

“The Promise of a New Past” (Samuel Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt)
Comments by Beth Seacord and Kenneth Hochstetter

In “The Promise of a New Past,” Samuel Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt (L&G) endeavor to give us a metaphysical theory of time that supports a literal reading of the ‘forgive and forget’ passages in Scripture and Rabbinic tradition. One possible reading of passages like Isaiah 43:25 that promise that God will “erase our transgressions” and “not remember” sin is that God will make it the case that our sins never occurred in the first place—God will erase our transgressions by changing the past! L&G explain, “On our reading, God returns to the original sin and *changes* it. He makes it such that it didn’t happen” (3). Whether this is a sound interpretation of Scripture and tradition is an interesting question (one beyond the scope of this paper) but L&G’s scriptural reading is not without precedent. For instance, they cite Leiner’s commentary on Genesis: “In the future when the sin of Adam will be fixed...the blessed God will clarify that [Adam] only ate from the good, and the sin was only in His mind as insignificant as garlic peel, and no more” (3). God’s forgiveness of Adam is so complete that the sin of eating from the tree will never have happened. Once God blots out Adam’s sin the Torah will have to be entirely rewritten as well as Jewish history if not all human history. Two questions arise at this point: First, is changing the past desirable and second is changing the past metaphysically possible? We will address each in turn.

First, is eliminating evil by changing the past valuable. Let me begin by saying that there are some strong reasons to think that deleting evil from history would be desirable. This is especially true on four-dimensional theories of space-time. If time is a static-block as eternalism posits or a growing block per the growing block theory of time, then there will be a strong

prima facie motivation to expunge those evil events from the space-time block. In the eschaton, we will not want every evil event of history 'sitting there' and glowering at us for all time. Slicing horrific evils away from history solves a troublesome version of the problem of evil that only arises for four-dimensional theories of space-time.

However, I am not sure that evil can be extracted from history or from persons without also destroying everything else along with it. Evil may be more deeply woven into our persons and into human history than the authors suppose. Therefore, the cost of eliminating all evil is may be too high. L&G acknowledge the difficulty of extracting evil from the world on pages 20-21, citing a section of the *Or HaHayyim* which is commenting on Exodus 32:23 where Moses is pleading for forgiveness for Israel's sin of worshiping the golden calf. In the *Or HaHayyim's* interpretation of Exodus, Moses reasons that if God is to delete the sinners from history then God will also delete Moses' work on behalf of the sinners (Israel). God replies to Moses that "only the sinner himself will God delete from his book, after having written them in the book, but he who merited in the midst of it, will not lose his merit, which he merited in it, in virtue of undoing this one and his evil" (21). So based on the *Or HaHayyim*, L&G reason that "it's actually possible to edit out the bad parts of the past while holding the rest constant....We're not told how, but we're told that it's possible" (21). L&G offer several possibilities for how God might erase the sins of history without also erasing the good. The nurse who had comforted the suffering patient will now be tending to a hallucination of a suffering patient or to her blighted garden. Or alternately, God could grant the nurse the virtue of compassion without the nurse performing any compassionate acts in the re-written version of history.

Even though the authors acknowledge the difficulty of removing evil from the past, I believe the difficulty is far deeper than they imagine. After God slices every sinful or evil event from history, there remains the problem of the sinful person who did the sinning. So let us imagine that God decides to delete an event from history where Beth cursed at a driver in the car next to her. Let us suppose that the event of Beth's cursing can be deleted. It still remains that there is a person who is hateful, angry, impatient and, perhaps, believes her driving agenda is more important than the other driver's agenda. The event of cursing the other driver is just the tiniest part of her sin. The source of the sin lies much deeper. Deleting the event of Beth's cursing the other driver may make the world a better place, but it does not erase the sinful attitudes that underlie the sin. Many sinful traits of mine are deeply ingrained in my character and, as such, is wound into my person. And if this is so, God cannot delete my flaws without deleting me or, at least this early version of me. If we consider our deeper sinful characters most people are not so different than Eliezer ben Dorida (22). God cannot delete these sins from me without also deleting me--my current sinful self. If this is the case, then we can imagine many people will have severely truncated lives. And if God is serious about editing out every evil, then I'm not sure what will remain of people in the world or of the world when God is done. Loosing most of the world and its human inhabitants seems to be too high a price to pay for the elimination of evil. Of course we will not have to worry about paying this price if changing the past is impossible.

Our second and more serious objection is to the metaphysical possibility of changing the past. We have several worries about this. The first is a problem for *any* account according to which the past can be changed. We'll put the objection in terms of God changing the past,

though it can be generalized to simply the past being changed. The problem, in short, is that the claim that God changes the past entails a contradiction. Suppose God changes the past by removing some event that occurred (e.g., some evil). If the Growing Block theory or some form of Eternalism (static or moving spotlight) is true, this would presumably involve God removing the event from some time slice, or removing the entire time slice which includes the event. If Presentism is true, this would presumably involve God eliminating a backward-looking property or making a past tensed proposition false. To fix concepts, suppose God changes the past by removing a time slice, which includes some evil – and thus he removed the evil from the past. As a result, we have the existence of the fact (or state of affairs, or whatever you want to call it) F_1 : *God's removing evil E_1 from the past*. Or, alternatively, we could say that proposition P_1 is true:

P_1 : God removes E_1 from the past.

If indeed God does remove the evil, then even if one eschews the fact or state of affairs, surely one will accept that P_1 is true.

The problem is that P_1 entails contradictory propositions. The first of these is entailed as follows: On a growing block or eternalism model, for an event to have occurred just is for there to exist a time slice prior to the moment in question which includes the event – in this case, the evil E_1 . If there is no such event in a prior time slice, then the event never occurred. Thus, God's removing the event or the entire time slice involves him bringing it about that there is no prior time slice that includes the event, and thus no event ever occurred. (Or, if Presentism is true, for an event to have occurred is for there to be a present backward looking property or a present true past tensed proposition. If there is no such property or a present false past tensed

proposition, then the event never occurred. Thus, God's changing the past involves him eliminating the property or making the present past tensed proposition false, and thus making it such that the event never occurred.) Thus, P_1 entails P_2 :

P_2 : It is false that E_1 existed.

But, P_1 entails another proposition as well, which contradicts P_2 . By the very meaning of “remove”, one cannot remove something that did not exist to be removed. Thus, for any x , if x is *removed* from x_1, \dots, x_n , then x existed and was one of the x s. Thus, if God *removes* some evil, then the evil existed. Thus, P_1 entails P_3 :

P_3 : E_1 existed.

Together, of course, P_2 and P_3 entail P_4 :

P_4 : E_1 existed and it is false that E_1 existed.

One may attempt to avoid the contraction by appealing to hypertime, suggesting that the sense in which E_1 existed is different from the sense in which it is false that it existed. Presumably, one would say that it is false that it existed in our timeline, but true that it existed in hypertime, and thereby suggest that contradiction is avoided. But, this does not avoid the problem. To be more precise, P_1 actually entails P_5 and P_6 to follow. First, to say that God removes E_1 from the past just means that God removes it from *our timeline*. And, clearly, if God removes E_1 from our timeline, then it is false that E_1 occurred *in our timeline*, from what was said above. Thus, P_1 entails P_5 :

P_5 : It is false that E_1 existed in our timeline.

Additionally, however, from the meaning of “removes”, if one removes x from among the x s, then x existed *among the* x s. Thus, if God removed E_1 from our timeline, then it existed in *our timeline*, else it was not *removed* from our timeline. Thus, P_1 entails P_6 :

P_6 : E_1 existed in our timeline.

And, together P_5 and P_6 entail P_7 , which is a contradiction:

P_7 : E_1 existed in our timeline, and it is false that E_1 existed in our timeline.

Thus, clearly, the details of *how* God changes the past will not matter. Thus, *any* view according to which God changes the past, or generalizing, any view according to which the past can be changed, entails a contradiction and is thus false.

On the assumption that this first objection could be addressed, we have a second worry about another conflict in L&G’s account. They endorse an account according to which God removes an evil (E_1) from our past time, but that he leaves a property, along the lines of: *being such that E_1 hyper used to exist*. The problem here is that the existence of such a property seems to logically depend upon the prior existence of the event. But, if God removes E_1 from the timeline, then it never occurred. If so, it’s hard to see how the aforementioned property can exist.

To help see the point, consider what Zimmerman suggests as a reply a presentist can give to the grounding objection against presentism (see p. 8 of L&G). The presentist believes that only present objects exist. But, then it seems that the presentist has no truthmaker for past tensed (or future tensed) propositions about past (or future) facts. For example, the presentist appears to have no truthmaker for the proposition *A dinosaur walked past this place 150,000,000 years ago*, since there are no present dinosaurs. Zimmerman suggests that one

option for the presentist is to hold that a present place has a present backward looking property, along the lines of *having been occupied by a dinosaur 150,000,000 years ago*. But, the presentist would presumably hold that this property can exist only if there was such a past fact. Had the dinosaur never occupied this place 150,000,000 years ago, then the place would *not* have the property.

Likewise, if God removes Abraham's lie to Pharaoh from history, then it never happened. If it never happened, then there can be no such property as *being such that Abraham's lie to Pharaoh hyper used to exist*. And, if the property does exist, it seems that the past event must as well. To help drive this point home, if properties about what hyper used to be do not depend for their existence upon what was past, then there can be, and perhaps are, all sorts of crazy properties about what hyper used to be. For example, there could be, and maybe there are such properties as *being such that it hyper used to be that Abraham rescued Lot from Sodom while driving a cherry red Lamborghini*; and *being such that it hyper used to be that King David fled to Mars to hide from his son Absalom*. But surely no one would think there are such properties, or even that God could create them in our world, since such events never occurred. Likewise, if God removes Abraham's lie from history, then it never occurred. And if it never occurred, then there can be no such property as *being such that it hyper used to exist*.

A third worry for L&G's account is that they do not accomplish what they set out to accomplish--namely giving an explanation of God's not remember our sins. If the property that marks the fact that an evil hyper-used to exist, then God would remember it and the evil for which the property stands. Further, God should remember the occasion of his editing—the time

at which he chose to delete past evils. If God remembers this occasion, there is no reason to think that he would not also remember exactly what he did—delete a specific evil.

Thank you for the invitation to review this paper. Too bad God won't be able to fix our mistakes later!

Reflections on The Promise of a New Past

R.T. Mullins

I have been looking forward to the publication of “The Promise of a New Past” for quite some time, and was not disappointed. Samuel Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt offer an intellectually stimulating proposal for philosophers and theologians to consider. Though I am no fan of hypertime, I think there is much worth exploring here. In the what follows, I shall offer a few of my critical reflections in the hopes that it shall stimulate further philosophical and theological exploration in the future, and perhaps even in the hyper-future.

As I understand it, Lebens and Goldschmidt are proposing an eternalist ontology of time. This eternalist ontology of time also contains a moving spotlight that picks out the present moment of time. Within this eternal block of time are contained a large number of temporal parts or stages of objects. Of particular interest are the temporal parts, or person stages, of human persons. Person stages exist for very brief moments of time. Typically, philosophers say that person stages exist for only an instant. These person stages are located at their respective moments of time within the eternal block, and they cannot change their location within the block on the standard story of eternalism. This view of persons is often referred to as four-dimensionalism. Here is where things get interesting. Lebens and Goldschmidt say that this eternal block of time exists within a presentist hypertime. On their proposal, God is able to do things to change the past in the eternal block of time, but God is not able to change the hyper-past. Lebens and Goldschmidt say that this basic proposal can offer interesting ways to address problems related to atonement, and problems related to theodicy.

On the standard four-dimensionalist story of personal identity over time, person stages are not numerically identical to one another. Instead, person stages enjoy some sort of continuity relation. Imagine a collection of person stages that comprise Sally. What makes the Sally-stage at time t_1 the same Sally as the Sally-stage at time t_2 ? Four-dimensionalists often opt for a biological or psychological continuity relation that involves something called immanent causation. Immanent causation is when one person stage causes the person stage at the very next instant to be a particular sort of way. Perhaps by causing the next person stage to have the right sort of psychological properties. Immanent causation avoids there being gaps in the life of the person. The intuition here is that if there is a causal and temporal gap between two stages, the stages cannot be in any meaningful continuity relation with one another. Thus, if there are causal and temporal gaps, personal identity is lost.

Here is a problem that I see for Lebens and Goldschmidt’s proposal. Say that Sally was a very bad person during the summer of 1999, but now she is repentant. God will change the past by either deleting or amputating the person stages that exist during the summer of 1999. As I understand Lebens and Goldschmidt, these person stages do not cease to exist. Lebens and Goldschmidt offer various proposals of what God might do with these person stages, but one thing is clear—these stages are no longer in a continuity relation with the rest of the Sally-stages. What this leaves us with is a rather large gap in the life of Sally. So it is very difficult to say that the Sally stages that exist before the summer of 1999 are in any sort of continuity relation with the Sally stages after the summer of 1999. It seems like God’s changing of the past destroys the four-dimensional resources for personal identity over time.

I have related worries for the victims of Sally's sinful summer. On the No More Evil version of this proposal, the person stages who fell victim to Sally's sin are deleted along with the sinful Sally stages who wronged them. This seems worrisome because those victimized person stages are in need of healing and justice. Deleting them does no such thing. I should hope that a perfectly good God could come up with a better way to bring about eschatological healing to the actual victims than deletion.

On Lebens and Goldschmidt's "The Promise of a New Past"

Hud Hudson

Lebens and Goldschmidt have put forth a fascinating paper brimming over with arguments worthy of serious consideration. I will restrict my critical remarks to just one intriguing move in section 3.1 of their essay, the section entitled – *Heavenly Super Tasks*.

I have elsewhere argued that by appeal to hypertime we can make rigorous sense of the informal idea that God could make past evils no longer a part of history, for although such evils certainly exist in the past (hypernow) that is consistent with their not existing in the past (hyperhence).¹

Yet Lebens and Goldschmidt ask – “Is an evil any less bad for existing just in the hyperpast? . . . We propose that God can do better.” They explore multiple strategies in the hopes of demonstrating this proposal, but I have worries about the degree of success of the first strategy they allege to have this consequence – an extension of the hypertime theory which appeals to an infinite hierarchy of hypertimes.

The following quotation condenses the main idea of this first strategy:

We propose that God can complete an infinite number of tasks, deleting all traces of [an evil] E from time, hypertime, hyperhypertime and so on. God can't undertake this supertask in time, nor in any level of the hypertime hierarchy, if he wants to completely eradicate E from every level. Rather the supertask must be atemporal: God acts, but not in time, nor in hypertime, nor in hyperhypertime . . . If God is atemporal, and if there exists an infinite hierarchy of hypertimes, allowing for each timeline to change within the timeline above it, God would have the power to remove any evil from history, leaving no trace whatsoever in the infinite hierarchy.

Here are four thoughts about this proposal, one for each of the claims embedded in the beginning of that first sentence: “God (i) *can* (ii) *complete* an infinite number of (iii) *tasks*, (iv) *deleting* all traces of E” – i.e., observations on Ability, Completion, Atemporal Tasks, and Deleting.

Ability: Whether bringing about the existence of a hierarchy of hypertimes is within God's power depends on whether such a sequence is metaphysically possible. Not even omnipotence has power over the impossible. We should concede that such a sequence is (at least) logically

possible, and we need not be distracted by any questions of nomological possibility, since those are questions that may arise about events within a spacetime at a single hypertime but not about the existence of a hypertime hierarchy itself. Still, metaphysical possibility is not a default setting, and when the authors state “there is no reason, besides incredulity, to deny that God could perform the supertask,” perhaps it would be better for Lebens and Goldschmidt to aim lower and advocate just for the epistemic possibility of the metaphysical possibility of the imagined scenario at issue.

Completion: Whether we should agree with the authors that God can perform a series of actions which complete the supertask they envision depends on what constitutes completion in this case. Consider a somewhat more familiar supertask: at 1pm the lamp on the table is switched on, at 1:30 it is switched off, at 1:45 on, at 1:52.30 off, at 1:56.15 on . . . and . . . *zeno the series*. When, exactly, is the series complete? ‘At 2pm’ is one perfectly good answer, for 2pm is the limit of the series, the first time at which every step is strictly past. And what is the state of the lamp at completion? Well, if that’s a way of asking for the state of the lamp at 2pm the answer is *underdetermined*. The constraints on the series will certainly tell us the state of the lamp at every time after 1pm and arbitrarily close to 2pm (on the earlier side), but it is also consistent with the lamp’s being on at 2pm or with the lamp’s being off at 2pm or with the lamp’s not even being in existence at 2pm (or with there not even being such a time as 2pm!). We might also entertain the answer ‘the series is complete at the interval beginning at 1pm and continuing up to but not including 2pm’. That is a perfectly good answer, too. No answer prior to 1pm is appropriate (since the series hasn’t then yet begun to exist), no moment between 1pm and 2pm will do (since the series isn’t at any such moment finished), and there is no least interval to privilege (since for every interval between 1pm and 2pm there is a shorter one containing all the later times). And what is the state of the lamp at completion (in this, our second interpretation of that phrase)? Well, it’s both on and off during that interval; better yet, its state is determined precisely for any instant in the interval you might care to select. But once we entertain the notion that the time of completion of the series is the entire interval in question, no answer of the form ‘on’ or ‘off’ is admissible.

Here’s why that matters: Turn your attention to Lebens and Goldschmidt’s proposed supertask. When, exactly, is the series complete? This question calls for a time (whether a moment or interval) as an answer, but we know in advance that no such answer will do. On the envisioned scenario, *every* time at a hypertime at a hyperhypertime (and so on through the relevant infinite-index) is *internal* to the series and thus not available to serve as the time of its completion. It may be better (rather than *when*) to ask *what* it is for the Goldschmidt-Lebens series to be complete. This question does admit of a good answer, one important component of which guarantees that each time reappears in distinct hypertimes, which themselves reappear in distinct hyperhypertimes, with no upper limit to the hierarchy. For any number of hypertime-prefixes, you can always ascend hyperhigher! Accordingly (and significantly), there is nothing analogous to our ‘at 2pm’ answer in the case of the oscillating lamp; there is no first hyper-location which serves as the *limit* of the Goldschmidt-Lebens series. Rather the Goldschmidt-Lebens series is (quite unlike a continuous temporal or hypertemporal series) countably infinite in structure, just one hyperlayer after another. By default, what it is for the series to be complete is just for the hierarchy (thus described) to be a feature of the actual world. No more, no less.

Atemporality: Whether we here have the performance of a supertask depends on whether the existence of each level in the hierarchy is properly regarded as the consequence of a divine action. In the quotation above, Lebens and Goldschmidt make it clear that the supertask be construed as atemporal, for “God acts, but not in time, nor in hypertime, nor in hyper-hypertime.” For the record, I think they should not take this as equivalent to the claim that God is atemporal as they appear to do, for God can be present at every time and still be responsible for the existence and character of atemporal structures such as the Goldschmidt-Lebens series. Nevertheless, to describe each stage in the hierarchy as the result of a divine task or action seems to risk a journey through the quicksand that surrounds discussions of atemporal, divine agency or else to misrepresent what is simply an existence dependence between an atemporal entity (on the one hand) and God and the divine nature (on the other). Fortunately, the authors face no real need to describe the whole affair as a supertask at all (a category usually used to mark out an infinite series of tasks each of which occurs at a prescribed time or during a fixed interval). What is promising about the Goldschmidt-Lebens series has nothing to do with its careful construction bit by hyperbit, but rather has everything to do with its complex structure which permits timelines to sport different histories at different hypertimes.

Deleting: The claim that such a sequence would completely eradicate all traces of a particular evil from every level of actuality is the primary reason Lebens and Goldschmidt have taken a philosophical and theological interest in it. To be fair, it is truly remarkable that some supertasks boast the peculiar feature of always adding more than is deleted at each stage of the sequence and yet ending up with less than they start with! Consider the supertasker who begins with one tile at 1pm (numbered 1), then creates two tiles (numbered 2 and 3) while destroying number 1 at 1:30, then creates two tiles (numbered 4 and 5) while destroying number 2 at 1:45, then creates two tiles (numbered 6 and 7) while destroying number 3 at 1:52.30, and so on. If we lay down the constraint that no tile is resurrected at 2pm, then none of our numbered tiles can survive the supertask and appear at that fateful hour. As we saw above, however, that is *not* a characteristic that can be claimed by the Goldschmidt-Lebens series; instead, the completeness of that series simply consists in the countably infinite, hypertime hierarchy being a feature of the actual world (rather than in reaching some limit point). Although reality is vastly increased (so to speak) with each step up that infinite ladder,

there the original evil still sits, at time₁ at hypertime₁ at hyperhypertime₁ . . .

even though it doesn't reappear at, say, time₁ at hypertime₁ at hyperhypertime₂. True – every step hyper-higher reveals an ever greater portion of creation, but evils that are already in existence are not *destroyed* on this model; they just fail to *reappear* elsewhere. The original evil is as fixed and undeletable a feature of actuality as the all-encompassing series that contains it.

Accordingly, I suggest that Lebens and Goldschmidt are mistaken to claim that thus equipped with infinitely-many hypertimes, God would have the power to remove history's evils, leaving no trace whatsoever in the infinite hierarchy. To attain the proposed goals of their paper, they will need to depend on the other strategies they pursue.

¹ See my *The Fall and Hypertime* (Oxford University Press, 2014). In the remarks that follow I have adapted some material from my article, “Science, Skepticism, Scripture, and Supertasks: Replies to Torrance, Deng, Madueme, Goldschmidt and Lebens” *Journal of Analytic Theology* Vol. 5, No. 1, (2017): 637-659.