

On the Argument from Omnipotence to Idealism

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The argument from omnipotence to (moderate) Hassidic Idealism developed by Sam Lebens (and Tyron Goldschmidt) depends upon the assumption that, “[i]f all of the features of an object wholly depend upon a mind willing it to have those features, then that object is an idea in that mind” (Lebens, *Principles*, p. 71). Lebens and Goldschmidt defend the principle by pointing out that there aren’t any obvious counterexamples to it.

I don’t know if they will accept what follows as a series of counterexamples; but they seem to me at least to constitute some suggestive thought experiments. The goal is to show that a created thing does not automatically have to be an idea in the mind of the thing that creates it, just because all of its properties are determined by the mind in question.

If there were concrete particulars that are not mere ideas, there would be some sort of metaphysical story that truly describes their structure — even if only the negative story that there’s nothing much interesting to say about them, because they have no structure. A nominalistic “concretist” like Kotarbinski might say there are just physical particles, and wholes made out of them as parts, and there’s not much more to be said about the metaphysics of physical things. The simplest ones may differ in many ways — some have a certain mass, others a smaller mass; some have positive charge, others negative charge — but there’s no need to posit something extra that “gives” some of them properties that others don’t have, or that accounts for their different natures (so there’s no ontological complexity, no breakdown into matter and form, substratum and property, or constitutive universals or tropes). And the complex physical objects just differ or resemble in virtue of being made of parts that differ or resemble, in virtue of having different numbers of parts, and in virtue of their arrangements.

Other metaphysicians will give some kind of complex story even about the simplest particles or substances: perhaps an Aristotelian matter-form story; or a substratum-plus-properties story (some metaphysicians talk about “bare particulars”, though they aren’t really “bare” if they have properties); or a bundle theory of universals; or a trope bundle theory.

To begin, let's set the nominalistic concretist story to one side (though I shall come back to it). On any of these metaphysically complex stories, it seems to me that — once I've wrapped my mind around a certain amount of creation *ex nihilo* — I can at least imagine things that depend completely, for all their properties, upon the direct and exceptionlessly-efficacious willing of two beings; but that would not thereby be mere ideas in the minds of those beings — because neither being has a complete conception of the thing they jointly create. And from there, it's a short step to imagining things that depend completely upon the direct and exceptionlessly-efficacious willing of a single mind, yet would not be mere ideas in that mind.

So, God could give one angel the job of willing that, at the center of a certain room, there be some prime matter; and another angel the job of willing that, if there's any matter at the center of that room, it takes on such-and-such properties (and no others). Perhaps the willing of the matter, and the willing of the properties, are both hard work; so, in the generation of billions and billions of particles, it's best to work together, even though each angel could do the job alone if necessary. The power God gives could be great: an angel that wills that such-and-such matter appears never fails to create it; likewise, for the willing of the exemplification of the properties.

Let's first suppose that willing that there be a certain piece of prime matter involves having the *idea* of that portion of prime matter (this assumes that prime matter comes in identifiable portions — which, granted, sounds like it may be a misconception). The angel in charge of properties would not have to have the idea of the particular bit of prime matter in order to will that, whatever matter is there, it receives certain properties. When the two angels go to work, then, neither need have a complete idea of the thing that results — the one knows only what matter will be there, the other knows only the properties that will be exemplified there. In that case, the particle that results will not be an idea in either of *their* minds; and yet its properties are completely determined by the wills of the two angels. This gets us to the conclusion that having all of your properties determined by *minds* that deliberately choose those properties is not enough, all by itself, to make you an idea in those minds — since neither angel has a full idea of the particle they generate.

Now, should it really matter that two minds are involved here? It hardly seems relevant, if the same generating-method is used. So if the matter-generating angel needed to take a break, the prime-matter-generating job *and* the property-generating job could be handed over to the one angel briefly. Then, so long as the angel puts together the fact that willing that so-and-so and willing that such-and-such have (in this context) the effect of willing that there be a so-and-so that is a such-and-such, it will have a complete idea of the particle it creates (though it's not obvious to me that the angel *must* put the two ideas together in this way). Still, the temporary assumption of both jobs shouldn't make this particle a mere idea, whereas the earlier particles were not.

A similar story can be told about angels that generate particles *ex nihilo* by means of the one's creating a substratum, and the other's bestowing properties upon whatever bare particular appears.

Now, as I intimated parenthetically, one might think that prime matter is nothing in itself — that the first angel couldn't have an idea of a particular bit of it (because it doesn't come in particulate bits). A prime-matter-generating angel could only make it the case that there be some prime matter or other at the center of the room. Perhaps the properties (including some kind of basic nature or essence) that the second angel gives the matter determines everything about the particle, so that the second angel is bound to have a complete idea of the particle. One might have similar worries about bare particulars; that there are no ideas of bare particulars that can be intentionally willed to exist prior to their having this or that nature. (Compare, for example, Arthur Prior's views about *thisness*.)

Still, so long as the particles being generated have more than one property, and the properties involved could be instantiated apart from one another, the story can be fleshed out in terms of two angels responsible for the different properties.

Such stories can easily be told in terms of the bundle theories of individuals — either a bundle theory of universals, or a bundle theory of tropes. One angel declares: “Let such-and-such universals be instantiated at the center of the room (coinstantiated with whatever other universals

are there)”; and the other declares: “Let so-and-so universals be instantiated at the center of the room (coinstantiated with whatever other universals are there)”. Or one angel makes half the tropes at the center of the room, the other makes the rest. Neither need have a complete idea of what the other angel will generate; so neither need have a complete idea of the particle that results (and they need never know what results, if they’re working quickly and not paying attention). Again, one of the angels could, occasionally, play both roles. Why should that suddenly make the particle a mere idea in the angel’s mind, whereas before it was not a mere idea in either of their minds?

Finally, on a nominalistic concretist conception of things, one has the angels merely decreeing: “Let there be exactly one so-and-so at the center of the room and nothing else there” and “Let there be exactly one such-and-such at the center of the room and nothing else there”. These decrees, on the nominalist picture, have nothing to do with universals or tropes or anything else that goes into the make-up of the particle that appears. Still, neither angel need have a complete idea of the thing, so the particle’s complete dependence in all its features upon their willings need not make it an idea in either of their minds. And again, a brief transfer of the creative role to a single angel shouldn’t make the difference.

Now, one could say that there’s always *someone* whose mind contains a complete idea of every particle — namely, God. And since God gives the angels their powers, and holds them and everything else in existence, these stories cannot get off the ground; the fact that the angels don’t have ideas of the particles, at the first stage, doesn’t show that *nobody* does. Still, what Lebens (and Goldschmidt) appealed to was the assumption that a thing’s complete dependence for all its properties upon a mind required that it be merely an idea in that mind. If we seem to be able to imagine a thing’s complete dependence upon a mind without its being merely an idea in that mind, the force of their argument has been blunted.