SCEPTICISM OF SCEPTICISM: ON MENDELSSOHN'S PHILOSOPHY OF COMMON SENSE

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ABSTRACT: In a seemingly contradictory manner, Moses Mendelssohn steadfastly argued for classical metaphysical postulates such as God, providence and immortality on the one hand, and held a sceptical approach towards metaphysics on the other. This tension is resolved through the appraisal of Mendelssohn's position as sceptical of what he took to be exceedingly speculative thinking in general, and the overly abstruse arguments sceptical philosophers have used to attack commonsensical truths, which he depicted as simple and self-evident, in particular. At first sight, Mendelssohn's scepticism of scepticism and its turn towards a philosophy that emphasizes not only the trustworthiness but also the truthfulness of commonsensical thinking, seems to radically subvert scepticism. Yet, Pyrrho's philosophy, widely perceived to be the foundation of the sceptical tradition in Western philosophy, also very much relied on common sense, a reliance which suggests it might have tacitly adhered to the epistemological principles Mendelssohn explicitly advocates. Rather than subverting scepticism, Mendelssohn's scepticism of scepticism therefore reflects a characteristically moderate and nuanced approach, one offering a profound reappraisal of what scepticism is in thought, and what it ought to be in life.

A striking common characteristic of philosophers advocating common sense in their philosophies is that their common sense is of a rather uncommon kind. After all, those who these philosophers themselves would have considered to be common people, do not necessarily begin to think commonsensically about the world after having reflected on the possibility of rather more metaphysically exotic or otherwise esoterically laden perspectives. The "common" common sense is thought of as being of a more primary kind, something akin perhaps to a healthy reflex of the mind which leads it, when facing reality, to apodictically accept the obvious. While Berkeley, for example, famously claimed to "side in all things with the mob,"¹ and emphasized the importance of "the high-road of plain common sense,"² such healthy minded reflexes seem not to have acted on the Bishop of Cloyne when he embarked on the kind of speculation which would eventually lead him to his immaterialism. Both the path and its goal, after all, are commonly untrodden.

So even if Berkeley is telling us that philosophy's role is to lead us back to common sense, it does not make the enterprise itself commonsensical. Nor indeed, does it make the conclusion his philosophy and others present as commonsensical, genuinely so in any meaningful sense of the word. Philosophers' conception of what is commonsensical could, and seems indeed to reliably have been, rather different than what would be reflected by,

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¹ George Berkeley, "Commonplace Book," in *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, 4. vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), vol. 1, 25.

² George Berkeley, "A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge," in *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), vol. 2, 328.

say, the beliefs shared by any community larger than the philosopher in question and his immediate circle. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that while Berkeley seems to have been genuinely convinced common sense leads to his immaterialism, Moore, in his “A Defense of Common Sense,” exemplified propositions he holds to be commonsensically “quite certainly true” with “there are and have been many material things.”³

While commonsense philosophers might very well suggest positions held more or less only by themselves, it is also at least possible some such thinkers will propose propositions or conceptions that do genuinely reflect an understanding common to humanity or, at the very least, to a significant segment of it. Yet, even if the propositions or ideas presented as commonsensical are in fact genuinely so, the common sense of commonsense philosophers remains of a different kind because it is reflective. Most people would commonsensically accept, for example, the chair for what it is and use it appropriately. Some people, probably not very many, would find a reason to doubt the chair’s existence, reflect profoundly on its nature and attributes, or seek out the most judicious understanding of the chair’s being. If a philosopher ultimately reaches the conclusion that the chair is best accepted uncritically, that the common people are right about the chair, she does so after an uncommon reflective process.

Though common to all commonsense philosophers, this reflective process differs among them. This paper will explore the sceptical reasoning behind Mendelssohn’s philosophy of common sense and seek to understand why it lead Mendelssohn to endorse what he thought of as commonsensical thinking. I will therefore be arguing that in spite of his reputation as a dogmatic pre-critical philosopher and his steadfast conviction in several undeniably metaphysical postulates, Mendelssohn actually holds a rather sceptical approach towards metaphysics in general, and towards what he took to be the overly abstruse arguments sceptical philosophers have used to attack commonsensical truths in particular.

While at first sight, this scepticism of scepticism and its relapse into common sense might seem to radically subvert scepticism, the paper will argue that the relation between common sense and scepticism is by no means of a simply contradictory nature. Accordingly, in basing his acceptance of commonsensical beliefs on a sceptical appraisal of metaphysics, Mendelssohn provides not only a characteristically nuanced understanding of both what scepticism is in the context of philosophical thinking and what it ought to be existentially, but also reflects the complex relation of sceptical thinking and common sense which has accompanied scepticism since its dawn in ancient Greek philosophy.

I. The Sceptical Metaphysician

In his *Discourses on Metaphysics*, Leibniz states that “the conception of God which is the most common and the most full of meaning is expressed well enough in the words: God is an absolutely perfect being.”⁴ He thereby suggests a theological position enthusiastically adopted by Mendelssohn. Indeed, given Mendelssohn’s commonsensical sensitivities, it is

³ George Edward Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 59.

⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, in *Discourse on Metaphysics; Correspondence with Arnaud; Monadology*, trans. George R. Montgomery (La Salle: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1973), §I, 3.

not surprising that his notion of God reflects characterizations that are widely perceived to be commonly held; “Maximum perfection,” “Maximum Good” and the “Maximum wisdom” are therefore “inseparable attributes of the All Perfect being, without which nothing can exist.”⁵ These are the most simple, commonly held truths reflecting the reality of the divine. The fact of the matter is, Mendelssohn repeatedly points out, that the reality of such an all perfect being, all knowing and supremely good, is widely accepted by sincere human beings of all cultures, even if at first sight it does not always seem that way.⁶

God is for Mendelssohn both the primal cause and the absolute best.⁷ Accordingly, the ground of actuality is supreme goodness.⁸ A critical implication is that God’s providence is complete; Mendelssohn’s Leibnizian God, could simply not have created beings whose happiness he would not have ensured. His providence is therefore expressed primordially in the reality of the best of possible worlds, wherein we are all directed towards the most supreme good of felicity; “if it is true that an all-good and all-wise being has brought us into existence, then by virtue of His unalterable attributes, he could not have fixed our destiny otherwise than for happiness.”⁹

Mendelssohn not only believed God created man for eternal happiness or felicity,¹⁰ but also that the very universe was created for that experience to be realized, or as his Socrates explains, “so that there are reasonable beings, which progress from step to step, gradually increase in perfection, and in this increase may find their felicity.”¹¹ Furthermore, as immortality is absolutely necessary for this gradual increase in perfection felicity consists of, it would be inconceivable that “these beings stop dead completely still in the middle of their course, not only stand still, but are all at once be pushed back into the abyss, and should lose all the fruits of their efforts.”¹² In *Morning Hours*, after stating that God must have destined us for happiness, he adds that “if this happiness cannot come to pass if the human being is not destined to live on eternally, then this annihilation is in direct conflict with God’s recognized attributes.”¹³

Mendelssohn, accordingly, was not merely absolutely convinced of the existence of a providential God and an afterlife, he felt these to be indispensable for human felicity in general, and his own in particular. As he put it in *Jerusalem*:

Without God, providence, and a future life, love of our fellow man is but an innate weakness, and benevolence is little more than a foppery into which we seek to lure one another so that the

⁵ Moses Mendelssohn, *Phädon or On the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 80. German text in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe* (henceforth *JubA*), ed. Alexander Altmann et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: F. Frommann, 1971), 3.1:52.

⁶ In *Jerusalem*, for example, Mendelssohn shows how a foreign visitor to Dessau’s temple of providence could honestly mistake, were he not to recognize our alphabetic script for what it is, the enlightened religion of the worshipers directing their attention in adoration to the words “God, all wise, all-powerful, all-good, rewarding the good” written on the wall, with empty idolatrous worship of some black lines. It is likely we similarly, Mendelssohn suggests, misinterpret foreign religious symbolism, overlooking the crucial difference between physical symbols and the lofty religious truths they are meant to symbolize. See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 113-115; *JubA*, 8:179-181.

⁷ Moses Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, in *Last Works*, trans. Bruce Rosenstock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 89-90; *JubA*, 3.2:102.

⁸ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 135; *JubA*, 3.2:155.

⁹ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 63; *JubA*, 3.2:70.

¹⁰ See also Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 123; *JubA*, 8:189.

¹¹ Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, 135; *JubA*, 3.1:114.

¹² Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, 135; *JubA*, 3.1:114.

¹³ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 63; *JubA*, 3.2:70.

simpleton will toil while the clever man enjoys himself and has a good laugh at the other's expense.¹⁴

Or in *Morning Hours*:

In all honesty, for me, were I to lose the sureness of my conviction about this [God and His attributes], life itself would have no pleasure, and all of my good fortune would give me no joy. With all my heart and soul I confess that I owe my confidence in these truths all the cheer, joy, and happiness that any day may bring to me, and if you have observed that in the adversities of life I retain some calmness of mind, it is simply and solely due to this confidence. Without God, providence, and immortality, all the good things of my life are in my eyes worthless and contemptible, and my existence here on earth seems to me, if I may make use of a well-known and often misused comparison, like wandering all day in wind and storm without the consolation of coming at nightfall to the refuge and shelter of a hostel – or as Voltaire says, without this comforting prospect we are all swimming in the deep, constantly struggling against the waves, with no hope of ever reaching the shore.¹⁵

The idea that without God, providence and the immortality of the soul, there can be no meaning to life, no value to our moral feelings and judgments and, indeed, no felicity or happiness, is one which recurs in Mendelssohn's philosophy, and whose importance it would be difficult to overstate. This Mendelssohnian trinity, which reflects the commonly accepted truths of what was known in his time as natural religion, lies at the very heart of his philosophical effort and is therefore a constant presence in his writing.

In fact, these principles had most probably been underlying his thought ever since the resolution of the religious crisis he seemed to have experienced as a young man and budding philosopher.¹⁶ Altmann finds an "unmistakable autobiographical ring"¹⁷ in the following passage of Mendelssohn's early *On the Sentiments*, in which Mendelssohn describes a state of crisis and its resolution through the encounter with "genuine philosophy"; "My feet wandered from the blessed path of truth. Like hellish furies, cruel doubts about providence tortured me; indeed, I can confess, without skittishness, that they were doubts about the existence of God, and blessedness of virtue [...] Thanks be to those true guides who have guided me back to true knowledge and to virtue. Thanks to you, Locke and Wolff! To you, immortal Leibniz! Without your help I would have been lost forever [...] In my soul, your writings have planted the holy truths on which my happiness is based; they have inspired me."¹⁸

Mendelssohn's stiff-necked adherence to his steadfast belief in God, providence and immortality, in an intellectual climate swept first by the Enlightened scepticism of David Hume and of the French philosophes, and later by Kant's restriction of reason to transcendental deductions which can never claim certainty about such metaphysical beliefs, is precisely why his thinking has often been characterized as a relic from pre-critical dogmatism. Yet, in seeming contradiction to this characterization, there is in fact an

¹⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 63; *JubA*, 8:131.

¹⁵ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 61; *JubA*, 3:2:68.

¹⁶ Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 27-28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ Moses Mendelssohn, *On Sentiments*, in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel I. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27; *JubA*, 1:64-65.

underlying sceptical twist to Mendelssohn's philosophy which reflects a far more reserved position vis a vis metaphysics than his unwavering commitment to certain metaphysical beliefs seems to indicate.

Indeed, our language is for Mendelssohn rather ill fitted to talk about metaphysical matters. As Freudenthal puts it, natural language, which was formed to engage in everyday matters, necessarily, Mendelssohn believes, turns "metaphorical and unreliable" when applied to the metaphysical realm.¹⁹ Subtle and abstruse theological differences, or indeed any of our inner perceptions including of course religious ones, can be neither adequately expressed nor exhaustively and securely grasped. This vagueness is among the reasons Mendelssohn provides when arguing in *Jerusalem* that it makes no sense to ask for religious oaths. The degree of vagueness involved in any expression of our internal perceptions is such as to make it impossible to define precisely what is meant by the religious language the oath consists of. So it is not just the case that the state has no right to differentiate between religions, but also that the oaths used to demarcate subtle theological differences are necessarily too vague to genuinely and reliably reflect the inner perceptions these theological propositions are meant to reflect.²⁰

The vagueness which characterizes metaphysical language is also the reason why, in his introduction to the prize essay, Mendelssohn states that "metaphysical truths are capable, to be sure, of the same certainty but not of the same perspicuity as geometric truths."²¹ In the essay's first section, he explains that geometry is expressed by "essential signs," which "agree in their nature and connection with the nature and the connection of the thoughts. Lines are essential signs of the concepts which we have of them, and these lines are placed together in figures in the same manner as the concepts are placed together in our soul."²² Philosophy, Mendelssohn explains in the second section, has lacked the aid of essential signs and so "everything in the language of philosophers remains arbitrary. The words and the connections among them contain nothing that would essentially agree with the nature of thoughts and the connections among them."²³ This leads to definitions being "endlessly heaped" on top of one another, and gives demonstrative philosophy "the look of vain verbosity."²⁴ When undertaking the complex task of thinking with arbitrary signs, we must therefore constantly focus on the arbitrary combinations of signs, continuously reminding ourselves what they are supposed to designate. This is a treacherous effort wherein "the slightest inattentiveness makes it possible for thought to lose sight of the subject matter, leaving behind merely empty signs," making the most cogent philosopher "appear to be only playing with words."²⁵

Consequently, it is, generally speaking, better not to be overly verbose about theological or metaphysical truths, as too much of our necessarily vague talking would undermine our ability to grasp them. "Too much talk about a matter does not render it any clearer" Mendelssohn writes in *Jerusalem* "but rather obscures whatever faint light of truth there

¹⁹ Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion Without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 11.

²⁰ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 66; *JubA*, 8:134.

²¹ Moses Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel I. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 255; *JubA*, 2:272.

²² Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," 264; *JubA*, 2:281-282.

²³ Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," 272; *JubA*, 2:290.

²⁴ Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," 272; *JubA*, 2:290.

²⁵ Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," 272-273; *JubA*, 2:290-291.

is.”²⁶ Accordingly, he blamed the obscuring vagueness of our language for most of the disagreements between the various philosophical schools, which he was inclined to explain “as mere verbal disputes, or at least as originally springing from verbal disputes.”²⁷

On one hand, therefore, Mendelssohn steadfastly believes in the metaphysical reality of a benevolent and providential God who ensures our continuing perfection and ultimate felicity, on the other, he holds a sceptical attitude towards metaphysics.²⁸ This contradiction might seem to suggest Mendelssohn is either less certain about his metaphysical postulates than he claims he is, or that his scepticism is but a sophistry meant to blur sound arguments which put God’s existence into doubt. As the belief in the central tenets of natural religion are so deeply ingrained in his thought and repeatedly emphasized, it seems the latter possibility should worry us more. The question it raises is why, if Mendelssohn is genuinely sceptical about metaphysical inquiry, is he not as sceptical about metaphysical postulates? In what sense, therefore, is Mendelssohn sceptical if at all?

II – Scepticism and Mendelssohn’s Scepticism of Scepticism

A sceptical inclination is in some sense embedded in the term “philosophy” itself. As Diogenes Laertius tells it, “the first to use the term and call himself a philosopher or lover of wisdom, was Pythagoras; for, said he, no man is wise, but God alone.”²⁹ So the very term “philosophy” reflects a suspicion of our claims to certainty.³⁰ The notion that the Western philosophical tradition was at its dawn perceived to be an inquiry aimed more at realizing our ignorance than claiming certainty, is strengthened by Socrates’ claim that he “had no wisdom, great or small”³¹ and by his relentless quest to show nobody else did either.³²

Yet, however much scepticism was present in philosophy before Pyrrho of Elis, it is that enigmatic figure the sceptical tradition most often identifies as its founding father. According to Diogenes Laertius, having accompanied Alexander on his conquests, Pyrrho “forgathered with the Indian Gymnosophists and with the Magi,” which led him to adopt a philosophy taking the form of “agnosticism and suspension of judgment.”³³ Pyrrhonic sceptics, therefore, sought to dismantle all of the dogmatic schools’ claims to knowledge while “they themselves laid down nothing definitely, not even the laying down of

²⁶ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 89; *JubA*, 8:156.

²⁷ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 92; *JubA*, 3.2:104.

²⁸ Though its exploration unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note the parallel between this position and one found in Maimonides, who, at least according to one prominent interpretation, both “set a very narrow limit to human knowledge” and affirmed that “man’s ultimate goal and felicity consists in intellectual perfection.” See Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82.

²⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), vol. 1, 13.

³⁰ The appellation “philosopher,” differs in that respect not only from the Greek term “sophist,” but from the Hebrew term “Hakham” as well.

³¹ Plato, “The Apology,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937), vol. 1, 404.

³² *Ibid.*, 406.

³³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, 475.

nothing.”³⁴ Indeed, while the scepticism which had taken hold at Plato’s academy argued that man could not obtain knowledge, Pyrrhonian scepticism dismissed even that claim as dogmatic and contented that while we cannot know whether it actually is impossible to obtain knowledge, we can convincingly show we do not currently possess it. The quest therefore has to continue, which is why they called themselves “inquirers” (“skeptikoi”).³⁵

In order to convincingly expose our current ignorance, Pyrrho and his followers suggested forms of argumentation that could counteract any attempt at asserting knowledge, an effort resulting in epoché, or the suspension of all judgments. Epoché, in turn, enables the rise of ataraxia, a deep or unperturbable inner peace.³⁶ Sextus Empiricus famously illustrates the advent of ataraxia out of epoché with the story of Alexander’s court painter, Appelles. Frustrated because of repeated unsuccessful attempts at painting a horse’s foam, Appelles gave up and flung the sponge he had been using to wipe the paints off his brush at the image, which inadvertently produced the effect of a horse’s foam.³⁷ Similarly, only after giving up our failed attempts at obtaining a firm grasp on truth and suspending our judgements, will ataraxia follow.

Pyrrhonic scepticism and its insistence on the suspension of judgment in all matters, raises an urgent ethical and existential problem; If I suspend all beliefs, including those concerning the proper, good or judicious line of action, how am I to act? What am I to do if I am to suspend judgment as to what should be done? The question of whether life without opinions is at all possible was fiercely debated in ancient Greek philosophy,³⁸ and the issue was perceived as a potentially severe challenge to a position which thought of itself not merely as a philosophy that must be thought or discussed, but one that must be lived as well.³⁹ This perplexity is reflected by Diogenes Laertius, who offers conflicting reports of Pyrrho’s behaviour. On the one hand we are told Pyrrho lived “a life consistent with [his] doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not,” and therefore, as Antigonos of Carystus tells us, had to be accompanied by friends. On the other hand, Aenesidemus tells us that “it was only his philosophy that was based upon suspension of judgement, and that he did not lack foresight in his everyday acts,”⁴⁰ an account strengthened by the fact Pyrrho lived to be nearly ninety (which would have been rather unlikely had he lived as obviously as Antigonos of Carystus would have us believe).

The latter description is not only more likely because it is less of a caricature than the notion of a hapless sceptic refusing to move out of the way of an incoming cart because he

³⁴ Ibid., 487.

³⁵ Ibid., 483. See also Myles Burnyeat, “The Sceptic in His Place and Time,” in *The Original Sceptics; A Controversy*, ed. Miles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 94-95.

³⁶ See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), xv.

³⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R. G. Bury, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), vol. 1, 20-21. Interestingly, Mendelssohn refers twice to this story, though in the context of La Mettrie’s retelling of it. The then notoriously materialist philosopher had used it to illustrate the possibility of seemingly ordered creation appearing randomly, a notion which Mendelssohn obviously objects to. See Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 81; *JubA*, 3.2:91, and Moses Mendelssohn, *To the Friends of Lessing*, in *Last Works*, trans. Bruce Rosenstock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 170; *JubA*, 3.2:212.

³⁸ Svavar Hrafn Savarsson, “Pyrrho and Early Pyrrhonism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53.

³⁹ Richard Bett, “Scepticism and Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181.

⁴⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, 475.

suspends judgment as to whether he will be hurt, but also because it is reinforced in Diogenes Laertius' description of Timon, Pyrrho's most important student. Timon emphasized that Pyrrhonism admits of apparent fact "without admitting that it really is what it appears to be,"⁴¹ and therefore claimed that "I do not lay it down that honey is sweet, but I admit that it appears to be so."⁴² The implication of this position in terms of action is that the Pyrrhonian Sceptic, according to Timon, does not do go outside of "what is customary" in his behaviour. This phrasing echoes Diogenes Laertius' succinct summary of Pyrrho's view, which "held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is in itself more this than that."⁴³

It therefore seems convincing to assume Pyrrho did indeed uphold "custom and convention" in his actions, lived daily life following established norms, as well as the appearances he was aware of and his natural inclinations.⁴⁴ In other words, the Pyrrhonist ethical response to scepticism is a commonsensical simplicity in action, which, however, seems to entail a distinctly complex or even implausible situation wherein Pyrrhonists are mentally committed to suspend all judgments about all things, including laws, customs and conventions, but yet do uphold them in their actions. This seems *prima facie* to be at least somewhat problematic; if I move out of the way because of an oncoming cart, am I still genuinely suspending judgment as to whether, for example, it would be nefarious for me to be run over by it? If I uphold the laws of my city, am I not at least tacitly agreeing that upholding the laws of one's city is the proper thing to do? This duality, it seems to me, is very important in understanding how Mendelssohn's scepticism differs from Pyrrho's, and we shall therefore return to it later on.

In the 16th Century, a significant amount of interest was raised by renewed editions of Sextus' writings, and the reemergence of scepticism in early modern thought was further amplified when advocates of both the reformation and the counterreformation borrowed Sextus' sceptical arguments to dismiss the case of their opponents.⁴⁵ Among the great masters in the art of using sceptical arguments in such debates was François Veron, who taught at a Jesuit college in La Flèche. One of his pupils there, René Descartes, was to ground a methodology of doubt which would herald the rise of modern philosophy.⁴⁶

Yet, Descartes' method of doubt, as radical as it was, was part of a philosophical effort to re-establish knowledge on a firm basis. The guiding question of the *Meditations*, to put it in Pyrrhonic terms, is what judgment is impossible to suspend if I genuinely seek to suspend all judgments? Having found that the cogito cannot be suspended, Descartes tries to build back from there. In that sense, Hume, whose devastating scepticism was essentially aimed at undermining any and all human claims to absolute knowledge, or as Craig puts it, differentiate the mind of man from the mind of God,⁴⁷ was even more radical. It is a critique that dismantles without necessarily seeking to rebuild.

⁴¹ Ibid., 515.

⁴² Ibid., 517.

⁴³ Ibid., 475.

⁴⁴ See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), xv.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xvi-xvii, 1-4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁷ Edward Craig, *Hume on Religion* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advances Study, 1997), 9-17.

As opposed to their classical forbearers, both Descartes and Hume agreed that far from leading to a blissful inner tranquillity, doubt is mentally destabilizing.⁴⁸ Mendelssohn, agrees with Hume and Descartes; to him, nagging doubts are a form of inner torture, certainly not the pathway to peace. As shown above, it is the firm knowledge that there exists a providential God, who ensures the immortality of the soul and therefore too human felicity, which leads to peace.

But if Mendelssohn so eagerly insists that forms of seemingly metaphysical knowledge are the key to felicity, and indeed tirelessly argues for the truthfulness of this knowledge, what then is Mendelssohn's scepticism? Mendelssohn is sceptical of precisely the kind of overly abstruse arguments sceptical philosophers have used to attack commonsensical truths which he takes to be simple and self-evident; his is therefore a scepticism of scepticism. Furthermore, his response to the unreliability of speculative thought is reminiscent of the ancient sceptical response to the ethical question; just as the ancient sceptics advocated trusting customs in their everyday life, Mendelssohn believes we should trust custom in thinking. It is therefore common sense that is the proper guide not only to human life but to human thinking as well, and it is by common sense that philosophical inquiry needs to orient itself.⁴⁹

Indeed, it is precisely because of the overly abstruse thinking Mendelssohn characterizes as necessarily untrustworthy, that the unhealthy, mentally destabilizing form of scepticism arises in the first place. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn explicitly differentiates his position as to the necessary vagueness of metaphysical and theological language, from the kinds of destructive scepticism he refuses to be associated with. Indeed, he bluntly characterizes the latter kind as a "disease of the soul" he ardently wishes to cure his fellowman of.⁵⁰ Mendelssohn's scepticism of scepticism is not supposed to lead away from the obvious truths of natural religion. To the contrary, it is supposed to warn us that the arguments used to undermine these apodictic commonsensical truths are not only necessarily couched in vague language, but also abstrusely speculative and therefore prone to lead a thinker astray. Metaphysicians, therefore, "are not afraid to deny things that it would never occur to common sense to doubt."⁵¹ The idealist, solipsists, Spinozist and sceptic all deny aspects of reality Mendelssohn finds so elementary that he "cannot believe anyone has ever maintained in earnest the truth of these far-fetched suppositions."⁵² If such thinkers did in fact reach such far-fetched realms, it is because they lost track of the

⁴⁸ Descartes' description in his second meditation of the effects of the doubt cast in the first is rather panic laden: "It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to top" See René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections and Replies*, ed. & trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 13. Hume famously found his questioning led him to "the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty," a state only remedied by dinner with friends and a game of backgammon. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 269.

⁴⁹ In his description of an allegorical dream wherein he walks a mountain path, Mendelssohn literally presents common sense as a more trustworthy guide than contemplation. See Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 72-73; *JubA*, 3.2:81-82. While in this passage, and many others, he uses the term "Gemeinsinn," Mendelssohn also refers to that which is commonly translated as "common sense" as "Bon-Sens" (e.g. *JubA* 3.2:202) or "Gesunde Menschenverstand" (e.g. *JubA* 3.2:102). See Micah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.

⁵⁰ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 67; *JubA*, 8:134.

⁵¹ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 71; *JubA*, 3.2:79.

⁵² Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 71; *JubA*, 3.2:79.

touchstone of common sense and followed their speculations to the point of absurdity, missing the simple truths necessary for felicity.

Mendelssohn, therefore, repeatedly makes the point that speculative arguments are far less reliable than commonsensical judgments. Accordingly, he thinks of his own metaphysical arguments as confirmations of simple truths. Their purpose is to clarify rationally what is intuitively clear.⁵³ In fact, even if they fail at performing that role, the truth of the commonsensical facts they are meant to confirm remains unwavering. It is telling, in this context, that *Morning Hours* opens with a frank admission that the kind of arguments it contains might not be relevant any longer. A tired Mendelssohn, beset with “a certain weakness of the nerves”⁵⁴ that gravely hinders intellectual exertion, is aware that “his philosophy is no longer in currency” and that the damage to it “is too far advanced merely to give the wheel a push in order to raise back up that which has been so long trampled beneath our feet.”⁵⁵ But even if Mendelssohn doubts his own speculative philosophy, he clearly believes that that which it sets out to prove remains steadfast nonetheless. Indeed, rather than suggesting that other truths may emerge from the new philosophy superseding his own, Mendelssohn suggests stronger powers, with “the profundity of a Kant,”⁵⁶ should re-establish demonstratively the doctrines which Mendelssohn argues are commonsensically accepted. So even if “the all-crushing Kant”⁵⁷ made the kind of speculative arguments Mendelssohn uses to confirm commonsensical truths obsolete, the truths themselves remain as actual as ever, it is just a matter of finding more suitable arguments for their confirmation. To paraphrase Mendelssohn in *Morning Hours*’ last lecture, the effort is of finding new paths to truths we hold dear.⁵⁸ Whether or not we find these paths, the truths we are seeking to reach remain accessible via the royal road of common sense.⁵⁹

So even in works wherein he seems to confidently elaborate philosophical proofs for the existence of God, Mendelssohn cautiously makes clear that the soundness of the truths these proofs are seeking to demonstrate does not depend on the soundness of the arguments provided. This indicates that he clearly felt that the demonstrative prowess of philosophy cannot replace common sense as our guide to religious beliefs. It also explains why Mendelssohn explicitly states in his prize essay that the arguments he suggests will not convince atheists.⁶⁰

Furthermore, when providing speculative arguments in confirmation of commonsensical truths, Mendelssohn repeatedly emphasizes the commonsensicality of the claims he is making.⁶¹ While one may feel the rather speculative propositions in question

⁵³ Indeed, Mendelssohn compares the immediate and intuitive ability of common sense to judge true and false to that of taste in judging beauty and ugliness. Therefore, just as an aesthetic taste needs to be refined, so too this sense need to be “incorporated into our temperament by constant practice and, as it were, transformed into our sweat and blood.” Mendelssohn, “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” 303; *JubA* 2:325.

⁵⁴ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 3; *JubA*, 3.2:3.

⁵⁵ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 4; *JubA*, 3.2:5.

⁵⁶ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 4; *JubA*, 3.2:5.

⁵⁷ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 3; *JubA*, 3.2:3.

⁵⁸ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 129; *JubA*, 3.2:148.

⁵⁹ As Altmann puts it, “If Kant discovered the validity of his beliefs from the aspect of the moral will, Mendelssohn saw his beliefs safeguarded by common sense.” Alexander Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn’s Proofs for the Existence of God,” in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1981), 137.

⁶⁰ Mendelssohn, “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” 279; *JubA* 2:297.

⁶¹ See, for example, Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 97 or 123; *JubA*, 3.2:110 or 142.

cannot genuinely be posited as meaningfully commonsensical, the point remains that this particular rhetorical tool again indicates the underlying assumption that commonly accepted arguments are *ipso facto* more convincing and more probably true.

So while he may have gained a reputation as a dogmatic metaphysician, Mendelssohn's scepticism of scepticism makes him, a commonsense philosopher who believed that the most important religious truths are simple, self-evident and commonly obtainable and obtained.⁶² Mendelssohn therefore strongly believed common people would often be far more just in their religious beliefs than metaphysicians lost in their overly speculative thinking and endless and often pointless "consequenzerey."⁶³ This position is reflected in a passage of Sophie Becker's diary,⁶⁴ wherein she writes of a conversation between Mendelssohn and the Duchess Dorothea of Courland, who was telling Mendelssohn that there is in us the feeling of having existed before our births and her ensuing conviction we would therefore continue to exist after our deaths. Mendelssohn, Becker writes, seemed to listen with pleasure and "advised the duchess not to allow herself to be robbed of her natural and warm conviction by any learned babble on immortality."⁶⁵

Mendelssohn's commonsensical epistemology, furthermore, relates to the importance he repeatedly ascribed to probability in our quest for truth. In his early essay on the matter, Mendelssohn explains that among the kinds of knowledge we have to attain, "probability can perhaps be regarded as the most necessary since it is suited to our limited sphere and, in most cases, must take the place of certainty."⁶⁶ Its influence on human action, and therefore also on human happiness says Mendelssohn, has always been evident to philosophers.⁶⁷ The importance of probability comes to the fore again in *Morning Hours* and the theory of truth Mendelssohn suggests in it. As Gottlieb points out, Mendelssohn defines truth as agreement "between the various representations of our different sense perceptions as well as agreement between the representations of different subjects, human and animal alike."⁶⁸ This differs from the standard correspondence theory of truth, which Mendelssohn characterizes as positing the agreement of words with ideas and of ideas with objects.⁶⁹ While the latter theory is "perhaps not incorrect," Mendelssohn takes it to be "unfruitful" as "there is no way to compare ideas with their objects."⁷⁰ As mentioned, he therefore suggests a theory of truth according to which, when it comes to knowledge of the external world, the more agreement one finds both between one's various senses and between various human beings, the more certainty one obtains.⁷¹ Accordingly, the more

⁶² See Freudenthal, *No Religion Without Idolatry*, 17.

⁶³ Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 8:153.

⁶⁴ Sophie Becker (1754-1789) was a gifted member of a learned and enlightened family, who travelled through Germany with the poet Elise von der Recke (1754-1833), during the years 1784-1786. These travels were recorded in her diary, which was posthumously published. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 717.

⁶⁵ Sophie Becker, diary entry, 29 September 1785, *Vor Hundert Jahren: Elise von der Reckes Reisen durch Deutschland 1784-86 nach dem Tagebuche Ihrer Begleiterin Sophie Becker*, ed. G. Karo and M. Geyer (Stuttgart: Spemann, n.d [ca. 1884]), 191. Translated in Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 721.

⁶⁶ Mendelssohn, "On Probability," in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel I. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 233; *JubA*, I:149.

⁶⁷ Mendelssohn, "On Probability," 233; *JubA*, I:149.

⁶⁸ Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 89.

⁶⁹ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 9; *JubA*, 3.2:10.

⁷⁰ Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 9; *JubA*, 3.2:10.

⁷¹ See, for example, Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 74; *JubA*, 3.2:83.

people agree about something, the likelier it is to be true.⁷² In other words, commonsensicality is embedded in Mendelssohn's very theory of truth. This is a critical addition to Mendelssohn's position; without it, the assumption that the opinion of the many is more likely truthful, which is embedded in commonsensical philosophy, is unjustified.

There are two further points about Mendelssohn's notion of common sense which are important to mention. Firstly, the degree to which it emphasizes the epistemological soundness of tradition as a source of knowledge and wisdom. Indeed, Mendelssohn's commonsensical inclination reinforces the notion that if many generations of our predecessors held certain truths to be evident or certain customs to be important, it is likely, indeed commonsensical, for these truths and customs to be genuinely valuable. After all, common sense is in no way restricted only to present "commoners," and previous generations certainly do fall under the scope of Mendelssohn's "common" sense. Mendelssohn perhaps sums this aspect of his commonsensical sensitivities best when in the appendix to the third edition of the *Phädon*, he states that "when I see a well-trodden path before me, I don't seek to blaze a new trail."⁷³

Secondly, the scope of Mendelssohn's notion of common sense clearly includes all different kinds of peoples and cultures. The "common" in Mendelssohn's "common sense" is all of humanity. This is meaningful and not necessarily the case; one could construe, and many have construed, notions of common sense wherein "common" only designates, say, a common nationality or religion. The universal scope of Mendelssohn's "common sense" is of significance in and of itself, but also in light of the repeated criticisms of exclusionism and excessive particularism levelled at Jews by various figures of the Aufklärung,⁷⁴ critiques Mendelssohn contended with throughout his adult life as the most important Jewish public intellectual of his generation. The scope of Mendelssohn's common sense reflects the universal scope of the values he sought to promote, primordially that blissful felicity, which according to the "concepts of true Judaism," he pointedly argues in *Jerusalem*, "all the inhabitants of the earth are destined to."⁷⁵

III – Common sense, Scepticism and Moderation

Diogenes Laertius' fascinating remarks about Pyrrho's travels with Alexander and their effect on him, suggests it would be reasonable to suspect that the figurehead of scepticism was at least partly led to his philosophical position because he found out beliefs which seemed commonsensical to the gymnosophists of India, or to the Magi of Persia, or indeed, to the wide variety of common people he would have observed in Alexander's epic

⁷² It is important to clarify that Mendelssohn's position is certainly not that we ought to believe things because they are commonly believed out of pragmatic concerns. Rather, he thought that the commonality of a belief was indicative of its actuality. Though at times Mendelssohn sounds almost like a pragmatist, he explicitly rejected adopting beliefs because they are useful, good or desirable. See Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 62; *JubA*, 3.2:69-70.

⁷³ Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, 147; *JubA*, 3.1:131.

⁷⁴ One particularly significant contemporaneous expression of this kind of criticism is August Cranz's, who portrays Judaism as inherently parochial in his "Search for Light and Right." *JubA*, 8:83. Cranz, a professional writer and self-styled Voltairian satirist, anonymously published the pamphlet, which Mendelssohn pointed to as the chief occasion for the publication of *Jerusalem*. See Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, 511-513 and Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 84; *JubA*, 8:152.

⁷⁵ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 94; *JubA*, 8:161.

expedition, were at least in some ways radically different from one another and from what had seemed commonsensical to him before he left Greece. Indeed, the difference in customs and persuasions between various peoples and cultures are one of the arguments listed in the ten modes of scepticism in order to reject dogmatic propositions.⁷⁶

Contrarily, Mendelssohn continually emphasizes that the basic tenets of natural religion are common to us all, even if it does not seem to be the case on first sight,⁷⁷ precisely because his commonsensical epistemology would be gravely damaged were the beliefs he presents as universally commonsensical turn out to be but culturally dependent, particular and local. If one does not agree with Mendelssohn that it is in fact common among all human beings to believe in a providential God and immortality, then these metaphysical postulates would lose what is for him their most important foothold. Given his take on the problematic nature of metaphysical inquiry, were the power of common sense to be diminished in Mendelssohn's philosophy, a variety of arguments critical to his thinking would be very difficult to maintain.

While Pyrrho certainly did not believe in a universal common sense with regards to religious postulates, he still seemed to have approved of a more restricted and basic form of it. After all, as we saw above, he emphasized the importance of the apparent, which Timon says "is omnipotent wherever it goes," and Aenesidemus and Epicurus identified as the sceptic's criterion.⁷⁸ This accords with most if not all commonsense philosophers and their tendency to strongly emphasize the importance of the apparent, as is clearly the case with Berkeley, Reid,⁷⁹ Moore, or even Mendelssohn.⁸⁰ While commonsense philosophers tend to argue that the apparent is in some sense real, the sceptic will suspend her judgment about that aspect of the issue, though both at the very least realize its pragmatic dominance.

The sceptic, according to Sextus Empiricus, goes as far as accepting evident inferences "relied on by living experience," such as a diagnosing a fire from seeing smoke or a wound from observing a scar.⁸¹ Witnessing the beauty and order of nature, Mendelssohn would add, one cannot but infer a providential God.⁸² Whether he is right in positing this inference as commonsensically evident is clearly, however, highly contentious. It does, after all, seem rather likely that there are far fewer people who infer a providential God from the state of the world, than people who infer fire from smoke.

The point remains, however, that Pyrrho, as mentioned above, acted on and upheld customs and laws in his daily life, which further implies Pyrrho himself could not completely suspend his judgment about the trustworthiness of common sense. Unless that is, we are to interpret him as advocating, or at least assuming the possibility of a genuine duality between thought and action, philosophy and lived experience. One according to

⁷⁶ See Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism; Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 151-171.

⁷⁷ See footnote 6.

⁷⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, 517.

⁷⁹ For more on Thomas Reid and the Scottish School of Common Sense in relation to Mendelssohn, see Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1786-1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 103-104, 114-118.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 52; *JubA* 3.2:60.

⁸¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 217.

⁸² See, for example, Mendelssohn, *To the Friends of Lessing*, 158 or 170; *JubA*, 3.2:198 or 212.

which common sense could be acted upon without being held to be trustworthy. This, it seems to me, is a notion Mendelssohn would be very sceptical of.

If a sceptic is to genuinely uphold laws and customs while suspending all judgments about them, she would, for example, perform relevant religious acts, while suspending judgment about their value or importance. The religious example is, it seems to me, particularly pertinent to our discussion, because it exemplifies more than anything Mendelssohn's position on this issue. Mendelssohn thought that religion "knows no act without conviction, no work without spirit, no conformity in deed without conformity in the mind. Religious actions without religious thoughts are mere puppetry, not service of God."⁸³ This is not, however, a problem for the sceptic, who can very well suspend judgment as to whether puppetry is less valuable than service of a God about whose existence she remains agnostic.

But not only did Mendelssohn believe religious acts had to be intentional, he also believed certain acts are extremely efficient in encouraging the proper religious intentions. This is the very crux of his position on the commandments. The whole point of performing the numerous commandments of the sanctified Jewish ceremonial law, is awakening the inevitably accompanying thoughts about God, providence and immortality.⁸⁴ The "living script" of everyday action is the most vivid language through which to communicate the most important religious truths.⁸⁵

Mendelssohn's position therefore implies that it is highly unlikely one could act in a certain way without encouraging certain beliefs, or in other words that it is not only the case that thought generates action, but also that action generates thought. Even if Pyrrho can walk away from the oncoming cart while suspending belief as to the consequences of just standing there as it hurtles down towards him, the kinds of thoughts his act will encourage about the event will inevitably be different from those which would have developed had he stood there and been run over.

If Mendelssohn is right in his scepticism towards the divide between thought and action Pyrrho seems to imply, reverting from scepticism to common habits and customs in behaviour is not all that different from reverting from scepticism to common habits and customs in thought. Indeed, if it is justified for common sense to guide our action, it must be justified, the argument would go, for it to guide our thinking as well. When Mendelssohn suspends judgment about speculative metaphysical argumentation, he consequently pleads not only to act according to common sense, but suggests that the truly existential response cannot but involve trusting common sense in metaphysical thinking as well.

In a fascinating passage of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates seems to similarly endorse reverting to commonsensical thinking, at least in all matters except for self-knowledge. Claiming not to envy the clever and industrious inquirers who "must go on and tell us the real truth about the appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasus and countless other remarkable monsters of legend

⁸³ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 44; *JubA*, 8:113. So even if Mendelssohn admits it would be acceptable for a *Mohel* to circumcise a Jewish child without believing in the religious significance ascribed to the act, this is only because the proper performance of the act is dependent on the father's intention, not the circumciser's. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 82; *JubA*, 8:150.

⁸⁴ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 119; *JubA*, 8:184.

⁸⁵ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102; *JubA*, 8:169.

flocking in on them,” he remarks it would take a great deal of time to reduce all these appearances to “the standards of probability” and concludes he “has no leisure for such inquiries” as he must first know himself. He therefore bids farewell to all such “extraneous matters” and concludes that in so far as such matters are concerned, “the common opinion is enough for me.”⁸⁶

Socrates, the tone of this passage suggests, is, however, in actual fact far from genuinely advocating any kind of adherence to common opinion. He clearly believes the inquirers’ accounts are far more convincing, it is just that he has other priorities and a limited amount of time. Indeed, while the whole passage seems rather ironic, his statement to the effect he is satisfied with common opinion is particularly so. After all, the “common opinion” is precisely what Socrates almost obsessively seeks to dismantle in all of his myriad dialogues. Furthermore, in the *Apology* he goes as far as insinuating that the opinion of the many is *ipso facto* less convincing than that of the few, as there will always be fewer experts, whether in the field of horsemanship or virtue, than ignoramuses.⁸⁷ And indeed, the very fact he was on trial for that mysterious activity he had dedicated his life to, and which drew to him first the attention and then the wrath of his fellow Athenians, shows Socrates had not acted commonsensically.

Socrates’ scepticism therefore positions itself against common sense both in thinking and, at least in some critical instances, in life as well. His scepticism is in that sense more radical than Pyrrho’s, who advocated common sense in every day action and managed to live a long life while remaining out of trouble. In that Pyrrho’s scepticism was at least behaviourally commonsensical, it was also more moderate. In that respect, Pyrrho might have been closer to the Socrates of Berlin, who was in his life as in his scepticism, a moderate. And indeed, while their scepticisms clearly varied, both thought sceptical thinking ought to lead to moderation in our daily lives. Perhaps this critical ethical point would even have been more significant to them than their disagreements.

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⁸⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Reginald Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 24.

⁸⁷ Plato, “Apology,” 408.

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