

## Creation and Modality: A Response to Ryan Mullins

Samuel Lebens

Philosophers should relish the sort of criticism that Ryan Mullins uncovers. He is charitable in his interpretation of others. The shortcomings and pitfalls he discovers are never superficial or trivial. As I take it, his criticisms are not meant to be devastating or destructive. Instead, they force his opponents either to reform or to re-articulate their positions—as fellow members of one intellectual community—refining our thinking together in what is, ultimately, a collaborative project. So, I'm honored to have had my work subject to his scrutiny, and though I don't think he succeeds in his attempt to demonstrate the incoherence of Hassidic Idealism, I *do* think that his concerns require careful consideration. The account of Hassidic Idealism put forward in my book *The Principles of Judaism* will have to be supplemented, to circumnavigate the choppy waters that Mullins has charted.<sup>1</sup> I should also declare that, in formulating my response, I have the distinct feeling that I'm pushing against the very limits of my own understanding; but perhaps that's the lot of any finite creature, turning its attention to its transcendent Creator.

### The Challenge

Let me start with points of agreement. Mullins is right that my argument relies upon a form of theism that sees God as omniscient, omnipotent, maximally good, perfectly rational, and free.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, for the sake of this discussion, I'm happy to accept the technical definitions that Mullins provides for each of those terms. Nothing too much will hang upon such technicalities, since a pretty intuitive conception of each of those Divine attributes will suffice for now.

I agree with Mullins that the best way to distinguish between emanation and creation, as two different models of God's ontological responsibility for the existence of the universe, is in terms of God's free and intentional action. If the universe is God's emanation, then there is nothing *free* about the ontological responsibility in question; instead, the existence of the universe necessarily flows from the nature of God. If the universe is God's *creation*, by contrast, then, whether the universe has a beginning in time, or whether it happens to be eternal *a parte ante* (*i.e.*, without a first moment), to be God's creation at all, the universe must be freely caused to exist by God.

I'm grateful to Mullins for making something clear to me that had hitherto been hazy. Whatever our account of God's relationship to time, and whatever differences theologians might have about God's other attributes, to believe in *creatio (originalis) ex nihilo* is to believe "that there is a state of affairs where God exists without a universe of any sort."<sup>3</sup> I shall follow Mullins in calling this state of affairs, "God's pre-creation moment."<sup>4</sup> Of course, the prefix, "pre-," needn't be read temporally. You might think that the first moment of the created universe is also the first moment of time. Accordingly, you won't be able to think of God's pre-creation moment as being *temporally* prior to the universe, since there can be no time before time. Instead, you'll think of His pre-creation moment as *ontologically* (rather than chronologically) prior to the universe. If God is *inside* time, by contrast, then God's pre-creation moment itself can be "a temporal moment or a series of temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> All of my references to Mullins are drawn from, "Theism Does Not Give Birth to Idealism," in this issue of this journal.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Mullins, [page no. to be inserted at later date].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

moments,”<sup>5</sup> before the first moment in which God creates. Either way, to believe in *creatio originalis ex nihilo* is to believe in a pre-creation moment.

With this way of framing things in place, we can say that *creatio continua* is the belief that there is no pre-creation moment; that there is no state of affairs in which God exists without a universe. This needn't collapse into emanationism. God could still be *choosing* at each moment, without beginning, to grant being to His universe. But what makes this *creatio continua* rather than *creatio originalis* is the claim that there happens to be no state of affairs in which God exists without a universe. I would therefore agree with Mullins' characterization of *creatio originalis ex nihilo*, as the belief that (a) God brings the universe into being by choice, and that (b) there exists a pre-creation moment (be it a temporal or an a-temporal moment).

Accordingly, I can fully endorse Mullins's characterization of the minimal theistic commitments that constitute the background for my Hassidic Idealism. They are the belief in God's (i) omniscience, (ii) omnipotence, (iii) maximal goodness, (iv) perfect rationality, and (v) freedom, in addition to the belief in (vi) *creatio (originalis) ex nihilo*. The sixth of those commitments in turn entails the existence of a state of affairs in which God exists somehow *before* (be it temporally or ontologically) and *without* the universe that He freely created. Hassidic Idealism includes all of those commitments in addition to its most distinctive and controversial ingredient, namely, its contention that the universe, and all that it contains (including you and me), are nothing more than ideas in the mind of God.

Mullins focuses on one of the three arguments that Tyron Goldschmidt and I have advanced in favor of Hassidic Idealism.<sup>6</sup> He hopes to show that Hassidic Idealism is *incoherent*; that its idealism is incompatible with its theistic commitments. If Mullins succeeds, then there would be no need to examine any other argument for Hassidic Idealism. No argument, however creative, can justify an incoherent belief.

Here's the basic argument that Mullins examines:

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

Mullins accepts 1. It is part of our shared theistic backdrop. He accepts that 2 follows from 1. So far so good!

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens, "Divine Contractions: How Theism Gives Birth to Idealism," *Religious Studies*, 56 (4), 509–524 (2020).

One could ask: would the world appear to us in any way whatsoever if we were merely ideas in the mind of God? That's a good question. Hassidic Idealism doesn't think of our minds as a special *type* of idea in the mind of God; ideas that somehow have their own consciousness. No. Hassidic Idealism claims that from God's transcendent perspective, we are not minds at all. We are just ideas *of* minds. This might make some people queasy about accepting 3. Ideas have no mental lives of their own. The world doesn't appear in any way to unconscious ideas. But, relative to the imaginary world that God dreams up, it *would* be true to say that we were minds, to whom things appeared thus and so. Outside of the story that God is telling, we are just ideas. Inside the story, by contrast, we are minds; minds with consciousnesses, to whom things appear thus and so. Isn't that enough to justify 3? I think so. Others think differently.<sup>7</sup> Mullins sees nothing more here than clashing intuitions, and is happy to grant me, if only for the sake of argument, the assumption of 3.

Mullins registers no complaints with 4. From our perspective, inside the story that God tells, we're anyway not fictional, so it's not clear that any value would be added to our lives by the falsehood of Hassidic Idealism. God has no needs whatsoever, so the falsehood of Hassidic Idealism couldn't add value to the life of *God*. If the falsehood of Hassidic Idealism would add no value to our lives—from our perspective—or to the life of God—from His perspective—then 4 would seem to be true. So far, I'm doing well!

5 follows from 1-4. Where Mullins and I part company is with the legitimacy of 6. Hassidic Idealism, according to Mullins, isn't possible. It's not possible because its idealistic commitments are in irrevocable tension with its theistic commitments. How so?

The theistic part of Hassidic Idealism maintains, among other claims, that (a) God has free will, that (b) the universe is created rather than emanated, which means that the universe is contingent, and that (c) there exists a pre-creation moment, in which God exists without a universe at all. But the idealist component of Hassidic Idealism, according to which all things other than God are merely God's ideas, are—Mullins insists—incompatible with all three of those theistic claims.

Let's take these concerns in reverse order. First—that Hassidic Idealism is inconsistent with the commitment to the existence of a pre-creation moment. According to the Hassidic Idealist, the universe just *is* a divine idea. Mullins is right to think that God, if He is essentially omniscient, must have *some* ideas. Accordingly, there "can be no state of affairs where God exists without His ideas," and since God's ideas constitute the universe, there can be "no state of affairs where God exists without the universe."<sup>8</sup> Thus, Hassidic Idealism is incompatible with commitment to a pre-creation moment. In all states of affairs in which God exist, so do His ideas, and thus, for the Hassidic Idealist, in all states of affairs in which God exists, so does the universe.

If Mullins is right that Hassidic Idealism leaves no room for a pre-creation moment, there might still be room for *creatio continua*, rather than mere emanation. But Mullins ruthlessly shuts the door on that option. What distinguishes creationism from emanationism is that, on the former rather than the latter, God is free not to give being to any universe at all. But if the universe is just God's ideas, or some subset of them, and if God necessarily has all of His ideas, then the universe necessarily

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<sup>7</sup> This is related to a debate between Saul Kripke (See *Reference and Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013)) and Jaakko Hintikka ("Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" *The Philosophical Review*, 71 (1), 3–32 (1962)). Kripke thinks it true, relative to the relevant fictions, that fictional characters think. Hintikka, by contrast, has trouble accepting that this is true in any meaningful way.

<sup>8</sup> Ryan Mullins [page no. to be inserted at later date].

exists. God cannot choose not to give it being. And thus, Hassidic Idealism leaves no room for creation at all; only emanation.

Perhaps we could insist that, even if God necessarily has some ideas, He doesn't necessarily have the very ideas that he has. He could have had *other* ideas. He could have had ideas, no subset of which would constitute a universe. But Mullins provides us with two good reasons to avoid this escape route. First, to be omniscient must include having knowledge of all possible worlds, but if God's ideas, given His omniscience, exhaust all modal space, then it's hard to see how His set of ideas could change from world to world. Second, if God doesn't have ideas of the world He's going to create, already with Him in His pre-creation moment, then "God would literally have no idea of what He is creating. For if God did have an idea of what He would create," then, for the Hassidic Idealist, "that idea would be the thing itself. In which case, it is too late to create the idea."<sup>9</sup> If God necessarily has the ideas that He has, and if the universe is some subset of those ideas, then the universe exists necessarily. Creationism is ruled out. Only emanationism remains.

Having first ruled out *creatio ex nihilo*, and then having ruled out any form of creation at all, Mullins completes his assault on Hassidic Idealism with the claim that, if it's true, then God has no choices open to Him at all. The God of Hassidic Idealism cannot be free. This is the result of a strange combination of modal explosion and modal collapse; a combination that Mullins diagnoses as a consequence of Hassidic Idealism.

First, the explosion. To be omniscient, God must have equally vivid ideas, representing each possible world, as He does of the actual world. But if He has equally vivid ideas of each possibility, then—for the Hassidic idealist—it would seem to follow that each possibility must be equally real. "In which case, we are left with a theistic multiverse or some kind of theistic modal realism<sup>10</sup>"—this is the explosion part, because it turns out that every possible universe must be real—either as distinct parts of the one and only possible multiverse, or because Hassidic Idealism has given rise to modal realism, according to which every possible universe enjoys an equal degree of reality, even if they're not all compossible.

Once we arrive at this explosion, we witness a modal collapse, either because there's only one possible world that God can actualize, and it contains a multiverse, in which every possible universe exists; or, because God is forced to give an equal degree of reality to each and every possible universe, even if actuality itself becomes a mere indexical property. On either option, God is left with no freedom of choice. Anything that He could do, He does do.

I disagree with Mullins. I think that Hassidic Idealism is compatible with Divine freedom, with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and thus, with the reality of a pre-creation moment. In what remains of this paper, I try to demonstrate how.

### **My Response**

One of the key features of Hassidic Idealism is the way in which it stratifies reality into two. A consequence of this stratification is that any sentence that we utter, before we can evaluate its truth-conditions, has to be indexed to one of these two levels or strata. Are we talking relative to God's transcendent perspective, beyond the universe, or, are we talking relative to the imaginary

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<sup>9</sup> Ryan Mullins, [page no. to be inserted at later date].

<sup>10</sup> Mullins, [page no. to be inserted at later date].

universe that God imagines into being? For example: we say that God split the Red Sea. But what do we mean? The Hassidic Idealist will say that, from one perspective, God *didn't* split the Red Sea at all, since the Red Sea isn't real, and cannot be split. All that exists is God and His ideas. There are no actual bodies of water. But, from another perspective, the perspective that's relative to the story of the universe, in which God—the author of the story—appears as a character, alongside His other characters, then, yes, there is a sea called the “Red Sea,” and many years ago, God split it apart to allow the Israelites to flee from the oncoming Egyptians.

In *The Principles of Judaism*,<sup>11</sup> I respond to a number of objections that one might raise in the face of Hassidic Idealism with the accusation that the objections in question fail to mark the distinction between these two levels. If you mark the distinction well, many of the objections evaporate. I now contend that if we mark this distinction sufficiently rigorously, perhaps more rigorously than I did myself in my earlier work, then we'll discover that both within the story of the universe, and from God's own transcendent perspective, there *is* a pre-creation moment; a moment in which God exists without a universe at all. How so?

In the story of the universe, the response is simple enough. The story—told by God from His transcendent perspective—is the story of a God who, once upon a time, lived all alone, before creating a physical universe. In the story itself, the universe isn't just an idea in the mind of God; no more than Hamlet is just an idea in the mind of Shakespeare in the play that Shakespeare wrote. In the world of his story, Hamlet is a real person of flesh and blood. So too, in the story of the creation, this universe isn't an idea. It's a concrete physical thing. In the story, God existed, pre-creation, with just His ideas to keep Him company—a pre-creation moment—and then, He created a physical world. This way, we secure the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in the story of the universe. But Mullins won't be satisfied. It's all well and good to say that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is true *within* the story of the universe, but does this mean that *creatio ex nihilo* isn't a *fundamental truth* since it isn't true *simpliciter*; since it isn't true from God's own story-transcendent perspective?

Well, if Mullins wants a pre-creation moment, even from God's transcendent perspective, in which God exists, alongside His ideas, but *without* a universe, then he can have it! What we have to do is to remember that, from God's transcendent perspective, there's a very real sense in which there *is* no universe. This, I have called Jewish Nothing Elism.<sup>12</sup> This gives us everything that Mullins has requested from a pre-creation moment. It has God. It has God's ideas. But it has no universe. Just as Shakespeare sat in his study with all of his ideas, but without any Danish prince there to keep him company; God in His transcendence dwells with all of His ideas—ideas of a universe—but with no universe. This is a pre-creation moment.

Ah, but now you might complain: you've given me a pre-creation moment at the most fundamental level of reality, but you've given me no creation. This is just acosmism. This is God existing forever without a universe, but only with *ideas* of a universe. Well, yes. I accept that that's all I've given you. That's just a consequence of the fact that the creation isn't as real as God is Himself. The creation isn't as real as God's pre-creation moment, in which He tells the story. The creation only exists relative to the story that God tells. The creation doesn't exist relative to the pre-creation moment, in which He tells the story. But that doesn't mean that there *is* no pre-creation moment outside of the story. On the contrary—outside of the story—there is *only* a pre-creation moment. And thus,

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 106–109.

we can give Mullins his pre-creation moment both within and without the story of the creation. The only complaint Mullins can level against this response, I think, is that it renders the creation itself less real, from God's perspective, than God is Himself. But I would think it impious to demand for the creation as much reality as *God* has. After all, Mullins agrees with me that God is the very foundation of reality.

A related concern arises. Can we really call this a *pre-creation* moment if, from God's perspective, there is no creation that comes after it? That's like calling my whole life a pre-Pluto-landing moment, because it all happens before I land on Pluto, when in fact, I'm never *going* to land on Pluto.<sup>13</sup> No. God's pre-creation moment is ontologically prior to the creation in just the way that Shakespeare's whole life is ontologically prior to Hamlet's. My life, by contrast, is in no way prior to my landing on Pluto, temporally or ontologically, since there is no state of affairs at all in which I land on Pluto.

Alternatively, if you insist that there *does* exist, at least a fictional story (one we're dreaming up right now) in which I *do* land on Pluto, then—yes—there *is* a sense in which my life is ontologically prior to that story in just the same way that God's pre-creation moment, outside of the story of creation, is ontologically prior to the creation. Fine, if we grant the existence of the story in which I land on Pluto, then yes, my life really is a pre-Pluto-landing moment in just the way that God's transcendent existence is a pre-creation moment. What's wrong with that?

Having provided Mullins with a pre-creation moment, we still have to ask whether we can avoid the modal explosion and collapse that Mullins prognosed. If God, in His pre-creation moment, beyond the story of the universe, has all of His ideas essentially, and if He can conceive of every possible universe-narrative, in addition to the universe-narrative of the universe in which we live, must we conclude that each and every universe-narrative is on a par? Must we conclude that if, from our perspective, this universe is real, then there exist an infinite number of other universes, be they distributed over one multiverse, or over a number of different possible worlds, from whose perspective their own universe-narrative is as true as ours is to us? If so, then we have an explosion on our hands—an explosion that leads to a sort of collapse, since God will have no freedom to actualize some universe or universes at the expense of others.

Can we avoid Mullin's explosion-implosion problem? I think we can.

Shakespeare has to do more than to think of an idea before that idea would be taken to form some part of a Shakespearean play. Likewise, we shouldn't think that every idea that God has, forms some part of a Godly story. I might even venture that the opening of the Hebrew Bible intimates a similar idea. God, in the book of Genesis, doesn't *think* the world into being. He *speaks* it into being. Perhaps it's not sufficient that God thinks a thought for that thought to form some part of the content of one universe-narrative or another; just as it's not sufficient for Shakespeare to think a thought for that thought to form some part of the content of a Shakespearean play. Shakespeare had to go to the trouble of writing certain thoughts down in a certain way, and publishing or staging those writings, before those thoughts would constitute some part of a *play*. Likewise, God had to go to some trouble—so to speak—to put a given thought into any given story. This action, above and beyond God's mere thinking, is what the book of Genesis might be referring to with its talk of God going to the trouble of *speaking* His world into being. This sounds like a rich and potentially useful metaphor, but how can we unpack it? I suggest a detour through some set theory.

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<sup>13</sup> This worry was put to me by Timothy Pawl.

Patrick Grim has argued, in a series of publications, that the notion of omniscience is incoherent on purely mathematical grounds. He defines omniscience as knowing every truth, and he claims to have shown that the notion of “every truth” is incoherent.<sup>14</sup>

Take any set you like, for example, the set with three members,  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , symbolized as  $\{x, y, z\}$ . Call that set  $S$ . Every set has a power set. We’ll call the power set of  $S$ ,  $P(S)$ . You build up  $P(S)$  by finding all of the possible sets that you could build using just the members of  $S$ , in addition to the empty set,  $\emptyset$ . With that background, we can figure out what the members of  $P(S)$  must be:

1.  $\emptyset$  – the empty set
2.  $\{x\}$  – the set with just  $x$  as a member
3.  $\{y\}$  – the set with just  $y$  as a member
4.  $\{z\}$  – the set with just  $z$  as a member
5.  $\{x, y\}$  – the set with just  $x$  and  $y$  as members
6.  $\{x, z\}$  – the set with just  $x$  and  $z$  as members
7.  $\{y, z\}$  – the set with just  $y$  and  $z$  as members
8.  $\{x, y, z\}$  –  $S$  itself, which gets to be a member of its own power set.

The power set of  $S$  is just a set with those 8 sets as its members, *i.e.*:  $\{\emptyset, \{x\}, \{y\}, \{z\}, \{x, y\}, \{x, z\}, \{y, z\}, \{x, y, z\}\}$ . Now, according to the power set theorem, proven by Georg Cantor:

- If  $S$  is a set, then its corresponding power set,  $P(S)$ , will have more members than  $S$ .

Bearing all of this in mind, Grim would ask us to imagine, for the sake of argument, that there’s a set called the set of all truths. Call it  $T$ . Since  $T$  is a set, it will have a power set, call it  $P(T)$ .

By Cantor’s theorem we know that  $P(T)$  must have more members than  $T$ . But how can that be? For each member of  $P(T)$  we can easily find a distinct truth. For instance, for each and every member of  $P(T)$ , it will either be true that that member is identical to  $\emptyset$ , or that it’s not-identical to  $\emptyset$ . And, since we’ve got at least one truth for every member of  $P(T)$ , it follows that there are at least as many truths as there are members of  $P(T)$ . But  $P(T)$  is supposed to be the power set of the set of truths. So, on pain of contradicting a theorem of set theory,  $P(T)$  must have more members than there are truths. We’re stuck!

All we can do, Grim maintains, is to deny that it’s meaningful to talk about a set of all of the truths to begin with. And, if we can’t make sense of a set of all of the truths, then we can’t make sense of a being who knows all of the truths.

Alvin Plantinga is, rightly, unmoved.<sup>15</sup> We *must* be able to talk about all propositions. If we couldn’t, then we couldn’t express some obvious truths, such as the truth that “all propositions are either true or false.” But if Grim is right about the set of truths, then the same reasoning would have to apply to the set of *all propositions*. The set of all propositions would have to have a power set. We’d easily be able to demonstrate that there are at least as many propositions as there are members of that power set, since we could just assert, of every member of the power set, the proposition that it’s a member of the power set of the set of propositions. We don’t need to know exactly where the

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<sup>14</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Patrick Grim, “Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange,” *Philosophical Studies* 71 (3), 267–306 (1993); Patrick Grim, *The Incomplete Universe* (Cambridge Ma.: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Patrick Grim, “Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange.”

argument goes wrong, but surely we *can* talk about all propositions—for, example, when we say that all propositions are either true or false. And, if we can talk about all propositions, then we can also talk about all truths. We can therefore say that God knows all truths. It would be interesting to know exactly where Grim’s reasoning falters, but it surely goes wrong somewhere. So Plantinga would argue.

Graham Oppy goes further.<sup>16</sup> Even Cantor has to accept that there is something like a universe of sets, even if there is no set of all of the sets. Now, this paper has enough talk of universes in it already, so let’s use a different word. Instead of “universe,” let’s call what Cantor would have to accept, an *all-inclusive-array* of sets. Describing exactly what the difference is between the all-inclusive-array of sets, which *does* exist, and the set of all sets, which doesn’t, isn’t straightforward. But Cantor has to allow for some such distinction, otherwise set-theory will collapse. So, Oppy argues, why can’t the theist make a similar move, and talk about an all-inclusive-array of truths that God knows, without ever talking about a set of all the truths? Of course, you’d need a theory of all-inclusive-arrays and how they differ from sets, but it seems like mathematicians are anyway in need of such a theory. And thus, Oppy concludes:

[W]e currently have no idea how to construct a fully satisfying theory of quantification over all propositions, and the like. But it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that there is a satisfactory theory of this kind to be discovered; and it also does not seem unreasonable to suppose that, when we have discovered a theory of this kind, we shall then see that the apparent difficulties that arise for the standard analysis of omniscience fade away.<sup>17</sup>

Bringing this discussion back to Mullins, and to Hassidic Idealism, I’d like to say that God exists, in His transcendent pre-creation moment, alongside all of His ideas—indeed, an all-inclusive-array of ideas. But I want to say that a Divine story isn’t just an array of God’s ideas. It’s a set of ideas. Now, it’s intuitive to think that, if an omniscient God knows all of the ideas in His array of ideas, then He also knows all of the *sets* that those ideas could comprise.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, God must know, and therefore have an idea, of all of the stories that He could tell. But there’s reason to think that this intuitive line of thinking is somehow mistaken.

We know that not every collection forms a set, because in that direction lies the Russell paradox. For that reason, set theorists sometimes talk about safe collections, as opposed to unsafe collections. But even once we’ve defined what makes some collections safe, and some collections unsafe, we have good reason to deny that every safe collection automatically forms a set. If every safe collection automatically formed a set, then there could be no good answer to the question: how many sets are there in our universe? If there were such a number, let’s call it  $w$ , then why couldn’t we form a set that had all of the  $w$  sets as members? This new set wouldn’t include itself, and so it would be quite safe. It would simply include every set *other* than itself. But if that new set existed, then there wouldn’t be  $w$  sets any more, there would be  $w + 1$  sets. And even the  $w + 1$  sets couldn’t be all of the sets, since the  $w$  sets, together with our new set, would also be a safe collection, and they too would form a set. We’ve reached the number  $w + 2$ . This could go on

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<sup>16</sup> Graham Oppy, *Describing Gods: An Investigation of Divine Attributes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>18</sup> This point was usefully pressed upon me by Brian Leftow.



forever. So, it turns out, there's no number that can be the number of sets in our universe at a given time. That's strange!

One solution suggests itself: we can simply deny that every safe collection automatically forms a set. Rather, we can say that every safe collection *could* form a set.<sup>19</sup> How many sets there actually are, we don't know, and we needn't care about. Set theory simply tells us how many sets we *could* build, and what their properties would be.

Christopher Menzel notes a peculiar consequence of this increasingly influential understanding of set theory.<sup>20</sup> Since not every safe collection *does* form a set, but since every safe collection *could* form a set, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that there are some possible worlds that look exactly the same as ours, built out of exactly the same foundational elements, in which the only differences are which safe collections happen to come together, in that world, to form sets, and which don't.<sup>21</sup>

In other work, I have sought to explain Menzels's point with the following thought experiment.<sup>22</sup> Imagine two identical bedrooms that contain exactly the same children's toys, located in exactly the same locations, in their respective rooms. Child 1 cares about Lego, and so—in his mind—he groups his toys into the Lego-set and the non-Lego-set. For him, that's the important distinction. Child 2 cares about trains, and so he groups his toys into the train-set toys and the non-train-set toys. Given what they care about, I could understand the sense in which the room belonging to child 1 contains different sets of toys to the room belonging to child 2, and vice versa. All of this, even though the two rooms look exactly the same to the neutral observer, with the same toys sitting in the same places. Nevertheless: from the perspective of the two children, the same array of toys would divide up into different sets.

But if there were no children here, grouping their toys together differently in their minds, could we really say that these two rooms contain different sets of toys, one different from the other? Could we really say that these two rooms differ? And yet, contemporary set theorists tell us that our world, and other possible worlds, are different in just the way that these identical rooms would be "different." But why should we think that there are any salient differences between these rooms, or between these worlds, if there are no minds making different choices in them as to what to group together?

Menzel thinks that the theist can offer a simple explanation. The safe collections that *do* become sets, in our world, are the ones that some mind thinks of together, so as to make them into a set (just as the children were responsible for collecting their toys together differently). The fact that there are, in some possible worlds, an infinite number of sets is no problem, so long as the mind in question is infinite too.

The difference between otherwise identical worlds, built up in the same way, from the same foundational elements, differing only in terms of the (transfinite) number of sets that exist there,

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<sup>19</sup> Øystein Linnebo, "The Potential Hierarchy of Sets," *The Review of Symbolic Logic*, 6 (2), 205–228 (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Menzel, "The Argument from Collections." In *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, ed. Jerry Walls and Trent Dougherty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Linnebo would try to avoid that consequence of his view (Linnebo, "The Potential Hierarchy of Sets," 207), but it's not clear that he can; which Menzel discusses in his "Argument from Collections."

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Lebens, *A Guide for the Jewish Undecided* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books and Yeshiva University Press, 2022).

can be explained in terms of God's activity. In different possible worlds, God can choose to group things together in His mind, in different ways. The difference between these worlds—which contemporary set theory seems to thrust upon us—is no longer brute nor mysterious; it is no more mysterious than the power of a thinker to think as it wishes to think, or a child to group his toys together in his mind.

Bringing this back to Mullins and Hassidic Idealism, my thought is this. Yes. God exists in His transcendent pre-creation moment alongside all of His ideas. He cannot exist without the all-inclusive-array of His ideas. But the necessity of His existing alongside all of His ideas doesn't condemn Him to be telling all possible stories with those ideas, because stories are more like *sets* of ideas. Intuitively, we *would* think that if God knows all of His ideas, then He must know all of the sets that He could build out of those ideas, and thus, that He must always know, and always have a vivid idea, of all of the stories that He could ever tell. But our tour through set theory has taught us that our intuitions might not be so trustworthy on this matter. Of course, God must know what sets He *could* build out of His ideas, but those sets only actually come to *exist* if He goes to the extra trouble of forming them.

Whether or not we can grasp exactly what this means: set theory gives us reason to think that there's an important distinction to draw between God's having an array of ideas and there being any particular number of sets that those ideas actually form. Moreover, theists have good reason to think that how many sets those ideas actually comprise, in any possible world, is ultimately up to God.

Accordingly, we can accept that God cannot exist without His all-inclusive-array of ideas. But we can still insist that it remains totally up to Him whether and how He groups those ideas together into *sets*; and thus, it remains totally up to Him which stories He chooses to tell with those ideas. Modal space will correspond to the stories that God *could* tell. Actuality, by contrast, corresponds to the story or stories that God *does* tell. Of course, God always knows all of the stories that He *could* tell, but set theory has led us to recognize that there's an important distinction between God knowing about *potential* stories, and His actually telling them.

Perhaps the implicit biblical distinction between God's thinking about things, and His speaking them into existence, corresponds to the distinction between God knowing how many sets He *could* form from His ideas, and His actually *constructing* them; the difference between His having an idea of the stories He could tell, and His actually telling one of them.

Admittedly, the Hassidic Idealist is committed to the idea that every fictional conscious character is conscious in the story in which they exist. The Hassidic Idealist might also be committed to the existence or potential existence of an infinite number of possible stories. But not all stories are on a par. Some stories are told by God. Some never get told by anyone. Some stories are told by God's characters in the stories that God tells. Some stories are told by the characters of characters in God's stories, and so on. God tells a story about Shakespeare. Shakespeare tells a story about Hamlet. Hamlet puts on a play about regicide for his uncle to watch. But the Hassidic Idealist isn't committed to the idea that God tells all of these stories. And thus, the Hassidic idealist isn't committed to the idea that all of these stories are on an ontological par.

Shakespeare is more real than Hamlet. Hamlet is more real than the characters in the play that he has performed for his uncle. The fact that God has an all-inclusive-array of ideas, doesn't mean that

He tells every story. In the story of the universe, there was a big bang. But neither in the story, nor beyond it, are we committed to modal explosions and implosions.

If I'm willing to accept a brute distinction between the stories that God tells and the stories that He merely thinks up, then why shouldn't I put all of this set theory to one side and, instead, accept a brute distinction between two modes of Divine story-telling?<sup>23</sup> We could allow that there's an actuality-bestowing mode of telling stories, and a mere possibility-bestowing mode of telling stories. God might not have a choice which stories He tells, but He might still have a choice which He bestows actuality upon.

Having thought about this for some time, I don't think that this is a route that's open to the Hassidic Idealist. From God's perspective, every possible world is *just* a story. No possible world is actual. I don't know what it would mean for God to bestow actuality upon one of them and not the others, in any objective or fundamental way, without undermining our Hassidic Idealism, and allowing that, even from God's transcendent perspective, God has created an actual concrete physical universe. But that's just what Hassidic Idealism denies. And thus, the Hassidic Idealist will not draw a brute distinction between two modes of story-telling, but a brute distinction between the stories that God knows *in potentia*, and the stories that God actually tells.

I have to admit, I have some difficulty comprehending the difference between God's having a clear idea of the stories that He could tell, and His actually telling them. After all, it's not as if He's telling them to somebody other than Himself. Moreover, a Hassidic Idealist like me finds it hard to think that there's any real difference to draw between God's having a vivid idea of a thing, and that thing existing. And yet, I'm comforted by the fact that we seem to be forced, by set theory, to make the sort of distinction I'm talking about in the special case of God's having ideas, and His forming those ideas into sets; even if I have a very shaky grip as to what that distinction really means.

Contra Mullins, Hassidic Idealism is compatible with Divine freedom, since it's wholly up to God which ideas He chooses to group together into what the Bible presents as a "speech-act"; "Let there be light." Hassidic Idealism is compatible with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, since there is a pre-creation moment both within the story of our universe and from God's own transcendent perspective. Admittedly, from God's perspective, the creation itself is less real than God and God's ideas, but it's more real than any creation of Shakespeare, and that should be enough!

There is one other way that the Hassidic Idealist could respond to the modal explosion-implosion.<sup>24</sup> She could bite some bullets and explain why they're not so difficult to bite. I conceded to Mullins that the difference between emanationism and creationism is that, on the former, God necessarily causes a universe to exist, and on the latter, He does so by choice. But perhaps this is a false dichotomy. Perhaps God enjoys a compatibilist rather than a libertarian freedom. Accordingly, what marks the distinction between emanationism and creationism needn't be whether God necessarily causes a universe to exist, but whether He necessarily does so by *choice*, as an intentional action (thereby *creating* a universe), or whether the universe necessarily tumbles out of Him without intention or volition (thereby *emanating* from God). The Hassidic Idealist could therefore accept the explosion and implosion and yet insist that it constitutes creation rather than emanation.

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<sup>23</sup> This option was suggested to me by Jesse Couenhoven and Timothy Pawl.

<sup>24</sup> This alternative suggestion was put to me by Katherin Rogers.

What this approach sacrifices, which my response to Mullins doesn't, is the Orthodox assumption that God could have refrained from creating a world. But that might not be a terrible price to pay. Indeed, if, in the story of the world itself, God *qua* character didn't have to create anything, then the Hassidic Idealist can at least salvage Mullins' Orthodox assumption as a non-fundamental truth—true relative to the story of the world, but not true from God's transcendent perspective.

In fact, we can even mitigate the extent of the explosion. Many theists accept that their theism renders certain epistemically possible worlds metaphysically impossible. For example, many theists accept that God couldn't create a world of unremitting gratuitous evil, without salvation or relief. Such a world might *seem* possible but won't be metaphysically possible if theism is true. Our alternative response to Mullins could therefore say: God only tells every story worthy of being told—this might be far fewer stories than we can imagine. Admittedly, all of the corresponding worlds exist as truly as does ours, and God has no choice as to which worlds He "creates," but—again—we might insist that this doesn't collapse into emanationism since God's story-telling is a necessary, intentional, and volitional output of His compatibilistic freedom.

I prefer my own response, since it retains as a fundamental truth the claim that God didn't have to create anything, and allows that God has libertarian freedom. But the fact that my response to Mullins isn't the only available escape helps to illustrate the extent to which Mullins has left the Hassidic Idealist room in which to maneuver.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> My thanks to Ross Inman and Betty Talbert for giving me the opportunity to respond to Ryan Mullins's excellent paper. My own paper was greatly improved in virtue of comments from Jesse Couenhoven, Hud Hudson, Brian Leftow, Timothy Pawl, Katherin Rogers, William Wood, and Dean Zimmerman, at the inaugural Rutgers Analytic Theology Seminar.