

# ***The Priority of Reason: Mendelssohn's Rationalist Aesthetics***

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ABSTRACT. Standing at the juncture of rationalist aesthetics and Kantian subjectivism is Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). Mendelssohn was a metaphysician in the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition and a foremost defender of rationalist ideals. Despite his firm commitment to the rationalist tradition, Mendelssohn is often identified as a transitional figure in aesthetics. Many characterize him as a proto-Kantian who moved toward a subjectivist aesthetic and anticipated Kant's three faculty theory (which establishes the autonomy of art from reason through the assertion of a separate subjective faculty of feeling).

Frederick Beiser rejects this view in his excellent study of rationalist aesthetics, *Diotima's Children*. In this work he argues that Mendelssohn was a genuine *rationalist* who never departed from rationalist ideals in his aesthetic thought. In this paper I support Beiser's case by arguing for the continuity of Mendelssohn's aesthetic thought with rationalist principles. I argue that Mendelssohn's aesthetic thought demonstrates a clear commitment to the priority of reason; he presents aesthetics as essentially rational. More specifically, I show this basic rationalist principle (the priority of reason) to be operative in Mendelssohn's rejection of empiricist aesthetics and in his objective definition of beauty as unity in multiplicity. After confirming the rationalist merits of Mendelssohn's aesthetics (with respect to these elements in particular), I address some problematic texts concerning mixed sentiments. In treating these texts I defend Mendelssohn from the charge of subjectivism through the development of a nuanced interpretation of his aesthetics.

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## 1. Introduction

The term *rationalism* appropriately describes the dominant current in German philosophy from Leibniz to pre-critical Kant.<sup>1</sup> This period in German philosophy produced impressive systems that moved in rigorous deductive fashion from basic principles to certain conclusions. A pervasive confidence in reason's capacity to deliver certain truth was characteristic of this period. Reason took priority in nearly all areas of human endeavor. Given the emphasis on reason, and rigorous deductive systematization in particular, it is surprising that German rationalism was also the genesis of aesthetics as a modern discipline.

Many perceive a substantive dichotomy between the arid truths of reason and the visceral pleasures of art. Yet, in the heart of German rationalism, there thrived a sixty year tradition (stretching from Wolff to Lessing) that gave birth to the modern discipline of aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> As might be expected, this rationalist aesthetic tradition gave priority to reason in the matters of beauty and art. The objective nature of beauty was precisely defined and its enjoyment was thought to require the participation of human reason. Art, as an endeavor concerned with beauty, was characterized by rules. Hence aesthetics was a thoroughly rational endeavor that sought to identify both the objective marks of beauty and the correct methods of its representation in art.<sup>3</sup>

This all changed with the advent of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). In this work Kant advanced positions that decisively ended the rationalist endeavor in aesthetics, including: "feelings of pleasure are non-cognitive," "beauty is not an objective attribute of objects" and, therefore, aesthetic judgment is merely subjective.<sup>4</sup> In an important sense, Kant's subjectivism paved the way for later modern and post-modern critics who would eschew most, or all, objective aesthetic criteria.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> i.e., Kant prior to *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>2</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, pp. 4, 16. Also, for a clear statement of Kant's subjectivism (i.e., that beauty is *not* an objective property of the beautiful object; there can be no objective rule of taste; the basis of aesthetic judgment is the subject's feeling) see especially Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, p. 44 (Ak. 203) and p. 79 (Ak. 231).

<sup>5</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, pp. 16-20.

Standing at the juncture of rationalist aesthetics and Kantian subjectivism is Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). Mendelssohn was a metaphysician in the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition and a foremost defender of rationalist ideals. Beyond metaphysics, he also spent an eight year period (1755-1763) developing the elements of his aesthetic thought.<sup>6</sup> Despite his firm commitment to the rationalist tradition, Mendelssohn is often identified as a transitional figure in aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> Many characterize him as a proto-Kantian who moved toward a subjectivist aesthetic and anticipated Kant's three faculty theory (which establishes the autonomy of art from reason through the assertion of a separate subjective faculty of feeling).<sup>8</sup>

Frederick Beiser rejects this view in his excellent study of rationalist aesthetics, *Diotima's Children*. In this work he argues that Mendelssohn was a genuine *rationalist* who never departed from rationalist ideals in his aesthetic thought. Beiser identifies basic rationalist aesthetic tenets as operative in Mendelssohn's *apparent* departures from the rationalist tradition.<sup>9</sup> Below I will support Beiser's case by arguing for the continuity of Mendelssohn's aesthetic thought with rationalist principles. I will limit my analysis to Mendelssohn's main aesthetic work *Philosophical Writings*.<sup>10</sup> I will argue that Mendelssohn's aesthetic thought demonstrates a clear commitment to the priority of reason; he presents aesthetics as essentially rational. More specifically, I will show this basic rationalist principle (the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, pp. 326, 328-9 and Hammermeister, *The German Tradition in Aesthetics*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>8</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, pp. 16, 41, 198.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 196-243. An example of one such tenet is the assertion that all pleasure derives from perfection. In this chapter Beiser also deals with the later Mendelssohn texts that seem to imply his departure from Wolff's single faculty psychology. The question of Mendelssohn's status as a single, dual or triple faculty theorist is beyond the scope of my study; see pp. 240-243 in *Diotima's Children*.

<sup>10</sup> While this work does contain the majority of Mendelssohn's aesthetic writings, it is not solely a work on aesthetics. *Philosophical Writings* also contains Mendelssohn's thoughts on sensation, natural theology, the problem of evil, suicide and metaphysics in general. That his aesthetic thought is woven in amidst these other important topics suggests that aesthetics is no mere ancillary topic. For Mendelssohn, as with other German rationalists, the study of aesthetics is integral to philosophic investigation in general. See Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 169, for Mendelssohn's explicit assertion of the importance and value of aesthetics in philosophical inquiry.

priority of reason) to be operative in Mendelssohn's rejection of empiricist aesthetics and in his objective definition of beauty as unity in multiplicity.<sup>11</sup> After confirming the rationalist merits of Mendelssohn's aesthetics (with respect to these elements in particular), I will address some problematic texts concerning mixed sentiments. In treating these texts I will defend Mendelssohn from the charge of subjectivism through the development of a nuanced interpretation of his aesthetics. First it is necessary to elucidate a core rationalist principle operative in Mendelssohn's aesthetics: all pleasure has its source in perfection.

## **2. Excursus: All Pleasure has its Source in Perfection**

Mendelssohn held that perfection was the end of all things. The essence of God is perfection and perfection is God's plan for creation. Thus, all things find their end in perfection.<sup>12</sup> Human desires, actions and projects are no exception to this universal rule.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Mendelssohn argues that the ultimate source of pleasure is found in perfection. Specifically, it is the perception of perfection that is the source of pleasure.<sup>14</sup> But what exactly does Mendelssohn mean by perfection?

For Mendelssohn the term "perfection" refers to any sort of excellence or harmony. In composite things perfection consists in some sort of harmony amidst the parts; in simple things (such as souls) perfection consists in the degree of a power (such as representational capacity).<sup>15</sup> Perfection is not necessarily a state without any flaw; rather, it can come in degrees.<sup>16</sup> Hence perfection is a wide term; Mendelssohn asserts that we take pleasure in things as diverse as an improved state of our own bodies, the rational order in nature, or our soul's own ability to distinctly represent the world.<sup>17</sup> All of these qualify as perfections for Mendelssohn.

<sup>11</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62, 160.

<sup>17</sup> Mendelssohn in a general sense works within a Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysical framework. Specifically, the soul is a simple substance with a basic power of representing

### 3. *Soul over Body: Mendelssohn's Rejection of Empiricist Aesthetics*

#### (a) *The Empiricist Position*

Mendelssohn begins his *Philosophical Writings* with the essay *On Sentiments*. This essay is a series of fictional letters between Theocles (Mendelssohn's mouthpiece) and his young dialogue partner Euphranor. Their epistolary dialogue covers a wide range of topics, but the chief issues discussed concern the nature of beauty and the enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure. On these topics Mendelssohn seeks to defend a rationalist aesthetic against an opposing empiricist position.<sup>18</sup> This is evident from the outset of the first letter, in which Euphranor begins the exchange by promulgating some empiricist aesthetic tenets.<sup>19</sup>

In general, Euphranor's empiricist aesthetic position favors the body, or sensation, over the cognitive capacities of the soul. He describes aesthetic enjoyment in visceral physical terms, "a sweet rush in the blood stream and . . . assorted pleasant motions in the limbs."<sup>20</sup> Aesthetic enjoyment is a passionate feeling completely opposed to the cold calculation of reason. Reason is portrayed as a "killjoy" when it seeks to identify the origin of such aesthetic pleasure.<sup>21</sup> Euphranor argues that beauty must surprise the senses; reason can "harden" one against this surprise or dissolve its enjoyment after the fact.<sup>22</sup> Euphranor appears to locate the enjoyment of beauty in a *sui generis* feeling. He asserts that this feeling is essentially opaque to reason; if it is subjected to analysis the "sweet rapture" of aesthetic enjoyment devolves into "a set of arid truths."<sup>23</sup>

Euphranor gives greater precision to his position by arguing that the experience of beauty depends on the *indistinctness* of representations in the soul.<sup>24</sup> That is, an experience of beauty must flow from the relatively obscure representations of bodily sensation, and not the distinct represen-

the world from its own point of view.

<sup>18</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that while Euphranor puts forth an empiricist aesthetic position, he is not a pure empiricist. See Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, note 9 on page 201.

<sup>20</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

tations of reason.<sup>25</sup> Thus, reason is barred from participation in aesthetic pleasure because of its capacity to make representations distinct. In Euphranor's empirical position the only legitimate role of reason is to choose between potential sources of pleasure according to prudence; it is not operative in the pleasure itself, which is sensual. Euphranor illustrates this point by way of an analogy to the enjoyment of sexual love within marriage. The bridegroom may consult reason when choosing a bride; but once this has been decided his reason must step aside to allow for the sensual enjoyment of the marital bed.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, once reason has chosen the object of aesthetic enjoyment, reason becomes superfluous and even deleterious to aesthetic pleasure. Euphranor ends his initial argument by asserting the key difference between the claims: "'this object is beautiful' and 'this object is true.'"<sup>27</sup> The soul's capacity to reason arrives at the latter; only a *sui generis* aesthetic *feeling* can secure the former.

*(b) Mendelssohn's Response: The Rational Process of Aesthetic Experience*

Given Mendelssohn's rationalist commitments, such a description of aesthetic enjoyment is not sufficient. Euphranor's position essentially bars reason from an entire realm of human endeavor: aesthetics. Beyond the mere prudential selection of objects to be enjoyed, Mendelssohn seeks to extend the operation of reason into the experience of beauty itself. In this way he seeks to give reason, and thereby the soul, priority over the body and sensation in aesthetic experience.

The initial problem Mendelssohn must face is Euphranor's claim that beauty depends on the indistinctness of representations. Surprisingly, Theocles concedes this very point when he states that "no distinct concept is compatible with the feeling of beauty."<sup>28</sup> Theocles explains that

<sup>25</sup> This is a point at which Euphranor reveals that he is not a pure empiricist; he only espouses some empiricist points. In opposing the obscure representations of the senses to the distinct representations of reason Euphranor appears to adopt the basic rationalist theory of the soul (i.e., the soul has a primitive faculty of representation that varies in distinctness).

<sup>26</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. In a later letter Theocles explicitly rejects any position that would make aesthetic experience dependent upon a mere "obscure feeling." In what follows I will

the soul is incapable of grasping a multiplicity in a distinct fashion, “all at once”.<sup>29</sup> Ostensibly the experience of beauty involves experiencing a sensuous *whole*; but a *sensuous* whole is necessarily composite (i.e., made of parts). Hence, it cannot be cognized distinctly at once. However, Theocles also notes that the feeling of beauty is incompatible with a “completely obscure concept.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, aesthetic experience cannot be the product of mere sensation. For Mendelssohn, aesthetic experience occupies a middle ground, between reason and sensation. To clarify this position, I will now place it within the context of Mendelssohn's single-faculty theory of the soul.

Mendelssohn adopted (generally) the Leibnizian-Wolffian theory of the soul. Key to this theory is that the soul has a single faculty of representation.<sup>31</sup> More particularly, the soul is capable of representing the world to itself from the point of view of its body. Thus, reason is characteristic not because it is a separate faculty; rather, reason is distinguished by the relative distinctness of representations. Mendelssohn describes aesthetic experience as a type of *representation* of a beautiful object that is neither completely distinct (as with the representations of reason), nor completely obscure (as with the representations of sensation). Mendelssohn terms these aesthetic representations “clear.”<sup>32</sup> The term clear indicates that a definite unity is cognized, but that the individual parts of this unity lack distinctness.<sup>33</sup>

By distinguishing aesthetic representations, Mendelssohn avoids reducing aesthetic experience to the obscurity of sensation. However, at this point in his argument it is still unclear how reason might retain priority in aesthetic experience. As it stands, the empiricist might still claim that these aesthetic representations are indicative of a *sui generis* feeling that is essentially opaque to reason. Mendelssohn avoids this consequence by stipulating a characteristic process by which aesthetic representations

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mitigate this apparent tension.

<sup>29</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Again the Leibnizian-Wolffian account of the soul (as representing things to itself with varying levels of distinctness) is implicit in this explanation of aesthetic experience.

arise.

Mendelssohn summarizes the process of aesthetic enjoyment with the terms: “*choose, feel, reflect, and enjoy*.”<sup>34</sup> These terms indicate a four step process which begins with reason prudentially *choosing* an object to be pursued for aesthetic enjoyment. Second, sensation is allowed to encounter the object in order to *feel* it initially. Thirdly, one reengages reason to *reflect* on each individual part, cognizing them and their various relations distinctly. Finally, one is to *enjoy* the object by directing one’s attention back to the whole. This last step corresponds to the clear representations of aesthetic pleasure.

The priority of reason is apparent from this description. Reason is explicitly active in two of the four steps. It serves as a necessary preparation to the enjoyment of beauty.<sup>35</sup> Yet, one might object that the fourth step of aesthetic *enjoyment* still serves as an irrational *sui generis* core to the experience of beauty. This objection is mitigated by several glosses Mendelssohn includes concerning this process of aesthetic enjoyment. These glosses indicate that the distinctive concepts of reason remain operative (in some reduced fashion) even in aesthetic *enjoyment*. In one such gloss Theocles states that, “[t]hrough the intuiting of the whole the parts will lose their bright colors, but they will leave traces behind them which illuminate the concept of the whole and lend a greater liveliness to the pleasure which arises from this.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in his previous letter Theocles stated that the “particular distinct concepts” receded “into the shadows” but continued to work in his aesthetic experience.<sup>37</sup> He claimed that these distinct concepts were operative in such a way that “the whole alone radiate[d]” from them; they made the manifold easier to grasp as a totality.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> It is clear that Mendelssohn thinks that reason must be active in some capacity prior to the enjoyment of the whole. However, it is not clear that he requires such a consciously deliberate employment of reason as preparation for aesthetic enjoyment. The process described above is most likely an ideal characterization of something that occurs often in an unconscious manner. Thus, reason is always operative in some fashion prior to aesthetic experience, but it may be more deliberately employed in order to heighten the eventual aesthetic pleasure.

<sup>36</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

In both glosses Theocles describes aesthetic enjoyment as if the distinct concepts of reason remained operative in some implicit capacity. Below, I will discuss how this might be understood in light of Mendelssohn's objective definition of beauty. Here, the fact that the distinct concepts of reason continue to operate *within* the representations of aesthetic pleasure should serve as strong evidence of Mendelssohn's commitment to the priority of reason in aesthetics.

#### **4. The Objective Definition of Beauty: Unity in Multiplicity**

Some readers may find it odd that Theocles wrote so much concerning aesthetics without bothering to give a precise definition of the beautiful. This delay in definition is due to the fact that Theocles begins his discussion of aesthetics from the subjective point of view (i.e., from the aesthetic experience of the subject).<sup>39</sup> However, his analysis of the subjective experience of beauty soon leads Theocles to give an objective definition of the beautiful object.

Unlike the empiricist position, Mendelssohn's rationalist aesthetic portrays reason as an integral (and operative) component of aesthetic experience.<sup>40</sup> For the empiricist there is no such thing as an objectively beautiful object because beauty is merely a subjective feeling.<sup>41</sup> For Mendelssohn, aesthetic experience seizes on, and reveals, objective beauty in the world. When humans take pleasure in beauty they take pleasure in some type of perfection in the beautiful object or objects.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, Mendelssohn states that "[t]he sameness, [or] the oneness in a multiplicity of features is

<sup>39</sup> One might attribute this subjective starting point to the empirical views with which Euphranor begins the epistolary exchange. Empiricist aesthetics necessarily places great emphasis on the subject, since beauty is merely a feeling and not an objective attribute of an object.

<sup>40</sup> In his essay *On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences* Mendelssohn refers to the perception of beauty as a type of sensuous knowledge; see *Philosophical Writings*, p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>42</sup> See the excursus above for an explanation of Mendelssohn's view that all pleasure flows from some sort of perfection. Beauty is a particular type of perfection (i.e. the type that is perceived sensuously).

a property of the beautiful object."<sup>43</sup> This definition can be paraphrased as *unity in multiplicity*.<sup>44</sup>

This objective definition is implicit in Theocles' subjective account of aesthetic experience. This *unity* is the "whole" which one perceives after the soul has distinctly cognized (to some degree) the parts of the manifold or multiplicity. Mendelssohn's objective definition suggests how one might understand the distinct concepts of reflection (step three above) operating (in some limited fashion) within aesthetic enjoyment itself (step four).<sup>45</sup> It makes little sense to say that someone perceives a unity or oneness if they have not first perceived a multiplicity. Initially the function of the distinct representations of the soul is to acquaint the subject with the richness of the multiplicity at hand. However, these concepts must also leave "traces" of themselves that continue to juxtapose the perceived unity. Inherent to the immediate experience of a unity is the experience of a unity *of parts*. Hence, some residue of the distinct conceptualization of individual parts must remain operative in order to facilitate the experience of a unity.

### **5. 'Unity in Multiplicity' as Illustrative of Rationalist Metaphysics**

Mendelssohn's objective definition of beauty (unity in multiplicity) is illustrative of a more general principle at work in the method and content of German rationalist metaphysics: simplicity out of complexity. This principle can be discerned at the heart of metaphysical efforts from Leibniz forward.

One can discern this principle at work in Leibniz's definition of the best possible world. He describes this world as having, "the greatest possible variety that is compatible with the greatest possible order"<sup>46</sup> The best possible world God could create is one in which simplicity is imbedded in an incredible complexity. Elsewhere Leibniz describes the perfection of

<sup>43</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Beiser uses the term unity-in-variety; see *Diotima's Children*, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> See the above text concerning Mendelssohn's description of the process of aesthetic enjoyment.

<sup>46</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 210.

divine conduct as consisting in a “*simplicity of the ways*” which “*is in balance with the richness of the effects.*”<sup>47</sup> In other words, God’s perfection consists in wielding a few fruitful laws to produce a rich multiplicity of phenomena.

These simplicities (laws or orders) represent the rational structure of the world. The existence of these simplicities led rationalists to conclude that the world is ultimately intelligible.<sup>48</sup> The rationalist project consists in uncovering this intelligibility through the careful deductive operation of reason and its distinct concepts. In other words, one could define a rationalist as one who seeks to identify (as precisely as possible) the simplicities at the base of all the complexities of the world. This project is evident in the metaphysical method that rationalists employ.

A characteristic feature of rationalist metaphysics is its starting point of basic principles or propositions. These principles include the principle of contradiction, the principle of identity and the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>49</sup> There is some disagreement as to which principles are truly primitive (i.e., most simple), but nearly all German rationalists start from these principles. From these basic principles, which are simplicities, rationalists attempt to explain the complexities of the world. Mendelssohn is no different in his metaphysical method.

Mendelssohn bases the certainty of metaphysics on the primitive principle of contradiction.<sup>50</sup> Like his rationalist predecessors, he bases metaphysics upon a simple law which is operative in a multiplicity of ways. Beyond this, Mendelssohn writes provocatively concerning the fruitful multiplicity contained in a single humble concept. He writes “All our concepts are like the seeds of grain of dying plants which, as bad as they look, are nonetheless full of inner virtue and conceal forests of beauty in their husks.”<sup>51</sup> Mendelssohn goes on to claim that many so called humble or fruitless metaphysical concepts can be “linked to endless truths”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>48</sup> Of course this does not mean that the world is completely intelligible to the limited intelligence of human beings. Ostensibly there are some perfections that are beyond the cognition of humanity, but within the purview of God’s infinite intellect.

<sup>49</sup> This method is evident in the major metaphysical works of Leibniz and Wolff among others.

<sup>50</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 255-257.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 271.

and “reduced by analysis to other concepts and truths.”<sup>52</sup> Here the rationalist impetus towards simplicity is on display. Mendelssohn conceives of metaphysics, in large part, as a science of analysis. This analysis involves breaking down apparent simplicities (concepts and definitions) into even simpler components.<sup>53</sup> These texts provide an interesting analogy to Mendelssohn’s aesthetic thought. A concept when analyzed is found to conceal “forests of beauty”. It is as if the concept itself, once analyzed, serves as the unity for an inner multiplicity. Just as sensuous beauty is not perceived until the distinct concepts of reason have done their work, so too the beauty of a humble concept is not revealed until it is shown, through analysis, to be a true unity of component parts.

This section is not meant as an overview of rationalist metaphysics in general or Mendelssohn’s metaphysical thought in particular; rather, the aim here is simply to ground Mendelssohn’s aesthetic thought in the rationalist tradition. Specifically, I have argued that the basic objective principle operative in Mendelssohn’s rationalist aesthetics (unity in multiplicity) mirrors the more general rationalist metaphysical principle (simplicity out of complexity). In carrying this principle into aesthetics, Mendelssohn affirms the rational structure of aesthetic experience and objective beauty.<sup>54</sup> I will now examine the chief challenge to Mendelssohn’s claims concerning the rational nature of aesthetics: tragedy. In examining this challenge, and Mendelssohn’s response to it, I will provide a more nuanced interpretation of Mendelssohn’s rationalist aesthetics.

## **6. *The Problem of Tragedy and Mendelssohn’s Solution***

At the beginning of this study I discussed how Mendelssohn linked all pleasure to some perfection (as its source). Mendelssohn inherited this characteristic rationalist position from Wolff.<sup>55</sup> This link to perfection portrays pleasure as an essentially rational phenomenon. Beiser explains why

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 271.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 274.

<sup>54</sup> In his essay *On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences* Mendelssohn goes so far as to extol aesthetics as a great source of knowledge for other disciplines within philosophy; see *Philosophical Writings*, p. 169.

<sup>55</sup> Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, p. 206.

this is the case by referencing the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>56</sup> Briefly stated, if a rational being is to take pleasure in something, this pleasure must have a sufficient reason. The sufficient reason for pleasure, generally construed, is a perfection of some type. That is, humans take pleasure in things because those things are perfect in some way; they have some sort of excellence. We have seen that within the realm of aesthetic pleasure, Mendelssohn identifies the characteristic perfection as beauty (which is unity in multiplicity).<sup>57</sup> Given this rationalist framework, the aesthetic enjoyment of tragedy presents Mendelssohn with a substantive problem.

The enjoyment of tragedy (including representations in drama and painting) raises the spectre of irrationalism for Mendelssohn.<sup>58</sup> Tragedy presents the perceiving subject with the imperfections of chaos and suffering; yet, these imperfections apparently lead to enjoyment. This would seem to indicate that human beings are not entirely rational; we enjoy some things *because* they are imperfect.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in order to maintain a thoroughly rationalist aesthetic (one in which reason retains priority), Mendelssohn must show how the enjoyment of tragedy does not involve the enjoyment of the imperfections it depicts (i.e., undeserved suffering, chaos, destruction, etc . . .).

Mendelssohn develops an ingenious solution to this problem in the latter part of his essay *On Sentiments*, and in a later work, *Rhapsody or Additions to the Letters on Sentiments*.<sup>60</sup> Mendelssohn's solution depends on a key distinction between an object and the soul's representation of that object. As an object in the world, some evil circumstance is obviously deficient and

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pp. 4-5.

<sup>57</sup> See Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 48. Here Mendelssohn identifies three sources of pleasure: "*sameness in multiplicity* or beauty, *harmony in multiplicity* or intellectual perfection, and finally the *improved condition of the state of our body* or sensuous gratification." All three types of pleasure find their origin in some perfection (broadly construed) and beauty is explicitly identified as a source of pleasure among these perfections.

<sup>58</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, p. 206.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

<sup>60</sup> Both of these works are included in Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Writings*. The work *On Sentiments* was composed first in 1755. Mendelssohn later decided to make various additions and alterations to this work in his *Rhapsody or Additions to the Letters on Sentiments*, written in 1761. In particular, *Rhapsody* refined Mendelssohn's theory of why pleasure is experienced in viewing tragedy.

imperfect. When we perceive some misfortune we disapprove of it; its imperfection leads to our dissatisfaction.<sup>61</sup> However, at the same time our soul enjoys the *representation* of this imperfection. Specifically, a representation of some imperfection still engages the soul's capacities of "knowing and desiring."<sup>62</sup> In other words, the perception of an imperfection exercises the excellences of the soul. Although the existence of evil objects dissatisfies, the perfection of the soul (i.e., its capability to perceive and represent evil objects) satisfies. In this way Mendelssohn shows how the soul makes itself (i.e., the exercise of its own capacities) an object to be perceived. The positive pole of a mixed sentiment originates in the perception of a perfection of the soul itself, not in the imperfection of some deficient object. Elsewhere Mendelssohn describes this as a satisfaction of an increased actuality of the soul.<sup>63</sup> It seems that there is an unavoidable element of pleasantness when the soul exercises its capacities. At the moment of its "act" the soul becomes more real or perfect because it is more active in its proper function.

Mendelssohn suggests that the balance between the pleasant and unpleasant aspects in mixed sentiments depends on what element predominates: the subject's external/objective relation to the imperfect object or the subject's internal/subjective relation (as a perceiver of the object).<sup>64</sup> Ostensibly, the pleasure experienced from the soul's capacity to perceive evil will be quite small if the evil befalls the subject, or if it affects someone for whom the subject dearly cares. At the same time, a greater objective distance from the tragic circumstance allows for satisfaction to prevail in the mixed sentiment.

This phenomenon explains how someone can experience intense aesthetic enjoyment in response to tragic representations in art. Tragedy in painting or drama has only a weak external/objective relation to the subject. The objective quality of gruesome events is weakened through artistic imitation or rendition. This allows the subjective pleasures of the soul to predominate (i.e., the pleasure of perceiving an imperfection or the pleasure of perceiving beauty in the presentation of the tragedy).

<sup>61</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 133.

<sup>62</sup> Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 134.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 134.

Some have discerned in Mendelssohn's treatment of mixed sentiments a type of anticipation of Kantian subjectivism and, consequently, a departure from rationalist ideals.<sup>65</sup> Mendelssohn's account certainly places much emphasis on the subject's experience; yet, Mendelssohn's solution remains thoroughly rationalist. At no point does Mendelssohn deny the objective nature of beauty. Also, the problem of tragedy itself arises only as a result of his commitment to the rationalist tenet that all pleasure has some perfection as its source. Rather than a departure from rationalism, I submit that Mendelssohn develops a more nuanced rationalism with respect to aesthetics and the experience of beauty.

This nuanced aesthetic retains an objective referent to beauty out in the world. For the rationalist, the soul represents the world to itself. In aesthetic experience the soul represents a unity amidst a multiplicity. Yet, the rationalist also believes that this representation of the soul must occur from the *point of view* of the body. This necessitates a subjective element to the experience of beauty, but not a subjectivism. Various circumstances can obscure the perception of beauty (such as the objective closeness of evil) and certain circumstances can increase its vibrancy (such as a deliberate and extensive period of reflection prior to the aesthetic enjoyment of the object).<sup>66</sup> Despite these mitigating subjective factors, the objective rational structure still remains in the object to be enjoyed.

Mendelssohn's retention of the definition "unity in multiplicity" testifies to his continued conviction that the world is ultimately intelligible, and that humans, by virtue of the soul's capacities, have the potential to engage the world in a rational fashion. It is at this point, when Mendelssohn analyzes the engagement of the soul with a beautiful object in the world, that he proves to be most characteristically rationalist. The subjective pleasure gained from perceiving beauty consists in a *rational* action of the soul. That is, the soul gains joy in the act of perceiving the rational structure of the world.

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<sup>65</sup> Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, p. 212.

<sup>66</sup> See my account of how the distinct concepts of reason may increase the aesthetic pleasure of beauty in sections III and IV above.

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