

**Moses Mendelssohn.**

*Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence.*

Trans. and Ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck.

Springer, 2011.

134 pages

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**Moses Mendelssohn.**

*Last Works.*

Trans. and Ed. Bruce Rosenstock.

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The pantheism controversy began when Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi wrote a letter to Elise Reimarus, claiming that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had confessed his Spinozism to Jacobi in a private conversation shortly before he died. Reimarus showed the letter to Moses Mendelssohn, who had been Lessing's closest friend. Mendelssohn was planning to write a biography of Lessing, highlighting the virtues of his character and his unrelenting search for truth. While Mendelssohn acknowledged that Lessing's religious views were less than orthodox, he could not imagine his friend would be attracted to a philosophy like Spinozism, which was synonymous with atheism, fatalism, and immorality. Still less did he think Lessing would make such a potentially damaging confession to Jacobi, with whom he had only recently become acquainted.

Mendelssohn and Jacobi struck up a correspondence through Reimarus, sharing their impressions of Lessing and their understanding of Spinoza. Their exchange was never friendly, but their animosity exploded when Jacobi published his account of the conversation in *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Moses Mendelssohn* (1785). Mendelssohn was furious about the book, because Jacobi had included selections from his letters without permission. Yet this offense paled in comparison to the challenge Jacobi posed to Mendelssohn. Jacobi's work was, in fact, the opening salvo in an assault on reason and philosophy. Spinoza was the initial target of this assault, because he tried to demonstrate that everything follows from a single infinite substance with strict necessity. This led Spinoza to deny free will, because he thought free will was inconsistent with the necessity with which things follow from their natures and from the nature of the one, true, necessary being. Jacobi took this to be the ultimate consequence of the principle of the sufficient reason, which rationalists like Leibniz, Wolff, and Mendelssohn defended. And Jacobi denied this principle with a *salto mortale*. In order to justify this leap, Jacobi appealed to an immediate and certain feeling called faith.

Mendelssohn found Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza incomprehensible. More significant, however, was his rejection of Jacobi's conception of faith. "The noble retreat under the banner of faith which you propose for your own part," Mendelssohn argued, "is totally in the spirit of your religion, which imposes upon you to suppress doubt through faith." Proud of his Judaism, Mendelssohn bragged that his religion made no such demand on him. Clearly incensed, Jacobi replied that all conviction, even the certainty of reason, "must itself derive from faith, and must receive its force from faith alone" (230). Soon, German intellectuals were taking sides for or against Mendelssohn or Jacobi, depending on their views of reason and faith. The enlightened philosophers

in Berlin accused Jacobi of defending blind faith; Jacobi's followers responded, denouncing the enlightenment's naïve faith in reason. Kantians began promoting their philosophy as the reasonable middle ground between Mendelssohn's rationalism and Jacobi's irrationalism, which largely explains the prominence of the critical philosophy during this period.

The story of the pantheism controversy is no doubt familiar to historians of eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosophy. English-speaking scholars are more likely to be familiar with Jacobi's side of the debate, since his *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785) and *David Hume on Faith* (1787) have been available in George di Giovanni's fine translation since 1994. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* (1785). There was, until very recently, no English translation of Mendelssohn's last work. Nor were there discussions in the scholarly literature that did justice to its author or its contents. As a result, *Morning Hours* is only vaguely remembered as a defense of traditional metaphysics. Works belonging to this genre have a reputation for being dogmatic, uncritical, and superficial. Many scholars do not consider them worth reading. However, we should not mistake this dismissive attitude for considered judgment. The obscurity of the *Morning Hours* and Mendelssohn's diminished reputation are largely the result of victors' history. Jacobi's followers promoted the view that Mendelssohn was dogmatic and superficial, because he did not recognize their interpretation of Spinoza, heed their warnings about rationalism, or defer to the certainty of their faith. Kantians repeated many of the same charges in their struggle to overcome the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy that Mendelssohn defended, and which still dominated the universities. Later, the accusations of the irrationalists and the Kantians were written into the historical record by the German idealists, whose perspective on the history of modern philosophy continues to influence our own.

Thankfully, more critical scholars have started to question Mendelssohn's absence from the history of modern philosophy and they are beginning to give him the credit he deserves. One of the most prominent of these scholars is Frederick Beiser, who notes "the injustice of our contemporary image of Mendelssohn" in *The Fate of Reason* (1987), where he also praises Mendelssohn for being "the most modern of all the rationalists." Perhaps more significant than endorsements from scholars like Beiser is the appearance of new editions and translations of Mendelssohn's works, which are making the honesty, integrity, and creativity of his thought available to English-speaking readers. In addition to excellent English translations of *Jerusalem* (1783) by Allan Arkush and Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Writings* (1761/1771) by Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Micah Gottlieb has recently published an important translation of selections from Mendelssohn's writings on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible, including selections from the Lavater affair, Mendelssohn's Preface to the *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, and his commentaries on Ecclesiastes and the Psalms. Gottlieb also includes selections of some of Mendelssohn's writings from the pantheism controversy in his translation, but we can thank Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Corey Dyck, and Bruce Rosenstock for finally making *Morning Hours* available in English in its entirety for the first time. That Dahlstrom and Dyck have done so in one translation and Rosenstock in another is probably a source of frustration to the translators. Yet the editions in which they have published their translations are different in ways that complement one another.

Before highlighting the differences between the Dahlstrom-Dyck edition and the Rosenstock edition, a few words about the text and contents of *Morning Hours* are in order. The text that Dahlstrom, Dyck, and Rosenstock translate derives from the first edition of the *Morgenstunden*, which was published a few months before Mendelssohn's death. This edition includes only the first part of the work Mendelssohn planned, dealing with the existence of God. Mendelssohn's death

prevented him from completing the second part, in which he planned to deal with Jacobi and defend the religion of reason from the irrationalism that Jacobi's faith represented. An indication of what Mendelssohn might have said in the second part of *Morning Hours* is found in a short piece called *To the Friends of Lessing: A Supplement to Mr. Jacobi's Correspondence Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1786). In this essay, Mendelssohn shows that Jacobi's account of his conversations with Lessing misrepresents Lessing's character; that Jacobi's understanding of Spinoza is, at best, confused; and that faith is not required to grasp the truths of reason, morality, or religion. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn came down with a fever the evening he delivered *To the Friends of Lessing* to his publisher. He died a few days later, depriving posterity of the second part of *Morning Hours*. This is, of course, a great loss; yet the first part of the work remains significant, even if it is incomplete.

The first part of *Morning Hours* is divided into two sections, which are further divided into a series of seventeen lectures. In his preliminary remarks, Mendelssohn claims these lectures were delivered at dawn to his son, son-in-law, and another young man. Whether this is true is not particularly significant. What is important is that the lectures allow Mendelssohn to develop his ideas and formulate his arguments. And it is also important that Mendelssohn's lectures downplay the originality of his thought. Instead of presenting *Morning Hours* as a systematic treatise that will bring about a Copernican revolution in metaphysics and change the course of all future philosophy, as Kant had done in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Mendelssohn sets himself a more modest task: he will provide philosophical guidance for young people. It is also significant that Mendelssohn's lectures do not directly engage Jacobi. The pantheism controversy may have been the occasion for Mendelssohn's work, but he did not let his disagreements with Jacobi determine the course his argument would take. In this respect, *Morning Hours* is similar to *Jerusalem*, which was also written in response to a provocation that Mendelssohn could not leave unanswered. Unfortunately, by sparing Jacobi the refutation so many of his arguments so richly deserved and not counting himself among the "great men, who have... advanced themselves to the forefront of metaphysics, Lambert, Tetens, Plattner, and even the all-crushing Kant," Mendelssohn may have played into the hands of his critics.

The seven lectures in the first section of *Morning Hours* confirm Mendelssohn's modesty, which is evident in his tone and in his expositions of the concepts of truth and falsehood; semblance, illusion and error; appearance and existence; sensation and reason; idealism and dualism. However, Mendelssohn's treatment of these concepts is more original and insightful than one would expect, based on the portrait he paints of himself in the preliminary remarks. Mendelssohn's criticisms of the correspondence theory of truth and his response to Hume both deserve special attention, as they may be compared to Kant's transcendental idealism and the confrontation with Hume that Kant stages in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Like Kant, Mendelssohn struggles to make sense of the relationship between representations and objects. Kant concluded that the pure forms of intuition and the pure concepts of the understanding must be the universal and necessary conditions of the possibility of experience, leading him to embrace idealism. Kant's idealism is more modest than Berkeley's idealism or Hegel's idealism, because it holds that our knowledge depends on our cognitive faculties as well as on the external objects that affect us; yet Mendelssohn proposes an even more reasonable solution. He investigates the limitations of our cognitive faculties and finds that reason is prone to error, while sensibility is subject to illusion. These deficiencies affect our knowledge to varying degrees, so our judgments about the correspondence between representations and objects can be more or less certain, just as we can be more or less sure that our senses are not deceiving us, depending on the conditions under which we experience an object, the number of times

we have encountered the object, and so forth. Mendelssohn rejects Hume's skepticism, because the relation of our ideas is governed, not merely by chance, nor solely by custom and habit, but by probability. The validity of induction is also governed by probability, so the likelihood that a judgment is true can be determined by the application of mathematics and logic. In some cases, the likelihood that a judgment is true approaches the absolute certainty of self-evidence. However, Mendelssohn fears that our knowledge of external objects cannot achieve this level of certainty, unless we can confirm the existence of a supreme being, whose goodness would guarantee that our representations correspond to the objects that affect us.

The ten lectures in the second section of *Morning Hours* attempt a demonstration of God's existence. Such a proof is necessary, not only to refute the idealist who denies the certainty of our knowledge of the external world, but also because Mendelssohn rejects any duty to believe in God's existence. Mendelssohn's rejection of the duty to believe is evidence of his uncompromising commitment to the freedom of conscience. He steadfastly maintains that we must seek truth wherever our investigations lead and accept, without bias or prejudice, the conclusions that follow from true premises. Common sense can help check the excesses of speculation, which lead reason into error; yet common sense is not sufficient to determine what is true or real. For this reason, a more ambitious proof is necessary. After considering the virtues of *a priori* and *a posteriori* proofs, Mendelssohn decides to use a combination of the two approaches. He argues that the existence of a necessary being can be inferred from the existence of contingent beings, insofar as the possibility of contingent beings is not sufficient reason for their actuality. Consequently, their actuality must depend on the desire and the approval of a necessary being. The supreme being must consider it *better* for a contingent being to exist than not to exist. Mendelssohn thinks this argument is convincing, but he acknowledges that he must present an *a priori* proof, if he wishes to demonstrate that the necessity of a supreme being is sufficient reason for its existence. It is at this point that Mendelssohn begins to articulate his objections to Spinozism, which leads into a discussion of Lessing's refined pantheism and its consistency with "the religion of reason." Mendelssohn argues that Spinozism is objectionable because it derives all the attributes of finite things from a single infinite substance, making finite things modifications of that substance. Had Spinoza simply conceived of the supreme being as a necessary being which allows every contingent being to exist, Mendelssohn says, he would have had no quarrel with Spinozism. Lessing's Spinozism is rather more robust than this, since he does not think it necessary to maintain that finite beings and infinite beings are separate substances; yet Lessing's pantheism is still acceptable to Mendelssohn, because Lessing finds in Spinoza a distinction between knowledge of the true and knowledge of the good. The latter is called will. And Mendelssohn contends that Lessing thought it was sufficient reason for the actualization of some of God's ideas rather than others, making his pantheism consistent with theism. Leaving further defense of Lessing for the second part of *Morning Hours*, Mendelssohn devotes the last two lectures to the *a priori* proof of God's existence. He uses familiar arguments from Descartes and Leibniz to show that the possibility of a necessary being is sufficient reason for its actuality. Consequently, it is possible and even necessary to infer the existence of the supreme being from the possibility of the concept of such a being.

The Dahlstrom-Dyck translation and the Rosenstock translations are both accurate and readable versions of Mendelssohn's work. In some cases, the translators use different terms to express the same thing – Dahlstrom and Dyck use "thinkable" for Mendelssohn's *denkbar*, while Rosenstock uses "conceivable" – but these differences do not generally affect the sense of Mendelssohn's text. Even Mendelssohn's investigations of the relationship between the possibility and actuality of contingent and necessary beings are rendered intelligible and accessible in both

translations. More significant differences are found in other aspects of the two editions. Dahlstrom and Dyck provide a much shorter introduction than Rosenstock, but Dahlstrom and Dyck's introduction more effectively summarizes Mendelssohn's arguments, giving the reader a better sense of what is distinctive about Mendelssohn's position on the metaphysical and epistemological problems he discusses in *Morning Hours*. On the other hand, Rosenstock does a better job of situating *Morning Hours* in its historical context. His introduction provides a more detailed account of Mendelssohn's conflict with Jacobi and his relation to Kant. Rosenstock also includes a translation of *To the Friends of Lessing* in his edition, which gives readers an indication of what Mendelssohn might have said in the second part of *Morning Hours*, had he lived long enough to publish it. Strangely, while Rosenstock has translated the remarks and additions to *Morning Hours* by J.A.H. Reimarus, and has made them available online, he does not include them in his edition. They are, however, included in the Dahlstrom-Dyck edition, which further illustrates the complementarity of the two translations. This extends to the differences between the editorial apparatuses of the two editions as well. The Dahlstrom-Dyck edition contains an extensive glossary, which will help scholars compare the translation with Mendelssohn's German, as well as the works of his contemporaries. Rosenstock does not include a glossary or lexicon, but he has included more extensive explanatory notes, which helpfully track references to other works and make important connections to Spinoza, Lessing, Kant, Jacobi, and the pantheism controversy. These differences are significant, but their significance will differ for different readers. In the end, I expect that anyone interested in Mendelssohn and *Morning Hours* will find one, or the other, or both of these translations very appealing.

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