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With the publication of a number of loose ends of scattered texts, fragments, and letters, the long-anticipated completion of the edition of Moses Mendelssohn’s *Gesammelte Schriften* known as *Jubiläumsausgabe* (jubilee edition) has finally come to its end. What had begun in a cheerfully upbeat and forward-looking mood in 1929 in Weimar Germany at the cusp of what is often referred to as the Jewish Renaissance has now, almost a century later, come to a bit of an anticlimactic close. Featuring thirty-nine tomes in twenty-four volumes, virtually every shred of writing Mendelssohn has ever been suspected to have composed or dictated to his son to go into his notebook has now been conscientiously assembled, carefully edited, and thoroughly commented.

But while readers might find the writings of the German Jewish philosopher, critic, and pioneering translator splendidly clothed in the stately maroon volumes of this centennial edition, this opulently equipped publication has also become a sort of a shrine: a tomb where one of the most original philosophers of the eighteenth century seems finally to have been put to rest in state to be solemnly interred by historians of philosophy, literature, and Jewish studies alike. Pleading for the case of Mendelssohn has not always had the results many an advocate might have hoped for. The resistance against or, to put it otherwise, the adherence to the canon of received ideas about this carefully embalmed exponent of a once glorious past has remained curiously well intact until today. What has changed with this impeccably curated edition, enhanced with a complete apparatus of commentaries and references, is that there exists now an indispensable repository of Mendelssohn’s work and its reception. Once the reader will get over the exhaustive wealth of details and begins to make their way through the maze of these tomes, they will find the trajectory of a thinker emerge whose intellectual acuity continues to challenge but also to inspire.

Begrudged as the formative exponent of modern Jewish thought, the role of Mendelssohn has been handled as a conflicted affair with the dean
of Mendelssohn studies, Alexander Altmann, calling Mendelssohn at some point a false Messiah.[1] The straw man of modern Jewish thought, Mendelssohn became the fall guy of generations busy with fashioning their identity in a world that ignored what it could not assimilate to its own image. As a consequence, Mendelssohn’s unflinching intellectual integrity made him the roly-poly of philosophy continuing to pop in the face of successive generations eager to invent themselves by forgetting to whom they owed this freedom.

Once spearheaded by such luminaries as Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttmann, and Eugen Mittwoch, with the assistance of such promising young scholars as Fritz Bamberger, Haim Borodianski, Simon Rawidowicz, Bertha Strauss, and Leo Strauss, the uplifting attempt to do justice to the thought of one of the central exponents of German and Jewish eighteenth-century intellectual life came to an abrupt halt in the 1930s. After the Shoah, however, it was not until 1971 when the edition was resurrected under the direction of Altmann, in turn to be succeeded by Eva Engel. The final volume to complete this centennial project was seen through by Michael Brocke and Daniel Krochmalnik as editors of these last volumes to conclude a project that began almost a century ago.

This “Century of Mendelssohn Research” reflects the history of a century of the German Jewish experience in its own telling way. It is the story of what started as an ambitious enterprise initiated as a celebratory project that the editors so confidently called a jubilee edition or Jubiläumsausgabe, a project that has now over the course of decades come to its completion on an almost anticlimactic note with a final volume delivering the last literary remnants: bits of drafts, notes, newly found letters, and comments. Remarkably, what was once intended to close the abysmal gap that the rupture of the Shoah had created appears now half a century after Altmann and his successors resumed work on the edition to serve at once both as a bridge to the thought of the pioneering exponent of German Jewish thought and as a stark and unrelenting reminder of the wound we could call if not Mendelssohn himself, then the history of the publication of his work.

Almost two and a half centuries after Mendelssohn passed away, we finally have now a complete repository of his writings down to the notes and scraps that have surfaced in the last decades. What remains yet to occur is nothing less than a long overdue revival of the appreciation of Mendelssohn’s work and thought, which has come to be curiously removed from our time as if his thought has lost its vigor and critical edge that many of his readers from Immanuel Kant to Georg Wilhelm Hegel once so cherished. Now that the potential mausoleum of the at-times exhaustive Jubiläumsausgabe is completed, it might finally be possible to rediscover Mendelssohn, a desideratum for which this edition proves to be both the condition and a formidable obstacle.

For, in the expanse of this edition’s run of thirty-nine volumes, it is difficult to see the forest for the trees. The palatial extent of the sheer number of volumes opens so many portals that leave the mind dazzled seeking entry to the world of a thinker whose nimble thought continues to keep readers under the spell of a lightness of thinking that defies the heavy-handed gravity of spurious metaphysical profundity. But with all the editorial accomplishments of this impeccably edited work it becomes clear how urgent the need for a new edition is, one that does not keep the reader from entering what presents itself as a mine-like maze, an arrangement that makes it hard for the reader who does not intend to spend a lifetime waiting to be let in to find the invaluable treasures this edition has to offer the persistent reader.

There exist alternative and more welcoming editions featuring more handy single volumes in the Philosophische Bibliothek of Meiner and a two-volume set of the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, but within these selective and
abbreviated alternatives the uniqueness of Mendelssohn’s thought appears somehow to be lost.[2] Waiting for a reappraisal and rediscovery, there is still hope that Theodor Adorno’s verdict might one day come true for Mendelssohn as well, that is, that “philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed,” as the opening line of his Negative Dialectics so pointedly notes.[3] Indeed, one might argue, in the case of Mendelssohn, such a reappreciation is not just necessary but also overdue at a time when rethinking philosophy, in other words, the reconceptualization of thinking itself, could not be more urgent in the face of the challenges we face. After all, there is nothing more practical than a good theory. Mendelssohn was only too well aware of this when he formulated his ideas.

Mendelssohn has often been dimmed down as striking a middle ground, seeking a balance, or negotiating a practicable form of coexistence. He has therefore occasionally been seen on a path to compromise. As a result, his insistently radical and philosophically irreverent impulse has often been unrecognized as the probing, unrelenting thrust that resists settling for any fixed forms of final answers that it is. A resolutely more engaging Enlightenment thinker than he has often been given credit for, Mendelssohn and his thought hold more, and more important, ideas in store than what the current narratives of mainstream history of philosophy would have it transpire. He has produced a wider range that both was once and now ought to be of greater significance for scholars of Jewish thought than the sound bites to which he has been reduced. Much of Mendelssohn’s work has been largely either dormant or ignored, tucked away as niche interest of a rarefied type of acquired taste for a thinker of apparently no historical significance, the final completion of the Jubiläumsausgabe might appear like the belated acknowledgment of the exponent of an Enlightenment Germany never had.

For this reason, a summary of the content of the concluding volume 21.1 and its rich apparatus in volume 21.2 would seem to promise little for the nonspecialist, and so this review is just to pick a few nuggets this volume offers. For example, the key passage in his Morning Hours (1785), where Mendelssohn discusses the distinction between reason and common sense to which this volume contributes a scrap of a draft to the Morning Hours, found in Mendelssohn’s notebook, allows for a better grasp of the well-known allegory concerning the relationship between reason, common sense, and speculation that can now be seen in closer proximity to Kant, for instance, than appeared to be the case. Christof Uebbing’s comments assume here critical significance for a more nuanced understanding of the very concept of reason at the core of Mendelssohn’s thought. Similarly, the draft of one of Mendelssohn’s short but succinct signal interventions in the debate on the Enlightenment that appears here in an earlier version offers a window into the development of his thinking, as the commentary tracks the context of the discussion between the different interlocutors that played a seminal role in the genesis of Mendelssohn’s ideas.

For English readers, it may be less of a desideratum, but relevant for the authoritative German edition is the long overdue inclusion of Mendelssohn’s sovereign reply to the condescending comments of his nemesis, Johann David Michaelis, in his review of Christian Wilhelm von Dohm’s On the Civil Improvement of the Jews (1781). Mendelssohn’s remarks are of historical significance as they expose Michaelis’s consequential shift in speaking no longer about Christians and Jews but distinguishing between them as Germans and Jews. This was a rhetorical maneuver that would stick among too many non-Jewish Germans but which Mendelssohn exposed here, incidentally in the same year that the debate on the Enlightenment reached its climax with Mendelssohn and Kant as the most important exponents. The painfully restrained but eloquent rejoinder refuting
Michaelis's argument that Jews would not meet the requirements necessary for a successful kind of "civil improvement" for which Dohm advocated ended on a light note exposing Michaelis's disingenuous point as fallacious that Jews would not be able to contribute with a reliable contingent of troops of their own for the purpose of the defense of the country. The concluding passage of Mendelssohn's rejoinder is worth remembering: "If the fatherland is to be defended, everybody who is called upon to do so must comply. In such cases, men usually know how to modify their convictions and adjust them to their civic duty. One merely has to avoid excessively emphasizing the conflict between the two. In a few centuries the problem will disappear or be forgotten. In this way, Christians have neglected the doctrines of their founders and have become conquerors, oppressors and slave-traders, and in this way, Jews too could be made fit for military service. But this is obvious that they will have to be of the proper height, as Herr Michaelis wisely reminds us, unless they are merely to be used against hostile pygmies and fellow Jews."[4] After all, for the peace-minded Mendelssohn, lacking in bodily stature qualification for the six-feet standard for troops in the Prussian army remained out of reach.

Many of the notes and fragments published in this volume offer a richer picture of the intellectual environment and historical context in which Mendelssohn moved than has been available before. This is also true for the last orphaned batch of letters and fragments of Mendelssohn's correspondence featured in this volume. They occasionally shine new and illuminating light on the context, for example, of the early stages of what was quickly to escalate into the full-blown controversy of the Baruch Spinoza dispute. It is remarkable to note here Mendelssohn's reply to one of the friends who knew Gotthold Lessing intimately, Elise Reimarus, the daughter of the notorious "Anonymous" who had composed the "Fragments" that Lessing brought to fame with the publication of his purported findings from the treasure troves of the Wolfenbüttel library a decade earlier. In her letter, she mentions that her brother was leaning toward keeping “Lessing's Spinozist views” secret (vol. 21.1, p. 157). In his answer, Mendelssohn replies that he might well put his project of composing a portrait of Lessing on hold while first braving the challenge with “the Spinozists (or All-Oners as they prefer to be called)” (p. 158). In short, the problem was less whether Lessing was a Spinozist and more either whether he could be counted among those who touted Spinoza as their patron saint or whether those were correct who, like Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, portrayed him as a menace. In this context, Uebbing's commentary to a lost letter from a Swiss correspondent of Mendelssohn, Isaak Iselin, deserves attention. Uebbing references a letter to Iselin from 1762 by Daniel von Fellenberg who mentions a topic, among other topics, on which Mendelssohn could be invited to write for the Swiss society's inaugural publication “une idée détaillée de la Morale de Spinoza”—a précis of Spinoza's Ethics (1677) (p. 345). The inclusion in Fellenberg's suggestions of possible topics implies that to him, at least, inviting Mendelssohn to publicly discuss Spinoza seemed like a feasible idea.

In the absence of a compass or guide to this Mendelssohn edition as a whole, how are we to make use of it as it seems to reject the reader like Franz Kafka's doorkeeper does? Seen as a philosopher, critic, translator, and interpreter whose emancipatory and challenging thought has become so assimilated to dominant attitudes that his canonical status has settled on his work with the patina of the antiquated, the Jubiläumsausgabe appears like a monument to a venerated sage sublimated into mere commemoration: at worst because it will be forgotten as monuments usually are, at best and hopefully so, because the time might come when this stone quarry style edition might serve as a gateway to a thinker still waiting to be fully appreciated.
It bears remembering that the first initiative to collect and publish the writings of Mendelssohn came from his composer grandson, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, whose trappings of Christian upbringing did not let him forget his Jewish roots. If the interruption of the great Weimar German project of the Jubiläumsausgabe is firmly imprinted in the now complete edition, displaying the mark of discontinuity as the stark reminder of the condition of its recovery, the edition also carries a ray of hope. For at the end of the completion of a print run there is always the expectation of readers and their unexpected readings, readers whose readings will give the dead letter, to stay with Mendelssohn’s parlance, new life in new readings. If the past experience of the Mendelssohn reception might often look like a sobering disappointment, it also highlights the striking staying power of a philosopher whose legacy continues to live because it still awaits its full recognition.

Offering an approach to philosophy, culture, and the study of religion, society, and history that defies compliance with the deep-seated assumptions and expectations that inform the majoritarian discourse, Mendelssohn leads the reader in an unassuming and gentle manner to reconsider the tacit conventions that delimit our views and ability for action. His agenda of advancing a philosophical discourse free from coercion and conceptual straitjackets advances a project of emancipatory thinking that practices what it envisions. But while the liberating thrust of Mendelssohn’s thought is inspiring, it is not easy to come by. It requires a reader willing to engage with the many little spokes the author throws in the reader’s wheel, preventing them from jumping too quickly to conclusions and rest on presumptive results. While Mendelssohn is billed as an easy and easy-to-understand author, his style suggests the very opposite: rich of turns that track the complexity with which thinking contends and stubbornly resistant to hasty reductionism and its attendant decisionism. In Mendelssohn, this attitude is accompanied with a critical reserve when it comes to committing to the concept without qualifications, a position that argues the case of a weak force of thinking. Not unlike Kant’s notion of the critical, this weak force defines thinking as attentive to the limits of its conceptual grasp, which for Mendelssohn remains always necessarily metaphorically mediated.

As a result, Mendelssohn’s writing reflects a style of its own. Attending to the metaphoricity of conceptual thinking and the linguistic capability in its specific and irreducible singularity, his language features the uncommon combination of transparent lucidity and agility. In other words, the elegance and eloquence refrains from any sort of semantic presumption and closure. Mendelssohn’s line of argument does not create blind alleys that close in on you. Instead of making the reader captive to the concept hook, line, and sinker, Mendelssohn’s writing opens to evermore translucency liberating us from the insufficiency imposed by the limits of unreserved submission to the concept. Typecast by historians of philosophy as a disciple of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, Mendelssohn however never shows any sort of obsession with terminology or conceptual distinctions that haunt their thought and that of their students. Classified as a “popular philosopher” or *Popularphilosoph*—a philosopher just good enough for the general public—he was in fact, upon closer examination, considered a philosophers’ philosopher: recognized, among others, by Kant, Hegel, and the Humboldt brothers, whose work testifies to the profound impact of their teacher. Characterized as a reformer of Judaism, his work was nothing less than a move to enable us to comprehend the viability if not trailblazing significance of the Jewish tradition for modernity. Neither false nor a Messiah, Mendelssohn’s impact defies any insinuation of a “mission,” as his signal contribution presents an emancipatory move away from any obsession with destiny as fate.
As meaning is for Mendelssohn to be found in the act of understanding from which it arises as performative, transcending the framework of a hermeneutic exercise, concepts like reform and assimilation betray the erroneous notion of tradition and religion to contain a static self-identical content in need of adjustment and change. Instead, in Mendelssohn, in whose book reform and assimilation do not exist, tradition and the teachings of religion come to life at the moment of their actualization in the present. For Mendelssohn, it is in the act of translation that meaning is produced. For any sort of writing, recording, or other act of symbolization will always fall short of fixing the "content" of a signification that is context and perspective bound, or what we today call a particular positionality of every form of enunciation. His theory of the "living script" spells this out in an unambiguous manner. [5]

While much of this groundbreaking thought has gone past many a scholar, it did not go unobserved by such an attentive reader as Jacques Derrida, for example. Indeed, Mendelssohn’s unsurpassed modernity still remains to be fully recognized. Attention to Mendelssohn’s modernity will address many of the theoretical challenges we continue to labor on in Mendelssohn’s work in eye-opening ways. He does so not by seeking to resolve the irresolvable tasks as if there were a silver bullet in wait, an obsession that absorbs so much of our efforts. Rather his philosophical ingenuity shows in the way he reframes the issues, making room for new and different outlooks and questions. If the strength of a philosopher counts in terms of the kinds of questions they ask rather than the answers they formulate, Mendelssohn’s subtle but consequent reshaping of the practice of philosophical discourse deserves our interest as a critical approach with an emancipatory thrust that might benefit us more than we might care to realize.

Only a more diligent, more attentive, and contextually more informed reading can prove the point. With the completion of the Jubiläumsausgabe with all its delays, its disorienting fragmentation into a confusing arrangement of his work broken down according to fields and subjects as if the very impulse of Mendelssohn’s thought does not consist in an unrelenting defiance against such classification and instead registers the interconnectivity of his thought, we now at least have a fully accessible and richly commented Mendelssohn who grants us no longer exemption from noticing him. With warts and all, including the blemishes this edition might characterize, it nevertheless has become difficult, maybe even to some degree impossible, or so one might hope, to ignore any longer one of the most significant Enlightenment thinkers.

Notes


[4]. In the volume featured here on page 51. I cite the translation found in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., The Jew in the Modern

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