred to as "contemplation"; in general, it is equivalent to philosophy). The relationship between these two varieties of cognition is far from straightforward, and has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate.[9] In what follows, I offer a few observations aimed at clarifying the specific role that the proofs for God's existence play in Mendelssohn's philosophical outlook. I will argue that these proofs do not merely seek to conceptually underpin the certainties of common sense regarding the divine; more fundamentally, they attempt to validate our cognitive access to reality as such. They are, in this sense, not only proofs of the reality of the divine, but also—perhaps above all—*proofs of the reality of our knowledge.*

For Mendelssohn, speculation constitutes one of the two fundamental modes of reason, the other being common sense. These are not two separate faculties, but rather two ways of exercising the same defining human capacity: rationality. Within this framework, common sense represents reason in its pre-theoretical and pre-reflective expression, as it operates in our immediate and practical engagement with the world. It is, in other words, our spontaneous "sense of reality", one that encompasses not only empirical certainties, but also metaphysical truths such as the immortality of the soul or the existence of a supreme being governing the world (see Freudenthal 2012, p. 30). Common sense enables us to distinguish, for instance, between being awake and dreaming, or to affirm that beyond our representations there exists a physical realm endowed with ontological self-sufficiency. These are certainties we possess intuitively or immediately, even if they have been acquired through implicit inferences of which we are not consciously aware.[10] Speculative reason, by contrast, is the theoretical, conceptual, and argumentative articulation of these same fundamental certainties. It is, so to speak, a sense of reality unfolded in reflective and discursive terms.

Therefore, the difference between these two modes of rationality is not one of kind, but of degree, and may be characterized as a matter of rhythm or pace (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 20-21): "[...] human understanding takes hasty steps and rashly goes forward without being made tentative by the fear of falling. By contrast, reason fairly taps around, as it were, with a staff before it dares to take a step; it totters along the same path, no doubt more carefully, but not without fear and trembling."

Despite their connaturality, these two modes of reason may come into conflict. Indeed, metaphysics often contradicts the affirmations of common sense, which it reproaches for proceeding too hastily and lightly in its judgments. Let us take, for instance, the certainty of common sense regarding the existence of a physical world beyond our representations. For common sense, this is a self-evident truth that requires no proof, though it should not be forgotten that such a conviction is also the result of inferential processes, albeit unconscious ones. Therefore, the attempt to prove this truth would seem, form the perspective of sound human understanding, senseless. For philosophical speculation, by contrast, the reality of the physical world is anything but obvious, and to demonstrate it conclusively—a trivial task for common sense—becomes an arduous undertaking, for some even insoluble. The same can be said about other realities that common sense easily admits and speculation questions, such as the reality of the world outside of God (Spinozism), or the reality of minds other than mine (solipsism). Further below I will indicate where the actual root of this disagreement between common sense and philosophy lies. For the moment, let us simply note that the conflict between the two is far from negligible: it results in disorientation and in the inability to find stable points of reference in reality.

As is well known, Mendelssohn advises giving precedence to common sense in cases of conflict between these two modalities of reason (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 59-60): "Experience has taught me that in most cases common sense tends to be right and reason must speak very decisively for speculation if I am to leave common sense and follow speculation [...]". I will not enter here into the reasons that lead Mendelssohn to favor common sense, a matter widely debated among interpreters.[11] Let it suffice to note that common sense tends

9 A broad account of current scholarly discussions on this topic can be found in Arkush (1994) and Freudenthal (2012). Additional contributions to the debate have been made by Kuehn (1987), Vogt (2005), Gottlieb (2011), Franks (2011), Fogel (2015), and Sánchez de León Serrano (2024).

10 Regarding the inferential nature of common-sense certainties, see Franks (2011).

11 For this issue, see Altmann (1982, p. 151), Arkush (1994, p. 92), Beiser (1987, p. 102), Freudenthal (2012, p. 31; p. 48), Fogel (2015), and Sánchez de León Serrano (2024). Broadly speaking, the primacy that Mendelssohn accords to common sense over speculative reason has prompted some scholars to question the authenticity of his adherence to rationality and even to portray him as either a concealed fideist (Arkush) or a dogmatist reluctant to rational scrutiny (Beiser). Freudenthal has argued—convincingly, in our view—that the tension between common sense and speculation in Mendelssohn should by no means be equated with the traditional conflict between faith and reason. In our reading, the primacy that Mendelssohn assigns to common sense does not run counter to his commitment to rationality, but rather exposes the self-destructive and alienating tendency of excessive

toward a form of realism, while speculation, in its more radical expressions, inclines toward a *de-realizing skepticism.* Common sense easily concedes the existence of realities that philosophical speculation finds dubious. Were we to rely solely on speculative reason, we would find ourselves deprived of certainties, and therefore disoriented and estranged from the world. This disorientation is precisely what the philosophical culture of the time—represented by figures such as Hume or Helvétius—actively promotes in its fervent struggle against prejudice (see Mendelssohn 1983, p. 95). Yet for Mendelssohn, excessive philosophical vigilance is no less harmful to our orientation and guidance in reality than the absence of reflection itself.

Let us now turn to the actual root of the disagreement between common sense and philosophical speculation, for it reveals the key to the crucial role that the proofs of God's existence play in Mendelssohn's thought. We have just seen that philosophy is reluctant to affirm realities that common sense embraces swiftly and without hesitation. These reservations concerning the admission of reality—which make philosophy a kind of *hyper-awareness*—are not incidental: they stem from a particularity of the philosophical inquiry that clearly sets it apart from other intellectual pursuits. Unlike disciplines such as physics or geometry, philosophy cannot simply assume or presuppose the objective existence of what it investigates: it must demonstrate it. It must prove that what it deals with—whether matter in relation to mind, the world in relation to God, or the world as such—*truly exists.*

This demand to prove the existence of what is being explored—this "transition from concepts to actualities," as Mendelssohn puts it (Mendelssohn 1997, p. 275)—is, according to Mendelssohn, the most difficult task philosophy must face. It is also what makes metaphysical speculation often seem so distant from the concerns of everyday life. For speculative reason, *reality as such is not self-evident:* it must be conquered through the concept, validated rationally, and shown to follow from firm and indubitable principles. To do so, philosophy must begin from the only truly incontestable point, however one approaches it, to wit: *the reality of the self and its representations.* Not even the most radical skeptic can deny this reality, which thus serves as the incontrovertible starting point for the eventual establishment of other realities. The real difficulty lies in making the transition from this immediate certainty to others that are less obvious and more in need of proof: in moving beyond the self and its immanent certainties in order to demonstrate the existence of something like an *objective reality*—i.e., independent of the observing subject.

In attempting to transcend our subjective realm in order to establish the existence of external realities—i.e., realities that are independent of their being represented—something of the evidence of the self is inevitably lost: *the degree of certainty diminishes*. It is precisely in this act of self-transcendence, in the attempt to affirm something beyond the self, that the skeptic appears, armed with his doubts and philosophical reservations (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 29). The skeptic then raises the following difficulty. Our perception of reality is inevitably shaped by our perspective and point of view—that is, *by our limitations*. Precisely because the apprehension of the real—at least for finite beings—always takes place from a particular standpoint, it can be understood as both a genuine grasp and a distortion of reality, a cognitive achievement and a product of our cognitive weakness. It thus becomes a particularly arduous task to distinguish between those representations that faithfully mirror reality, granting cognitive access to an objectivity that transcends our own standpoint, and those that, by distorting reality, merely constitute modifications of our own being without any objective correlate, thereby reinforcing our epistemic isolation.

For these reasons, it is precisely in "the step into existence"—as just described and depending on how it is interpreted and carried out—that the various metaphysical positions emerge: idealism, realism, pantheism, solipsism, materialism, skepticism, and so on. All these positions are, at their core, different ways of confronting the fundamental philosophical problem of how to carry out the passage to actual reality and answer the question: what exists? A common denominator can be observed among them: with the possible exception of realism (depending on how it is defined), all of these positions cast doubt on some dimension of reality that common sense tends to take for granted: "Metaphysicians do not shy from denying those things which the sound human understanding would never dream of doubting" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 57). For that reason, they all stand, to varying degrees, in tension with sound common sense. Idealism, for instance, denies the reality of the physical world, viewing its presumed existence as a prejudice born of our cognitive limitations, a bias generated by our perspectival standpoint. Pantheism—in its Spinozist form—denies the extra-divine substantiality of created things in general, and of the human mind in particular. Solipsism rejects the reality of other minds. Skepticism, for its part, denies the very possibility of reliable cognitive access to reality *tout court*. The justifications for each of these positions may differ, but the fundamental problem they confront remains the same.

As already noted, sound common sense would never think of denying any of these realities, which it takes as self-evident. Yet this does not mean that it accepts them gratuitously or that it naively conflates its own representations with reality *quoad se*. Common sense, too, operates according to a certain method, though it is more expedient and resolute than that of philosophical speculation. Indeed, as the very expression "common sense" suggests, its method rests on the identification of what is common, stable, recurrent, or unified across different perceptions, interpreting this as a sign of a self-sufficient and independent reality. As Mendelssohn aptly puts it (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 38): "[...] agreement leads to a common ground." The first kind of agreement we encounter—one that points toward the existence of an external reality—is the agreement between our different senses (sight, smell, touch, etc.). The combination of their respective perceptions, and the recognition of a coherence or agreement among them—say, between the tactile and visual perceptions of

philosophical vigilance and compulsive doubting (*Zweifelsucht*). I have discussed this issue in greater detail in Sánchez de León Serrano (2024).

a spherical object—, allows us to detect objects that are external to our senses and that cause the sensations we receive through them. Expanding the scope, we can also detect external realities through the agreement among our various perceptions over time. Further still, the same procedure can be applied to the agreement between the perceptions of different subjects of the same kind (human beings), or even—if we wish to expand the scope further—between perceivers of different kinds (such as humans and animals). The broader the range of perceptions we consider, and the more clearly we can discern what is held in common among them, the stronger our assurance becomes that this agreement is grounded in reality *quoad se*—i.e., in a reality independent of any particular perceiver.

Although this procedure has its justification, it ultimately fails to meet the demands of metaphysical speculation, for a fundamental reason: no matter how much we expand the scope and range of our perceptions, we remain confined within our own perspectival framework—i.e., that of finite minds—, which is always relative and particular, and therefore incapable of rising to a truly universal and all-encompassing standpoint.[12] The certainty we gain through this method, at best, will be probable, but never apodictic, and the suspicion of distortion or subjective deformation will remain. To establish the reality of something with true certainty, free from perspectival contamination, we would have to seek agreement, not merely among finite minds, but between our mind and a mind entirely free from limitations and point of view: an infinite intellect, i.e., God. This is precisely what Mendelssohn affirms in the following passage (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 38):

> If we could be persuaded that the supreme intellect exhibited to itself the things outside of us as actual objects, then our assurance of their existence would have attained the highest degree of evidence and there would be no further increase that it might undergo. This is no idle speculation to which I lead you out of boredom. If we shall have convinced ourselves of the existence of the supreme being and its properties, then a way will also present itself of making for ourselves some concept of the infinity of the supreme being's knowledge and from this truth, along with several others, perhaps in a scientific, demonstrative manner, of refuting the pretentions of the idealists and of proving irrefutably the actual existence of a sensory world outside us.

Several aspects of this passage deserve our attention. First, the argumentative strategy suggested by Mendelssohn appears to be aimed primarily at the idealist, but it can equally be applied to other de-realizing metaphysical positions (such as Spinozism or solipsism).[13] The central question is whether a supreme intellect, entirely free from limitations, would represent certain realities in the same way as our finite intellect does.[14] If, for instance, the "sensory world"—when considered in relation to an infinite intellect—cannot possess any ontological self-sufficiency, then we can be confident that it is mere *Schein*, an appearance resulting from our perspectival and cognitive limitations. If, on the other hand, it is conceivable that an infinite intellect can produce and sustain objects outside itself, then not only idealism, but also Spinozism (which denies the existence of extra-divine realities) can be refuted.[15] In any case, the proposed approach requires us to demonstrate the existence of such an infinite intellect and to infer, from its essential properties and attributes, the nature of the world it has created. In short, it is a matter of uncovering the structure of reality by beginning from its *ultimate generative source*, rather than proceeding in the opposite direction—i.e., from the world to God.

Mendelssohn is well aware that the strategy he proposes may at first glance appear obscure and abstruse ("This is no idle speculation [...]"). Indeed, it seems implausible and an excessive "detour" to attempt to prove the existence of a supreme intellect—something apparently remote from immediate experience—as a first step toward establishing the reality of what surrounds us, such as the physical world, which seems more tangible and readily accessible. Would this not amount, one might object, to attempting to prove what is obscure by means of something even more obscure, and what is near by means of what is distant and remote? And yet, for Mendelssohn—as he explicitly states in the passage—this procedure is the most secure and demonstrative; indeed, it is, in his view, not susceptible to any higher degree of evidence.[16]

To make Mendelssohn's strategy more plausible, it is important to recall the fundamental demand that defines philosophical inquiry, namely: that nothing be taken as self-evident, and that the actual reality of whatever is under investigation must be demonstrated. This demand entails that nothing can be accepted as simply "given"; rather, reality *as such* must be rendered intelligible. How? By deriving it from its ultimate origin or source. Even if Mendelssohn affirms—against typically "de-realizing" metaphysical positions—certain realities that common sense takes for granted, such as the world or physical reality, he does not therefore

12 Gottlieb aptly describes this form of knowledge grounded in the concordance among finite minds as "finite truth" (Gottlieb 2011, p. 91).

13 Corey Dyck, for instance, analyzes how Mendelssohn employs this argument to refute idealism. See Dyck (2011, pp. 167-168).

14 We find a similar argument in *On evidence* (Mendelssohn 1997, p. 290). At its core, this argument concerns the distinction—common since the seventeenth century—between primary and secondary qualities: the former are properties of things that are independent of the observer, while the latter are relative to it, and therefore subjective. What Mendelssohn proposes is to establish this distinction by taking as a measuring stick an infinite intellect, one free from biases and cognitive limitations that might distort its apprehension of reality. If what we represent as primary—i.e., endowed with objective existence—also appears as such to an infinite intellect, then we may affirm its objective reality with complete certainty.

15 In another passage from *Morning Hours* (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 74), Mendelssohn tries to refute the idealist by showing that a world consisting of minds and bodies is more in keeping with God's perfection and creative impetus than an ontologically "parsimonious" world consisting of minds alone. For a more detailed examination of this issue, see Sánchez de León Serrano (2024).

16 The top-down trajectory proposed by Mendelssohn is, in fact, characteristic of seventeenth-century continental rationalism. For Descartes, Spinoza, and Malebranche alike, the certainty of God's existence must precede all other certainties.

regard them as ontologically and conceptually irreducible or obvious. To do so would render them opaque to conceptual understanding. If philosophical speculation is indeed to confirm the dicta of common sense—as Mendelssohn demands—, then it must account for everything that common sense assumes unreflectively. And this requires, precisely, that all things be derived from their ultimate source of intelligibility: God.[17]

Thus, the difficult step to existence that defines the philosophical task is, above all, a passage to absolute and unlimited existence, i.e., a reality that allows for no relativization or restriction of any kind. Otherwise, the suspicion of perspectival distortion would remain intact, merely deferred indefinitely rather than dispelled. It is therefore not viable to ascend to the certainty of the divine by way of the certainty of the world, which is always partial and open to doubt. Rather, the ascent to the divine must proceed directly from the certainty of the self, avoiding any mediation through the world or dependence on what is extramental. This is precisely the acrobatic move that must be accomplished, and which defines the distinctive structure of the new proof of God's existence that Mendelssohn proposes in chapter 16 of *Morning Hours*. It becomes clear, then, that the proof of God's existence is not the demonstration of one being among others, but rather of *being as such*—being that is independent of knowledge. In this sense, it is also a proof of the reality of knowledge itself, for knowledge is validated precisely by its capacity to grasp what is external and independent of the particular knower.[18]

3. First Part of the Proof: Incompleteness of Self-Knowledge

All the elements are now in place to proceed to the examination of the proof for God's existence that Mendelssohn presents in chapter 16 of *Morning Hours*, which he himself calls *"a new proof for the existence of God on the basis of the incompleteness of self-knowledge"*. The proof is clearly divided into two parts. In this section, we will examine the first part, which deals specifically with the incompleteness of self-knowledge; in the following section, we will turn to the second part. The preliminary reflections presented thus far will allow us to better understand both the peculiarities and the potential difficulties of Mendelssohn's argument—an argument that is, in many respects, quite singular within the landscape of modern philosophy.

A few contextual remarks are in order. Mendelssohn presents this proof in the penultimate chapter of *Morning Hours* (chapter 16), after having laid out (among other things): a) in the first part of the work (chapters 1–7), his concepts of truth and knowledge, along with his fundamental disagreement with idealism;[19] and b) in the second part (chapters 8–17), his account of the relationship between speculation and common sense, his refutation of Spinozism, and his conception of the supreme being as endowed not only with unlimited cognitive power, but also with a *poietic* or creative faculty that grounds the divine act of creating the best conceivable world. Thus, before proceeding to demonstrate that God exists, Mendelssohn has already shown that God (if he exists) necessarily creates a world with extra-divine substantiality (against Spinoza), and that this world—being the best conceivable—is characterized by ontological profusion and abundance, and is therefore endowed with matter (against the idealist). Having established these points regarding the divine nature, what remains is to demonstrate that a deity with such characteristics actually exists. This final step will complete the harmonization between common sense and speculation, which Mendelssohn had earlier identified as the *telos* of philosophical reflection.

More specifically, in chapter 16, before presenting his new proof, Mendelssohn takes care to clarify a number of fundamental concepts. The first point Mendelssohn emphasizes is that everything which actually exists must also be thinkable—that is, capable of being conceived and rationally known. Otherwise, it could not exist at all, since what is unthinkable is, by definition, that which cannot under any circumstances come to be. However, to say that a given reality is thinkable and rationally knowable does not mean that our finite reason—what Mendelssohn calls "subjective" reason—is actually capable of knowing or fully grasping it. Let us consider, for instance, the following empirically verifiable truth (the example is Mendelssohn's own): "There is a tree here." If we wished to transform this empirical truth into a rational one, we would have to explain all the determinations, conditions, and contributing factors that converge to make this fact possible: the type of soil in which the tree is planted, the seed from which it grew, rainfall, sunlight—in short, everything that has played a role in the emergence of this observable fact. Our finite reason cannot comprehend this infinite set of enabling conditions. Yet for reason as such, considered objectively, a clear grasp of this totality is indeed possible. Otherwise—as noted above—the fact in question could not even occur.

Since the actual existence of this tree—or of any other empirically observable fact—is inconceivable without an infinite set of enabling conditions, we may refer to such entities as "dependent." As Mendelssohn puts it: "their existence depends upon the existence of a thing different from them without which their existence

17 This demand for conceptual derivation from God reveals what, according to Wundt, constitutes the distinctive mark of German Enlightenment school philosophy in contrast to medieval "sachgebundene Scholastik," namely: the requirement to ground being in knowledge, rather than the other way around. As Wundt observes with respect to Wolff (Wundt 1945, p. 161; the observation could apply to Mendelssohn as well): "Und weil die Erkenntnis hier die übergreifende Form ist, wir aber nur erkennen, was untereinander in Zusammenhang steht, so werden die Bestimmungen auseinander hergeleitet und nicht, wie in der alten Ontologie, einfach nebeneinandergestellt." According to Wundt (1945, p. 165), this is a kind of philosophical reflection characterized by the "emphasis on the I" (Ich-Betontheit) and "relational thinking" (*Beziehungsdenken*).

18 Bernard Williams has expressed this idea, with regard to Descartes, in particularly apt terms (Williams 1978, p. 48): "Knowledge does have a problematical character, and does have something in it which offers a standing invitation to scepticism. [...] This starts from a very basic thought, that if knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed (except for the special case where the reality known happens itself to be some psychological item) independently of any thought or experience. Knowledge is of what is there anyway."

19 For a detailed and illuminating analysis of the first part of *Morning Hours*, see Dahlstrom (2019).

cannot be rationally comprehended" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 102). Now, if we wished to rationally conceive the existence of a dependent being in a complete and satisfactory way, it would not suffice to consider even the most exhaustive set of enabling conditions, since these, too, are themselves dependent. As Mendelssohn aptly remarks (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 102): "The question is postponed but not resolved." No matter how thorough the enumeration of these conditions may be, it fails to satisfy reason, which finds itself indefinitely referred to further "dependent" beings—interconnected through relations of dependance, yet each requiring its own conditions. This endless referral compels us to posit the existence of a truly independent being, one whose existence depends on nothing else and is grounded solely in its own nature. The very thinkability of the dependent presupposes, as a condition of its intelligibility, the existence of an independent being as its ultimate origin and ground. Because it depends on nothing else, the existence of such a being is necessary—that is, it follows from its very essence—, whereas the existence of dependent beings can only be considered "contingent".

Up to this point, Mendelssohn has merely restated, in his own terms, the proof of God's existence based on the principle of sufficient reason, as defended by the tradition running from Leibniz through Wolff and Baumgarten. Now, however, he tells us that he will present this very same proof in a way that has never been proposed before. What changes, then, is not the substance of the proof—the demonstration of an independent and necessary being as the ultimate origin and ground of what is dependent and contingent—but rather its mode of presentation, its internal articulation. What, then, would motivate a new version of a proof that is already regarded as satisfactory? As already shown in the previous section, the answer lies in the skeptical scruples that arise in the transition to existence: these render unviable any demonstrative ascent to God that begins with the physical, empirically observable world, since the very existence of that world is problematic and thus cannot serve as a reliable premise. The traditional version of the proof, which we have just reviewed, precisely relies on the existence of the world—understood as the infinite totality of dependent and accidental beings—in order to rise to the certainty of a supreme, independent, and necessary being. If we wish, then, to preserve the probative force of the argument in the face of this skeptical challenge, we must avoid the "detour" through the physical world and instead begin from another dependent reality—one whose existence is not in question.

The dependent reality in question is none other than the self itself, whose existence—as repeatedly observed—is beyond doubt. Yet, Mendelssohn argues, it is equally undeniable that certain aspects of my own being escape my conscious grasp. In his words (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 103): "I am not merely what I distinctly know of myself or, what amounts to the same, there is more to my existence than I might consciously observe of myself; [...]." It is thus incontrovertibly clear to me that I exist, but I do not clearly know—that is, in a rationally satisfactory manner, as described above—all the aspects and determinations encompassed by my being. This incompleteness of self-knowledge is as evident as the certainty of self-existence: they are, so to speak, two complementary truths, bound together in the very act of self-apprehension. There is thus an undeniable clarity regarding the fact of my existence and an equally undeniable obscurity regarding all that this existence comprises or contains.[20]

It is at this point—at this undeniable obscurity of my own being—that Mendelssohn introduces the decisive turn. How much of my being, one might ask, escapes my conscious self-apprehension? It does not seem possible to determine the extent of what remains hidden from me. Rather, we observe that the aspects and details of my being that exceed my conscious grasp are virtually infinite. My being contains an inexhaustible multitude of facets that neither I—the cognitively limited creature that I am—nor any other finite mind could ever fully comprehend in all their detail. What would be required, then, is an infinite, omniscient mind capable of clearly apprehending everything encompassed by my finite being. Only God can fully grasp the unfathomable depth and richness of my own self. We must therefore conclude that there is no perfect correspondence in me between the thing (myself) and the concept (my self-apprehension), and that such correspondence—when it comes to my own being—can only be found in God, understood as an infinite intellect.

This constitutes the first part of the proof and the foundation upon which Mendelssohn will base the transition to the supreme being. One may ask to what extent this new version of the proof—built on the premise just outlined—manages to bypass the difficulties that burdened the traditional formulation. Recall that the classical version relied on the existence of an infinite set of contingent and interdependent beings—i.e., a world—in order to ascend from there to the certainty of an independent being. The problem lies precisely in the fact that the existence of that world is subject to skeptical doubt, and therefore cannot serve as a valid premise for the proof. Mendelssohn, with remarkable ingenuity, preserves this infinite plurality, but instead of projecting it outward, toward an "outside"—a world external to the self, whose existence remains in question—he *introjects* it, so to speak, inmanently into the subject's own interiority. This infinite plurality belongs to the hidden side of myself, to that which escapes my self-apprehension, but whose existence—despite its opacity—is as evident and incontestable as my own being. These are, let us recall, two complementary certainties, intimately bound together: I know with the same clarity that I exist and that I am more—infinitely more—than I can grasp of myself. Thus, Mendelssohn relocates the infinite extension of the external world within the self, without having to exit my own being or to make an illegitimate leap toward a doubtful exteriority. Instead of abolishing the presupposition of the universe, but also without dogmatically affirming its reality, Mendelssohn has "interiorized" it, turning it into a certainty that corresponds to that of the self.[21]

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20 Here is the structural connection with the argument from contingency: I do not know myself, (therefore) I surely am a contingent being. See *On Evidence* (Mendelssohn 1997, p. 289).

21 Freudenthal (2018) offers a different interpretation of this first part of the proof, one that is not necessarily incompatible with the

Mendelssohn might well have found, within the very tradition of Leibniz-Wolff-Baumgarten, the inspiration to refine the proof in the just described way, specifically in the famous theory of *petites perceptions*. As is well known, Leibniz uses this notion to refer to all those perceptions present in the soul that escape its conscious grasp. As the term itself suggests, the "smallness" of these perceptions—combined with their great number, low intensity, or mutual indiscernibility—prevents the mind from perceiving them clearly, making them into something like the obscure and impenetrable background of mental life (see Janke 1982, pp. 237-238). Yet beyond simply acknowledging this psychic reality, the importance of the concept lies in its ability to account for the presence of the infinite universe that surrounds us *within* the soul itself. Since these minute and imperceptible perceptions constitute the imprint that the entire universe leaves on us, their presence within us implies the universe as a whole, a whole that in its detail remains beyond our grasp, yet it is fully readable to an unlimited intellect. As Leibniz himself puts it in the preface to his *Nouveaux essais* (Leibniz 1882, p. 48): "On peut même dire qu'en consequence de ces petites perceptions [...] dans la moindre des substances, des yeux aussi perçants que ceux de Dieu pourraient lire toute la suite des choses de l'univers."[22] In other words, in the *petites perceptions*, the universe of which we are a part becomes a part of us; the totality that encompasses us turns into a province—certainly immeasurable—of our own being, encompassed and contained by it.

Thus, the infinity of the universe is reflected in the infinity of details, aspects, and facets of my being, which thereby constitute a kind of interiorized universe. The recognition of this fact—i.e., of this (infinite) *surplus* of reality that exceeds my self-apprehension—allows Mendelssohn to legitimately carry out the problematic "step into existence" described in the previous section, or at least part of it. This means transcending the sphere of the self and its immanent certainties without exposing himself to the charge of dogmatism, since the infinite reality thus acknowledged still belongs to the very core of my being. With this, we have examined the first part of the proof, which concerns the incompleteness of self-knowledge. Let us now turn to the second part, in which Mendelssohn—on the basis established in this section—undertakes the decisive step: showing that this infinity within me, which overflows my self-apprehension, is in fact the object of apprehension of an omniscient intellect.

4. Second Part of the Proof: The Ontological Status of the Knowable

In the second part of the proof, Mendelssohn seeks to show that this (immeasurable) portion of my being which escapes my self-apprehension does not, however, escape the apprehension of an omniscient being—whence it follows that an infinite intellect, that is, God, indeed exists. In order to make this decisive step, Mendelssohn draws on the notion of "thinkability" introduced at the beginning of chapter 16. Recall: everything that actually exists must also be thinkable, that is, capable of being conceived and rationally known. Otherwise, it could not exist at all, since what is unthinkable is, by definition, that which cannot, under any circumstances, come to be. However, to say that a given reality is thinkable and rationally knowable does not mean that our finite reason is in fact capable of knowing or fully grasping it. A paradigmatic example of this is precisely the (infinite) reality of my own being that escapes my self-apprehension, as theorized in the previous section: my limited knowledge cannot encompass all that is contained within me, but *de iure* this reality is knowable. Hence, an all-encompassing reason would indeed be capable of grasping it in its entirety. But does such an all-encompassing reason truly exist? How can we know it exists, based on the evidence we possess, namely, the knowability of what exists and the undeniable fact that an infinite number of aspects of my being remain hidden from me?

Now, Mendelssohn asks, what does it actually mean to ascribe "knowability" to something? How should we understand, in ontological terms, the status of this "being able to be known"? To ask this, Mendelssohn argues, is tantamount to asking about the ontological status of dispositions, abilities, or potentialities that we commonly attribute to beings, for example (Mendelssohn's own examples): the elasticity of air, the malleability of gold, my capacity to stand up while I am sitting, and the like.[23] When we speak in such terms, we are not attributing a real predicate or an actually existing property to the thing, for doing so would amount to confusing the possible with the actual, and would lead to blatant contradictions, such as claiming that I am both sitting and standing at the same time. As Mendelssohn puts it (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 105): "Do we not

account presented here. In a both convincing and suggestive manner, he argues that what underlies Mendelssohn's argument is the awareness of the fragility of our existence and of our radical dependence on an infinity of causes. According to Freudenthal, this awareness grounds both the certainty of our death and the religious sense of the infinite, as characterized by Schleiermacher. By starting from the concrete experience of one's own fragility and anxiety in the face of death, Mendelssohn would overcome the abstraction typical of traditional proofs of the existence of God, thereby uniting in a single argument the philosophical demonstration of the divine and the particular religious experience of our dependence on the universe. Freudenthal further argues (2018, p. 533) that Mendelssohn's proof does not aim to refute skeptical doubt—as is the case with the proofs of Descartes and Spinoza—, since it rests on common sense and on our immediate sense of the fragility of existence. On this latter point, however, my interpretation diverges from his. According to the reading presented here, Mendelssohn does take into account possible skeptical scruples. For this reason, the proof begins from the self-certainty of the I—which is immune even to the most radical doubt—and seeks, on this sole basis and without presupposing anything further, to ascend to the certainty of the divine. Certainly, and as Freudenthal rightly notes, the argument translates in conceptual terms our awareness of finitude and fragility—and thus of our dependence on the universe—, yet this awareness is presented as indissolubly bound up with the awareness of the self, and therefore cannot be undermined from a skeptical standpoint. In our view, the reconciliation that Mendelssohn achieves between concrete experience (rooted in common understanding) and metaphysical argumentation—constituting the strength of his proof—does not entail indifference toward skeptical doubts but, on the contrary, a direct engagement with them.

22 See also Ch. Wolff (1736-37, *Theologia naturalis*, I, §183): "Deus in unoquolibet, quod est in hoc universo, videt totum universum."

23 On this issue, see Freudenthal's penetrating reflections (Freudenthal 2018), to which I am greatly indebted.

contradict ourselves if we attribute to a thing that is actually on hand, as part of its make-up, something that is not actually on hand, if we hold a mere possibility to be a predicate of something actual?"

Yet this observation sharpens the question even further: what does it mean, then, to attribute to something a capacity, disposition, or possibility, if in doing so we are not designating anything that actually exists in the thing itself? Considering—Mendelssohn argues—that human knowledge largely consists in recognizing and dealing with such possibilities, dispositions, and capacities, should we therefore dismiss the entire body of human knowledge as absurd? True to his philosophical method, Mendelssohn attempts to untie the knot by tracing the problem back to the very language we use.[24] When we attribute a capacity to something, we should not interpret this as the assignment of a real property or feature to the thing, for this would involve a blatant contradiction. "Capacity"—and related terms such as "disposition," "possibility," etc.—refers rather to something "ideal": a mere thought, something relative to a mind that thinks it, and with no autonomous existence outside of that mind. Thus, I can attribute elasticity to air and malleability to gold without thereby designating anything real inherent in those entities, but rather a thought, an idea, a representation that resides in a mind, which, in considering those objects and their constitution, also thinks of the possible changes and conditions they might undergo. Mendelssohn thus concludes (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 105-106): "All possibilities therefore have their ideal existence in the thinking subject and they are, as thinkable, ascribed by this subject to the object. A possibility that is not thought is a veritably impossible thing [*ein wahres Unding*]."

This conclusion may seem trivial, but the implications Mendelssohn draws from it are profound and constitute both the key and the true difficulty of his argument for the existence of God. That possibilities are mere thoughts and reside in a mind means, nothing less, *that there is no possibility that is not actually thought by a mind*. The possibility that I might stand up while sitting is not something actually real, for it contradicts the fact that I am presently sitting; but its merely "ideal" status implies that it is the correlate—the *ideatum*—of a mind that thinks and represents it. Otherwise, it would not be something "ideal," located in a mind, but rather an *actually existing possibility*, independent of any thinking subject—which is a contradiction in terms.

If we apply this reasoning to the initial claim that everything that truly exists must be knowable and thinkable (i.e., capable of being conceived), then we must admit—on pain of contradiction—that such *de iure* knowability is in fact equivalent to being *de facto* known, to being the *ideatum* of a mind that actually thinks and conceives it. Curiously, in the case of knowability—as opposed to other "aptitudes"—the possible coincides with the real: to say that something is knowable amounts, according to the chain of inference examined here, to saying that it is actually known, something that cannot be said, for instance, of the possibility that the city of Paris be destroyed tonight. From this it follows that reality in its full scope and detail is the object of a mind's consideration.

Let us also recall that—as established in the first part of the proof—the scope of what truly exists, even if we limit ourselves to admitting only the existence of my own self, is boundless and can be fully grasped only by an omniscient being. Now, if what is cognizable is, as such, actually known by a mind, it follows that that (infinite) portion of myself which I do not know, but which—by the mere fact of existing—is cognizable, is in fact the object of knowledge of an infinite intellect. As Mendelssohn puts it (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 106-107):

> There must therefore necessarily be *one* thinking being, *one* intellect that represents to itself not only me together with all my constitutive features, characteristics, and distinguishing signs, but the sum total of all possibilities as possible, the sum total of all actualities as actual, in a word, the sum total and connection of all truths in their greatest possible development and does so in the most distinct, complete, and exhaustively detailed way. *There is an infinite intellect.*

The conclusion that there is a complete correspondence between existing things and representations of them, and that, therefore, an infinite intellect exists, crowns Mendelssohn's proof of God's existence.[25] As already noted, the proof aims to be innovative in its form, not in its substance. In this regard, we would like to make two final observations before concluding our analysis. First, as in the initial part of the argument, Mendelssohn may have drawn inspiration from the Leibniz-Wolff-Baumgarten tradition in developing this second phase of the demonstration. Indeed, a central tenet of this tradition is that possibilities do not possess independent subsistence—otherwise they would be actual realities, not mere possibilities—and that their proper locus is the divine mind (see Altmann 1982; Freudenthal 2018). This is not a controversial claim. What is novel in Mendelssohn's approach, in our view, is his application of this "ideal" status of the possible to the entire range of dispositions, capacities, and aptitudes that we commonly attribute to real beings in ordinary language. Once philosophical rigor is applied to that language, it becomes evident that it tends spontaneously to reify or objectify such dispositions and potentials—that is, everything falling under the category of the possible—, thereby granting real existence to what, strictly speaking, can only have an ideal status. Once this reifying mechanism of language is exposed, it becomes clear that no aspect of reality escapes the grasp of an infinite mind, for every being without exception has aptitudes, and these subsist solely in the mind that apprehends or cognizes them.

The second observation concerns the "commonsensical" counterpart to which these complex philosophical reflections may correspond, in line with the idea that speculation translates into conceptually rigorous language what is already implicit in common sense. With regard to the fundamental theses that shape the argument, Mendelssohn notes (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 104): "These propositions appear plausible

24 Regarding Mendelssohn's method of resolving philosophical disputes through the analysis of language, see Dahlstrom (2011).

25 Dyck (2011, pp. 169-170) has argued—rightly, in our view—that this proof brings to completion Mendelssohn's strategy against the idealist, outlined above, which consists in demonstrating the concordance between God's perspective and our own.

to sound common sense." Yet the claim that the self constitutes an unfathomable universe in itself, or that every entity—no matter how insignificant—is mirrored by a thought in the divine mind, hardly seems to be in line with everyday intuition. In what sense, then, can Mendelssohn make such a statement? If we set aside the chain of inferences and focus instead on the underlying intuitions that structure the argument, we can indeed discern beliefs already held and endorsed by common sense. To begin with, the idea that the human being never fully knows himself, and that a certain indeterminate portion of oneself always eludes one's own awareness, is a truth few would deny; in fact, its contrary—i.e., the notion of the mind's total self-transparency—is much harder to defend. Likewise, the belief that nothing escapes the all-seeing eye of God is a venerable maxim, exemplified, for instance, in the Gospel of Luke: "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (Luke 12:7).[26]

On this final point, let us briefly consider what it would mean, from a commonsensical perspective, if the world in its entirety were not perceived by an all-encompassing mind. Mendelssohn's contemporary Christian Garve (1742–1798) gave a remarkably vivid expression to this thought in his commentary on Cicero's *De Officiis* (which he himself translated and of which Mendelssohn owned a copy).[27] There, Garve reflects on the unsettling consequences that would follow if such an all-encompassing consciousness did not exist, and if our finite minds were the only mirrors reflecting the spectacle of the universe. Were this truly the case, Garve argues, the greater part of the universe would remain unperceived and shrouded in darkness—a prospect which, in his view, is both sad and absurd. *Sad*, because in the absence of an all-encompassing mind, we—finite beings—could never hope to satisfy our aspiration to complete knowledge (Garve 1787, pp. 29-30). Indeed, without an infinite consciousness, the overall meaning of reality would remain forever concealed; or rather, reality itself would lack meaning, since it would not be governed by intelligence. But such a thought, Garve continues, is also *absurd* (*ungereimt*), for things exist insofar as they perceive or are perceived by someone (Garve 1787, p. 31). Consciousness is the light and vital warmth of the universe; and if our minds were the only ones that exist—a mere epiphenomenon of a universe not made for them—, then the universe would be "a desolate desert, buried in eternal night and silence" (*eine Einöde, in ewiger Nacht und Stillschweigen begraben*; Garve 1787, p. 32).

Garve's reflections shed light on Mendelssohn's proof in two essential ways. *First,* they support Mendelssohn's claim that the task of speculative reason is to translate the pre-reflective insights of common sense into clear concepts. Garve himself describes his meditation as a "dark feeling of the human soul," in need of further articulation (Garve 1787, p. 29). For Mendelssohn, as already noted, the core of his proof—namely, that "everything actual must not only be thinkable but also thought"—already lies within the grasp of uncorrupted common sense. In this regard, the proof offers a systematic expression of what we already tacitly believe. *Second*, Garve makes explicit the underlying motivation for Mendelssohn's argument by highlighting the consequences of a world unperceived by an all-embracing mind. Without such a mind, not only would truth remain forever beyond the reach of finite intellects, but reality itself would be devoid of all coherence and intelligibility. At first glance, this may seem mistaken: we have seen that reality is intelligible by definition. But if understanding and rational cognition are merely accidental—i.e., if minds are mere epiphenomena rather than essential to the universe—, then thought and being lose all intrinsic correspondence. Without intelligence, the intelligible vanishes; actual thinking is the necessary correlate of what is thinkable: "Without being known, nothing is knowable; without being noticed, no characteristic marks; without a concept, no object is actually on hand" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 106). It is intelligence that makes reality unitary and common to the plurality of its partial perceivers, and it is the idea of an infinite mind that secures this unity.[28]

5. Concluding Remarks

We have shown in what sense, for Mendelssohn, the philosophical proofs of God's existence—and in particular the new proof he proposes in Chapter 16 of the *Morning Hours*—have as their primary function the task of securing the harmony between common sense and speculation. Indeed, we have seen that such harmony can only be effectively achieved if a common denominator is established between our finite human mind and an infinite intellect. Only then is it possible to discern which of our representations derive from our

26 We find another philosophical articulation of this idea in Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*, §869 (Baumgarten 2014, p. 294): "One who is rich in <*pollens*> the most distinct knowledge of the human soul is a SCRUTINIZER OF HEARTS. Therefore, God is a scrutinizer of hearts (§740), and he perceives perspicuously <*perspicit*> every soul's, or every monad's, representation of the sensible world (§400, 741), and indeed much more perfectly than a given monad or soul knows itself and its own representation of the world (§864)." The expression "scrutinizer of hearts" comes from the *Book of Wisdom* (1:6).

27 See Garve (1787, 2nd edition; pp. 29-32). In a letter to Zollikofer (January 3, 1786), Garve praises Mendelssohn for having managed in his *Morning Hours* to articulate in philosophical terms what he has only been able to express in passing (see Altmann 1973).

28 According to Altmann (1982, p. 144), the power of the mind—be it infinite or finite—to subsume a plurality or aggregate under a comprehensive unity constitutes the core of the argument: "The novel proof in *Morning Hours*, seventeen years later, offered the implementation of Iselin's suggestion: The infinite and perfect intellect that comprises the universe in all its aspects is conceived upon the analogy of the unifying power of the human soul." This idea, as Altmann points out, is a central element in the *Phädon*, and Mendelssohn may have drawn inspiration for it from Shaftesbury, whose thought exerted a notable influence on him. The notion of the mind as a unifying principle of reality—and the consequent need to assume the existence of a universal consciousness—is clearly thematized and developed, among other places, in his 1709 work *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody*. See, for example, the following passage (Shaftesbury 1732, p. 357; the italics and capitalizations are in the original text): "Is there then such a *uniting Principle* in NATURE? If so, how are then a Self, and *Nature* not so? How have you something to understand and act for you, and NATURE, who gave this Understanding, nothing at all to understand for her, advise her, or help her out (poor Being!) on any occasion, whatever Necessity she may be in? Has the WORLD such ill fortune *in the main*? Are there so many particular understanding active Principles every where? And is there Nothing, at last, which thinks, acts, or understands for *All*? Nothing which administers or looks after *All*?"

limitations and which truly reflect reality as it is. Yet this task, in turn, requires demonstrating the existence of such an infinite intelligence, so that—starting from its essential attributes—we may infer the structure and features of the world it has created. The demonstration of such an intelligence's existence, as carried out by Mendelssohn, has been the object of the foregoing reflections. The complementary task—i.e., inferring the traits of the created world from the properties of that intelligence—belongs to a different investigation.[29]

At this point, we may briefly ask about the contemporary relevance (or irrelevance), the merits, and the philosophical significance of the new proof presented by Mendelssohn. Ferdinand Alquié has noted, regarding the so-called "ontological proof"—as formulated by thinkers such as Anselm of Canterbury, Descartes, or Malebranche—that the proof becomes refutable from the moment it is conceptualized, but that it nonetheless "illuminates a unique and unconceptualizable experience: the contact of thought with being" (Alquié 1974, p. 117, footnote 14). Understood in this sense, as the expression of a basic and irreducible experience, the proof—Alquié seems to suggest—is in itself irrefutable. We believe that this insightful observation can be equally applied to Mendelssohn's argument, even though it would be more accurately classified as a cosmological rather than an ontological proof. Indeed, the experience Mendelssohn's argument seeks to conceptualize is that of a fundamental opacity of the self in relation to itself, combined with the intuition of an all-encompassing gaze that penetrates into the most hidden recesses of our being. One may certainly question the conceptual means Mendelssohn employs to articulate these basic insights. One may even doubt the truth of these underlying intuitions and argue—in a way more attuned to our contemporary scientific and philosophical outlook—that the universe is in fact a "vast death" and "blind omnipotence" (B. Russell 1959, pp. 47-48). Yet we cannot doubt that the proof responds to a constitutive longing and restlessness of the human mind, and it is in this that its perennial truth resides.

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29 For a more detailed examination of this issue, see Sánchez de León Serrano (2024).

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