

# Inside, The Real: Moses Mendelssohn's Speculative Realism

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In his influential book *After Finitude* (2008), Quentin Meillassoux argues for a new absolute, up-to-date with the 21<sup>st</sup> century—absolute contingency. There is only one thing we can know to be true completely independently of us and our modes of representing or constituting the world around us—that there is no underlying reason for being (factuality), and, therefore, nothing to guarantee any sort of necessity, except the necessity of contingency. In the jargon of Western backpackers to India, “everything is possible.” What makes Meillassoux’s book representative of a larger and rather disorienting moment in philosophy is the way he here captures an underlying desire common to many contemporaries: the desire to break out of the confinements of what he labels “correlationism”—the modern inability to think being outside its correlation with thinking, the inability, that is, to explore being as such, in and of itself, in its utter indifference to human experience:

For it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere. (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7)

Of course, this paradoxical desire for an experience beyond experience is nothing new in itself. It has characterized much of post-critical, that is, post-Kantian philosophy. Whatever else may be Kant's accomplishments as a philosopher, he has determined the limits of our experience, providing a powerful, at times overbearing, reality principle. It is hard to transgress the limits of Kantian experience without being labeled naïve, not yet of age, or too old and demented to realize what's what.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not one accepts or rejects Kant's account of the limits of human, finite experience, there has been a felt need, since Kant, to show how we might step over these boundaries, without clinging to an innocence forever lost.

With the major exception of Hegel,<sup>2</sup> rebellions against the strictures of Kantian experience have in the past usually found

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<sup>1</sup> There is a thread connecting Walter Benjamin's earliest reflections on "experience" as a suffocating instrument of super-ego control, and his attempts to expand the Kantian concept of experience. In the early essay ("Experience") he writes: "What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us: this above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted, he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right... yes, this is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality" (see Benjamin 1996, pp. 3-5). It can be shown that, for Benjamin, Kantian experience fails to distinguish itself from this common, "philistine" notion. It is a kind of universalized philistinism, a position anyone can occupy, only to see there is nothing of value to see there. As such, it cannot serve as a standard of all possible experience (see *ibid.*, pp. 100-10).

<sup>2</sup> The status of experience in Hegel's philosophy is a vexed topic, the treatment of which would far exceed the limits of this essay. For this reason, we shall restrict ourselves here to the following schematic remark. Why not include Hegel among the attempts discussed below to broaden the Kantian experience? Even though art remains for Hegel an important albeit restricted realm, already the very title of his first and best known major book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, seems to suggest that spirit itself is an object of experience. However, the very same title lends itself to a significantly different reading, according to which spirit is not so much an object of experience, but its subject. This sets the status of experience in Hegel apart from the below-mentioned line of post-Kantian thought, for it, at a minimum, opens up the possibility not so much of a richer, fuller concept of experience, but of a different bearer of experience—the absolute.

Kant's allegiance with scientific experience too reductive, incapable of accounting for the totality of our life worlds, and have often turned to the realm of art to provide an alternative (Schelling, Heidegger). In a nutshell, Kant's notion of experience was deemed too restrictive, incapable of capturing the fullness of experience. The novelty of Meillassoux's move lies in the reversal of this stratagem; for Meillassoux, Kantian and post-Kantian experience is not scientific enough, it remains all too committed to sense and understanding, to our lived experience, and dares not the adventurous path opened up by modern science, which allows us to achieve knowledge that we no longer understand.

With his case for absolute or necessary contingency, Meillassoux strikes right at the heart of Kantian experience. For the Kantian concept of experience is premised on the impossibility for our understanding to forego the distinction between possibility and actuality. The sense that Kantian philosophy had quite literally conditioned our possible experience, imposing severe restrictions on what counts as experience, and allowing very little to transcend these restrictions, has to do with the limitation of the possible to what can be actualized by empirical experience.<sup>3</sup> Possible experience, for Kant, has to carry within it a distinction between possibility and actuality (Goldman 2012, p. 112). Hence,

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<sup>3</sup> The ontological status of Kantian sensibility is a complex and ambivalent matter. On the one hand, Kant entirely subverts the traditional association of sensibility with passive, formless content, instead endowing sensibility with a formative power. As Simon Hajdini puts it, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* “[s]ensibility is no longer understood as a mere *a posteriori* appendage to the Understanding, but is rather conceived of as an autonomous producer of representations (of space and time) as irreducible to the categorical, i.e. intellectual, synthesis of experience. Sensibility enters the stage as a formative principle, as pure sensibility, delivered of its empirical character and of its formlessness, and thus also of its reduction to the mere receptivity of the senses” (Hajdini 2015, pp. 87-88). According to Hajdini, this conception of sensibility proved too difficult for Kant to stick to, and in the course of the *Critique*, receptivity becomes the sole irreducible characteristic of sensibility.

our discursive intellect is limited precisely to the extent that, for us, experience needs to be realized, actualized by empirical content given from without (in distinction from the hypothetical, archetypical intellect that forgoes these distinctions, but must remain an idea of reason, thinkable, even necessary as a regulative principle, but not an object of knowledge). Kantian empirically possible experience is limited to the potentially empirically given. The Kantian possible is thus possible actuality and precludes any conception of possibility that would be formally severed from empirical actuality.

At this level, the current rebellion against Kant does point in the right direction; for his notion of possibility seems clearly, in this light, not to be possible enough, so to speak, in a sense reducible to actuality. “There’s nothing you can know that can’t be known,” seems to be the message of Kantian experience, to take a theme from The Beatles.<sup>4</sup> But then it is not so much, as Meillassoux argues, ancestral claims that cannot be accounted for—scientific claims about a time before human consciousness,

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Simon Hajdini for the following formulation of this dimension of Kantian experience: “From this point of view let us now again take a look at the structure of the Kantian analogy. If it is true that I can only gain *a priori* knowledge of the relation of a given *x* to a *y* as its effect, but not the knowledge of this *y* itself, this can also be articulated in the following way: the effect can only be a discovery, since it cannot be constructed, but *a discovery I can seek for*, a discovery I can discover (*ein Fund, den ich (auf)suchen kann*). And the reason I can seek for it is that I have the *a priori* rule of seeking for it in experience, a rule that is nothing other than the law of change, of the necessary connection of cause and effect. And because I have the rule for seeking it, what I eventually discover will always be the effect of some determinate cause and thus never a discovery of something I never sought after, or more precisely: never a find that could not be found, never a discovery that would not be consistent with the *a priori* rule for seeking it in experience. *In experience I can only discover what can be sought after*. Thus, no discovery is blind, nothing is blindly discovered, and everything is discovered in accordance with the principle of the search itself. (In experience) one cannot discover anything that would oppose the rule of the search. That is to say: in experience there are no surprises” (Hajdini 2012, unpublished manuscript).

before human life, etc. — but the very capacity of science to make truly new discoveries, discoveries that change the scope of what is possible. To know the unknown is not so much a matter of access to a time or dimension independent of our experience, but a far more radical notion of our knowledge and experience effectively changing reality as such.<sup>5</sup>

But such a change in the scope of the possible is hardly accountable by Meillassoux. In the first *Critique*, Kant entertains the notion of “absolute possibility,” or the possible “in every respect” (Kant 1998, p. 332). As if anticipating resistance to the strictness of his notion of possible experience, Kant explores the notion of a non-empirical conception of possibility that is utterly severed from actuality, precisely in order to distinguish the underlying criteria of the critical examination of cognition. Why not posit a different conception of experience than that of critical philosophy, one that is not limited to the formal conditions of empirical givenness and that would thus span the region of thought unlimited by any criteria of its actualization? Why not allow experience to transcend the strictures of the Kantian conditions of possibility?

Absolute possibility, unlike empirical possibility, would be essentially possible, inasmuch as the condition of its possibility would be unattainable; hence, its possibility could not be transformed by actualization. The Kantian empirically possible, by contrast, is transformed when the condition with which its concept formally agrees is empirically given, and when what was possible becomes actual. What is empirically possible is actualized when its condition is empirically given to sensibility, but absolute possibility would not be able to be so transformed; it would be possible without the chance of the condition of its possibility being overturned; it would be “possible in all respects”

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<sup>5</sup> See Zupančič 2017, pp. 77-83. Zupančič here develops the paradoxical notion of an independent being created as such, as independent, at the moment of its discursive creation, or scientific discovery.

without the chance of its becoming actual. Such a conception of possibility, “can in no way be of empirical use, rather it belongs solely to reason, which goes beyond all possible empirical use of the understanding” (Goldman 2012, p. 112).

The problem with absolute possibility, for Kant, is that it in principle cannot transition to actuality; in lacking conditions of possibility, it also lacks conditions for its actualization. We might choose to ignore this as a Kantian clinging to our limitation—who knows what is possible for absolute possibility? Maybe it has criteria for actualization that forego our understanding? Perhaps, but this would mean, minimally, that for us it would make no discernible difference, and is therefore of no empirical use. To paraphrase Kafka, there is infinite possibility, only not for us.<sup>6</sup> In other words, absolute contingency, the assertion that, in principle everything can be different than it is, leaves us with no instrument to detect such a difference, should it occur (see Johnston 2011). We seem to be caught in a dilemma; either we accept the restriction of the realm of the possible to Kant’s transcendental conditions, or we adopt a notion of the possible that seems to intrinsically resist any detectable actualization.<sup>7</sup> Either way, the sense of the possible itself seems diminished, either reduced to our empirical reality, in principle given to experience, or utterly severed from it. Possibility either hovers too close to the ground of given empirical

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<sup>6</sup> The best-known version of Kafka’s original line is found in Benjamin’s essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death.” The quote appears in the context of a conversation with Max Brod that began with “present day Europe and the decline of the human race.” In reply to Brod’s attempt to locate a dimension of hope in Kafka, Kafka is quoted as saying, “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us” (see Benjamin 2002, p. 798). Benjamin is quoting here from an essay written by Brod in German in 1921. A slightly altered recounting of the conversation can be found in Brod 1960, p. 75: “Plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us.”

<sup>7</sup> Agamben’s attempts at recovering a sense of the possible not reducible to its actualization, while conducted in an “archeological” fashion, tracing the problem back to Aristotle, suffer from the same problem (see Agamben 1999).

actuality, or drifts in the infinite universe of the unrealizable. Is it possible, if that word still has any meaning, to expand the Kantian limitations on possible experience from within, as it were, without losing touch with experience and without straying too far in the open sky of the absolute? Must we dismiss the desire to go beyond the strictures of Kantian experience and accept our transcendental horizon as the ultimate reality principle, or do we just need a different dream?

Alenka Zupančič has analyzed the dream element of Meillassoux's project:

[S]ince Descartes we have lost the great outside, the absolute outside, the real, and have become prisoners of our subjective or discursive cage. The only outside we are dealing with is the outside posited or constituted by ourselves or different discursive practices. And there is a growing discomfort, claustrophobia, in this imprisonment, this constant obsession with ourselves, this inability to ever get out of the external inside that we have thus constructed. There is also a political discomfort that is put into play here: that feeling of frustrating impotence, the impossibility of really changing anything, of absorbing the small and big disappointments of recent and not-so-recent history. Hence the certain additional redemptive charm of a project that promises again to break out into the great outside, to reinstate the real in its absolute dimension, and to ontologically ground the possibility of radical change. (Zupančič 2017, p. 76)

This fantasy of the great outside serves as a protective shield from its obverse anxiety, as fantasies do, saving us “from that little yet annoying bit of the outside which is at work here and now, persistently nagging, preventing any kind of discursive cage from safely closing upon itself.” (Ibid.)

Meillassoux's vision offers a way to renew the project of German idealism—to account for a post-critical absolute—but with the non-intuitive coupling of a strong commitment to scientifically informed “realism,” along with an equally strong allegiance to the fundamental experience attributed to pre-critical thinking,

and supposedly lost with Kant, and never recovered by any of his followers.

But a way forward was actually shown long ago. In order to move forward, we will now look back—to the thought of Kant’s contemporary, a figure who has come to embody, in the history of philosophy, the outdated, pre-critical, dogmatic “school” philosophy: Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn’s underlying figure of thought—the frame of his fantasy—is not that of the great outdoors, but rather that of an internal exteriority, the absolute within.

### *Morning Hours*

Mendelssohn’s *Morning Hours* (1785) is a historical object, not only because it has been thus classified, but also because it bares the marks of the historical conditions of its composition. Intended as a systematic presentation of his views on metaphysics, all in the service of proving the existence of God, it was composed in part as a response to Mendelssohn’s correspondence with Friedrich Jacobi regarding the question whether, and in what sense, Lessing was a Spinozist. As this private correspondence became public, and scandalous, it became known as the “pantheism controversy,” a public debate whose influence on the ensuing developments of German culture and philosophy is today well established (see Beiser 1987; Henrich 2008; and Franks 2005). Jacobi’s interpretation of Spinozism as the pinnacle of rational, naturalistic thought, leaving no room for the spontaneity required for a creator God and human freedom, and reducing subjectivity to a powerless witness of a mechanistically determined world, posed a challenge to the intellectual optimism of the Enlightenment, forcing a choice between rational knowledge and freedom.

In the scholarship, Mendelssohn’s role in the affair is restricted to its private aspect—the debate about Lessing (Beiser 1987).



Jacobi's dismissive attitude towards his opponent (whom he once admired) has stuck, and most interpreters have considered Mendelssohn incapable of understanding the depth of Jacobi's challenge. But it might be that Mendelssohn's very blindness to the challenge makes him of continuing relevance to philosophical concerns today. Mendelssohn's view of contingency is what made him immune to the threat of Spinozism, and also what led him to develop a notion of the absolute as that which, from within, prevents self-enclosure.

### *Contingencies*

Jacobi is often credited with realizing, in his interpretation of Spinoza, the nihilistic consequences of the elimination of final causes from reality, rendering our universe a contingent, mechanistically determined one.

Mendelssohn saw no such threat in Spinoza. First, Mendelssohn notes, quite presciently, that Spinozism seems to lend itself just as easily to causally mechanistic accounts as it does to more vitalistic accounts,<sup>8</sup> as indeed would be championed by Herder and later Schelling. More importantly, it fails to account for contingency.

Mendelssohn distinguishes between two senses of the contingent. What we call "accident," he says, aims to cancel intentional, final causes. What we call "chance" is more radical, as it aims to cancel efficient causes as well. This sense of contingency only fully emerges on the plane of history, rather than nature, and may indeed be what distinguishes the two. While we cannot

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<sup>8</sup> Spinozism is a "two-headed Hydra. One of these heads bears the heading: *Everything is one*; the other: *One is everything*" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 84). That is why, Mendelssohn notes, Spinozism has been attractive to both "atheists" and "enthusiasts," or "mystics."

fully expound Mendelssohn's thinking here, it is possible to say, rather schematically, that history for him is not "outside" nature—rather, we could say it supplies the frame where the eternal and contingent (here understood as empirically contingent) aspects of reality can intersect in a significant way. An event, a real break between before and after, that introduces the "new," Mendelssohn argues elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> is ontologically inseparable from its subjectivization.

While in the early stages of his discussion Mendelssohn seems to subscribe to the view that contingency is ultimately an illusion,<sup>10</sup> arising from the limits of our finite (in Kantian terms, discursive) intellect, he breaks with this view on a decisive point. Contingency, he argues, cannot be grasped in its conceptual opposition to the necessary, for such an opposition "reifies" contingency itself, and thus makes it "pass into its opposite," to use an appropriate Hegelian anachronism, and become itself necessary:

[T]he contingent being is not on hand on account of the fact that its dependence on a necessary being makes the opposite unthinkable, for then it would, indeed, have to be necessary and immutable itself. What follows in a necessary way from a necessary truth must itself be necessary. Thus, the reason for a contingent being's existence or its dependence upon the necessary cannot be found in its property of being an object of knowledge. If this were the case, then it would not itself come to actuality merely *somewhere* and *at some time*, but instead would necessarily remain immutably the same for all time; for, as an object of knowledge, it is immutable and eternal. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 70)

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<sup>9</sup> In his *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn distinguishes between eternal, contingent, and temporal truths. Interestingly, temporal truths—Mendelssohn's name for events—do not fall under either rubric, they are neither eternal nor contingent, here understood as empirical. What constitutes this domain is precisely the gap between the eternal and the empirically contingent (see Mendelssohn 1983, p. 91).

<sup>10</sup> For a historical account of contingency, focused on it being an illusion, see Hacking 1990.

One could formulate this by saying that the contingent is necessarily contingent, as it resists the conceptual closure of the necessary. Contingency in the more radical sense, for Mendelssohn, resides in the gap between the conceptual “whatness” or essence, and “thatness” or existence—in other words, to highlight its paradoxical status: contingency resides in the gap between contingency and necessity.

We can consider this Mendelssohn’s first “speculative” move: what for Kant is characteristic of our finite, discursive mode of understanding, the gap we encounter between our concept of a thing and its empirical make up, supplied by intuition, given from “outside,” is for Mendelssohn the very definition of contingent being as such. The gap between a thing and its notion is not an epistemological limitation imposed on our understanding but the very ontological nature of anything contingent.

This notion of contingency becomes clear in Mendelssohn’s rejection of the “refined” Spinozism he attributes to Lessing. Mendelssohn’s notion of refined Spinozism is the idea that the Spinozistic ontological picture is plausible as a picture of the ideal existence in God’s mind, the world as a realm of non-actualized potentiality. “Actually existing” reality is constituted by the gap between the ideal and the real, between the conceptual space of possibility and the empirically given.

It is the gap between the ideal and the real that Mendelssohn takes to be fundamental; the world we inhabit, in its actuality, is “the best” in a very specific and somewhat paradoxical sense—in that it can be better. And it is precisely in this, in reality “falling short” of the ideal, failing to rise to its own notion, that Mendelssohn sees divine providence—God has left room for improvement, for perfection.

“Falling short” of the ideal reality that is in God means for Mendelssohn that contingent reality is under-determined, not fully actualized and articulated, as it is in God’s mind. While this gap between existence and essence is characteristic of all

contingent being, human beings for Mendelssohn in some sense are the gap, they inhabit it. Mendelssohn notes that in Hebrew, which was his first philosophical language, there is no word for contingency, and the word used to translate it carries almost the opposite meaning, that of a happy encounter, a mark of providence—an opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Cogito's Shadow*

There is one argument in *Morning Hours* for which Mendelssohn, uncharacteristically, makes a claim to originality. He constructs a proof for the existence of God based on the cogito's shadow, so to speak, on the immediately given absence of self-knowledge, or what we might call the argument from the unconscious:

I will attempt to conduct this proof in another way as well, in a way that, as far as I know, no philosopher has touched on. // In addition to the immediate feeling of my own existence [...], 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. This observation is, it seems to me, no less undeniably evident [than the consciousness of my own existence]. As a perception of the inner sense, it has its subjective certainty and since, with respect to myself, my own I is also the subject of thoughts, the predicate “immediately known” can be attributed to me as well. That I do not know everything that pertains to my existence can be no deception of the senses, no illusion. For

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<sup>11</sup> Mendelssohn 2011, p. 65. Mendelssohn seems to have had in mind the Hebrew word *mizdamen*, which is a reflexive form of the root *zmn*, which means time, and carries in its semantic horizon the sense of invitation or summoning, as well as chance occurrence. It also carries the sense of the opportune.

in the first place we are not transposing something known internally onto an external object; we have no intention of connecting the make-up of one's sense with that of others, of inferring from *often* to *always*, all of which were sources of sensory illusion [...]. In fact, it would not be possible for either our body or our soul to be on hand if they were merely what we distinctly observe of them. (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 103)

Note, first, Mendelssohn's move from less to more, from the lack in our knowledge to the assertion that there is more to know: "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." The gap that is characteristic of contingent beings, becomes for Mendelssohn not simply an object of experience, but the very site of experience. Therein lies the crux, easily overlooked, of Mendelssohn's argument, as well as his implicit reception of Kantian ideas. *Morning Hours*, which was composed in part as Mendelssohn's response to the pantheism controversy, was also a response to Kant's critical philosophy, as was evident to contemporaries, including Kant, but is no longer evident today. Some were willing to go further, so far as even to suggest, in clear opposition to Mendelssohn's proclaimed intentions, that *Morning Hours* had not only come to terms with the Kantian critique but, in fact, offered a decisive response to it.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Mendelssohn understands Descartes's achievement—the certainty of the "cogito"—in a way that departs from Descartes himself, and is best clarified by Kant's critique and development of this certainty as that of the transcendental "I" or

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<sup>12</sup> As may be gathered from a letter written to Kant by Ludwig Heinrich Jakob, his disciple and admirer in Halle: "Mendelssohn deserves to have his book favorably received [...]. But right away I heard some triumphal songs [...] that celebrate a victory that Herr Mendelssohn, according to his own statements, never even had in mind. Yes, one could even make out from certain reviews that this book is thought to have dealt a serious blow to the Kantian critique" (Kant 1999, p. 246).

the unity of apperception. In recasting the “cogito” as the unity of apperception, Kant famously criticized Descartes for privileging the certainty of the “I” as content or object of a thought (cogito as my thinking of myself), and had put the focus on the formal, if implicit, self-consciousness involved in cognition regardless of its object. Since the I’s spectral presence accompanies all cognitions as a formal condition of the unity of apperception, the “I” that appears as an object of knowledge has no privileged status, and is to be known, like all other objects of experience, as receiving its material from the outside, that is, empirically. In contrast, the transcendental “I” itself, as a formal condition of experience, is not an object of experience.

Like Kant, Mendelssohn notes that the certainty of the “I” lies not in the particular act of consciousness (“I think”), but in this I’s shadowy, or implicit, underlying presence in all cognitive acts broadly construed:

The philosopher [Descartes] could have said with equal right: I hope, therefore I am; I fear, therefore I am, and so forth. Only, according to his theory, all those alterations that transpire within us possess the common characteristic that he calls “thought.” He thus included them all in the general phrase, *I think*. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 29)

While, like Kant, Mendelssohn sees the certainty of the cogito not in its content but in its form, he simply attributes that insight to Descartes himself. It seems that for Mendelssohn, novelty in philosophy depends on treating the “old” as already addressing the challenges of the “new.” Consequently, he subtly denies the possibility of deriving existence from this certainty, just as Kant does, and instead offers a deceivably commonsensical definition of existence:

And existence? If we begin from ourselves, as we must necessarily do in all our knowledge, then *existence* is merely a common word

for *acting* and *undergoing*. We are conscious of acting or undergoing something every moment of our life and the characteristic that these two have in common we call “existence.” I have concepts and sensations, therefore I am a conceptualizing and sensing being. I act or undergo something, therefore I am actually on hand. (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 29-30)

Note that existence belongs on neither side—neither in acting nor in undergoing, neither the active nor the passive, neither in thinking nor in substance. What is beginning to be teased out here is a paradoxical notion of existence (*Daseyn*), which is understood neither as a “whatness,” or essence, nor as a “thatness,” or pre-conceptual existence, but lies rather in their nonrelation, as the very locus of their codependence or coarticulation. It is, as Mendelssohn so disarmingly puts it, a “common word” for what, as he will proceed to argue in his original proof, is in human beings never unified. What thinking and being have in common is the gap separating them.

For Mendelssohn, as for many post-Kantian philosophers, the idea of the thing in itself, apart from our perspective, is unsustainable, and yet, he also asserts it as a real, if shadowy experience. While as a rule, in principle, there can be no meaning to a thing that does not accord with a concept, that is precisely what the fundamental experience of subjectivity attests to. It is an exception where no exceptions are permissible or thinkable:

[The] agreement between a thing and [its] concept knows no exception [...]. // My own existence is undeniable for me. It is equally impossible for me to deny the fact that inherent in my actual existence are characteristics and constitutive features that I do not consciously know and that even those of which I am conscious do not by far have in my conception the perfection that pertains to them in the thing. [...] In a word, between concept and thing, if I look merely at my knowledge of myself, the most perfect harmony is not to be found, the necessity of which we have just proven. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 106)

It is first and foremost in our self-relation (or rather, self-non-relation)—that is, in the discrepancy we sense as a need, a demand, or an urge for realization and articulation—that we encounter the thing in itself.

### *The Stammering Subject*<sup>13</sup>

If Descartes vacated all phenomenal contents in order to reach the purely formal but certain position of the cogito, Mendelssohn begins his own, original journey to God by taking hold of that very void. What matters for Mendelssohn in Descartes is not so much the “I think” as the hollowed out, formal “I.” The very assertion of the “I” as the site of enunciation opens a gap that all subsequent enunciations cannot quite suture. Whatever follows “I” hovers in indeterminacy. It is crucial for Mendelssohn that this lack of knowledge or indeterminacy is not merely a psychological,

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<sup>13</sup> Mendelssohn had in fact developed, without using the word, a concept of the unconscious. In the 1780s he was engaged in the establishment of Karl Philipp Moritz’s magazine *Know thyself, or Magazine of experiential psychology, a reader for the learned, edited with support of some friends of the truth by Karl Philipp Moritz*. An important study that Mendelssohn contributed to the magazine was occasioned by a pathological experience reported by the famous Spalding, who had been attacked by a sudden incapacity to write or speak; he felt a “tumultuous disorder” in one particular region of his mind, though his capacity for speculative thinking functioned properly as before. Whereas Spalding had tried to account for his problem in purely physiological terms, Mendelssohn offered a psychological account. In a manner that vaguely anticipates elements of Freudian thinking, Mendelssohn explained the stuttering as resulting of “unwelcome ideas” that were “strangers” in the soul. Mendelssohn’s essay here introduced, with remarkable emphasis, the concept of the “unconscious” in two senses of the term: 1) as the zero of awareness in purposive actions that, as a result of expertise, proceed almost mechanically; 2) as repressed (“dislodged”) ideas that, being as yet “unwelcome,” have been consigned to oblivion but become effective in dreams. The recalcitrant character of these ideas and the disturbing effect they have on the proper functioning of the ego, certainly call to mind key Freudian formulations (see Altmann 1973, pp. 668-71).



empirical state (susceptible to deception and the illusion of the senses), but is understood along the lines of the Kantian gap between the transcendental “I,” the condition of possibility for the unity of apperception, and the empirical, psychological “I”; it is a formal condition, a result of the gap between the “I” and subsequent predicates, and is therefore “immediately known,” as certain as the Cartesian cogito. Indeed, it is the very form of the “I,” stripped of all phenomenality and presuppositions, taken as its own content. The space of reflection is not opened up by self-transparency, but rather by the formal inaccessibility of the subject to itself. It is here, at the inaccessible heart of selfhood that Mendelssohn uncovers the meaning of the in-itself.<sup>14</sup>

While not reducible to empirical, psychological experience, it is important to Mendelssohn that this formal aspect is not a mere abstraction from experience, but rather accompanies everyday experience elusively yet palpably, just as the unity of apperception does. Mendelssohn both radicalizes and threatens Kant’s transcendental/empirical divide by, so to speak, internalizing it even further. The very gap between the “I” that thinks and is itself as an object of experience is taken as an immediate, if elusive, object of experience, a kind of background experience. It is what accompanies immediacy by always eluding it, the elusive immediacy of the immediately elusive. In other words, it is the paradoxical empirical experience of our abstract, formal, transcendental aspect, which can never become an object of empirical knowledge. What arises here is the strange materiality of the medium of experience, its density. What this dimension of experience aims at can be rendered by borrowing Walter Benjamin’s formula: it is what is experienced *in*, rather than *through* experience.<sup>15</sup> A dimension of

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<sup>14</sup> Mendelssohn here goes a long way towards clarifying Lacan’s identification of his barred subject with the Cartesian cogito. On the Lacanian barred subject as inaccessibility “as such,” see Žižek 2016, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> This is the key distinction in Benjamin’s essay “On Language as Such and The Language of Man”: the distinction between what is communicated

experience which does not constitute a special empirical content, or reach outside the bounds of experience, but is rather parasitically attached to all experience, and thus exceeds the strictures of experience from within.<sup>16</sup>

### *Surplus Knowledge*

For Mendelssohn, to know oneself as unknown is not merely to determine the limits of (self)knowledge, to declare “this is as far as one can go”; it is already to assert the reality of a privation. The knowledge that consciousness is barred is not merely a statement of limits, a recognition of the limits of human understanding, but also, at the same time, the assertion of the unknown as real, or rather, as we shall see, as something to be realized.

This is why Mendelssohn draws very different conclusions from this gap at the heart of subjectivity he discovers—with the aid of Kant—in the Cartesian subject. While Kant might be right in assigning an empirical status to the knowledge I do possess about myself, the absence of knowledge is not easily confined to the empirical. While it might make sense to subject all contents of thought to the same criteria of understanding, the non-relation at the heart of selfhood raises the issue of the ontological status of self-knowledge, and by extension, of knowledge in general. The crucial but subtle point advanced by Mendelssohn here is that the very pursuit of (self)knowledge is premised and dependent on its inaccessibility/impossibility—self-knowledge is produced in the attempt to overcome the gap constitutive of it. It is a surplus

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*through* language and what is communicated *in* language. The former is what we use language for as a means of communication, the contents conveyed by language, whereas the latter is the spiritual essence of language (see Benjamin 1996, pp. 62-74).

<sup>16</sup> A structure comparable to that of the Freudian drive in relation to the biological instinct.

knowledge produced by the very formal detours in the subject's effort to attain knowledge.<sup>17</sup> The question regarding the conditions of possibility of this dimension of knowledge thus leads Mendelssohn to his "proof" of God's existence. From the inaccessibility of the self, Mendelssohn argues, "it obviously follows that an entity must be on hand which represents to itself in the most distinct, purest, and most thoroughgoing manner everything that pertains to my existence [...]. There must, therefore, be *one* thinking being, *one* intellect that thinks in the most perfect way the sum-total of all possibilities as possible and the sum-total of all actualities as actual" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 104).

There are two dimensions to the function God fulfils in Mendelssohn's proof that need to be distinguished. First, there is God as what Lacan called "the subject supposed to know." In more philosophical terms, this is the notion of God as the site of knowledge, a necessary presupposition of the pursuit of knowledge. God is the bearer of the knowledge we lack. Why can't that site just be "objective reality," the world out there? Well, it can, of course, but it will precisely be a divinized "objective reality," a necessary presupposition one cannot effectively doubt. God here is the name of the guarantee that "the truth is out there."

Second, and this is a significant point we cannot here elaborate on sufficiently, God makes knowledge possible in the emphatic sense of the term, by guaranteeing that there is something *to* know, that is, he is responsible not for the actualization of possible knowledge but rather for its virtualization or potentiation, for maintaining that knowledge foreclosed from immediately given reality. It is only in this minimal temporal gap that a project of knowledge can set forth, relying not only on the truth being "out there" in the literal sense, but also in the figurative, on it being "out there," non-trivial, perhaps even slightly mad. For

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<sup>17</sup> On the logic of surplus enjoyment and how it relates to surplus knowledge, see Žižek 2017.

the truth to be discoverable it must also be held in suspense, not immediately given in its full scope. The truth, as Lacan put it, is half-said (Lacan 1998, p. 92).

*From Conditions of Possible Experience  
to the Experience of Possibility*

Mendelssohn's conditions of possible experience thus push against the Kantian limitation of experience to the potentially empirically given, since the knowledge he is after only becomes possible by virtue of its impossibility, its structural reclusion from the empirically given. This kind of knowledge is not merely transformed from possible to actual knowledge by "filling in" with empirical material, sensibility, what was formally possible; it is actualized against the background of its formal inaccessibility, changing the conditions of possibility themselves in actualization. The transition from possibility to actuality, Kant's yardstick for a serviceable notion of the possible, is retained. But in this transition, the scope of the possible is expanded beyond the empirically given. There can be a true discovery, the creation of new knowledge, that is nonetheless not trivial, not just waiting there to be discovered. While not everything is possible, as Meillassoux would have it, one thing is, perhaps the only one that really matters: the impossible.

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