

Responses to Three Critiques

It's a tremendous honour to have a symposium dedicated to my book, *The Principles of Judaism*; especially under the auspices of the Association for the Philosophy of Judaism – an organization that I helped to found, and whose new, younger, and more dynamic leadership are bound to take it from strength to strength. The honour is only compounded by the fact that the three symposiasts, engaging with my work, are such fabulous scholars, and good friends. I can't hope, in a short response, to do justice to all of the issues raised, but I'll jump right in and at least try to sketch the sort of avenues through which I'd hope to address the probing and creative issues that have been raised.

Ryan Mullins – one of my favourite sparring partners, and a good friend – focusses his attention on an argument, originally developed alongside Tyron Goldschmidt, according to which, if Hassidic Idealism is so much as possible, then, given God's perfect rationality, it must be actually true. I'm still committed to the validity of the argument, and thus, I agree with Mullins that if the theistic opponent of Hassidic Idealism is to escape from its clutches, she will have to deny that Hassidic Idealism is so much as possible. Mullins offers two reasons for endorsing the impossibility of Hassidic idealism. Personally, I'm more worried about the second reason, but I think that they can both be resisted.

The first reason for thinking Hassidic Idealism to be impossible is that it is incompatible with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Since we believe that doctrine to be true, we must conclude that Hassidic Idealism is impossible (at least, epistemically impossible – since I don't take Mullins to be claiming that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is metaphysically necessary. God didn't have to create anything at all).

This first consideration doesn't keep me up at night for multiple reasons (in addition to my general exhaustion, which helps me to fall asleep whenever my head hits a pillow). First: I wonder, to what extent I or Judaism *really* are committed to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Admittedly, I argue, in my book, that it is the most plausible account of creation, but I also document the fact that there have been respected Jewish thinkers committed to other cosmogonies, such as *creatio continua* and *creatio originalis ex materia*. Absent an argument compelling the committed Jew to adopt *creatio ex nihilo*, I don't think Mullins' first consideration is sufficient to rule out the truth of Hassidic Idealism.

Second: let's say that I am committed, for one reason or another, to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (and, as I make clear in the book, I actually am), wouldn't it be enough that the doctrine is true *in* the story of the world? All that Mullins has argued is that, for the Hassidic Idealist, there's a sense in which God, in His transcendence, created nothing at all. But many Hassidic thinkers, given their commitment to what I call Jewish Nothing-Elism, would agree. What matters to them is that, in the story of our world, and therefore from our perspective, it remains true to say that God willed a physical universe into being from nothing. That sounds pretty much like *creatio ex nihilo* to me.

And yet, I think that I'm conceding too much. I think that the Hassidic Idealist can continue to make the case, against Mullins, that even His transcendence, God does create something from nothing, and that He exercises true freedom in so doing. Jerrold Levinson argues that a work of art, like a novel, is created not merely by the artist having an idea. The artist has to select that idea from the landscape of all of his other ideas, and in the act of selecting that idea, and – in a human context – pointing it out to others, via some

artistic medium or other, the artist creates something that never existed before. The idea existed before, as a Platonic type. But what's new, is the existence of what Levinson calls, an *indicated type*.¹ God has ideas. He has them essentially. But then, there's a pre-creation moment, in which he selects a set of ideas from the more general set of all of his ideas. He indicates those ideas; just that set. I would argue that it is God's act of *selection*, selecting, and committing to some ideas rather than to others, which is His act of creation. We can therefore make sense of a pre-creation moment, if we must, in order to satisfy the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Mullins' second reason for thinking Hassidic idealism to be impossible is more worrying to me, but my hope is that I've already laid the foundations of a response. This is how Mullins presents the concern:

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.

Hassidic idealism entails that everything is necessary. Since it isn't true that everything is necessary, Hassidic idealism must be false. Perhaps another way of putting the worry is that, since every possible world is an idea in the mind of God, and since there is nothing more to being actual, for the Hassidic idealist, than being an idea in the mind of God, the position has generated a modal explosion, allowing in modal realism by the back door. As Mullins presents the concern:

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.

I hope to have laid the foundations for a response already by distinguishing between God's having ideas, and His selecting them, and indicating them, to create something new out of them, in terms of an "indicated type." It's worth noting that in the book of Genesis, God isn't presented as thinking the world into being. He is presented as *speaking* it into being. Perhaps the distinction between thinking and speaking here maps onto my distinction between merely having an idea, and the extra action of selecting one idea from among those ideas. Being actual, on this account, doesn't reduce merely to being an idea in the mind of God. It reduces to being among the ideas that God has selected. A more concessive response is also available, should my distinction between having and selecting ideas collapse. Ultimately, the Hassidic idealist could bite the bullet, and yet still maintain that God can at least be free relative to the story in which we live, even if His actions are determined in His transcendence. On this more concessive response, the modal collapse and explosion that Mullins fears don't have to make it into the story in which we live our lives. I'm guessing that this response won't satisfy him much, and so I hope the distinction between having and selecting ideas does hold water!

Dean Zimmerman – my friend, mentor, and philosophical guru, to whom the book was lovingly dedicated (in the vain hope that it would stop him from criticizing anything in it) – focusses his attention on another

¹ Levinson, J. (1990), *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press).

one of the arguments for Hassidic idealism that I developed alongside Tyron Goldschmidt. According to this argument, it is sufficient for x to be an idea in the mind of y , if x depends completely and directly for the possession of all of its properties, upon the will of y . Zimmerman's brilliant strategy for undermining this argument is to develop a series of creative thought experiments designed to undermine this sufficient condition for being an idea (and he's hitting me in a weak spot here because I tend to love Zimmerman thought experiments). He writes:

[O]nce 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.

I think the first sentence of this excerpt is telling. First, Zimmerman has to get his head around a certain amount of creation *ex nihilo*. This is telling because, ultimately, I don't think it is all that easy to get a sense of how creation *ex nihilo* could be possible, if we're talking about the creation of something other than ideas in a mind that dreams them up. And thus, our first question could be, where do these two beings come from. Who created them? Are they necessarily existent beings? I have good reason to believe that there's only *one* necessarily existent concrete being, not two. Is it legitimate, at this stage in the dialectic to assume that we can get our heads around their creation for nothing? But I'll bracket these concerns for the sake of argument and engage with the thought experiment itself.

What I think Zimmerman's thought experiment reveals is that the allegedly sufficient condition for being an idea, advanced in Goldschmidt's and my argument, is lacking something. Coming under the control of some mind, for the possession of your properties, is not going to be sufficient for being an idea in that mind unless we add two further conditions: (1) it needs to be the case that all of x 's properties are dependent on that mind; that (2) no other mind has a similar power over x ; and that (3) no other mind has a veto over the mind that has this power over x . A later consideration that Zimmerman raises would have me add a temporal condition too, such that the power in question had by the mind, over x , has to be in force at all times. But I don't think that these new conditions are *ad hoc*. They seem perfectly plausible to me. Zimmerman's thought experiments get 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.

I agree. But it only goes to show that we need to add more detail to our sufficient condition. It doesn't, however, undermine the basic case that Goldschmidt and I are trying to make.

Ideas can be had by multiple minds. They can even be created, in a collaborative effort, by multiple minds, just as the Coen Brothers collectively created the screenplay for *Fargo*. But Goldschmidt and I are less interested, for the purposes of our argument, in the necessary conditions for being an idea. We are in the business of isolating just one sufficient condition. If something is dependent, at all times of its existence,

for the possession of all of its properties, including its existence, upon the directly efficacious will of just one mind, y , and if no other mind has a veto over this power of y , then it remains difficult to believe that x is anything other than an idea in the mind of y . If some of these conditions aren't met, then all bets are off. Maybe x is an idea, and maybe it isn't.

I think we still have a plausible sufficient condition for being an idea, even once we've added well motivated conditions, in light of Zimmerman's thought experiments. Moreover, I think that the condition, once amended, is still apt to lead us, given some very standard theistic commitments, to the conclusion that all things other than God are ideas in the mind of God.

Finally, I come to the contribution of the brilliant Filippo Casati, who focusses on my treatment of apophaticism. He summarises my basic picture in terms of two moves:

FIRST MOVE: Whenever we claim something about God, such a claim is false (or nonsensical).

SECOND MOVE: The falsity (or the nonsensicality) of such a claim is illuminating and/or therapeutic.

This isn't quite right. But it's close enough for Casati's arguments to pose a real problem for me. Nevertheless, and for the sake of clarity, it's worth pointing out the slight inaccuracy. Unlike many apophatic theologians, I am not committed to the claim that "whenever we claim something about God, such a claim is false (or nonsensical)." In fact, my considered position is that only *some* of the claims that a systematic theology makes are likely to be false or nonsense, and that we won't always be in a position to know when. I *am* however committed to *some* theological claims being straightforwardly true; that God exists, for example, and that God is good.

Having said that, I do think that any conjunction of claims, expressed in a natural human language, that seems to provide an exhaustive account of the nature of God will be false or nonsensical. I also raise (but don't commit myself fully) to the distinct possibility that any claim, expressed in a natural human language, about the fundamental relationship between humans and God, will be false or nonsensical. But even if we suitably amend Casati's summary, the arguments that he advances pose a real challenge to me. Here are the suitably amended moves:

FIRST MOVE: Many important claims about God, to which a systematic theology will likely be committed, are false (or nonsensical).

SECOND MOVE: Even when we arrive at such false (or nonsensical) claims, they could still be such as to be illuminating and/or therapeutic.

First, Casati applies his scarily brilliant brain to a proper analysis of the logical structure of the first move. The question is whether the parenthetical disjunction is inclusive or exclusive. Rightly, he observes that my preference is to treat it as inclusive, since I think that there might be such a thing as false nonsense, even though some people define nonsense (partly) in terms of lacking a truth-value. I claim that this understanding of nonsense is present in the *Tractatus* (where Wittgenstein describes contradictions and tautologies as nonsense) but Casati argues that even Wittgenstein thought that, in the final analysis, lacking truth-evaluable content is a necessary condition for being nonsense. Moreover, I have to be consistent, and in my early work on Russell, I committed myself to the claim that category mistakes are necessarily false but *not* nonsense, because they're false. So, perhaps, if only to be consistent with my

earlier work (to which I'm still partial), I should accept Casati's advice and endorse only an exclusive reading of the disjunction in FIRST MOVE.

The argument that Casati constructs is designed to force a dilemma on me. Either I am committed to the existence of a class of nonsensical claims about God that are illuminating and/or therapeutic, or I am committed to the existence of a class of false claims about God that are illuminating and/or therapeutic. But both horns of this dilemma are going to raise uncomfortable consequences – which is what makes it a dilemma.

One of my favourite methods for explaining illumination is to appeal to Elizabeth Camp's account of metaphor.² But, Casati argues, this route is closed to me if the claims in question are nonsense. Camp's account of metaphor allows for a string of words to point to some fact by setting up some sort of an analogy. One makes a claim, literally about an object and a property, and this claim allows us to construct some sort of a model, that allows us to see how the real object of the metaphor instantiates a property (even a property for which we currently have no name) by way of the model, and by way of the fact that the object and property with which we started are somehow analogous to the real object of the metaphor and the property that it holds. But if the string with which we start is nonsensical, then it doesn't make a literal claim about an object and a property, and therefore, it can't establish a model that points to something beyond it.

Casati then goes on to argue that nonsensical strings don't merely fail to illuminate in the ways that I want them to, but they can't be therapeutic either. My case for the therapeutic nature of apophatic theology centers upon the notion of verisimilitude. But nonsensical claims cannot be verisimilar. Casati provides the following example of verisimilitude:

[I]magine a box which contains five balls. Since there are five balls in the box, the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is not true. It is, in fact, false. Having said that, it is still intuitive to think that such a proposition is more truthlike than the proposition *there are no balls in the box*. There is a sense in which the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is closer to the truth; it has a higher degree of verisimilitude.

What we see is that verisimilar claims, in order to be closer or further away from the truth, at least need to be meaningful. How can I claim that a conjunction of sentences claiming to offer an exhaustive account of the nature of God could be verisimilar, if I don't even allow that they could be *meaningful*? Having run out of options on this first horn of the dilemma, Casati tries to impale me on the second horn.

Given the exclusive disjunction of FIRST MOVE, and if the illuminating and/or thereuptic claims of an apophatic theology cannot be meaningless, then they must be false. Regarding this horn of the dilemma, it might seem as if Casati's initial (and quite understandable) error in interpretation, will get me off the hook. But, not one to make things easy for myself, I'll try to show how that isn't the case.

² Camp, E. (2006), "Metaphor and That Certain *Je ne Sais Quoi*", *Philosophical Studies* 129, pp. 1–25.

First, Casati argues that the Camp-style illumination mechanism isn't available to me, even if I acknowledge that the illuminating claims are meaningful falsehoods. Initially, it seems that his case is built upon the misunderstanding that I deny that any claims whatsoever about God can be true. He writes:

According to Camp, metaphors can be insightful because they "set an implicit analogy between two object-property pairs, where the hearer presumably has had experience with both the object and the property in one pair but only with the object of the second" (Camp, 2006, p.11). Grasping the insight of a metaphor is, thus, solving this "analogical equation" by applying our "imaginative skills" (Camp, 2006, p.11) ... At this point, it is important to notice that Camp's account of metaphors necessarily presupposes the possibility of claiming something true about the metaphors' subject matters, for we can apply our imaginative skills and solve an analogical equation if and only if we can make *true* claims about its object-property pairs and their relation.

You might think that I'm saved from embarrassment, since I'm not committed to the claim that we can't make any true claims about God. But I don't think that this will save me. Ultimately, I think that there are some things about God that can't be said, and that can be illuminated. But if those things aren't sayable, then they can't be illuminated by the Camp-mechanism for exactly the reasons that Casati points out.

Then Casati argues that I can make no room for therapeutic falsehoods. Once again, his case seems to be built upon the misunderstanding according to which I don't think that any claims about God are true. But, once again, his case is deeper than that. He writes:

As mentioned above, it is possible to claim that a false proposition is closer to the truth than another false proposition if and only if we can take a third proposition to be true. This third proposition is, thus, used as the yardstick by means of which we measure the 'proximity' to the truth of the other two propositions. Without being able to take any proposition to be true, we would not be able to have a benchmark against which we can measure the verisimilitude of the other propositions... Since all claims about God are false, Lebens finds himself in the unpleasant situation of not having any true claims about God at his disposal.

Since I can have no true yardsticks, I can't meaningfully appeal to verisimilitude. Now, as I've pointed out, I'm not actually committed to the claim that all propositions about God are false (or nonsensical). But, if I'm committed to the claim that some facts about God cannot be captured by true propositions, and that these facts can be approached by degrees of more and less verisimilitude, then Casati's argument still stands.

Casati's contribution to this symposium combines brilliant exegesis with dazzling reason and rigour. I don't think that in this short response, I can offer any escape from his dilemma that does justice to the weight of the problems that populate its two horns. But I can quickly sketch the sorts of moves I think are left open to me, some of which I wouldn't have dreamt of had I not been in dialogue with Casati behind the scenes of this symposium (for which I'm grateful to him).

As I've said, I think I must accept that FIRST MOVE is best understood as an exclusive disjunction. Moreover, my strongest inclination, when faced with Casati's dilemma is to embrace the second horn, and thereby

deny that the illuminating and/or therapeutic claims in question are nonsense. Instead, I should maintain that they are false.

And yet, if only for the sake of pursuing an argument to its bitter end, I think that there are things that can still be said in favour of the first horn. I know it will be a hard sell, but perhaps I can assert, of a string of nonsense, that it is a metaphor. And though my claim will have to be literally false, it might still be a true metaphor. And perhaps, in order to cash out what this metaphor – according to which a string of nonsense is a true metaphor – really means, we will come to realise that it's only metaphorically true that it's a metaphor. And this process might go on *ad infinitum*. It's not clear to me that this sort of regress is vicious. Instead, such an infinite chain might be exactly the sort of mechanism, convening upon the truth only in infinity, by which language is able to point beyond itself. Now, I know that this sounds very bla-bla, but I have worked out such a claim in more detail elsewhere, and it seems to me it has deep roots in Midrashic thinking about the nature of religious metaphors.³

Moreover, perhaps a string of nonsense can be therapeutic in the following way. Consider a systematic theology presents as a long conjunction of claims. Perhaps, upon realizing that some of the conjuncts are nonsense, and seeing how difficult it is to assert the rest, without stumbling into the nonsense, you come to realize that the remaining conjuncts, the ones that are not nonsense, can be, collectively, at best verisimilar rather than true. And thus, the nonsense itself needn't be verisimilar in order to play a part in a therapy that has the replacement of truth for verisimilitude as its goal. Moreover, and much more speculatively, if there can be degrees of truth, perhaps there's some room to construct a notion of degrees of meaning, such that some strings of words are less meaningful than others. A spectrum of more and less meaning might allow for the introduction of verisimilitude, or at least verisimilitude-similitude, that can apply to nonsensical strings.

And yet, as I've said, my inclination is to abandon the first horn altogether, and accept that the illuminating and/or therapeutic claims of an apophatic theology must be false (and not meaningful). I think that on this horn of the dilemma I've got more room for maneuver. First, even if Camp's mechanism for illumination is closed to me, I think others remain open. A suitably situated brain in a vat (on the assumption of Putnam's semantic externalism) speaks falsely when she says that she's a brain in a vat – since she doesn't have the linguistic power to reach beyond the world of simulated-vats and simulated-brains, so as to be able to speak about real-vats and real-brains, and to assert that she's a real-brain in a real-vat. And yet, when she utters her falsehood, it seems clear to me that her falsehood gestures towards the truth of her situation; a truth that she, in her linguistic confines, is powerless to express. This is an illuminating falsehood, and nothing that Casati has said disqualifies me from appealing to the same sort of mechanism, even if it differs from Camp's.

Moreover, it isn't clear to me that Camp's mechanism requires that there be a literally true claim to stand as an analogue of the object and property pair to which a metaphor refers. What has to exist, I think, is a truth, about an object and a property, to which the object and property pair of the metaphor points. But just because such a truth exists, it needn't be the sort of truth that we'd ever have the power to express

³ See my "A Commentary on a Midrash: Metaphors about Metaphor" in S. Lebens, A Segal, and D. Rabinowitz (eds.), *Jewish Philosophy in an Analytic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 78-95.

literally;⁴ just as the falsehood of the brain in the vat points towards a real and existing truth, but to a truth that the envatted brain lacks the power to assert via a literal use of natural language. So, perhaps Camp's method is open to me in the end.

Finally, I think that, on the second horn of the dilemma, I'm not going to have much problem making sense of the verisimilitude of a systematic theology. First of all, I don't deny that there is an exhaustive truth about God. I just argue that we will never be in a position to truly assert a claim that expresses that exhaustive truth. The existence of such a truth might be enough to provide me with the yardstick that I need in order to make sense of verisimilitude. Even if this isn't good enough, the fact that some of the conjuncts of the system are true, and some false, and that some of the falsehoods will be closer and further from truths that one day we'll be able to express, is enough to allow for the notion of verisimilitude to attach to the system, even if some of its more mystical conjuncts are false in such a way as to rule out the applicability of verisimilitude. We can copy the move I made on the first horn of the dilemma and suggest that the conjuncts to which verisimilitude cannot apply might still function to show us how it is verisimilitude, rather than truth, that should be applied to the remainder.

I'm sorry to have been as brief as I have been in these responses. It has been such fun to engage with all three fantastic contributions. I extend my sincere thanks to Dar Triffon-Reshef and Itamar Weinshtock Saadon for organizing this online event.

⁴ Camp raises the possibility that we don't yet have the words to refer to the relevant objects and properties, but perhaps there could be cases in which we have reason to think that we never will have such words.