

5 Is God a Person? Maimonidean and Neo-Maimonidean Perspectives

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5.1 Introduction

Is God a person?

It depends, of course, on what we mean by ‘person’. I propose a stipulative and partial definition: for any x , if x has (1) *thoughts* and (2) *will*, then x is a person. The definition is partial because *thought* and *will*, although *necessary* for personhood, will not be *sufficient*. Perhaps personhood *also* requires the possession of a first-person perspective and/or phenomenal consciousness. It might require a certain degree of intelligence, if we don’t want every animal to count as a person. But for fear of biting off more than I can chew, I’ll stick to my bare-boned definition for the purposes of this chapter.¹

According to Maimonides, God is *not* a person, even on our bare-boned definition. God neither thinks nor wills, providing we mean by ‘think’ and ‘will’ what we normally mean by those words (Maimonides 2000: I.56). This represents, in spite of his apparent endorsement of Aristotle’s description of God, the *intellectus*, the *ens intelligens*, and the *ens intelligibile* (thought thinking itself).²

Kabbalistic Judaism, by contrast – especially in its Hassidic manifestation – draws a sharp distinction between God as he is in himself – the *Ein Sof*, who transcends the category of personhood – and God as he is manifest in his creation, through the intensely personal attributes or entities, known as the *sefirot*.³ In this picture, an a-personal *Ein Sof* unfolds himself into his creation in deeply personal ways. The God that the Hassidic masters met in many (though by no means all)⁴ of their religious experiences was a *personal* God.

In this chapter, I argue that the philosophical methodology of Maimonides, retooled for our times, can yield a completely *personal* theology, with a distinctively Hassidic flavour.

5.2 Maimonidean Methodology

Maimonides’ *magnum opus* – his *Guide for the Perplexed* – is open to radically divergent readings. Some contend that the task of the book was to reconcile tensions between philosophy and scriptural religion,

but then, they *disagree* as to whether Maimonides took himself to have *resolved* those tensions or not.⁵ Joseph Stern (2013: 14–15), for his part, doesn't accept that reconciliation between philosophy and religion was the task to begin with. According to Stern's Maimonides, there never was such a conflict to resolve. Judaism always *had* its own philosophy, which got lost and damaged in transmission. According to Stern, the task of the *Guide* is to recover what has been lost.

Other debates abound: does Maimonides think that substantive theological knowledge can ever be *attained*? Alexander Altman (1987) and Herbert Davidson (1992–1993, 2011) would say, 'yes'. Shlomo Pines (1979), and latterly, Joseph Stern (2013) would say, 'no'.

Despite all of this disagreement, as to how Maimonides should be read, we can find some (relatively) uncontroversial commitments at the level of Maimonidean *methodology*. Maimonides maintains that theological conclusions – to the extent that they can be drawn at all – can only be derived from empirical premises. He writes (Maimonides 2000: I.71),

I have already told you that nothing exists except God and this universe, and that there is no other evidence for His Existence but this universe in its entirety and in its several parts. Consequently the universe must be examined as it is: the propositions must be derived from those properties of the universe which are clearly perceived, and hence you must know its visible form and its nature. Then only will you find in the universe evidence for the existence of a being not included therein.

Furthermore, Maimonides was convinced that Aristotelian physics gives us an excellent description of the fundamental principles governing empirical phenomena in the sublunary realm:

I hold that the theory of Aristotle is undoubtedly correct as far as the things are concerned which exist between the sphere of the moon and the centre of the earth. Only an ignorant person rejects it, or a person with preconceived opinions of his own ... which lead him to ignore clear facts.

(Maimonides 2000: II.22; see also II.24)

And thus, we have the (relatively) uncontroversial outlines of a Maimonidean methodology:

- 1 *If* theological knowledge is possible, it must be attained via knowledge of the natural world.
- 2 Only an ignoramus or a dishonest apologist would disregard the clear and certain findings of Aristotelian science, regarding the sublunary world.

5.3 Aristotelian Physics Leads to a Wafer-Thin Theology

For Aristotle, a substance is composed of matter and form. Matter is that which undergoes *change*. Change is the process of some potential, held by matter, becoming actual. Matter – on this Aristotelian account – is a *relative* notion. Wood is matter *relative* to a table. Wood is what *becomes* a table and persists through the changes of table-making. Earth and water, by contrast, are matter *relative* to the wood; they are what become the wood in the first place (Stern 2013: 100).

The job of the sciences, as far as Aristotle is concerned, is to describe a substance in terms of its matter and form, and to *explain* why that matter took that form. Take a table. The wood and the nails are its *matter* – to use Aristotelian language, they are its *material cause*. The shape of the table is its form – its *formal cause*. This matter took this particular form because of the cutting and banging activities of the carpenter – which constitute the *efficient cause* of the table, *and* because of the carpenter’s desire to have a flat, elevated surface to put things on – this desire is the *final cause* of the table.

If a substance has a *complex* form – e.g., if it is table-shaped *and* green, or if the form of a table-shape breaks down into the form of its surface and legs – then we are owed an explanation as to why the matter has *each* element of its complex form.

The take-home point is this: Aristotelian physics contained its own conception as to what scientific *explanation* should be. Whenever you have a substance, with matter and form, there is a *call* for a scientific explanation. Explanation is to proceed in terms of (1) material, (2) formal, (3) efficient, and (4) final causes. David Bostock (1999: xxv) argues that we’d do better to think of these four notions as types of *explanation* rather than as types of *causes* – since modern readers would only recognise one of Aristotle’s four causes (namely *efficient* causes) *as* causes.

In Book VIII of his *Physics*, Aristotle claims that we need to posit an unmoved mover. His argument rests upon his prior arguments for the eternity of the universe; arguments that Maimonides rejects. After all, we’ve moved beyond the moon, and Maimonides is less eager to rely on Aristotle at those dizzying heights. Indeed, Maimonides *doesn’t* think that philosophy or science can *ever* settle the question as to whether or not the universe is eternal.

But let’s assume, for the *moment*, that the universe *is* eternal. Given Aristotle’s conception of time, according to which time isn’t passing unless something is *changing*, the argument runs as follows (259^a13–20): *if* the universe is eternal, then there must be an eternally occurring process of *change*; the eternal change of all things is, itself, a single and continuous change; a single change requires a single cause. If the change is eternal, then the cause must be eternal too. To fend off regress, Aristotle concludes that there is one eternal and *unchanging* changer. Since the

change in question fundamentally concerns the motion of the spheres, which causes all of the various changes *under* the moon, this unchanging changer can be thought of as an *unmoved mover*.

If the universe is eternal, *then* – Maimonides agrees – there *must* be an unmoved mover. But we can't *know* whether Aristotle is right about the eternity of the universe. And yet, the theist shouldn't worry. Even if Aristotle is *wrong*, and the universe has a *beginning*, then there still has to be a creator. A universe can't have a beginning without a creator – presumably, a creator who transcends time and therefore doesn't require a beginning of its own. Things don't begin without creators. Either way, whether the universe has a beginning or not, you've got yourself a God.⁶ Or do you? Is Aristotle's unmoved mover *worthy* of being called, 'God'? Not according to Maimonides (Maimonides 2000: II.4).

Here's the idea: the unmoved mover is a *mind*. It moves the physical realm much like our own minds can move our bodies. Moreover, the lower intellects in the heavens move as they do in order to try, constantly, to come closer to this unmoved mover, since he is an object of their love. It follows: the unmoved mover does what it does because of its very particular *form*. If it has a *form*, then we're still talking about something that science should explain; since science is all about explaining why matter takes the form it does. If we're talking about something that science should explain, then we haven't yet reached God. God should be the *ultimate explanans*.

Aristotle's God cannot be God. He has too much *form*! At most, the unmoved mover can be akin to an angel, created by God to play a specific role.

Here Maimonides is borrowing from Ibn Sina. According to Ibn Sina, God is that being that exists necessarily and therefore grounds the existence of all contingent beings. God is the answer to two fundamental questions: (1) 'why is there anything at all?' (answer: God exists necessarily and cannot fail to exist), and, (2) 'how was anything other than God possible?' (answer: the possibility of the existence of other things was in some sense or other grounded in the ground of all being, which exists *a se*, i.e., God).⁷ This necessary being – the *cause* of all else – is simple. A simple being transcends the dichotomy between matter and form.

This is somewhat surprising because Maimonides prefers a God who created the world at the beginning of time, to an Aristotelian God who creates eternally, in part because the former manifests a free will that seems lacking in the latter. But, in fact, God the freely willing creator and Aristotle's unmoved mover are *both* too personal for Maimonides.

Remember Bostock's point: causation and explanation are kindred notions for Aristotle. Accordingly, (1) only something completely simple fails to call for explanation and (2) anything that fails to be completely simple must have *a cause*. God – if he is *uncaused* – must be totally and utterly simple. As long as there is *complexity* – even the *conceptual*

complexity involved in having a *form* that contains multiple *properties*, or the complexity implicit in the duality between matter and form – then a good Aristotelian physicist will still have something to explain.

Maimonides' conclusion: if Aristotle and Ibn Sina are right, and the world is *eternal*, but also if they're wrong, and the world has a *beginning*, then, either way, scientific explanation has to bottom out in a completely simple cause; *more* simple than Aristotle's unmoved mover. We're compelled to believe in a *God*,⁸ but that God has to be completely and utterly simple.

5.4 Maimonides' a-personal Theology

According to Maimonides, *structure* in representation implies structure in what is represented. But God is simple – *without* structure. Propositions about God, by contrast, will have to have *syntactic* structure. Accordingly, any representation of God will be *misrepresentation*.

Even when you say, as Maimonides says himself, that God's wisdom is not like our wisdom, you *still* impute multiplicity to God. Maimonides writes you are *still* led to the assumption, 'that there is a plurality in God' (Maimonides 2000: I.60). For Maimonides, there are better and worse ways to speak about God, but all of them – it seems – misfire in fundamental ways.

Maimonides was keen on Rabbi Hanina's saying, in the Talmud (Tractate Brachot 33b), even the words enshrined in our compulsory liturgy are offensive to God. Rabbi Hanina compared even *those* words to a person praising a king for all of the silver that he has, when in actual fact he (also) has gold. In using *words* – *any* words – even those that we're *commanded* to use – we're really using the wrong currency.

There's something deeply problematic going on here. If we really can't speak about God, then we can't say that we can't speak about him. But we *are* speaking about him. Something's going wrong! Real knowledge of God is *impossible*.⁹ Our best attempts at theology collapse in on themselves. *If* God exists, he will be too simple for us to talk about meaningfully. We won't even be able to say of him that he's too simple to talk about! Perhaps the best thing to do is to stop talking.

Alternatively, there is room for a mystical reading of the *Guide*. Maimonides knows that thought and language break down when applied to a completely simple God, but perhaps the process of coming to see this breakdown can inculcate in us mystical experiences; experiences of a God beyond the reach of language and thought. Maimonides *might* be read as alluding to such experiences of his own, at certain points in the *Guide*.

Either way, God is *not* a person. God has no will, no knowledge, and no life at all, if what we mean by 'will' and 'knowledge' and 'life' are what we normally mean by those words (Maimonides 2000: I.56).

Why is it so very defamatory, for Maimonides, to describe God in personal terms? Because to do so implies that he isn't simple, and that, therefore, he isn't ultimate, and that, therefore, he isn't perfect. But what about Maimonides' endorsement (Maimonides 2000: I.68) of God as a *thought that thinks itself*; that God *thinks*?

First: for Maimonides, 'thinks' doesn't mean, applied to God, what it means when applied to humans (Maimonides 2000: I.56). Admittedly, in his explanation of the doctrine that God is a thought that thinks itself, Maimonides seems to suggest that human thought bears a structural similarity to Divine thought (Maimonides 2000: I.68). But it isn't enough to render God a thinker, let alone a *person*, that he does something structurally analogous to what we would normally call thinking. And thus, even if he endorses the doctrine that God is a thought that thinks itself, he doesn't mean to claim that God *thinks*; not in any normal sense of the word.

Second: it's not clear that Maimonides actually *endorses* this doctrine. As Josef Stern reads him, all Maimonides claims to do, in I.68 of the *Guide*, is to explain what 'the philosophers' mean when *they* claim that God is a thought that thinks itself – jargon that Maimonides never explicitly adopts.

Maimonides *does* seem happy – even if only as the lesser of other evils – to describe God in terms of his 'active attributes'. This boils down to describing God in terms of what he causes to *occur*. We say that God is gracious, but all we mean is that God's consequences over the world are such that, were they to be the consequences of a human agent, we would be warranted in attributing graciousness to that agent. We say that God is angry with evil doers, but all we mean is that the (eventual) consequences for evil doers are such that, were they to have been arranged by a human agent, we would be warranted in attributing anger to that agent.

If we were to adopt a functionalist or behaviourist conception of a person, such that x is a person if x has a causal profile of a certain sort, then even *Maimonides* might be able to say that God is a person. On this account of personhood, two 'people' might have completely different inner workings – indeed, one of them may have no inner workings at all – but if both of them have similar sorts of effects over the world, then both of them can be called *people*. On this account, an automaton, or a zombie, could still be a person. To call God a person, in this *functionalist* sense, would be, for Maimonides, no worse than the use of active attributes.¹⁰

Accordingly, when I say that, for Maimonides, God is not a person, I'm ignoring functionalist conceptions of personhood. My point is that, for Maimonides, God neither thinks nor wills.

5.5 Taking Stock, and Looking Ahead

The Maimonidean methodology outlined in [Section 5.1](#) leads to the thin theology outlined in [Section 5.3](#), given its commitment to the Aristotelian vision of science outlined in [Section 5.2](#). It leads to an a-personal God.

Looking forward, I claim: a Maimonidean methodology would have to *change* in today's scientific climate, and it could end up licensing a very different theology: either the theistic idealism of George Berkeley or the idealism associated with Hassidism.

For Berkeley, there are three fundamental categories of beings (Berkeley 2009): (1) the Divine mind, (2) non-Divine minds, and (3) the ideas had by these minds. Despite appearances to the contrary, there is an important sense in which Berkeley accepts that material beings exist. What are they? They are a variety of Divine ideas. *Your* ideas are not material entities, but some of *God's* ideas *are*. Your chair, for example, is a material being. It isn't an idea in your head. But it *is* an idea; an idea in the mind of God.

Hassidic idealism only recognises *two* fundamental categories: (1) the Divine mind and (2) *his* ideas. There are, of course, *ideas of* material entities, and *ideas of* non-Divine minds, but these ideas are just ideas in God's mind. No idea is material, and no mind is an idea. All that exists is God and his ideas. No other minds. No material objects. Instead, Hassidic idealism distinguishes between what's true inside the world as God imagines it, and what's true simpliciter.

In the world, as God imagines it, you and I are people, with material bodies, and our own minds. The Hassidic idealist doesn't deny any of that. But *outside* of that image that God imagines, you and I are nothing more than *ideas of* people, and our bodies are nothing more than *ideas of* bodies. Compare: in the stories told by Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes is a detective who smokes a pipe; *outside* of those stories, Holmes and his pipe are nothing more than ideas.¹¹

The rest of this chapter charts a course from Maimonides to a personal God, (generally) via Idealism (of one form or another).

5.6 Neo-Maimonidean Methodology

Maimonidean methodology was based on the following two claims:

- 1 *If* theological knowledge is possible, it must be arrived at via knowledge of the natural world.
- 2 Only an ignoramus or a dishonest apologist would disregard the clear and certain findings of Aristotelian science regarding the sub-lunary world.

Both of these principles are, today, in peril. Consider principle 1: *contemporary* science is after precise and overarching mathematical descriptions of regularities observed in nature. It isn't interested in Aristotelian explanation. Hard and fast theological commitments are exceedingly unlikely to fall out of a description of regularities in nature. If Aristotelian explanation bottoms out in commitment to an entity

called God, contemporary science bottoms out into mathematical regularities, and nothing more.

Consider principle 2: it's hard to imagine a reasonable argument, today, that only an ignoramus or dishonest apologist would disregard *Aristotelian* science regarding the sublunary world.

I don't know what Maimonides would say if he were alive today. I'm no clairvoyant. Moreover, there would seem to be a *number* of different available revisions to the methodology, each of which could equally well describe themselves as true to the spirit of Maimonides. I present two options, before endorsing a third.

Option 1: much of what Aristotle called *scientific* explanation could be retained, even in the face of contemporary science, and simply repackaged as *metaphysical* explanation; a level of explanation that goes beyond what the *scientist* is concerned to deliver. *Metaphysical* explanation still has to bottom out in a completely simple, uncaused cause, beyond the primitives of science.¹² Option 1 allows the contemporary Maimonidean to retain the theology of Maimonides. Perhaps this would be the route he would have taken today.

Option 2: contemporary physics describes the causal profile of its fundamental particles, and forces, *without* describing their essences. It tells us what particles *do*, rather than what they *are* in themselves. Recognising this, we could argue that – *a fortiori* – the essence of *God* lies forever beyond our epistemic grasp. We should rest satisfied with an apophatic theology, and/or a theology that describes God's causal profile, without seeking to describe his *essence*.¹³

Indeed, Maimonides wrote, '[L]earn from the height of the heavens how far we are from comprehending God, for there is an enormous distance between ourselves and these corporeal objects, and the latter are greatly distinguished from us by their position, and hidden from us as regards their essence and most of their actions. How much more incomprehensible therefore is their Maker, who is incorporeal!'. Knowledge of physics should induce a theological humility in us all. And thus, option 2 retains much of the theology of Maimonides, inspired towards his austere theology by the humility that physics should instil in us concerning the essence of things.

A third option, it seems to me, better captures what really motivated principle 2 of the Maimonidean methodology. It was never a mark of ignorance, or religious extremism, to disregard particular teachings of Aristotle, *per se*. Rather, the Aristotelian way of thinking was, in the days of Maimonides, the consensus among all educated people. A consensus of experts is worthy of respect. To discard such a consensus, without weighty evidence on your side, would – indeed – be the sign of ignorance or extremism.

Given the empirical bent of Maimonides – who urged us to begin our theology by looking at the natural world – it seems safe to say that, all other things being equal, the community of natural scientists today

would carry more weight for a neo-Maimonidean, than other intellectual communities, if and when such communities are in conflict (especially regarding matters that fall within the expertise of the scientists). Accordingly, one could update principle 2 as follows:

- 2*. Only an ignoramus or a dishonest apologist would disregard the clear and certain findings of contemporary science.

2* makes no reference to Aristotle or to Neo-Aristotelians. It doesn't come to the table with any assumption that metaphysical explanation has to bottom out in a simple uncaused cause. Maimonidean deference to natural sciences needn't today come along with deference towards Aristotelianism. If God has multiple properties, and he necessarily instantiates them all, then that multiplicity of properties is no reason to think that there must be some external *cause*, causing them all to come together. The fact that they *necessarily* come together, and the fact that we *understand* their necessary connection, may well signify that there's nothing more to explain. Some things just are! Once we've freed ourselves of deference to Aristotle, why should we think that explanation always has to bottom out with unspeakable simplicity?

Downstream, we may find that scientific explanation *doesn't* go far enough; that it's a good beginning, but that it still needs to be supplemented with metaphysical explanation. The natural sciences are where the neo-Maimonidean *begins* her inquiries, but she needn't *end* with them. She may well have to move from physics to metaphysics, but we shouldn't imagine from the outset that metaphysical explanation (whatever that will turn out to mean) will have to have an *Aristotelian* flavour.

Principle 1 tells us that theological knowledge has to be arrived at (if at all) via knowledge of the natural world. Principle 2* would instruct us to consult the contemporary scientific community in order to come to knowledge of the natural world. But sadly for the theist, the contemporary scientific community, on the whole, tends to think that there is *no* room to arrive at any substantive claim – positive or negative – about the existence of God, from a scientific description of the cosmos.

In other words: 2* undermines 1. Or, at least, their conjunction leaves us with little hope of success in theology. But on at least one reading of Maimonides, we have reason to believe that Judaism itself – in its texts and teachings – already contains deep insights about God (even if their true understanding has become corrupted). Moreover, for Maimonides, Jewish history gives the Jew reason to believe in the existence of the God who revealed himself to them in a national theophany at Sinai (see Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah*, 8:1–3). So, it's not obvious that a neo-Maimonidean has to give up so easily.

If we come to the natural world *already* believing that God exists, perhaps we can still grant the natural world a leading role to play in our

coming to a fuller and finer *description* of God. Knowledge of the natural world, for the contemporary Maimonidean, can still lead the way in theological *theorising*, even if we can't expect it to furnish us with an independent proof of God's *existence*.

Traditional Judaism believes that God reveals a great deal about himself through our canonical texts. It also believes that those texts have to be viewed through the prism of the Rabbinic tradition. The Maimonidean recognises that the philosophical truths embedded in that tradition might be deeply buried, and that our knowledge of the natural world should take a lead in guiding our interpretation of Jewish tradition. In short, we have to arrive at a reflective equilibrium between various and varied Jewish sources (containing as they do, buried wisdom of the revelation), on the one hand, and the findings of the sciences, on the other. In this process, undertaken with the prior knowledge that God exists, the sciences take the lead.

Option 3 is an authentic neo-Maimonidean methodology, undergirded by three claims. 1* translates the spirit of 1. 2* translates the spirit of 2. 3* seems to capture the spirit of the conjunction of 1* and 2*:

- 1*. Knowledge of the natural world should be a primary guide (or perhaps, *the* primary guide), in consultation with philosophical reflection,¹⁴ and Jewish tradition, in our coming to descriptions of God.
- 2*. Only an ignoramus or a dishonest apologist would disregard the clear and certain findings of contemporary science.
- 3*. We have an antecedent knowledge that God exists. Descriptive and discursive knowledge of God, by contrast, and to the extent that it's possible, can only be achieved via a reflective equilibrium between the texts of the evolving and ongoing Jewish tradition, and the findings of the natural sciences (with the sciences taking the lead). Canonical Jewish texts should then be reread in the light of that equilibrium.

This – just like option 1 and 2 before it – is an authentically neo-Maimonidean methodology. Applied in the days of Maimonides, it would yield his a-personal theology, given how Aristotelian the sciences were at that time. But what sort of theology emerges when one applies it today?

5.6.1 *Fine-Tuning*

The neo-Maimonidean methodology that we've sketched until this point asks us to turn to the natural sciences, already believing that God exists, but then allowing conversation with the sciences to fill in our theological picture. Some people, however, are still looking to the sciences to *prove* that God exists.

According to some, the Big Bang Theory entails that the universe had a temporal beginning, and so – per force – it had a creator.¹⁵ This

contemporary version of the cosmological argument should be met with caution. First: the Big Bang Theory has space-time converge on an initial singularity, but not in such a way that the universe would have had a first *moment*; just like the number series converges upon 0, even though there is no *first* number between 0 and 1. Second: physicists working on quantum gravity tend to be sceptical, these days, that there ever *was* a singularity.¹⁶ Accordingly, the contemporary physics that *really* gets theists excited has less to do with a *beginning*, and more to do with *design*; less to do with *proof*, and more to do with *the balance of probability*.

Physicists measure the most fundamental parameters of nature. In recent years, they've been interested in exploring what would be the case if those parameters differed. Had gravity been slightly weaker (relative to the strength of electromagnetism), the supernovae responsible for generating the heavier elements would never have formed. Had it been slightly stronger, stars would have formed from smaller amounts of material. Either way, evolution of life as we know it could not have occurred. Simon Friederich (2018) reports similar findings about the strong nuclear force: 'For the production of appreciable amounts of both carbon and oxygen in stars, even [small] deviations of the strength of the strong force from its actual value would [have been] fatal'. Had the weak nuclear force been weaker 'by a factor of about 10, ... stars such as the sun, which depend on hydrogen, ... would not exist'. Regarding the cosmological constant (symbolised by the Greek letter ' Λ '), Manson reports a most astonishing finding (Manson 2009: 272):

When Λ is positive, it acts as a repulsive force, causing space to expand. When Λ is negative, it acts as an attractive force, causing space to contract. If Λ were not precisely what it is, either space would expand at such an enormous rate that all matter in the universe would fly apart, or the universe would collapse back in on itself immediately after the Big Bang. Either way, life could not possibly emerge anywhere in the universe. Some calculations put the odds that Λ took just the right value at well below one chance in a trillion trillion trillion.

As a result, 'some physicists started describing the values of the parameters as "fine-tuned" for life' (Manson 2009). It is not my intention to evaluate the voluminous literature for and against the new design argument that has emerged in the wake of these discoveries (for good summaries, see either Friederich 2018 or Manson 2009). But remember, we're not looking for proofs of, or even arguments *for*, God's existence. The neo-Maimonidean comes to the table with antecedent theism, grounded in the theophany at Sinai. But fine tuning is deeply relevant to how we flesh our theology out. Fine tuning suggests that the theism supported by contemporary physics is *not* a theism that requires a simple God as

the ground of being, but an *architect* God who *designs* the universe to fulfil a specific purpose; not *simple*, but pretty clearly *personal* insofar as we're dealing with a God with plans, and intentions.

5.6.2 Copenhagen

Electrons are fired through two slits, unobserved. They leave marks that suggest that they travelled, not as a stream of particles, through the slits, but as a *wave*. When electrons are *observed* passing through the slits, with *detectors*, this wave of possible positions (or superpositions) collapses into *specific* positions, and the electrons leave marks consistent with having passed through the slits as individual particles, and *not* as a wave.

John von Neumann (1933) was the first to suggest that the 'subjective perception' of the human observer is what collapses the wave function. This suggestion is sometimes folded into the so-called Copenhagen interpretation, even if, in actual fact, there never was a 'unitary' Copenhagen interpretation (Howard 2004). The notion that consciousness collapses the wave was later endorsed by Fritz London and Edmond Bauer (1939), and later by Eugene Wigner (1967). Much more recently, the suggestion has been developed, and defended against critics, by Henry Stapp (2001).

Admittedly, the notion that consciousness causes the collapse hasn't enjoyed much popularity among scientists. But once we're talking about the *interpretation* of the mathematics, perhaps we're no longer in the domain of science proper. We're now talking *philosophy*. And indeed, one of the *primary* reasons why scientists haven't gravitated towards this interpretation of quantum mechanics has little to do with physics and *much* to do with philosophy. Kelvin McQueen (2017) explains that *physicalism* is what tends to motivate opposition to the suggestion that consciousness collapses the wave function. The argument runs as follows:

- 1 Everything that happens in the physical world can be explained in terms of physical causes.
- 2 Therefore, it is impossible for non-physical consciousness to cause anything to happen in the physical world.

McQueen explains that philosophers tend to support (1) with an appeal to the fact that physicists never appeal to consciousness in their fundamental causal laws. Physicists, adopting this philosophy, strain every sinew to formulate purely physical explanations of the collapse of the wave function (such as the many-worlds interpretation). This, in turn, supports the philosophers in their defence of (1). Philosophy and science seems to be caught in a counterproductive feedback loop! McQueen concludes: if this is what 'the argument for physicalism amounts to then it is viciously circular'.

Another popular objection to the von Neumann interpretation asks how can consciousness collapse the wave function when consciousness

itself depends upon the quantum phenomena that occur within the *brain*? Note: this objection assumes that consciousness can be reduced to brain-activity. Therefore, it presupposes physicalism. The objection doesn't seriously consider the suggestion under consideration that mind is actually *independent* of matter, including *brain-matter*, and *mind* interacts with matter (including with brains).

Retaining the von Neumann interpretation as a live option, despite the opposition of many scientists and philosophers, doesn't violate 2* of our neo-Maimonidean methodology; not once we've seen that the consensus against it is based on circularity and prejudice. Moreover, there is no consensus as to how we *should* interpret the findings of quantum mechanics.

With this background in place, I want to draw your attention to the following four points:

- 1 The von Neumann interpretation might suggest that mind and matter are *equally* fundamental. This isn't idealism. This is *dualism*. Even so, we have good reason to deny, despite Biblical language to the contrary, that God has a body. If minds and bodies are equally fundamental, and if the possession of a mind poses no obvious obstacle to Godliness, and if the Bible and the Rabbis seem to attribute a mind to God, then the neo-Maimonidean will be more and more agreeable to the notion that God might have (or be) a mind.
- 2 You might think that *idealism* is a more fitting metaphysical conclusion to draw from the von Neumann interpretation. Mind is *more* fundamental than matter, since matter depends upon mind for the possession of certain determinate physical properties. Mind is the most fundamental category known to us from the natural world. That God should have (or be) a mind becomes yet more agreeable to the neo-Maimonidean.
- 3 Berkeley (2009) imagines the following objection against his form of idealism: if we're plugged into a material world that's simply thought up by God, why is it so exquisitely detailed? Why doesn't God just imagine the *surface* of objects, rather than pack them full of internal details? Nowadays, we can turn this objection on its head. The world of quantum mechanics, on von Neumann's interpretation, is much as you might expect from a virtual world, programmed according to the requirements of the experiences of its users. Hence Einstein's complaint, regarding the so-called Copenhagen interpretation: '[it] seems to me to come to the same thing as Berkeley's principle, "*esse est percipi*"—to be is to be perceived' (Einstein 1951: 669).
- 4 Stories have the following odd characteristic. In the real world, if a head has some hair on it, then it will have an even or an odd number of hairs. This isn't so in a fiction. Sherlock Holmes has hair, but there is no fact of the matter as to whether he has an even or an odd

number of hairs. But if that detail became relevant to the *story*, a character could *count* the hairs, and an answer would be provided by the author. The Hassidic idealist can view the findings of quantum mechanics, under von Neumann's interpretation, as a subtle Divine signature. God *could* have written a story with no such gaps in it. But since he wants us to discover that we're living in his story, he left gaps that collapse upon inspection, in just the way that stories have gaps that – so to speak – collapse upon inspection.¹⁷

Eventually, we might discover a purely *physical* mechanism to explain the collapse of the wave function.¹⁸ But note two things. First: the laws of quantum mechanics might be as fundamental as laws can get; we shouldn't expect to discover *physical* mechanisms that underpin it, if it really is as fundamental as it gets. Second: the neo-Maimonidean should be humble in her theology. She recognises that our understanding of natural sciences is set to evolve. She simply does the best that she can in the time that she lives, as Maimonides did in his own time. She knows that her theology can only ever be as provisional as her science, and she's fine with that. We may have left Maimonides' extreme apophaticism behind, but we (hopefully) haven't ditched the humility that lay at its heart.

5.6.3 *Consciousness*

When he was at graduate school, David Chalmers heard it said that 'One starts as a materialist, then one becomes a dualist, then a panpsychist, and one ends up as an idealist'. He explains (Chalmers 2018),

First, one is impressed by the successes of science, endorsing materialism about everything and so about the mind. Second, one is moved by [the] problem of consciousness to see a gap between physics and consciousness, thereby endorsing dualism, where both matter and consciousness are fundamental. Third, one is moved by the inscrutability of matter to realize that science reveals at most the structure of matter and not its underlying nature, and to speculate that this nature may involve consciousness, thereby endorsing panpsychism. Fourth, one comes to think that there is little reason to believe in anything beyond consciousness and that the physical world is wholly constituted by consciousness, thereby endorsing idealism.

The first step away from materialism is precipitated by an awareness of the problem of consciousness; a problem that Chalmers (1995) diagnosed years earlier:

The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of *experience*. When we think and perceive, there is a whirl of

information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. ... This subjective aspect is experience... It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does.

The problem isn't that science hasn't yet found a way to account for subjective experience. The problem is that subjective experience isn't itself a function or a process. Science explains functions and processes. It can describe all of the functions and processes that tend to come along with subjective experience. But since the experience itself is neither a function nor a process, scientific explanation is rendered mute. The search for a solution to this problem caused Chalmers to jettison materialism for dualism (Chalmers 1996). It then caused him to flirt with panpsychism (Chalmers 2013). Now he is taking idealism ever more seriously. Is he convinced? No. The most he will say is this (Chalmers 2018):

I do not claim that idealism is plausible. No position on the mind-body problem is plausible. ... Idealism is not significantly less plausible than its main competitors. So even though idealism is implausible, there is a non-negligible probability that it is true.

In short, contemporary physics doesn't obviously have the resources to explain where subjective experience comes from. Nobody in their right minds would want to deny that subjective experience exists. This problem bestows a non-negligible probability of truth upon idealism.

For our purposes, note that Chalmers plots a philosophical journey that begins with the neo-Maimonidean respect for contemporary science; that journey begins with materialism, but inches ever closer to idealism.

5.6.4 *Laws of Nature and Creatio Ex Nihilo*¹⁹

What are laws of nature? How might a neo-Maimonidean respond to this question?

Remember: we're coming to this discussion with an antecedent commitment to theism, and even to the existence of a God who made himself known – miraculously – to the Jewish people. We *are* willing to reinterpret Jewish texts and tradition where appropriate. We will be *led* by the natural sciences. But at the end of the day, we're looking to reach a reflective equilibrium between reason and Jewish tradition. Accordingly, if miracles and creation *ex nihilo* can have their place, that would be desirable.

Remember also: when it doesn't undermine our antecedent theism, the neo-Maimonidean will generally want to privilege the scientific

community over other intellectual communities, at least concerning matters that fall within their expertise.

Imagine a law of nature: *F*s cause *G*s. There are at least four ways in which such a law might be understood.

- 1 **Classical Humeanism:** A correlation between *F*s and *G*s has been observed. Natural laws are merely descriptions of observed regularities.
- 2 **Neo-Humeanism:** There is a counterfactual dependence of *G*s upon *F*s. That is to say: had *F* not occurred, then neither would *G*. And, according to the Neo-Humean, all that this really means is that, in the closest possible world in which *F* didn't occur, *G* didn't occur either.²⁰
- 3 **Nomic necessitarianism:** There is (at least in the actual world) a relation of necessitation which links the property of *F*ness to the property of *G*ness, such that wherever *F* is instantiated (in the actual world), *G* is also instantiated.²¹
- 4 **Dispositional essentialism:** The *F*s has an essential disposition to bring about *G*s.²²

Religious and scientific reasons would repel the neo-Maimonidean from the first two options. On the assumption that causation is mere *regularity*, it is impossible that one-off event, (1) should be the cause of a second one-off event, (2) as theists take God's creation of the universe to be. Moreover, it will be difficult for the Humean to make sense of miracles (which is why Hume famously attacked their possibility). The job of science, for the Humean, is to find patterns that can accommodate all of the data. What we might call a *miracle* wouldn't be the effect of God's causal *power*, it would merely be an event that fits no previously anticipated pattern. In the wake of a so-called miracle, we'd simply have to find a new pattern among the data that could accommodate the aberration. In the final analysis, there can be no miracles.

Admittedly, it was possible for God to have created an entire *sequence* of worlds, each one from nothing (Hasdai Crescas might have advocated for this view,²³ with roots in a well-known Midrash: *Bereshit Rabba* 3:7). Accordingly, God's creation of the world can be thought of in terms of a regular *pattern* of similar events. However, this limits God's power: it becomes impossible for God to create just *one* world; if God creates any world, he must create *many* worlds. Most theists will reject the notion that God *has* to create a sequence of worlds.

Admittedly, the *neo*-Humean is able to make sense of a singular act of creation and God's working miracles. God created the universe (or wrought a miracle) if and only if, in the closest possible world where God *does not* create a universe (or enact the miracle), no universe obtains (no miracle occurs).

But even if the neo-Humean can overcome our religious concerns, both forms of Humeanism jar against the testimony of the scientific

community. Albert Einstein, for example, was quite explicit that he *wasn't* searching for mere regularities (or even for true counterfactuals). 'What really interests me', he said, 'is whether God had any choice in the creation of the world'.²⁴ The aim of the physicist, he said, is 'not only to know how nature and her transactions are carried through, but also to reach as far as possible the utopian and seemingly arrogant aim of knowing why *nature is thus and not otherwise*... Thereby one experiences, so to speak, that God Himself could not have arranged these connections in any other way than that which factually exists'.²⁵

Another way to describe what the physicist is looking for, above and beyond mere regularities, is to appeal to Steven Weinberg's notion of 'logical rigidity' (Weinberg 1994: 148). The notion is supposed to capture the fact that the laws of nature are, on the one hand, contingent – they could have been different; but that, on the other hand, given the sort of world we happen to live in, and given the sort of entities out of which this world happens to be built, logic will *dictate* the way those things must interact. As I've tried to sum this idea up elsewhere: 'Other worlds are possible, but if its laws of physics are *different*, then it won't be composed of electrons and protons, although it may be composed of *shmelectrons* and *shprotons*' (Lebens 2020: 88). As Weinberg, himself, puts it (Weinberg 1994: 235–236),

Whatever the final theory may be, it will certainly not be *logically* inevitable. Even if the final theory turns out to be a theory of strings that can be expressed in a few simple equations, and even if we can show that this is the only possible quantum-mechanical theory that can describe gravitation along with other forces without mathematical inconsistencies, we will still have to ask why there should be such a thing as gravitation and why nature should obey the rules of quantum mechanics. Why does the universe not consist merely of point particles orbiting endlessly according to the rules of Newtonian mechanics?²⁶

Given the testimony of the scientific community, and the fact that this community's testimony takes on a central weight for the neo-Maimonidean, the first two options for understanding the laws of nature are eliminated (even *without* reference to the possible theological puzzles that they would generate). Scientists are looking for something stronger than regularities among the events of this world, or regularities among possible worlds.

But, sadly, neither of the text two options can accommodate *creatio ex nihilo* (at least, not straightforwardly). Contemporary physics tells us that, in any closed physical system, even if that system is the whole universe, there is no fluctuation in the quantity of matter/energy. This is known as a loss of conservation.²⁷ For the nomic necessitarian, these

laws are a necessary consequence of the way in which the natural properties (instantiated in our world) happen to be related (in this world). For the dispositional essentialist, these laws are a function of the dispositions of the sorts of entities that exist in our world.²⁸

According to both views, if you find a world in which matter-energy is *not* necessarily conserved, then you've found a world that isn't ours. A universe in which, at t_0 there is no matter and no energy, and at t_1 there *is* matter and energy, cannot be *our* world.

Our two first options failed to give natural laws enough binding power. Our two latter options give natural laws *too much* binding power. Even God would be bound by them. *Creatio ex nihilo* and all other law-breaking miracles are ruled out *ab initio*. We don't seem to have found the most desirable equilibrium.

The theist who wants to respect both the practice of physics *and* the possibility of *creatio ex nihilo* and other miracles might prefer a different account of the laws of nature; one that gives laws the rigidity and oomph that scientists are looking for, whilst giving God room for creation and miraculous intervention.

- 5 **Supernatural non-Humeanism:** The only fundamental causal power in the world is the will of God. When a scientist discovers a law of nature, she merely discovers regularity in the will of God. God tends to will for *G*s after *F*s.

Creatio ex nihilo is possible. The laws of conservation are nothing more than a general description of the way that God *tends* to run the cosmos. When that disposition is manifest, it will have all of the *oomph* that God's power can be expected to give it. Moreover, to the extent that God's mind and will are perfectly rational, we shouldn't be surprised to find logical rigidity and mathematical simplicity in his regular modes of thinking and willing. This type of supernatural non-Humeanism might not be attractive to the majority of contemporary scientists, but to an antecedent theist, who wants to do justice to the *practice* of science; it can seem very attractive indeed, especially compared to its competitors.

Elsewhere, Tyron Goldschmidt and I claim the following²⁹: any time you find that all of the features of some x wholly depend upon some mind, y , willing it to have those features, then you also find that x is an idea in mind y .³⁰ Note that, according to supernatural non-Humeanism, material objects only have the properties that God wills them to have. It follows that they are all God's ideas. We've arrived at (at least) Berkeleyan idealism.³¹

Perhaps I've been too quick. Let the theist simply endorse a naturalistic account of natural laws and then stipulate that God has the power to break them at will. In that way, the nomic necessitarian and the dispositional essentialist can accommodate creation and miracles. I would

respond with the following claim: on this account, the power of independent natural laws is an illusion since God holds a veto. God's will remains the ultimate, or fundamental, causal power behind everything that occurs. This account therefore collapses back into idealism, since nothing is beyond the immediate manipulation of the will of God.

What about a naturalistic non-Humeanism that allows for the laws to *evolve*? What the laws disallow at one time might be allowed at another. This view can accommodate *creatio ex nihilo*. The laws won't allow such a thing *now*, but maybe they did in the *past*. This view cannot accommodate miracles, even if it can accommodate the creation. The Jewish tradition suggests that God's miracle-working powers allow him to suspend laws, even as those laws continue to hold true in general. If we concede that God has that power, then, once again, God's will remains the only fundamental causal power in the picture. Consequently, this escape route from the argument still collapses into supernatural non-Humeanism and, thus, into idealism.

5.7 Kurt Vonnegut and a Personal God

For Berkeley, God is a mind. He *thinks* material objects into being. His *will* explains why he thinks some things and not other things. Regularities in his thought and will are what scientists discover. Berkeley's God is a person – or, at least – a mind that thinks.

Kabbalistic Judaism differentiates between the *Ein Sof* (God in his transcendence), about whom nothing can be said, and the God that we experience in various deeply personal guises on earth. The *Ein Sof*, *they* would say, is not a person. He is the God of Maimonides. The personal God of the Bible and the Rabbis, by contrast, is the God that we experience on earth. Do they have two Gods: one personal and one a-personal?

In his novel, *Breakfast of Champions* (Vonnegut 1991), Kurt Vonnegut appears as a character. Are there two Kurt Vonneguts: the fictional one in the story and the non-fictional one that *wrote* the story?³² Some argue that when a non-fictional person appears in a fiction they do so via some sort of a surrogate: the *real* Kurt Vonnegut doesn't appear in his novel – only a fictional surrogate does. There are, on this theory, two Kurt Vonneguts. Amie Thomasson attacks the surrogacy theory (Thomasson 1999: 104):

Most works of historical fiction would lose much of their poignancy if they were not set amid real historical events and individuals, and fictionalized biographies or comedies often center on the idea that the lives of famous historical individuals went rather differently. Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, for example, would lose much of its humor if it did not involve the real Lenin, Tristan Tzara, and James Joyce coming together in Vienna [*sic.*]³³, but only some similar fictional individuals (in a similar fictional city).

The surrogacy theory is harder to dismiss than this. Let us make the very natural assumption that the fictional surrogate for Lenin is a *representation* of Lenin. We can say that a story is about x if it directly refers to x or some y , such that y stands in this representation relation to x . Stoppard's *Travesties* can then be about Lenin, even if it doesn't refer to Lenin. It refers to a *representation* of Lenin, and so it's still *about* Lenin.

Nevertheless, I take it to be uncontroversial that:

- 1 Kurt Vonnegut refers to himself in *Breakfast of Champions*.
- 2 *Breakfast of Champions* refers to its author and is therefore self-referential.

The surrogacy theory is committed to the notion that, in (1), 'Kurt Vonnegut' refers to the real author, and 'himself' refers not to the author but his fictional surrogate.³⁴ But can that be what makes a book self-referential? Surely, the term 'self-referential' can only apply to a text when an author *refers* to herself, and therefore Vonnegut's writing can only be self-referential if he refers in it, not to a surrogate of himself, but to *himself*. Perhaps this begs the question against the surrogacy theory. I'm too quick to assume that self-referential fiction *has* to have the author referring to *herself* rather than a *surrogate* of herself. But self-referential *non-fiction* surely refers to its authors *directly*. Can the surrogate theorist give a uniform analysis of (2) and:

- 3 Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography* refers to its author and is therefore self-referential.

Are we to say that *Breakfast of Champions* is self-referential in virtue of referring to a surrogate of its author, whilst Russell's *Autobiography* is self-referential in virtue of referring *directly* to its author? Why is the asymmetry? You could try to avoid this asymmetry via the following analysis of self-reference: ' x refers to its author' is true if x was written by y , and x contains a name that either refers to y , or refers to some z , such that z is a representation of y . This single analysis can take care of (2) and (3). But can this really be an analysis of *self-reference*?

A story can perhaps be *about* a person in virtue of *referring* to a surrogate of that person. But surely a story doesn't *refer* to a person unless it *refers* to that person. To deny that would be to deny a tautology. And yet, the surrogacy theory's *ad hoc* analysis of self-reference seems to be denying *just* that tautology. It seems to allow that an author refers to herself without referring to herself. I can't see a non-tautology-denying analysis of the predicates in question that would allow (1) and (2) to be true, whilst also giving a uniform analysis to (2) and (3).

Surrogacy won't help us here. Rather, conclude that there is only one Kurt Vonnegut. Some things are true of him in the story, which are false about him outside of the story, and *vice versa*. The same analysis can apply

to the *Ein Sof* and God as we experience him. They are both one and the same God. Accordingly, the official Hassidic account might be that God is a person, as he appears as a character in the world, and not a person outside of the world, even though the personal God and the a-personal God are one and the same entity: there's only one Kurt Vonnegut, and there's only one God – who is a person inside of His story, but not outside of it.

Given the great status that Maimonides has in the Jewish tradition, and given their reverence for the role of Jewish tradition in the ongoing revelation of God's will, the Kabbalists were unwilling to jettison the God of Maimonides. He is their *Ein Sof*. I'm not the first to suggest that the influence of Maimonides was part of the inspiration for the simplicity of the *Ein Sof*.³⁵ But ironically, if we we're being true to a Maimonidean *methodology*, in our new scientific and philosophical surroundings, we might jettison the God of Maimonides.

Neo-Maimonidean methodology gives us no reason to think of God in the wafer-thin terms of the *Ein Sof*. This is well and good, since whatever the Kabbalists (and especially the Hassidic idealists) might *say*, their *Ein Sof* – their God outside of the story – *must* be a mind. True: stuck as we are within the story of this world, we might know painfully little of God in his transcendence. He might be the person that we vaguely experience through the mist of our most apophatic religious experiences; like brains in a vat recognising what they are, at the same time as recognising the semantic obstacles in the way of expressing just what they recognise themselves to be.³⁶ But even this *Ein Sof*, of whom we can know so little, in that he imagines this world into being, in an act of creative *tzimtzum* (see Lebens & Goldschmidt 2020), he must be a *mind*; a mind that *imagines* – even outside of the story. Perhaps only a *person* would imagine a *story*.³⁷

5.8 Conclusions

The God of the Bible is personal. The God of the Rabbis is personal. And, even though we need to allow the natural sciences to *lead* our neo-Maimonidean reflections, the following points seem salient:

- Fine-tuning points towards a personal God.
- Quantum mechanics can be thought of as pointing towards the fundamentality of the *mental*, which removes some of the stigmas from the proposition that God has (or is) a mind.
- The problem of consciousness likewise points towards the fundamentality of the mental.
- Neo-Maimonidean reflection upon the laws of nature licenses Berkeleyan idealism, or even Hassidic idealism, as live options. Both forms of idealism seem to be committed to the existence of a personal God (or, at the very least, a God with a mind, that thinks and imagines).

To the extent that contemporary sciences *do* point in the direction of idealism, mightn't the neo-Maimonidean be attracted to the sort of idealism that eschews a *personal* God, favouring some sort of a-personal mega-consciousness instead (see, for e.g., Yetter-Chappell 2017)? No. Why should she? Once you've jettisoned the requirement that explanation bottoms out in something simple, and therefore a-personal, and once the mental becomes a respectable fundamental category, why resist – in the process of coming to a reflective equilibrium with the Jewish tradition – the tremendous impetus that that tradition brings to the table in *favour* of a personal God? For the neo-Maimonidean, it seems eminently reasonable to claim that God is a person after all.³⁸

Notes

1. Elsewhere, I advance a more substantive account of personhood (Lebens, MS).
2. See Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII, [Chapters 7](#) and [9](#), and Maimonides (2000: I.68).
3. For more on the Sefirot, see Lebens (2017).
4. There is, indeed, a venerable Hassidic tradition that relates to God as the great Nothingness at the heart of all beings, or an older Kabbalistic tradition relating to God as the Nothingness from which Being sputtered out in the creation *ex nihilo*; deeply apophatic conceptions of God, undergirded by a deeply experienced sense of terror in the face of nothingness (see, for example, Matt (1990)).
5. Moshe Halbertal (2007) advocates an optimistic reading, according to which Maimonides resolves the central tensions that he addresses. Leo Strauss pioneered the reading according to which Maimonides alludes, in esoteric hints, to his secret conclusion that the tensions cannot be resolved (1952, 1963).
6. Whether Maimonides' cosmological argument guarantees *knowledge* of God's existence, or mere *certainty*, and whether there's a difference between these notions, is a matter for debate. We needn't enter into the fray. Whether at the level of knowledge, or merely well-reasoned belief, Maimonides thinks we should (in some sense or other) *endorse* the existence of God (see Stern 2013: [Chapter 5](#)).
7. For more on Ibn Sina and his argument, which appears in his *Sharḥ Kitāb al-Iqām*, see McGinnis (2010, 2011).
8. Whether or not this belief can ever amount to knowledge, see footnote 6.
9. Here I'm following Stern's interpretation of Maimonides who thinks that we can be *certain* that an *unknowable* God exists. See footnote (6).
10. Tyron Goldschmidt made this point to me in conversation, inspired by Alston (1985).
11. For more on Hassidic idealism, see Lebens (2015, 2017), Goldschmidt and Lebens (2020), and for more exegesis of the primary sources, see Lebens (2020).
12. This suggestion was put to me by Omar Fakhri. Conversation with Simon Hewitt was also instructive on this point.
13. The possibilities for this route are heightened if, as I shall argue, contemporary science points in the direction of idealism, since the idealist might argue, as did Berkeley, that we have no clear conception of what a mind *is*, despite the fact that they are part of the fundamental ontology of an idealist meta-

- physics. God might be a mind. That doesn't mean that we know very much at all about him. Thanks to Tyron Goldschmidt for discussion on these points.
14. This philosophical reflection itself can, and should, take its lead from the natural sciences wherever possible.
 15. The most prominent proponent of this argument from the Big Bang is William Lane Craig (1997; Craig & Sinclair, 2009).
 16. I owe these reservations to Pitts (2008).
 17. For more on the last two points, see Kurtsal and Lebens (MS).
 18. Presenting an earlier draft of this chapter, at a conference in Innsbruck, on 'The Nature of God: Personal and a-personal concepts of the divine', this point was raised by Julian Perlmutter.
 19. The argument of this section overlaps extensively with §3.5 of Lebens (2020).
 20. See Lewis (1973).
 21. See David Armstrong (1983), John Foster (1983) and Fred Dretske (1977), among others.
 22. For more on dispositional essentialism, see Brian Ellis (2001), Chris Swoyer (1982), and Alexander Bird (2005), among others.
 23. See Feldman (1980).
 24. As told to his assistant, Ernst Strauss, and quoted by Holton (1986: 91).
 25. Einstein (1929: 126).
 26. Richard Feynman (1992: 55) reports a similar criterion for the truly natural laws.
 27. Lawrence Krauss (2012) reports that matter in our own universe *does* sometimes pop out of nothing. But the events that he reports result from underlying rearrangements of quantum fields. As David Albert (2012) puts it, 'The fact that some arrangements of fields happen to correspond to the existence of particles and some don't is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that some of the possible arrangements of my fingers happen to correspond to the existence of a fist and some don't. And the fact that particles can pop in and out of existence, over time, as those fields rearrange themselves, is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that fists can pop in and out of existence, over time, as my fingers rearrange themselves. And none of these poppings – if you look at them aright – amount to anything even remotely in the neighborhood of a creation from nothing'.
 28. Alternatively, these laws may be a disposition of the world itself (see Bigelow et al. (1992)).
 29. Goldschmidt and Lebens (2020).
 30. The materialist can't accept this as a *necessary* condition for being an idea, since they argue that this condition is never met – a mind can't will anything without all sorts of physical processes occurring in the background. But they *can* accept it as a *sufficient* condition. Even the materialist would accept that if (*contra* materialism) a disembodied mind *existed*, and if it had the power over some object *x*, to determine by will alone, all of its features, then that *x* would be an idea of that mind.
 31. Note how natural the combination is between Berkeleyan idealism and supernatural non-Humeanism. Indeed, it was adopted by Berkeley, and in modern times, by Del Ratzsch (1987) and John Foster (2004).
 32. Much of what follows in this section is my attempt to improve upon some of what appears in Lebens (2017).
 33. The play is actually set in Zürich.
 34. This already amounts to an odd, indirect, and non-standard form of anaphoric reference.
 35. See Idel (1986, 1988: 253); Matt (1990).

36. See Lebens (2014).
37. Admittedly, I argue in Lebens (Forthcoming) that there will still be some senses of ‘personhood’ such that God is only a person in the story, but a non-personal mind beyond it. This doesn’t undermine the conclusion of this chapter, which operates with a thinner conception of ‘personhood’.
38. Once again, I note that the conclusion of this chapter only goes through on a relatively thin conception of what it takes to be a person. On the thicker conception of personhood that I develop elsewhere (Forthcoming), God is a person in the story of this world, but beyond that, he is a non-personal mind that thinks. Nevertheless, on *some* conceptions of personhood, a sufficiently complex mind that thinks sufficiently complex thoughts *is* a person. That’s the conception of personhood operative in this chapter. On such a conception, God is personal even in his transcendence. I would like to thank the organisers, and all of the participants of the fascinating conference at the University of Innsbruck, *The Nature of God: Personal and a-personal concepts of the divine* at which I presented an earlier draft of this chapter. I would also like to thank the editors of this volume.

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