

Creation and Idealism in Analytic Jewish Philosophy

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Sam Lebens' *The Principles of Judaism* is by far one of the most creative and fascinating books on philosophy that I have read in recent history. Lebens aims to develop a Jewish analytic philosophical theology that is clear, rigorous, and faithful to the Jewish tradition. I learned a great deal from this book, and it has been a continual delight to debate these ideas with Lebens over the years. Lebens covers an impressive range of topics from religious language, God, creation, cosmology, idealism, scripture, mysticism, the nature of time, atonement, and eschatology. In this short essay, I wish to focus on the topic of God, creation, and idealism. Lebens offers an argument from God's perfect rationality to idealism. I will offer an objection to this argument. Before doing so, I will need to define a few terms, state where Lebens and I agree, and then explain where we disagree.

I begin with the nature of God. As I see it, the concept of God is that of a perfect being who is the single, ultimate foundation of reality. There are different conceptions or models of God that differ over their description of God's perfect nature, and differ over the way in which God is the foundation of reality. When it comes to God's perfect nature, Lebens and I both agree that God is a necessarily existent being with essential attributes like aseity, eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, perfect moral goodness, perfect rationality, and perfect freedom. As a necessarily existent being, God cannot fail to exist. This entails that God is eternal, since eternality means existing without beginning and without end. God is *a se* in that God's existence does not depend upon, nor is it derived from, anything external to the divine nature. As omnipotent, God has the maximal power-granting set of abilities, and no liabilities. Certain power-granting abilities are relevant to this discussion such as maximal cognitive power, which I take to involve the ability to know all of the facts about reality (i.e. omniscience), and the ability to be appropriately responsive to reason. As omniscient, God will know all of the objective reasons worth responding to. As perfectly rational, God will always act on the basis of objectively good reasons. Since moral facts are objectively good reasons, and God is appropriately responsive to reasons, God will be perfect in moral goodness. Finally, as perfectly free, God is the source of His actions, has the ability to do otherwise, and will always be guided by objectively good reasons for acting.

Next, I need to discuss how God is the ultimate foundation of reality. There are multiple views one might affirm. For example, one might believe in a doctrine of emanation. God emanates a universe if the universe necessarily follows from the divine nature. On an

emanationist understanding of things, God does not perform any voluntary action in bringing about the universe. The universe simply does come about from God's essence. Things are different when it comes to a doctrine of creation. A creation occurs if God freely brings about the existence of a universe. Yet there are two doctrines of creation represented throughout the history of philosophical theology. One is the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, and the other is the doctrine of eternal creation.¹ According to Lebens, creation ex nihilo can be understood as the affirmation that, "The universe was created by God at some point in time (perhaps the *first* moment in time), before which there was nothing (except God)."² This doctrine is distinct from an eternal creation view which Lebens defines as, "The universe has always existed, with no beginning. It is nevertheless God's creation. He is *eternally* creating it; giving it being."³ Panentheists reject creation ex nihilo in favour of eternal creation.⁴ Theists affirm creation ex nihilo. Lebens and I both agree that God creates the universe ex nihilo, and thus we reject panentheism.

Before carrying on, I wish to emphasize something about the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. The doctrine says that there is a state of affairs prior to creation where God exists all alone. I call this God's precreation moment. This is something that Jews and Christians agree upon. Consider the Christian philosopher Boethius on the matter.

Now this our religion which is called Christian and Catholic is founded chiefly on the following assertions. From all eternity, that is, *before the world was established*, and so before all that is meant by time began, there has existed one divine substance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in such wise that we confess the Father God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God, and yet not three Gods but one God...The divine nature then, abiding from all eternity and unto all eternity without any change, by the exercise of a will known only to Himself, determined of Himself to form the world, and brought it into being when it was absolutely naught, nor did He produce it from His own substance, lest it should be thought divine by nature, nor did He form it after any model, lest it should be thought that anything had already come into being which helped His will by the existence of an independent nature, and that there should exist something that had not been made by Him and yet existed.⁵

¹ (Wilberding 2016) (Adamson 2016)

² (Lebens 2020, 31)

³ (Lebens 2020, 31)

⁴ E.g. (Oord 2022)

⁵ (Boethius 1918)

Of course, Jews will not be very keen to affirm the Trinity with Boethius, but the notion that God exists all alone prior to creation should be a welcomed common ground. Consider what Moses Maimonides says on the matter.

In the beginning *God alone existed, and nothing else*...Even time itself is among the things created; for time depends on motion, i.e., on an accident in things which move, and the things upon whose motion time depends are themselves created beings, which have passed from non-existence into existence. We say that *God existed before* the creation of the Universe, although the verb *existed* appears to imply the notion of time; we also believe that He existed an infinite space of time before the Universe was created; but in these cases we do not mean time in its true sense. We only use the term to signify something analogous or similar to time.⁶

As philosophers and theologians have reflected on God's precreation moment, they have considered a series of questions and topics. A common claim is something called the doctrine of divine ideas. This doctrine says that all possibilities are grounded in the nature of God. All of the possible things that God could create, and all of the possible timelines that God could bring about, are eternal ideas in the mind of God. These divine ideas are essential to the mind of God. They are not the sort of things that God freely creates. Instead, whatever God freely creates will be patterned after the divine ideas.⁷

Here is an interesting question to consider. Out of all of the possible universes that God could create, why did God select this particular universe? In order to answer this question, one will need to have an answer to a slightly different, though related, question. Out of all of the possible universes that God could create, which particular universe did God create? If you don't know what kind of universe God did in fact create, it is difficult to begin hypothesizing about why God selected this universe.

In my view, I say that God selected to create a universe filled with material and immaterial objects. God has created all sorts of physical objects from electrons and quarks to complex biological organisms. God has also created immaterial substances that we call souls or minds. This is the particular kind of universe that God has selected to create. Why this

⁶ (Maimonides 1956, 171)

⁷ Cf. (Ward 2020)

particular universe? I'm not entirely sure, but I can gesture towards a partial answer.⁸ The partial answer is that physical and immaterial objects have intrinsic value, and God is interested in bringing about more valuable things into existence.

Lebens disagrees with me on this issue. He thinks that God has created a very different kind of universe. What kind of universe has God created? God has created an Extreme Hassidic Idealist universe. (*Extreme Hassidic* is Lebens' terminology, not mine.) According to Lebens, Extreme Hassidic Idealism says that everything is a mind or an idea in a mind, and that no minds other than God exist.⁹ In other words, all that exists is the mind of God and His ideas. Creatures like you and I are merely ideas in the mind of God. Lebens offers a very provocative argument for this conclusion called The Argument from Perfect Rationality. The argument goes a little something like this.¹⁰

- 1) Assume: God is necessarily perfectly rational and necessarily omniscient.
- 2) Therefore: God would not do what he knows to be otiose, and he knows what is otiose.
- 3) Assume: If Extreme Hassidic Idealism is so much as possible, God could create a world that appears exactly like ours without creating non-mental material objects.
- 4) Assume: If God could create a world that appears exactly like ours without creating non-mental material objects, such objects would be otiose.
- 5) Therefore: If Extreme Hassidic Idealism is so much as possible, then God would not create non-mental material objects.
- 6) Assume: Extreme Hassidic Idealism is possible.
- 7) Therefore: God does not create non-mental material objects.

I am more than happy to grant premises (1)-(2). The omniscient God always acts for a reason, unless He has a good reason not to. What premises (3)-(4) are asking me to consider is that God has no good reason to create a universe with material objects. Why should I think a thing like that? As I said before, I believe that physical objects have intrinsic value, and that intrinsic value gives God a reason to bring them into existence. Lebens disagrees with my

⁸ For a more detailed answer, see (Mullins and Sani 2021).

⁹ (Lebens 2020, 70)

¹⁰ (Lebens 2020, 74-75), the original argument is stated with Berkeleyan Idealism. On (Lebens 2020, 76), Lebens quickly says that the argument can be rearticulated with Extreme Hassidic Idealism. Yet, what exactly the rearticulated argument should look like is a bit hazy to me. For the purposes of this essay, I have replaced "Berkeleyan Idealism" with "Extreme Hassidic Idealism."

evaluation of the situation. As far as he can tell, it seems like God could have no good reason to create a physical universe. The existence of physical objects that are really distinct from divine ideas would add nothing of value to God or creatures. Lebens says that this is so because it is impossible to add value to a perfect God. Further, making creatures that are flesh and blood that are distinct from the divine ideas would not add anything of value to the lives of creatures.¹¹ The Jewish tradition says that God's reasons for creating have to do with the moral and experiential lives of creatures. Our moral and experiential lives appear the same way in an Extreme Hassidic idealist universe as they would in a physical universe.¹² So a physical universe adds nothing of value, leaving God with no good reason to create one. Thus, the conclusion in premise (5) which says that God would not create such universes if Extreme Hassidic Idealism is possible. If I am willing to grant (6), that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is possible, then the conclusion in (7) follows.

This is a very fascinating argument. I want to raise two objections to this argument that focus on rejecting (6). First, I want to argue that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is not possible because it is inconsistent with the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Second, I want to argue that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is impossible because it is inconsistent with God's perfect freedom.

The Inconsistency of Extreme Hassidic Idealism and Creation Ex Nihilo

The Argument from Perfect Rationality is assuming that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is consistent with the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. The whole thrust of the argument is over what kind of universe God would freely create out of nothing. Yet I say that Hassidic Idealism is inconsistent with the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, thus rejecting the coherence and possibility of (6). Here is why I think that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is not possibly consistent with creation ex nihilo.

Recall that creation ex nihilo affirms that there is a precreation moment where God exists all alone. Here is what that means. On theism, there are two phases that map onto the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. First, God has the ideas of what He intends to create. In this state, God is alone without any creatures. Second, God creates things that are distinct from

¹¹ (Lebens 2020, 78)

¹² (Lebens 2020, 76)

God and His ideas, and these distinct things resemble His ideas. In this second state, there is God and everything that He has created.

As stated earlier, the divine ideas are essential to God's nature. The traditional claim is that all possibilities are grounded in God's nature. God essentially has a perfect knowledge of His own nature, and thus essentially knows all of the possibilities. After all, it is difficult to understand how God could be considered omniscient if God did not have perfect knowledge of His own nature. Since the divine ideas are essential to God's nature, there is no state of affairs where God exists without His ideas. Given this, the theist says that God and His ideas are prior to creation because God uses His ideas as a template for which things He intends to create.¹³ In reflecting on the doctrine of divine ideas and creation, Thomas M. Ward says, "God has things in mind and has creatures—possible creatures—in mind before he creates anything."¹⁴

Hassidic Idealism cannot make sense of this since (i) creation just is God's ideas, and (ii) God never exists without His ideas. What this means for Hassidic Idealism is that God never exists without creation. That violates the doctrine of creation ex nihilo's claim that prior to creation God exists all alone. What Hassidic Idealism looks like is either a doctrine of eternal creation or emanation. I have my doubts that Hassidic Idealism can affirm eternal creation since God does not freely bring about His ideas. God's ideas are essential to Him, and thus cannot be the product of free choice. Thus, it seems that Hassidic Idealism has to affirm emanation instead of creation.

The Inconsistency of Extreme Hassidic Idealism and Perfect Freedom

Here is one final reason for rejecting (6) in the Argument from Perfect Rationality. Again, the thrust of the argument is about what kind of universe God would freely create. The argument is assuming that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is consistent with divine freedom. Yet I say that Extreme Hassidic Idealism is inconsistent with divine freedom. Allow me to explain why.

It is a standard theistic claim that God's freedom involves the ability to do otherwise. For example, God is free to create or not create anything whatsoever. Also, God is free to create this universe, or any other universe of His choosing. As I see it, divine freedom is

¹³ (Ward 2020, 5, 7-8)

¹⁴ (Ward 2020, 7)

inconsistent with Extreme Hassidic Idealism because it entails a modal collapse and a modal explosion, both of which make it impossible for God to have any choice whatsoever.

Consider God and His ideas. It is a standard theistic claim that God is free to create any of the possible universes that He has ideas of. God is also free to refrain from creating any of them. In other words, God has options. Things are different on Lebens' Idealism. On Extreme Hassidic Idealism, the created order is nothing more than God's ideas. Since God eternally and essentially has His ideas, God has no ability to do otherwise. This entails a modal collapse. A modal collapse occurs when the distinction between contingency and necessity is collapsed into one category. In the case of Hassidic Idealism, everything is collapsed into the category of necessity. Why? Because Idealism also leads to a modal explosion, which means that all possibilities are actual. Since all that exists, and that could possibly exist, just are the divine ideas, everything that could possibly exist does in fact exist. All possibilities are essential ideas in the mind of God, and all it means to exist as actual is simply to be a divine idea. In other words, all that could possibly exist must exist. The entire way things are could not be any other way. That means that everything is necessary since everything could not be in any other way. If everything is necessary, there is no such thing as free choice or the ability to do otherwise for God and creatures. Hence, why I say that there is no divine freedom here.

Extreme Hassidic Idealism assumes divine freedom, but Extreme Hassidic Idealism is inconsistent with divine freedom. Thus, Extreme Hassidic Idealism is incoherent, and so not possible. Hence, I reject (6) in the Argument from Perfect Rationality.

Concluding Reflections

As I said before, I have taken great delight in debating these ideas with Lebens over the years, and I am very interested to see how he will respond to my arguments in this short essay. Lebens is an incredibly bright and creative thinker, and I recommend his work to all who are interested in Jewish philosophy.

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