God's perfection and human perfection: Mendelssohn's account in the *Evidenzschrift* and its relation to Wolff's philosophy

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ENG Abstract: This paper aims to present the relationship between God's perfection (God as the most perfect being) and the obligation for human perfection in Mendelssohn's essay *Evidenzschrift über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften*, particularly with regard to his reception of Christian Wolff's philosophy. In the *Evidenzschrift*, Mendelssohn seeks to investigate how much certainty there can be in philosophy – therefore including both natural theology and practical philosophy. Against this background, if we are to consider the interconnection between divine and human perfection, we must regard (a) Mendelssohn's ontological proof of God as the most perfect being, as well as a teleological proof concerning the perfection of the world (in the third chapter of the *Evidenzschrift*); and (b) his account of the obligation human beings have to pursue our own perfection and that of others (in the fourth chapter), which is ultimately connected to the notion of the reflection of God's perfections. In this paper, we shall *firstly* present Mendelssohn's account of God as the most perfect being, and that of the perfection of the world; *secondly* consider his account of the law of nature and the obligation to pursue perfection; so that *thirdly* we may examine both notions against the background of Christian Wolff's philosophy (particularly his natural theology and practical philosophy), to show that although Mendelssohn was substantially influenced by Wolff in both regards, he also introduced new nuances not present in Wolff's account.
Key-words: Ens Perfectissimum; God's perfection; Human perfection; Mendelssohn; Wolff.[1]

PT A perfeição de Deus e a perfeição humana: a concepção de Mendelssohn na *Evidenzschrift* e sua relação com a filosofia de Wolff

PT Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar a relação entre a perfeição de Deus (Deus como ser perfeitíssimo) e a obrigação à perfeição humana no ensaio *Evidenzschrift über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften* de Mendelssohn, particularmente quanto à sua recepção da filosofia de Christian Wolff. Na *Evidenzschrift*, Mendelssohn busca investigar qual o grau possível de certeza da filosofia – incluindo, portanto, a teologia natural e a filosofia prática. Nesse contexto, buscando considerar a interconexão entre perfeição divina e humana, precisamos ter em mente (a) a prova ontológica de Mendelssohn acerca de Deus como o ente perfeitíssimo, bem como uma prova teológica a partir da perfeição do mundo (no terceiro capítulo da *Evidenzschrift*); e (b) sua concepção da obrigação que seres humanos possuem, de buscar sua própria perfeição e a perfeição de outrem (no quarto capítulo), que, no final das contas, está conectada à noção de reflexão das perfeições de Deus. Neste artigo, *primeiramente* apresentaremos a concepção de Mendelssohn acerca de Deus como ente perfeitíssimo, bem como aquela quanto à perfeição do mundo; *em segundo lugar*, consideraremos sua abordagem da lei de natureza e da obrigação à perfeição; por fim, *em terceiro lugar*, examinaremos ambas as noções no contexto da filosofia de Christian Wolff (particularmente sua teologia natural e sua filosofia prática), a fim de mostrar que Mendelssohn foi significativamente influenciado por Wolff em ambos os aspectos, mas também introduziu novas nuances que ainda não estavam presentes na concepção de Wolff.
Palavras-chave: Ens Perfectissimum; Mendelssohn; Perfeição de Deus; Perfeição humana; Wolff.

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Divine perfection: God as the most perfect being. 2. Human perfection and its connection to divine perfection. 3. Mendelssohn's account against the Wolffian background. 4. Final remarks. 5. Bibliography.

Introduction[2]

According to Paul Guyer[3], Moses Mendelssohn's *Evidenzschrift über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften* can be considered the most refined summary of Wolffianism. Nevertheless, as others have also pointed out[4], Mendelssohn is indeed not a Wolffian philosopher *per se*, or at least not a particularly orthodox one. Unlike other philosophers from the first (and second) half of the XVIII century – such as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Georg Friedrich Meier, to mention just two of the most important –, Mendelssohn's contact with Wolff's and Leibniz's philosophies is *sui generis*, due to his autodidactic character. Even so, at first glance one may recognise several features of these philosophies within Mendelssohn's attempt at a solution to the crisis of metaphysics of his time[5]: if not through a complete adoption of the famous but controversial principle of sufficient reason, at least through key topics and arguments. Two of these topics, which are entwined, are God's perfection (that is, the existence of the most perfect being) and human perfection (the commandment to strive for the perfection of all states of human beings). In the current paper, we intend to present both conceptions in their proper context within the *Evidenzschrift*, in addition to offering some insight into Mendelssohn's reception of Wolffian notions in these regards, considering Mendelssohn's adoptions as well as modifications of such topics in the specific case of the *Evidenzschrift*[6].

In the *first* section, we examine Mendelssohn's account of natural theology. The tension between certainty [*Gewißheit*] and probability [*Wahrscheinlichkeit*] – upon which is also grounded the distinction of the proofs of the existence of God – can be observed throughout his essay. On the one hand, we can prove with certainty God's existence by examining the concept of the most perfect being (which is the reason of all things), however, this kind of logical proof lacks practical conviction [*Überzeugung*]. On the other hand, with less certainty (only probability), but in a more convincing way, we may prove God's existence by means of the contemplation of beauty, order, and perfection in the world. From both proofs we gather the relevance of God's perfection and perfection of the Creation, which are central to consider human perfection.

In the *second* section, thus, we explore Mendelssohn's conception of practical philosophy. According to Mendelssohn, there are three ways for us to know the law of nature (that commands the search for perfection): by means of our appetites, inclinations, and so on, leading to a sole final end [*Endzweck*] which is perfection; by investigating the concept of a being endowed with free will [*freiwilligen Wesens*], for which the criterion of delight [*Wohlgefallen*] is perfection; and in the concordance with God's purposes for the world and for human beings (as creatures), which is the imitation of the divine perfections. It is this last feature that interests us the most, since here we can see the direct practical implications of Mendelssohn's natural theology.

Finally, in the *third* section, we compare Mendelssohn's account to Wolff's account of the role of God's perfections in practical philosophy, that is, in the obligation towards perfection. Firstly, we will consider the differences and similarities between both philosophers' attempts to prove God's existence as the most perfect being (which is the reason of all things). Secondly, we will compare their different approaches concerning the practical implications from the notions of the glory of God and acting as paying tribute to God's perfections. Thirdly, and finally, we will finish this paper by examining Mendelssohn's and Wolff's practical imperatives against this background of the connection between natural theology and practical philosophy.

1. Divine perfection: God as the most perfect being

In the *Evidenzschrift*, Mendelssohn aims to show which kind of certainty is possible in metaphysics. Particularly in its second and third sections[7], he presents two pure concepts that indeed apply to two actual

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2   I would like to thank Professor Heiner Klemme, Professor Fábio César Scherer, Professor Charles Feldhaus, Guillem Sales Vilalta, John Walsh, and Cleiton Marcolino Isidoro dos Santos for our discussions on subjects of this paper, as well as the participants of the workshop "Mendelssohn, Lessing, and the Enlightenment" (and particularly Guillem and Pablo Genazzano for the organisation). I would also like to thank Robin Hambly for the linguistic revisions of this paper.

3   Guyer 2016, p. 522: "[...] Mendelssohn's work [the *Evidenzschrift*] remains one of the most elegant presentations of the central tenets of the Wolffian approach to philosophy available" (see also: Guyer 2020, p. 28-29).

4   For the biographical elements and reconstruction of Mendelssohn's arguments, I consider the following bibliography: Albrecht 2004; Altmann 1973, p. 112-130; Altmann 1975; Guyer 2016; Guyer 2020, p. 27-72, 75-102; Klemme 2018; Vogt 2008. Recent scholarship on the subject comprises also: Rovira 2017; 2023. Quotes from Mendelssohn's *Evidenzschrift* follow the edition organised by Wolfgang Vogt (Mendelssohn 2008).

5   Vogt 2008, p. XI.

6   For a systematic account of the relation between God's perfection and human perfection from the crucial perspective of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, see: Pollok 2010.

7   The *Evidenzschrift* is composed of four sections: the first concerns mathematics; the second, metaphysics; the third, natural theology; and the fourth, practical philosophy. The purpose of the essay is to answer a question, proposed by the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1762 as a prize competition, about the possibility of achieving the same degree of certainty in metaphysics as is the case in mathematics. Famously, Mendelssohn won the prize – over Immanuel Kant's dissertation. For a more detailed account on the history of the essay, see the bibliography provided above.

objects, conferring certainty to them[8]: the self and God (the latter of which interests us here). In short: from the notion of God, we may conclude His existence. This is so because Mendelssohn subscribes to a Leibnizian-Wolffian version of the traditional ontological proof of the existence of God, famously developed by Anselm of Canterbury[9], but with a reception history of its own[10]. It is this notion of God as the most perfect being [*ens perfectissimum*] that we seek to examine here. In addition, we discuss its practical implications in the next section.

Mendelssohn proposes at least two ways[11] of demonstrating God's existence: either by means of the notion of God as the most perfect being, the so-called *ontological* proof; or by means of what he calls a *teleological* proof, that is, inferring God's existence by observing the perfection that exists in the world. Mendelssohn's main point is that the ontological proof is logically sound, thus achieving a great degree of certainty – but lacks conviction, since a human being can take it to be correct, but still not feel motivated to act in accordance with it[12]. On the other hand, the teleological proof lacks certainty, because it does not follow an examination of the concept of God – but rather, like traditional *a posteriori* proofs, departs from given facts about the world. Such proof, however, is significantly more persuasive than the ontological proof, because it offers a more vivid knowledge of God[13]. We shall examine both of Mendelssohn's proofs – stressing the relevance of the notion of perfection in both cases (God's perfection and the perfection of the world).

(a) Ontological proof: God as the most perfect being

At the beginning of his exposition in the third chapter, Mendelssohn himself asserts that: „*Die Begriffe von Gott und seinen Eigenschaften sind noch von einer wunderbaren Kraft*"[14]. It is important to notice that, by "attributes" [*Eigenschaften*], Mendelssohn is ultimately referring to God's *perfections*. This becomes clearer in the following extract:

> Eine einzige Kette von Schlüssen verbindet alle Vollkommenheiten dieses urbaren Wesens; seine Selbständigkeit, Unendlichkeit, Unermeßlichkeit, sein vollkommenster Wille, grenzenloser Verstand und uneingeschränkte Macht, seine Weisheit, Vorsehung, Gerechtigkeit, Heiligkeit u.s.w. sind dergestalt wechselweise in einander gegründet, daß jede von diesen Eigenschaften ohne alle übrigen einen Widerspruch enthalten würde[15].

Mendelssohn's first approach[16] on the concept of God as the most perfect being takes God to be the "*urbare*[-] *Wesens*" whose perfections are all interconnected. Indeed, as he points out, one may start from any of God's perfections and arrive at all others – his example is the departure in considering God's perfect will as implying also a consideration of his perfect intellect [*Verstand*] and perfect power [*Macht*], from which also follow God's justice, goodness, and wisdom. Furthermore, Mendelssohn states that God contains his own reason[17] [*Grund*], unlike all other things, as the sole necessary thing[18]. Furthermore, God is also the "*freiwilliger Schöpfer und Erhalter*"[19] of all things.

Mendelssohn affirms that: „*diese Anfangsgründe der natürliche Gottesgelahrtheit haben alle Gewißheit, und beinahe die Evidenz der geometrischen Wahrheiten*"[20]. Such a statement serves as the development of his main argument from the *Evidenzschrift* – that is, to show that there can be certainty in areas other than mathematics, such as in metaphysics and practical philosophy. Moreover, the problem with metaphysics is that, unlike mathematics, one must prove its object to indeed be actual [*wirklich*]. So, how can we know that these assessments are actual, not merely possible? That is, how can we *know* that such statements about God are true?

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8   Cf. Guyer 2016, p. 522.
9   Anselm (2008, p. 87) famously says: "Well then, Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as You see fit, that You exist as we believe You to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought"; and: "Therefore, Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if You are not this sae being something greater than You could be thought – which cannot be" (Anselm of Canterbury 2008, p. 96). For a synthesised version of Anselm's arguments, see: Plantinga 1965, pp. 3-27.
10   See, for instance: Taylor 1965; Tomatis 2003.
11   In fact, as Guyer points out (2020, p. 45), there are also two kinds of *a priori* arguments: the ontological argument (inherited from Descartes through Leibniz), and the argument concerning the determination of concepts (borrowed from Baumgarten). On the relation between both arguments, see: Guyer 2020, pp. 45-49.
12   This point is discussed within the tradition of the ontological argument – I intend to examine it in further research.
13   The problem is that, ultimately, our intellect is not as perfect as the divine intellect (see: Mendelssohn 2008, p. 64). Indeed, as he states: "*Wir wissen von den Eigenschaften der Dinge außer uns niemals mit überzeugender Gewissheit, ob sie Realitäten, oder bloße Erscheinungen sind*" (Mendelssohn 2008, p. 67).
14   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 54.
15   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 54.
16   Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 55.
17   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 55: „*Da er alle diese Vollkommenheiten ohne Grenzen besitzt; so ist er unendlich und folglich einig. Da er den Grund seines Daseins in keinem endlichen Dinge haben kann, außer ihm aber kein unendliches Ding vorhanden sein kann, so hat er den Grund seines Daseins in sich selber, ist also selbständig und notwendig. Ferner, wenn endliche Dinge vorhanden sein sollen; so müssen sie den Grund in ihm haben; denn außer ihm gibt es kein notwendiges Wesen, das den Grund derselben enthalten könnte, und in einem zufälligen können sie nicht hinlänglich gegründet sein*".
18   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 66: „*Das notwendige Wesen erfordert zu seinem Dasein nur einen einzigen Grund, und dieser liegt in seiner innern Möglichkeit*".
19   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 55.
20   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 55.

Precisely at this point Mendelssohn starts to unfold his version of the ontological proof of God. After all, within philosophical tradition, it is the so-called "ontological" proof that aims to derive his necessary existence from the mere notion of God. Mendelssohn departs from the notion of nothing [*Nichtsein*]. He states that: „*Was nicht ist, muß entweder unmöglich, oder bloß möglich sein*"[21]. A thing is impossible, if there is a contradiction amongst its determinations[22] [*Bestimmungen*]; and it is merely possible, if it lacks a reason for its actualisation. The existence of a thing counts, indeed, amongst its determinations: in the case of not necessary things, their existence is an accident [*Zufälligkeit*]. However, as Mendelssohn remarks, this does not apply to the notion of the most perfect being, since it would contradict its determinations:

> Nun kann dem vollkommensten Wesen ein solches Dasein nicht zukommen, denn es würde seinem Wesen widersprechen, indem ein jeder einsiehet, daß ein unabhängiges Dasein eine größere Vollkommenheit sei, als ein abhängiges; daher der Satz: das allervollkommenste Wesen hat ein zufälliges Dasein, einen offenbaren Widerspruch enthält. – Das allervollkommenste Wesen ist also entweder wirklich, oder enthält einen Widerspruch. Denn bloß möglich kann es nicht sein, wie vorhin erwiesen worden; daher bleibt für dasselbe nichts weiter übrig, als die Wirklichkeit, oder die Unmöglichkeit[23].

The notion of the most perfect being is, one could say, of a *sui generis* nature. The most perfect being would not be the most *perfect* being if it were to not exist instead of existing, which is why existence is considered to be one of its perfections. After all, it is more perfect to exist than not to exist.

However, considering the very history of the ontological argument, it is important to notice that Mendelssohn's account departs from its Cartesian version, but also from the Leibnizian perspective[24] that one must prove, first hand, that the notion of *ens perfectissimum* is itself possible, that is, not contradictory. Mendelssohn attempts to do so by addressing the same features stressed by Leibniz (and Wolff, as we shall see): the affirmation of realities [*Realitäten*], and negation of flaws [*Mangel*]:

> Nun werden von dem allervollkommensten Wesen alle Realitäten bejahet, alle Mängel verneinet; daher kann in dem Begriffe derselben kein Widerspruch liegen. Wer da sagt, das allervollkommenste Wesen enthält einen Widerspruch, der widerspricht sich selber, indem das Subjekt alle Mängel verneinet, das Prädikat aber einige bejahet wissen will. Hält aber das allervollkommenste Wesen nichts widersprechendes in seinem Begriffe, so muß es wirklich vorhanden sein, wie aus dem vorigen erhellet[25].

Realities and negations are, themselves, determinations of a thing[26]. All realities are affirmed in the most perfect being, and all flaws are denied. Therefore, concludes Mendelssohn, there is no contradiction between the attributes of the most perfect being, and the logical conclusion is that it is (1) *possible* – and, therefore, (2) *actual*. The first point is the case because of the lack of contradiction, and the second point because the first is the case. It follows from the *possibility* of the most perfect being *that* it is *actual*, that is, it *exists*.

For Mendelssohn, as for the previous tradition sympathetic to the argument, the argument is logically sound – and, therefore, in Mendelssohn's terms, provides certainty. Also considering this perspective, we can see, from the passage just quoted, that if someone were to deny the validity of the argument, the problem would be in that person's own contradiction – which is also a feature established in the traditional accounts that are in favour of the argument[27].

Nevertheless, perhaps a feature of Mendelssohn's originality in such regard is his admission that, although the argument is itself logically sound, it lacks practical conviction, at least in some cases. This is so because human intellect cannot by itself bridge the gap between possibility and actuality – unlike divine intellect, in which all possible truths are interconnected, so that God knows everything, thus connecting all possibility to all actuality[28]. Human beings may agree that the argument is coherent and yet not be properly convinced by it – which could also have practical implications. However, there is yet another proof, more convincing, that supplies the need for the theological support of human acting, which we will now discuss.

(b) Teleological proof: Perfection in the world

Precisely because the logical argument of the ontological proof provides certainty, but not complete conviction, Mendelssohn aims to offer yet another kind of argument – that, instead, convinces more than proving with logical certainty. Such is the "teleological" argument for the existence of God, as Wolfgang Vogt phrases it[29]. Within a traditional theological framework, it is an *a posteriori* kind of argument, in contrast to the

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21   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 57.
22   Indeed, Altmann (1973, p. 123) and Guyer (2020, p. 45) highlight that the notion of "determination" – crucial to Mendelssohn's argument – stems from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's account of the ontological argument. Therefore, in this sense, Mendelssohn is closer to Baumgarten than to Wolff.
23   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 57.
24   Cf. Guyer 2016, p. 522-523. Concerning the history of the reception of the argument by Descartes and Leibniz, see also: Tomatis 2003, p. 49-52, 58-60. And for relevant passages of both philosophers, see: Plantinga 1965, pp. 31-49, 54-56.
25   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 58.
26   Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 58.
27   In this paper, we will not tackle the details of criticism and defence of the ontological argument, since our goal is rather to examine Mendelssohn's proof and its connection with Wolff's account.
28   Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 64-65.
29   Vogt 2008, p. XXVIII.

a priori character of the ontological argument. In other words, it does not depart from the *notion* of God as the most perfect being to conclude for his existence, it rather departs from facts known from *experience* to arrive at God as the necessary thing, reason of all things – even if also concluding for the account of God as the most perfect being, but from another argumentative route.

Mendelssohn starts his new approach by addressing its difference from the previous one:

> [...] so ist es mit den bloß demonstrativen Beweisgründen nicht genug, sondern das Leben der Erkenntnis muß durch eine Menge von überführenden Gründen angefeuert werden. Die praktische Überzeugung gehet hierhin von der bloß theoretischen ab. Diese begnügt sich mit der trockensten Demonstration, mit der bloß deutlichen Erkenntnis, jene aber erfordert nicht ausdrücklich Deutlichkeit und Gewißheit, sondern vornehmlich eine lebendige wirksame Erkenntnis, einen starken und lebhaften Eindruck in das Gemüt, dadurch wir angetrieben werden, unser Tun und Lassen dieser Erkenntnis gemäß einzurichten[30].

Further, he enlists the key ideas of the argument, which seem more like guiding lines for contemplation than an argument as such:

> Man kann die Gründe, auf welchen diese anderweitige Beweisarten sich stützen, in folgenden Hauptklassen einteilen. 1) Die Schönheit und Ordnung in den sichtbaren Teilen der Schöpfung, sowohl in ganzen Weltsystemen und ihrem Zusammenhange, als in einzelnen besondern Teilen auf unserer Erde. 2) Die Schönheit und Ordnung in den Gesetzen der Bewegung, und endlich 3) die unleugbaren Absichten in der Natur, in allgemeinen und besondern, in ordentlichen und außerordentlichen Naturbegebenheiten, dahin auch die Schicksale gewisser Staaten, und sogar die Begebenheiten einzelner Personen zu rechnen sind[31].

Mendelssohn's main point here is that one may be convinced of God's existence by contemplating his effects in the world. Beauty and order are directly mentioned, but the exact notion we must have in mind is that of *perfection*, which Mendelssohn defines as close to both the previous notions. After all, beautiful is that which is perfect; and order is a kind of perfection. The first idea concerns the presence of perfection in the whole and in the parts of Creation, the whole being the context of the parts. The second idea regards the perfection in the laws of movement of the world and its parts; and the third considers the purposes within nature, conducting toward perfection. These are, for Mendelssohn, facts that may be learned from experience – instead of being deduced by logical argumentation. Even if Mendelssohn remarks that beauty and order – and, therefore, also perfection – are accidental[32], the conclusions – concerning the existence of God – that one may draw from the arguments developed from such notions are highly probable[33].

In this way, the teleological proof is *complementary* to the ontological proof: where the latter offers certainty, but lacks conviction, the former convinces better, even if it means that it must give up certainty to some degree – which is not a problem, if we consider both proofs together. Quite poetically[34], Mendelssohn compares the ontological and the teleological approaches thus:

> Indessen besitzen diese Beweistümer eine weit größere Beredungskraft als selbst die Demonstration. Sie machen durch ihre Lebhaftigkeit einen stärkern Eindruck in das Gemüt, erwecken die Seele zu werktätigen Entschließungen, und bringen diejenige praktische Überzeugung hervor, die bei der Betrachtung der göttlichen Eigenschaften unsere vornehmste Absicht sein sollte. Die demonstrativen Beweistümer sind wie die Festungen, die ein Land wider feindliche Anfälle schützen, für friedliche Einwohner aber weder die bequemsten noch die anmutigsten Wohnplätze sind. Wer keinen Widersacher zu bestreiten, keine spitzfindige Zweifel zu besiegen hat, der findet in der Methode aus der Schönheit, Ordnung und aus den Absichten der Natur, ihren Schöpfer zu erkennen, die süßeste Beruhigung, den erquickendsten Trost, und dasjenige Feuer und Leben der Erkenntnis, das in das Begehrungsvermögen übergehet, und Entschließungen veranlasset, die in Handlungen ausbrechen[35].

Therefore, arguments of a teleological kind lack certainty, because they depend upon an *a posteriori* examination of the world; but they serve well to convince human beings about God's existence, and to motivate them to act in accordance with such conviction – *practical conviction*, as Guyer emphasises[36]. Precisely the latter part, about action, concerns practical philosophy – and the interconnection between God's perfection (as the most perfect being) and the commandment of perfection for human beings. Although Mendelssohn does not explicitly state thus, we may say that both these arguments are relevant to practical philosophy

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30 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 70.
31 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 70.
32 Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 70.
33 Mendelssohn states that: „*Je mehr Ursachen, je öfter sie zusammen kommen, und je schicklicher und der Vollkommenheit des Ganzen angemessener die Wirkung ist; desto wahrscheinlicher ist die Vermutung, daß diese Wirkung die Absicht eines vernünftigen Wesens gewesen sei. In unserm Falle steigt die Wahrscheinlichkeit auf einen sehr hohen Grad, und kommt der Gewißheit nahe, ohne völlig erreichen kann sie dieselbe niemals, so lange wir weder alle Ursachen, so oft sie zusammen kommen, noch das richtige Verhältnis der Schicklichkeit einer einzigen Begebenheit zum Ganzen vollkommen deutlich einsehen können. Endlich kann auch aus den Absichten nur eine weise Anordnung und Einrichtung, nicht aber eine Schöpfung aus dem Nichts dargetan werden*" (Mendelssohn 2008, p. 71).
34 In Guyer's words (2020, p. 53), commenting a similar passage: "[...] Mendelssohn the aesthetician meets Mendelssohn the metaphysician".
35 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 71-72.
36 Cf. Guyer 2020, pp. 53-54.

in their own way, exactly because they are complementary[37]. And indeed, the most crucial feature we must account for is that, in both cases, the concept of perfection is central: God's perfection within the ontological argument, and the perfection of the world as pointing out the existence of the most perfect being that creates it. We shall now examine Mendelssohn's account of practical philosophy, leading especially to the connection of this feature with his natural theology.

2. Human perfection and its connection to divine perfection

In the fourth and final section of the *Evidenzschrift*, Mendelssohn deals with practical philosophy[38]. The main notion to be addressed here is that of *law of nature* – so that his investigation concerns the degree of certainty which it is possible to obtain in such regard. In short, the law of nature commands that human beings *seek perfection* and *avoid imperfection*. Mendelssohn's leading question is: how do we arrive at such law, that is, the natural law which informs human beings about what to do and what to omit? According to Mendelssohn, there are *three ways* to know the law of nature that commands our actions – which, in Heiner Klemme's interpretation[39], may be summarised as: (1) an *a posteriori* approach (perfection as the final end of all human inclinations, desires, etc); (2) an *a priori* approach (perfection as that which a free being wants); and (3) an approach concerning the concordance with God's purposes for the world (which is the reflection of divine perfection).

The first approach departs from an *a posteriori* examination of the "*Begierden und Wünsche, Leidenschaften und Neigungen der Menschen*"[40]. According to Mendelssohn, in all cases, these faculties want but one end: "*die Erhaltung oder Verbesserung unseres, oder eines andern Geschöpfes, innern oder äußern Zustandes*"[41]. In other words, when human beings want, desire, long for something, they do so because they are inclined toward the improvement of their state – regardless of the virtuous or vicious character of such desires, etc. Such improvement is, however, exactly the search for perfection, as Mendelssohn points out: "*Es zielen also alle lasterhaften sowohl als tugendhaften Begierden der Menschen zuletzt einzig und allein auf die wahre oder scheinbare Vollkommenheit (Erhaltung und Verbesserung) ihres oder ihrer Nebenmenschen, innern oder äußern Zustandes*"[42]. Both true and apparent perfection – at any rate the perfection of our states and the states of other human beings – are objects of our desires. From this, Mendelssohn presents a first formulation of the law of nature – that is, the law of nature at which we arrive from the first kind of approach, *a posteriori*: "*Mache deinen und deines Nebenmenschen innern und äußern Zustand, in gehöriger Proportion, so vollkommen, als du kannst*"[43]. In short, this is the very law of nature that hovers behind all human desire – exactly because all desires long for the improvement of our states[44].

The second approach concerns the investigation of the *a priori* notion of a being with free will[45] [*freiwilligen Wesens*]. For Mendelssohn, between two things, a free being may choose that which pleases him or her the most. But what pleases him or her the most? He says: "*Der Grund dieses Wohlgefallens ist die Vollkommenheit, Schönheit und Ordnung, die es in dem vorzuziehenden Gegenstande wahrnimmt, oder wahrzunehmen glaubt*"[46]. In a nutshell, a truly free being chooses the object in which he or she perceives more perfection, beauty, and order – whereby *perfection* is the element to be highlighted. In this context, Mendelssohn also defines it thus: "*Unter der Vollkommenheit begreife ich auch den Nutzen und das sinnliche Vergnügen, das uns der Gegenstand verspricht, denn beides gehöret zu den Vollkommenheiten unsers innern oder äußeren Zustandes*"[47]. Consequently, perfection goes hand-in-hand with pleasure[48] – so that the contemplation of it gives pleasure [*Lust*], whereas the contemplation of imperfection gives displeasure [*Unlust*]. Exactly because perfection, beauty, and order imply pleasure (and imperfection, ugliness, and disorder imply displeasure), perfection, beauty, and order give the free being a *motive* [*Bewegungsgrund*]. That is, the free being is

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37 It is also important to notice that Mendelssohn does not aim to convince the unbeliever with his own presentations of these arguments, as he states already at the beginning of the third section that he does not intend "*[...] die Atheisten von dem Ungrunde ihrer Meinung zu überzeugen, sondern vor einer Gesellschaft von wahren Weltweisen die Gewißheit zu schätzen, mit welcher wir das Dasein Gottes und seine Eigenschaften aus der Vernunft erkennen*" (Mendelssohn 2008, p. 54).

38 For an excellent examination of Mendelssohn's account of practical philosophy in the *Evidenzschrift*, its contrast to Wolff and debate with Kant, see: Klemme 2018.

39 See: Klemme 2018, p. 293-295.

40 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 75.

41 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 75.

42 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 76.

43 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 76.

44 As Klemme (2018, p. 292) points out, Mendelssohn seems to presuppose the order of things at this point – that is, that all our desires necessarily tend toward perfection.

45 Guyer (2016, p. 553) interestingly asserts that Kant, in his critical philosophy, accepts this second approach – leading to his methodology in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*.

46 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 76.

47 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 76.

48 This point clearly has Wolffian influence, since Wolff defines "pleasure" thus: "*Indem wir die Vollkommenheit anschauen, entsteht bey uns die Lust, daß demnach die Lust nichts anders ist, als ein Anschauen der Vollkommenheit*" (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 404). He also defines "good" as: "*Was uns und unsern Zustand vollkommener machet, das ist gut*" (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 422); and "motive" as: "*Gründe [...] des Wollens und nicht Wollens*" (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 496). Since we shall discuss mainly the Wolffian influences concerning the interconnection between natural theology and practical philosophy in the final section, we merely indicate these points of contact in this footnote. However, it is also interesting to point out that, whereas Mendelssohn takes the notion of the free being to be an *a priori* way of knowing the content of the law of nature, Wolff first considers the concepts of pleasure, goodness, and motive in his *empirical psychology*. Nevertheless, the relation between Wolff's empirical and rational psychology is indeed quite complex – so that we could not simply take the former to be an a posteriori kind of psychology, and the latter an *a priori* kind.

motivated by the contemplation of perfection to choose accordingly that which he or she takes to be more perfect, more beautiful, and more ordered – since it is exactly that which pleases him or her the most.

A free being is motivated toward perfection – in the sense of a *„moralische Notwendigkeit"*[49] (and not of a *„physischen Zwang"*). Here, we arrive at Mendelssohn's account of obligation[50]: *„Eine Verbindlichkeit ist nichts anders, als eine moralische Notwendigkeit zu handeln, d. i. etwas zu tun oder zu unterlassen"*[51]. In short, someone is obligated when one *must* do or not do something in the sense of a *moral necessity*. Such is the case with the free being, who is obligated to arrange his or her choice of that which pleases him or her the most in accordance with the contemplation of perfection, beauty, and order. In this way, he or she is obligated to *„so viel Vollkommenheit, Schönheit und Ordnung in der Welt hervorzubringen, als ihm möglich ist"*[52]. Thus, we arrive once again at the law of nature as the commandment to seek perfection: *„Mache deinen und deines Nächsten innern und äußern Zustand, in gehöriger Proportion, so vollkommen, als du kannst"*[53]. This formulation of the law of nature is essentially the same as the one from the previous approach – with the sole difference that Mendelssohn substitutes the word *„Nebenmenschen"* for the word *„Nächsten"*. As meaning, however, it is the same: if previously we arrived at the law of nature by the *a posteriori* examination of the desires of human beings, now we arrive at it by the *a priori* investigation of the free being, who chooses what pleases him or her the most (perfection), giving pleasure and, thus, a motive – and ultimately obligating him or her to the search for perfection.

Finally, the third way to arrive at the law of nature is by considering the concordance of the law of nature with God's purposes for the world. In a word, it concerns the notion of acting in accordance with the final end God intended for Creation – which, for human beings (as creatures), is precisely the commandment to be *„ein Nachahmer der Gottheit"*[54], an imitator of God. But how does Mendelssohn arrive at such notion? Previously, we saw that, in natural theology, we can only achieve certainty by means of *a priori* arguments that, even if lacking practical conviction, are logically sound. Concerning an approach on the theology of Creation, one could consider that Mendelssohn intends that the background notions in his practical philosophy must derive from the most certain and most convincing approaches on the subject of metaphysics and natural theology – since he says that practical philosophy presupposes metaphysics, which natural theology is a part of[55]. So, according to Mendelssohn, I can only know my duties to God, to myself, and to my fellow human beings if I know in a certain way all these three objects of my duties. Therefore, concerning particularly God, we must take into account both of Mendelssohn's arguments – the ontological and the teleological.

Thus, when he starts his argument concerning God's purposes, we could infer that he is also departing from the notion of God as the most perfect being – when stating, for instance, that God acts on the wisest purposes, thus creating the world and giving it the law of nature (from his perfect will, wisdom, and goodness). For Mendelssohn, the *only possible* purpose God could have for the world is the perfection of his creatures – since God possesses the most perfect wisdom and goodness[56]. At this point, the notion of the obligation of human beings to be imitators of God's perfections fits entirely:

> [...] wir sind Geschöpfe Gottes, also sein Eigentum[57.] Sind wir sein Eigentum; so hat er das Recht, von unsern Kräften denjenigen Gebrauch zu machen, den er gut findet, denn was er gut findet, ist unstreitig das Beste. Er hat also das Recht, das sittliche Vermögen, uns Gesetze vorzuschreiben; denn die Gesetze, die er uns, seinem Eigentume, vorschreibt, sind der Regel der Vollkommenheit gemäß[58].

God, and only God, can prescribe the *best laws* for human beings to follow – not only because He is the Creator of human beings, but especially because He is *the most perfect being*, thus possessing the most perfect wisdom, goodness, and so on. He is entitled to do so, and human beings (as God's property) are also better-off for it.

Here, we see the exact practical implications of the notion of God as the most perfect being in Mendelssohn's account: God's perfection (and perfections) and human perfection are interconnected. God is the most perfect being, because he possesses the highest perfection in general, and all his attributes are also the most perfect. Human beings are not the most perfect beings, but we are creatures (and, therefore, the property) of the most perfect being, who prescribes us a law that is, itself, the most perfect law. Indeed, the most relevant aspect[59] is that: *„Unsere Handlungen sind gut oder böse, in so weit sie mit der Regel der*

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49 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77.
50 Wolff also defines obligation in very similar terms: *„Einen verbinden etwas zu thun, oder zu lassen, ist nichts anders als einen Bewegungs-Grund des Wollens und Nicht-Wollens damit verknüpffen"* (*Deutsche Ethik*, § 8). For a thorough discussion concerning Wolff's and Mendelssohn's accounts of "obligation", also regarding Kant's account, see: Klemme 2018.
51 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77.
52 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77.
53 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77.
54 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77.
55 Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 81-82.
56 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77-78.
57 Although Mendelssohn explicitly considers human beings to be God's property, Wolff does not seem to phrase the relation between God and human beings directly thus. Instead, it follows from his sequence of definitions. He affirms that: *"Servus dicitur homo, qui est in dominio alterius"* (*Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 967), and that: *"Homines omnes sunt servi Dei"* (*Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 968), because God possesses the dominion over human beings. Such dominion [*dominium*] is defined as *"[...] jus pro arbitrio suo disponendi de ipsa rei substantia, ejus usu atque fructu"* (*Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 959), which, on its turn, points at the definition of "property" [*proprietas*] (*Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 955).
58 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 78-79.
59 Mendelssohn also includes an additional argument concerning rewards and punishments for human beings as a complementary argument (cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 79). However, the centrality or not of the notions of rewards and punishments does

Vollkommenheit, oder welches eben so viel ist, mit den Absichten Gottes übereinstimmen, oder nicht"[60]. Accordingly, virtue is the habit [*Fertigkeit*] to perform good actions (that is, actions that agree with the rule of perfection and with God's purposes), and vice is the contrary[61].

Thus far, we have seen that the practical role of the ontological argument is to provide the same certainty for moral judgments as is available for statements concerning natural theology. That is, because we arrive at the certainty of God's existence by means of the argument of God as the most perfect being, we also arrive now at the certainty of the statements of practical philosophy, which state that we must act in accordance with the acknowledgement of God's highest perfections. However, as we also saw in the previous section, despite its logical certainty, the ontological argument lacks conviction – which is also reflected in practical philosophy. After all, not all human beings comprehend the certainty provided by the ontological argument. On the contrary, the very history of the ontological argument shows how controversial the argument can be, even in rational terms. In this sense, the argument itself will have implications concerning practical philosophy as well: there are human beings who are not convinced by it, and, therefore, will not be convinced to act in accordance with the course of action it proposes.

At this point, we arrive at two considerations. Firstly, as we have seen, to know the law of nature by means of the consideration of its concordance with God's purposes for the world is but one of three ways to arrive at the law of nature. Therefore, even if a person fails to acknowledge the law of nature in such regard, he or she can indeed arrive at it by the other two ways. Secondly, and more importantly, we also need to consider that the teleological argument also has practical implications, and particularly in the sense that it is meant to be taken alongside the ontological argument – thus aiming for the achievement of the conviction required for statements of practical philosophy even in this third way of knowing the law of nature.

Even if a human being fails to be convinced – and, therefore, motivated – by the ontological argument of God as the most perfect being, particularly concerning its practical implications in the contrast between human and divine perfection, the teleological argument bridges the gap and provides further conviction to the otherwise not convinced person. In other words, the teleological argument – that the beauty, order, and perfection of the world seem to require the existence of God as the Creator – appeals to the faculties of such a person who was not touched by the logically sound, but seemingly cold ontological argument, namely involving aspects of sensibility and aesthetics. Such aesthetical aspects arise from the contemplation of harmony (perfection), that gives a person pleasure from such contemplation. Furthermore, such pleasure can also motivate the person – to the promotion of a greater perfection in honour of the perfect Creator, responsible for the way the world is arranged. Indeed, as we have seen, it is not strictly speaking an argument in the most rigorous logical sense, but it is an argument in the sense of a concatenation of considerations from which arise the motivation for a specific course of action. And such a course of action is indeed the same as for the two previous ways to know the law of nature: to seek perfection, here formulated in the sense of the promotion of greater harmony in the world.

However, we should notice that the ontological and the teleological arguments go together in practical philosophy, as was the case in natural theology: the ontological argument completes the teleological argument in its certainty, and the latter provides the former its otherwise lacking conviction. Taken alongside one another, both arguments promote the bigger picture that we take God to be the most perfect being, who is also the Creator of all existing perfection in the world – and that we must act in accordance with such a more complete notion, promoting perfection and avoiding imperfection, which is precisely the content of the law of nature.

Contrarily to the two previous approaches on the law of nature, Mendelssohn does not provide an exact formula for the law of nature in this third approach. At this point, however, he offers the most synthetised formula: „*Mache dich und andere vollkommen*"[62]. He also adds three maxims – which, according to Klemme[63], correspond to the three ways to know the law of nature: (1) "*Erwäge, worin die Neigungen aller Menschen übereinstimmen*"; (2) „*Erkenne dich, als ein freiwilliges Wesen*"; and (3) „*Erkenne dich, als das Eigentum Gottes*". Taken together, these maxims represent a fine synthesis of Mendelssohn's approach in the *Evidenzschrift* – pointing out that we may arrive at the same conclusions concerning the law of perfection as the law of nature from these *three different paths*: either by acknowledging the final end of our inclinations, or by recognising our quality as free beings that want and choose perfection, or by attesting our part as creatures in the Creator-creature relationship, as participating in the purpose of the perfection he intended for the world.

3. Mendelssohn's account in relation to Christian Wolff

So far, we have examined Mendelssohn's account by itself, without addressing its influences and immediate context. Now, we shall regard it against the background of Wolff's philosophy[64] – which most prominently counts as Mendelssohn's great influence in the *Evidenzschrift*. Scholars increasingly attest that Christian Wolff's philosophy was the most influential philosophy in the German philosophical scene in the first part of

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seem to be entirely clear in Mendelssohn's approach – which is also the case regarding Wolff's approach on the subject. See, for instance, Klemme's interpretation (2018, pp. 295-296).
60   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 79.
61   Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 79-80.
62   Mendelssohn 2008, p. 80.
63   Klemme 2018, p. 296; see also: Guyer 2020, pp. 63-64.
64   In this section, I depart mainly from the arguments from (and bibliography indicated in): Lanzini Stobbe 2023.

the XVIII century. Famously, his practical philosophy is focused on an account of perfection that has its roots in his system of metaphysics. Wolff defines perfection, as it is now well known[65], as „*Die Zusammenstimmung des mannigfaltigen machet die Vollkommenheit der Dinge aus*"[66], and "*Perfectio est consensus in varietate, seu plurium a se invicem differentium in uno*"[67] – to quote merely the two main definitions from his German and Latin works, respectively. In the *Evidenzschrift*, Mendelssohn does not seem to explicitly define perfection in terms of a *consensus in variety* – or concordance in the manyfold, as it is sometimes translated – but, as we have seen, always presents it alongside the concepts of beauty and order. Indeed, Wolff also presents perfection in a close conceptual connection with order[68] – but it is perfection *as* harmony that counts as the most Wolffian feature of Mendelssohn's concept of perfection. Since Wolff owes much to Leibniz concerning the formulation of perfection as consensus or concordance[69], which are different words for harmony, it goes without saying that Mendelssohn's account of perfection is connected with Wolff's account.

Mendelssohn's connection to Wolff is also noticeable in the context of natural theology. Indeed, as Guyer points out, Mendelssohn's account of the ontological argument follows the Cartesian version added by the Leibnizian "proviso"[70] that we must first-hand prove that the most perfect being is possible, in order to follow from there that it is actual. Leibniz's approach on the matter is quite specific, but Wolff developed a whole second volume of his *Theologia Naturalis* based on the notion of *ens perfectissimum*. He defines it by means of the concepts of "co-possibility" (defined as that which exists simultaneously inside one object[71]) and "reality" (that which we truly know to exist in a given object): "*Ens perfectissimum dicitur, cui insunt omnes realitates compossibiles in gradu absolute summo*"[72]; and "*Deus est ens perfectissimum, scilicet absolute tale*"[73]. In short: God is the most perfect being, that is, the being in which all compossible realities exist. Like what we have seen to be Mendelssohn's approach, Wolff also attempted[74] firstly to prove that it is possible for a being to entail all possible realities, only to conclude then that such a being exists, and that it is God.

However, here we find an intriguing difference between both approaches to the ontological argument. We have seen that Mendelssohn departs from the notion of *ex nihilo nihil fit* – that nothing can come from nothing[75]. Thus, an impossible thing does not exist, because it entails a contradiction amongst its determinations; a possible thing does not entail such a contradiction, and can exist or not exist, depending on a reason for its actualisation. Now, God is not only a possible being, but also the necessary being which contains among its determinations the determination of its existence. Wolff's *a priori* argument in the second volume of the *Theologia Naturalis* (1737), on the other hand, does not depart from the notion that nothing can come from nothing. Instead, it is his *a posteriori* argument that departs from such a point, both in the *Deutsche Metaphysik* and in the first volume of the *Theologia Naturalis* (1736), but to arrive at the proof of God as the reason of all things[76] – not to arrive at God as the most perfect being as such.

Even if, as Jean École points out[77], in a way, Wolff's ontological argument presupposes the *a posteriori* kind of argument, we cannot but point out this difference between Wolff's and Mendelssohn's approaches – which may be due to Baumgarten's influence. Indeed, the very fact that Wolff does not provide an ontological argument as such in the *Metaphysik* is also intriguing, particularly because the notion of *ens perfectissimum* will have implications in the realm of practical philosophy. However, we may consider that Mendelssohn departs from the notion of *ex nihilo nihil fit* to consider the notion of the most perfect being exactly because both notions are entwined and may be examined alongside each other within a rational framework – such as his initial approach concerning natural theology in the *Evidenzschrift*. In other words, where Wolff tackles the issue at two specific moments – one *a posteriori*, the other *a priori* – Mendelssohn starts directly from the approach that provides, within his project, more certainty: namely, the *a priori* one.

Like Mendelssohn, Wolff also provides an important role for the notion of *ens perfectissimum* in his *Deutsche Ethik*, where he considers the obligation to acknowledge God as the most perfect being to be at the core of the duties toward God[78]. He asserts, for instance, that we are obligated to know God and His

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65 For recent studies on the subject, see: Goldenbaum 2024; Lanzini Stobbe 2023, p. 71-146; Rosenkoetter 2024.
66 *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 152. Quotes from the *Deutsche Metaphysik* are from the bilingual edition organised by Ciafardone (Wolff 2003); quotes from the *Deutsche Ethik* are from the edition of the series of Wolff's complete works (Wolff 2016). Other quotes follow original editions (Wolff 1730; 1736; 1737).
67 *Ontologia*, § 503.
68 Wolff's definition of order in the *Metaphysik*, for instance, is this: „*Aehnlichkeit des mannigfaltigen in dessen Folge auf und nach einander*" (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 132).
69 For the history of Wolff's concept of perfection and its relationship with Leibniz, see: Schwaiger 1995, p. 93-113.
70 Guyer 2016, p. 523.
71 *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 1.
72 *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 6.
73 *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 14.
74 See Wolff's arguments in: *Theologia Naturalis*, II, §§ 1-78.
75 Cf. Mendelssohn 2008, p. 57.
76 Cf. *Deutsche Metaphysik,* §§ 928-930, 945-946.
77 Cf. École 1988, p. 199.
78 See Wolff's arguments in: *Deutsche Ethik*, §§ 650-662.

perfections[79], and to glorify God in all our actions[80], because the divine perfections go together with the natural law. In fact, this is a crucial part of Wolff's account of the obligation to perfection – because natural law and the divine law command the same search for perfection[81].

Indeed, to know God and his perfections and act *accordingly* is a topic that concerns precisely Wolff´s notion of God's main purpose for the world – which is the reflection of his perfections or, to use traditional nomenclature (as Wolff does), the *glory of God* [*Herrlichkeit Gottes; Gloria Dei*]. In the *Deutsche Metaphysik*, Wolff states that:

> Und bleibet demnach nichts übrig, als daß die Welt Gottes Vollkommenheit als in einem Spiegel vorstellet. Dieses ist die Absicht, welche Gott durch die Welt erhalten kann, und pfleget man diß die Offenbahrung der Herrlichkeit Gottes zu nennen, daß man demnach sagen kann: Gott habe die Welt gemacht, um seine Herrlichkeit zu offenbahren. Nehmlich die Herrlichkeit Gottes wird der gantze Bezirck seiner Vollkommenheiten zusammen genommen genennet[82].

In the first volume[83] of the *Theologia Naturalis*, Wolff resumes such notion thus: "*Finis, quem Deus per existentiam totius mundi intendit, est finis ultimus*"[84]; and "*Patefactio summae Dei perfectionis seu manifestatio gloriae divinae est finis ultimus, quem Deus per existentiam hujus universi intendit*"[85]. Like Mendelssohn, Wolff also affirms that the *only possible* purpose God can give the world is the reflection of his perfection. This follows, ultimately, from the notion that God is the most perfect being – but, in the *Metaphysik*, Wolff does not explicitly present such notion (even though he incorporates it into his argument in the *Ethik*). Instead, his argument relies on the examination of God's intellect and will – which he indeed takes to be the most perfect intellect[86] (that represents all possible worlds) and will[87] (that wants to produce the best possible one).

The notion itself seems substantially the same in Mendelssohn's philosophy as it is in Wolff's philosophy. The main difference seems to be that Mendelssohn does not use the exact terminology – the *glory of God*. Nevertheless, in both cases, the glory of God seems to be the bridge between the consideration of God as the most perfect being as a pure feature of natural theology and its application within the realm of practical philosophy. That is, human beings must arrange our actions in accordance with our esteem of God as the most perfect being. And, for that, we must *perfect* ourselves (and help others to) – because human perfection is the means for the greater reflection of God's perfections in the world[88].

However, we should point out that the role of God as the most perfect being in Mendelssohn's account also entails a complementary feature: the teleological proof of the existence of God. As we have seen, for Mendelssohn, the ontological proof of God provides certainty, but lacks conviction. Even if we may arrive at the law of nature by two other ways – by the *a posteriori* examination of our inclinations and the *a priori* examination of the notion of free being – the third way to know the law of nature may be open even to a person who is not convinced by the ontological argument, particularly by means of the complementary teleological argument. The practical function of the teleological argument, therefore, is to enable this third way of knowing the law of nature even for such a person who is otherwise not convinced, in practical terms, of God's existence and of the corresponding obligation to promote perfection as the tribute to God as the most perfect being, Creator of all perfection that exists in the world.

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79 *Deutsche Ethik*, § 653: „*Wenn der Mensch GOtt ehret, so braucht er zu seinem Bewegungs-Gründen die göttlichen Vollkomenheiten (§. 651.). Derowegen muß er sein Thun und Lassen dergestalt einrichten, daß man daraus erkennen kan, er halte GOtt für ein so vollkommenes Wesen als er ist. Denn weil das Thun und lassen der Menschen durch ihre Bewegungs-Gründe determiniret wird (§. 496. Met.); so kan man auch aus Erwegung ihres Thun und Lassens auf ihre Bewegungs-Gründe kommen. Und ist hierzu dienlich, was von Erforschung des inneren Zustandes ihres Gemüthes (§. 193. 199.) gelehret worden. Auf solche Weise können andere aus seinem Thun und Lassen Anlaß nehmen an die göttlichen Vollkommenheiten zu gedencken, auch zugleich lernen, was dir Erkäntniß derselben fruchtet, und werden dadurch gleichfalls zu derselben Erkäntniß angetrieben. Also werden die Vollkommenheiten GOttes mehr bekand gemacht, und seine Ehre wird mehr ausgebreitet (§. 590.), folgends befördert er die Ehre GOttes. Und dieses ist es, was GOtt von dem Menschen erhalten kan, daß er nehlich seine Ehre befördert*".

80 *Deutsche Ethik*, § 654: „*Der Mensch wird auch von GOtt verbunden dem Gesetze der Natur ein Gnügen zu leisten (§. 29. 30.), und beweiset so gar GOtt dadurch seine Güte (§. 58.) und Liebe (§. 1071. Met.) gegen uns, als ein gütiger und liebreicher Vater (§. 59.). Wer demnach diese Erkäntniß mit als eine Bewegungs-Grund aller Handlungen brauchet, dazu er durch das Gesetze der Natur verbunden ist, derselbe ehret GOtt in allen seinen Handlungen (§. 652.) und befördert durch alle seine Ehre (§. 653.). Und hieraus erkennet man, wir man zur Ehre GOttes essen, trincken, arbeiten und schlaffen kan*".

81 *Deutsche Ethik*, § 17: „*Insonderheit aber wird eine Regel ein Gesetze der Natur genennet, wenn uns die Natur verbindet unsere freye Handlungen darnach einzurichten: gleichwie wir auch ein göttliches Gesetze heissen eine Regel, nach welcher uns GOtt unsere freye Handlungen einzurichten verbindet, und wiederum ein menschliches Gesetze eine Regel, darnach uns Menschen unsere freye Handlungen einzurichten verbinden*".

82 *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 1045. Wolff also says that: „*[...] so sind alle Creaturen (denn eine Creatur heisset ein Ding, das durch Gottes Kraft seine Würcklichkeit hat) Spiegel der göttlichen Vollkommenheiten, und kan man von der Creatur, wenn man sie betrachtet, jederzeit zu Gott hinaufsteigen, das ist, von dem, was man bey ihr findet, Anlaß nehmen, an Gottes Vollkommenheiten zu gedencken, die dadurch als durch Problem befestiget und erläutert werden*" (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 1046). See also: *Deutsche Ethik*, § 662.

83 In is interesting to notice that Wolff divides his *Theologia Naturalis* in two volumes, where the first concerns the *a posteriori* approach (based on the *a posteriori* proof of God as a necessary being against all other contingent beings), and the second the a priori approach (departing from the notion of *ens perfectissimum*). On the subject, see, for instance: École 1985; pp. 113-222, École 1990, pp. 329-420; Theis 2018.

84 *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 628.

85 *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 629. Also: "*Creaturae omnes sunt specula perfectionum divinarum*" (*Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 785).

86 *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 953.

87 *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 985.

88 Cf. *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 1032. On the subject, see: Lanzini Stobbe 2023, pp. 123-135.

We may consider this feature an innovation of Mendelssohn's in comparison with Wolff concerning the context between both notions (of the most perfect being and of the existence of perfection in the world). To be sure, Wolff is certainly aware that there are human beings who, even if using their own reason, are not convinced by arguments for the existence of God. As examples, we can mention the atheist or the pantheist, present in Wolff's writings on natural theology and practical philosophy[89]. The atheist also accesses the content of the law of nature as the commandment to promote perfection – which was at the core of Wolff's conflict with the Pietist theologians from Halle[90]. In this way, like Mendelssohn, we could say that the atheist knows the law of nature by another way than that of the concordance with God's purposes for the world, for instance.

Nevertheless, what seems new in Mendelssohn, that was not explicitly highlighted by Wolff, is that there is a gap between the rational certainty of God's existence provided by reason, on the one hand, and the conviction of God's existence by means other than reason, which can be expressed in a prominent way in the notion of the existence of beauty as harmony in the world. For Wolff, the problem with arriving at the law of nature and not being yet convinced of God's existence is that, by doing so, one lacks correctness or perfection in the use of reason, which, by itself, is meant to know the reasons [*Gründe*] of all things, and ultimately the reason [*Grund*] of all things[91]. God, perfectly rational, does know the particular reasons of all things and the general reason of all things. For Mendelssohn, the tension between certainty and conviction is more nuanced, particularly concerning the human perspective – so that it is not a matter of promoting a person's greatest possible rationality, but also of understanding that human reason can only go so far[92]. In other words, human beings cannot know all things by means of our reason, and precisely on that point we need arguments such as the teleological one, which provide conviction with the greatest certainty available. In short: in fairness to Wolff, the question of the limitations – imperfections – of human reason is already present, but it is to Mendelssohn's merit that he expresses the problem in terms of the contrast between certainty and conviction.

A final word on the formulation of the law of nature itself, as expressed in practical philosophy. Like Mendelssohn, Wolff also provided several kinds of formulations of the natural law, the two most quoted being:

> (1a) „*Thue, was dich und deinen oder anderer Zustand vollkommener machet: unterlaß, was ihn unvollkommener machet*"[93];
> (1b) „*Thue, was dich und deinen Zustand vollkommener machet, und unterlaß, was dich und deinen Zustand unvollkommener machet*"[94].

Mendelssohn's formulations were:

> (2a) „*Mache deinen und deines Nebenmenschen innern und äußern Zustand, in gehöriger Proportion, so vollkommen, als du kannst*"[95];
> (2b) „*Mache deinen und deines Nächsten innern und äußern Zustand, in gehöriger Proportion, so vollkommen, als du kannst*"[96];
> (2c) „*Mache dich und andere vollkommen*"[97].

Mutatis mutandis, Mendelssohn's formulations seem to follow the content, if not the phrasing, of Wolff's formulations in all aspects. Indeed, it is a difference in formulation – rather than content – a departure from the verb "to do" [*tun*], like Wolff, and from the verb "to make" [*machen*], like Mendelssohn. However, such a difference seems rather to be stylistic, not conceptual. Conceptually, Mendelssohn adds to the formula itself a feature that is present in Wolff's account, but not in his formula: the notion of order as proportion. When Mendelssohn adds „*in gehöriger Proportion*", what he has in mind is indeed that every human being – or every thing, as a matter of fact – is due a specific degree of perfection, that is not, however, the highest perfection of all, which beholds exclusively to God. Furthermore, this very feature of the notion of perfection is present in Wolff's account as well, since, as we have seen, perfection and order are interconnected in his ontology.

However, the most intriguing difference between Wolff's and Mendelssohn's formulations concerns the framework in which they are presented. In Wolff's account, there is ultimately *one* formulation: *do that which makes you and others more perfect, omit that which makes you and others more imperfect.* In Mendelssohn, the three formulations are almost the same, but they point out different, but complementary ways to arrive at the commandment to seek perfection. Even if perfection is the ultimate goal – that is, our desires long for perfection, the free being seeks perfection as that which pleases him or her the most, and we acknowledge that God's purposes tell us to seek perfection – all these points concern three different ways to arrive at the obligation for perfection. Indeed, it may resemble Wolff's notion of the correspondence of natural law,

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89 See, for instance, the last sections of Wolff's second volume of the *Theologia Naturalis*.
90 On the subject, see, for instance, the recent contributions in: Klemme; Grunert 2023.
91 See also: Lanzini Stobbe, 2023, pp. 24-52.
92 As Klemme points out (2018, p. 299): „*Zwar mochte auch Wolff einen möglichen Konflikt zwischen unterem und oberem Erkenntnisvermögen nicht abstreiten, aber Mendelssohn ist der Ansicht, dass dieser Konflikt nicht einfach durch deutliche Begriffe gelöst werden kann. Wolffs Rationalismus überzeugt nicht mehr. An die Stelle der motivierenden Vernunft treten Empfindung und Anschauung*".
93 *Deutsche Ethik*, § 12.
94 *Deutsche Ethik*, § 19.
95 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 76.
96 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 77.
97 Mendelssohn 2008, p. 80.

divine law, and human law – in the sense that all three laws, grounded on different sources, may point at the same end, which is perfection[98]. Mendelssohn's account seems to follow this general insight, but from a more specific perspective that does not merely reflect Wolff's account. Instead, Mendelssohn focuses on the different ways to arrive at the law of nature, which, as such, were not entirely present in Wolff's account. Indeed, Mendelssohn incorporates key features of Wolffianism – like the notion that all our desires long for perfection, and that we find the law of nature in the concordance with God's purposes for the world. Nevertheless, as scholars point out, it also seems a step further in the direction of Kantian criticism, particularly if we regard Mendelssohn's account of the free being – thus meaning a dissociation from the Wolffian perspective.

Final remarks

There are several points that can yet be considered in the context of Mendelssohn's reception of Wolffian philosophy, and indeed also concerning the relation between natural theology and practical philosophy. In this paper, however, the points that we wanted to discuss concerned specifically the practical implications of God as the most perfect being, which implied the notion of the glory of God as the final end for human beings. We have seen that, in such regard, Mendelssohn is conceptually very close to Wolff's account – and both are inserted in a larger tradition of natural theology that comprises most of Scholastic philosophy and theology, as well as previous accounts – which we could not detail here[99]. Nevertheless, even if stating it in a seemingly trivial way, Mendelssohn is not Wolff – and this becomes clear when regarding some of his merits in developing Wolffian insights. A clear example of this is his assessment that, although the ontological proof is a logically sound proof of the existence of God, it does not necessarily mean that it has the convincing power to make all human beings acknowledge the existence of God, and therefore to convince them, by itself, to act in accordance with it. Instead – and this is the most relevant highlight – there can be other kinds of proofs, like his teleological one, that, despite lacking certainty in demonstration, flourish due to its practical conviction because of an aspect of human life that is neither cold nor methodical[100], which is the realm of feelings and the heart[101].

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98 Cf. *Deutsche Ethik*, § 17.

99 I intend to address in further detail the practical implications of Wolff's account of the *ens perfectissimum* in another paper, considering its origins and influences as well as developments within early XVIII century Wolffianism.

100 This is also Klemme's criticism of the Wolffian account: „*Sein Rationalismus scheint in der Praxis zu scheitern, weil Wolff nicht anzuerkennen bereit ist, dass das Wollen der Menschen auch durch Gefühle (sinnliche Begierden) bestimmt wird, die ihrem Wesen nach überhaupt nicht deutlich erkannt werden können*" (Klemme 2018, p. 288).

101 In a way, Mendelssohn's account seems closer to Anselm's original proposal in the *Proslogion* – but this is a matter to be addressed at another opportunity.

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