

NOTHING ELSE

SAMUEL LEBENS
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA

Moses commands the children of Israel to ‘know this day, and lay it on thy heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is nothing else’ (Deuteronomy 4:39). In context, the final clause of this verse is most straightforwardly read as a declaration of monotheism: there are no other *gods*. Nevertheless, one can trace a central line of Kabbalistic thought taking this verse to be saying something more radical. It’s not merely that there are no *gods* besides God; it’s that there is nothing else *at all* besides God. Call this school *nothing-elsism*.

The declaration that ‘there is nothing at all besides God’ is open to multiple interpretations. This paper dismisses various interpretations of nothing-elsism. Nothing-elsism, as it appears in the Jewish tradition, I shall argue, should not be read as pantheism, panentheism, nor even as acosmism. Nothing-elsism, at least as it appears in the Jewish tradition, is merely *idealist*, and might even be a consequence of classical theism itself.

I. NOTHING-ELSISM IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

Rabbi Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) writes: ‘The essence of God is in everything, and nothing exists outside of God. Since God gives being to all, it isn’t fitting to say that there would be any created thing living by way of another. Rather, he is their existence, their life, and his existence is found in all things.’¹ R. Cordovero is a nothing-elser.

1 My translation of *Shiur Komah*, Modena manuscript, 206b, quoted in Brakha Sack, “R. Moses of Cordovero’s Doctrine of Zimzum”, *Tarbiz*: 213–14. This quotation appears with a different translation in Jay Michaelson, *Everything is God: The radical path of nondual Judaism* (Trumpeter, 2009), 62.

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1555-1630) writes on our verse from Deuteronomy: ‘Its interpretation isn’t that there is no God other than him, for this is obvious and [already] explained in [Deuteronomy 6:4]’. Deuteronomy 6:4 clearly informs us that ‘the Lord our God, the Lord is one’. So as to avoid superfluity, R. Horowitz reads *our* verse (Deuteronomy 4:39) as conveying something else — namely, that:

nothing exists without his existence. For he, may he be blessed, gives being to all, and life to all, and he is the existence of those that exist. And there is no existence other than his existence. It’s just that this existence clings to him more, and from this existence, other existence cascades outwards, and all is in the first power, and this is the thing that is infinite.²

R. Horowitz is a nothing-elser.

The founder of Hassidic Judaism, Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (known as the *Besht*, 1700-1760) goes further. He tells us that even when we recite Moses’ apparent declaration of *monotheism* (i.e. Deuteronomy 6:4), twice daily in the *Shema* prayer, we should have in mind 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 [consider that] 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.³

The Besht is a nothing-elser.

Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl (1730-1787), a disciple of the Besht, wrote that ‘Divinity above, Israel, Torah, the world-to-come, and this world, are all one.’ They seem to be many distinct things, but this is an illusion: ‘By way of them all, Godliness is spread out, this in a more internal way, and this in a more external way, in the mode of clothing and a body.’⁴ The things which look less holy, are not really distinct from the things which are

2 My translation of Josef Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot HaBrit* (Machon Yad Ramah, 1997), tractate Shevout, 160a.

3 My translation of Israel ben Elieser, *Sefer Baal Shem Tov* (1938), Parshat Vaetchanan 13.

4 My translation of M. N. Twersky, *Meor Enayim* (Pe’er Mikdoshim, 2015), Parshat Vayeitze, s. v. ‘vata’. Also cited, with slightly different translation, in Michaelson, Everything is God, 71.

more holy. It's just that the holy things appear to us through the illusory garb of the less holy. R. Manachem Nachum is a nothing-elser.

Perhaps the most systematic of all Hassidic thinkers was Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1813), the founder of Chabad, or Lubavitch, Hassidism. In one of the most famous passages of his magnum opus, the *Tanya*, he writes:

[E]very intelligent person will understand clearly that each creature and being is actually considered naught and absolute nothingness in relation to the Activating Force ... continuously calling it into existence and bringing it from absolute non-being into being. The reason that all things created and activated appear to us as existing and tangible, is that we do not comprehend nor see with our physical eyes the power of God... If, however, the eye were permitted to see and to comprehend the life-force and spirituality which is in every created thing, flowing into it ... then the materiality, grossness and tangibility of the creature would not be seen by our eyes at all... Hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.⁵

The idea seems to be that, when compared to the existence of God, who gives being to all other things, the being of those other things is somehow nullified. A sun-beam illuminates things outside of the sun. But in the sun itself, a sun-beam is nothing; it is nullified. The sun-beam, even beyond the orb of the sun, is merely an *emanation* of the sun. Using this metaphor, R. Shnuer Zalman tells us: 'It is only in the space of the universe, under the heavens and on the earth, where the body of the sun-globe is not present, that this light and radiance appears to the eye to have actual existence.'⁶ From the perspective of God, who is analogous, in this metaphor, to the sun, the world itself apparently doesn't exist; it is a mere emanation. There is 'truly nothing besides Him.' R. Shnuer Zalman is a nothing-elser.

We have traced a school that spans into five centuries of Kabbalistic writing. It is typified by declarations of God's being, in some sense or other, the only thing that exists. And yet, despite that unifying characteristic, all of the texts quoted are riddled with interpretative hurdles. Many are written in an impressionistic style. Metaphor abounds. This is not a literary tradition that lays out its arguments with numbered premises. How exactly are we to understand these texts, and the school that they constitute?

5 S. Z. Baruchovitch, *Likkutei Amarim Tanya: Bilingual Edition* (Kehot Publ. Society, 1973), Shaar Hayichud Vebaemuna, Chapter 3.

6 Baruchovitch, *Likkutei Amarim Tanya*, Chapter 3.

II. INTERPRETATION 1: NON-DUALIST PANTHEISM

One way to go — perhaps the most obvious — is to interpret these texts with a flat-footed literalism. Just read them. They're telling us that only one thing really exists — despite any appearance to the contrary. Accordingly, Jay Michaelson calls Jewish nothing-elsism the 'radical path of nondual Judaism,' according to which everything is God. According to non-dualism:

[S]uperficial perceptions of separation — of duality — are not ultimately correct ... [I]n its deepest reality, all of being is one. The boundaries we see all around us, between you and the outside world, between tables and chairs, are not ultimately real — though they may be partially true, or true in some relative way.⁷

That is to say, non-dualism is what Jonathan Schaffer elsewhere calls *existence monism*. According to existence monism, 'there are no particles, pebbles, planets, or any other proper parts to the world. There is only a seamless Parmenidean whole.'⁸ For a non-dualist, to say that everything is God is to say that there exists only one thing, and that that one thing — that Parmenidean whole — is God.

And yet, to attribute existence monism to the Jewish nothing-elsers is, to my mind, uncharitable for a number of reasons. The first set of reasons are philosophical. Bertrand Russell⁹ and G. E. Moore¹⁰ confronted, in the early days of their careers, adherents of existence monism. Their arguments against existence monism were devastating. I focus here on Russell.

The existence monist thinks that there is only one object. An absurd consequence of this is that, in the final analysis, any proposition that seems to be about *two* things will have to be transformed into a proposition about *one* thing, since there only is one thing for propositions to be about: *i.e.*, the Parmenidean whole — which, in our case, is God. But this won't work, Russell argues, for any proposition that contains an asymmetrical relation:

7 Michaelson, *Everything is God*, 17.

8 Jonathan Schaffer, "The Internal Relatedness of All Things", *Mind* 119, no. 474 (2010): 341.

9 Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (Routledge, 1903/1992); Bertrand Russell, "On the Nature of Truth", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 7, no. 1 (1907).

10 G. E. Moore, "External and Internal Relations", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 20, no. 1 (1920).

The proposition ‘ a is greater than b ’, we are told, does not really say anything about either a or b , but about the two together. Denoting the whole which they compose (ab), it says we will suppose, ‘(ab) contains diversity of magnitude.’ Now to this statement ... there is a special objection in the case of asymmetry. (ab) is symmetrical with regard to a and b [since, if there’s only one thing, there can’t be two distinct fusions of a and b], and thus the property of the whole will be exactly the same in the case where a is greater than b as in the case where b is greater than a .¹¹

The existence monist can’t distinguish the proposition that ‘ $2 > 1$ ’ from the false proposition that ‘ $1 > 2$ ’. This constitutes a serious blow to the hopes of reconciling existence monism with the truth of mathematics. Now, of course, nondualists tend to wave their hands around, around about now, in an attempt to save the *apparent* truth of mathematics. Remember, Michaelson has told us ‘that perceptions of separation — of duality — are not ultimately correct’, but he does allow that they may be ‘partially true, or true in some relative way’.¹²

Fine. But the nondualist certainly seems to take the non-dual perspective on reality as somehow *truer* than any perspective that engages in separation. Michaelson makes much of the point that the world of separation, to which number theory would apply, is *actually* one, rather than many separate things, but that even this oneness is an illusion, because *true* reality transcends number altogether. He assures us that ‘The Kabbalistic math of this reality is that $2 = 1 = 0$. Fortunately,’ he confesses, ‘I don’t have to be good at math anymore’.¹³

To entertain any thought about the world, even the thought that ‘all is one’, is somehow to separate the world from this very thought *about* the world. Accordingly, no thought, for the non-dualist, can be *wholly* true, since the very act of thinking rends the unity of the Parmenidean whole asunder; yielding a thought, *and* the thing that the thought is about. Nevertheless, we can still say that the world of separation, signified by the number 2, is *less* true than the world of unity, signified by the number 1, and *less* true still than the unthinkable thought encompassing all, signified by the number 0. All levels represent one reality, which is why Michaelson’s ‘Kabbalistic math’ tells us that $2 = 1 = 0$, but that each stage of this equation is *truer* than the one before it. Russell understood this well:

11 Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, § 217.

12 Cf. Michaelson, *Everything is God*, 17.

13 Michaelson, *Everything is God*, 9.

The one final and complete truth [for a non-dualist] must consist of a proposition with one subject, namely the Whole, and one predicate. But since this involves distinguishing subject from predicate, as though they could be diverse, even this is not quite true... [but] it is as true as any truth can be.¹⁴

Our first complaint is easy to register: a low grade partial truth just doesn't seem fitting for an indubitable theorem of number theory, such as the claim that $2 > 1$. To treat such a claim as less true than the wild speculations of metaphysicians and theologians is to beggar belief. It's all very well for Michaelson to say that he doesn't have to be good at maths anymore. Some of us still care about arithmetic! Furthermore, the problems for the non-dualist don't end here.

If no proposition is entirely true, then the monistic theory itself cannot be entirely true. And if 'the partial truths which embody the monistic philosophy' are not entirely true, then 'any deductions we may make from them may depend upon their false aspect rather than their true one, and may therefore be erroneous'.¹⁵ That is, by the lights of non-dualism, we shouldn't trust any non-dual conclusions: the non-dualist concedes that his own premises are merely partially true. How then do we know what conclusions he *would* have come to had he started with *totally* true premises?

To summarise: Russell's main argument is that existence monism cannot attribute complete truth to innocuous mathematical propositions, *and*, it gives rise to a completely untenable theory of truth. There have been some existence monists in the history of philosophy, but we should be very careful before labelling anyone as such, since it commits its adherents to a complete philosophical disaster.

The second set of reasons not to attribute non-dualism to the Jewish nothing-elsers are theological and traditional. Theistic non-dualism is a form of pantheism: the universe is God because God is all that there is. The problem with pantheism is that it leans one in either of the following two directions, both problematic from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism. The first takes the identity between God and the universe, and bleeds divinity so thoroughly into the universe that there basically no longer remains what any objective bystander would take to be a universe at all. The denial of the existence of

14 Russell, "On the Nature of Truth", 39.

15 Russell, "On the Nature of Truth", 36.

the universe is acosmism. But what of the Torah, and its creation narrative, and its description of a world below the heavens, and its injunction that we should serve the Lord our God? How does any of this make sense if there is no universe, and if there is nothing at all other than God?

The other direction pantheism pushes towards takes the identity between God and the universe, and bleeds the universe so thoroughly into divinity that there basically no longer remains what any objective bystander would take to be a deity at all. Indeed, Michaelson is keen to emphasise how little divides the non-dualist and the atheist. It's not that there's a personal God pulling the strings of the universe. It's merely that the universe *is* God — not a personal God, since all distinctions of personality and agency get washed away when one arrives at the Parmenidean whole that subsumes all distinctions. Thus, Michaelson can say:

[N]onduality may be said to be the place where mysticism and atheism shake hands. The cosmology may be identical, as there are no puppet-masters pulling the strings of our reality. Yet the stage is now a cathedral.¹⁶

It sounds beautiful. But to place so thin a wedge between theism and atheism is to arrive at something wholly alien to the basic Jewish narrative of a personal God, commander, father, and king. The bastions of Jewish nothing-elsism are not drawn from some controversial backwater of the Jewish map. They were not post-modernist gurus of new-age, Jewish renewal. Despite their radicalism and their often antinomian rhetoric, they were eager to situate themselves at the heart of the Jewish tradition, along with its narratives of a personal theology and its body of ritual law. Anything close to atheism, I would wager, cannot be close to them.

Michaelson would probably resist this line of attack. Non-dualism, he might say, is the summit of theological piety since, in his words, 'It is the ultimate antidote to idolatry... not just any image of God, but even any experience that sets itself apart from others, is error.'¹⁷ But the traditional Jewish response to polytheism is not to give up on theism altogether. And, given the monistic theory of truth underwriting non-dualism, this response is somewhat empty. *Everything* is error, on their account, including the claim that everything is error!

16 Michaelson, *Everything is God*, 30.

17 Michaelson, *Everything is God*, 56.

Russell commends Harold H. Joachim for having ‘considered very carefully the whole question of error’ from a monistic perspective.¹⁸ Joachim concludes that: ‘the erring subject’s confident belief in the truth of his knowledge distinctively characterizes error, and converts a partial apprehension of the truth into falsity.’¹⁹ On Joachim’s account, error has nothing to do with truth or falsehood: *every* proposition with which mere mortals deal is somewhere *between* true and false; *error*, on the other hand, resides in the confident belief that a partial truth is wholly true. This conclusion seemed to Russell ‘the only possible one for a monistic theory of truth’.

Russell goes on to conjure up the following scene. A jury has to decide whether a man has committed a crime. If the jury keeps in mind the monistic theory of truth, and thereby remembers that any verdict they come to can only ever amount to a partial truth, then their verdict will be right, whatever their verdict. If they forget the monistic theory, the same verdict will be erroneous!

We can respond to Michaelson: given the monistic theory of truth, the non-dualist can sacrifice goats to Baal, and libate wine to Hermes, providing that, when doing so, she remains humble in the knowledge that all truths are partial. This will not be *error*, nor idolatry. But if the Jewish non-dualist takes part in a traditional Jewish prayer service, *confident* in the belief that to do so is mandated by God, she falls into error and idolatry far worse than that of the less certain Baal and Hermes worshipper. While I am sympathetic to the notion that theological certainty is a form of idolatry, this goes too far!

The final set of reasons to resist a non-dual interpretation of nothingness is textual. Return to the quotes with which we started. It’s true that they abound with declarations of the following form: ‘nothing exists outside of God’; ‘there is no existence other than his existence’; ‘there is nothing else in the entire world, other than the Holy One, Blessed be He’; ‘there is truly nothing besides Him’. But the very same passages tell us: that things don’t live by way of another — implying that they *do* exist but only *by way* of God; that from His ‘existence, other existence cascades outwards’ — implying that God gives being to others; that a person ‘has no fundamentality other than

18 Russell, “On the Nature of Truth”, 32.

19 Russell, “On the Nature of Truth”, 32, quoting Harold H. Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (OUP, 1906), 162.

the [Godly] soul that is within him' — implying that our being is grounded in God's. And even when these texts declare our existence to be nullified, they say it only *relative* to God's existence. And even then, the nullification doesn't seem complete. Non-divine beings are like sun-rays. They *do* exist, even *inside* the sun, but their existence is derivative, and — *inside* the sun itself — wholly irrelevant. Thus existence monism, which is philosophically disastrous and religiously heterodox, is also unsupported by these texts. These texts don't deny that we exist. They deny that our existence is independent of God. They deny that our existence is fundamental. When they do deny that we exist, they do so only from a certain *perspective*, and only in a certain limited *sense*.

Jewish nothing-elsism doesn't preach that nothing-else exists besides God. It preaches that nothing else exists in quite the way that God does, or that nothing else is as fundamental as God is.

III. INTERPRETATION 2: PRIORITY-MONISTIC PANENTHEISM

Jonathan Schaffer argues that when writers *could* be understood as existence monists, there is often a more charitable reading available: they are not existence monists, but *priority* monists. Priority monism *doesn't* deny that many things exist; it merely insists that they are *grounded* by, and that their existence is *explained* by, the existence of the whole cosmos. The whole cosmos is the one and only fundamental concrete entity that *grounds* all other concrete entities. Priority *pluralism*, by contrast, holds that certain *particles* or *atoms* are fundamental, and that metaphysical explanation snakes up from *them*.²⁰

In order to provide a philosophical explanation of all that exists, we might start with fundamental atomic building blocks, and offer a bottom-up explanation. The priority monist, by contrast, starts from the *whole* that all things compose, and explains what's going on within, via a top-down explanation. When philosophers write that only one thing *exists*, they can sometimes be read to be saying that only one thing is *fundamental*, and that that one thing is the *whole* that all non-fundamental things compose.

Elsewhere I have argued that Schaffer is sometimes *too* charitable, and too eager to read priority monism into the words of genuine existence mon-

²⁰ Jonathan Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole", *Philosophical Review* 119, no. 1 (2009): 31–32.

ists.²¹ But we already have reason to deny that the Jewish nothing-elsers were existence monists. Can we then follow Schaffer's strategy, and interpret their words in terms of priority monism?

Let's try. Assume classical theism. Accordingly, God exists *a se*. At some point in time, he created a universe that is distinct from himself. Assume also priority monism. Accordingly, the most fundamental ontological substance is the whole that all things compose. Of course, God himself *and* the created universe would compose a *whole*: the fusion of God and the universe. On the assumption of priority monism, this fusion turns out to be more fundamental than God. This is heterodox. Worse: we would seem to have landed ourselves in a contradiction. If God exists *a se*, then he cannot be ontologically grounded by the fusion.

But the problem is easily avoided. Stop calling the thing that we *were* calling God, 'God'. Instead, call it *the soul of God*. Call the fusion 'God' instead. Given these new labels: the soul of God is, indeed, *the soul of God*. And the universe that that soul created, is the *body* of God. God is the fusion of body and soul, and is the only thing that is fundamental. Nothing else is. This is nothing-elsism, since nothing other than God is fundamental. This is panentheism, since the created universe is a proper part of God. And, this is priority monism, since the only fundamental being is the one whole that all other beings compose.

This interpretation of Jewish nothing-elsism fits much better with the texts than does non-dualism. Of course, nothing exists by way of beings other than God—since God is the fusion of all things, in which all things are grounded. Of course, the existence of all things 'cascades outwards' from God, since God is the ground of all being. Of course, a person 'has no fundamentality' other than that which is derived from God, since God is the only fundamental being. Of course, our existence is nullified *relative* to God's existence, since his existence is fundamental, and ours is derivative.

And yet, there are philosophical and theological reasons to resist this new interpretation of nothing-elsism, *despite* its *prima facie* fit with the texts. The philosophical reasons have to do with motivation. The theological reasons have to do with the heterodoxy of panentheism.

21 Samuel Lebens, "Russell and Bradley: Rehabilitating the Creation Narrative of Analytic Philosophy", *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 5, no. 7 (2017).

As for motivation, priority monism understood as the doctrine that the *whole* is prior to its parts might better be labelled ‘priority holism’ — since it’s about putting the whole before the parts. It does so by arguing that nothing else can be ontologically fundamental. Why think that nothing other than the whole can be fundamental?

Let’s examine two of Schaffer’s arguments. The first argument contends that only if the whole is fundamental can the metaphysical possibility of gunk be explained. Gunk is infinitely divisible matter: *e.g.*, atoms that can be divided into sub-atomic particles that can be divided into strings that can be divided into twines, and so on and so forth, *ad infinitum*. If you’re a priority pluralist, and the world is built upwards from simple *fundamentals*, then gunk shouldn’t be so much as *possible*. How would we get going, building a gunky universe, bottom-up? For a priority pluralist, there would be nothing basic at gunky worlds: ‘Being would be infinitely deferred, never achieved.’²²

Schaffer’s solution is to treat the whole as prior to the parts. Being snakes downward from the whole, not upwards from the parts. Thus being has a foundation, even in a gunky universe. Schaffer presents the pluralist with an infinite regress in any gunky world. We start with the gunk and descend down to its more and more fundamental parts, but we never reach a bottom. Being has no foundation in such a world. But what if the foundation of that infinite chain stands outside of the chain itself? In that case, you wouldn’t need to reach a bottom in order for the whole to have a foundation.

For the theist, God is the ground of all being. This *is* priority monism, but it is not priority *holism*. Being neither snakes down from the whole, nor up from some basic *parts* of the whole. Rather being is conveyed upon the whole, and upon its parts, from a transcendent God. Even the fusion of that whole and God derives its being from God. The gunk argument needn’t move a theist.

A second argument: if a proposition *p* is true at a world *w*, then *p*’s truth at *w* is grounded in the fundamental features of *w*. Next, Schaffer contends that the whole world is required to make negative-existential propositions true: that there are no unicorns is not made true by any particular corner of the world

22 Schaffer, “Monism”, 62.

lacking a unicorn, but by the global lack of unicorns.²³ The whole world is a truth-maker to negative existentials. Thus, the whole world is *fundamental*.

Once again, theism bursts the bubble. If God is omnipotent, he merely has to will for p to be true in order to make it true. If God willed for there to be unicorns, then there would be. He may sometimes will for things to go differently from the way they actually go — but only in virtue of having bequeathed free will to his creatures, and of his continually reining himself in. According to classical theism: beings (other than God) can only have a free will subject to the veto of God. *God's* will, by contrast, is never subject to any veto. He has the power to will and to make true anything under the sun. Accordingly, that God doesn't will for there to be unicorns can certainly play a role as a truth-maker for there being no unicorns. Who needs a fundamental truth-making *whole*, when there is already a fundamental truth-making *God*? A pattern is emerging. Schaffer argues that we require the whole universe, rather than its constituent parts, to play a foundational role, and the theist meets the argument by saying that *God* can play that role equally well.²⁴

Priority holism may or may not be well motivated in the absence of theism. For the record: I think it fares quite well. But theism undercuts the doctrine's appeal. So, why attribute this view to the Jewish nothing-elsers, given their theism?

Besides these philosophical qualms, panentheism has various heterodox consequences. If the material universe is a proper part of God, then God has material proper parts. One of the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith, as codified by Maimonides, stipulates that God is *incorporeal*. These principles were never universally accepted, in their entirety, by Jewish thinkers, even among contemporary Orthodoxy.²⁵ But it's fair to say that they have a default position in popular Jewish thought. Attributing the wholesale rejection of God's incorporeality to the bastions of the Kabbalistic and Hassidic traditions would constitute quite a cost to their Orthodox credentials.²⁶

23 Jonathan Schaffer, "The Least Discerning and Most Promiscuous Truth-maker", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60, no. 239 (2010).

24 This pattern can be developed further in response to Schaffer's other arguments for priority holism. I leave that work to the imagination of the reader.

25 M. B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).

26 Moreover, we could note that even the fringe thinkers who did attribute some sort of body to God (as documented in chapter 3 of Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*), thought of

The doctrine of divine simplicity also plays a role in Jewish orthodoxy. In high-medieval theology, divine simplicity was taken to extremes: God has no properties, and/or is identical to all of his properties, and/or is identical to his actions. Some of these interpretations of the doctrine are puzzling.²⁷ But one vestige of divine simplicity that is still central to the Jewish tradition is that the *Ein Sof* (i.e., God in his transcendence) is *mereologically* simple. Panentheism, with its divine proper-parts — God’s body, and his soul — violates this last vestige of divine simplicity.

God is simple. He may be a proper-part of the mereological fusion of God and the world. But that fusion isn’t fundamental. Only *he* is. Theism *does* entail a variety of priority monism, but not the priority holism of Schaffer. Theism doesn’t entail panentheism.

Our second interpretation of Jewish nothing-elsism is much more charitable than our first. It fits much better with the texts, and is not guilty of glaring philosophical confusion or obfuscation. But, it commits the nothing-else tradition to a philosophical doctrine that lacks motivation for theists, and generates a panentheism at odds with the Jewish tradition. The question is: can we arrive at an interpretation of the nothing-else tradition that fits with the texts, but has more philosophical motivation, and is more consonant with religious tradition?

I believe that we can arrive at such an interpretation in Hassidic idealism. I have explored Hassidic Idealism in a number of places.²⁸ More recently, Tyron Goldschmidt and I have developed and defended Hassidic idealism at length, presenting it as a consequence of *theism*.²⁹ The following section summarizes some of the arguments that Goldschmidt and I have developed, and applies them to the problem at hand.

God’s corporeality in quite ethereal terms. Nobody in the Jewish tradition goes so far as to give God the sort of sundry physical parts that panentheism lumps him with.

27 Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Marquette Univ. Press., 1980).

28 Samuel Lebens, “God and His Imaginary Friends: A Hassidic Metaphysics”, *Religious Studies* 51, no. 2 (2015); Samuel Lebens, “Hassidic Idealism: Kurt Vonnegut and the Creator of the Universe”, in *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics*, ed. Tyron Goldschmidt and Kenneth L. Pearce (OUP, 2017).

29 Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens, “Divine Contractions: Theism Gives Birth to Idealism”, *Religious Studies* forthcoming.

IV. INTERPRETATION 3 – HASSIDIC IDEALISM

To understand nothing-elsism, in the Jewish tradition, one first has to understand the considerations that gave rise to it. The roots of this tradition run deeper than a Biblical verse or two proclaiming God's unity and uniqueness. Jay Michaelson gives a standard sounding-account of the underlying motivation for nothing-elsism. He writes:

Kabalists begin from the premise that there is a One, that which does not change, and deduce that because the one is infinite, it is all there really is... If [an] object has its own separate existence, then the Ein Sof exists everywhere but suddenly stops at the border of the object; it is thus not Ein Sof [i.e., it is not without end]. Therefore the object must be filled with God ... [O]ne can't hold that there is something infinite and also that something else exists apart from it...³⁰

Why think that a thing's being infinite requires that nothing exists apart from it? The natural numbers are an infinite sequence, but that doesn't mean that everything in existence belongs to it. The existence of tables and chairs doesn't threaten the number sequence with finitude. Why then would it threaten the creator of the heavens and the earth?³¹ What Michaelson is undoubtedly alluding to is the Kabbalistic tradition of *tzimtzum* (lit. *contraction*), as developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), with some earlier precedent.³²

Rabbi Luria's most prominent disciple, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, provides the first explicit, written account of the doctrine of *tzimtzum*.³³ The beginning of God's creation involves *contraction*: first there was the infinite light of God

30 Michaelson, *Everything is God*, 27 and 58.

31 In other words: Michaelson is committing Jewish nothing-elsism to the mistake that William L. Craig, "Pantheists in Spite of Themselves", in *For Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Christian Cheology*, ed. James K. Beilby (Baker Academic, 2006) attributes to Philip Clayton. We can debate whether Craig's accusation was fair against Clayton (see William Rowe, "Does Panentheism Reduce to Pantheism? A Response to Craig", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61, no. 2 (2007); for Clayton's original argument, see chapter 3 of Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006)), but it does seem to be fair when levelled against Michaelson. Michaelson truly *does* commit Jewish nothing-elsism to the absurd conclusion that if a thing is infinite then 'it is all there really is'; that nothing else can exist besides *it*, merely because of its infinity.

32 See Sack, "R. Moses of Cordovero's Doctrine of *Zimzum*".

33 C. Vital, *The Tree of Life: Chayyim Vital's Introduction to the Kabbalah of Issac Luria. The Palace of Adam Kadmon* (Aronson, 1999).

uniformly extended, and leaving no space untouched; next, there was a contraction of the light away from a centre point, leaving a circular void surrounded by the light; finally, there was a line of light penetrating the circle, creating a channel for the light to move from the outside to the inside. Only after these three stages, could the creation begin:

Within that [circular] empty place, He emanated, created, formed, and made all the worlds — every one of them. Th[e penetrating] line is like a single narrow conduit through which the “waters” of the supernal light of the Infinite spread and are drawn to the worlds that are in the empty space in that void.³⁴

Goldschmidt and I (ms) tease out an argument from such and other descriptions, and present the doctrine of *tzimtzum* as a solution to a philosophical problem. But some ways of framing the problem are more promising than others. Some are full of holes, and Michaelson apparently stumbles into those holes. Thus a problematic way of framing the problem: If God is infinite, He (or His light) fills all space; if He (or His light) fills all space, then there is no space vacant in which creation can occur; so if God is infinite, creation cannot occur; but since creation does occur, either (a) God must have contracted his infinity, or (b) God must be identical to the creation. The very first step in this line of reasoning, especially as presented by Michaelson, seems to trade on an elementary confusion about infinity. To be infinite *isn't* to fill all of space.

A more charitable reconstruction leaves *infinity* behind, and concentrates on *omnipresence* instead: If God is omnipresent, then he fills all space; if God fills all space, then there is no vacant space in which creation can occur; so if God is omnipresent, creation cannot occur; but since creation does occur, either (a) God must have contracted his omnipresence, or (b) God must be identical to the creation. But, again, the very first step is problematic. Omnipresence can be understood, not in terms of God *actually* occupying all of space, but in terms of his power and knowledge extending throughout space. The other steps in the argument are problematic too.³⁵

We do better to interpret R. Vital's talk of light filling all of space as a *metaphor*. We're not really talking about light or extension in space. Rather, the talk of God's light getting in the way of creation is a metaphorical way of

34 Vital, *The Tree of Life*, 14.

35 for more details, see Goldschmidt and Lebens, “Divine Contractions”.

conveying 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 God’s nature leaves no room in *logical* space for creation. A non-spatial construal of the problem runs as follows: If God has a certain perfection *P*, then there is no logical space for creation; if there is no logical space for creation, the creation cannot occur; but since creation *does* occur, God must have contracted his perfection.

How might one try to cash this argument out? What perfection could one substitute for *P* so as to arrive at something compelling? Goldschmidt and I argue that there are a number of compelling substitution instances for this argument.³⁶ Summarizing just one of the arguments here for the sake of illustration: Since God is omnipotent, He has a perfectly efficacious will. Since he has a perfectly efficacious will, any features of any object are wholly dependent upon the mind of God willing it to have those features. But if all of the features of an object are wholly dependent upon a mind willing it to have those features, then the object is an idea in that mind. So if God is omnipotent, all objects are ideas in His mind.

This is an argument from theism to idealism. It isn’t often recognised that theism entails idealism. But the only assumed premise in this argument that doesn’t fall out of a bog-standard variety of theism, is the claims that if all of the features of an object are wholly dependent upon a mind willing it to have those features, then that object is an idea in that mind. But this seems to be a very plausible candidate sufficient condition for being an idea.

You might object that having a perfectly efficacious will does *not* entail that every feature depends upon that will. God has an efficacious will, but if you are essentially a human being, then he can’t will for you to be a *fish*. God’s having an efficacious will doesn’t entail that the properties you have are *wholly* dependent upon his willing you to have them, since your essence also plays a role in governing what properties you can instantiate. This objection relies upon a controversial doctrine of essentialism. But even if we assume this doctrine, it remains the case that you owe even your *essence* to God’s having made you the way he made you. It may be the case, that from deciding to make *x* a table, and onwards, God’s choices are limited as to what he can do with *x*. But it was his choice to make it a table to begin with. At least, at that moment in time, *x* met

36 Goldschmidt and Lebens, “Divine Contractions”

the sufficient condition for being an idea of God's. If we simply add the premise that ideas are always ideas — that once an idea, always an idea — then the argument goes through even with the objection in hand. Theism entails idealism. If you're not happy with this argument, and there are certainly wrinkles to iron out, I refer you to a fuller defence, and to other arguments for the same conclusion, in Goldschmidt and Lebens (forthcoming).

If the argument is sound, then God's omnipotence entails that he can't create objects that aren't also ideas in his mind. He cannot create objects *beyond* his mind.

We can now fill in R. Vital's argument, replacing perfection *P*, with omnipotence: If God is omnipotent, then there is no logical space for the creation of anything beyond the divine mind; if there is no logical space for creation beyond the divine mind, then the creation cannot occur beyond the divine mind; so if God is omnipotent, then the creation of objects outside of the divine mind cannot occur. At this point, we have two options. Either, (a) God relinquishes or *contracts* his omnipotence, in order to make room for creation outside of his mind; or (b) the creation doesn't really take place outside of God's mind at all. The first option would be real *tzimtzum* — real *contraction*. But the nothing-elsers don't *believe* in real *tzimtzum*. God doesn't relinquish perfection. He is unchangingly perfect. Rather, they believed in *fake tzimtzum*; the *illusion* of *tzimtzum*. They chose the second option.

Accordingly, God didn't really *contract* his omnipotence in order to create a world outside of his mind. Instead, he created a world that *appears* to be outside of his mind, but which, in actual fact, has been in his mind all along. This is Hassidic Idealism. Every existent being, other than the mind of God, is an idea in the mind of God. To the extent that God has ideas of things which are *not* ideas of ideas, it's as if he's telling himself a story: *in* the story, there exist all sorts of things which are not ideas; but of course, *outside* of that story, they are *all* ideas (just as Sherlock Holmes is a person, and not a mere idea, in the stories told by Conan Doyle; but Sherlock Holmes is nothing more than an idea *outside* of those stories). If God is a character in the story that he tells, and if, in the story, he is the creator of all that exists outside of his mind, then, in the story, it must be true that he contracted his omnipotence. But of course, this is all just a *story*. God is in actual fact immutable. He never changes. He never contracts. He just imagines that he does, and creates an imaginary world. That world exists, as do all imaginary things, as *ideas*. This is Hassidic Idealism.

Jewish nothing-elsers are idealists of just this variety. What does that make of their insistence that there is nothing else besides God? It means that nothing else *fundamental* exists besides God. This is priority monism, but not priority holism. Are the Jewish nothing-elsers pantheists? Not without further argument. Ideas are not identical to the minds that think them, and minds are unlikely to be mere aggregates of their ideas. Are they acosmists? No! Ideas *exist*. Accordingly, Jewish nothing-elsers are committed to the existence of the cosmos. The cosmos is a set of ideas in the mind of God. Does this make them pantheists? Not without further argument. Ideas are not obviously proper parts of the minds that think them. We talk about ideas being *inside* minds, but this is probably just a metaphor. Minds may well be simple substances that *ground* ideas, without *containing* them in any literal sense. Jewish nothing-elsism is neither pantheistic, nor pantheistic, nor acosmic. It is Hassidic idealism, and nothing else.

I have *contracted* much of what must eventually be said about Hassidic idealism, and its motivations. For further *expansion* and defence of the doctrine, see the extensive treatment in Goldschmidt and Lebens (forthcoming). In this essay, I have argued that Hassidic idealism is preferable, as an interpretation of Jewish nothing-elsism, to non-dualism and panentheism. But there are independent reasons for thinking that, in addition to being the best interpretation of Jewish nothing-elsism, Hassidic idealism is *ideal*.³⁷

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