Moses Mendelssohn’s *Sache Gottes, oder die gerettete Vorsehung (God on Trial, or Providence Acquitted)*

This treatise was not published in Mendelssohn’s lifetime. It was composed during the period of the composition of *Morning Hours*, sometime in 1784. It was first published in Volume 2 (pages 411–451) of the 7 volume *Moses Mendelssohn’s Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig 1843–1845), edited by G. B. Mendelssohn. It is republished in vol. 3/2 of the *Jubiläumsausgabe*. The most interesting point in this treatise, which largely follows the argument of Leibniz’s *Causa Dei*, the last Latin section of his *Theodicy*, is its forceful rejection of the doctrine of eternal suffering as a punishment for sinners. It also seems from certain passages that Mendelssohn wrote this treatise not for wide public distribution, but for a Jewish audience only. (On the latter point, see Leo Strauss’s Introduction to *Sache Gottes in JubA 3/2*, pp xcviii–ci). It would take me too far afield to properly respond to the most significant analysis of this treatise so far published, the *Einleitung (Introduction)* to the work in the *Jubiläumsausgabe* (3/2) (now translated in *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, ed. and tr. Martin Jaffee, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012). But I would at least want to say that I agree with Strauss in finding the most important element of this treatise to be Mendelssohn’s rejection of eternal punishment, his main point of disagreement with Leibniz. Strauss takes Mendelssohn’s insistence on the claim that every rational being has to be considered as a self-standing creature with its own rights and not to be considered merely as a part of a larger whole to be a diminution in the concept of justice. Justice, Strauss says in the final page of the Introduction, is classically understood to be obedience to the law, but with Mendelssohn it is expressed as a right that can be claimed against God himself to be happy and not to be used for the good of the whole. This, Strauss argues, is the sign of a bourgeois sense of individual entitlement. Of course, Strauss would have to say the same thing about Kant’s conception of the rational being as “end in itself.” While there may in fact be a link between the rise of the bourgeoisie and this transformation in the conception of justice from the classical period, it seems to me to be rather extreme to disparage this transformation as a change entirely for the worse. The classical conception of justice, with its associated conception of the ordered hierarchy of beings from ruler to ruled (as in the Aristotelian system), lacks the means to launch an attack on the institution of slavery. Justice is not, pace Strauss, only about obedience to the law. It is also about respect for the absolute dignity of the single individual. To think that biblical justice is only about obedience is, of course, a mistake, but one that Strauss seems to make. He identifies the justice that dares to raise an objection against a God who would torment an individual eternally for the sake of the order of the whole, a form of gnostic “world flight” (*Einleitung*, p. cvii). This is a tremendous exaggeration, even if there may be a kernel of truth in the idea that, for example, Job’s complaint God bears some relation to the gnostic’s rebellion against the tyrannical God who is the source of unjust suffering in this lower world. But the book of Job is hardly gnostic. I find Mendelssohn’s argument against eternal damnation to be one of the most important advances he makes in Enlightenment rational theology, even going beyond what Lessing permits himself to say in his defense of Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (“Leibniz von den ewigen Strafen”, in: G.E. Lessing, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 7, Berlin 1956, pp. 454–488, p. 454 and pp. 467–468. 544). Lessing almost adopts Mendelssohn’s position, but he admits that it is possible that an immortal soul might refuse the better instruction that would teach it to transcend its moral evil. This possibility would apply only to a being committed to evil, and Mendelssohn rightly judges that only a Satan could be so fundamentally evil, and no such creature could be created by God, he says.

It is perhaps a bit audacious to translate *Sache Gottes* as *God on Trial*. The German is Mendelssohn’s rendering of the Latin text of Leibniz, appended to his *Theodicy*, entitled *Causa Dei*. The Latin in turn in Leibniz’s rendering of the word that he coined, *theodicy*, which is a combination of the Greek work *theos* and *dike*. The question then is, what does *dike* or *causa* mean here? One possible answer is, *trial*, and Leibniz does in fact portray his task in the *Theodicy* as defending God against the accusation that he is responsible for the world’s evil, for which he would held guilty in a court of law. On the other hand, a perhaps more fitting translation of *dike* and *causa* would be, *case*, as in *the case for the defense*. While it is not completely wrong to translate *Sache Gottes* as *God on Trial*, Mendelssohn probably had it in mind to write *The Case for God*. His aim, as the second part of the title suggests, is to rescue God’s Providence from those who would not only deny that God’s Providence exists, but would go so far as
§ 1. An acquittal of God’s providence and his ways not only contributes to the glory of God, but also, and primarily, to our own benefit and advantage. Through this defense case, we learn first of all to honor the grandeur of God, that is, his power and wisdom, and, second, to love his goodness, and what flows from it, his justice and his holiness. We are thereby encouraged to imitate him as far as we are able. This treatise will fall into two sections. The first will contain the merely preliminary concepts or such truths as must be established beforehand in our justification of God. The second section contains the justification itself. The former section treats of God’s grandeur in particular and his goodness in particular; the latter section deals with these attributes in so far as they are the source of God’s Providence, which extends to all created things, and of his Governance, which extends to all rational beings who are capable of happiness.

§ 2. In different schools of philosophy, as well as in different religious traditions, one finds more emphasis placed upon God’s grandeur than upon his goodness; in others, the opposite is the case, and one places God’s goodness before his grandeur. But both are errors. The first we may name theological despotism and the second anthropomorphicism. The first overly strict system turns God into a tyrant, whereas the second reduces him to our level and ascribes to him human weaknesses. The true religion of reason looks at both aspects in their interrelationship; God’s grandeur, as the Kabbalists say, is mollified through his love, din m’muzag b’rachamim (justice intermixed with mercy). The saying of Rabbi Yochanan is quite wise, Everywhere you find the grandeur of God, you will also find his self-humbling goodness. B’chol makom sh’atah motzeh g’dulato shel ha’kadosh baruch hu, sham atah motzeh `anvato. He then proves this saying with passages from the H. S. [sacred scripture, Heilige Schrift].

§ 3. The grandeur of God consists of two main parts. It includes his omnipotence and his omniscience.

§ 4. The omnipotence of God is divided into his independence from all other beings, and their dependence upon him.

§ 5. The independence of God is manifest in his existence and his activity. In his existence, in so far as he is a necessary and eternal being, that is, self-grounding; from this is derived his infinitude.

§ 6. In his activity he is both naturally and morally independent; naturally: he is in the highest
degree free and determined to act only through himself; morally: he is the sole source of activity and there is none above him.

§ 7. The dependence of all things upon God extends to every possible thing, that is, everything whose existence is not blocked because it involves a logical contradiction, and also to all actual things.

§ 8. The possibility of things [to exist that do not exist] depends upon God’s existence. If there were no God in existence, nothing would be possible, nothing would be conceivable. All possibilities are thoughts in God’s understanding from all eternity.

§ 9. Actually existing things depend upon God for their existence, but not only upon his understanding, but also upon his will. For their existence: all things outside of God are freely created by God, and freely maintained [in existence] by him. One can appropriately describe the maintenance of things in existence by God as the continuous creation of things by God, just as a stream of light unceasingly flows out of the sun, if one is permitted to use an analogy. One must, however, avoid the error of thinking about created things as the necessary outflow of God; if the sun poured out its light freely, the analogy would be more appropriate.

§ 10. Things also depend upon God in their activity in so far as God has an influence upon their actions and their ensuing effects. However, all the goodness and perfection of the actions of created things has its ground in God.

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2 In my Introduction to Mendelssohn’s Last Writings I discuss Kant’s pre-critical work, The Only Possible Demonstration of the Existence of God. In that text, Kant argues that there must be something that exists in order for anything to be possible. If nothing at all existed, then nothing would even be possible, Kant then goes on to argue that the necessarily existing something is God. In Morning Hours, Mendelssohn offers this as one of the ways to prove God’s necessary existence, but he hesitates to endorse this argument completely because it places existence before essence, that is, it starts with some undefined something and then connects it to the essence of God, namely, his perfect understanding and his perfectly good will. As I try to show in my Introduction and Commentary, this early work of Kant plays a major role in Friedrich Jacobi’s interpretation of Spinoza (where Spinoza’s God is the necessarily existing something), and Mendelssohn’s problems with this way of understanding God (as pure existence prior to any essence) leads him to contest Jacobi’s interpretation of Spinoza and also to accuse him of philosophical confusion. Sache Gottes was written while Mendelssohn was working on Morning Hours, and it is interesting that here he is more open to the argument from the necessity of something existing to prove the necessary existence of God.

3 Here Mendelssohn pulls back from the previous sentence’s implication that the mere existence of God grounds all possibilities. Now he asserts that God’s reason holds all possibilities in itself.

4 Vollkommenheit. It is hard to translate this word. It might also be rendered “completion.” What Mendelssohn means when speaking of the perfection of created, contingent things is that such things fall on a range of living up to what they are meant to do or be. Sometimes, failings are due to chance circumstances, as when a drought prevents the full flowering of a tree. Other times, the failing is due to a lack of understanding of what one is meant to do, as when one allows one’s passions to dictate one’s behavior against one’s better judgment. The failings are not caused by God. But if something does manage to express all its latent potentialities to the fullest, as when the tree blooms after a season of rain or the individual acts in accordance with her understanding of what is best, then the Vollkommenheit of the thing is expressed, that is, its perfection or completeness, its fully being what it was meant to be.
§ 11. The influence of God upon the actions of created things is both immediate as well as specific and concurrent. The influence is immediate since every effect is dependent upon God not only because there is a chain of causes going back to God, but also because he is necessarily no less involved in the bringing about of the effect itself as he is in the bringing about of [the entire prior chain of] its causes.

§ 12. The influence of God is also specific, not only because it extends in general to the existence of things and their activities, but also to the special and defined manner and way that they follow upon one another. All perfections flow out unceasingly from God, the father of light and happiness, the gentle giver of all that is good.

§ 13. So much for the power of God. His wisdom, in so far as it is infinite, can be called his all-knowingness, or omniscience. Since, like God’s omnipotence, it is complete and perfect in the highest degree, and admits of no limitation, it therefore encompasses all possible ideas, all truths, in one word, everything that can become an object of understanding. It extends therefore over all possible as well as over all actual things.

§ 14. The possible includes both that which is necessary, whose opposite is that which cannot be conceived, and therefore cannot be an object of God’s knowledge, and also every contingent thing, whether it ever actually existed or will exist or whether it will always remain only a conceivable possibility.

§ 15. The contingent thing is dependent [upon God], although only in connection with other things which exist with it in space and time. The totality of all contingent things, in so far as they belong within one systematic whole, is called a world. The totality of all contingent things that now exist, together with all their relations and connections, and including also the unfolding of all the changes that they have ever suffered or will suffer, is called the actual world. There are many possible worlds, but only one of them has become actual.

§ 16. Divine wisdom comprehends this world as the one that has actually come into being. God’s decision to bring this single world system from out of all possible world systems into actuality transformed God’s knowledge of all possible worlds into the knowledge of this actual world.

§ 17. It is upon this point that the doctrine of God’s foreknowledge rests, and it extends equally to the moral as to the physical aspects of this world. Both of these aspects are connected in our world, and one is not conceivable without the other.

§ 18. So much for divine grandeur. We come now to divine goodness. Just as knowledge, or the recognition of what is true, is the perfection of the understanding, so is goodness, or the demand for and contentment with what is good, the perfection of the capacity for desire. Every will as such has only that which is good as the object of desire, but a will that is imperfect has the apparent good, or a lesser good, as its object, whereas the divine will has the truly good, or the best, as its object.
§ 19. We now have to consider the will and its object, namely good and evil, in so far as the former contains the reason for the will’s willing of it, and the latter the reason for the will’s not willing of it. In regard to the will itself, we must bring into consideration its nature and its varieties.

§ 20. Freedom is thought to be a necessary part of the nature of the will. The will is free when the action results from proper deliberation and our approval of its execution. This excludes necessity, since what happens by necessity does not allow for deliberation.

§ 21. But the necessity so excluded is metaphysical necessity, in other words, the sort of necessity whose contrary is what is impossible or whose existence would entail a logical contradiction. But freedom does not exclude moral necessity, whose contrary is indeed conceivable, although it is not as good, not as seemly, or not as choice-worthy in view of its prudence. Granted that God can never err in his choice, he therefore always chooses that which is best and most seemly, but this does not injure his freedom; indeed, it means rather that God’s freedom is completely perfect. Freedom rises in perfection to the degree that it reliably flows from wisdom’s guiding rules.

§ 22. Freedom would not exist if there were only one possible object of the divine will. There would be only one possible object if, as some philosophers have maintained, whatever is not actual is also not possible. In such a case, there would be no choice, and where there is no choice, there can be no freedom, and without freedom there can no expression of goodness or wisdom.

§ 23. So much for the nature of the will. The division of willing into its types, in so far as it is useful for our project to distinguish them, falls, in the first major division, into the type that is deliberating and the type that is consequential, and, in the second major division, the type that is originative and the type that is acquiescing.

§ 24. An option of the will is either under deliberation and provisional, or it is consequential and decisive, which is to say, it is either merely an option or it is a decision. The former is incomplete and does not succeed in getting executed; the latter is complete and drives forward to execution. If we apply these distinctions to God’s will, we can say that his deliberating will extends to each possible good thing in accordance with the relative measure of its goodness and perfection; but God’s consequential will encompasses the totality of all possible good things, being the settled decision to allow that which is best from among all possible good things to come into actuality. This always succeeds in getting executed. The divine decree is enacted.

5 The idea here seems to be that the deliberating will of God assigns to each possible option a relative weight of goodness, and the consequential will decides upon the totality of all possibilities whose sum yields the highest level of goodness and perfection possible. It seems impossible for God to choose the highest level of goodness in each possibility, since this may be incompatible with the highest level of goodness in some other possibility. The interconnectedness of possibilities means that certain possibilities are chosen not because in themselves they are best, but that they are part of the best cumulative totality of goodness. This is the kernel of the case for God when he is charged with either originating or acquiescing to that which is not the best in certain specific parts of the totality.

6 This is a point that Gershom Scholem directly contests in his 1919 essay, unpublished in his lifetime, entitled “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” whose English translation is found in Critical Inquiry, Spring, 1999. Scholem
§ 25. The deliberating will of God is not for that reason less serious or pure. It does not consist merely in daydreaming; wishing for what might be is not something we find in God. Nor is it a sort of conditional willing, which would decide upon an option if certain conditions were to be fulfilled. The deliberating will of God seeks to bring into being what is good and to hinder the coming into being of what is bad, but it does not do so with a single, equivalent degree of striving. The highest degree of desiring, or striving, in God’s will to bring the good into existence and to hinder the bad, is directed toward what is most perfect and most exactly measured in accordance with the relations among the good things that merit being brought into being and the bad things that ought to be hindered from existing.7

§ 26. Now, not all the provisional options of the will can concurrently be actual since some of them are in contradiction with others. Thus the highest wisdom will settle upon and choose that selection [of options] whose totality produces the greatest sum of perfection. This choice allows God’s omnipotence to be actualized. This choice we may call God’s decree.

§ 27. The deliberating will in God is therefore not totally inconsequential, although its effectuation must on occasion be repressed because some of its provisional options come into collision with others. The deciding will, on the other hand, when we are speaking about God, can never be repressed or restrained, and therefore its effectuation cannot be circumvented. It is a well-known axiom: he who is able and wants to do something, does it. But this holds true only for the finally deciding will. Under the word “able” we must understand also the knowledge that doing the thing is what is demanded. When therefore the capability to act, and the knowledge that the thing ought to be done, and the final decision to do the thing, all come together, then the actual deed follows necessarily. But one cannot say this about the deliberating will, since only that provisional will achieves its full effectuation when there is no higher degree of striving standing in its way and it therefore finds itself in the position of [effectuating] the ultimate decree.

§ 28. The will in the second major division is further divided into an originating and an acquiescing will. The former concerns the deed done by one’s own will, the latter the deed done by some other freely choosing being. To acquiesce means not to hinder where one has it in one’s power to hinder. There are certain things that one may not do, but which one may acquiesce to; indeed there are times when one is obligated not to hinder their performance. The object of the acquiescing will is in such a case not the deed itself, which always remains something forbidden, but rather the acquiescence, which can at times be allowed, and at times can even be one’s duty.

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7 As noted in the previous footnote, it seems that Mendelssohn’s point here is that the deliberating will weighs the relative merits (and negative consequences) of things that are good in themselves and things that are bad in themselves. Sometimes, a lesser good in one case may contribute to the greater goodness of the totality. And it may be necessary for God to acquiesce to something bad (he could never originate it himself) for the sake of the greater goodness of the whole.
§ 29. So much then for the will itself. That through which the will is set in motion, the sufficient reason behind willing or not willing, is the good and the bad, order and beauty, perfection, and so on. Both good and bad are able to be divided into three types: metaphysical, physical, and ethical or moral.

§ 30. Everything apart from God has aspects of imperfection and aspects of perfection; everything possesses reality, but not in the highest degree. The reality appertaining to lifeless, living, and rational beings is called the metaphysical good; the deficiency [in reality] is the metaphysical evil.  

§ 31. When this metaphysical good is consciously perceived by a living being, there ensue feelings of pleasure, contentment, and pleasantness. Likewise, from the direct imagination of metaphysical evil there arise feelings of displeasure, pain, and discomfort. Pleasure and displeasure, pain and enjoyment, constitute the physical good and the physical evil. In and of itself, good can only have good as its consequence, and likewise what is bad can only something bad as a consequence. But in a purely accidental manner, good may spring from evil, and evil may come from what is good, as when peace of mind comes after worry about an approaching misfortune, or when contentment follows after the eager expectancy of the possibility of a good greater [than what we actually experience], and equanimity after the forgetting of the sensation of an evil that has befallen us.

§ 32. Good and bad, considered as the purpose and intent of our actions, constitutes moral goodness and moral badness. Moral badness can only incite the will to action if it assumes the appearance of goodness, and moral badness consists precisely in the preference that a rational being gives to the apparent good while setting aside the true good. Moral badness naturally brings about physical evil, just as moral goodness is a source of physical goodness. The former [i.e, physical

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As the previous notes have suggested, Mendelssohn identifies the degree of perfection or completeness of a thing’s being or doing what it is meant to be or do as the degree of its being really that thing. It is not clear whether Mendelssohn would countenance the concept of bare existence being something equally shared among all real things, whatever their degree of reality. In my comments to *To the Friends of Lessing*, I have argued that Friedrich Jacobi is precisely attempting to press such a concept of bare existence on Spinoza, saying that Spinoza’s one substance (=God) is the bare existence that subtends every finite thing, and, because it is a necessary existence, all finite things are caught in a deterministic net. Mendelssohn seems to have no use for a concept of bare existence, since what exists but has no further predicates is indistinguishable from what does not exist at all, at least according to the Leibnizian–Wolffian metaphysics where the possibility of being the subject of predication (being a what) is the precondition of something’s existing at all. That a thing is (that it exists), Wolff would say, is a supplement added on to what a thing is. So, back to Mendelssohn: the whatness of a thing is its being a certain sort of thing, and its being that thing has degrees of perfection or completeness; the thatness of the thing, its reality, simply follows its whatness, and also has degrees. It would make no sense to speak about degrees of existence. Something either is or it is not.

The deficiency in a thing’s perfection or completeness, its not fully being what it is or not fully doing what it is meant to do, provokes a feeling of pain in those living things that are capable of consciousness. The awareness of the lack or deficiency generates displeasure or disquiet. There are physical states corresponding to the metaphysical state of perfection or imperfection. Why physical? Because, simply, only a living, physical being can feel these things. A pure mind would understand its deficiency (as when a mind might miscalculate an math problem), but it would not register as a sensation of pain.
evil], in so far as it redounds against the agent himself, is properly named *punishing* evil. In an accidental way, moral evil can also have good consequences, as when a morally good act is followed accidentally by a physical evil. But both eventualities [i.e., moral evil followed by physical good, and moral goodness followed by physical evil] must come to pass without one’s intention, otherwise our moral judgments would be called into question and the very nature of what we call morality would be altered.\(^{10}\)

§ 33. Every good thing is an object of the divine will, at least of the provisional, deliberating aspect of the divine will; this will encompasses every perfection of both lifeless and living things, as well as the happiness of creatures possessing feeling, and the virtue of the rational being, to such a degree of approval [by God’s will] as the most precise measure of its inner goodness determines.

§ 34. The deliberating will of God considers every actual evil only as something to be prevented, but in the decree of God, or in his originative will, not every evil is immediately prevented. There can be cases where the prevention of a lesser evil will draw greater evils in its wake. In such a situation, the hindering of the evil will not be realized. God can acquiesce to certain evils, that is, despite the fact that they are of course, *qua* evil, objects of his hate, in his omniscient decrees he can will not to prevent them, so that a greater good might not be removed [along with the evil], or even perhaps be hindered [from ever coming into being]. In cases where two goods collide, the lesser must yield to the better, and the smaller evil will be preferred to the greater. In the deliberating will there is no collision since one considers each good and each evil in and of itself, without reference to anything connected to it. In the executing will or in the decree, however, colliding options must be decided between, and therefore exceptions must be made [to the rule that every evil considered in and of itself should be prevented].

§ 35. It follows from this that metaphysical and physical evil can transform the imperfections of things into the instruments of a higher goodness, just as happens in the case of the pain inflicted upon individuals by their sensitive conscience or through legal punishment.\(^{11}\)

§ 36. But a moral evil, an evil through which one incurs guilt, must never serve as a means deliberately chosen to bring about some good. No one may do something bad so that something good happens, or so that something good comes out of it. On the other hand, a moral evil may be the unavoidable condition without which a greater good would not be achieved or a greater evil not

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10 If someone intends to bring about good by the inflicting of physical pain on someone or intends to punish someone by causing him to feel pleasure, and if we would approve of these acts as moral, then our moral judgment would no longer be in conformity with our current intuitions about what is good and bad, and it might even be questioned whether the very notion of morality has shifted.

11 The “imperfection of things” refers to the failures of things to be fully what they are meant to be, or do what they are meant to do. These failings are metaphysical evils, and the consciousness of them leads to physical evil. Mendelssohn compares them to the evil (the feeling of pain) that one’s conscience causes in oneself after the commission of a moral misdeed and also to the evil (also, the feeling of pain) that punishment causes to the guilty criminal. Mendelssohn is not asserting that all evil is retributive or punitive, productive of some improvement in a flawed object, whether lifeless or living. This would be a monstrous defense of God since it would so clearly fly in the face of the facts, namely, that innocent people suffer.
be prevented. In such a case it is the task of wisdom not to hinder the evil, that is, to acquiesce to it. This acquiescence occurs not out of necessity, but because it conforms to the edict of the highest wisdom and goodness. If God acquiesces to an evil, this acquiescing will must have a reason. The motivating reason behind the divine will, however, can be nothing other than that which is best.

§ 37. An evil through which one incurs guilt can never be the object of the originative will of God, though on occasion it can be the object of his acquiescing will. God himself can himself never perform a moral evil, though, at the very most, he can in certain cases not will to prevent it.

§ 38. One can consider the following to be a rule common to both God and the human being in regard to the acquiescence in evil through which one incurs guilt. It is not permitted to acquiesce to the sin of another, in the case where its prevention does not entail committing a morally culpable act. In a word, it is only permitted to acquiesce to a sin when one is obligated to acquiescence. Wherever acquiescence is not a duty, there one is obligated to prevention. In what follows I will expand on this.

§ 39. One may therefore put it this way: God has what is best as the final aim and object of his will; what is good, however, including what is bad, since this is what is less good [than what it can be], and in this class must be reckoned the evil that is inflicted through punishment, all these things also belong to the objects of God’s will, although only as means [to the end of achieving that which is the best]. However, in the case of the evil through which one incurs guilt, or sin, this can never be a means, but only a condition, a condictio sine qua non, without which that which is proper and requisite would have had to be denied its place in the existing world.

§ 40. So much then for grandeur and goodness, both of which belong the topics that constitute the preliminaries to our treatise. We come now to the point of binding the two things together. Both must be taken together because the first property, grandeur, cannot be derived from the other and vice versa: goodness derives just as much from grandeur, that is, wisdom and power, as grandeur does from goodness. Wisdom and power are the properties through which goodness can become efficacious. Now the goodness of God extends in one of its aspects to all created things in general, and in another aspect to rational beings in particular. Goodness in the former aspect [in relation to all created things], when it is bound together with grandeur, constitutes Providence, and it consists in the creation and maintenance of this universe. Goodness in the latter aspect [in relation to rational beings], when it is bound together with grandeur, is the Justice or the Governance of God, in so far as it extends to such beings as are gifted with reason and are capable of happiness.

§ 41. Since the goodness of God, which is revealed in his creation, or his Providence, provides immutable guidance to God’s wise intelligence, it follows from this that divine Providence must be evident in the whole temporal unfolding of the universe, so that one must be able to say with full certainty that God has chosen from all possible world unfoldings the one that is the very best, and that this one best world unfolding constitutes the universe as it actually is. Because all the parts of the universe stand in connection with one another, and because God’s highest wisdom can make no decision without considering all the parts of universe and their contribution to the whole, God’s
decree must concern only the whole. Each part of the universe considered separately is able to be related only to the deliberating, provisional will of God, but the consequential will, the will behind God’s final decree, regards only the universe taken as a whole.

§ 42. To put the matter correctly, there is really only a single decree of God responsible for the unfolding of the entire universe. This single decree considers every individual part of the universe and its contribution to the whole and compares it with all other things [that could take its place] in other [possible] unfoldings of the universe.

§ 43. Therefore the decree of God is unchangeable, since the motivating reasons for any change in God’s will have already been taken into consideration. But this is the source of a hypothetical necessity, a sureness and a firmness of the will, that consists in the fact that Providence is never beset with doubt and God’s ordering Design never wavers. However this is no absolute necessity and no compulsion, since a different order than the one that obtains among the parts of the universe, and therefore in the universe as a whole, was possible. The decree of God which chose among the many contingent possible unfoldings of things, does not alter their contingency. The contingency of things is grounded in the necessary and unchanging Being [of God], and is an object of his omniscient wisdom and not of his will, and therefore not of his omnipotence.12

§ 44. Regardless of the fact that all future things are predetermined and inescapable, still the actions and efforts of human beings as they pursue their goals are neither useless nor fruitless. In the way God imagined the universe before he enacted the decree to create it, if I can speak in such a human way of God, all of the efforts and actions of living and rational beings were included as the causes of the effects that were to come to be in time, and they have helped to determine this universe as the best there is, and they must be considered as contributing to the weal of the whole. The effects take place and are predetermined not in and of themselves, but as effects and consequences of the causes that have been foreknown and predetermined in the decree of God. Everything that God right now, as things are happening, could bring to bear as a contributory cause or an acquiescing partner, has from all time been brought to bear in his decree, and he has from all time determined and established what in eternity should take place and be permitted to take place. If, for example, my present improvement or my change of heart can move divine compassion to avert an impending misfortune, then from all time this change of heart has belonged to the best unfolding of things and was from all time efficaciously operating in the divine decree so as to now bring about exactly the result that it now is seen to bring about.

§ 45. We have already mentioned above that all things have been determined through divine foreknowledge and Providence. But that does not mean that we may live, act, and behave in some

12 This rather confusing point is explained in much greater detail in what follows and later in paragraph 83 below. The idea is that God knows but does not directly cause the moral decisions of rational beings. These decisions arise from the deliberation of the actor. There is a sense in which God is of course the cause of these deliberations since he the cause of all that happens in the universe, but he causes them in so far as they are the way that one of his creatures expresses its nature, but he does not himself do the deliberating as such. Put differently, the intentionality of the actor is not God’s intentionality, since the actor is not omniscient.
knee-jerk manner, reacting only to how things happen to strike us, taking all things just as they are in and for themselves and as if we were helpless before them. Rather we must see things as the effects of causes and originating from sources that have been foreknown along with them. To view effects as if there was nothing we can do about them even though we have not considered what might have caused them, or to consider events as predetermined without ever bringing into the picture the influence of willing and voluntary actions, this is the error of the so-called strict fatalists. Whoever holds that the prayers of people are useless, that their changes of heart, their exertions and efforts and all their deeds and sufferings in order to alter their fate are vain and fruitless, such a person has fallen victim to the error of the system of the Mohammadan, and commits a fallacy that the ancients had already named the fallacy of inertia. The fate of humans does not entirely depend upon themselves, but for the most part it does. In what follows I will have more to say about this.

§ 46. The infinite wisdom of the Almighty, combined with his immeasurable goodness, has brought it about that, when everything is given its due and is viewed separately as well as in relation to the whole, nothing could have been better than what God has actually accomplished. There is so much order, beauty, and regularity, there is so varied and so grand a multivoiced harmony in this all-encompassing cosmos, that its equal could not be found any other world system: consider the complete agreement between matter and spirit, and the complete agreement between the natural or efficient causes and the moral or final ones. Everything works in accordance with the wisest of all plans; nothing takes place except if on the one side there is an efficient cause behind it, and on the other side if there is a plan, suited to the perfections of God, to which it corresponds. About those exceptions which certain philosophers account as miracles, I will have more to say in what follows.

§ 47. As often as in God’s workings there is something that arises that seems to justify blame against God and that in its outward appearance seems to have been able to turn out better than it did, we can be assured that this is to be ascribed only to our weakness, and that a sage who was able to take everything into consideration would not be able to wish for anything better, neither in view of the whole nor in view of every individual being who was capable of happiness.

§ 48. It follows that nothing could be more devoutly wished for nor more the source of happiness than to serve a master who is so entirely good and to conform, as far as it is possible for us, to conform to his wishes and plans in all things and to submit oneself to his command in all things. In effect, this is to love God above all else, to trust in him completely, and to find our highest happiness in the contemplation of his perfections.

§ 49. The doctrine that all the parts of creation are complete and that the whole is the most complete of all things, is given explicit expression in Scripture with the words, vayar e. et kol asher asah v’hinei tov m’od.13 One should remember that Hebrew does not have a special form for the expressing the superlative adjective. It either uses the he-paragogicum14 or it places m’od after the

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13 Genesis 1:31, given in Hebrew script in the original. “And God saw all that he had made and behold, it was very good,” or, as Mendelssohn wants to have it, “it was the best.”
14 If one places the definite article before the predicate adjective, as in ha’yeled hu hatov, we must render the adjective
adjective, so *tov m’od* is to be rendered as “the best.” Now in relation to the works of earlier days which only have to do with parts of creation, it is only said *vayar e.ki tov* [and God saw that it was good]. On the sixth day, however, after creation had been completed, it reads: “God saw everything that he had brought forth, and behold, it was the best.” All of the parts when they were considered in and by themselves were not always the best, although they were always good. But divine contemplation saw the universe as the most perfect that was possible.\(^1\)

§ 50. So much for Providence generally considered. The goodness of God, to the extent that it applies to intelligent beings, combined with his wisdom, constitutes his justice, in accordance with which a rational being is apportioned as much happiness as can be apportioned to him. The highest grade of God’s justice constitutes his holiness. This includes not only strict righteousness, but also his fairness, and to this can be added his all-loving compassion, in so far as it harmonizes with God’s wisdom. It is for this reason that each rational being is apportioned as much and as great a degree of happiness as the highest divine wisdom can grant to him, quite apart from his entitlement to it based on service or right. God’s fairness is not, of course, partial to one person or another.

§ 51. Justice generally considered can therefore be divided into special justice and holiness. Special justice deals with the physical goodness and badness of created, rational beings; holiness has to do with their moral and immoral behavior.

§ 52. Physical goodness and badness is met with in this life and will probably not arise in our future [post-mortal] existence. Many people complain that in this life human life is prone to numerous evils, but they do not consider that the greatest proportion of this evil is to be ascribed to the fault of humans themselves and that in fact we do not recognize with sufficient gratitude the comfort that God provides to us. We pay more attention to the bad things that befall us than to the good that we unceasingly experience. Our complaints in fact largely go to prove the infrequency of evil in our lives, and they often draw immediate consolation in their wake. When one cries out in pain, one wants thereby to lighten one’s pain or to move others to offer their comfort and sympathy. One who cries inconsolably looks upon his present pain as if its duration were endless.

§ 53. Others principally fault God for what in their opinion is the unjust division of goods in this

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\(^1\) It is important to remember that divine contemplation sees the universe, which is temporally beginningless and endless according to Mendelssohn, under the image of eternity. Only viewed this way is the universe perfect. Each part is good, although not necessarily the best that the part, taken by itself, could be. In paragraph 60, Mendelssohn will argue that from the perspective of its human inhabitants, the universe’s perfection arises from the fact that there is an infinity of time in which each and every human may attain the full of measure of happiness possible for humans. Mendelssohn refuses to allow that the perfection of the universe from God’s point of view means that any point of time in the unfolding of the universe there is providential perfection, that is, a perfectly justifiable allotment of suffering and happiness. Only in the infinity of time will all the imperfections in beings that possess an immortal soul, imperfections that are felt as suffering and pain, be ultimately removed.
They assert that physical goodness and badness are not distributed in accordance with one’s merits based upon one’s moral goodness or badness. Very often things go badly for good people, and bad people often prosper in this world. Plato in the second book of his Republic offered a vivid portrait of this and it is deservedly acknowledged to be the classic statement of the problem.

§ 54. Leibniz responds to this accusation [against God’s justice] in two ways: first, that all the tribulations of this life cannot be compared to the blessedness that awaits us in the next life, and that our bitterest complaints will be met with their complete satisfaction then; second, that physical suffering is the necessary condition of our being able to enjoy happiness both in this life and the next. Suffering is required for enjoyment, just as putrefaction is required for plant growth.

§ 55. All the tribulations of this life will not only then be completely reversed, but in themselves they serve even to increase our happiness. Evils are thus not only needed, they are to be welcomed for the sake of enhancing the good and permitting it to be recognized. Thus far Leibniz. But one may also see how this whole attitude derives from the common and popular theory of morals, according to which virtue is chosen only for its reward, and moral goodness for its incidental profit. But according to the loftier moral theory of some philosophers, the good not only in and of itself is conducive to happiness, but is itself the very same thing as happiness. This view will provide us with easier and a larger number of reasons to justify the ways of God and Providence and for the first time properly to appreciate and as a consequence correctly judge the relationship between physical and moral goodness.

§ 56. Let us listen above all to the voice of the Stoic who is perhaps a bit overzealous in his opposition to the popular theory of morality.

Whoever performs the good, this strict moralist avers, for the sake of a reward that he expects it to bring, is fundamentally in search of profit rather in love with goodness. Virtue with its eye on compensation is nothing more than base usury and not genuine virtue. You cannot recognize the true article unless you find bliss within it just by itself. For someone who does not find sweet enjoyment purely in the will to do good, who does not consider it to be happiness to spread happiness, who does not find that the imitation of God is its own reward: such a man is familiar only with the name [of virtue] but not the reality. He has not reached that height from which the wise man looks down upon the lot of human beings. You hope for a return on your charity that you distribute in this life? Be off, miserable wretch, for you are not charitable; all that drives you is usury. Do you humble yourself in this world so that you might be a lord in the next? Is this not more a craving for elevation than true humility? Is this what we call to blissfully do the work of God when we expect rich blessings as its consequence and when divine bliss itself is not for us the richest blessing? Without suffering there is no perseverance; without sacrifice there is no valorous courage; without self-denial there is no greatness of spirit; without persecution there is no heroic love of the truth! Without the fortune of fools and criminals there can be no service done in the cause of virtue, just as without a battle no victory can ever be celebrated. You are reducing all that counts as the will to
do the good into lowly self-interest when you accustom people always to have an eye out for their compensation, and only to call an apportionment of fortune’s favors fair when it suits their own selfish wishes. What sort of empty, unsatisfying life it would be for the defender of virtue if his every effort at doing good and his every sally on its behalf would add to his pile of fortune’s favors. The gods themselves, Seneca declares, enjoy no more pleasant spectacle than the virtuous hero who battles against his fate and will not succumb to it.

§ 57. All this may, when looked at from a certain angle, have a measure of truth, although I do find that the following caveats and comments to be worth bearing in mind. Firstly, as long as the common person lacks a better instruction, it would be wise to forebear from making him doubt his system of morals. It would be culpable hard-heartedness against long-suffering innocence to rob this innocence of its hope of a better future if one could not lead it to see how innocent suffering is itself happiness and that it will one day show itself in an even stronger light to be happiness. It is misanthropic perversity when one removes from a vice-prone man the popular fear that perhaps would restrain him for the commission of many terrible crimes, if his soul is incapable of grasping the great truth that the commission of any transgression is its own punishment. What would you say of a brave young man who knocks away the crutches from a lame person simply because he himself does not need them? You would do nothing different if you destroy the popular system of morality when the common person still has not fully understood the principles of your higher one. Secondly, the popular system contains much that is true. Its concepts must be refined, but not overturned. On another occasion we have noted the fact that without an expectation of an unending future, no system of morality can be established. Any theoretical structure one constructs concerning virtue and vice would be full of unstoppable leaks if the human soul is not immortal. Truly we look forward to no compensation for our virtue, for virtue is no kind of debit, divine bliss is never a loss, the performance of the good is itself our true advantage, but we do expect that in the life hereafter we will receive the most shining confirmation of this great truth, the unwavering recognition and consciousness that the performance of virtue ennobles our spiritual powers, and that to behold this truth is the only real happiness that is worthy of our immortal soul.

And we also expect that in the hereafter there will be a punishment for the tyrants who oppressed us here, but not that we might vent our hatred upon them, for this is only vengeance. A rational individual, Plato tells us, does no harm nor wishes for any to be done, just because he has been harmed. If he inflicts punishment or gladly witnesses its infliction, it is so that harm might no longer be done. And in all this we find only a correction [of popular morality] and not the complete overthrow of its principles. If the vice-prone individual cannot be cured of his spiritual disease through any other means, then we are right to wish that it should happen through his punishment in this or the next life. And if without physical pain and suffering he cannot be brought to understand that injustice, persecution, and tyranny are in and of themselves already forms of punishment, we may wish that he be persuaded through suffering. He himself would wish for this suffering, if he viewed his own advantage and his own well-being in their proper light.
§ 58. The stricter moral doctrine is therefore within its rights to assert that the favors of fortune are not unequally distributed in this life the way one generally takes them to be. This moral doctrine is correct when it asserts that the imprecations people utter against the ways of Providence, against an unjust fate, against the ingratitude paid to their exertions for others, against the triumph of vice and the happiness of the wicked, that these are for the most part the complaints of people who do not understand the worth of the moral good and who consider virtue to be a sort of debit that needs to be balanced by a reward on the credit side of the ledger. Such people think that the love of the truth is a cost for which one needs to be compensated. They have an exaggerated estimation of their own desserts, or at least they would like to get others to agree to their exaggerated estimate. They want to make a name for themselves with their complaints and imprecations, even if it means accusing God himself and his Providence. In a word, such people for the most part fancy that they deserve from Providence a far better treatment than they in fact deserve, unlike those who—lest we skip over people like ourselves—think they are deserve a much harsher treatment from Providence. But it is true that the popular system of morality has a point when it insists that this stricter method of rescuing Providence [from the charge that it is unfair] would be lacking if it did not set before humans the promise of a future life. Here at any rate is where the knot is tied. If human existence were only stretched between life and death, then the thread of life would be cut with every death in such a way that it could never be repaired. The Gordian knot would never find its true unraveling. One the one hand, we would be able to say that Providence was justified because all the discontent, the exaggerated self-estimation, the laziness, and the unbalanced calculations of people who raise a ruckus about their fate, all of this would be punished because they would never gain a better insight and knowledge about the fairness of their desserts, the very things [i.e., insight and knowledge] that we said they were missing [in order to find more happiness in this life]. On the other hand, there would be much that would still remain that could not be justified in this way. Even if we were entirely content with our lives and had a childlike trust that everything came to us of God’s will, we would still be compelled to admit that there was much in this world that was mixed up and off the track. Only in the future unfolding of all the things we have ever done or suffered can we recognize the true worth of our virtue and vice and the authentic shape of good and evil. Only in the unfolding future beyond the horizon of our sight can the knot find its true unraveling.16

§ 59. If we refine the concepts [of popular and strict morality] in this way and unify the principles underlying both systems, it is not necessary to postpone the actualization of

16 It seemed as if Mendelssohn were granting to popular morality the point that if the soul were not immortal, it would not be possible to justify the ways of Providence. But Mendelssohn’s point seems to be that when we do what is right without concern for its consequence, we do nonetheless expect that the consequence will, eventually, turn out to increase happiness, even if it is not our happiness. Mendelssohn does not believe that the afterlife is when the imbalance in the justice of our world will be righted. If good action is not compensated now, it will be compensated at some future time in this world. This is the kernel of truth in the popular moral system, namely, that good and evil cannot go unrewarded or unpunished if they are truly good and evil, and God is truly a providential God. The point is developed in the next paragraph.
Providence to “a better time” as it were or to abandon our rescue of it on this side of the grave. No! Providence’s ways are entirely just on this side too. Virtue is now and remains in the next life blessedness, and vice is and remains damnation. Because the human being is immortal, the fortunes of this life cannot and should not be any differently distributed than according to this rule. There would be neither truth nor justice, neither wisdom nor goodness, in the works of God, if things were apportioned according to another rule. Indeed, all virtue and, together with it, all blessedness, would entirely disappear from the kingdom of God if the favors of fortune, as we have called them, were distributed according to human beings’ desserts. All blessedness is gone if a human being could never be either brave or compassionate, magnanimous or patient, in a word, when all the good we do that springs from our nobility of spirit were to be transformed into of the sheer self-interest of a constricted heart. Whoever beholds from a great height the fate of humans, whoever views from this cloudless atmosphere the vacillating tides of battles between virtue and vice, and between happiness and unhappiness, and then attempts to see how this spectacle unfolds into the distant mists of the future, such a person will worship and not grumble against God’s justice.

§ 60. Our system [that reconciles popular and strict morality] can solve the greatest difficulty that Leibniz confronts in relation to the future life. He speaks about the challenge posed by someone who brings the accusation against Providence that even in the future life there is a surfeit of evil over goodness since most humans are condemned to perdition and only a select few are destined for a state of blessedness. The Christian philosopher who accepts it as a dogma of his faith that the godless ones (and how many there are of these according to this system!) await eternal damnation, finds in this point truly insoluble difficulties. To rescue his system, Leibniz must take recourse to an infinite multiplicity of angels and to inhabitants of other star systems who can pass muster in much larger numbers for selection into the state of eternal blessedness. But neither our religion [of Judaism] nor our reason accepts such a daring initial assumption [as the dogma of the eternal damnation of the godless]. No single individual who is capable of knowing happiness nor any citizen in God’s realm is set apart for damnation or eternal suffering. Each person proceeds upon his own path and traverses through his own unfolding series of steps until he reaches the level of happiness that is his apportioned measure. Whatever loss we suffer along the way is, in view of our immortal spirit, our truest gain and increase in our perfection. Whoever within God’s realm suffers on behalf of the greater whole, reaches through this very suffering a higher step and a higher grade of reality and a higher happiness. Providence is not only just in relation to the whole, but also in relation to every single creature in all of the paths that Providence follows.17

17 Mendelssohn is identifying a thing’s degree of perfection and its level of reality, and both with its degree of happiness. This is essentially an Aristotelian perspective: the complete actualization of a thing’s capacity for doing what it is meant to do, is its level of reality; for the human, this is also happiness. Aristotle, however, has no notion of Providence because he does not believe that a good God has created the cosmos, nor does he believe that all humans are equally capable of happiness because they are all created in God’s image. For him, if a thing fails to reach its highest level of perfection, this is due to an imbalance, so to speak, between its material constituents and its formal organization. A woman, for example, is an incomplete human because she has an overabundance of the wet and the hot. Matter is a necessary ingredient in the cosmos, and so also its graded levels of perfection in organic
§ 61. The most significant difficulties [in acquitting Providence] typically arise in relation to the holiness of God, or in view of the relationship between divine perfection and the moral behavior of created beings. If God loves virtue and hates vice, and he produces in others a similar love and hate, then how does it come about that in the very heart of the Almighty’s realm vice holds sway? Can God not prevent this, or does he not want to?

§ 62. One therefore concludes that God contributes more to moral evil than can be reconciled with his holiness. He seems to promote evil, both physical and moral, not only through his acquiescence to it, but through his active production of it.

§ 63. The view is that God contributes to moral evil even if he only acquiesces to it and had no direct influence upon its effectuation, if he were merely to not prevent it, since it is surely in his power to prevent it if he wanted to.

§ 64. But the reality is, one goes on to claim, that the problem does not lie merely with God’s acquiescence or failure to prevent moral evil, for he lends it power and opportunity. He created and maintains the power to do evil, and all the opportunities for its effectuation arise through his management of the universe.

§ 65. Therefore there have been some who have been so reckless and heedless as to make God a contributory cause, or even the sole cause, of evil in either its physical or moral sense and perhaps in both of its senses, and thereby they have run the risk of entirely overturning God’s holiness, justice, and goodness.

§ 66. In order to acquit him, others have been willing to grant that God’s omniscience or his omnipotence, in short, his grandeur, is flawed, that either he does not know about the evil or that he does not concern himself about it, or that his power is not sufficient to oppose it. To the former group belong the Epicureans who withdraw evil from the purview of divine wisdom, and to the latter group belong the Manicheans, who assign evil to a being who is the equal of God in power. And, finally, there are the Socinians who remove from the free decisions of rational beings all foreknowable certainty.

bodies and, in the superlunary realm, the stars. But Mendelssohn must reconcile the imperfection of humans with God’s justice: Why should God allot different degrees of happiness to humans if they are all created equal? This is a problem that Leibniz confronts no less than Mendelssohn, but in this paragraph we see that Mendelssohn rejects Leibniz’s answer. Leibniz argues that this universe contains the greatest amount of perfection (and happiness) possible, and that it does so at every moment of its existence. Mendelssohn rejects this position, arguing instead that only in an infinite amount of time will the universe be perfect, that is, will the suffering within it on the part of rational beings capable of happiness be compensated for with their happiness. Mendelssohn feels that the perfection of the universe is incompatible with the notion that any being within it will suffer eternally. Eternal suffering, even of one being who is capable of happiness, would constitute an unjustifiable imbalance within the universe. Eternal suffering would be an absolute evil without any degree of goodness, and a perfectly good universe could never contain such absolute evil. If there were an absolutely evil rational being who deserved eternal suffering, this being would not have been able to have been created by a good God. No such being could vacate itself of all trace of goodness without ceasing to exist, as we are told in paragraph 70 below.
§ 67. As far as concerns God’s acquiescence to moral evil, I have already had occasion to remark that a free will may sometimes not be held guilty on its account, that it is sometimes allowed, that is, it is morally permissible, or, what is more, it is sometimes even a moral obligation and morally necessary. In fact, we stated that acquiescence to moral evil is at all times either forbidden or a moral obligation. No rational being may acquiesce to a moral evil. It is every person’s obligation to prevent it when the act of prevention does not stand opposed to one’s own duty. There are cases, however, where our duty or our obligations to ourselves and others forbids us to prevent others from performing morally evil acts. A sentinel who has been assigned to stand guard at a certain post may watch as two of his friends prepare to fight a duel without hindering the proceeding, or a clerk may know that his employer is acting unfairly without betraying this fact to anyone. Prevention in these cases is contrary to one’s duty, and for this reason acquiescence is not only permitted, it is morally necessary. Making the necessary qualifications when speaking about the character of the divine person, what has been said applies to God also.

§ 68. If, namely, God had not chosen the best unfolding of events (in which also sin has its share) and had not brought it into being, he would have had to acquiesce to something that is even far worse than sin itself. He would have acted contrary to his own perfection and consequently to the perfection of other beings, since divine perfection cannot forgo choosing that which is the very best, and the lesser good is evil in comparison with what is better. To ascribe to God a lower level of perfection either in relation to his power or his understanding or his will is to at once to overthrow our idea of God and everything else besides. If therefore he could not have prevented sin without having had to bring into being a less perfect world, God was duty bound, both for his own sake, for the sake of his perfection, and the perfection of all the creatures that he has brought forth, to not prevent sin, that is, to acquiesce to it.

§ 69. As far as the physical side involved with sin is concerned, some have made God the cause of and actual source of badness, so that in their opinion the evil for which one is morally culpable is itself brought about through God and must have been an object of his free will. This is what the Epicureans reproach us [Jews] about [when we credit with God with omniscience], and they want to conclude that God is lacking in knowledge or will, and on the other side the Manicheans object to us [when we say God is omnipotent] and they prefer to ascribe all blame to an entirely evil being who opposes the power of the all-good God. We therefore need to explain to what extent we are able to ascribe to God an involvement with moral evil. We will see that God’s involvement reaches only to the material side of the evil, that is, to what is itself still good about it, and not to the formal side, or what is actually morally bad in the sin.

§ 70. In order to shed light on this, we must take a moment to cast our glance at the nature of moral evil and at evil more generally. All the actions of humans are, considered from a moral angle, neither entirely good nor entirely bad. To be capable of perfectly good actions has not fallen to the lot of finite beings. In order to attain complete righteousness, actions must arise

18 For God to have chosen the lesser good, in other words, is for him to have chosen evil. God can only choose the very best option among all possibilities since, being all good, he can never choose what is evil.
from the most powerful conviction about the good together with the harmonious conjunction of all one’s abilities to effectuate it. This degree of perfection it has never been granted to any created being to share in. - Perfectly evil actions, on the other hand, can neither exist in and of itself, nor is a being conceivable that is able to will and love the evil as evil. The outcome of any of the acts that a created being is capable of, must always be of a mixed nature, partly good and also partly bad, and it rightfully deserves the name of evil \textit{a potiori} [from the greater part] in the event that it contains more bad than good. But no freely acting being can love and show preference for anything bad except in so far as it is good or seems to be good. Whatever humans do or allow to be done, whatever takes place under the conditions of our actual life, belongs neither entirely in the column of virtue nor in the column of vice, but is perhaps much more a combination of both, getting its character from the predominating element.

§ 71. In so far as actions are morally good, they have as their goal and sometimes also their actual result, physical good, that is, the actualizing of a capacity. These actions for the most part attain their goal when they do not meet resistance. In and of themselves, such actions are brought about by beings possessed of a free will in so far as they are effectuated by motives about which they have clear and vivid knowledge; in so far as actions are morally bad, the opposite is the case. They [evil actions] are either \textit{dolus} [evil in their intention, according to the law] or \textit{culpa} [evil through negligence, according to the law], and they arise from either a lack of goodness or a lack of power and have as their [immediate] source either an error of the will or a culpable mistake of knowledge or misfiring of one’s ability to act. If the blame should be assigned to a misfiring of the power of the freely willing agent, it must necessarily also have arisen from a mistake of the will, as has been shown on a previous occasion. All moral evil therefore has as its immediate source a mistake of the will. This mistake arises either from motives that are not known by the actor with sufficient clarity and vividness or a lack in the training requisite perform the action [when one knows what is right]. For this reason all moral evil is the consequence of a limitation or lack in one’s actualization of a capacity.\footnote{The main point here is that moral evil is never performed by an agent actualizing his or her capacities to the fullest extent possible. There is some misfiring somewhere, either in the way one thinks about what ought to be done (an error in knowing what is good) or in one’s ability to do what one knows is right (a weakness of the will). Since either the motives or the ability to act upon them are faulty, the will itself is faulty, since the will is a combination of motivating principles and the ability to act upon those motivations.}

§ 72. Moral evil can nonetheless result in very positive consequences and effects. Although in and of itself it springs from negative causes, by means of its combination with positive capacities, as is the case generally with all negative causes,\footnote{While the will may be deficient in some way when it performs a moral evil, it still possesses a positive power to the extent that it possesses any power whatsoever.} it can also effectuate positive consequences. Death, sickness, darkness, and freezing cold can accidentally have positive consequences, although they are in and of themselves negative. What is positive in the effect is the result of what is positive in the cause, although it is connected with a negativity. Pain
and sickness are actual evils, springing as they do from a reduction in a capacity, that is, from a negative source. Sickness consists in the curtailed functioning of one or more of the tasks of the human body, or in the lack of harmonious cooperation among them. Pain arises from an overly powerful impression made upon a part of our body that leads to a curtailment of our mental functioning and the normal flow of one sensation following after another. This topic could be developed much further, but we will skip over the rest, take it as having been proved, and get right to our final destination. All the achieved realities and potential capacities of things require a cause, both for their coming into being and also for their maintenance and continuation; as such, they are the objects of the divine will, brought into being and maintained by it. All their deficiencies and curtailments are, however, negations of what is actual [Nichtwesen] and require therefore only negations of their causes [Nichtursachen]. The divine being is therefore not a causa efficiens [efficient cause] of them, but on a cause deficiens [a non-efficient cause], that is, it is not an originative cause of them, but only a cause that does not prevent them. If, therefore, one wants to ascribe them to the divine will, they may be so ascribed only in so far as the divine will does not prevent them from coming into being, that is, in so far as God’s bringing the contrary into being has not been found to lead to the good.

§ 73. If we consider the immeasurable unfolding of actual things in their totality, we find that it undeniably comprises a combination of good and evil, and that the latter consists partly of moral evil, partly of physical evil, and partly of metaphysical evil. Based upon the actual fact of this unfolding as it has come into being, we can see that it is the only one possible and that in no other unfolding could a lesser amount of evil have been allowed to come into being. We can also see how in one way the question as to whether this or that event could have turned out differently disappears. Had it been possible to completely prevent physical evil by merely rearranging individual things, this would have meant a greater level of imperfection of the whole, since the total elimination of imperfection is impossible for the reason that created things possess a limited nature, that is, they must be conjoined with metaphysical evil. In the case of moral evil, we may similarly say that the complete prevention of it is impossible for metaphysically limited beings. Based upon the fact of its existence, we can with certainty assert that no less an amount of moral evil could have been allowed and no greater amount prevented, unless God, contrary to his attributes, had brought forth a less perfect world. The immediate source of all evil is the limited nature of created things. All the good within this creation springs from the capabilities of things and their realization, both of them created and

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21 The point seems to be that one can certainly imagine a world so constituted that there is no sensation of pain, which is what Mendelssohn means by physical evil, but this world would have been more imperfect and not less imperfect than ours. The reason is that the conditions for physical pain would necessarily still be present, namely the metaphysical evil that is found in all limited things, that is, the fact that all limited things at some time or another fail to actualize their full potential (things do not maintain their existence in a steady state, but rise and fall in their “reality” as the proceed through time). Now if these failings are not conjoined with a sensation of the failing, thus producing physical evil, there will be less perfection overall. Why? Mendelssohn seems to assume that if there is sensation at all, it must include a sensation of pain if the creature is metaphysically limited. The only way to eliminate physical evil would be make creatures insensate altogether, and this is clearly involves a lessening of the perfection of the creatures overall.
maintained in existence by God as the single and only object which his divine will and omnipotence could have created and maintained. All that is evil, on the other hand, springs solely from the deficiencies of created beings, which are in and of themselves inescapable. One can picture this if one takes the example of the physical capabilities of bodies. From the capacity for locomotion, which is a realization of [the capacities of] a physical body, there arises movement and swiftness. The curtailment and slowing down of a body’s movement is ascribable to the force of inertia, whose essence in and of itself is indeed privative, but which, through its connection [with that of which it is a privation], has very positive consequences. In the case of the moral misdeed or the moral behavior of beings endowed with free will, the activation of their capacity for knowledge [of good and bad] and of their capacity for putting it into practice is the working out of their nature, which is created and maintained by God and is therefore in and of itself good. Evil in such a being arises through a deficiency in its capacity for knowledge or in its capacity to put it into practice and is therefore a voluntary mistake [in knowing] what is good or it is the self’s deficiency in power or skill. Both of these things are privations and therefore are not created and also not maintained in existence as such [privations]. God can therefore not be looked upon either as the primary cause or as a contributing cause, neither of their coming into being nor of their continuation in being. The sole question is, Why has he acquiesced to them? His omnipotence is only a cause of them and their effects in so far as it is an acquiescing cause but not in so far as it is an originating or contributing cause. If their prevention would have been incompatible with his divine attributes, as the fact of their existence attests with complete certainty, and if his acquiescing to them must have been a necessary condition without which this most perfect universe would not have been able to come into being, then Providence is free of any guilt concerning them, despite what a disordered reason may assert. God does not bring forth evil, neither as a primary cause or as a contributory cause. His omnipotence has neither created it nor does it maintain it in existence. He has only acquiesced to it, and to do this was, on account of his supreme wisdom and his supreme goodness working together, a moral necessity. Without this acquiescence he either would have had to bring forth no world at all or at the very least a less perfect world, and this is in conflict with his divine attributes.

§ 74. We now want to attempt to apply these general principles to a specific case in order to see how far in detail they extend in solving the difficulties that one typically raises against Providence. Let it be imagined that there once was a depraved criminal who killed his father in order to get his hands on his property sooner, and thereafter gave himself over without reserve to all of his cravings, now to this one out of debauchery and now to that one out of sheer depravity. And now imagine that after a long series of crimes and misdeeds throughout his entire life, he falls into the hands of the executioner or, in a fit of despair, he ends it all in a grizzly act of suicide. Whether such a man has ever existed is beside the point. It is enough that the possibility of such a man must be granted, and in all probability similar cases must have existed. Let us see to what extent such a man provides grounds for lodging a complaint against Providence, and what reason can bring forward in the way of a defense.

§ 75. We are looking at an interlacing of incidents and events that comprise both good and
evil of a variety of kinds. Events in the world of living bodies, no less than in the spiritual
world, together with all sorts of changes of a physical and moral nature, flow together from a
thousand meandering paths into a flooding river whose final destination we cannot see. Death
and decay in the organic world are not truly a disordering of nature, but can be easily
explained. When a complex organism is so altered that the motion of its organs results in the
dissolution rather than the harmonious integration of the whole, then we say that the organism
is dead. If this fact can be outwardly perceived by the senses, we say that the organism is
decaying. We furthermore see that nature is constantly destroying organic beings in order to
bring forth new ones in order that these in turn may be destroyed. The entire course of
organic nature consists in destruction and generation in an endless cycle. If there be any
purpose in nature, it must be either destruction for the sake of generation or generation for
the sake of destruction. One must serve as the means and the other as the goal [of nature].
The question is, Which is the means and which is the goal?

Summer and winter, day and night, sleeping and waking, are differing conditions that are in
ceaseless alteration, one replacing the other. Here too the question arises, Which is the
means and which is the goal? It is obvious that an animal does not have periods of wakefulness
only so that it might sleep, but much more is the reverse the case. Every animal must
sometimes sleep if it is in its nature to sometimes be awake. Only that condition in which is
found a greater amount of reality, of perfection, and of harmonious integration, can count as a
motivating reason and thus serve as a goal. The condition of lesser perfection has therefore
the role of a means that must be present if the goal is ever to be achieved. In so far as it is a
lesser perfection, it cannot itself count as a goal or a motivating reason. In the alternation of
generation and destruction, it is undeniably generation that serves as the goal of nature and
destruction is merely a means. Or, better put, there is no true destruction, there is only
change of shape and a passage from form to form. Destruction is merely an appearance. Death
and decay strike our senses as unpleasant and sometimes hideous, but they affect us this way
only because human senses fail to perceive in this dissolution and destruction of the old forms
the coming into being and emergence of new forms. Death and decay, from the viewpoint of a
natural scientist who, at least in this role, considers them purely with his reason, are not at all
so horrible, and many a researcher has his senses so much under control that the sight of
them finally loses all the unpleasantness that usually attaches to them. From the viewpoint of
the All-seeing one, then, death and decay are not any kind of corruption or disorder, they are
no kind of destruction, but they are rather a transition from one shape to another, a
metamorphosis of form into form, which in the individual parts seems to be imperfection and
error, but in the whole follow the higher laws of wisdom and order. So much for evil in the
world of organic bodies, whose ordered and disordered conditions can take on the aspect of
real perfection and imperfection only when they impinge upon percipient and thinking beings.
Evil in the spiritual realm of sensation and imagination comes is much closer to being
something positive. All the sensitivity, agony, and sting of the conscience that the depraved
son felt, all the suffering and shame that befell his father, are not only for these individuals a
form of positive evil, but they also generate, in those spiritual beings whose nature is
constituted to feel sympathy for them, sickening sensations which worsen their state of being.
One might perhaps even go so far to say that in the eyes of a rational being the depravities
and sensual excesses that the evil one enjoyed in the course of his uninhibited revelry in sin, are even more sickening and obnoxious than the agonies that he brought upon himself.

§ 76. We have seen in what went before that reason can find no exit [from the difficulty of acquitting Providence] if death would turn out to be either a passage to nothingness or to eternal suffering. In the first case, human life is limited to the time between birth and death, a period that can quite easily be encompassed within one overarching gaze. The entire labyrinth a single life can be laid out before our eyes. We will find in it no order or plan, not because we have failed to see the pattern, but because as a matter of fact there is none. Its pathways criss-cross this way and that without any purpose, and they even end without any purpose at the point where one would expect a purpose to be found, if anywhere. For the excuse that the evil that exists in the parts tends toward the perfection of the whole, that excuse will not serve here. Every percipient and thinking being is in itself a system and it has a particular interest in its own existence, and it cannot be just for it to suffer so that some other being might be better off, it cannot be just to make its life pass from one state of imperfection to another and in the end have it be reduced to nothingness, in order that the larger whole might be made more perfect.

§ 77. But if eternal damnation should follow upon this life here, the difficulty is even more insoluble. Repeat it ever so often, “The human being has deserved this and brought it upon himself through the abuse of his freedom,” the fact remains that the justice of God is itself responsible for repaying a finite evil with infinite suffering. This absurdity, to which so many theologians have taken recourse [in attempting to solve the difficulty of Providence], needs no refutation. Indeed, according to the system of a religion that is known to us, the number of the elect is even quite small and, in comparison with the number of those who have been from all eternity destined for infinite suffering, it nearly counts as nothing at all. It is for this reason that some of the adherents of this religion have argued that on the other numberless solar systems there is an infinite multitude of beings that are similar to humans who have not like us been destined for eternal condemnation but rather for eternal happiness. All the more pity for us poor creatures of the earth, we who have been destined only to suffering. Others have, on the contrary, declared that the measureless number of the condemned serves to create a pleasing feast for the eyes of the small number of the elect to reward them for what they had to endure in this life and compensate them for the suffering and sorrow brought upon them because of their loyalty to virtue. They will see those people suffer unspeakable agonies in the afterlife whom they envied in this life, and in this sight they will delight themselves. - Oh! Truly, whoever could find his comfort in such a system is not only himself a tyrannical,

22 The 1843 edition of the Gesammelte Schriften (vol 2) in which the treatise first appears reads instead of “finite evil” (“endliche Bosheit”) “infinite evil” (“endlose Bosheit”). The absurdity (“Ungereinheit”) of repaying infinite evil with infinite suffering is not so absurd as to merit no refutation. I therefore assume that either in the ms. Mendelssohn made an writing mistake, thinking ahead to “endlose” with “Elend” (suffering) and writing it also before “Bosheit” (evil), or that the error crept in during typesetting the ms. I cannot make sense of the sentence in any other way.

23 One might think that Mendelssohn is describing only Calvinist Christianity, but from what he goes on to say it is clear that he has all of Christianity in mind.
unfeeling creature, but he makes the Creator into the worst of misanthropic tyrants. It is incomprehensible how so many lengthy volumes could have been written for and against this incredible doctrine, unless we recall the fallacious and in part simply misunderstood basic concepts that led to it.

§ 78. We hope to avoid all these difficulties [in regard to acquitting Providence] without having recourse to such violent remedies. Just like every atom in lifeless nature, every living being, every I in the entire universe, is of infinite duration, and fulfills in every moment of its existence the design of Providence. Each rings the changes through its own course of life stages, and with every stage that it fulfills, it readies itself for the next stage for which it is designed. We need to remember that the difference between lifeless and living beings consists in this, that the former can be called imperfect or perfect only in their relation to the latter. No lifeless thing possesses consciousness, none recollects the past or looks forward in expectation to the future. Living beings, and especially those that are rational, each have their own independent status. They exist only for their own enjoyment, and they each constitute their own little worlds. When each runs through its own course of life stages, it does not do so merely for the sake of other beings, but primarily in view of itself and its own inner independence. Each living being fulfills at every moment the design of Providence, but it thereby achieves an increase in its own inner perfection.

In every one of its ceaseless activities, living things improve their faculties and expand their capacities, moving without exception step by step closer to happiness. This is what we are permitted with absolute confidence to expect on the basis of God’s attributes. But this happiness does not consist in reaching some fixed and final goal, but rather in a continuous progress, for finite beings will never become entirely what they are able to be, and their happiness consists only in closing in on the goal.

§ 79. The destiny of each and every human being includes therefore an infinite unfolding of life stages that no mortal eye can view in its fullness. In every small world [of a person’s life], as in the greater universe, it can reliably be assumed that the perfection of the whole will at times make necessary the presence of flaws and apparent imperfections in the part. Birth and death are two epochs in the unfolding of life’s stages when its course seems to swing in an entirely different direction. With birth one departs from a condition of sleeping sensations in which most of one’s capacities were inactive and one enters the stage of this visible world in which all human being’s powers and faculties wondrously unfold. And what of death? It certainly does not lead one back from this flourishing and ever-striving life to that earlier period of impotent inactivity. Even if such an arrangement were called for by the greater good of the whole, as some have averred, it certainly could not be justified in regard to the separate independent beings who have, as it were, a legal claim to their further progress toward higher perfections and who, in brief, can never, for all time, be robbed of the good that they, in this best arrangement of things, have acquired in their lives through their self-improvement. The reasons for this will on a later occasion be further explored, but for now let us return to the
topic of physical evil that is part of our lot in this life. Recalling the pains, agonies, and sufferings that had befallen the innocent father and the depraved son had not only caused us to feel unpleasant sensations, but the enjoyment of the voluptuous pleasures and sensuous excesses into which the son had thrown himself had even almost seemed to be a greater insult, and we undertook to investigate in what way Providence had contributed to these things, and in what God could be viewed as the primary or contributory cause of this evil.\footnote{Mendelssohn is not asking about how God could permit the scene of the the depraved son and his father to cause us such pain, but rather how God could permit such suffering and such depraved pleasures to take place in the first place, considering how morally repugnant it is. Our repugnance at the scene and our own physical disgust when contemplating goes to demonstrate the great difficulty we would have in squaring it with God’s Providence.} Pain is such a violent sensory feeling that the usual associative chain of our ideas is disrupted. In every instance there is either an actual or imminent rupture of the stable structure of our nerves, and the mental correlate of this immediate feeling is displeasure, since it has an imperfection as its object. Furthermore, because of pain’s violent disruption of the flow of our ideas, it also brings in its wake an imperfection on the subjective side.

§ 80. One sees from this that the source of this [physical] evil is something merely negative. At its base there is some deficiency or limitation from out which the evil arises. The disruption that takes place in our organic constitution, as we have seen, is in and of itself only a transition to a reestablishment of what holds it together, although it seems to our senses to be the dissolution of it. It is therefore in and of itself not a true evil. If the new generation were immediately and directly linked to the disruption of our stability in such a way that we could notice the transition with our senses, the disruption of our stability would not be sensed to be something bad, nor would it present itself as unpleasant. Together with the disruption we would also perceive creation [Bildung], and viewed from this [organic] side, pain is not pain. And viewed from the other [mental] side, it is obvious that the disruption of the normal chain of our ideas is only due to our human incapacity to pursue the course of our inward representations at the same time that a violent impression assails us from the outside. If a human being’s mental representations were not so limited, the strong impression upon our organ of sensory feeling would not prevent their forward movement and therefore, once again, pain would not be pain. One therefore sees that pain, which in and of itself is of a positive nature, nonetheless arises from a negative source. Everything that is brought into being by the power of our body and, in the process of coming into being, sensed by the power of our mind, is good. Every actualization of our powers is a reality, but our incapacities, that is, the disruptions and limitations of these underlying powers, make pain into an evil. Now we have seen that the authentic powers of things require God as their originating cause, just as their continued existence and their actualization requires his cooperation as their maintaining cause. The limitations of these powers, however, require God neither for their origination nor for their maintenance. God has therefore neither brought pain into being, in so far as it is an evil, nor does he maintain it in existence, but he has admittedly acquiesced to it, since, as we have seen, he could have prevented it, given the fact of his omnipotence. A similar explanation holds in relation to the enjoyment of harmfully excessive pleasures. Their present enjoyment is at times bewitching, and in fact everything that the powers of our body and mind contribute to
effectuating, is an actual good. But the consequences of such pleasures can be destructive both our body and our mind. For our bodies, in so far as they cause an overstraining in the fabric of our nerves, the result of which is, on one side, the damaging of the other remaining functions of the body and their being placed in misalignment, and, on the other side, a proportionate relaxing of the nerves that arises in accordance with the general law of all organic constitutions, namely, that after any overstraining there always follows an equal and opposite relaxation. In the case of the mind, the excess of enjoyment found in the pleasures of the voluptuary draws all the attention of the mind into this one focus, undermining and weakening the mind’s remaining powers whose harmonious functioning is indispensable for one’s happiness. It sickens and insults our moral sensibility to observe the misalignment between the present enjoyment of sweet pleasures and its ensuing result, but what can be done to remedy this evil? One must join the consequences of this enjoyment so directly and immediately to it that our senses can perceive the transition from the one state to the other, or reason must possess the strength of sensory certitude in its persuasiveness so that it can make the distant future no less real than the lived present, or the organization of our nerves must be such that the strongest tremors felt in one part will cause not the slightest vibration in the whole. And the mind must on its side have the power to calmly direct all its functions in the midst of the most violent upheavals of sensory pleasure. The evil that causes us injury us in all this, therefore, derives from a deficiency and limitation in our power, and God did not bring these into being, as we have seen, but has merely not prevented them. Our powers and their actualization into the fullness of their reality are objects of the divine will and effects of his omnipotence, but their limitations and deficiencies are only acquiesced to by him, that is, they are not prevented. But we also see what would have happened had the evil of pain and of excessive pleasure been hindered. Only in an entirely different organization of the organic world and the mind could this have happened and the question is no longer why God has not prevented these evils in the present world, but rather why God has chosen this present organization and hadn’t preferred another one in which these evils would have been eliminated. This question presupposes that God has not chosen the best among all possible organizations, that another one is possible in which the full realizations [of our powers] would have been joined with with fewer limitations, and these in turn with fewer harmful consequences. Who cannot see the contradiction in this presupposition!25

25 Namely, that God did not made the best choice available to him when he created this world. Mendelssohn seems to be begging the question, or he is trading on the ambiguity of the word “best.” The world God chose may have the best possible organization given the limitations of organic bodies and their associated minds, but it may not be a just or fair one. Perhaps it would have been best had God not created a limited world in the first place. To answer this, Mendelssohn has recourse to his doctrine of the endless progress of created beings with capacities for moral action toward perfection. In infinite time, this limited world finds its moral justification when limited moral beings overcome all their limitations and reach perfection. This goal is not reachable as a permanent condition, of course, but from God’s eternal perspective, the universe he has created is perfect. It needs to be added that Mendelssohn does not subscribe to the view that humanity as whole is making moral progress, a position he explicitly attacks in Jerusalem. The progress to perfection only holds for the individual, and only when the infinite duration is taken into consideration. The distribution of good and bad people in this life remains about the same throughout history, according to Mendelssohn. The doctrine of infinite progress toward perfection is defended by Origen in his doctrine
§ 81. But in relation to the individual, why must the man we have imagined be miserable, why must pain and excessive pleasure so terribly combine their workings in his life just so that the whole universe might be more perfect? If his well-being so very much conflicts with what is best for the whole, doesn’t he have the right to complain about the fact that he is exactly the one who must be a part that suffers on behalf of the whole? I answer: the question must find its solution in the infinitude of time. This individual has been apportioned, as have all other beings, a course of life stages that is of infinite duration. From the fact that it exists [in this best of all worlds], we can with certainty draw the conclusion that in the forward movement of an individual’s course of life stages there will be more happiness than suffering, more progress toward perfection than backsliding toward deficiency and imperfection. What holds the whole universe holds equally for the subject, namely, more good than evil has been established and created, if one is permitted to speak this way [about a single individual]. The question, therefore, of why his existence is preferable to his non-existence, answers itself: because his existence includes more happiness than suffering. And the question, Why has this suffering not simply entirely prevented?, takes us back to the question that we have already answered, Why has God created this and not another organization of the world?

§ 82. We have still to examine the moral evil together with its torments and its other consequences. As regards the consequences, in so far as they are physical evils, it is manifest from the fact of their having been acquiesced to [by God], that they fit into his plan for what is best. The depraved man, even in his most senseless craving, cannot avoid having his actions turn out to be part of the overall design of Providence. However evil his intention may be, once it is permitted to come to fruition, it fits into the system of Providence’s purposes and is a part of what is best. Therefore it is only the action itself considered in regard to its moral quality, as a perverted use of freedom, that remains for us to speak of. We have assumed that the murder of the father was committed with studied intent, that the son was fully aware that it was his father he was murdering, and that with his all faculties intact—reason, consciousness, and will—the son performed this abominable deed. Undeniably, the son must have believed that in the given circumstances this deed was for the good, otherwise he would never have determined to do it. A mistaken conception of good and evil was the source of his crime. How could the unfortunate man come to this perverted conception? It is possible, if we posit that he had a false understanding of God, Providence, and the destiny of the human being, that he denied that he denied the soul’s immortality along with the punishments and rewards of the afterlife, and that he believed that the enjoyment of the most extreme pleasures is the greatest human good, and that the satisfaction of both licit and illicit desires is the single true happiness available on this earth. Add to this that he had benumbed his conscience of apokatastasis, condemned as heretical by the orthodox church. Mendelssohn understands his move to be a radical break with orthodox Christianity and with Leibniz’s attempt to rescue it from the challenge brought on side by atheist skepticism and on the other side by the Origenist heresy. The next step, taken by Schelling, is to see God himself as involved, indeed torn from out of his own perfection, in the struggle between good and evil throughout time (see his Treatise concerning the Essence of Human Freedom). Mendelssohn approaches this idea when early in this essay he speaks about the self-humbling of God. It is not unfamiliar to him from the Kabbalah, but it likely struck him as opening the door to forms of mysticism and “fanaticism” he would rather not encourage.
through debaucheries in order that it might not diminish the happiness he was determined to enjoy. From all this the result that will come to pass is that he will think that the possession of great wealth is his single highest good, the only means to attaining his happiness, and if it could be achieved through no other method than the murder of his father, then this deed would be seen as one to be eagerly embraced. This man’s abominable principles have their origin most likely in a faulty education, for which the father himself is not entirely blameless, or perhaps in the corrupting environment of depraved men, the reading of salacious books, the frequent enjoyment of harmful and licentious pleasures that became for him compelling need, or whatever else may have seduced his reason and taken it so far from the paths of truth. What is clear here in any case is that the sources of his moral evil are not to be sought in the integral capacities of things and their actualization, but rather in their deficiencies and limitations. And these are neither created by God nor maintained in existence by him, but only permitted by him as conditions with which this universe would not have been the best possible. God is here neither the sole cause of evil nor its contributing cause, but he has only not prevented it, taking the whole [universe] as his concern. The only question then is, To what extent is it compatible with divine goodness and wisdom not to prevent this terrible evil, taking this single man as his concern. Preventing this evil would have brought into being an entirely different unfolding of his life’s stages, it would have transformed him into a different part of the whole than he actually was, and the question is only whether a being such as he was and an unfolding of life stages such as his should have been created, whether overall more good than evil will come into being through him, and whether this [depraved] man in the infinite continuance of his existence will enjoy more happiness than suffering. As soon as we grant this possibility, then God’s acquiescing to the moral evil without which this particular unfolding of life stages would not have been able to be realized, is not only morally allowed, but morally necessary, and therefore in agreement with God’s wisdom and goodness. However, the idea that in the infinite continuance of every rational being’s existence there is to be found more progress toward perfection than backsliding toward imperfection, and more enjoyment than suffering, this idea can neither be refuted nor proved through experience, and employing pure reason’s a priori concepts allows this idea to be grasped in no other way than through a consideration of the attributes of God, but this fact does not preclude us from expecting that the idea can be demonstrated with complete certainty. An eternal continuance [of a rational being’s existence] that includes more suffering than happiness and in which one looks forward to more backsliding than progress towards perfection, is certainly in and of itself not at all impossible. But it would unfitting for divine wisdom and goodness to bring a creature into being that was thus predestined for suffering. The claim that this being might contribute to the perfection of the whole is, whenever we are speaking about a rational being, no valid excuse. This being constitutes itself as its own complete system, and if it promotes perfection [of the whole], then it must thereby [itself] become more perfect, and therefore be happy.

§ 83. Finally it will be useful to consider a few remaining difficulties [involved in rescuing Providence] that are typically raised concerning human freedom. We will try to get rid of them as quickly as we can.

God’s foreknowledge alters nothing in the free decisions of rational creatures, although
it is indeed the case that God’s foreknowledge encompasses from eternity and with the most perfect certainty everything that in the future will be decided or will not be decided. If someone were to foresee with all possible certainty that a vessel is about to be shipwrecked on a sandbank if the helmsman does not alter course, this man’s forecast has not the least influence upon the imprudence or ignorance of the helmsman. The one is not speeding to destruction because the other has foreseen it, but rather the other has foreseen the consequence of the helmsman’s intention to speed ahead in that direction. The highest certainty with which God foresees future decisions alters nothing here in the real world. Also in this world decisions do not come to pass because God has foreseen them, but rather God was able to foresee them because they are inescapable and settled in advance with certainty. But this very certainty, does it not conflict with freedom? While it is I who take the decisive step, do I not remain free and does the decision not depend upon myself, although it surely possesses an inescapable certainty? Indeed it is so, so long as the motives for the decision, in so far as they are directed to an intended goal and this goal is known to me, have an effect upon my will. For there to be true freedom all that is necessary is that the representation of the goal should come to be an effective cause of my decision. Now no compulsion directed against the mind of a human being can have an effect except by means of one’s [capacity for forming an] intention. No physical power can move the will of a human being in any other way than by affecting the intention of the individual and being able to alter his representation of what is good and bad. Freedom remains healthy and intact so long as the individual makes his choices in accordance with clearly recognized goals. The certainty that these decisions will be made is rather of a piece with the freedom one has to make them, so far is it from standing in opposition to this freedom. But we need not only consider those motives that affect our will from the outside, but also the subjective motives on whose basis an individual proceeds toward an action that is undertaken in spite of and contrary to all external reasons, if it is his intention to demonstrate that his freedom is unfettered. This intention is nonetheless a subjective motive for acting that adds to the determined certainty of the decision. If one chooses to call this inescapable certainty a kind of compulsion or necessity, one is only shifting the meaning of one’s words without in the least effacing the reality of the difference between the things themselves. There is one kind of necessity that arises directly from efficient causes, but another one entirely that requires the accompaniment of motives for acting, clearly known goals, and principles derived from our knowledge of good and evil. The first kind can in no measure be modified through our knowledge of good and evil, no one is accountable for it or is changed through being punished or rewarded for it; the second kind, however, is not only accounted to a cause that acts freely, but in so far as it is only grounded in our knowledge of good and evil, punishment and reward exercise a most powerful influence upon it.

§ 84. All these difficulties [in acquitting Providence] that are in and of themselves already quite considerable are only further exacerbated by erroneous religious ideas. Each party [to the charge against God’s justice] brings his own nation’s faith into the philosophical dispute and thereby infinitely multiplies the confusion. From ages past people have been raised on the chimera that there once had been a golden age when in their total innocence they were free from all physical and moral
evils and led perfectly happy lives. And how is evil supposed to have entered the world? The brilliant idea occurred to some people to adopt the notion of a fundamentally evil being, a creature whose whole enjoyment consists in doing evil and who is supposed to have seduced innocent humanity into taking its first misstep. It is from this first misstep that the great horde of moral and physical evils and all the horrors and torments under which humanity groans, are supposed to have flowed as a natural consequence. In order to justify the ways of God, one alleges that humanity drew all this evil upon itself. One thus places the Creator and his creatures into the roles of dueling antagonists. The human who had angered and offended God is then condemned in accordance with God’s strict justice to eternal damnation. From the moment of that first misstep, the human is worthless as far doing good is concerned. He has been transformed into a purely evil being without any capacity for making morally good decisions. Should there be any chance of salvation, it would require an extraordinary exercise of grace, a supernatural intervention on the part of God, which would generate in the human an ability for goodness. But even this extraordinary exercise of God’s grace usually and for most humans is thwarted by the resistance of their corrupted nature and only rarely does it achieve its intended aim. One can see the immense confusion that must be created when these popular religious concepts are introduced into philosophy. The hypotheses and opinions which they have spawned are numberless. Each hypothesis is advanced by a different religious faction and these factions have multiplied themselves endlessly, each one calling the rest heresies. Should any one of them gain sufficient power, it then sets upon persecuting the others. One group would assign the Godhead too much influence over the destiny of humans, and another group too little. One side makes God into a partner in all the evil that has happened on the earth, another side ascribes the free decisions of a human being to compulsion, while yet another attributes them to pure chance. Countless are the subtleties, the empty distinctions, and the verbal twists in which all sides take refuge in order to find some exit from this labyrinth. But you all will search in vain for an exit as long as you search to join this hodgepodge of picturesque religious notions with philosophical overrefinements and as long as you do not allow these picturesque notions to find the resting place they deserve. To find an exit from the labyrinth, you must walk on the pure path of common sense that alone can vouchsafe us here any illumination.