

## **Moses Mendelssohn's Original Modal Proof for the Existence of God**

### **Abstract**

In his 1785 book *Morning hours*, Moses Mendelssohn presents a proof for the existence of God from the grounding of possibility. Although Mendelssohn claims that this proof is original, it has not received much attention in the secondary literature. In this paper, I will analyze this proof and present its historical context. I will show that although it resembles Leibniz's proof from eternal truths and Kant's pre-critical possibility proof, it has unique characteristics which can be regarded as responses to deficiencies Mendelssohn identified in these earlier proofs. I argue that by analyzing the semantics of judgments about dispositions, Mendelssohn provides a novel explanation for the basic premise shared by these proofs, namely that possibility is grounded in actuality. Additionally, this analysis simplifies the inference to a unique infinite mind grounding all possibility. Thus, the proof is worth studying both for historical reasons and for its original account of modal concepts.

Moses Mendelssohn presents in his last book of 1785, *Morning Hours, or Lectures on God's Existence*<sup>1</sup> a proof for the existence of God which he claims to be original. Yet this proof has not

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<sup>1</sup> Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*. Other references to Mendelssohn's writings are cited according to the volume and page number in the *Jubiläumsausgabe* (cited as 'JubA'). I cite Kant from the Akademie edition by reference to volume and page number (Ak). Quotations from *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited by the standard (A/B) pagination.

received much attention in the secondary literature.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will offer a critical reconstruction of this proof in light of its historical context. The proof derives the existence of an infinite intellect as an explanatory ground for modal truths about possibilities and dispositions. A possible reason for the relative lack of scholarly interest in Mendelssohn's proof is that it resembles other proofs for the existence of God based on the grounding of modal truths, especially Leibniz's proof from eternal truths. Another modal proof roughly from that period is Kant's pre-critical proof from the grounds of possibility. I will show that although Mendelssohn's proof resembles the aforementioned proofs, it has several unique characteristics which can be regarded as responses to deficiencies Mendelssohn identified in the other proofs. Like the other proofs, Mendelssohn's version is not faultless, to say the least, but it is philosophically interesting both for the history of theistic proofs and more generally for its novel analysis of modal concepts.

I proceed as follows. In section 1 I present the basic structure of Mendelssohn's original proof. I then situate the proof in the context of a family of proofs based on the grounding of modal truths. This family includes Leibniz's proof from eternal truths and Kant's pre-critical possibility proof. As I will show, Mendelssohn was aware of these proofs and addressed them in review articles from the 1760s. In sections 3 and 4, I argue that the proof's uniqueness lies in addressing the shortcomings he identified in Leibniz's and Kant's versions of the proof regarding the

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<sup>2</sup> After its publication Ludwig Heinrich Jakob discusses the proof in his review of *MH (Prüfung der Mendelssohnschen Morgenstunden)*. Kant mentions it briefly in a letter to Christian Gottfried Schütz from 1785 (Ak 10:428). In contemporary scholarship it is mentioned in Leo Strauss' introduction to *MH* (JubA 3.2:vii–cx, translated in *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 125–6, 182–4); Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God," 128–30; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 39–41. Recently it is discussed in Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant*. None of these, however, offers a thorough analysis of the argument. An exception is Freudenthal, "Between Rationalism and Romanticism: Moses Mendelssohn's Proof of the Existence of God" which I am indebted to in my discussion. Freudenthal, however, focuses on the existential-religious implications of the proof which in my view are not necessarily entailed by the text. In contrast, I focus on the metaphysical aspect in its historical context.

grounding of modal truths and the singularity of the ground. Finally, I present Kant's response to the new argument in the *Morning Hours* which was published after Mendelssohn's death.

## 1. Proofs for the Existence of God from the Ground of Modal Truths

Moses Mendelssohn's 1785 book, *Morning Hours, or Lectures on God's Existence*, contains a concise presentation of his epistemological and metaphysical positions in the form of a series of lectures to his son.<sup>3</sup> The book defends broadly Leibnizian positions and tackles questions about idealism and Spinozism (central to Mendelssohn's dispute with Jakobi over Lessing's pantheism).<sup>4</sup> But, as its title suggests, the final aim of the book, is to provide "rational knowledge of God" (*MH* xix), that is, proofs for the existence of God. To that extent, Mendelssohn employs refined versions of two arguments well-known from the history of philosophy. One of them, presented in the last chapter of the book, is the Cartesian argument from the essence of the most perfect being, labeled by Kant as the ontological proof. In the introduction of the book, Mendelssohn admits that his deteriorating health prevented him from following the most recent developments in metaphysics, including above all the "all-quashing Kant" (*MH* xix). But his presentation of the proof clearly aims at Kant's famous refutation that existence is not a real predicate.<sup>5</sup>

The second is the proof which Kant labeled as the cosmological proof—a family of arguments for the existence of God based on the role of God as the ultimate cause of all existing things. This line of thought in its different versions has a long history, from Plato and Aristotle,

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, two other students participated in the morning lectures, Mendelssohn's son-in law Simon Veit Wizenhausen and Bernhard Wessely (Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 642–43)

<sup>4</sup> More in Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 94; Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, chap. 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God," 120; Rovira, "Mendelssohn's Refutation of Kant's Critique of the Ontological Proof."

through medieval philosophy, and onto early modern thinkers, such as Leibniz, Clarke, Wolff, and Crusius among others. Mendelssohn's version of the argument is presented in chapter 12 and the first half of chapter 16. The argument resembles Leibniz's argument from the contingency of the world ("ex contingetia mundi"), proceeding from the existence of something known to be contingent (for example the certain existence of the self) to the existence of a necessary being, God. Mendelssohn argues that the only possible sufficient reason for the existence of all contingent things is the approval of the best possible world by an omnipotent and omniscient being (*MH* 69–72). As with the ontological argument, Mendelssohn defended the cosmological argument already in his 1763 essay "On evidence in metaphysical sciences", though he added some details to deal with possible objections.<sup>6</sup>

After presenting the cosmological argument from contingency, in the second part of chapter 16 Mendelssohn sets to "conduct this proof in another way as well, in a way that, as far as I know, no philosopher has touched on" (*MH* 103). The title of the chapter names this argument "a new proof for the existence of God on the basis of the incompleteness of self-knowledge." The fact that the new argument follows the cosmological argument in the same chapter is perhaps a reason why some commentators saw the proof as another version of the cosmological argument.<sup>7</sup> But labeling it a cosmological argument is misleading and underplays the uniqueness of the proof.

The initial premise of the proof is "the incompleteness of self-knowledge." The inference is supposed to lead from this fact to its ultimate explanation—the existence of God. In being an inference from a given fact to its ground in God it resembles the cosmological argument. But the

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<sup>6</sup> Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God," 127; Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant*, 81–85.

<sup>7</sup> Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God," 127–28; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 39; Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant*, 136.

initial fact and the kind of grounding it requires are different. In what follows I argue that the fact that requires explanation is not a fact about the existence of something or the world as a whole, but rather a fact about a possibility, a modal fact. The initial premise is not used to highlight an actual property, for example the limitations of human knowledge, but rather to point to the fact that it is *possible* to know more about ourselves than we actually know. Therefore, the justification for maintaining that this modal fact requires an explanatory ground is different from the one required by a non-modal fact. Moreover, Mendelssohn's proof resembles other proofs by Leibniz and the pre-critical Kant which also begin with modal facts. Both distinguished this form of argument from the cosmological proof. In recent years there is a growing interest in this type of argument as part of the metaphysics of modality in philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I show that Mendelssohn's proof and its original account of modality can make an interesting contribution to this literature.

What obfuscates the relation between Mendelssohn proof and the modal proofs of Leibniz and Kant is that Mendelsohn bundles truths about actuality with truths about possibility and argues that both are grounded in a thinking being: "Now I maintain not only that everything possible must be thought to be possible by some thinking being, but also that everything actual must be thought to be actual by some thinking being. What no thinking being represents to itself as possible is also in fact not possible and, in precisely the same way, what is thought by no thinking being to be actual cannot in fact also actually be on hand" (*MH* 104).

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<sup>8</sup> For example Adams, "God, Possibility, and Kant"; Chignell, "Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being"; Nachtomy, "Leibniz and Kant on Possibility and Existence"; Newlands, "Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility"; Stang, *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*; Sinclair, *The Actual and the Possible*.

Likewise in the final summary of the argument, Mendelssohn begins with the premise that “everything actual is actual in its utter completeness” (*MH* 107). Yet the relevant fact about actual things stated in this premise is not their existence as it is in cosmological arguments. As I will show in section 3, the argument relies on a *modal* truth supposedly entailed by all truths, whether about possibility or about actuality, namely that all truths are *knowable*. From this claim Mendelssohn continues to the *nervus probandi* of the proof, by arguing that if something is knowable then it is actually known by some thinking being.<sup>9</sup>

Mendelssohn summarizes this crucial step of the proof at the outset:

Every possible concept is thought as the alteration of a subject, as a thought in a thinking being. It must therefore at least have an ideal existence, that is, it must be a true concept of some sort of thinking being.

This leads to the second step of inferring the existence of one infinite thinking being:

no truth can be thought to be possible by contingent beings with the highest degree of knowledge.

There must, therefore, be one thinking being, one intellect that thinks in the most perfect way the sum-total of all possibilities as possible. *There is an infinite intellect, and so forth.* (*MH* 104)

Thus, the complete structure of Mendelssohn’s argument is as follows:

M1. I exist.

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<sup>9</sup> Strauss makes this point, claiming that in comparison with Leibniz’s proof from eternal truths, Mendelssohn proves “that everything thinkable must also be actually thought. This proof is the nerve of his argument” (*Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 184). Kant also identifies this move from possibility to actuality as the heart of the Mendelssohn’s argument, that “something is conceivable only if it is actually conceived by some being or other” (*Ak* 10:428). See section 5 below for Kant’s response.

M2. If something exists, then it is knowable (it is possible to know its full concept)

M3. There are some truths about possibilities. (M1, M2)

M4. Truths about possibilities are not true in virtue of the determinations of existing things, but only in virtue of thoughts.

M5. Thoughts are determinations of thinking beings.

M6. There are some thinking beings (M3–M5).

M7. There are infinite truths about possibilities, and they are all inter-connected.

M8. Only an infinite being can encompass the thought of all possibilities.

M9. There is one infinite thinking being (M6-M8).

Before discussing Mendelssohn's proof in detail, I will first present the other proofs of this type in order to emphasize the uniqueness of Mendelssohn's version.

The first is Leibniz's proof from eternal truths. Among other places, it is presented in the *Monadology*:<sup>10</sup>

43. It is also true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences insofar as they are real, that is, or the source of that which is real in possibility. This is because God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend; without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible.

44. For if there is reality in essences or possibles, or indeed, in eternal truths, this reality must be grounded in something existent and actual, and consequently, it must

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<sup>10</sup> And Similarly in *Theodicy*, §184.

be grounded in the existence of the necessary being. (Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 647)

The above argument is very succinct and can be unpacked as follows:

L1. There are necessary (i.e. eternal) truths (e.g. the truths of mathematics)

L2. Necessary truths are about possible objects (essences), not actual objects (e.g. the geometric truths about triangles do not depend on the existence of triangle objects).

L3. Possible objects must be grounded in something real.

L4. The only possible ground for possible objects are ideas in God's intellect.

L5. God exists.

In the *Monadology* Leibniz does not elaborate on the justification of premises L3 and L4, besides pointing that L4 stands in contrast to the position attributed to Descartes that modal truths are grounded in a divine decree, meaning in God's will rather than in God's intellect (*Monadology* §46).<sup>11</sup> The *Theodicy* provides more details which I will discuss below. It should also be noted that Leibniz clearly distinguishes the a priori proof from eternal truths from the a posteriori cosmological proof from contingent existence: "We have proved it [the existence of God] through the reality of eternal truths. But we have also proved it a posteriori, since contingent beings exist,

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<sup>11</sup> See also Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 178–83; Newlands, "Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility" for Leibniz's dispute with the Cartesians regarding this issue.



and their final or sufficient reason can be discovered only in a necessary being which has its reason for its existence in itself.” (*Monadology* §45)

It is therefore plausible that Mendelssohn also distinguished between these types of proofs. Mendelssohn’s modal argument resembles Leibniz’s line of thinking, in that it infers the existence of a divine mind as the ground of possibilities. As we shall see, however, Mendelssohn begins with a different initial modal fact (instead of L1) which enables him to provide an argument why it must be grounded in thought (justifying L4).

In his pre-critical writings, Kant also endorsed an a priori proof from the ground of possibility. This proof is first mentioned in fragments from the early 1750s (Ak 17:233–4). Its first explicit formulation appears in Kant’s 1755 essay “New Elucidation” which I cite for its succinct presentation:

Possibility is only definable in terms of there not being a conflict between certain combined concepts; thus the concept of possibility is the product of a comparison. But in every comparison the things which are to be compared must be available for comparison, and where nothing at all is given there is no room for either comparison or, corresponding to it, for the concept of possibility. This being the case, it follows that nothing can be conceived as possible unless whatever is real in every possible concept exists and indeed exists absolutely necessarily. For, if this be denied, nothing at all would be possible; in other words, there would be nothing but the impossible.) Furthermore, it is necessary that this entire reality should be united together in a single being. (Ak 1:395)

The basic structure of the proof:

K1. The possibility of something depends on the lack of contradiction between its predicates (the formal ground of possibility).

K2. The formal ground depends on there being content for the predicates being compared (the material ground of possibility).

K3. The material ground of the possibility of a predicate presupposes the existence of something.

K4. If nothing exists, nothing is possible.

K5. It is impossible that nothing is possible.

K6. It is necessary that something exists.

K7. There is one thing that exists necessarily.

K8. The single necessarily existing thing is God.

The structure of the argument remains almost identical in the 1763 book *The Only Possible Argument* where it is much more detailed.<sup>12</sup> Like Leibniz, Kant clearly distinguishes this argument from the cosmological argument. But unlike Leibniz and Mendelssohn, Kant contends that the argument from possibility is superior to the cosmological argument. Even if the latter can infer the necessity of an ultimate causal ground, it cannot infer the existence of a most perfect necessary being: “The argument or the existence of God which we are presenting is based simply on the fact

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<sup>12</sup> This proof has been thoroughly analyzed in recent decades. In addition to the literature mentioned earlier see also Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology*, 64–77; Fisher and Watkins, “Kant on the Material Ground of Possibility: From ‘The Only Possible Argument’ to the ‘Critique of Pure Reason’”; Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project*, chap. 8; Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, chap. 1; Kanterian, *Kant, God and Metaphysics: The Secret Thorn*, chap. 2.5,4; Abaci, *Kant's Revolutionary Theory of Modality*, chap. 4.

that something is possible. . . None of the proofs which argue from the effects of this being to its existence as cause can ever—even granting that they are of the strictest character, which in fact they are not—render the nature of this necessity comprehensible” (*OPA* 2:91).

In comparison with Leibniz, Kant’s argument is much more elaborate and requires fewer assumptions since it starts from the analysis of the concept of possibility, although Kant modestly claims that it is “merely an argument in support of a demonstration [Beweisgrund]” and not a rigorous logical proof (*OPA* 2:66). Mendelssohn’s argument is closer to Leibniz’s in its direct inference to a divine mind as the ground of modal truths, but as I will show below, Mendelssohn gives it a level of thoroughness more comparable with Kant’s argument.

Mendelssohn was aware of Leibniz’s and Kant’s proofs, although he does not mention them in the *Morning Hours*. He refers to the Leibnizian type of proof in a review of Lambert and wrote an extensive review of Kant’s *OPA*. This raises the question why he claimed that his proof is entirely original. In what follows I argue that although Mendelssohn’s proof resembles those offered by Leibniz and Kant in beginning from the grounding of modal truths, it incorporates important differences that can be viewed as responses to the shortcomings he found in the other proofs. I will compare the proofs regarding the following four aspects and suggest why Mendelssohn could think that his version was superior. The first aspect is the type of modal facts presupposed in the initial premise. The second is why modal truths must be grounded in actuality—the grounding premise. The third is the inference from the existence of *some* actual ground to a *single* necessary being—the singularity of the ground. The fourth is the inference from the single ground to the existence of the theistic God, in other words the most perfect being, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent.

## 2. Leibniz and Kant on the Grounding of Modal Facts

All the proofs begin from the fact that there are modal truths, that is, truths not about actual things and their properties but about what is necessary, possible or impossible, and then continue to argue that such facts must be grounded in some existing being. But the proofs vary regarding the type of modal truths and the explanation of why they require a ground in an existing being.

Leibniz begins with “eternal truths”, for example, the truths of mathematics. He rejects the view that these truths exist independently of God: “One must not say, with some Scotists, that the eternal verities would exist even though there were no understanding, not even that of God. For it is, in my judgement, the divine understanding which gives reality to the eternal verities.” (*Theodicy* §184).<sup>13</sup> The reason for rejecting free-floating eternal truths is the general principle that “all reality must be founded on something existent” (*Theodicy* §184). But what does Leibniz mean by “reality” in possibles and eternal truths? The following example clarifies that “reality” means a relation to some existing object: “It is true that an atheist may be a geometrician: but if there were no God, geometry would have no object.” The point of the example is to show that for the eternal truths, (e.g. the truths of geometry) to have content, they must have reference to an object by being related to some existing thing. The geometrician might be oblivious of the ultimate ground of the concepts of geometry in the divine mind and still derive true propositions, but without this metaphysical theory there is no complete explanation for the reference of geometrical terms.

In these sections of the *Theodicy* Leibniz presents the view that possibilities are grounded in the divine understanding in contrast to Bayle’s Cartesian view that possibilities are grounded in divine will. Leibniz espoused the view that possibilities are grounded in God’s intellect throughout

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<sup>13</sup> Translation from Leibniz, *Theodicy*.

his career.<sup>14</sup> This position is not original to Leibniz and can be traced back to Neo-Platonism, through Augustine to scholastic philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

How does Leibniz argue that the content of eternal truths is grounded in God's thought and not in another manner? The following passage provides a hint of a possible explanation:

In the region of the eternal verities are found all the possibles, and consequently the regular as well as the irregular: there must be a reason accounting for the preference for order and regularity, and this reason can only be found in understanding.

Moreover, these very truths can have no existence without an understanding to take cognizance of them; for they would not exist if there were no divine understanding wherein they are realized, so to speak. (*Theodicy* §189)

First, Leibniz suggests that the order and regularity among necessary truths can only be grounded in one understanding. The theme of the unity of the modal truths is picked up by Mendelssohn in his argument for the singularity of the ground of all possibility, as detailed below. Secondly, Leibniz holds that eternal truths do not have existence without being thought. But this explanation is incomplete. What does it mean for truths to exist? Surely any truth is thinkable, but why must it be actually thought by someone? The *New Essays*<sup>16</sup> provide a further explanation:

The Scholastics hotly debated how a proposition about a subject can have a real truth if the subject does not exist. The answer is that its truth is a merely conditional one which says that if the subject ever does exist it will be found to be thus and so. But it

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<sup>14</sup> For example in the earlier 'On the Origin of Things from Forms' Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum*, 79, Discourse on Metaphysics §2 (Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 304). See also Newlands, "Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility," 165.

<sup>15</sup> More in Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 180; Mercer, "The Platonism at the Core of Leibniz's Philosophy," 228–29.

<sup>16</sup> Translation from Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*.

will be further asked what the ground is for this connection, since there is a reality in it which does not mislead. The reply is that it is grounded in the linking together of ideas. In response to this it will be asked where these ideas would be if there were no mind, and what would then become of the real foundation of this certainty of eternal truths. This question brings us at last to the ultimate foundation of truth, namely to that Supreme and Universal Mind who cannot fail to exist and whose understanding is indeed the domain of eternal truths. (*NE* 447)

The puzzle about eternal truths such as the truths of geometry is that they do not refer to existing objects. Leibniz's solution is, first, to note that these truths are conditional, for example, the geometrical truth that "if a figure has three sides, its angles are equal to two right angles" (*NE* 447). Secondly, Leibniz asks what grounds the reality of the ideas in the propositions and the reality of the conditional relation. Leibniz answers that ideas and the relations between them can only be grounded in the divine mind. This last step is also implied by Leibniz's general position on relations earlier in the *New Essays*: "Relations and orderings are to some extent 'beings of reason', although they have their foundations in things; for one can say that their reality, like that of eternal truths and of possibilities, comes from the Supreme Reason" (*NE* 227).

Combining these accounts of eternal truths and relations results in the following explanation: the conditionality of eternal truths is a kind of relation and the reality of all well-founded relations is grounded in the divine mind. But it is not clear from these passages what kind of relation is involved in conditional propositions and how the divine mind is involved in grounding them. As I will show, Mendelssohn elaborates the relational explanation of possibilities by providing an analysis of possibilities as counterfactuals.

Kant does not begin his argument with eternal truths, but with an examination of the notion of possibility in general. He distinguishes between two conditions for something to be possible. First, there can be no contradiction in the concept of the thing. Contradictory predicates render a thing logically impossible. The lack of contradiction is the logical or formal ground of possibility (*OPA 2:77*). The formal ground is however only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. Since non-contradiction is a relation, there must be things that stand in that relation, predicates. For predicates to stand in the logical relation of non-contradiction they must themselves have some content, designate something that can be thought. This thinkable content is the material (or real) ground of possibility (*OPA 2:78*). Thus, for something to be possible these two conditions must be fulfilled: the formal condition—the predicates must not contradict each other; and the material condition—its predicates must have content. Kant gives this example to illustrate the distinction: “A triangle which has a right angle is in itself possible. The triangle and the right angle are the data or the material element in possibility” (*OPA 2:77*). A right-angled triangle is possible because first, there is no contradiction between being a triangle and having a right angle (the formal condition), and secondly, being a triangle and having a right angle are real predicates with content.

What is required for satisfying the material condition, in other words, what does it take for a predicate to designate something, to have content? Kant maintains that the content of predicates presupposes something existing. If nothing exists, then nothing can be given as a “datum” for thought, and therefore there would be no material element for possibility. Some possible predicates are complex and can be analyzed into more simple constituents. For example, the concept of a body can be analyzed as including “extension, impenetrability, force” (*OPA 2:80–81*). If these are un-analyzable simple predicates, they must signify something real:

the question will be whether space and extension are empty words, or whether they signify something. The lack of contradiction does not decide the present issue; an empty word never signifies something self-contradictory. If space did not exist, or if space were not at least given as a consequence through something existent, the word ‘space’ would signify nothing at all . . . But in the end, when you consider how this is then given to you, the only thing to which you can appeal is existence. (*OPA* 2:81)

We see here that without the “datum” the alleged possible predicate is nothing but an “empty word” that does not signify anything. The use of “signifying” (*bezeichnen, bedeuten*) suggests that the grounding relation between a possibility and an existing thing is a reference relation. A possible explanation for this is that Kant understands possibility in terms of conceivability. Since conceivability presupposes some content that is conceived, a contentless thought is impossible, it is not a thought at all.

But how is the content of possibility grounded in God? This question is heavily disputed in the literature. The prominent interpretation is that God grounds possibilities by exemplifying (instantiating) the fundamental predicates.<sup>17</sup> Some argue that Kant presents this kind of grounding relation as an alternative to Leibniz’s theory of grounding possibilities in divine thought,<sup>18</sup> while others argue that Kant shares Leibniz’s intellectualism.<sup>19</sup> But regardless of whether Kant and

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<sup>17</sup> For example Wood, *Kant’s Rational Theology*, 67; Logan, “Whatever Happened to Kant’s Ontological Argument?”

<sup>18</sup> Adams, “God, Possibility, and Kant”; Chignell, “Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being”; Boehm, *Kant’s Critique of Spinoza*, 29–30. Nachtomy argues that Leibniz’s account is not purely intellectualist as the simple elements of divine thought are grounded in God’s essence (Nachtomy, “Leibniz and Kant on Possibility and Existence.”)

<sup>19</sup> Yong, “God, Totality and Possibility in Kant’s Only Possible Argument”; Hoffer, “The Relation between God and the World in the Pre-Critical Kant: Was Kant a Spinozist?”; Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, 49–56. Stang and Abaci hold a kind of agnosticism, arguing that Kant’s text is indeterminate regarding the type of grounding relation, either on purpose because the relation is inconceivable for human thought (Stang, *Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*, 118–19) or because of the instability of his pre-critical metaphysical assumptions (Abaci, *Kant’s Revolutionary Theory of Modality*, 130–31).



Leibniz diverged regarding the way God grounds possibilities, the motivation for grounding possibilities in God is similar. The need to ground possibility in actuality stems from the need for possible predicates to have reference, to signify something real.

Mendelssohn, in his 1764 review of Kant's treatise, questions Kant's account of the grounding relation. Mendelssohn notes that the analysis of the conditions of possibility seems to be based on human epistemology because Kant assumes that the givenness of objects is a condition for the content of thought: "His entire proof seems to proceed from the fact that we human beings cannot think, and cannot perceive any agreement or contradiction in our representations when we do not receive these representations from real things. . .the author seems to derive inner possibility in general from the limited mode that we human beings come to have knowledge of inner possibility" (*JubA* 5.1 606–7, my translation).

But this, Mendelssohn continues, is problematic when thinking about God as it would entail that God would not be able to think about things without the existence of some eternal materials independently of God. Instead, Mendelssohn argues that "the materials, the data for everything thinkable, have existed from eternity in God himself; These are, therefore, only existing concepts" (*JubA* 5.1 606–7, my translation).

Hence Mendelssohn agrees with Leibniz that God's thought is the ground of possibilities. Mendelssohn's objection to Kant is unjustified because it takes the grounding relation to be an epistemic relation while Kant intends it to be an ontological one. Thus, the material ground of possibility turns out to be God himself, and at no point Kant assumes the existence of something external to God. But this criticism highlights that Kant's explanation of the premise that possibilities require a material ground is unclear and that the examples from human epistemology

are unhelpful. I will show that Mendelsohn's original proof twenty years later provides an alternative explanation for this premise.

But if Mendelssohn endorses the Leibnizian option of grounding possibilities, why would he make the effort to construct a new proof? There is no evidence about Mendelssohn's views on Leibniz's proof from eternal truths except one remark in his review on Lambert's *Neues Organon*.<sup>20</sup> Lambert mentions the proof in the following passage:

In Theology it is proven that the divine understanding is the source of all simple concepts or the truths constructed from them. This means: there are truths because there is a God, and there is a God because there are truths. Expressed metaphysically: God is the Principium essendi (ground of being) of the truths, and the truths are the Principium cognoscendi (ground of knowing) of the existence of God. (*Neues Organon* §234.a, my translation)

Commenting on this passage, Mendelssohn writes,

Mr. Lambert seeks the ground of all truths, as usual, in the divine understanding; and he holds the truths to be ground of knowing (Principium cognoscendi) the existence of God, in so far one can infer an eternal intelligent individual (Suppositum intelligens) from the eternal truths. We would like to see this proof carried out more clearly, because the inference from the possibility of representations to the existence of a representing being seems to raise a few difficulties. It is easy to grasp that the divine understating is also the source of all truths, if one is already convinced that God exists on other grounds. Naturally, from this it seems that the opposite inference

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<sup>20</sup> This is noted by Strauss (*Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 183).

is also possible, from truths to the existence of God's understanding; nevertheless, this way is not as easy as it seems. (*JubA* 5.2, 45, my translation)

Mendelssohn is not objecting that such a proof is possible but complains that the inference from modal truths to a divine mind is insufficiently developed. The passage following the above one in Lambert might explain why Mendelssohn was dissatisfied: "Nevertheless, the simple concepts are knowable in themselves, because they require nothing more than being thinkable. That they are as a matter of fact known and thought, depends on a *Suppositum intelligens* [self existent thinking being], or a thinking being" (*Neues Organon* §234.a, my translation)

Lambert states that the simple concepts are recognizable in themselves, that is, independently from the knowledge of God's existence. But if this is the case why do they require a metaphysical ground, what is left to explain about them? Lambert does not explain this, instead he continues discussing the characteristics of simple concepts.<sup>21</sup> As we shall see, in his own proof, Mendelssohn shows that there is a puzzle about the content of modal truths that can only be explained by grounding them in a thinking being.

### **3. Mendelssohn on the Grounding of Modal Facts**

Mendelssohn's argument does not begin with eternal truths as in Leibniz's argument or possibility in general as in Kant's inference. Instead, he begins with the truth that there is more to know about ourselves than we are initially aware of: "In addition to the immediate feeling of my own existence,

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<sup>21</sup> Lambert elaborates on this issue in the 1771 *Anlage Zur Architectonic*, §299 where he claims that without the metaphysical ground in divine thought the entire realm of logical truths would not be even an "empty dream." Mendelssohn, however, probably did not read Lambert's later work (Basso, "Mendelssohn on Lambert's *Neues Organon*," 69).

I also presuppose the following perception as indubitable: I am not merely what I distinctly know of myself or, what amounts to the same, there is more to my existence than I might consciously observe of myself; and even what I know of myself is in and for itself capable of far greater development, greater distinctness, and greater completeness than I am able to give it” (*MH* 103).

While knowledge of our existence is evident,<sup>22</sup> it is also evident for Mendelssohn that our knowledge is incomplete because it cannot fully explain our existence. The fact of incomplete knowledge entails a modal fact, that what we know is “capable of far greater development,” meaning that more is *knowable* than is actually known by us. From this modal truth, Mendelssohn derives the existence of a thinking being using the following principle: “Everything possible must be thought to be possible by some thinking being.” This is because “every possible concept is thought as the alteration of a subject, as a thought in a thinking being. It must therefore at least have an ideal existence, that is, it must be a true concept of some sort of thinking being” (*MH* 104).

This principle resembles the one Leibniz presupposes in his proof from eternal truths. But the justification for this principle is different. As shown in the previous section, both Leibniz and Kant appeal to the content or reality presupposed by possible concepts. Mendelssohn, however, turns to the semantics of modal propositions to argue that they are reducible to propositions about actuality and this actuality includes a thinking being.

The context of this analysis is the additional claim that not only truths about possibility presuppose a thinking being, but also truths about actuality depend on a thinking being:

Now I maintain not only that everything possible must be thought to be possible by some thinking being, but also that everything actual must be thought to be actual by

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<sup>22</sup> Mendelssohn affirms Descartes’ inference “I think therefore I am” (*MH* 29).

some thinking being. What no thinking being represents to itself as possible is also in fact not possible and, in precisely the same way, what is thought by no thinking being to be actual cannot in fact also actually be on hand. . . each actuality, if it is supposed to be true, must be known and conceived to be true by some sort of being. A concept must correspond to the thing; each object must be depicted in some sort of subject  
(*MH* 104)

This claim might seem to hinder my characterization of the proof as based on the grounding of possibility, because it means that the argument can function also without any reference to modal facts. However, I argue that this claim is a generalization of the initial premise that there is more to know about ourselves than we actually know. What is true about the knowability of our own existence is true of all existing things. The existence of an actual thing *entails* a modal fact, namely the fact that this actual thing is *thinkable* by a mind through a corresponding concept.

It is this generalization that allows Mendelssohn to offer a general analysis of propositions about possibility by noting that “thinkable” is a term that denotes a possibility. Applying the above principle that “everything possible must be thought to be possible” entails that everything thinkable is actually thought to be thinkable. Since thinking something as thinkable is equivalent to thinking it, everything thinkable is actually thought. This is the crux of the argument, the move from possibility to actuality. Presented in this way, the direct inference from being thinkable to being actually thought is obviously suspect. Mendelssohn anticipated this objection: “I indeed recognize, many might say, that everything actual cannot be other than thinkable. But how does it follow from this that it must in fact be thought by some being? Does this not entail inferring from possibility to actuality, from what can be to what happens? One thus seems to beg the question or

to slip in what should first be proven. Is it not something like this that still creates some doubt for you?” (MH 104)

Mendelssohn begins his response by turning to analyze the class of words denoting “a capability, facility, predisposition for something,” that is, the words that ascribe a possibility to something. For example: “Elasticity or the capability to be stretched is attributed to the air that surrounds us, inasmuch as it is not yet stretched. The capacity of standing up is ascribed to me as I sit here, before I actually exercise it. Thus, in all these cases mere possibilities are asserted as predicates of subjects” (MH 105).

According to Mendelssohn, *Prima facie*, there is something peculiar about such words. They seem to involve a contradiction because they ascribe to things properties they do not actually possess. For example, an elastic object is stretchable but not yet stretched. This raises the following problem: “How can mere possibilities be on hand as actual predicates? Do we not contradict ourselves if we attribute to a thing that is actually on hand, as part of its make-up, something that is not actually on hand, if we hold a mere possibility to be a predicate of something actual?” (MH 105).

Mendelssohn notes that much of our knowledge is not about the actual properties of things, but about the dispositions or capabilities of things. How can it be that “the entire mass of human knowledge” is absurd? To solve the apparent contradiction involved in the use of such properties, Mendelssohn suggests that the attribution of dispositions should be analyzed as propositions about counterfactuals. Thus, attributing a disposition means making a judgment about how the current properties of a thing would change *if* it were put in a different condition:

If we attribute a possibility to any object at all as part of its make-up, then we are merely saying that, on the basis of the present make-up of the object, it can also be

conceived how, in other circumstances, it would take on that property that was ascribed to it as possible. To ascribe expandability to gold, elasticity to air, and the capability to walk to someone sitting, means merely to declare of the gold that, on the basis of its present, actual make-up, it can be conceived how in other circumstances it would be actually expanded. (*MH* 105)

The sentence “Gold is expandable,” for example, means that gold has such properties that when put in a different environment, it would expand. The crucial point in the argument is that such counterfactual propositions presuppose a thinking subject that makes the judgment. Mendelssohn claims that only in thought can there be a connection between the present properties of a thing and its future properties under different conditions using this explanation: “On the basis of the present condition, on the basis of the actual make-up of a thing, the thought can arise for a thinking subject, that in other circumstances a different make-up would accrue to it and that therefore this different make-up of it is thinkable. All possibilities therefore have their ideal existence in the thinking subject and they are, as thinkable, ascribed by this subject to the object” (*MH* 105–6).

Mendelssohn does not explain why only thought can make this connection between actual properties and properties in another possible situation. Perhaps it is an application of Leibniz’s doctrine that relations are ideal entities: “Relations and orderings are to some extent beings of reason” (*NE* 227). Adding the previous claim that every actual thing has the disposition of being thinkable, Mendelssohn concludes that since everything is thinkable everything is actually thought: “Everything actual must not only be thinkable but also thought by some being or other. To every real existence, there corresponds an ideal existence in some subject or other; to each thing, a representation. Without being known, nothing is knowable” (*MH* 106).

Granted, this inference is problematic, and those unconvinced by the Leibnizian position that identifies truths about relations with them being actually thought, will also not be convinced by Mendelssohn.<sup>23</sup> But in comparison with the Leibnizian position, Mendelssohn's analysis of dispositional properties as counterfactual propositions offers a specific articulation of the type of relation involved in modal facts. Thus, Mendelssohn offers a more elaborate justification for the principle that possibility must be grounded in actuality than both of those that were offered by Leibniz and Kant.

#### **4. The Singularity of the Ground of all Modal Facts**

The final step in the argument is to infer from the existence of some (one or more) thinking subjects that ground modal facts to the existence of a single ground of all modal facts. Interestingly, the justification for this step is the main deficiency Mendelssohn found in Kant's modal argument. Recall that in Kant's argument there is a transition from "(K6) necessarily, something (or other) exists" to "(K7) there exists one necessary being" (Ak 1:395). In *OPA*, Kant offers several arguments for the uniqueness and simplicity of God which seem to justify this move. But in his review of Kant's treatise, Mendelssohn claims that Kant fails to provide an adequate argument against the multiplicity of grounds of all possibilities:

From the preceding, it is not understandable why the necessarily existing being A cannot provide the material for the inner possibility of a, b, c etc., the necessary being

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Russell's assessment of Leibniz's argument from eternal truths: "This argument I can only describe as scandalous. . . it confuses God's knowledge with the truths which God knows" (*The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 221). L. J. Jakob in his detailed review of *MH* recognizes that the transition from thinkability to being actually thought is the crux of the argument, but admits that he could not understand it (*Prüfung der Mendelssohnschen Morgenstunden*, 240).



B the material for the inner possibility of m, n, o, p, and the necessary being C the material for z, y, z, etc. The author must prove that the single being A is sufficient for providing the material for all inner possibilities so that all other necessarily existing beings are needlessly presupposed; or he must show from the concept of necessity that the real ground of all inner possibility can be contained only in one necessarily existing being. (*JubA* 5.1, 608, my translation)

Mendelssohn argues that Kant did not successfully rule out the scenario in which the grounding of possibilities is parceled out between different entities. Kant's arguments for the uniqueness of the necessary being have been thoroughly analyzed, and most interpreters agree with Mendelssohn that they are problematic or require additional premises to work.<sup>24</sup>

Mendelssohn, however, provides a brief argument for the uniqueness of God:

Whoever is only familiar to a degree with the connection among truths and with the unfathomable depth of all knowledge will confess that none of them can be known in their greatest perfection and with the most distinct consciousness unless the entire sum total of them is discerned to precisely the same degree, with precisely the same truth, certainty, distinctness, and completeness. There must therefore necessarily be one thinking being, one intellect that represents to itself . . . the sum total of all possibilities as possible, the sum total of all actualities as actual, in a word, the sum total and connection of all truths in their greatest possible development and does so in

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<sup>24</sup> For example see Adams, "God, Possibility, and Kant," 433–34; Stang, "Kant's Possibility Proof," 289; Chignell, "Kant, Real Possibility, and the Threat of Spinoza," 652.

the most distinct, complete, and exhaustively detailed way. There is an infinite intellect. (*MH* 106–7)

The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. Every truth is known by some thinking being (as explained in the previous section).
2. There are infinitely many truths.
3. All truths are mutually dependent, that is, none can be fully known without knowing all others.

Conclusion: There is a single mind knowing the infinitely many truths.<sup>25</sup>

Let us consider premises 2 and 3. Why are there infinitely many truths? Mendelssohn assumes that each being has infinitely many properties since we are aware of the vast incompleteness of our knowledge about ourselves. But this does not prove an infinite number of truths, only a large number of truths ungraspable by us. In this case, the conclusion would not require an infinite mind, but only a vastly superior finite mind.<sup>26</sup> Yet the premise is not unreasonable, and Mendelssohn could have provided some justifications, for example from the infinite divisibility of space or the infinity of time. These are implied by Mendelssohn's reservations of versions of the cosmological proof based on the impossibility of an eternal past (*MH* 68) and his subsequent rehashing of the Leibnizian cosmological proof which presupposes an infinite chain of causes and effects (*MH* 69).

Secondly, why are all truths interconnected? Mendelssohn presented an argument to that effect two decades earlier in the prize essay “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” based on the principle of sufficient reason (PSR):

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<sup>25</sup> Leibniz makes a similar argument, but not in published writings Mendelssohn could be acquainted with. See Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 181.

<sup>26</sup> Guyer criticizes Mendelssohn on this point (*Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant*, 137).

This splendid basic principle is the bond that ties all imaginable truths together. In the divine intellect every science exists, and all possible truths cohere like the propositions of a geometrical demonstration. . . . By virtue of the principle of sufficient reason, possibilities and actualities cohere with one another in the divine mind in the most precise manner, and all truths constitute a single whole, a single science, an infinite demonstration, which the Supreme Being surveys at a single glance. If it be supposed that something could exist without any reason, then its existence would be a truth that is connected with no other truth, a solitary island in the realm of truths, to which there is no possible access. Hence, it cannot be an object of the infinite intellect. (*Philosophical Writings*, 287)

Mendelssohn claims here that the PSR entails the interconnection between all truths. The claim is demonstrated by arguing that the denial of the PSR is incompatible with divine omniscience because the denial of PSR entails unconnected truths. A truth without a sufficient reason would be an “isolated island” unknowable by God, and hence impossible. The argument presupposes the premise that God knows all truths through their reasons because they are derived from the one fact that requires no further reason, God’s existence. Perhaps in *MH*, Mendelssohn makes the assumption that the PSR entails the interconnection between all truths even without presupposing in advance the existence of an omniscient God. This can be based on the following line of thought: if every truth has a reason (according to PSR), the reason is either through a relation to all other truths or through a relation to a single truth which requires no further reason and is therefore the connecting reason of all truths; otherwise, there would be arbitrary truths without reason. Hence the appeal to a mind as the only possible ground of modal truths enables Mendelssohn to directly infer the existence of a thinking God without additional arguments. Granted, the strong version of

the PSR that excludes the possibility of isolated truths as required in this argument can be contested.

The last step of the argument aims to prove that the infinite intellect has a free and benevolent will, and Mendelssohn claims this step easy to prove by referring to previous chapters: “It has already been sufficiently elaborated that there cannot be discernment without activity, knowledge without approval or disapproval, infinite intellect without the most perfect will” (*MH* 107). Mendelssohn probably refers to his discussion of the faculty of knowledge where he distinguishes between the material aspect of knowledge concerned with truths and the formal aspect of knowledge concerned with approval and disapproval (*MH* 43). Mendelssohn states that these types of knowledge necessarily coincide, stemming from the essence of a thinking being: “Both faculties—the faculty of knowledge as well as the faculty of approving—are, as we know from psychology, expressions of one and the same power of the soul” (*MH* 44). Though interesting, I will not evaluate the account of the faculties, as it is irrelevant for my focus on the grounding of modal truths.

Combining all the above steps, the final formulation of Mendelssohn’s argument begins with the complete conceptual determination of any actual thing, continues with the claim that the complete concept of every actual thing is grasped in some thinking being. This leads to the existence of one infinite mind grasping all complete concepts, ending with the theistic conception of God, that is. omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent:

[1] Everything actual is actual in its utter completeness.

[2] The exhaustive detail of the concept in some thinking being or other corresponds to the completeness of the thing.

[3] Complete and exhaustive concepts can only be found in a perfect intellect and [4] a perfect intellect does not exist without a perfect will, nor supreme discernment without the freest choice and most effective expression of power. (*MH* 107)

Let us summarize the advantages of Mendelssohn's argument over Leibniz's and Kant's proofs:

1. All three proofs are based on the principle that possibility is grounded in actuality. Leibniz and Kant maintain that the content of possible predicates must be somehow given in actuality, but do not provide detailed explanations why this is the case. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, does provide an argument for this principle by analyzing judgments about dispositions as counterfactuals and showing that the latter presuppose a thought that relates actual features with non-actual conditions.
2. This explication of dispositions provides direct support for the existence of a mind without needing an additional step arguing that the ground of possibility is a mind, as Kant's argument requires (in *OPA* 2:87–89).
3. The infinity of dispositions predicated to the infinity of things and their inter-relations justify the inference to a single mind grounding all possibilities.

For these reasons, the proof is worth studying in detail, although it is far from faultless, as I indicated at various places. Regarding the analysis of dispositions, my main focus here was on the historical context and therefore I will not discuss how Mendelssohn fares in comparison to more sophisticated accounts of modality, dispositions, and counterfactuals developed much later in the twentieth century.

## **5. Epilogue: Kant's Response to Mendelssohn**

In the introduction to *MH*, Mendelssohn calls Kant “the all-quashing” (*MH* xix) referring to his influential rebuttal of rationalistic metaphysics, including all theoretical proofs for the existence of God. It is, therefore, worth mentioning Kant’s response to Mendelssohn’s original proof. In a letter attached to Schütz’s review of *MH*,<sup>27</sup> Kant rightly identifies the core of Mendelssohn’s argument to be that “something is conceivable only if it is actually conceived.” This entails the conclusion that “an infinite and at the same time active understanding must really exist, since only in relation to it can possibility or reality be meaningful predicates of things” (Ak 10:428). Kant does not address the argument in detail, but uses his general take on rationalistic metaphysics to criticize it. The principle on which it is based is correlated with “an essential need in human reason ... to support its freely floating arch with this keystone [the idea of an infinite active understanding].” However, using this subjective need to infer “something valid about objects” is a product of an illusion that treats subjective principles of thinking as objective conditions of reality.

Interestingly, we can find in these few lines an implicit criticism of Kant’s own pre-critical modal proof which is also based on the merely subjective principle according to which, “only in relation to it [the necessary being] can possibility or reality be meaningful predicates of things.”<sup>28</sup> Another hint for the relation between Kant’s assessment of Mendelsohn and his own modal proof can be gleaned from a long footnote in the essay “What is Orientation in Thinking.” Kant begins with identifying the inference of the modal proof with a subjective need of reason:

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<sup>27</sup> Ak 10:428–29. Translated in Kant, *Correspondence*.

<sup>28</sup> The nature of Kant’s repudiation of his pre-critical modal proof, hinted in the Critique of Pure Reason section on the transcendental ideal (A571–83/B599–611), is still under debate. For a recent discussion see Abaci, “Kant, The Actualist Principle, and The Fate of the Only Possible Proof”; Hoffer, “The Dialectical Illusion in Kant’s Only Possible Argument for the Existence of God.”

Since reason needs to presuppose reality as given for the possibility of all things. . . it sees itself necessitated to take as a ground one single possibility, namely that of an unlimited being, to consider it as original and all others as derived. . . we find a subjective ground of necessity, i.e. a need in our reason itself to take the existence of a most real (highest) being as the ground of all possibility (Ak 8:138n).<sup>29</sup>

Kant then continues with an assessment of Mendelssohn:

Just as it is here, so it is also with all the proofs of the worthy Mendelssohn in his *Morning Hours*. They accomplish nothing by way of demonstration ... only we must not give out what is in fact only a necessary *presupposition* as if it were a *free insight* (Ak 8:138n).

Although Kant does not refer specifically to Mendelssohn's unique proof, the similarity with the letter to Schütz suggests that Kant appreciated Mendelssohn for expressing the insight valuable in his own modal proof, the subjective assumption of a ground of all possibility.

At the same time, in both texts Kant has high praises for Mendelssohn: "One can regard this final legacy of a dogmatizing metaphysics at the same time as its most perfect accomplishment, both in view of its chain-like coherence and in the exceptional clarity of its presentation; and as a memorial . . . that a Critique of Reason, which casts doubt on the happy progress of such a procedure, can thus use it as an enduring example for testing its principles" (Ak 10:428–29).

The praise is somewhat self-serving as Kant regards the virtues of Mendelssohn's proof useful for honing the weapons of critical philosophy. I suggest, however, that Kant's praise also

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<sup>29</sup> Translated in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. The claim that the modal proof expresses a subjective necessity is found in Kant's theology lectures: "even this proof is not apodictically certain; for it cannot establish the objective necessity of an original being, but establishes only the subjective necessity of assuming such a being" (Ak 28:1034).

reflects the significance he attributed to the principle underlying Mendelssohn's modal proof in comparison to other proofs for the existence of God. The cosmological proof posits a necessary being, and therefore expresses the need of reason to presuppose a first cause, but it cannot by itself attribute intelligence to this cause (A606–7/B634–35). The concept of intelligent design derived by the physico-theological proof has a heuristic role in science, but also runs the risk of curtailing the search for necessary laws in nature by positing anthropomorphic ends (A692–93/B720–21). In contrast, Mendelssohn's claim that all truths are fully known and interconnected in the divine mind, fully expresses the aim of reason "to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed" (A307/B364). In other words, Mendelssohn's premise, follows from the assumption that the structure of reality corresponds to the structure of perfect thought.<sup>30</sup> While this premise is illusory when taken objectively, reason is justified in using it as a regulative principle embodied in the idea of God which means "nothing more than that reason bids us to consider every connection in the world according to principles of a systematic unity" (A686/B714). From a Kantian standpoint, Mendelssohn's proof perfectly expresses this principle by positing the complete thinkability of reality while erring in taking it as an objective principle of reality.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Willaschek argues that "the claim that the structure of reality corresponds to that of rational thought" is the erroneous tacit assumption Kant identifies in speculative metaphysics in general (*Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*, 9).

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