Mendelssohn and Kant: Ethics and Aesthetics

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Abstract

Among other points of disagreement, Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant held contradictory opinions on Judaism. While Mendelssohn argued that Judaism held no views that were contrary to reason and considered its basic tenets both rational and universal, Kant dismissed Judaism as a “statutory faith,” a legalism devoid of morality. Looking at these two opinions in contrast and in light of each thinker’s respective theories of ethics and aesthetics provides an opportunity to reinstate Mendelssohn’s prominence as a rational philosopher and innovative theorist of religion.

There is an apocryphal story of Kant’s first meeting with Mendelssohn in Königsberg in 1771. Mendelssohn came into Kant’s classroom—a famously hostile place for anyone deemed an outsider—and stood stoically while the students hooted and hollered, whistled and stomped, and mocked and baited. When Kant swept in and stole back the attention, no one paid the short, ugly hunchbacked Jew any mind. But, he reasserted himself after the lecture, pushing through the student horde to approach Kant. After a moment, Kant embraced him as a new friend.

I always imagined Kant as a tall, towering, Teutonic intellectual who swooped down to hug the undersized Mendelssohn. But it turns out that Kant was short—as short as Mendelssohn—and the scene was of two small-framed men clasping one another in the middle of a lecture hall. If there was a giant in the exchange it would have been Mendelssohn; The Critique of Pure Reason was still a decade away and Mendelssohn’s reputation throughout Europe—as a philosopher, as a Jew, as an anomalous mix of both—was already well established. By changing the perspective of their meeting, Mendelssohn becomes the active protagonist who bestowed honor on Kant by his visit and turned Kant into the recipient of an elder, more prominent colleague’s attention. Doing so shifts the assessment of their respective prominence. However, the power granted to Kant—and the reduction of Mendelssohn’s importance—by

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later generations has defined our evaluation of each thinker’s theories. What happens if we return to Mendelssohn as a guide rather than Kant?

Among their disparate views are their contradictory opinions of Judaism as a religion capable of reason. Mendelssohn famously argued that Judaism is not only reasonable, it is the exemplar of reason itself; Kant just as famously dismissed it as static, anachronistic and mindless. Kant and Mendelssohn’s differences trace a fundamental distinction in the role each individual can play in his or her own religiosity. While both thinkers attach importance to a person’s action vis-à-vis religious ritual, they describe and value that activity very differently. Where Mendelssohn defined a Jew’s enactment of Jewish ritual as rational, relevant to moral self-fashioning, and an exemplar of a reason-based language that required mental agility and freedom of choice, Kant cast that same ritual behavior as an inherently concretized, non-rational legalism, and a hold-over from ancient days. Looking closely at those two positions in conversation with each thinker’s respective theories of ethics and aesthetics provides an opportunity to reassert Mendelssohn’s prominence.

Kant’s essay *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793)—written 10 years after Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem, Or On Religious Power and Judaism* appeared— influenced the conceptual understanding of religion in general and damaged the philosophical assumptions about Judaism in particular. Using morality as the measure of religion, Kant contended that Judaism exemplified a primitive faith that perpetuated mistaken notions of obligation, society, and law. Foregrounding his concept of moral autonomy, the rational ability to choose the good for its own sake and regarding this choice as a compelling moral duty, Kant distinguished between the idea of duty and moral understanding. By differentiating between (religious) obligation and (moral) sense, he put the onus of performing virtuous behavior not on the requirements of a Godhead but on the individual who is capable of moral judgment. Kant is more interested in a good person (in the sense of a good will) than in a good action (habit or outcome), which he regards as always ambiguous and uncertain:

The human being must make or have made *himself* into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil. These two [characters] must be an effect of his free power of choice, for otherwise they could not be imputed to him and, consequently, he could be neither *morally* good nor evil. If it is said, The human being is created good, this can only mean nothing more than: He has been created for the *good* and the original *predisposition* in him is good; the human being is not thereby good as such, but he brings it about that he becomes good or evil, according as he