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Kant's Philosophical Context: Mendelssohn, Lessing and the Enlightenment

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ENG **Abstract:** This introduction aims to present the contents and objectives of the dossier *Kant's Philosophical Context: Mendelssohn, Lessing and the Enlightenment*. The introduction situates the dossier within recent historiographical efforts to move beyond classical narratives that cast "pre-Kantian figures" as merely transitional. It highlights how the collected articles explore Wolffian metaphysics in context, Mendelssohn's proofs of God's existence, and his articulation of Jewish philosophy, alongside Mendelssohn and Lessing's influence on aesthetics and early Romantic criticism. By tracing continuities and tensions from Wolff to Schlegel through a focus on Mendelssohn and Lessing, the dossier reconstructs the plural and dialogical character of Enlightenment thought, vindicating the enduring relevance of these figures for understanding the diversity and fruitfulness of eighteenth-century German philosophy.
Keywords: German Enlightenment, Kant, Lessing, Mendelssohn.

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Introduction

Kant famously described Mendelssohn's philosophy as both the "final legacy" and the "most perfect accomplishment" of dogmatic metaphysics (AA 10: 428–9), thus portraying him as the culmination of a tradition destined for obsolescence. Such retrospective assessments played a decisive role in shaping the canonical narratives of modern philosophy, dominated by the idea of a Copernican revolution embodied in Kant's critical project. In recent years, however, growing efforts have been made to broaden and revise these narratives by reconsidering the role of other relevant figures that might have been overshadowed by Kant.[1]

In line with these historiographical tendencies, the present dossier does seek to go beyond Kant's own verdicts on his predecessors: rather than reading eighteenth-century German philosophy through the lens of Kant's retrospective judgments, it shifts the focus to two of the most influential and respected figures of the Berlin Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. By foregrounding these figures, as well as their fundamental sources and debates, this volume aims to reassess the dynamics of German philosophy in the eighteenth century, and to recover dimensions that have been arguably obscured by the prevalence of Kant-centred narratives.

The volume grew out of the workshop *Mendelssohn, Lessing and the Enlightenment*, organised by the editors at the University of Hamburg in June 2024, and is conceived as a continuation and expansion of the discussions initiated there. By bringing together perspectives on metaphysics, morals, religion, and aesthetics, the articles gathered here aim to offer a plural account of Enlightenment thought by vindicating Mendelssohn and Lessing not as transitional or merely precritical figures, but as original thinkers whose ideas remain central to understanding the Enlightenment and its enduring legacy. To this end, the contributions are organised into three main sections: (1) *German Metaphysics in Context: Wolff, Mendelssohn, and Kant*; (2)

1 Among the works published over the past decade, we may highlight for instance: Dyck & Wunderlich (2018), Fugate & Hymers (2018), Guyer (2020), Boer & Prunea-Bretonnet (2021), Pollok & Fugate (2023), Dyck (2024).

Morals, Metaphysics, and Religion in Mendelssohn's Philosophy; and (3) *Foundations and Developments in the Aesthetics of the Enlightenment*.

1. German Metaphysics in Context: Wolff, Mendelssohn, and Kant

The first articles of the dossier explore key debates in German metaphysics, focusing on Wolff's, Mendelssohn's, and Kant's approaches to rational psychology, the completeness of metaphysics, and the challenges of idealism. By addressing questions about the soul, the systematic unity of knowledge, and the relation between inner representations and external reality, the contributions in this section highlight both the continuities that link Wolff, Mendelssohn, and Kant and the tensions that drove the developments of metaphysics in the Enlightenment.

To begin with, Guillem Sales Vilalta's article "Before (and beyond) Kant's Paralogisms. Wolff's *Psychologia Rationalis* (1734) and Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* (1767)" revisits the background against which Kant developed his famous critique of rational psychology in the first *Critique*. Rather than simply assuming Kant's retrospective definition of rational psychology as a purely rational "doctrine of the soul," the article shows that Wolff's *Psychologia Rationalis* stems from the results of empirical psychology and relies on experience as its explanatory basis. Mendelssohn's *Phaedon*, likewise, is shown to develop a nuanced account of the soul's immortality, one that does not map exactly onto the paralogistic inferences targeted by Kant. By reconstructing these two landmarks of enlightened rational psychology, the article highlights how Wolff's and Mendelssohn's approaches remain indispensable for understanding both the legacy Kant confronted and the debates he helped to reshape.

Complementing this analysis, the following article by Bruna Picas and Dino Jakušić ("Is Metaphysics the Only Discipline that Can Be Complete? The Completeness of Metaphysics in Kant and Wolff") turns to the broader question of metaphysics as a science. Starting from Kant's ambivalent characterisation of metaphysics as both the "queen of the sciences" and a "battlefield of endless controversies," the authors examine whether metaphysics possesses a distinctive kind of systematicity that sets it apart from other disciplines. By debating with recent scholarship—particularly Marcus Willaschek's (Willaschek 2018) account of systematic unity in Kant—the article argues that Kant's conception of completeness has a special meaning in the case of metaphysics. Based on the distinction between "unconditioned completeness" and "comprehensiveness," Picas and Jakušić argue that only metaphysics can fulfil the former, and that both Kant and Wolff conceive of metaphysics as uniquely capable of such completeness. At the same time, the article highlights the sense in which Kant departs from Wolff's version of the project, thereby illuminating the continuities and ruptures that mark Kant's complex relation to the Wolffian tradition.

The first section closes with "Kant and Mendelssohn about Idealism" by Roberto Horácio Sá-Pereira. While the article acknowledges the Cartesian and rationalist background to early modern debates on the relation between representations and external objects, it also claims that the "problematic idealism" addressed by Kant in the Refutation of Idealism is most precisely exemplified in Mendelssohn's *Morgenstunden*. In this work, Mendelssohn is said to combine metaphysical dualism with an "indirect" sort of epistemic realism, according to which external objects are only problematically inferred from inner representations. By reconstructing the Refutation of Idealism as a world-directed transcendental argument, Sá Pereira shows that Kant's central aim is to establish the existence of mind-independent entities as a necessary condition for temporal self-consciousness in contrast with Mendelssohn, whose position allows an epistemic gap between representations and reality. Kant's insistence on direct awareness of external things is thus framed primarily as a response to Mendelssohn, while also distinguishing his view from Cartesian and Berkeleyan forms of idealism.

2. Morals, Metaphysics, and Religion in Mendelssohn's Philosophy

Taken together, the foreseen contributions illuminate the conceptual terrain of early modern German metaphysics, thereby preparing the ground for the second section and its specific focus on Mendelssohn's engagement with morals, metaphysics, and religion. Its contributions show how Mendelssohn creatively adapts and extends Wolffian ideas, while also addressing the interplay between moral striving, metaphysical reasoning, and religious identity in the German Enlightenment.

Emanuel Lanzini gives initial shape to these topics with the article "God's perfection and Human perfection. Mendelssohn's account in the *Evidenzschrift* and its relation to Wolff's philosophy". Lanzini examines Mendelssohn's exploration of the relationship between divine perfection and human striving for self-perfection in his *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften*, situating it within the broader framework of Wolffian philosophy. The article focuses on Mendelssohn's ontological and teleological arguments for God's existence, demonstrating how he connects the moral pursuit of human perfection with the perfection of the divine. While the paper argues that Mendelssohn draws extensively on Wolff's ideas, it also highlights the innovative ways in which he adapts Wolff's natural theology and practical philosophy, offering a nuanced account of the interplay between morality and religion in the German Enlightenment.

The second article in this section, "The Step into Existence: Reasoning toward God in Mendelssohn's Morning Hours", analyses Mendelssohn's argument for God's existence in chapter 16 of his *Morgenstunden*. This article aims at assessing whether Mendelssohn's argument is a mere reformulation of prior accounts or a genuinely original proof. It places Mendelssohn's argument within his broader philosophy, where the function of such proofs is not only to demonstrate God's existence but to facilitate the mind's transition to objective reality. The analysis breaks down Mendelssohn's argument into two parts: first, the incompleteness

of self-knowledge and the existence of an unlimited reality, and second, the need for an infinite intellect to represent all that exists. Sánchez de León concludes by assessing the philosophical value and limits of Mendelssohn's proof, highlighting its attempt to reconcile finite cognition with metaphysical realism.

Bringing these threads to a close, Anaïs Delambre's article, "What is Jewish Philosophy? An Attempt at a Definition Based on *Jerusalem* (1783) by Moses Mendelssohn", complements the prior analysis by turning to Mendelssohn's understanding of Judaism and its philosophical articulation. Whereas *Morgenstunden* seeks to ground the relation between human finitude and the infinity of God through metaphysical reasoning, *Jerusalem* might be seen as confronting the specific challenge of situating Jewish religion within a political and intellectual order shaped and dominated by Christian institutions. Delambre discusses Mendelssohn's two-fold role as both a philosopher and a Jew, and examines how *Jerusalem* challenges the separation of these identities to conclude that Mendelssohn's philosophy is best described as Jewish in that it merges Jewish traditional principles with external philosophical influences, demonstrating the harmonious relationship between both dimensions within his thought.

3. Foundations and Developments in the Aesthetics of the Enlightenment

The last group of articles focuses on aesthetic matters. From Alexander Baumgarten's systematic formulation of aesthetics as an autonomous field, through Mendelssohn's treatment of negative sentiments, to the reception and transformation of Lessing's ideas in early Romantic thought, the contributions collected in this section highlight the diverse ways in which Enlightenment thinkers explored the relation between cognition, sensibility, and art.

David Hereza reconstructs the epistemological framework of Baumgarten's aesthetics. Hereza shows that Baumgarten's contribution cannot be reduced either to a straightforward continuation of Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalism or to a rupture with it. Instead, Baumgarten introduces an "internal turn" within the rationalist tradition itself, reconfiguring the very notion of rationality. In contrast to the Cartesian identification of truth with what is "clear and distinct," he advances the concept of "extensive clarity," a form of cognition in which confusion is not a defect but a constitutive aspect of human knowledge. From this perspective, aesthetics emerges not as a marginal field but as a systematic reflection on modes of apprehension in which sensible knowledge operates alongside analytic thought. Poetic and artistic expressions exemplify this orientation, indicating that aesthetic cognition constitutes a legitimate form of knowledge rather than a mere deviation from rational inquiry.

Following this analysis of Baumgarten, Serena Feloj and Pablo Genazzano turn to Moses Mendelssohn's theory of sentiments. While Baumgarten was innovative in establishing the cognitive autonomy of sensibility, he did not attribute independent aesthetic value to negative or discordant aspects of experience. Mendelssohn, by contrast, represents a further development in eighteenth-century aesthetics: he undertakes a systematic analysis of negative aesthetic elements and further underlines its meaningful role within aesthetic experience.

In "The Power of Illusion. The Theory of Disgust starting from 82. *Literaturbrief* by Moses Mendelssohn," Serena Feloj examines Mendelssohn's reflections on disgust, especially in Letter 82 of the *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* and in the subsequent *Rhapsodie*. She argues that Mendelssohn treats disgust as a particular case because it resists the mechanism of aesthetic illusion: unlike fear, pity, or other unpleasant affects, disgust cannot be transmuted into pleasure through the spectator's awareness of artifice. Rooted in the lower senses —taste, smell, and touch—, disgust produces an immediate and persistent repugnance that is unaffected by the mind's recognition of aesthetic fiction. For this reason, Mendelssohn maintains that it must be excluded from those sensations capable of giving pleasure in imitation. Yet, as Feloj underlines, Mendelssohn does not simply exclude disgust; he situates it within his broader theory of illusion and relates it to his account of "mixed sentiments" in the *Rhapsodie*. Disgust thereby delineates the limits of representability while also highlighting a more general point about aesthetic cognition: art does not merely imitate but mediates and exercises human faculties, and disgust contributes negatively to defining the scope of aesthetic judgment.

Pablo Genazzano situates Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments within his intellectual exchange with Lessing. He argues that Lessing's letter of 2 February 1757 provided a psychological insight that Mendelssohn later assimilated. According to Genazzano, Mendelssohn's letters *Über die Empfindungen* (1755) locate pleasure primarily in the soul's striving for objective perfection. Lessing's suggestion—that even unpleasant passions can occasion pleasure by making the soul aware of its own representational activity—gradually shifted Mendelssohn's focus from the perfection of objects to the soul's self-reflection. By examining Mendelssohn's engagement with Burke and the two editions of the *Rhapsodie* (1761; 1771), Genazzano shows how Mendelssohn first tested Lessing's principle in response to the paradox of Burke's concept of sympathy, and later refined it into a clearer distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of representation. In this reformulation, pleasure is no longer grounded primarily in the perfection of the object but may also arise from the soul's reflection on its own cognitive and moral capacities. For Mendelssohn, this reflective dimension provides a "more universal" explanation of mixed sentiments. Genazzano describes this development as a reflective turn rather than a departure from Mendelssohn's earlier standpoint.

In the last article of the dossier, Germán Garrido examines Lessing's influence on Friedrich Schlegel's early literary criticism. Complementing interpretations that emphasise Jacobi as the principal catalyst of early Romantic philosophy, Garrido argues that Schlegel appropriates a Lessingian model—dialogical, polemical, and historically oriented—in works such as the *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, the 1796 review of *Woldemar*, and his 1797 characterisation of Lessing. According to Garrido, this model yields a conception of criticism that is

both philological and philosophical: criticism becomes a practice of historicising and testing philosophical categories, exposing rival dogmatisms through "reciprocal demonstration" (*Wechselerweis*), and formulating argumentative interventions rather than purely aesthetic judgments. Schlegel's engagement with Lessing is thus selective and programmatic: Lessing provides the critical attitude that Schlegel later develops in *Vom Wesen der Kritik* (1804). The result is a redefinition of aesthetic judgment as an intellectual practice rooted in historical awareness, philological precision, and philosophical reflection.

Conclusion

Viewed in a broader perspective, this dossier seeks to contribute to the ongoing and fruitful reappraisal of the German Enlightenment by foregrounding philosophical dialogues from Wolff to Schlegel, with particular attention to figures such as Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Kant. In doing so, it challenges Kant-centered narratives and offers a plural account of eighteenth-century German thought. By recovering its diversity and tensions, the volume reframes the Enlightenment not as a monolithic episode culminating in Kant, but as a constellation of inquiries whose creativity remains indispensable for understanding modern philosophy and its enduring legacy.

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