

Classical Theism and Jewish Conceptions of God

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Monotheism is the belief that God exists, created, and continues to sustain the world (Deists, by contrast, *deny* that God continues to sustain the world). *Classical Theism* has more to say than Monotheism. Its God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Moreover, its God is simple, atemporally eternal, and impassable. Does Orthodox Judaism require us to believe these claims?

Judaism is not a creedal religion. If you were born a Jew, you are considered a Jew, irrespective of what you happen to believe. A gentile who *becomes* a Jew, through conversion, remains a Jew, even if he/she loses the theological beliefs that led him/her to convert. We've already arrived at one sense in which a Jew *doesn't* need to be a Classical Theist. A Jew doesn't need to believe anything to be a Jew.

Nevertheless, Jewish law recognises the notion of an *apostate*. Is a Jew who fails to be a Classical Theist an apostate? According to the *Mishna* (Sanhedrin 10:1),¹ a Jew becomes an apostate if he/she verbally denies the doctrine of the resurrection, or the divinity of the Oral Torah.² Menachem Kellner infers that the Rabbis are more concerned with what you *say* (verbal denial) than with what you *believe* (Kellner, 2006). In fact, according to Kellner, doctrine has almost no import in the Rabbinic worldview whatsoever. I disagree. But even so, I'd concede that the beliefs that *do* matter to the Rabbis are not particularly fine-grained. You might have to believe that the Torah (both Written and Oral) is part of the revelation of God. But crucially, what you understand by the word "God" (and, indeed, the word "revelation") is left relatively open.

Judaism rarely *legislates* belief – some deny that it ever does (see Goldschmidt 2014). According to those who think that Judaism *does* command belief, it does so sparingly, appealing only to broad and general principles, such as the thirteen principles of Maimonides, or the three principles that later thinkers coalesced around (see Lebens 2020).

Classical Theism, as a more fine-grained collection of theses than Monotheism, is too fine-grained to be included among the essential principles of Judaism. If one believes, with the Orthodox Jew, that the Hebrew Bible is an authentic revelation of God, it's going to be hard to deny that God is omnipotent,³ omnibenevolent,⁴ and omniscient.⁵ But is God *simple*, impassable, atemporal? Maybe. Maybe not. Forgive the turn of phrase, but Judaism is too broad a church to allow for apostasy to turn upon such detailed scruples.

¹ A foundational text of the Oral Torah, the Mishna was redacted at the beginning of the 3rd Century CE. For what is meant by "Oral Torah", see the next footnote.

² Rabbinic Judaism is premised on the belief that, in addition to the Five Books of Moses, the revelation at Sinai was the source of various oral traditions, passed down over generations and eventually written down, for fear that they would be lost in the years of exile. Rabbinic commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, and upon earlier texts within the corpus of the Oral Torah, are also considered to belong to the Oral Torah upon their being accepted into the literary canon of Rabbinic Judaism. The "Written Torah" refers to the Pentateuch, and sometimes to the entire Hebrew Bible.

³ See, for example: Genesis 18:14; Jeremiah 32:17, 32:27; and Job 42:2.

⁴ See, for example: Deuteronomy 32:4, and Psalms 100:5, 145:9, 145:17.

⁵ See, for example: Deuteronomy 29:29; Jeremiah 23:24; Psalms 139:12; and Job 28:24, 37:16.

A better question: *should* Judaism, or believing Jews, embrace Classical Theism? There are, without doubt, some very important voices in the Jewish tradition who *did* endorse, and even helped to shape the history of, Classical Theism. But those traditions, I shall argue, were always in tension with other Jewish ideas that came to their most full articulation in the Kabbalistic tradition. The most philosophically satisfying way to proceed, for the Orthodox Jew, I shall argue, is to embrace only certain *elements* of Classical Theism, while endorsing a large number of claims that the Classical Theist is bound to reject.

In the opening paragraph of this chapter, I mentioned three doctrines that the Classical Theist endorses, in addition to the claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. The three extra claims are that God is (1) simple, (2) atemporally eternal, and (3) impassable. If you are a Jew who accepts that the Written and Oral Torah are the product of revelation, should you accept these three extra claims? In §1, I explore the reasons that Jewish thinkers have had for doing just that. In §2, I raise some problems that emerge for those thinkers. In §3, I suggest some Jewish alternatives Classical Theism, to escape the problems raised in §2.

1. Jewish Classical Theism

Classical Theism claims that God is (1) simple, (2) atemporally eternal, and (3) impassable. First, we'll look at the motivation for divine simplicity. Then we'll turn to God's putative eternity and impassibility.

1.1. Keeping it simple

That God is simple could mean a number of things. It could be a mereological claim. Accordingly, we'd be saying that God isn't composed of multiple parts. There are both scriptural and philosophical grounds for God's mereological simplicity.

Biblical Grounds: When Moses says, "Hear, oh Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), he's not merely saying that there's only one God. He says that elsewhere (*e.g.*, Deuteronomy 4:35). Rather, it's plausible that, in this verse, Moses is claiming God to be mereologically simple, *i.e.*, indivisible.

Philosophical Grounds: If God were mereologically *complex*, you'd be able to ask what caused the various parts of God to come together. Since God – *ex hypothesi* – is the first cause, and since to ask what caused the parts of God to come together is to ask for a cause that is *prior* to God, that question can make no sense. Since that question can make no sense, it follows that God must be mereologically *simple*.

But the Classical Theist attributes something more than *mereological* simplicity to God. Here are some (confusing) things that we hear Classical Theists say:

- God has no properties.⁶

⁶ Indeed, Maimonides argues that if you are describing a being that has *attributes*, then you cannot be describing God (Maimonides 2000, 1:60).

- All of God's properties are one.⁷
- God's existence is identical to His essence.⁸

Notice that these claims, at least *prima facie*, conflict with one another. Moreover, the final claim is difficult to take seriously at all. Philosophers in the analytic tradition are going to think of God's essence in terms of some sort of complex property that is essentially His. If God's existence is identical to that property, does that not make God Himself a property? Properties are generally thought to be abstract, and therefore causally inert. God, by contrast, is concrete: the cause of all things. So how can God be identical to any property? It's not hard to see how these claims provoked the ire of Alvin Plantinga (1980). And yet, some historical sensitivity can help us to see an argument behind these claims, worthy of a hearing.

When Classical Theists claim that God's existence and essence are the same thing, they don't mean that God is a property. That would be to assume too much about what an essence is. To understand these historical ways of talking, one has to grasp that, in the background, these thinkers are committed to the notion that God is *conceptually* simple. By "conceptual simplicity," I mean the following:

CS: *x* is conceptually simple iff *x* transcends all metaphysical categories (including matter, form, particular, and universal).

When we're told that God's essence is identical to His existence, I take it to mean that God can't be *distinguished* from His properties. This isn't because He and His properties are very alike, nor because He *is* a property, but because the entire distinction doesn't apply to God to begin with. What it means for God to be conceptually simple is that He altogether transcends the metaphysical distinction between an object and its properties.

If God is conceptually simple, then we can't really say very much at all about God. Indeed, the variable in CS occupies a place in the sentence that's grammatically reserved for a noun. Nouns refer to objects or particulars. So, any attempt to apply the formula of CS to any actual being, including God, is always going to be self-defeating. We've arrived at the sort of paradox that captured Frege – the concept-horse paradox – when he conceded that, by his own lights, it wasn't possible for him to refer to concepts, even though he seemed to be doing so, even in the very act of saying that one couldn't refer to concepts.⁹

Every declarative sentence has a subject and a predicate. It seems to follow that any declarative sentence about God will predicate some property of Him. But if every attempt to distinguish God from His properties is a category mistake, then every declarative sentence about God, even our claim that God is conceptually simple, will be doomed to the same fate. They will all be category mistakes.

Maimonides has two strategies for circumnavigating this difficulty:

Strategy 1: Even if we can't truly *affirm* predicates of God, we can truly *negate* them. Since God isn't the sort of being to whom properties apply, we *can* truly say that God *isn't* ignorant, and that God *isn't* weak (see Maimonides 2000, 1:58). But, as

⁷ Hasdai Crescas (2018, 1.3.3, p. 109) writes, "although from our perspective [God's multiple] attributes are separate, they are one from God's. And the infinite goodness that is His essentially includes them all and renders them one on all counts."

⁸ In the words of Maimonides (2000, 1:57), "His existence... and essence are perfectly identical."

⁹ For a summary of the Fregean paradox, see Price (2016).

Gersonides points out, it remains unexplained why Maimonides is less comfortable saying that God isn't wise, and that God isn't strong, since these negations, by Maimonidean lights, would also be true (Gersonides 1987-1999, 3:3, pp. 111-112).¹⁰

Strategy 2: We can talk about what God *does* rather than what God *is* – or more accurately, we can focus on God's causal imprint on the world. Indeed, when the Bible describes God as merciful, it is, according to Maimonides, engaging in a shorthand. It really means that God has the sort of causal imprint upon the world that people would tend to have if they were merciful (Maimonides 2000, 1:54). The problem with this strategy is that it's left something of a mystery how and why God causes the things He causes, since there can be no such things as the properties in virtue of which God has that causal profile.

Why were Jewish thinkers attracted by these counter-intuitive ideas? Following Ibn Sina, Maimonides (2000, 2:4) believed that only a being that was conceptually simple could function as an explanation for the existence of our universe.¹¹ This belief was undergirded by an Aristotelian conception of what *calls* for explanation and what *counts* as explanation.

According to Aristotle, whenever we are confronted with some matter taking some form, the phenomenon calls for explanation. Why does that parcel of matter take that form? For these purposes, matter needn't be thought of as physical. Anything that serves as the subject of predication is, in that context, functioning as matter to some form. For example: when I say that democracy is a just system of government, democracy is the matter, and *being a just system of government* is the form. According to Aristotle, whenever matter takes a form, there is a call for explanation.

Take, for example, my table. It is matter with form. It therefore calls for an explanation, since we can ask, "Why does this matter take this form?" By way of answer, I must first distinguish the matter (*i.e.*, the wood and the nails) from the form (*i.e.*, its *tablehood*). This much provides me with the material and formal cause. An explanation must also provide an efficient cause, in this case: the movements and actions of a certain carpenter over a certain time. The explanation isn't complete, as far as Aristotle is concerned, until I've provided a *final* cause, which would be something like the *motive* or *goal* of the carpenter. This will tell us why the carpenter fashioned that material into that form in that way. Next, we could take the wood, or the nails, and ask for an explanation of why *those* parcels of matter have the form that *they* have (or had, before they were made into a table), and the process of explanation will begin again.

In Book VIII of his *Physics*, Aristotle appeals to God as the "unmoved mover," in terms of which the motion of the spheres can be explained. God is the efficient cause of their motion, and the desire of the spheres to come close to God is the *final* cause of their motion. But, according to Ibn Sina¹² and Maimonides (2000, 2:4), this theology actually fails to be sufficiently Aristotelian.¹³ In other words: Ibn Sina and Maimonides seek to out-Aristotle Aristotle. If you have something that can be described as a *mover*, then you still have the distinction between matter and form – in this case, the *being* and its property of being a *mover*. But if God has a *form*, then we're still talking about something that calls

¹⁰ See Seymour Feldman's helpful synopsis of Gersonides's argument (Gersonides, 1987–99, Vol. II, p. 79).

¹¹ For more on Ibn Sina and his argument, which appears in his *Sharḥ Kitāb al-lām*, see McGinnis (2010; 2011).

¹² See the previous footnote.

¹³ To be sure, Maimonides doesn't actually *present* himself as differing with Aristotle over this point. But he is.

for an explanation. If we're still talking about something that calls for an explanation, then we haven't yet reached *God*, since God is supposed to be the *ultimate explanans*.

Only something with conceptual simplicity fails to call for explanation, since only something conceptually simple transcends the distinction between matter and form. This just follows from an Aristotelian conception of explanation. The belief that God is the final explanation of the universe, coupled with a sufficiently Aristotelian conception of what explanation is, and of what *calls* for explanation, pushes us in the direction of saying that God must be conceptually simple. Explanation can only bottom out in conceptual simplicity.

There are also some non-Aristotelian routes to God's conceptual simplicity. For example:

- **Saadya Gaon** thought that God must transcend the distinction between object and property in virtue of His being the creator of both categories (Saadya, 1976, 2:8, p. 111). This argument relies upon the (admittedly contentious) assumption that categories and properties are the sort of things in need of creation.
- **Hasdai Crescas** thought that God transcended the distinction between object and property because, at least regarding properties of perfection – *i.e.*, the sort of properties we might want to attribute to God – Crescas was a resemblance nominalist. God – and not some property or other – is what serves as the paradigm that gives meaning to all predicates of perfection. On this picture, God isn't wise in virtue of holding the property of *wisdom*. Rather, what we mean, when we say that God is wise, is that He is the final being in a sequence of increasing resemblance, in a given respect – the wisdom-respect. What we mean when we say that something other than God is wise is merely that it resembles God in that same respect (Crescas, 2018, pp. 108, 323).¹⁴

According to Maimonides, every time the Bible seeks to make a predication about God, we'll have to re-read that predication as a disguised negation, or as a truncated description of God's causal imprint on the world. These radical interpretations of the Bible are, at least, in possession of Biblical warrant. After all, according to the Bible: God's ways and thoughts are beyond us;¹⁵ He is incomparable to *any* other being;¹⁶ and He tends to appear to the nation amidst a cloud, as if to signify that our grasp of Him can only ever be hazy and tenuous.¹⁷ There's also a well-known Talmudic story, much admired by Maimonides, according to which language is an irredeemably blunt tool with which to talk about God (Tractate Brachot 33b; Maimonides, 2000, 1:59).

Nevertheless, we shouldn't understate how radical the view becomes. Unless you adopt the resemblance nominalism of Crescas, you're going to have to subject even God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence to a radical re-interpretation. God isn't powerful, as are other powerful beings, in virtue of having the property of *power*, nor He is knowledgeable, as are other knowledgeable beings, in virtue of holding the property of being *knowledgeable* (*cf.*, Maimonides 1:57). Instead, all of these predications – power, knowledge, and the like – are radically equivocal. You may try to soften the blow by saying that our words can have some sort of analogical application to God, but it remains something of a mystery how we can meaningfully use language analogically if the

¹⁴ Like any nominalist, Crescas might have trouble explaining what a respect of resemblance is, without reintroducing properties into the picture.

¹⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9.

¹⁶ Exodus 15:11; I Kings 8:23; and Psalms 35:10; 86:8.

¹⁷ Exodus 13:21-22; 16:10; Numbers 16:42; Leviticus 16:2; Deuteronomy 4:11; I Kings 8:10-12; and Psalms 97:2.

analogue is something that is, in principle, beyond comprehension.¹⁸ It's fine to trade in metaphors, but if we can have no notion of what our metaphors are metaphors for, then we won't have escaped from the clutches of a very austere theology. Isaiah wasn't exaggerating when he said that God's ways and thoughts are beyond us.

1.2. Time for a change

As I understand it, Classical Theism isn't merely the view that the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator of the universe is conceptually simple. It also includes the claim that God transcends both time and change. Admittedly, there is one verse in the Hebrew Bible which explicitly states that God is unchanging (Malachi 3:6). But there are 23,144 *other* verses to consider.

In the Hebrew Bible, God seems to be constantly reactive to the actions of man. The decision to flood the earth, saving only Noah, serves as a paradigm example. The God of the Bible looks to be a being who travels with us along the passage of time, interacting with His creation, and changing course where necessary. This is also how God is presented throughout early Rabbinic literature. God is even described, in the Talmud, as engaging in different activities at different points of the day (*e.g.*, Tractate Avoda Zara, 3b). So how did medieval Orthodox Jewish thinkers come to embrace the picture of a God who utterly transcends time and suffers no change or causal interaction?

It is sometimes argued that if God were perfect, He must be unchanging because every change constitutes a step away from, or a step towards, perfection. But if God were perfect, He couldn't change by taking a step *towards* perfection (since He's already there). He couldn't change by taking a step *away* from perfection because to step away from perfection is itself an imperfection, and God is – *ex hypothesi* – perfect. So, God can't change. Once it's established that God is unchanging, we must conclude that He exists beyond time. Time, after all, is the measure of change. Things which are, in principle, not subject to change are also, in principle, not subject to the passage of time.

The argument of the previous paragraph assumes that all changes are either an improvement or a deterioration. But why think that? Perhaps there are multiple ways of being perfect. A perfectly powerful being should be able to commit crimes. A perfectly *moral* being couldn't do such a thing. Perfections can conflict. In fact, perfect morality might sometimes get in the way of other (non-moral) values (Wolf, 1982). So, perhaps there are a variety of equally, and maximally, good ways of being. Moreover, perhaps what it really means to be a perfect being, is to be able to choose your own perfections, from one moment to the next.¹⁹ Worse still, the argument seems to assume from the outset that God is outside of time. If, by contrast, God were a *temporal* being, then there would be no reason whatsoever to think that change would always come at a cost. Witness William Hasker's perfect watch:

A short while ago, it registered the time as five minutes after six o'clock, but now it registers twelve minutes after six. Clearly, this is a change in the watch. (Compare this watch with an "immutable" watch that always registers 10:37, day in and day out.) Is this

¹⁸ One option would be to collapse the analogical route into the suggestion of Crescas, such that "power" applies primarily to God, and secondarily to man. I'm reliably told that some people read Aquinas' doctrine of analogy in this way. But if that's the case, it doesn't strike me as analogy at all. It strikes me as a form of resemblance nominalism.

¹⁹ This possibility was suggested to me by Tyron Goldschmidt. The idea is mentioned, in passing, in our Goldschmidt & Lebens, 2020.

a change for the better, suggesting a previous state of imperfection? Not at all... Is it then a change for the worse, a decline from perfection? ... It is, in fact, an example of *a change that is consistent with and/or required by a constant state of excellence.*

(Hasker, 1994, pp. 132-133)

A perfect temporal being would *have* to change, like Hasker's watch, just in order to maintain its perfection. So, our first argument for God's being unchanging, in addition to its other flaws, was begging the question, by assuming that God was outside of time.

Why should we think that God is outside of time? Perhaps you'll say that, because God *created* time, He must be beyond it. But that's to make various assumptions about what time is. If time is the measure of change in the physical universe, then it *would* seem to follow that the creator of the physical universe must somehow transcend time. Aristotle certainly seems to have thought that time can only pass in the presence of changing physical states. But, in more recent times, Sydney Shoemaker has convinced many that we can make sense of time passing even through a completely frozen physical universe (Shoemaker, 1969).²⁰ If time can pass without anything going on in the physical universe, then there's no reason to think that the creator of the physical universe was also the creator of time. Time might be uncreated.²¹

Perhaps you'll think that if time was uncreated, and that if God was *bound* by time, then the very existence of time becomes something of a threat to God's sovereignty. But if God is, *by nature*, a temporal being, then it's peculiar to say that God is a prisoner to time. It's absurd to complain that God is the prisoner of His own nature. That God is bound by His temporality, is no less a worry than that God is bound by His goodness, and therefore *a prisoner to it.*²²

Certainly, if we're thinking of time as some sort of container that exists prior to God and forces itself upon God, then God's sovereignty would be undermined. But for all we know, the passage of time is nothing more than the passage of God's consciousness from moment to moment. Perhaps the very fabric of time is grounded in God, such that the passage of time is just a consequence of God's nature.

Some argue that, since God is perfect, He is never in *need* of anything. And, since He never *needs* to change, He must already be all that He ever needs to be. Consequently, He can have no merely potential powers, or potential properties. Rather, all of His powers, and all of His properties, are always actual (*cf.*, Maimonides, 2000, 1:55). This renders God changeless, since change is just the actualisation of latent potential. God is pure act. There can be no change because there is no latent potency in God.

But, once again, this argument begs the question, tacitly assuming from the outset, without argument, that God exists beyond time. Only if God exists beyond time would you have any reason to think that

²⁰ As Robert Koons (in correspondence) rightly points out, Shoemaker's case is less that watertight. Shoemaker's account, for example, requires action at a temporal distance.

²¹ As I hope to demonstrate in a few paragraphs time, there are some costs associated with taking time to be uncreated. For example, the theist will be left wanting an explanation as to what was the cause of God's initial temporal state – if time had a beginning – or she'll be left wanting an explanation of the temporal progression of Divine states, if there *was* no beginning. For these reasons, as should become clearer later on, a theism that places God outside of time, and views time as God's creation, could be thought to have more explanatory power. Thanks to the Jonathan Fuqua for discussion of this point.

²² These arguments are owed to Ryan Mullins (2014; 2016).

perfection entails changelessness. But if God is, by nature, a temporal being, then He *would* need to change, from moment to moment, like Hasker's perfect watch, in *virtue* of His perfection. This *need* would be no imperfection, just as God, by nature, *needs* to act morally.

The failure of these arguments to establish that God is unchanging and atemporal has given succour to Open Theism, according to which God is a temporal being. But I fear that Open Theists neglect to take seriously another argument that moved many philosophers in the Middle Ages. The argument runs as follows: if causation and change are among the *explananda* for which God serves as *explanans*, then God Himself cannot be liable to causal manipulation or change (*cf.*, Maimonides, 2000, 2:4).

In other words: if God were among the things that can change and be causally reactive, then He would be one of the *explananda* rather than the *explanans*. God must therefore, by dint of His role as the ultimate explanation of the universe, be an *uncaused* causer, and an *unmoved* mover, an actor with no latent potential to be acted upon. And even this says too much. After all, God doesn't have some property in virtue of which He moves or causes things. His transcending the very distinction between matter and form is what allows Him to be the ultimate explanation. Open Theism, with its changing temporal God, cannot allow God to serve, in this way, as the ultimate *explanans*.

A possible response, on behalf of the Open Theist, proceeds as follows: God need not be the proximate explanation of every change in order to serve as the ultimate *explanans*. Instead, God creates the material world, and continues to sustain it in being. But the particular contours of the events that transpire within that world, post-creation, arise independently of God's causal activity (even if He's sustaining all of the causal agents in being). These changing events then provoke reactions from God. God, on this picture, remains the *ultimate* explanation and cause, but He is Himself liable to change.²³

This response, I fear, is hollow. On this account, God is the ultimate explanation of the changes that transpire in the created universe, but the created universe itself is the ultimate explanation of the changes that transpire in God. That would be to place God and the created universe on the same explanatory plane, which would, in turn, undermine the sense in which God is the ultimate *explanans*.

The only way to render God the ultimate *explanans* is to say that He is unchanging. The only way for a being to be *perfect* and unchanging is for that being to be atemporal, knowing all things from His eternal present, without change. This is a strong argument, even if it forces us to reinterpret Biblical and Rabbinic presentations of God.

I hope to have given Jewish Classical Theism a fair hearing. Now for the opposition.

2. Reasons to resist

2.1. Eat your French Fries

In §1.1, we distinguished between two forms of simplicity: mereological and conceptual. We should also distinguish between two forms of conceptual simplicity. Maimonides and Saadya Gaon thought that God transcended the distinction between object and property in such a way that positive-predication – *i.e.*, the attribution of a property to God – can never be literally true. As we saw, this is

²³ This response was put to me by an anonymous reviewer of *Lebens* 2021.

problematic. It renders all talk about God (including this very sentence) more or less false. This type of conceptual simplicity should be distinguished from the conceptual simplicity that Crescas endorses.

According to Crescas, God transcends the distinction between object and property, but *not* in such a way that predicates can't apply directly to Him. Crescas pulls this off by saying the following: God doesn't have multiple properties, and we can't meaningfully distinguish between God and His properties, but God is, nevertheless, what gives meaning to any number of predicates, by functioning as their paradigm exemplar (Crescas, 2018, pp. 108-109, 323).

This conception of simplicity captures a sense in which God is perfect. His power, knowledge, grace, and the like, hang together so perfectly that they can't be isolated one from the other as distinct properties. They are, instead, different aspects of one perfectly integrated essence; the essence of a being who gives meaning to words like "power," "knowledge," and "grace." Let's call Crescas-style simplicity, *simplicity_C*, and Maimonides-style simplicity, *simplicity_M*. We can define these forms of simplicity as follows:

Simplicity_M: An entity is *simple_M* iff it transcends all metaphysical categories (including matter, form, particular, and universal).

Simplicity_C: An entity is *simple_C* iff it functions as the paradigm exemplar that gives meaning to all the non-relational predicates that apply to it.

It's only *simplicity_M* that troubles me. *Simplicity_M* is what we called conceptual simplicity in §1.1. As we saw, the reason for adopting *simplicity_M* stems from an Aristotelian conception of explanation. But there are problems with that conception. First: it seems to assume that anything that calls for explanation *can be* explained. But perhaps there are things which are, in principle, inexplicable.

More fundamentally, perhaps there are facts which don't call for an explanation at all (even if the facts in question *do* have the structure of matter instantiating form). Dan Baras provides the following example:

Suppose you take an ordinary looking coin and toss it hundreds of times. Suppose it lands HTHTHTHTHT... (H = heads; T = tails) and continues in this pattern every single toss. Such an occurrence would no doubt call for explanation. On the other hand, if the result were a messy, insignificant sequence of H and T, the occurrence would not call for explanation.
(Baras, 2020, p. 11607)

Admittedly, and as Baras documents, there are a number of different disambiguations of the phrase, "calling for explanation." But one could argue that, on any plausible disambiguation (and certainly on all of those provided by Baras), some facts *do*, and some facts *don't*, call for explanation. Relatedly, you might think that, sometimes, "that's just how it is," *is* an appropriate explanation. Disgraced comedian, Louis CK, once described how frustrating a conversation with children can be (excuse the exotic language):

They just keep coming; more questions: "Why?", "why?", "why?" ... My daughter the other day, she's like, "Papa why can't we go outside?"
"Well, cuz' it's raining."
"Why?"
"Well, water's coming out of the sky!"

“Why?”

“Because it was in a cloud.”

“Why?”

“Well, clouds form when there’s vapor.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know! That’s... I don’t know any more *things*. Those are all the things I know!”

“Why?”

“Cuz’ I’m stupid, okay? I’m stupid!”

“Why?”

“Well, because I didn’t pay attention in school, okay? I went to school, but I didn’t listen in class.”

“Why?”

“Cuz’ I was high all the time. I smoked too much pot.”

“Why?”

“Cuz’ my parents gave me no guidance...”

“Why?”... This goes on for hours and hours and it gets so weird and abstract. At the end it’s like, “Why?”

“Well, because some things *are* and some things are *not*.”

“Why?”

“Well, because things that are *not* can’t *be*.”

“Why?”

“Because then nothing wouldn’t *be*. You can’t have f*cking nothing *isn’t*; everything *is!*”

“Why?”

“Cuz’, if nothing *wasn’t*, there’d be f*cking all kinds of sh*t that we don’t like: giant ants with top hats dancing around. There’s no room for all that sh*t!”

“Why?”

“... You eat your French fries you little...”²⁴

Surely at some point, the right answer to a why-question really is, “Well, because some things *are* and some things are *not*.” I have to admit that, unlike the Aristotelian, I have no method for determining where and when to draw that line. But a line has to be drawn somewhere, and it sometimes seems as we’ve dug down as far as explanation can hope to seek, long before the Aristotelian has given up. Sometimes you ask why a particular thing has a particular form, and the right answer has to be an investigation-terminating answer, like the one that Louis CK sought to give his daughter. Wittgenstein makes the point with less humour in the *Tractatus*:

6.371: At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.

6.372: So people stop short at natural laws as at something unassailable, as did the ancients at God and Fate.

And they both are right and wrong. But the ancients were clearer, in so far as they recognized one clear terminus, whereas the modern system makes it appear as though everything were explained.

²⁴ Transcribed from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tf17rFDjMZw>, accessed on 06/10/21.

(Wittgenstein, 1961)

These words can be turned against Ibn Sina and Maimonides. They treat God like the moderns treat laws of nature. They treat God as if He explains something. But what the ancients, according to Wittgenstein, truly grasped with *their* talk of God was that God *isn't* an explanation. Or at least, not a regular explanation. He is a terminus; an investigation-terminating answer. The right point at which to offer an investigation-terminating answer is when you've come to conclude that an *explanatory* answer simply isn't possible. The existence of something so conceptually simple as to make it impossible to talk about can't possibly hope to *explain* anything. So why posit such simplicity_M to begin with? Instead, explain as much as you possibly can, which may well take you all the way to the posit of a being who is necessarily existent, and (say) necessarily omnipotent. What causes God to have all of those necessary properties? At this point, it's in order to reply: "well, because those properties are essential to a being who grounds all other beings." Why? Because that's how the notions of necessity, grounding, power, and being relate to one another. Why? "Well, *because!*" At no point am I tempted to ascend to the posit of a being so simple_M that we can't actually talk about it. So, eat your French Fries and stop asking why.

Saadya Gaon also thought that God was simple_M, but only because he thought that God has to be the creator of properties and categories. He thought this entails that God could *have* no properties (Saadya, 1976, p. 111). But (a) it's not clear that properties and abstract categories stand in need of *creation* to begin with, and (b) it might well be possible for those things to be somehow grounded in God whilst also *applying* to Him. In short: Simplicity_M was a bad turn for Jewish theology to have taken. It forced us into highly revisionary re-readings of Biblical and Rabbinic literature. Its philosophical motivation was insufficiently compelling to justify such a cost.

2.2. Time and time again²⁵

The notion that the God of Judaism – who reveals Himself through the Hebrew Bible – exists outside of time raises a host of problems. How can God, in His timeless eternal present, be present to Moses on Mount Sinai, and be present to Elijah on Mount Carmel, simultaneously, if the event of Moses being atop Mount Sinai isn't simultaneous with the event of Elijah being atop Mount Carmel? Simultaneity is a transitive relation. So, if God's timeless present is simultaneous with two separate events, A and B, then A and B must be simultaneous too; but the life of Moses didn't overlap at all with the life of Elijah.

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann famously addressed these issues with their notion of ET-simultaneity – a non-transitive relation that relates temporal events to the life of an atemporal God in His own eternal present (Stump & Kretzmann, 1981; 1987; 1992). Their work gave rise to a burgeoning secondary literature. I'll let readers assess that literature on their own. In the meantime, let's accept (if only for the sake of argument) that tying the life of an Eternal God to the individual moments of our temporal lives poses no insurmountable challenge for the Jewish Classical Theist. But there are other challenges in store.

If God is unchanging and impassable, then we cannot have any affect upon God. If we can't have any affect upon God, then how can He know what we're doing? For example, I just typed the words, "for

²⁵ Some of the arguments in this sub-section overlap with arguments I develop further in *Lebens* 2021.

example.” Did that not cause God to know that Samuel Lebens typed the words “for example”? If my actions have no causal affect over God, then how could God know of any of my actions?²⁶

Maimonides, like most Classical Theists, was happy to accept Aristotle’s account of God as the *intellectus*, the *ens intelligens*, and the *ens intelligibile* (thought thinking itself).²⁷ In other words, God knows all things, but only in virtue of knowing Himself. At this point, you could ask lots of questions. If God’s knowing Himself is sufficient for His knowing that I wore blue socks today, then doesn’t that imply that God’s essence somehow *entails* that I would wear blue socks today? And, if that fact was entailed by the essence of God, then did I really have free will to do otherwise?²⁸

At this point, Maimonides argues that we’re ignoring the radical equivocation that separates predicates applied to *creatures*, and predicates applied to a simple_M God. It might be true that human knowledge is *factive*, such that knowing something about the future entails that the known fact is already determined, but that doesn’t tell us anything about *divine* knowledge. The word “knowledge” is equivocal (Maimonides 2000, 3:20). At this point, one might wonder whether the Maimonidean reconciliation of Divine foreknowledge and human freewill is anything more than a pyrrhic victory. To secure it, Maimonides had to remove everything we know about knowledge from the word “knowledge” when applied to God (Gersonides, 1987–99, Vol. II, p. 79).

Crescas was right, I think, to pour scorn upon the notion that God is His own thought, as well as being His own act of thinking. Crescas insists: what God knows is *not* identical to what God *is* (Crescas, 2018, 4.13, p. 354). If God is omniscient, then He knows all intelligibles. How could all of the intelligibles be rendered *one*? That would mean that the fact that $2+2=4$ is identical to the fact that London is the capital of England. And, how can this “one” intelligible be rendered somehow identical to an omniscient God, and to His act of knowledge? Rather, if God knows every particular, then He must know them severally. He cannot be identical to all of them. This is all very sensible, but how can we block the inference that God is made knowledgeable by the many things that He knows, which entails that things outside of God are contributing to His perfection, or at least, *acting* upon Him (*Ibid.*, 2.1.2, p. 124)?

Crescas responds as follows. Typically, an object is ontologically prior to human knowledge about it. God’s knowledge is different. God’s knowledge *confers* existence on the things that it knows (*Ibid.*, 2.1.4, p. 139). *Humans* are perfected (and acted upon) by the things that they know. That’s because

²⁶ Eleonore Stump (2016) argues that the sort of influence an object of knowledge has over a knower needn’t be a *causal* influence in Aristotle’s sense of an efficient cause. But it seems to me that if God is truly going to be the explanatory ground for all phenomena, then He should be beyond any form of influence. If we influence God, even non-causally, then our actions explain what occurs in the life of God, which compromises the extent to which God is the ultimate *explanans*.

²⁷ See Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* XII, chapters 7 and 9, and Maimonides (2000, 1:68).

²⁸ One might think that the Classical Theist has the resources to respond to these worries. Christopher Tomaszewski (2019) argues that what I’m calling simplicity_M needn’t entail modal collapse – it needn’t make all things necessary. The blue-sock creator could exist necessarily without it being necessary that He should have created any blue socks (so long as we use “the blue-sock creator” rigidly). Similarly, Robert Koons (2002) argues that having all thing flow from the essence of God needn’t pose any challenge to our free-will. Koons would say that God’s essence is only *contingently* the essence of a blue-sock creator. But how could God *know* that His essence had this contingent property by knowing *only* His essence? How could the blue socks creator *know* that He had created blue socks, if that fact is contingent and all He’s able to know is His *essence*? God would have to know more than just His essence. He’d have to know how is essence is contingently related to things beyond His essence; the contingent *effects* of His essence.

those things play a role in giving *rise* to human knowledge. But in the case of *divine* knowledge, the order of explanation is reversed; God's knowledge gives being to the things that He knows.²⁹

In other words: an impassable God can be omniscient so long as He is the cause of all things. But that would give rise, of course, to a theological fatalism that leaves no room for libertarian free will.³⁰ Now, Crescas won't have minded that corollary. Crescas was a determinist and a compatibilist. But, if you want to give human beings libertarian free will, which seems to be the implicit assumption of the Hebrew Bible, and if you want to make sense of God knowing all things, it becomes very difficult to maintain that God cannot be acted upon.

We act upon God when we cause Him to know the things we've chosen to do. This doesn't mean that God has to be in *time*. Our actions could be ET-simultaneous with God, even though they are not simultaneous with each other, such that they are always, in His eternal present, causing Him to know them. But it *does* entail that God is, in some substantive sense of the word, *acted* upon. This, the Classical Theist can't accept. Instead, they'll have to say that God knows all things, without really meaning it, since the word "knowledge" when applied to God has been stripped of all known semantic content, or applies by an analogy even though we can have no idea what the analogue is. Or, holding the meaning of "knowledge" constant, they can say that God knows all things by knowing Himself, or by causing all things, but then they'll have to give up on libertarian free will. These are big costs for the believing Jew. But the costs don't end there.

The entire Hebrew Bible is, in large part, a document of the *covenantal* relationship between a particular nation and God. Louis Newman (1991, p. 95) points to Biblical treatments of *covenant*, according to which a *covenant* – quite unlike a *contract* – only makes sense in the context of a prior *relationship*. Moreover, parties to a *contract* are not committed to anything that isn't explicitly among the *terms* of the contract. Covenantal relationships, by contrast, are more open-ended. The people commit to obey God's voice, even beyond any specific injunction written in the Pentateuch. These duties arise "not from the text of Torah, or even from the interpretations of that text, but from living in relationship with God" (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

But, is it possible to have a relationship with something impassable? Isn't relationship bound up in the possibility of having moments of joint-attention, which amount to the possession of phenomenal

²⁹ As Robert Koons (2002) documents, Aquinas agrees: if God knows that *p*, it's because God wills that *p*, and because God's will makes it the case that *p*. Unlike Aquinas, Crescas was willing to accept that this rules out the possibility of human libertarian freedom – see the next footnote.

³⁰ As Robert Koons (2002) would rightly point out at this juncture (and indeed as Robert Koons *did* point out, in correspondence, at this juncture of an earlier draft), there's no reason to think that God cannot be the cause of our *free* actions. Wasn't Tolkien the cause of Frodo's free choices? This response only works if, like me, you're willing to stratify reality into multiple levels of increasing (or decreasing) fundamentality (depending upon which way you're looking). On this account, relative to the level of reality in which Frodo acts, it *isn't* true to say that Tolkien determines Frodo's choices. It is only relative to a *different* level of reality that we can say that Tolkien determines what Frodo does. Relative to *that* level of reality, it *isn't* true to say that Frodo is a free agent. Two agents cannot both be 100% causally responsible for the same action. Koons thinks that this rule doesn't apply when one of those agents is God. But that's only true because of the massive distinction between the level of reality upon which God stands, and the level of reality upon which other agents stand – which mirrors the gap between Tolkien and Frodo. But if you're willing to stratify reality in this way, into multiple levels, Classical Theism ends up losing some of its appeal, as we'll see in §3.2.

states whose content is co-dependent, and causally reactive, with the state of the other?³¹ God's capacity to take part in meaningful, dynamic, and interpersonal relationships seems *central* to the Bible's own presentation of the covenant at its heart. An impassable God cannot be a covenantal partner, since his phenomenal states cannot be co-dependent upon the states of others.³²

In the context of a careful analysis of multiple books of the Bible, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel concludes that:

the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos... The prophet hears God's voice and feels His heart. He tries to impart the pathos of the message together with its logos.

(Heschel, 2001, p. 31)

But an impassable God has no passion. No emotion.³³ Perhaps God's causal imprint on the world merely manifests *as if* He stands in a covenantal relationship. Perhaps the prophets merely *impose* the language of pathos upon the logos of their prophecy, for poetic effect. But such a wholesale rereading of the central narratives of the Bible, squeezing *anything* truly personal out of the covenantal relationship, and all of the *pathos* out of the prophetic moment, is to disfigure the Biblical narrative beyond recognition. What remains of the Biblical narrative, once God's personhood has been interpreted away, will be:

something wholly drab, trivial, and insipid. It is not even a matter of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; it is, instead, throwing out the baby and keeping the tepid bathwater, at best a bland, unappetizing potion that is neither hot nor cold and at worst a nauseating brew, fit for neither man nor beast.

(Plantinga, 2000, p. 42)

The doctrine that God is impassable threatens to eviscerate the central message of the Hebrew Bible.

3. Striking a compromise

In the previous section we've seen reason for the Jew to jettison central planks of Classical Theism: simplicity_M and impassibility. Jewish Open Theism might appear to be the natural alternative to turn to. I think that would be too hasty.

³¹ Robert Koons is right to point out, in correspondence, that I'm assuming here that God's phenomenal states supervene upon His intrinsic state. "Many modern philosophers of mind," he notes, "would deny that this is true of human being (e.g., externalists about phenomenal content)." In response, I'm willing to concede that I swim against that tide. I *don't* think that phenomenal states can float freely from the intrinsic states of the minds that have them. If, like Koons, you think otherwise, you'll be able to resist this part of my argument.

³² Eleonore Stump (2016) would argue that Classical Theism can countenance inter-dependent states between man and God, so long as the dependence isn't *causal*. See footnote 26 above for a brief rebuttal of this strategy.

³³ Admittedly, some Classical Theists make room for God to experience a constant sort of intellectual joy in consequence of His constant self-contemplation. But, for reasons I've already spelled out, God's emotional states cannot be *reactive* to ours (since I assume that emotional states affect the intrinsic state of a mind that has them). Moreover, someone committed to God's simplicity_M can only use language that describes God as loving us, or having other emotions, including intellectual joy, in ways that are equivocal or metaphorical. But metaphors can't hope to be all that illuminating if we, in principle, can have no knowledge of what our metaphors are metaphors for! So you can *call* the God of Classical Theism an emotional being, but you won't really know what the word "emotional" is supposed to mean in that context. I find such moves unhelpful.

Elsewhere I've argued that the Open Theist, who believes in a personal God, living in time, can't coherently claim that God is necessarily omnipotent (Lebens, 2021). God is left inherently vulnerable to disappointment if his free creatures have the ability to shape the open and unknown future in ways that God won't like. The very possibility of vulnerability, I maintain, is incompatible with necessary omnipotence.

In response, Ryan Mullins pointed out to me (in correspondence): God didn't *have* to create a universe. Accordingly, He didn't *have* to expose Himself to disappointment. True: He always carried the *potential* for disappointment, but it was up to Him whether to take any risks. I don't accept that this recovers God's necessarily omnipotence, but it *does* leave God very much in the driver's seat vis-à-vis His own potential anguish, and certainly powerful enough to live up to the Biblical descriptions of God's might.

Moreover, perhaps a perfect being *should* be vulnerable. Not to be so invested in the causes of justice that one would feel bitter disappointment when evil prevails, would be an imperfection. It would amount to an evil indifference (see Heschel, 2001, p. 364; 1951, p. 244). If investment in our flourishing renders the God of Open Theism vulnerable, and if this somewhat compromises God's omnipotence, then so much the worse for fully-fledged omnipotence – no perfect being should be invulnerable, if the price of invulnerability is *indifference*. The God of Open Theism is plenty powerful enough. The real problem with Open Theism lies elsewhere.

Open Theism, as we've already pointed out, has to abandon the claim that God is the ultimate explanation of the universe. The God of Open Theism is, of course, responsible for the creation of the universe. That's all well and good. But, according to Open Theism, we creatures, with our human freedom, are responsible for changes that occur within *God*. In that case, there's a sense in which the creator and the creation are on an explanatory par. Against most Classical Theists, I deny that the ultimate explanation of the universe has to be simple_M. Indeed, a simple_M entity cannot explain anything since it cannot be spoken about.³⁴ But, against the Open Theist, it seems to me that, for reasons both philosophical and scriptural, God *does* need to dwell alone on His own explanatory plane, to function as the ultimate *explanans*. The God of Open Theism *doesn't* do that.

Finally, and as I've argued at length elsewhere, a distinctively *Jewish* theory of revelation would see the will of God animating both religious thought and practice in the community of religious Jews over time (Lebens, 2020, ch. 7). Although it currently meets with some resistance among ultra-Orthodox Jews, I have argued that Jewish Orthodoxy cannot coherently escape from commitment to the claim that revelation is unfolding (*Ibid.*). Accordingly, to the extent that Saadya Gaon, Maimonides, and Crescas have joined the great pantheon of Rabbinic thinkers, their thought has become part of the Torah. They are not infallible, as we take only Scripture to be, but revelation nevertheless speaks through them.

Disregarding Maimonidean theology stands at odds with the belief that Maimonides was one of the most important Rabbis of his age, and therefore a vital cog in the vehicle of ongoing revelation.

The Jewish philosopher, who believes that multiple thinkers and schools have been part of an unfolding process of revelation within the Jewish tradition, recognises that no single link in the chain

³⁴ And, as I've mentioned, for example, in the previous footnote, I do not find appeal to analogical or metaphorical predication to be a helpful way out of this problem.

(other than Scripture) is infallible, but that each link matters. Accordingly, she will want to subject the work of those thinkers and schools to philosophical scrutiny in search of the most philosophically attractive way of finding a best fit between them. As we've seen, the God of Maimonides is impassable and atemporal. The God of the Hebrew Bible is personal, reactive, and timebound. The God of the Talmud seems to have had His own daily schedule of activities! Moreover, the God of the Talmud is an emotional and empathetic being (Harris, 2017, pp. 83-84).

The question is, how to find a philosophically respectable path of best fit that honours the notion that every historical stratum of religious Jewish thought was a conduit of revelation (even if some of the conduits were fallible)? I have two suggestions.

3.1. The two faces of a Maimonidean God

For any predication of the form "God is X", Maimonides licences the translation into, "God has a causal impact on this world such that if a person were to have that sort of causal impact, we would say that that person is X." Strictly speaking, God isn't covenantal, loving, reactive, compassionate, merciful, or jealous. But, at various points in time, He has the causal impact that we would tend to associate with a person who was any one of those things. A cynical way to put this would be to say that the God of Maimonides is what philosophers of mind call a zombie. He presents outwards to the world just like a person, but the lights are not on inside. He is, in a sense, dead behind the eyes – or, at least, ineffable behind the eyes.

Perhaps that's too cynical. The picture could be sketched in different terms. We must distinguish between the phenomenal God and the noumenal God, even if – of course – they are, numerically, the same God; the one and only God. When the Bible and the Rabbis talk about God as emotional, passable, temporal, and the like, they're not speaking falsely. They are, rather, describing God *as He appears to us* – *i.e.*, the phenomenal profile of God. In fact, the Rabbis tend to be very careful to use qualifiers such as, "so to speak," to make it clear that they're not describing God as He really is in and of Himself with their anthropomorphisms. When the Rabbis ascribe emotional states to God, they tend to do so only to the *Shekhinah*, which may be nothing more than the phenomenal *appearance* of God on earth.

When Maimonides talks about God as impassable, atemporal, and knowing all things in virtue of knowing only Himself, he isn't *contradicting* the Rabbis. Instead, Maimonides is gesturing towards the ineffable reality that lies *beyond* the phenomenal God – *i.e.*, God as He is in and of Himself; the noumenal God.

If we jettison the claim that God is simple_M, because of its weak philosophical motivation, and the paradoxical limitations that it places upon religious language, the faithful Jew might still be able to do justice to the place of Maimonides in the process of ongoing revelation. She can do so by adopting much of the remainder of his theology, and applying it, as Maimonides meant to apply it, not to the phenomena described by the Bible and the Rabbis, but to the noumena behind the phenomena.

I don't see any deep philosophical problem with this avenue. I merely report, for what it's worth, that I find it deeply uninspiring. I find it uninspiring because the cynical way of framing this theology isn't at all inaccurate. This God *is* a philosophical zombie. The relationship we have with Him is founded upon an illusion. In actual fact, He isn't the sort of being who can have a relationship at all; He just appears *as if* He is. Accordingly, I have another suggestion.

3.2. The two faces of a Kabbalistic God

Rabbi Chaim Ickovits of Volozhin, in his *Nefesh HaChaim*, describes the ways in which the human being is designed so as to echo the form and structure of more supernal and more abstract worlds, that exist beyond our own. These more abstract worlds function as something like a family of nested prisms through which the light of God is refracted and ultimately revealed down here on earth. Each level of this multi-dimensional universe is, in turn, structured in ways that correspond to the limbs and sinews of the human being.

Who is God speaking to when he says, “Let us make man in our image”? The answer of the Kabbala is that God is speaking to the entire creation, whose image is somehow encoded in the physical design plan of the human being (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:4).

God gave the human being, and because of their covenant with God, the Jewish people in particular, the power to sustain, strengthen, and polish these prism-like worlds, by fulfilling God’s commandments. Indeed, each of the Torah’s commandments are also correlated with a limb of the human body. By performing a commandment with her own limbs, the Jew strengthens corresponding limbs in the multi-dimensional supernal “body” through which God is made manifest in the world. Conversely, those who stand commanded by God also have the power to *diminish* God’s manifestation in this world by doing harm to the realms above, through transgression of God’s command. Indeed, the only reason that Nebuchadnezzar and Titus were able to destroy God’s Temples in Jerusalem was, according to Rabbi Chaim, because the Jewish people, through their behaviour, had damaged the supernal realms, and thereby lessened the manifestation of God down on earth (*ibid.*).

As we find in the 13th-Century Kabbalistic text, *Sefer Ha-Yihud*, attributed to Rabbi Shem Tov of Faro:

For when the lower man blemishes one of his limbs, as that limb is blemished below, it is as if he cuts the corresponding supernal limb. And the meaning of this cutting is that the limb is cut, and becomes more and more contracted, and is gathered to the depths of being, called nothingness, as if that limb is missing above. For when the human form is perfect below, it brings about perfection above; [in the same manner] the impurity of the limb below causes the gathering of the image of that supernal limb into the depths of nothingness, so as to blemish the supernal form, as it is written “Because of the evil, the righteous is taken away” — taken away, literally.³⁵

Pious Kabbalists recognise the legal authority of Maimonides and his ruling that it is heresy to attribute corporeality to God. Even so, there are a great many respects in which this incorporeal supernal “body” functions, very much, as if it were God’s own body. Just as our body both clothes our soul but also allows our soul to be manifest to the world, so too this supernal “body” hides God in some respects but is also the vehicle that allows His light to become manifest in the world.

When our human body is in pain, and to the extent that our pain and suffering is a function of the fact that we live in a fallen world in which we and others are polluted by sin, how much more so must God be – and at this point, Rabbi Chaim is careful to add a clause that means, “so to speak” – *suffering* from the corresponding injury that must be present in the corresponding body part in the higher realms of reality?

³⁵ Translated by Moshe Idel (1990, pp. 184-185).

And when a person no longer feels his personal suffering from his torments because of his great bitterness over *His* [i.e., God's] suffering (so to speak), that very bitterness will then [function as the] scouring of his sins, and in this way, he attains atonement, and his personal torments leave him.

(*Nefesh HaChaim*, 2:11)³⁶

And indeed, the “pain” will then evaporate on high.

Although this picture is couched in qualifiers, such as “so to speak”, the Kabbala clearly invites us to think of our own bodies as having an influence over some (albeit incorporeal) reality that functions much like a body for *God*. Moreover, each and every limb of this supernal “body”, in their isomorphic correspondence to the limbs of the physical human body, and in all of the dimensions in which this body exists, is built out of ten elements called the *sefirot*. These elements represent various deeply psychological attributes of God, which are hypostatized, and become more and more independent one from the other in the lower dimensions of reality. Some of these elements are male. Some are female. Some are in tension with one another. Others are thought of as erotically united so as to produce offspring further down this great chain of being (see Schäfer, 2000).

Despite the anatomical and psychological features of the unfolding manifestations of God on earth, or (more accurately) of the various created vehicles through which God's light is refracted into our reality, the Kabbala is equally clear that, beyond all of the manifestations, God as He is in His transcendence, described in Kabbalistic terminology as the Infinite (or *Ein Sof*), is just as the Classical Theists conceive of Him. The *Ein Sof* is perfect, and simple_M. The *Ein Sof* is unchanging, and impassable. The *Ein Sof* is beyond time and, despite all that we've just said about the *Ein Sof*, He is also beyond description!

So, like the God of Maimonides, the God of Kabbala can also be described in terms of two faces. The *Ein Sof*, on the one hand, corresponds to what we called the noumenal God. The unfolding powers and potencies that the Kabbalah refers to as the *sefirot*, and as the limbs of the supernal anthropos (or *Adam Kadmon*), on the other hand, are the elements of the *phenomenal* God, or perhaps vehicles through which the noumenal God manifests in the phenomenal world.

On the one hand, Kabbalists want to preserve all that Classical Theism might say about God, when talking of the *Ein Sof*. On the other hand, in the wake of Rabbi Isaac Luria, and his doctrine of *tzimtzum* (i.e., *contraction*), Kabbalists also insist that the light of the *Ein Sof* was only able to emanate down into our region of reality through some sort of internal contraction.

Michael Wyschogrod was quick to point out: the doctrine of *tzimtzum* seems to pollute the doctrine of the *Ein Sof*. It seems to attribute, without any equivocation or analogy, an intentional action to it: an intentional contraction.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that *tsimtzum* Judaizes the emanation of Neoplatonism [according to which the creation is the unthinking overflow of God's abundance]. Whereas in classical Neoplatonism the process of emanation is unknown to the Absolute and is therefore in no sense an undertaking on the part of the Absolute, Judaism cannot absorb such an impersonal process at the core of its faith. Before

³⁶ My own translation.

emanation takes place, there must be a prior divine movement [viz., *tzimtzum*] to make possible the subsequent process, and this prior movement is purposive ... So, against its will, and against its better judgement, the kabbalah deals with, or at least leaves a place for, the personality of Hashem [even at the level of the *Ein Sof*] ...

(Wyschogrod, 1996, p. 98)

In other work, both alone and alongside Tyron Goldschmidt, I have argued that the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, as it was understood in the later Hassidic tradition, should be explained along the following lines.³⁷ Some facet of God's perfection (it might be His omnipotence, or omniscience, or omnibenevolence) gets in the way of anything being able to exist at all besides Him. Moreover, since God can't actually rein in any of His perfections (since to do so would be an imperfection), God is actually unable, *because* of His perfection, to create anything external to Himself.

What God does, therefore, is to create the *illusion* that He has reined in some of His perfections. This in turn creates the illusion of there being logical space for a creation to exist outside of God. In that space, God creates the world. But of course, since the contraction and the space that it vacated are an illusion, so too – from God's perspective – is the world that He has created.

The doctrine isn't to be confused with acosmism. The universe *does* exist. It just turns out to be nothing more than an idea in the mind of God. Moreover, we fatally misunderstand the doctrine if we neglect to recognise that it bifurcates reality into two. There is what's true from the transcendent perspective of God. In addition to that, there is what's true relative to the illusion that God has generated (or, if you prefer to think of it this way, what's true according to the story that God is telling, or the dream that God is dreaming).

In the story that God is telling, all of the following claims are true: God has reined in some of His perfection; the creation exists outside of God; you and I are real human beings made of flesh and blood and possessed of libertarian free will. But, from the perspective of God in His *transcendence*, none of that is true. From that perspective, God is unceasingly perfect, and you and I are mere figments of His imagination. I have labelled this doctrine Hassidic Idealism (although it was also embraced by certain opponents of Hassidism, such as Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin).

I would argue that we've improved upon the two-faced Maimonidean picture sketched in §3.1. The Hassidic God still has two faces – so to speak – but neither of them are the face of a zombie! There is God in His transcendence. That God is outside of time, eternally dreaming up our universe (in all of its temporality) from His eternal present. He is impassable, atemporal, and perfect. He may even be simple_c (but, as we've seen, we have good reason to steer clear of simplicity_M). As Wyschogrod points out, even at this level of reality, we can't really deny that God has some elements of a personality. After all, He makes a *decision* to imagine a world into being. He certainly seems to be a *mind*. On the other hand, He might still be impassable. And thus, God in His transcendence, you might think, is still not *fully* personal (depending upon how you define personhood).³⁸

In addition to this layer of reality, there's God as He appears as a character in His own story. This is the very same God. Things are true of Him in the story that are not true of Him beyond it. In the story, He has the emotional life that the Bible, Rabbis, and Kabbalists attribute to Him. He doesn't just *appear*

³⁷ Goldschmidt & Lebens, 2020; Lebens, 2020.

³⁸ See Lebens 2021 for more discussion on what Divine personhood might mean.

that way in the story. That's the way that He really *is*, in the story. In fact, His changing psychology, His covenantal relatability, and His passionate love for His creation, are just as real, and just as ontologically fundamental, as your humanity, and your life, and the world around you. Sure, there is a *more* fundamental layer of ontology than that; an ontological layer in which an impassable and therefore (somewhat) impersonal God dwells alone. But our rung of the ontological ladder is what matters to us most of the time. On that rung of the ladder, God's emotional life is perfectly real. Maimonides cannot say that God's emotions are as real as yours and mine. The Hassidic Idealist can.

Hassidic idealism allows the believing Jew to avoid the disfiguring re-reading of the Bible and Rabbinic literature that Classical Theism would force upon her. You might think that idealism itself constitutes its own disfiguring re-reading of the Bible – but note that this idealism itself need only be true relative to God's own layer of reality. It needn't be true relative to the layer of reality that the Bible mostly describes. At the same time as respecting the heart of the Biblical narrative, Hassidic idealism inherits from Maimonides the notion of a bifurcated theology – if not a noumenal and phenomenal God, then a transcendent and immanent God: God the author, and God the character in His own story. In this way, the Maimonidean tradition hasn't been wholly ignored.

Hassidic idealism would be well advised to ditch simplicity_M. Indeed, one way of parsing Wyschogrod's point is that the doctrine of *tzimtzum* couldn't be applied to the *Ein Sof* if the *Ein Sof* were truly simple_M. Nevertheless, the Hassidic idealist can attribute to the *Ein Sof* a great portion of the picture of Classical Theism, including simplicity_C, impassability, and atemporal eternity. In this way, the Hassidic Idealist can claim to have navigated a path of best fit through the often-conflicting strata of Jewish thought over time. Accordingly, the Hassidic Idealist has grounds to hope that she has been faithful to the unfolding process of revelation that began at Sinai.^{39,40}

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³⁹ You might worry that if the world in which we live is just a story, then – like in a mere story – contradictions can be true. That possibility, in turn, threatens to undermine all of classical logic. I respond to this worry in various places in Lebens 2020 (§§3.5, 4.5, and 5.2.2–5.2.3)

⁴⁰ My thanks to the editors of this volume for their comments on an earlier draft, every one of which was insightful and constructive. Any errors or infelicities that remain in the paper, are my fault alone (and God's, for dreaming me up this way).

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