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The Power of Illusion. Disgust and Representability in Moses Mendelssohn's Aesthetics

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ENG **Abstract:** In the context of the emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline in mid-eighteenth-century Germany, Moses Mendelssohn was one of the leading voices in the development of a new theory of sentiments and representation. In this context, Mendelssohn understood the need to delineate the limits of aesthetic representation and addressed the issue through an in-depth study of sentiments. In this article, I propose a study of the category of disgust in Mendelssohn's aesthetics, starting from his theory of aesthetic illusion. Disgust is, in fact, a feeling that cannot be reduced to the illusion created by the work of art but always refers to reality. To this end, I will refer mainly to the 82nd *Literaturbrief*, in which Mendelssohn expounds his study of disgust, and secondly to the *Rhapsody* as a text that reveals the need to deepen the theory of aesthetic illusion in light of the limits indicated through disgust. Finally, an aesthetic paradigm will emerge, which is also relevant to the contemporary debate on the possibilities of aesthetic representation.
Keywords: Mendelssohn, disgust, illusion, aesthetics, representation.

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Outlining the scope of study of a new discipline, as happened after 1750 in Germany with aesthetics, means not only defining its object of study, but also establishing what should be excluded from it. It was with this objective in mind that an intense debate on aesthetic disgust developed in the second half of the 18th century, involving Mendelssohn, Lessing, Herder, and eventually Kant, leading to the definitive exclusion of this category from the discipline of aesthetics[1].

The path leading to the exclusion of disgust offers important insights into the theorization of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline and allows us to observe Mendelssohn's development of his thinking on judgment of taste from a very particular perspective. The debate on the feeling of disgust touches on themes of great relevance to 18th-century aesthetics, such as the relationship between beauty and perfection, the limits of representation, the concept of the tragic, the relationship between aesthetics, teleology, and theodicy, and, last but not least, the connection with morality[2].

Leah Hochman's recent study emphasizes Mendelssohn's specificity in his reflections on the imperfect and the formless, to the point that it would be reductive to define him simply as a predecessor of Kant (Hochman, 2014, p. 7).

The German debate on disgust began, as Winfried Menninghaus (Menninghaus, 1999) recalls, with the notes that Johann Adolf Schlegel, father of the Schlegel brothers, added to his translation of Batteux's text (Batteaux, 1746). Schlegel commented on Batteux's text in articles in 1751, which were then expanded in the two subsequent editions (1759-60). Here, disgust is defined for the first time as the feeling par excellence that delineates the boundary of aesthetics, according to a systematic attempt to define the discipline: "Only disgust is excluded from those unpleasant sensations that allow their nature to be transformed through imitation. In this case, art would waste all its work in vain" (Schlegel, 1770, p. 111). In Schlegel's eyes, exclusion from artistic representation also determines a refusal to reflect on this exclusion. In other words, Schlegel points out, for the first time, how the prohibition on artistically representing what is disgusting has also marked

1 Berwin reconstructs in great detail, through correspondence, Mendelssohn's relationships with the leading intellectuals of his time (Berwin, 1919).
2 For a more general overview, see the first paragraph of Rongen, 2014. See also: Feloj 2017.

the absence of theoretical reflection on disgust as an aesthetic category: "it is difficult to investigate disgust because disgust is always very unpleasant to us, even in imitation" (Schlegel, 1770, p. 112).

However, this is not the case with Mendelssohn, who perhaps more than any other 18th-century author returns to this aesthetic category. The text in which he most clearly expresses his position is the *82nd Letter on Literature*, dated February 14, 1760, which takes Schlegel's translation as its starting point. Mendelssohn denounces Schlegel's reluctance to deal with the theme of disgust and, in a few lines, provides a clear definition of the term. Disgust has to do with the theme of aesthetic illusion, displeasure, and pleasure in representation, themes that underlie the discussion of the tragic in the *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* between Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Nicolai. The *Briefwechsel* is, in fact, a response to Du Bos' treatise, *Réflexions critiques*, in which illusion was excluded from theater, considered merely a sensory deception into which no spectator could fall (Du Bos, 1719).

The letters on tragedy, written between 1756 and 1757, were Mendelssohn's first opportunity to return to his *Letters on Feelings*, published in 1755, and to clarify the importance of aesthetic illusion in relation to aesthetic displeasure[3]. Decisive in this regard will be the draft essay on inclinations, *Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen* (JubA II, pp. 154-155), the final part of which is devoted to illusion as the highest degree that intuitive knowledge can attain, which, by combining pleasure and reflection, can act on the soul with particular force.

1. Illusion and aesthetic pleasure

With the gradual departure from the objective-metaphysical aesthetic and intellectualistic systems of Bodmer (1727), Schlegel (1747), and Curtius (1753)[4], Mendelssohn distances himself from Baumgarten's conception of pleasure as an intellectual perception of perfection, in favour of an aesthetic that looks to Duboisian emotionalism[5], without, however, abandoning the idea of a philosophical foundation[6].

In this perspective, in which pleasure and displeasure depend solely on the feelings experienced by the perceiving subject, aesthetic illusion is no longer limited to intellectual consciousness but becomes the very cause of aesthetic pleasure. The awareness of the illusory nature of representation is, in fact, for Mendelssohn, a condition of tragic pleasure, since it frees the audience from the pain felt when watching the action on stage.

In his letter of mid-December 1756, Mendelssohn argues for the necessity of illusion in order to guarantee pleasure in imitation (JubA XI, 82-88): the senses must believe in the reality of what is instead artistic fiction, while the higher faculties of the soul must perceive the illusory nature of the representation. Aesthetic pleasure is thus structured in two necessary and successive moments: the sensory moment of non-awareness of the illusion and the intellectual moment of awareness of the illusion. Unpleasant or painful sensations can thus be the object of aesthetic pleasure, since it is their perfect representation, their artistic imitation, that generates pleasure.

Showing that he had not yet completely departed from Baumgarten's theory of perfection, Mendelssohn argued that it was precisely the possibility of experiencing pleasure in tragic performances that proved the perfect success of imitation and established the value of aesthetic judgment, albeit unreflective, intuitive, and emotional. Mendelssohn in fact returned several times to the concept of imitation. Significant is the passage in the text dedicated to the principles of belles-lettres and fine arts, in which artistic imitation of nature is defined on the basis of Batteux's text. In the same passage, Mendelssohn returns to the function of representation in the imitation of objects that are unpleasant in nature (JubA II, 429-434).

Starting with the *Letters on Tragedy*, illusion becomes central to Mendelssohn's aesthetic theory, as evidenced also by the *Letters on Literature*[7]. In his *Literaturbrief* of November 8, 1759, Mendelssohn thus arrived at a new position on the concept of perfection in aesthetics: the perception of perfect characters is not capable of arousing aesthetic emotions and, on the other hand, simple pleasant emotion is not lasting and cannot guarantee stability of judgment; aesthetic illusion, on the other hand, is pleasurable in a lasting way because it intuitively assures the perfection of imitation, makes the subjective element of pleasure dominant, and allows even the most complex aesthetic emotions, such as the sublime or tragic pleasure, to be explained (JubA V.1, 98-101).

Lessing's letter of February 2, 1757 (JubA XI, 105-108) was decisive for Mendelssohn's elaboration of the concept of illusion. Reformulating Dubos's idea of the intrinsic pleasure of emotional activity in the spirit, Lessing argued for the need to eliminate aesthetic illusion as superfluous. It is on this basis that, in the same letter, Lessing expounds his theory of the dual component of sensations in tragic enjoyment: a subjective-

3 Regarding illusion, see the article: *Die Rolle der Illusion in der Kunst nach Moses Mendelssohn* (Haimberger, 1975, pp. 31-49).

4 This is the thesis of Wolfgang Vogt's recent work, which argues, perhaps with excessive vehemence, that Mendelssohn's aesthetics are autonomous in that they constitute not so much a critique of rationalism or an extension of gnoseology as a figure born of the crisis of metaphysics (Vogt, 2005, p. 201).

5 Jean-Paul Meier restores the importance of Du Bos's thinking for Mendelssohn, stating that if Leibniz and Wolff can be considered the two fathers of Mendelssohn's aesthetics, Du Bos is the third (Meier, 1978, p. 672).

6 See Mendelssohn's criticism of Du Bos in his *Letters on the Feelings* of 1755 (JubA II, 304-305), the discussion with Lessing and Nicolai in the *Letters on Tragedy*, particularly in the letter of March 2, 1757 (JubA XI, 108-109), and his rehabilitation of Du Bos's theory in the *Rhapsody* (JubA II, 389).

7 For further information on the *Literaturbriefe*, see: Engel, 1982, pp. 259-274. More recently, Lorenzo Lattanzi wrote: "In the Literaturbriefe, he discusses pastoral poetry at length in relation to the seventh of Johann Adolf Schlegel's treatises attached to his translation of Batteaux's Beaux Arts, contesting the definition of idyll as a picture of delicate feelings and simple bucolic joys" (Lattanzi, 2002, p. 130).

pleasant dimension must be distinguished from the objective-unpleasant dimension. With this idea, Lessing intended to reject Mendelssohn's theory on the origin of pleasure following fear as a form of relief for the evil that has disappeared. This idea of Lessing had a great effect on Mendelssohn, who felt it necessary to rework his *Letters on Sentiments* with the publication of *Rhapsody*, starting precisely from Lessing's distinction between the objective and the subjective. Conversely, Lessing was impressed by Mendelssohn's *Illusionstheorie*, and in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, illusion became a central aesthetic category and the essential condition for the emotional identification of the spectator with the character (Lessing, 1767-69, XI Stück).

2. A theory of disgust: the 82nd *Literaturbrief*

In the eighty-second letter on literature, the theory of aesthetic illusion is applied to disgust, which already shows here its problematic and unique character as an aesthetic feeling that resists any attempt to deceive the viewer with art[8]. As I said, the occasion is the publication of Schlegel's notes, which Mendelssohn comments on as follows:

> While reading *Schlegel*'s translation of *Batteux*'s *Einschränkungen der schönen Künste* etc., an expanded and corrected edition of which has been published in recent years, I came across the following note by Mr. *Schlegel*, which I think deserves further discussion. *Batteux* speaks of spectacles that are unpleasant in nature and yet, when imitated, arouse the highest degree of pleasure. I remember reading in *Aristotle* the reason he gives to explain this phenomenon. "However accurately nature may be imitated," says the French writer, "art always reveals itself and thereby informs the heart that what is presented to it is nothing but an illusion, nothing but an appearance, and therefore cannot grant it anything real. In the arts, this gives grace to those objects that are unpleasant in nature." On this occasion, Mr. *Sch*. observes in a note that disgust is absolutely to be excluded from the unpleasant sensations that are pleasing in imitation. "Here," he says, "art would waste all its work in vain" (JubA V.1, 130)[9].

Schlegel's explanation of the impossibility of tracing disgust back to unpleasant sensations that are enjoyed in imitation refers to the violence of this aesthetic feeling: "Where does all this come from? [...] Should he not perhaps add that the impressions of disgust are too violent? A violence that can be derived from the endless disorder that disgust, which nature arouses, often causes in the human body! Should this not be the reason why it has an even stronger effect on the imagination than on the heart? Why are its impressions more lasting, and does all its intensity remain longer than all other unpleasant sensations? Or does this sensation contrast so much with our nature that we ourselves cannot investigate why the disgusting always displeases us, whether it is real or invented?" (JubA V.1, 130-131).

According to Schlegel, the feeling of disgust is so powerful that the displeasure it causes the subject is so lasting that it resists the pleasure derived from artistic imitation. For Schlegel, disgust would therefore resist the triggering of that mechanism of alternating displeasure and pleasure that can explain the satisfaction derived from the artistic representation of unpleasant objects. Furthermore, the violence of disgust would even prevent its theoretical analysis.

With a statement that could be taken as a motto for the subsequent debate on disgust, Mendelssohn firmly opposes Schlegel's position: "I hope you have not become so delicate that you fear a study of this kind. I dare to observe the nature of disgust ever more closely. At the very least, I must on this occasion arouse the freedom of your disgust, then I can attribute the blame to my subject of investigation" (JubA V.1, 131).

For Mendelssohn, disgust is not merely a sensation that cannot be enjoyed in imitation, but also an aesthetic category that eludes illusion, remaining reality. Mendelssohn does not shy away, as he has explicitly stated, from an analysis of disgust, either in his *Letters* or in his writings on aesthetics, and yet his conclusion is in fact the same as that reached by Schlegel: disgust must be excluded from those sensations that are pleasing in imitation.

For Mendelssohn, however, the cause is primarily sensory:

> Let's see how this unpleasant sensation usually arises naturally. Which senses are most involved in this sensation? It seems to me that they are taste, smell, and touch. The first two with excessive sweetness and the last with an exaggerated softness of bodies that do not resist sufficiently the fever that strikes them. These objects then become unbearable even to the eye, simply through association with the concept that reminds us of the repulsion they cause to taste, smell, or touch. Strictly speaking, however, there is no object that is disgusting to the eye. Ultimately, the mere presentation of disgusting objects, if sufficiently intense, can arouse repugnance in and of itself, and certainly, it should be noted, without the mind needing to present the object as if it were real (JubA V.1, 131).

The three lower senses, which require contact with the object, are defined by Mendelssohn as the channels of disgust, yet their violence is such that it undermines the very principle of reality: whether the disgusting object is actually present or imitated by the artist's work, our reaction will be the same and will leave no room for aesthetic pleasure.

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8 See also Singer, 2006, p. 166, for Herder's subsequent reaction to Mendelssohn's theory.

9 All translations of Mendelssohn's texts are mine.

> Here we already see the obvious reason why disgust is excluded in every way from unpleasant sensations, which are enjoyed in imitation. Firstly, disgust is a sensation which, according to its original nature, is suited only to the darkest of all the senses, such as taste, smell, and touch, and these senses play no role whatsoever in works of fine art (JubA V.1, 131).

However, this is not sufficient to explain the clear exclusion of disgust from aesthetics:

> I find an even more important distinction between disgust and those unpleasant sensations that are enjoyed in imitation. Representations of fear, pain, terror, compassion, etc. can only arouse displeasure as long as we consider the misfortune to be real. These representations can also resolve into pleasant sensations through the memory that it was an artistic illusion. The repulsive sensation of disgust, on the other hand, by virtue of the rules of imagination, follows the mere presentation in the mind, whether the object is considered real or not. What, then, helps the offended mind when the art of imitation is clearly betrayed? Its displeasure does not come from the assumption that evil is real, but from the mere representation of it, and this is properly real. The sensations of disgust are therefore always natural and never imitation (JubA V.1, 132).

The case of disgust is therefore an interesting and particular aesthetic case: the imagination provides a representation, and it is the mere appearance of the object that "offends the soul," which does not need to establish the truthfulness of the representation. Disgust is therefore an immediate sensation, which certainly depends on sensory perception and imaginative activity, but which eludes any intellectual reference. It is therefore easy to understand how, in an attempt to establish an emotionalist aesthetic as opposed to Baumgarten's intellectualism, disgust could be of great theoretical interest to Mendelssohn.

3. The task of art: *Rhapsody*

The analysis developed in the eighty-second letter provides further arguments in favour of excluding disgust from aesthetics, anticipating the close link between the theory of disgust and the theory of mixed feelings that will become clear in the *Rhapsody* of 1761:

> However, the unpleasant passions of the soul have a third advantage over disgust and other inferior bodily sensations, thanks to which, even outside imitation, in nature itself, they frequently entice the soul. This advantage consists in the fact that they never arouse pure pleasure, but always mix their bitterness with delight. [...] The soul has the freedom to dwell a little on the pleasant part, a little on the unpleasant part of a passion, and to procure for itself a mixture of pleasure and displeasure that is more attractive than the purest pleasure. [...] However, it is very different in the case of disgust and sensations akin to it. In that case, the soul knows no perceptible mixture with pleasure. Displeasure prevails, and therefore no situation can be imagined, either in nature or in imitation, in which the soul would not have to withdraw with repugnance from these representations (JubA V.1, 132-133).

Mendelssohn thus finds a completely original way in the *Letter* to indicate in disgust what marks the boundaries of aesthetics: it is not only a sensation that resists aesthetic illusion, not only does it elude intellectual judgment, but it is also a sensation that cannot renounce its own purity.

This same reflection can be found in the *Rhapsody*, published a year after the *Letter* was written. In the *Rhapsody*, it becomes clear how the conceptualization of aesthetic illusion and the theory of mixed feelings are connected. Thanks to his correspondence on tragedy, Mendelssohn adopted Lessing's distinction between objective and subjective feelings, which allowed him to explore the function of aesthetic illusion in the imitation of unpleasant phenomena, although his basic argument did not differ greatly from that presented in the *Literaturbriefe*. "Artistic imitation, on stage, on canvas, in marble" is for Mendelssohn a "means of making the most terrible events palatable to delicate souls" (JubA II, 390). With an analysis that anticipates (if not actually establishes) Kant's reflections on ugliness, Mendelssohn sees the greatness of artistic activity in turning natural displeasure into pleasure, since "the intimate awareness of being faced with an imitation rather than the truth mitigates the intensity of repugnance towards the object, exalting the subjective side of representation" (JubA II, 390).

Art therefore consists in creating an illusion that guarantees aesthetic pleasure:

> Art deceives the senses and the soul's desire, and the imagination is so carried away that we sometimes forget all signs of imitation [...] To increase our enjoyment, we have become accustomed to diverting our attention from anything that might compromise the illusion, directing it only towards what can maintain it. However, as soon as the relationship with the object begins to become unpleasant, a thousand details catch our eye to remind us that we are dealing with a mere imitation (JubA II, 390).

Going beyond the ideas that guided the eighty-second *Letter*, disgust is no longer defined solely as that which resists artistic imitation because of its violence, but rather as that which prevents aesthetic illusion by omitting those elements that distinguish natural truth from artistic fiction, which allow for the alternation of subjective pleasure and objective displeasure in representations. In a way, everything that goes against the principles of illusion and mixed feelings is disgusting. From this perspective, the two examples of disgust proposed by Mendelssohn are not surprising:

> Since the difference between the material of imitation and that of nature [...] are the most sensitive signs capable of attracting attention whenever necessary, without detracting from the artistic effect, it

> is also understandable why painted statues are so unpleasant when they come too close to nature. I believe that even the most beautiful statues, painted by the greatest artists, could not be contemplated without feeling disgust (JubA II, 390).

Life-size wax statues, however realistic, even if created by the greatest artist, inevitably generate disgust. Nothing perceptible indicates that what we are looking at is a simple imitation and, for this reason, "we feel repugnance at the absence of the distinctive characteristics of life, movement" (JubA II, 392)[10].

Another element goes beyond the reflections that Mendelssohn entrusted to the *Letter* and extends his theory of mixed feelings. For Mendelssohn, the mixture of pleasure and displeasure has a more lasting, more incisive effect on the soul, resulting, from an aesthetic point of view, even more 'effective' than pure pleasure. Mendelssohn's originality lies in recognizing that what is simply pleasant, purely beautiful, leaves only a momentary impression on the soul and quickly leads to satiety and boredom. Disgust fits precisely into this dynamic, giving rise to a category that can be defined as 'disgust through saturation' (Menninghaus, 1999).

Disgust therefore does not merely mark the outer boundary of aesthetics, that which cannot be the object of artistic illusion, but also insinuates itself into the concept that defines aesthetics as a discipline, that is, it is also found in the very concept of beauty. Almost constituting the authentic negative of aesthetic pleasure, disgust is what overturns the purest delight after the soul has quickly become saturated with it: "what is simply pleasant quickly satiates us and ends up disgusting us. [...] in the sense of taste, everyday experience shows that absolute sweetness quickly becomes nauseating if it is not mixed with something spicy" (JubA II, 396).

It is this characteristic of disgust that makes it an interesting category for Mendelssohn's entire aesthetic system, and this particular type of disgust due to saturation is based on the dynamic between multiplicity and unity of experience, which, for Mendelssohn, constitutes aesthetic judgment.

Disgust is therefore not something to be excluded from aesthetics and artistic practice simply because its representation would be offensive to our senses, because it does us "violence," as Schlegel claimed. Rather, disgust is defined, first, as a nauseating homogeneity that does not need to be brought to unity through the process of representation; second, it is not possible to have a representation that arouses disgust because no representation can be entirely unpleasant: as a determination of the soul, it will always have a pleasant effect on the subject.

The exclusion of disgust from aesthetics is not based simply on prohibitions affecting artistic creation, as was the case in France during the same period[11], but it is justified on a philosophical level and, in this way, any form of rehabilitation of the disgusting by virtue of the power of art is prevented. In this perspective, Mendelssohn not only overturns the meaning of the category of disgust, justifying from the conceptual point of view its exclusion from aesthetics, but also undermines the traditional relationship between beauty and perfection, not so much by denying it as by completely rewriting it[12].

4. The limits of representation and the power of illusion

In the cultural context of mid-18th-century Berlin, where Mendelssohn lived, the theme of the limits of representation took on a very special meaning which, in my opinion, had a different philosophical depth from that found in France or England during the same period. In defining the boundaries of the new aesthetic discipline, disgust coincides with that which lies beyond the boundaries, with that which cannot be included in the new thematization of *vis repraesentativa*. Instead of a normative treatment of artistic representation[13], Mendelssohn tackles the theme of the representability of disgust from a purely metaphysical point of view, indicating not what the artist should or should not reproduce, but rather the possibilities and limitations of the subject's faculties.

In this sense, Mendelssohn abandons a mimetic conception of art and embraces instead a notion of art as an expression of the spirit, since the "perfection of the spirit" of the artist that we see reflected in his work "provides a pleasure that is extraordinarily greater than simple similarity, because it is more worthy and much more complex" (JubA II, 433). What we admire in a work of art is therefore not its resemblance to reality, nor the artist's technique, but rather the "extraordinary gifts of the spirit, and it is precisely these gifts that we call genius in the strict sense" (JubA II, 477)[14].

Mendelssohn therefore sees art as a direct expression of the faculties that characterize man and a unique opportunity to enliven our representational capacity. In this sense, we can speak of an aesthetic humanism in Mendelssohn: his aesthetics cannot simply be reduced to a form of emotionalism, nor certainly to a Wolffian intellectualism, but in some way combines the two, redefining the concept of representation in a way that is still stimulating today. In this sense, disgust becomes a particular element through which to look at a more general theory, which we could define, with Stöckmann, as 'anthropological aesthetics' (Stöckmann, 2009).

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10 The theme of disgust aroused by painted statues recurs frequently in German aesthetics, starting with J.J. Winckelmann's *History of Art* and the debate on ancient polychromy. Hegel's position in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (Hegel, 1970, p. 67) is also significant in this regard. See also: Brinkmann, Scholl, 2010.

11 Think, above all, of Denis Diderot in the *Salons*, with particular reference to Poussin's painting *Paysage au serpent* in the *Salon* of 1767 (Diderot, 1767, III, p. 268), but also to his *Pensées éparses sur la peinture, la sculpture, l'architecture et la poésie, pour continuer les Salons* (Diderot, 1766-77).

12 The important relationship between Jewish belief and the concept of representation, which is certainly decisive for Mendelssohn, especially in his later writings of the 1880s, such as *Morgenstunden* and *Jerusalem*, is beyond the scope of this research. In this regard, I refer to the recent essay *Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast* (Freudenthal, 2011, pp. 351-372).

13 As can be found in some of Diderot's pages, but also in Burke's *Enquiry*.

14 On the subject of genius in Mendelssohn, see: Engel, 1976, pp. 91–106.

What arouses disapproval, or even what is unpleasant, should therefore not be excluded from art and aesthetics, but, on the contrary, its representation, for example in tragedy, stimulates the subject to exercise their capacity for moral disapproval through intuitive knowledge[15].

Pleasantness and unpleasantness are therefore sensations that blur the distinction between objective and subjective, and it is certainly not normative rules of representation that can guarantee the moral perfection of man through aesthetics. Rather, only that which is incapable of moving the capacity for representation is subject to a form of exclusion; not so much according to normative parameters, but rather on the basis of the fact that it would force the subject into a form of staticity that would prevent its determination.

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15 This idea is, in a sense, consistent with Altmann's assertion that Mendelssohn gives priority to moral reason when it conflicts with theoretical reason. Altmann also relates the opposition between symbolic knowledge and intuitive knowledge to the relationship between *Aufklärung* and *Bildung* (Altmann, 1982, pp. 18-9).