

# Divine Contractions: Theism Gives Birth to Idealism\*

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we seek to show two things. First, that theism — together with some presumptions at least as plausible — entails at least one version of idealism. For the theist, this serves as proof of idealism; for the materialist, as proof of atheism. Second, that a connection between theism and idealism would make sense of a central doctrine in Jewish mysticism: the doctrine of divine contraction (heb. *tzimtzum*). But first to fix some terminology.

## 2. Berkeley, Better, Besh”t

Behold three versions of idealism:

**Berkeleyan Idealism:** Everything is a mind or an idea in a mind. No mind is an idea, and no idea is a mind. Some mind is infinite (i.e., God’s) and some minds are finite (e.g., ours).

**Tame Hassidic Idealism:** Everything is a mind or an idea in a mind. But some minds are ideas and some ideas are minds. Material objects and other minds are ideas in God’s mind. Indeed, everything other than God’s mind is an idea in God’s mind.

**Radical Hassidic Idealism:** Everything is a mind or an idea in a mind. There are no minds other than God, and there are no material objects. Everything other than God’s mind would have to be an idea in God’s mind, and minds and material objects could not be ideas.

Radical Hassidic Idealism seems to be the most absurd of these views: there are *obviously* minds other than God’s; after all, we ourselves all have or *are* minds.

Not so fast. Distinguish between (1) an author writing a story, and (2) what happens in that story (see Lebens 2015; 2017b). Similarly, distinguish: (1) God imagining a world, and (2) what God imagines. Radical Hassidic Idealism contends that on one level of reality — the level (2) of what God imagines — finite minds and material objects exist. But on a more *fundamental* level — the level (1) at which God is merely imaging a world — finite minds and material objects do *not* exist. At this fundamental level, only God and his ideas *of* minds and his ideas *of* material objects exist. Just as the idea of red is not red, God’s ideas of minds are not themselves minds.

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Naturally enough, Berkeleyan Idealism is the view of George Berkeley. Hassidic Idealism is the view of various Hassidic thinkers contemporaneous with Berkeley. For example, the founder of Hassidism, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (the *Baal Shem Tov*, or the *Besh"t*, 18th c.) teaches that when reciting the *Shema* prayer, which declares the unity of God, the worshipper must understand that:

there is nothing else in the entire world, other than the Holy One, Blessed be He; that all the world is filled with his glory [alluding to Isaiah 6:3]. And the fundamental principle of this intention, is that the person should consider himself as empty and void, and he has no fundamentality other than the soul that is within him, which is a portion of God above [alluding to Job 31:2]. Consequently, there is nothing in the world other than the one, Holy One, blessed be He.

(Ben Eliezer 1938: *Parashat Va'Etchanan 13*)

No nihilism here. We *do* exist, but *derivatively*. God exists fundamentally. Hence we have priority monism: many things exist, but only one is foundational. God here plays a role vis-a-vis every other person that is at least analogous to the role a mind plays in sustaining its ideas.

### 3. Theism Gives Birth to Idealism

With the terms fixed, the case proceeds: three little arguments, as rough as they are suggestive, each followed by a little more commentary in turn.

*Argument 1:* God is omnipotent. Hence, God has a most efficacious will. Hence, any contingent features of any object are wholly dependent upon God willing it to have those features. God has then the sort of power over objects that minds typically have over their ideas. Indeed, if all of the contingent features of an object wholly depend upon a mind willing it to have those features then it is an idea in that mind. Therefore, all objects are ideas in God's mind.

*Commentary:* Omnipotence and the efficacy of the divine are acceptable to most theists.<sup>1</sup> What is not so acceptable is that the radical dependence of all objects follows from the efficacy of God's will *or* that mentality follows in turn from this radical dependence. Still, these should be accepted.

In order now: The argument requires only that radical dependence upon God follows from the efficacy of God's will insofar as *contingent* beings are concerned, since all non-divine minds and material objects are contingent beings. If God is omnipotent, then nothing contingent *could*

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<sup>1</sup> For an argument that omnipotence entails efficacious will, see Pearce (2017).

occur without, at least, being subject to his veto — even the exercise of our free will is subject to his veto. The dependence that our argument requires follows directly from God’s omnipotence.

Problem: Not every feature of our minds depend upon God. Our *existence* might be contingent, but e.g. our *humanity* is essential to us. Our essence restricts what is possible. God could not will us to be fish. Hence, our features are not wholly dependent upon God’s will. Answer: Our essence might not include *humanity*. The entire objection assumes a controversial doctrine of essentialism. Even granting as much, God is still responsible for the existence of anything with such essences, rather than others. As long as our *existence* is dependent upon God, it matters not that some of our properties are *essential* to us, since even such “necessary” properties are conditional upon our existing.

Next: Mentality *does* follow from radical dependence. We have no definitive argument in this case. But we propose it modestly as the best explanation of the phenomena. However modest, a best explanation is *something*. The phenomena are the abundant supply of confirmatory examples and the absence of any counter-examples. Any time you find that all of the features of a thing wholly depend upon some mind willing it to have those features, then you also find that the thing is an idea in that mind.

Problem: We do have a counterexample in the movement of our arms, which depend upon our minds, and yet the movement of our arms are not ideas in our minds. Answer: No counterexample at all. Such movements are not wholly dependent on our minds. Another counterexample: The colours on the canvas are dependent upon the will of the artist, and yet the colours on the canvas are not ideas in the artist’s mind. Answer: no counterexample at all. The colours are not wholly dependent upon the artist’s mind. Not *wholly* dependent upon our will, so not necessarily any idea in our minds.

Problem: Our argument won’t convince anybody antecedently committed to materialism. A materialist won’t accept that minds ever have the power wholly to determine the features of ideas. According to the materialist, a mind’s will-power can’t determine the features of your ideas without all sorts of physical and neurological causes playing their essential roles.<sup>2</sup> Answer: Even the materialist would accept that if (contra materialism) a disembodied mind existed, and had the power over some object to determine all of its features by will-power alone, then that object *would* be an idea of that mind. The materialist can’t accept this as a necessary condition for being an idea, since they argue that this condition is never met. But they can accept it as a *sufficient* condition. Accordingly, even the materialist can accept the premises of our argument.

A similar problem that has a similar response: There are no clear-cut non-divine examples where all of the features of a being wholly depend upon some mind willing its having those features. Consider: Our ideas have features that are unknown to us. We didn’t will our ideas to have those features. It follows that not all of our ideas have *all* of their features depend upon our will.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Arif Ahmed for raising this concern.

Answer: Again, we do not propose a necessary condition for being an idea. The condition may never be met by *human* minds and *their* ideas. But we *do* propose a sufficient condition. In fact, minds are imperfect insofar as they have less control over their content. An omnipotent mind has no such weakness. To be the idea of an omnipotent mind is to have all of your features known by that mind, and under the control of its will.

A final problem: The argument equivocates. Radical dependence does follow from the efficacy of will. Moreover, mentality *does* follow from radical dependence upon a will. But the dependence is a different animal in each case: radical dependence follows from efficacy of will insofar as the will *causes* all; mentality follows radical dependence insofar as the features *consist* in what is willed. The argument equivocates on causal and constitutive senses of dependence.

Answer: There is one sense of dependence here: features depend upon the efficacious will insofar as the will gives being to the feature; and insofar as the will gives being to the features, they are mental. The artist causes the canvas to have the colours it does, but — on a classical theistic account — God sustains each moment of that causal process such that the canvas could not come to have the colour it has without God willing it directly, or willing it in virtue of willingly respecting the freedom of the artist, by sustaining her actions and their results in being.

Kenneth Pearce distinguishes between a grounding and a causing will: ‘An agent has a grounding will if and only if the agent’s acts of willing ground their fulfillment. An agent has a causing will if and only if, in cases in which the agent wills successfully, the agent’s willing causes its fulfillment’ (Pearce 2017: 9). We say: finite minds have grounding will with respect to the merely intentional objects that they dream up (Pearce seconds this), whereas God has a grounding will with respect to all objects, rendering them all intentional from his perspective.<sup>3</sup>

There we have it: an idealism that leaves Berkeley behind. Hassidic Idealism of the radical or tame version will do. All beings other than God are His ideas. You too are an idea in the mind of God.

*Argument 2:* God is as necessarily perfectly rational as he is necessarily omniscient. Hence, he would not do what he knows to be otiose, and he knows what is otiose. If Berkeleyan Idealism is so much as possible, God could create a world that appears exactly like ours without creating material objects. If so, such objects would be otiose. Hence, if Berkeleyan Idealism is so much as possible, then God would not create such objects. Since Berkeleyan Idealism *is* possible, God does not create material objects.

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<sup>3</sup> See also McCann (2012) for a similar distinction between general causation and God’s efficacious will, which bestows existence upon its objects.

*Commentary:* Perfect rationality and omniscience are acceptable to most theists. What is not so acceptable is that perfect rationality rules out otiosity, *or* that material objects would be otiose, *or* that Berkeleyan Idealism is possible. Still these should be accepted.

In order now: Perfect rationality does rule out otiosity. A perfectly rational agent does not do something for no good reason — unless there is a good reason for doing something for no good reason. Buridan's ass should not dance, since it has no good reason to, but it *should* arbitrarily choose one stack of hay over the other, since it *should* try to avoid starvation.<sup>4</sup>

Another route: Perfection pursues the most beautiful course of action of those available, given one's ends. This route adopts the following aesthetic principle: Otiose actions are never the most beautiful way of achieving one's ends. So perfection does not pursue otiose actions.

Yet another route: Otiosity is ruled out by any plausible Principle of Sufficient Reason, e.g. that every contingent being must have a reason for existing, special cases aside (compare Kleinschmidt 2013). Otiose contingency, as such, could have no reason for existing.

Next: Material objects would be otiose if idealism were possible. God's end in creating us is our moral and experiential lives; matter, if it existed, would be a mere means towards that end. The phenomenal world is of intrinsic value; the material world would be of extrinsic value. But the possibility of idealism means that the phenomenal world *could* exist without the material world. Matter would then not be necessary to our moral and experiential lives, and material objects would thus be rendered otiose.

Berkeley had much the same thought: 'If therefore it were possible for bodies to exist without the mind, yet to hold they do so, must needs be a very precarious opinion; since it is to suppose, without any reason at all, that God has created innumerable beings that are entirely useless, and serve no manner of purpose' (Berkeley 1982: §19).

Problem: We would refuse to plug into an experience machine for the rest of our lives — irrespective of the experiences it could promise us — because we want to be in '*actual* contact with ... deeper reality' (Nozick 2013: 43). Creating a real world for us to be in contact with would add value. Answer: An ideal world is not less real for being mental, and is more real than the world of an experience machine: the ideal world contains interactions with other souls and moral

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<sup>4</sup> Presented with two sequences of actions of the same net expected utility, one longer, one shorter; a human agent would always be more rational to choose the shorter sequence because humans have limited resources — and thus the longer sequence will have a higher cost in time or energy. God does not face this problem, since he has unlimited time and energy. Consequently: it is not so obvious that decision theory rules out God choosing an action containing otiose steps. You might think that a diachronic analysis *would*, since each step of the otiose sequence would have a lower average utility than each step of the non-otiose sequence. But even then, God's being outside or unlimited by time might require a synchronic analysis. Furthermore: sophisticated diachronic analyses might forgive detours. We respond: there is more to rationality than what any such theory describes, this something more is spelled out by the simple constraint: don't act without good reason, unless there is good reason to act without good reason. Thanks to Arif Ahmed and Arnon Keren for conversation on these points.

opportunities besides. The experience machine tears us away from the real world, whereas the ideal world *is* the real world.

Next: The possibility of idealism. Even materialists accept the possibility of idealism. For example, take Russell: ‘Berkeley retains the merit of having shown that the existence of matter is capable of being denied without absurdity’ (Russell (1998), 4). Moreover, we can formulate as many arguments for the *possibility* of idealism as there are arguments for idealism: simply preface a conjunction of the premises of any arguments for the actuality of idealism with the possibility operator. The originals are powerful enough; their modally modest counterparts unassailable.

An additional argument *sketch*: The possibility of an ideal world without a material world makes for the possibility of scepticism about a material world — as Descartes taught us. But then idealism eventually solves this scepticism since it collapses the sceptic’s distinction between the world of appearance and the world of reality — as Berkeley taught us. Of course, the world of reality exists if it *is* the world of appearance. To be sure, we’re arguing only for the *possibility* of idealism at this point. We’re not in the business of answering the sceptic; our point is rather that the possibility of scepticism about a material world should convince the materialist of the *possibility* of idealism.

Theism entails Berkeleyan Idealism. So far, so good. But we can go further. Revise the argument with the premises that (1) Tame Hassidic Idealism is possible, and that (2) creating minds that are not at once divine ideas would be otiose. If we can be all that we will ever be, even whilst being divine ideas, why would God go to the trouble of making us anything else?

Problem: Tame Hassidic Idealism is not possible. We couldn’t be ideas, not even *divine* ideas. Ideas do not think or feel. When you prick them they do not bleed. Answer: It is a consequence of Tame Hassidic Idealism that some ideas *do* think, feel, and bleed. Unless the critic has an *argument* against this consequence, then the objection is sheer and mere assertion. Hume and his descendants think, and don’t deny that they think, that they’re nothing at all if not ideas. Just denying, without substantiation, that we are ideas fails to engage with a form of idealism that has some divine ideas doing some quite finite thinking.

On the assumption that divine ideas would have as much reality as any material objects, Gotthold Lessing has the same thought: the ‘original image is the thing itself, and to say that the thing also exists outside this original image means duplicating the latter in a way that is as unnecessary as it is absurd’ (Lessing 2005: 30).<sup>5</sup>

Theism entails Tame Hassidic Idealism. So far, so good. Now revise the argument with the premise that (1) Radical Hassidic Idealism is possible, and that (2) creating minds would be otiose if God could simply create ideas *of* minds. Rinse, wash, repeat.

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Bob Adams for this reference. Dean Zimmerman suggested that we call this argument ‘How Lessing is Always More’.

Radical Hassidic idealism distinguishes truth *simpliciter* from truth in the divine imagination. If you're less than totally divine, then you're just a divine idea. That would be true *simpliciter*. Yet it isn't true in the divine imagination that you're just a figment of imagination. You're dreamt up as a person, after all. It's true in the divine imagination that you're a mind, even if it's true *simpliciter* that you're just an idea. Compare: in the play, Hamlet is a prince of Denmark and not at all an idea; outside of the play he is just an idea and not at all a prince.<sup>6</sup>

Problem: Radical Hassidic Idealism is not possible. We know that we're not imaginary because we have phenomenal consciousness. We think; therefore, we are. Answer: Daniel Dennett to the rescue — we have no phenomenal consciousness. A better answer: You do have consciousness and think. That's true of you — but only in God's imagination. Compare: Hamlet does have phenomenal consciousness and thinks too — inside the story.<sup>7</sup> Outside of our relative stories and images, neither of us are minds. We are ideas.

Problem: Even if making us *material* would be otiose, making us *real* would not. Being *real* adds value. Answer: God's end is our moral and experiential lives. What matters then is that it should be true that we are real and that the world we live in is real — as it is from within the world as we experience it. God's end is not thwarted if it is also true to say that we are *not* real — as it is from some perspective transcending human experience. Our reality adds value to *us*, not to God; it need only be true that we are real, relative to the world in which live.<sup>8</sup>

*Argument 3:* Two propositions, as attractive as contradictory: (1) God is perfectly good, perfectly knowledgeable, and perfectly rational; (2) God created our suboptimal universe (compare Rowe 2004). How could a perfectly good and rational God knowingly have created a suboptimal world? Radical Hassidic Idealism to the rescue: (1) is fundamentally true, but false relative to the image

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<sup>6</sup> For the claim that fictional characters are ideas, see Everett & Schroeder (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Descartes' *cogito* argument works just as well, if it works at all, for fictional characters within their fictions as it does for us within ours; see Hintikka (1962). Even Kripke's criticism concedes that the *cogito* is sound in the fiction, if sound at all; see Kripke (2013). Hintikka and Kripke disagree only about whether this renders the *cogito* a bad argument *per se*.

<sup>8</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggests that our view is open to parody: Do we really think it would be otiose for Shakespeare to make Hamlet as a flesh-and-blood human being? Response: We do. Shakespeare *didn't* create Hamlet in order to have a relationship with a flesh-and-blood human being. He created him for purely theatrical purposes. It is certainly essential to the *story* that Hamlet be a flesh-and-blood human being, but that much Shakespeare already achieved. To have made him so *outside* of the story *would* have been otiose. As it is, Hamlet has enough of a worry about whether or not to be; Shakespeare had no such problem about Hamlet. He gave him ample being to worry about in the play. Analogously, we don't believe that God created us in order to have a relationship with beings on an ontological par with him. We don't believe that God had any need of such a relationship. We assume that God created the world entirely for *our* benefit, and not at all for his; or perhaps he created the world in order to express himself (see Lebens 2017a). God's giving us flesh and blood outside of the story in which we live would have been as otiose as Shakespeare creating a human being merely in order to populate his play.

that God imagines; (2) is true relative to the image that God imagines, but fundamentally false. God didn't really create a world; He merely *imagined* doing so. Since (1) and (2) are only asserted relative to different levels of reality, contradiction avoided.

*Commentary:* God's perfect goodness, knowledge, and rationality are acceptable to most theists. What is not so acceptable is that this universe is suboptimal, or that if it is, God could not have created it. Still, these claims should be accepted.

In order now: This universe is suboptimal since *no* universe is optimal. If a happy rabbit makes the universe good, an extra happy rabbit would make it better; God could always have created a better universe by creating another happy rabbit (see Swinburne 2004: 114-15). Similarly, if a universe is good, God could create two such universes. Whatever makes the original good will be had in double measure. A best universe could never have been had

Next: A perfectly good, knowledgeable and rational God cannot create a suboptimal universe. Those who deny this (see e.g. Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder (1994; 1996)) propose that God can sort all of the suboptimal universes into those which are acceptable and those which are not even minimally acceptable. God can then arbitrarily but rationally chose to create one of the acceptable universes.

Daniel Rubio disagrees. His detailed response is, naturally, ingenious. The moral is simple: slicing the set of universes into the acceptable and unacceptable won't be acceptable. Rational decision theory still mandates that God not choose the *worst* of what remains — the *minimally* acceptable world. After dismissing *that* world, the same principle dictates that God dismisses the least acceptable of the remainder. Rinse, wash, and repeat: 'After infinitely many steps ... we run out of worlds' (Rubio forthcoming). On some plausible assumptions about goodness and rationality, it turns out that God cannot create any world.

Rubio responds by denying that God is bound by the demands of goodness and rationality. By *our* lights that is to deny that God is perfectly good and rational; Rubio jettisons standard theism. Now instead: maintain God's perfect goodness and rationality, and conclude that the world is imaginary. Berkeleyan and Tame Hassidic Idealism *deny* that we are imaginary. So, prefer Radical Hassidic Idealism.

Problem: If God would never make a world, then God would never imagine making it. Answer: Reason to refrain from creating a world like ours is not reason to refrain from *imagining* it. A good author would not want to bring about bad things, but might want to write a story about bad things. According to Radical Hassidic Idealism, our suffering is no more real to God than the suffering of fictional characters is to their author. That fictional pain is fictionally real for fictional characters creates no obligation upon authors to refrain from imagining it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Against the objection that there are more moral constraints upon God's imagining than on our imagining, see Lebens (2015).



Problem: Relative to the universe that God imagines, God creates a suboptimal universe, and thus is not perfectly good or rational. Answer: Bite the bullet. As a character in his own imaginary universe, God is at least immoral or irrational enough to have created this universe; even though, outside of what he imagines, God is perfectly good and perfectly rational. This is a kind of divine hiddenness: God does not appear in this world as he is beyond this world. But he does so in order to make this world possible. If God allowed us to see his full goodness, we could no longer *be*: ‘You cannot see my face, for no man will see me and live’ (Exodus 33: 20). If God acted in perfect goodness and rationality, then he would not have created the universe. And indeed he has not. But he has diminished his goodness or rationality in an imaginary universe so that such a universe could be imagined to be.

Problem: Another option besides Radical Hassidic Idealism is open. Argument 3 can be treated as a theistic proof of the world’s non-existence. Paul Kabay (2013) argues that theism entails the non-existence of the universe. As a Meinongian, he thinks that there *are* non-existent beings. Why not conclude that *we* are among them? He does not take the existence of the universe to be evident. Indeed, since Kabay takes fictional characters to be non-existent beings, a fictional world is a non-existent world. Answer: Reject Meinongianism. Imaginary things, such as the universe, *do* exist. They are just not what they seem to be. Imaginary unicorns are not animals, but they *do exist*. They are ideas. We are too.

Problem: Rubio preserves God’s love, Hassidic Idealism does not. Two answers: First, love of a fictional creation is possible. Tolstoy was said to cry upon realising how Anna Karenina’s life would end. Second, Radical Hassidic Idealism stratifies reality into two levels — what is true within the image that God imagines, and what is true beyond it. Even if we are imaginary from God’s transcendent perspective, we *are* real within the story in which we live, and so is our relationship with God, who appears within the story too, and loves us.

Three arguments from standard forms of theism to radical forms of idealism have now been introduced.<sup>10</sup> Not all need be convincing. Still, they might help to make sense of a central doctrine of Jewish mystical thought, as we now show.

#### 4. Divine Contractions

The doctrine of *tzimtzum* (*Heb.* contraction) claims that to create the world God first had to make room for it by contracting himself. The doctrine traces back at least to Rabbi Isaac Luria (*the Arizal*, 16th c.), and has since become a central doctrine of Jewish mysticism. Our arguments from theism to idealism can make sense of the doctrine.

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<sup>10</sup> For another argument that theism entails a kind of idealism, albeit of a kind different from Berkeleyan or Hassidic Idealism, see Greco (2017).

R. Hayyim Vital (16th-17th c.) provides the first written account of the *Arizal's* elaborate cosmogony: In the beginning, 'a most supreme, simple light filled the whole of existence'. Subsequently, that light contracted uniformly in all directions, away from the 'exact centre of its light' (Vital 1999: 11-13). Not clear: How can an infinitely extended light have a *center*? Clear enough: A uniform contraction in all directions, away from some fixed point would leave a circle, unoccupied by the light. Then, we're told, a straight line of light extended into the center of this circle of darkness. Only then could the creation of worlds proceed.

And so we have three stages: First, an infinite light uniformly extended, leaving no space untouched; second, a contraction of that light, leaving a circular void of darkness surrounded by light; third, a line of light penetrating the circle, creating a channel by which the light can move from the outside into the circle. Only after these three stages, can the more familiar creation begin. Or so we're told.

Assuming God doesn't do things without good reason, the idea is that the creation wasn't *possible* until God fashioned a space in which it could occur. Unclear: What is God's light? Clear enough: R. Vital took it to be infinitely extended in virtue of God's being infinite. Teasing out an argument, we present the doctrine of *tzimtzum* as a solution to a philosophical problem:

*The Problem of Creation:* God is infinite. Hence, He (or His light) fills all space. Hence, there is no vacant space in which creation can occur. Hence, the creation cannot occur. But creation *does* occur. *Reductio* against the starting point. *Tzimtzum* to the rescue: God must have *ceased* to be infinite, *contracting* to create the requisite vacant space.

*Commentary:* Not compelling — the argument contains too many questionable *hences*. Contrary to the first *hence*: God's being infinite need not mean that he, or anything emanating from him, is *infinitely extended in space*. Compare: the natural numbers are infinite, but they are not extended in space. Contrary to the second *hence*: God's infinity need not mean *comprehensiveness*. The notion that God's infinity entails his containing all things has historical precedent with various pantheists and panentheists since antiquity (see Nagasawa 2017: 13), but is no less problematic for that. If God contains everything, then God has physical parts — which is at odds with traditional Jewish doctrines of divine simplicity and incorporeality.

God's infinity is instead taken to mean that he has infinite power, knowledge, or goodness — none of which obviously entails infinite spatial extension. On the other hand, in *addition* to his being infinite, God *is* taken to be omnipresent. Perhaps his infinitely extended light is just a metaphor for his infinitely extended presence. Replace 'infinite' with 'omnipresent' in the above argument for:

*The Real Problem of Creation:* God is omnipresent. Hence, He fills all space. Hence, there is no vacant space in which creation can occur, etc. *Tzimtzum* to the rescue: God must have relinquished his omnipresence, contracting himself so as to leave some space vacant for creation.

*Commentary:* Still not compelling — still too many problematic *hences*. Omnipresence is usually understood in one of two ways. One: God really and literally *is* located throughout space. The other: God isn't *really and literally* located anywhere; rather, his power, knowledge, or goodness extend everywhere. The one understanding secures the first *hence*, but is problematic: a simple incorporeal being might not admit of extension in space (but see Inman 2017). The other understanding renders the first *hence* quite false.

Problems remains (even if Inman (2017) rescues the first *hence*). The line of reasoning assumes that a space needs to be *vacant* for creation to occur in it. Quite an assumption. After all, material objects can coincide with one another: the statue spatially coincides with the lump of clay. One ship can even coincide with another (see Hughes 1997). Not uncontroversial. Still, since neither God nor his light are material, usual worries with co-location might not apply. Take immanent universals — located where particulars instantiating them are located. God and his creations might similarly coincide.

The line of reasoning also assumes that creation must occur in space — and *hence* a substantivalism about pre-creation space at odds with contemporary cosmology. No one is criticizing R. Vital for not knowing about the Big Bang Theory. But let's not attribute an unnecessary pre-creation substantivalism to him either.

Summary: The problem of creation rests on (1) a theory of omnipresence, (2) a stricture upon co-location, and (3) substantivalism about pre-creation space. The problem is more straightforwardly resolved by denying any of these controversial assumptions, rather than by adopting *tzimtzum*.

And yet perhaps R. Vital's description of spatial contraction of light is *metaphorical*. Perhaps he's saying that some divine attribute or other, metaphorically rendered as 'light', makes creation impossible. It's not that God's nature leaves no room in *physical* space for creation, but that it leaves no room in *logical* space. Then:

*The Really Real Problem of Creation:* God has perfection, or a set of perfections, *P*. Hence, there is no logical space for creation. Hence, creation does not occur, etc. *Tzimtzum* to the rescue: relinquish or reign in the perfection. The contraction is not spatial, but of God's perfection.

*Commentary:* More about what perfection(s) *P* might be later.

Whether or not the contraction is spatial, there are problems with taking it literally. R. Yosef Irgas (17th c.) develops *ten* arguments against a literal interpretation. For example, consider a literal *spatial* contraction. Various classical Jewish sources describe God as formless and incomparable

(e.g. Isaiah 40:18; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, 1:11), and prohibit corporeal representation of God, as the Arizal and his disciples were well aware. But, if *tzimtzum* is interpreted spatially and *literally*, then they transgress this prohibition by attributing a spatial *form* to God — the form of ‘an encompassing circle with an empty space at its center and a straight line within it’ (Fraenkel (2017), 230).

Consider a literal *non-spatial* contraction. Plausibly, relinquishing perfection is incompatible *with* perfection: why would and how could a perfect being harm itself? Furthermore: relinquishing perfection in the act of creation is incompatible with God’s immutability. If any of God’s attributes diminish in the act of creation, then how can we say that God is unchanging? These worries were widely raised (See Fraenkel 2017: 235).

Consider the *Yalkut Shimoni*’s enigmatic phrase: ‘You are he from before the creation of the world. You are he after the creation of the world. You are he in this world. You are he in the world to come.’ R. Shneur Zalman (18th-19th c; the *Baal HaTanya*) explains this passage: God remains throughout these epochs and places, ‘without any change in essence or knowledge’ (Ibid., 276). God’s essential properties never change; and they are never reigned in.

Thus, on either a spatial or a non-spatial construal of the problem of creation, a formless, perfect, and immutable God cannot perform the required contraction. These considerations led to a non-literal interpretation of *tzimtzum*. Thus the *Baal HaTanya* describes a literal interpretation as ‘absolutely impossible’ and begs God to forgive those ‘who erred and misinterpreted in their in-depth study of the writings of the *Arizal* and understood the concept of *tzimtzum* mentioned there literally’ (Fraenkel 2017: 276).

The non-literalists don’t *really* advocate for the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, but for the *illusion* of *tzimtzum*. There was no *real* contraction of divine attributes. There was merely the *appearance* of such a contraction. The *Baal HaTanya* explains that, while *tzimtzum* occurs from our perspective, from God’s perspective it does not:

Know this: “In the heavens above and on the earth below — there is nothing else [besides G-d]” (Deuteronomy 4:39) .... Therefore, even the earth and that which is below it are completely nonexistent and empty from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He... [W]ith his attribute of Gevurah [restraint] and Tzimtzum, he hides and conceals the life-force which flows into the heavens and the earth, so that they and all their hosts should appear as if they were independently existing entities. The Tzimtzum and concealment is, however, only from the perspective of the lower realms, but from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He, everything before Him is considered as actually naught, just as the light of the sun in the sun.

(Borukhovich (1993), II:6)

Non-literal *tzimtzum* faces theological problems of its own. If *tzimtzum* is a prerequisite for creation, but only *appeared* to happen, then it follows that creation itself only *appeared* to happen. Creation turns into an illusion too. The non-literalists therefore appear to be committed to a radical acosmism

This line of attack is pursued by the literalist, R. Shlomo Elyashiv (19th-20th c; the *Leshem*), who see the resulting acosmism as undermining the Torah's account of creation and the rest of the Jewish narrative (see Fraenkel 2017: 214). The *Leshem* goes for a literalist interpretation of *tzimtzum* instead: God literally had to contract his spatial extension, or diminish in some other perfection — depending upon whether the spatial or non-spatial interpretation of the problem of creation is adopted. Problem: doesn't this render God both changing and, currently, imperfect?

Answer: Assume that perfection is a part of God's essence. But assume that there are many mutually incompatible ways in which to be perfect. God need not be perfect in each way, because he *cannot* be perfect in each way. But God must be perfect in *some* way. God then might be able to *choose* which way to be perfect, and thus in which way not to be perfect — a kind of divine contraction.

For example, perhaps God's perfection could include omnipotence, or perhaps it could include omnibenevolence, but not *both* at the same time: an omnipotent being can do anything, whereas an omnibenevolent being *cannot* do anything bad. Consequently, perhaps a perfect being can *decide* whether it wishes its perfection to include omnipotence, or omnibenevolence. God is as perfect as can be either way, but either way he must sacrifice some perfection. This could be spelled out in terms of God choosing between different maximal consistent sets of great-making properties (compare Nagasawa 2017: 90-4).

On this model, God's essential perfection never diminishes. But in that God chooses to sacrifice one perfection on the altar of another, there is nevertheless a *contraction* — not of his essence, but of one of the ways in which it manifests, i.e., his 'light'. This allows us to distinguish between God's essence and God's light — putting to use the obscure terminology of R. Vital. And thus, the literalist can maintain that a real contraction occurred, but *not* within the essence of God.

For example, perhaps there are some goods that a perfect or maximal God can only have *alone*, and there are some other goods that God can only have in virtue of being the creator. Perhaps the attribute of *Lordship* requires a creation: 'Calling Him Lord means that He has servants and that He is a lord over them. But if He had not created them, it would not have been possible to call Him by the name Lord ('*adon*') (Vital 1999: 4; compare Luzzatto 1982: 17-19). Either way, God is essentially perfect or maximal, but the choice to create meant sacrificing some goods in exchange for others. *Something* contracted. Not God's essential perfection.

Putting all of this together: in the next and final section we show how our arguments from theism to idealism can help us to understand the *Really Real Problem of Creation* — until now, no more than a schematic appeal to as yet unnamed perfections. More: our arguments from theism to idealism motivate a non-literal construal of *tzimtzum* as the most attractive solution to the *Really Real Problem*.

## 5. Braxton Hicks

The *Really Real Problem of Creation* of the previous section was merely schematic: God has a perfection, or a set of perfections, *P*. Hence, there is no logical space for creation. Hence, creation does not occur, etc. What *P* might leave no logical space for creation? Earlier, we presented three arguments from divine perfections to idealism. These arguments provide near substitution instances for the schema. For example, replacing perfection *P* with *omnipotence*, and ‘the creation’ with ‘the creation of objects beyond God’s mind’, makes for:

God is omnipotent — slip in argument 1 from theism to idealism here (an argument which derives idealism from God’s omnipotence). Hence, there is no logical space for the creation of objects beyond God’s mind. Hence, the creation of objects beyond God’s mind doesn’t occur, etc.

Literal *tzimtzum* comes to the rescue as a *reductio* on God currently being omnipotent. God’s omnipotence must have literally contracted, so as to make room, in logical space, for the creation. This is to water down one’s theism — by stripping God, even if only temporarily, of his omnipotence. Radical Hassidic Idealism to the rescue: God *is* omnipotent; objects beyond God’s mind were never created. The creation of such objects *appears* to occur. But it doesn’t and can’t — and there is no requirement on omnipotence to be able to do the impossible either. *Tzimtzum* is an illusion.

Replace *P* with *perfect rationality and omniscience*, or with *perfect rationality, knowledge, and goodness* — the attributes at work in arguments 2 and 3.<sup>11</sup> Wash, rinse, and repeat. The proponent of literal *tzimtzum* can treat the problem in each case as a *reductio* on God’s currently possessing the relevant perfection, and avoid idealism. The proponent of literal *tzimtzum* denies our first three arguments for idealism, but only because proponents of literal *tzimtzum* are willing to water down their theism — stripping God, even if only temporarily, of the relevant perfections. Radical Hassidic Idealism retains *all* of God’s perfections, but views the problem of creation as a *reductio* on the creation of a world beyond God’s mind.

Problem: Can Radical Hassidic Idealism avoid collapsing into acosmism, since it has the world as an illusion? And can it avoid collapsing into pantheism or panentheism, since it has the world as a part of God’s mind? Answer: No acosmism. The cosmos is a set of ideas in the mind of God. The ideas *exist*. No pantheism or panentheism either, at least not obviously. Ideas are not

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<sup>11</sup> The connection between argument 3 and non-literal *tzimtzum* is particularly clear. It explicitly entails that a perfect God appears in the story of this world as *less* than perfect. The appearance is skin-deep. The *tzimtzum* of God’s perfection is non-fundamental.

obviously identical with or parts of minds; divine ideas are, likewise, not obviously identical to or parts of God's mind. We talk about ideas being *inside* minds. Probably just a metaphor.

These answers might not satisfy Orthodox opponents of non-literal *tzimtzum*: The world is still robbed of significance if it is merely an illusion. But again: 'the world is merely an illusion' is *false* when uttered by us, on our level of reality, even if true when uttered *about* us by God from *his* level of reality. Recall the Baal HaTanya quoted above. Our level of reality is what matters most of all to *us* (see Lebens (2015)). So Hassidic Idealism doesn't accord us the same degree of reality as God. But a desire to share an ontological pedestal with God is profanity — like the builders of Babel, trying to conquer the heavens.

## 6. Conclusion

There is a *Really Real Problem of Creation*. There is a solution in the non-literal *tzimtzum* of Radical Hassidic Idealism. Moreover: theism anyway entails Radical Hassidic Idealism. As shown elsewhere, Hassidic Idealism should be an attractive option to theists because it helps to solve theological problems (see Lebens 2015; 2017b). We have shown here that it is no longer optional, but prescribed. You might not have dreamt that these conclusions could be true. All that matters is that God has.<sup>12</sup>

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