

God and his imaginary friends: a Hassidic metaphysics

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Abstract: What happens when you assume that the world is a dream in the mind of God, or that the world's history is a story that God is spinning? Focusing on the role that this assumption plays in the thought of Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801–1854), at least as it is understood by Rabbi Herzl Hefter, I argue that this assumption generates interesting solutions to old riddles in the philosophy of religion and interesting insights into the nature of religious language.

Introduction

There is a religious metaphor describing God in terms of a dreamer, dreaming the world into existence;¹ and a related metaphor describing God in terms of a storyteller, telling the story that is our world.² This article explores what happens if you take either one of these metaphors literally, or at least, *seriously*.³ I will argue that doing so can generate distinctive solutions to old riddles in the philosophy of religion, and a new way of framing debates in the philosophy of religious language.

The Izhbitza Rebbe, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801–1854), was a leader of the Hassidic movement in Poland. Academic studies tend to paint him as fatalistic and antinomian.⁴ This reputation has led to his being sidelined by religious conservatives and to his cult-status among neo-Hassidic revivalists.⁵ A recent paper by Rabbi Herzl Hefter (2013), on the other hand, seeks to reclaim the Izhbitza for mainstream orthodoxy as neither a straightforward determinist nor an antinomian.

I won't argue that Rabbi Hefter's account of the Izhbitza's views is accurate (though I think it is), nor will I argue that the Izhbitza's eccentric views should

be adopted (since I'm not convinced). Instead, I seek to explore *Rabbi Hefter's Izhbitza*, and the distinctive contributions he makes to the philosophy of religion. In this way, I hope to bypass questions about the *real* content of the Izhbitza's thought. Our concern is with *Rabbi Hefter's Izhbitza* even if you don't agree with me that *Rabbi Hefter's Izhbitza* is a fair representation of the Izhbitza.⁶

The assumption

The central metaphysical assumption of the Izhbitza is this: the world is God's lucid dream.⁷ Why assume this?⁸

It is a doctrine of classical theism that God, in some sense or other, sustains the world. This doctrine could be framed in either a weak or a strong formulation. The weak formulation argues that God sustains the world intermittently, like a person providing food for a helpless youngster. The strong formulation argues that God continuously sustains, like a person conjuring up a mental image of a flower.⁹ The image of the flower continues to exist only as long as the thinker continues to pay attention to it.

When the psalmist says, 'Everybody's eyes wait for you, and you give them their food in its time. You open your hand, and satiate the desire of every living thing' (145:15-16), he seems only to give expression to the weak doctrine. Every living thing exists independently of God, but without him opening his hand from time to time, they would starve, and die, like the helpless baby left unfed. Psalm 104, however, which *begins* with expressions of the weak doctrine, goes further (104:29-30): 'You hide your face, and they vanish; you take away their breath, and they die, and return to their dust. You send forth your spirit, they are created: and you renew the face of the earth.'¹⁰

If God hides his face, even momentarily, we vanish, like a mental image that disappears as soon as the thinker stops thinking. Furthermore, in this psalm, God has actively to involve himself in the sustenance of the world: 'he renews', as in, he continually generates or regenerates, 'the face of the earth'. This phrase is echoed in Jewish liturgy: 'He is awesome in praise, master of wonders, who, in his goodness, renews every day, continuously, the work of creation.' God's sustenance isn't just a matter of periodically stepping in with the timely opening of a hand, as we see in psalm 145; God's sustenance is, rather, a continuous necessity, as we see in psalm 104, and in Jewish liturgy. This sounds more like the strong doctrine.

The strong doctrine of Divine Sustenance therefore has a certain appeal to Jewish sensibilities (and it certainly *was* appealing to most of the Hassidic Masters¹¹). It isn't a big jump from accepting the strong doctrine of Divine Sustenance to thinking of God's relationship to the world in terms of a dreamer to a lucid dream, or a thinker to a mental image, or a storyteller to the world of the story being told.

The Genesis creation narrative lends further credence to the Izhbitza's assumption. In that narrative, God just has to say 'let there be x ' and then, automatically, there is x . How does God pull that off? The traditional answer is: via omnipotence. But that isn't a particularly discursive explanation. If, on the other hand, God is dreaming us up, or is the author of our story, then of course he just has to say, 'let there be x ', and then there will be. For what does it mean for Hamlet to be a prince of Denmark over and above Shakespeare's having stipulated in some sense or other, 'let him be a prince of Denmark'?

The Izhbitza presents his assumption without argument. But one can at least understand why it might have seemed attractive to somebody who already adopts the tenets of classical theism, along with a commitment to the authority of the Bible. Or, at the very least, one can see why the analogy of God as the dreamer/author of the world can be *attractive*, even if you don't chose to take it as *seriously* as the Izhbitza did.¹²

Problems with the assumption

The Izhbitza's assumption gives rise to the following problems.

Problem One - The Loss of Freedom: If I am just a character in God's dream or story, then I have no free will. I do whatever he imagines me to do. Why would God command me to act in certain ways and hold me responsible for my actions, if I have no freedom?

Problem Two - The Loss of Significance: If we are just characters in God's dream or story - his imaginary friends - then I'm not real; or, at the very least, I lose a degree of ontological significance; significance I thought I was entitled to believe myself to have.

Problem Three - Panentheism or Acosmism: The Izhbitza's view that the world is, in some sense, in the mind of God - who encompasses, but goes beyond the world - seemingly commits him to panentheism. If the world is a part of God, then God has *parts*. God's having parts conflicts with the Orthodox doctrine of Divine simplicity. One way out for the Izhbitza would be to say that the world isn't even a *part* of God. On this acosmic picture, all that exists is God. All else is a dream-like illusion. But the assertion of acosmism is self-defeating; it entails that the experiences that led us to assert it, and indeed the experience of asserting it, were themselves illusory. Why should we trust our own assertion of acosmism, if it's all grounded in illusions?¹³

Problem Four - The Problem of Evil: If God is writing this story, why did he have to include such horrific scenes of suffering and depravity? The classical theodicies, to the extent that they are at all successful, seem shut off to the Izhbitza. Evil is *all* God's fault. Classical theodicies try to get God off the hook, but the Izhbitza's assumption places God radically *on* the hook!¹⁴

I shall argue that the Izhbitza is able to wield his one metaphysical assumption to overcome these problems and to forge solutions to various traditional riddles in the philosophy of religion.

Response to Problem One

The Izhbitza is notorious for his play on the famous Talmudic phrase that ‘All is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven’, which, in the Izhbitza’s teaching, became, ‘All is in the hands of heaven, *even* the fear of heaven!’¹⁵ But, this appearance of strident determinism is undercut by instances in which the Izhbitza seems committed to our free will¹⁶ and to the radical contingency of events that transpire around us.¹⁷ The Izhbitza seems committed to a contradiction: everything is preordained, and yet some things are truly up to us.

Rabbi Hefter (2013, 61–62) suggests that we pay careful attention to the corollaries of the Izhbitza’s metaphysical assumption. According to the Izhbitza, ‘creation is essentially the projection of the consciousness of God. A thought in the mind of God *is* reality.’ God, apparently, dreams us all up *as* being free, and that ‘fact makes free will a reality’. We have what Rabbi Hefter calls a ‘paradoxical two-tiered’ reality. On one tier, determinism is true. On the other, human beings have libertarian free will. I don’t see a paradox here. A good way to explore this two-tiered reality is by looking at the semantics of fiction. Take the following sentences:

- (1) Hamlet was a Danish prince.
- (2) Hamlet was an investment banker.
- (3) Hamlet was a figment of Shakespeare’s imagination.

There is a sense in which (1) is true and (2) is false. Hamlet was a Danish prince, not an investment banker. If, in an English Literature class, you contend that Hamlet *wasn’t* a Danish prince, but that he *was* an investment banker, your teacher will say that you have made a mistake. However, there’s another sense in which *both* sentences are false. In order to be a Danish prince *or* an investment banker, you first of all need to exist. Hamlet never existed. If you look at a list of all of the Danish princes in history, Hamlet won’t be on it. But, when your teacher asks you whether Hamlet was a Danish prince, you would be mistaken to say, ‘No, I don’t think he was, since he was merely a figment of Shakespeare’s imagination.’ We seem to be dealing with two senses of truth and falsehood: truth-relative-to-the-Hamlet-fiction, call it truth_H, in which (1) is true and (2) and (3) are false; and truth-*simpliciter*, in which (1) and (2) are false and (3) is true.

Take the following two sentences:

- (4) Hamlet only did what Shakespeare ordained for him.
- (5) Hamlet had free will, and thus the choice to kill his uncle was his own.

Sentence (4) is true, but would be the wrong answer to your teacher's question when she asks you: why did Hamlet kill his uncle? Thus, sentence (4) has truth-simpliciter, but isn't true_H. You owe your teacher a better answer. If you didn't think that Hamlet had free will, a lot of the suspense and the drama would be sapped out of the play. Shakespeare could have written a play about Hamlet the automaton with no will or emotion. It would have been a very different play. The Hamlet that we know and love is a Hamlet with free will.

Sentences (1) and (5) are true_H, which is a real species of truth, but, they are false-simpliciter. And sentences (3) and (4) are true-simpliciter, but false_H. Sentence (2) is false-simpliciter as well as false_H. Just as Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet, God, for the Izhbitza, is the author/dreamer of our world. And thus the Izhbitza can make the following two claims:

- (6) We only do what God ordains for us.
- (7) We have libertarian free will.

Just as you can assert sentences (4) and (5) without contradicting yourself; the Izhbitza can assert sentences (6) and (7) without contradicting himself. If you were accused of contraction, when asserting both (4) and (5), you would be right to accuse your accuser of ignoring the semantic ascent that you tacitly make between asserting (4) relative to the standards of truth_H and asserting (5) relative to the standards of truth-simpliciter. Likewise, if you were to accuse the Izhbitza of contradiction, for asserting both (6) and (7), he would be right to accuse you of failing to recognize the semantic ascent that he is tacitly making between (6), which he asserts relative to the standards of truth-simpliciter, and (7), which he asserts relative to the standards of truth-relative-to-God's-dream-or-story (call it truth_E for earthly truth). God's being the author_E of our world is no more of an attack on our freedom than Shakespeare's authorship of Hamlet is an attack on Hamlet's freedom.

The meaning of 'freedom'

We don't want it merely to be fictionally true that we have freedom - we want real *bona fide* freedom. In a sense, this issue brings us straight to Problem Two. In other words: the Izhbitza's response to Problem One isn't good enough because we demand more ontological significance for ourselves and for our freedom. We don't just want to exist in a fiction; we want to exist. We don't just want freedom in a fiction; we want freedom. That is the challenge of Problem Two, which I address in the next section.

A related issue should be dealt with here: the word 'freedom' relative to truth_H doesn't mean the same thing as 'freedom' relative to truth-simpliciter. Any sentence that is true_H will be true-simpliciter once you've added a fiction-operator to it. A fiction-operator, such as 'in the Hamlet fiction it is true that...', takes a

sentence and relativizes its truth-conditions to the fiction. The concern is that predicates under the scope of such operators shift their meaning. It is whatever ‘freedom’ means, free from the scope of any fiction-operators, that Problem One is concerned about. To be told that we have whatever ‘freedom’ means under the scope of a fiction-operator is no response at all. But I think this is the wrong way to think about fiction-operators.¹⁸ Take the following sentence:

(8) In the Hamlet-fiction it is true that Hamlet is free.

The meaning of any complex sentence has to be arrived at in stages. Following an example of Dummett’s (1981, 10), witness the brackets in the expression, ‘ $(2+3) \times 6$ ’. They serve to illustrate that, in relation to the multiplication-operator, ‘the whole expression ‘ $2+3$ ’ is to be treated as unitary’. The first stage in the construction of our expression joins ‘2’ to ‘3’ by ‘+’ to form ‘ $2+3$ ’. Only in the second stage do we join the expression formed in the first stage to ‘6’ by the multiplication-operator. Thus, complex expressions have an ‘order of construction’, or a constructional history. ‘ $2+(3 \times 6)$ ’ has a different constructional history, and thus a different meaning, from ‘ $(2+3) \times 6$ ’. Sentence (8) is not an exception. It has a constructional history.

The phrase ‘In the Hamlet-fiction it is true that...’ is a sentential operator. It operates upon fully formed sentences. The semantic function of the predicate ‘ x is free’ is to make atomic sentences true when the referent/value of x is free. The semantic function of that predicate doesn’t change when it appears under the scope of the fiction-operator. It continues to make its atomic sentence true when the value of x is free. The operator then comes along, after the formation of that atomic sentence, at the next stage of the constructional history of the complex sentence, and relativizes the truth-conditions to the story.

First we construct the meaning of ‘Hamlet is free’; only then can we apply the operator, to arrive at the meaning expressed by sentence (8). In some important sense then, predicates within the scope of such operators mean just the same thing as they do outside the scope of such operators. They have finished making their semantic contribution before any operators come on the scene. If we thought that predicates meant something *different* under the scope of such operators, it would be very hard to follow conversations about dreams and stories. The Izhbitza’s response to Problem One involves no subtle redefinition of the predicate ‘ x is free’.

Of course, the problem might not be that we have changed the meaning of ‘freedom’ but that we have still changed the truth-conditions of ‘I am free’. We no longer say that the sentence is true iff I’m free, but we say that it is true (or, at least true_E) iff God dreams that I’m free. But then, as I said above, it seems that we’ve really moved on to Problem Two, which worries about our losing our ontological significance. We don’t want ourselves or our freedom to be figments of anybody’s imagination.

Response to Problem Two

There's not much that the Izhbitza can do to win you over if you simply dislike the idea of losing your ontological ultimacy. Your desire to exist in the most fundamental way possible, such that the sentence 'you are not imaginary' will not be true_E, but true-simpliciter, is not a desire that the Izhbitza seems to share with you. Perhaps as a result of religious experiences that left him feeling that God is, in some sense or other, *more real* than anything else, or perhaps because of his commitment to the theological orthodoxy that has God being ontologically prior to all else, the Izhbitza was happy to exist 'only' as a figment of God's imagination, and to be free 'only' relative to the imaginary story that God is spinning/dreaming. Problem Two is simply out of kilter with the Hassidic sensibilities of the Izhbitza.¹⁹ But there is something that I can offer you, on his behalf, to 'cure' you of your desire to be fundamental.

- (9) Between 1880 and 1914 [the years in which the Sherlock Holmes stories were set], there was no such address as 221B Baker Street.

Sentence (9) is true. There *was* no such address until the 1930s. But, (9) *isn't* true-relative-to-the-Sherlock-Holmes-stories (it isn't true_{Sh}). Sherlock needn't worry about the truth-simpliciter of sentence (9) since it is false_{Sh}. Sherlock Holmes has a greater stake in truth_{Sh} than he does in what *we* call truth. Likewise, you have a greater stake in truth_E than you do in truth-simpliciter (truth outside of the story that God is telling). The following sentences are true_E: 'you are free'; 'you are real'; 'you are the figment of nobody's imagination'. That should be enough for you.

You might think that the emphasis that Judaism places upon the value of life, and of a life well lived, demands that our lives have ultimate ontological significance. Perhaps you are distressed, therefore, about the truth-simpliciter of the following sentence: 'you are a figment of God's imagination and all your actions are determined'. But that sentence is false_E, and 'you are free and ontologically significant' is true_E. That, the Izhbitza might claim, should be enough for you.

In short, there are two incommensurate axes upon which to evaluate a sentence: (1) its metaphysical ultimacy/fundamentality and (2) its pragmatic relevance. True_E sentences are more metaphysically fundamental than true_{Sh} sentences and true_H sentences (true_H sentences are, for example, true relative to Shakespeare's fiction *within* God's fiction; true_E sentences are true only relative to God's fiction). The fewer fictional operators that are tacitly at play in the *truth* of a sentence, the more fundamental it is. But sentences that *we* would call true are of much *less* pragmatic relevance to Sherlock than are true_{Sh} sentences. Similarly, your freedom, and your existence, might not have the sort of ontological ultimacy that you desire for them, but at least, for you, they

are *real*, and maximally relevant. For you, truth_E has more pragmatic relevance than truth-simpliciter .

You might think that a creator who gives his creatures more ontological significance would be more perfect than the Izhbitza's God, and thus, you might think that the Izhbitza has failed to describe the greatest possible being of classical theology.²⁰ We commonly assume that intentional objects, like fictional characters, can be created *ex nihilo*. But are *physical* objects the sorts of things that *can* be created *ex nihilo*? We saw, earlier, that the Izhbitza's metaphysical assumption removes a lot of the mystery from the Bible's creation narrative. This is because the creation *ex nihilo* of intentional objects is more readily understood than the creation *ex nihilo* of mind-external physical objects. So, perhaps a being who gives its creatures more ontological significance, *ex nihilo*, than the Izhbitza's God simply isn't possible!

Response to Problem Three

Problem Three seeks to force the Izhbitza into a choice between the 'heresy' of pantheism and the absurdity of acosmism. There is a variety of responses open to the Izhbitza.

Response (i): The contents of a thought needn't be a *part* of the thinker unless the thinker happens to be thinking about her nose (or any other of her parts)! And thus, despite his being in the mind of Shakespeare, we don't need to say that Hamlet is a *part* of Shakespeare. Nor are we forced into saying that Hamlet doesn't exist. Indeed, there are viable schools of thought that would have it that Hamlet *does* exist (see e.g. van Inwagen (1977) and Goodman (2004)) outside Shakespeare's mind despite being dependent upon Shakespeare and the continued existence of a literary work (see e.g. Thomasson (1999), 35–38). Likewise, the Izhbitza could consistently claim that human beings are in no sense *a part* of God, and that despite depending upon God, their existence as Divine fictions is assuredly real. And thus the Izhbitza can escape pantheism and acosmism. Of course, this comes at the expense of admitting that we and our world are abstract objects, like fictional characters. But that admission is only true-simpliciter ; it isn't true_E . In fact, it is false_E , and therefore this admission isn't pragmatically relevant to us.

Response (ii): Even if the Izhbitza wanted to adopt internalism about mental content and claim that the contents of God's dreams are *part of God*, he could deny the claim that pantheism is anathema to Jewish Orthodoxy. The doctrine of Divine Simplicity isn't explicitly stated in the Hebrew Bible. It was widely adopted by mediaeval Jewish theologians and became something of an orthodoxy. But older conflicting theologies were kept alive in the Kabbalistic tradition. According to this response, the Izhbitza could take his pantheism and rest assured that he is innocent of heresy.²¹

Response (iii): The Izhbitza could claim that his metaphysical assumption is able to remove the absurdity from acosmism.²² Take the following sentences:

- (10) God is all that exists.
- (11) All appearance is unreal.

Sentence (10) is (contra response (i)) true-simpliciter, according to this response. But it is false_E. Sentence (11) is false_E, but, if the phrase ‘all appearance’ rigidly refers to appearances that occur to *us* in *our* world, then (11) is true-simpliciter. As long as (11) is false_E, then, relative to the notion of truth that has most pragmatic relevance to human beings, we haven’t committed ourselves to the absurdity that Problem Three alleges against acosmism.

There seem to have been some strong acosmic trends in early Hassidic thought (trends that are still alive today in some Hassidic circles).²³ The Izhbitza’s assumption can make sense of that trend, saving it from absurdity. Acosmism is true, according to response (iii), when stated in Godese (that is to say that it is true-simpliciter), but it is false when stated in English (that is to say that it is false_E).

Response to Problem Four

In a famous Talmudic story, Moses gets a glimpse of the future sage, Rabbi Akiva, and of his horrific death. Moses asks God the following question (*Tractate Menachot* 29b):

- (12) Why do such bad things happen to Rabbi Akiva?

God answers with the phrase ‘שתוק, כך עלה במחשבה’. The Soncino translation of the Talmud (Epstein (1935–1948)) translates the phrase as ‘Be silent, for such is my decree’. But this translation does violence to the text. A more direct and literal translation would be this: ‘Be silent, for so it arose in my mind.’²⁴ On the Izhbitza’s assumption, we can run with this literal translation of the phrase, and see how it might function as an answer to Moses’ question.

Authors will often report that they don’t feel themselves to be completely in control of their characters or their stories. They begin writing something one way, and it turns out differently from how they expected. They will even talk of characters taking on a life of their own. Of course, the author is ultimately in control. If she doesn’t like the direction the story takes, she can edit it. But there may be a limited sense in which she’s *not* in control; a sense in which the creative process places the creator in a passive role. The creator waits to see what will arise in her mind and unfolds the internal logic of the story in ways that may even surprise her.²⁵ When God says to Moses, ‘Look, that’s just how it arose in my mind’, he’s saying that he’s just a dreamer or an author, and he’s not completely in control of the dream that he’s dreaming or the story that he’s spinning.

You might think that if God is a perfect being, he *wouldn't* create in a passive way. He'd have a plan, and stick to it. But perhaps the creative process is such that even the *perfect* author must be sensitive to the ideas and images that passively 'arise'. A perfect *being* might have to be in control of his thoughts – maybe that's *not* the case with a perfect-creator/artisan.

Even so, it's one thing for God to say to Moses, 'Look, I'm sorry that that's what came up in my mind'; it's another thing entirely for him to desist from trying to change that story, or dream the dream towards a more fair ending. God, on this interpretation of the story, seems uncaring. Well, does God really love us? In the dream/story, as told in the Bible, God as a character in his own story is presented as loving us. Thus, the sentence, 'He loves us', is true_E of God. But, perhaps that true_E sentence is false-simpliciter.²⁶ God might be saying to Moses, 'Look, from the perspective of my character in the story, I owe you a theodicy, because my character loves you and has the power to save you, but you know me as an author, in my transcendence, and, from that perspective, I don't owe my merely fictional characters anything, and I'll continue to create as the ideas rise up to me.'

Two potential theodicies arise:

Theodicy 1: According to the first theodicy, God isn't responsible for the evil that occurs in history, even though he is its author, because, like any author, certain scenes just arise in his mind. It might be telling that in the original quote of the Izhbitza, God isn't likened to an author, but to a dreamer. In a dream, even the most lucid of dreams, the dreamer is not fully in control. God might even *love* his fictional characters.²⁷ But, he can't stop the horrific scenes arising before his mind. God is not a perfect *Being* but a perfect *Artisan*. Theodicy 1 also gives us a *freedom* that might be less offensive than the account of freedom given so far. 'We are free' is true of us, even relative to the standards of truth-simpliciter, in the way that characters have a life of their own and surprise their authors.

Theodicy 2: We can deny, according to this second theodicy, any claim that the creative process *essentially* involves a degree of passivity. On the contrary, God wrote the history of the world and was in complete control. But the responsibility that an author has for the evils occurring in their stories doesn't seem to be a *moral* responsibility. Anthony Burgess is not morally responsible for the evil things that occur in his *Clockwork Orange*. The victim of the rape that occurs in that book would be acting irrationally if she accused Burgess of moral responsibility for it. 'Burgess imagined the rape into existence' is false-relative-to-the-*Clockwork-Orange*-fiction (call it false_{CI}). It is only true relative to our tier of reality. And, relative to those standards, it isn't true to say of the victim of that rape that 'that woman is a real woman'. Burgess didn't harm anybody.

(13) God is morally responsible for all evil that has occurred in history.

Sentence (13) is false-simpliciter, because, fundamentally, history is merely a fictional story whose author is God. Admittedly, it seems to be true_E. But, relative

to the standards of truth_E, all of the traditional theodicies *are* open to the Izhibitza because the Izhibitza doesn't think that it is true_E to say that 'we are just characters in a Divine story'.

Not only are the traditional theodicies open to the Izhibitza, relative to the standards of truth_E, the Izhibitza has shown how the problem of evil doesn't touch God as he is in himself. This is the crux of Theodicy 2. For, just as truth_E-claims are the ones that are most pragmatically relevant to us, truth-simpliciter-claims are the truth-claims that are most pragmatically relevant to God. Accordingly, if (13) is false-simpliciter, then that's what's going to matter to God. According to theodicy 2, God says: 'Recall, Moses, that I, as Creator, am not morally responsible in the way that you are suggesting, with your question, that I am, because the sort of responsibility you have in mind only makes sense *within* creation.'²⁸

Theodicy 1 may not satisfy you. Even if you accept that God can't help himself, you might think it doesn't get him off the moral hook. God might not be harming real people of flesh and blood when he harms us – given that, from his transcendent perspective, we're just fictional characters – but you may nevertheless count it as a moral failing in an author if he is even capable of (yet alone incapable of not) coming up with scenes containing barbaric depravity. Burgess was not responsible for the rape of a real woman, and perhaps he couldn't stop himself from thinking/writing it up, but we might count it against him as a moral vice that his subconscious could spew up such filth. I would want to resist this line of attack. There are some works of excruciating darkness that are of such aesthetic brilliance that to count them as a vice against their creators seems incongruous with the inherent worth of their creation. Furthermore, if God, as an infinitely great artist, is creating an infinite number of stories, then some of them are likely to be sweet and delicate, and some of them are probably going to be dark and gritty. We just happen to live in a dark and gritty story.

The second theodicy stands to face a more powerful objection. Why is it that Burgess shouldn't be morally responsible for evils in his story? Probably, you might think, because they aren't hurting sentient persons! But, in that case, God *should* be morally responsible – *his* stories, unlike Burgess's stories, affect sentient persons: us! The key claim of this critique seems to be sentence (14),

- (14) Unlike fictional characters, we are sentient, die, and exist in space-time.²⁹

But, sentence (14) is only true_E. It is, by the lights of the Izhibitza's assumption, false-simpliciter. We only make a distinction between God's stories and Burgess's stories because *we're* living in God's story. But, inside Burgess's stories, it is true to say that his characters are sentient persons. And, outside our story, it is true to say that we are merely abstract objects – fictional characters; figments of God's imagination. If you don't like this way of thinking, it seems to me that you're not really taking the Izhibitza's metaphysical assumption seriously. That's your

prerogative. It's an outlandish metaphysical assumption that we are *merely* fictional characters. But, to criticize this theodicy because you don't like its foundational assumption isn't to undermine my claim that that very assumption can play a role in generating theodicies.

Finally, you might say that if the Izhbitza's metaphysical assumption is true, then authors should be more careful: as it turns out, their characters really *do* suffer, just as we suffer as God's characters. And, because authors should be careful, and because God isn't careful, God is not off the hook for the evil that occurs in our world.³⁰ But, once again, I fear that this line of attack doesn't really take the assumption and its multiple tiers of reality seriously enough. From God's transcendent perspective, which is the one that is maximally pragmatically relevant to him, it really is true that we are abstract objects.³¹ It really is false that we are sentient beings. And thus, from his transcendent perspective, it really is true that he isn't morally responsible for the evils that occur to us, which, from that perspective, are merely *fictitious* evils.

The main conclusion to draw from theodicy 2 is that the classical theodicies are open to the Izhbitza after all. The claim that allegedly closes the door to traditional theodicies (that God completely controls our destiny) isn't true_E, and thus, relative to the standards of truth_E, the traditional theodicies might well be true.

Summary: the philosophy of religion

In responding to the four problems that we raised with the Izhbitza's metaphysical assumption, we have seen that, armed only with that assumption, he has the resources to resolve both the problem of theological fatalism and, perhaps, the problem of evil, whilst making a certain amount of sense of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and perhaps saving acosmism from absurdity.

The philosophy of religious language

On my presentation of the Izhbitza's thought, there is no mystery at all as to how we can be both free and determined. But this should ring alarm bells: the Izhbitza himself called it a 'great mystery' (Leiner (1995), *Tazria s.v. Isha*), and Rabbi Hefter (2013, 62) describes the relationship between what I have called truth-simpliciter and truth_E as a 'paradoxical two-tiered reality'.

Perhaps a detour through the topic of brains in vats will help us to explain the Izhbitza's sense of mystery and paradox.³² Hilary Putnam argued that we can know that we are not brains in vats (Putnam (1982), ch. 1). Given Putnam's somewhat ambiguous statement of the argument, I invoke Anthony Brueckner's (1986) reconstruction of it.

Putnam's argument relies upon a causal theory of reference: a person can only refer to entities to which he and his act of reference stand in certain causal

relations. Imagine that you are a brain in a vat (henceforth, a BIV). Because you're a BIV, you have never witnessed a real tree, but only computer-generated simulations of trees. Imagine that you have never been taught English by anybody who has any causal contact with *real* trees. Imagine, instead, that you, or your community of unknowingly envatted brains, have coincidentally developed a language that is internally indistinguishable from English.

Given the contours of this thought-experiment, your use of the word 'tree' couldn't possibly refer to a tree. Putnam offers three possible alternative referents for the BIV's token of 'tree': (i) the tree-in-the-image (which Brueckner (1986, 150) takes to be '*the succession of sense impressions had by the BIV*'); or (ii) the electrical impulses that cause the brain in the vat to have the sense impressions that are had when un-envatted brains see a tree; or (iii) the features of the computer program responsible for generating those impulses. Opting for option (i), though any of them would do, Brueckner reconstructs Putnam's argument as follows:

- (a) Either I am a BIV (speaking vat-English) or I am a non-BIV (speaking English).
- (b) If I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I have sense impressions as of being a BIV (given option (i)).
- (c) Even if I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), I certainly don't have sense impressions as of being a BIV.
- (d) If I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false (given (b) and (c)).
- (e) If I am a non-BIV (speaking English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I am a BIV.
- (f) If I am a non-BIV (speaking English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false (given (e)).
- (g) My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false (given (a), (d) and (f)).

What's more, the following sentence turns out to be true whether it is said in English or in vat-English:

- (T) My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I am a BIV

Brueckner (*ibid.*, 156) explains:

(T) is true so long as the metalanguage used in stating (T) is the same as (or contains) the language of the mentioned sentence. And this relation does hold for the relevant meta- and object languages: if (T) is uttered by a BIV, then vat-English will be both the meta- and the object language, and if (T) is uttered by a non-BIV, English will be both the meta- and the object language.

Given the truth of both (g) and (T), you seem able to move from a mere semantic claim about the self-defeating nature of the sentence 'I am a BIV' to the epistemic

claim that you *know* that you are not a BIV. Since you know that your utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false, and that they have disquotational truth-conditions (given (T)), you also know that you are not a BIV.

Opponents of this argument are going to think that they have been the victim of some sort of philosophical sleight of hand. Indeed, Brueckner (*ibid.*, 164) contends that Putnam's argument amounts to nothing more than a 'trick'. Given (g), I do know that the proposition I happen to be asserting with my tokens of 'I am a BIV' is a false proposition, but I don't know which proposition it is that I'm asserting. I don't know if I'm speaking English or vat-English. I don't know if I am falsely asserting the proposition expressed by English tokens of the sentence, or falsely asserting the proposition expressed by vat-English tokens of the sentence. There's a big difference!

Thomas Nagel's way of putting the concern with Putnam's argument is as follows (Nagel (1986), 73):

If I accept the argument, I must conclude that a brain in a vat can't think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it. What follows? Only that I cannot express my skepticism by saying 'Perhaps I am a brain in a vat.' Instead I must say 'Perhaps I can't even think the truth about what I am, because I lack the necessary concepts and my circumstances make it impossible for me to acquire them!' If this doesn't qualify as skepticism, I don't know what does.

Imagine that we are scientists looking at the output of BIVs. One day, we observe that one of the brains has uttered the sentence, 'I am a Brain in a vat'. On the assumption of Putnam's theory of reference, we know that the brain must be speaking vat-English. Thus, we know that she's said something false. But we also know that, in the final analysis, this falsehood has a different cause from the falsehood that arose when she said that ' $2 + 2 = 5$ '. The latter falsehood arose through bad arithmetic, but the former falsehood seems to arise only because the BIV didn't have the linguistic capability to express what she really wanted to assert. We might say, about that BIV, in such a situation, that despite saying something false, she had come about as close as she could to articulating the truth about her situation. We might say that her falsehood was *illuminating*. To echo Nagel, it was an attempt (perhaps the best possible attempt) to think the truth about what she is, despite lacking the necessary concepts.

Given the Izhbitza's metaphysical assumption, a Putnam-like argument (and a Nagel-like response) can lead us to an apophatic theology:

- (h) Either I am a figment of God's imagination (in which case I make assertions relative to the standards of truth_E) or I am not a figment of God's imagination (in which case I make assertions relative to the standards of truth-simpliciter).
- (i) If I am a figment of God's imagination, then my utterances of 'I am a figment of God's imagination' are true (relative to the

standards I assert things to) iff according to the image that God imagines, I am a figment of his imagination (given a causal theory of reference and the Izhbitza's foundational assumption).

- (j) If I am a figment of God's imagination, then I do at least know that I am not a figment of his imagination *in* the image that he imagines.
- (k) If I am a figment of God's imagination, then my utterances of 'I am a figment of God's imagination' are false relative to the standards to which I asserted them (given (i) and (j)).
- (l) If I am not a figment of God's imagination, then my utterances of 'I am a figment of God's imagination' are true (relative to the standards to which I assert things) iff I am a figment of God's imagination.
- (m) If I am not a figment of God's imagination, then my utterances of 'I am a figment of God's imagination' are false.
- (n) My utterances of 'I am a figment of God's imagination' are false (given (h), (k) and (m)).

Furthermore, my utterances of (T') are true, relative to my own standard of truth, whether or not I am a figment of God's imagination:

- (T') My utterances of 'I am a figment of God's imagination' are true iff I am a figment of God's imagination.

Knowledge of (n) and (T') should have been enough for the Izhbitza to know that he is not a figment of God's imagination! But, perhaps that's what leads to the Izhbitza's sense of mystery. Perhaps he recognized that all of the things he was asserting about the relationship between God and the world were false; that he was unable to make assertions relative to God's truth-standard, and thus unable to assert the propositions that he wanted to assert. On this reading, the Izhbitza would identify with Nagel's words: 'Perhaps I can't even think the truth about what I am, because . . . my circumstances make it impossible . . .!' All this talk of our being figments of God's imagination, or characters in his story, is false_E; but that falsehood was the best that the Izhbitza could do to gesticulate towards the propositions he was unable to express – the propositions that his words might well have expressed had he been able to speak the language of God.

Just as belief aims at knowledge, but doesn't always make it, the attempt to assert a proposition might not always succeed. There is a temptation to describe the BIV's utterance of 'I am a BIV' as a failed attempt to assert the proposition that English expresses with tokens of 'I am a BIV'. She did assert something. She asserted the proposition expressed by vat-English tokens of 'I am a BIV'. But it is intuitive to describe her as attempting, and failing, to assert a proposition that was, in the end, epistemically closed off to her. The inaccessible proposition was the one towards which her falsehood somehow 'gesticulated'.

Committing the Izhbitza to a causal theory of reference will surprise people, no doubt. But, he did hold his metaphysical assumption, and he did adopt a certain mistrust of religious language, and, on a causal theory of reference, one can see why his metaphysical assumption might have led him to that mistrust (give the argument from (h) to (n)). Indeed, according to the Izhbitza, even at Mount Sinai, the revelation *par excellence*, we got some sort of approximation: an illuminating falsehood much like the illuminating falsehood that emerges, on a causal picture of reference, when a BIV says 'I'm a BIV'. On the Izhbitza's idiosyncratic reading, the first item of the Decalogue should read 'I am an approximation of the Lord your God' instead of 'I am the Lord your God'.³³

Having said all of this, it's not clear to me that the Izhbitza *needs* to defend anything like the apophatic mystery and paradox towards which he seems to have been attracted. In Putnam's thought-experiment, the BIVs have no contact with the outside world; nobody from outside the vat teaches them how to speak English. Disanalogously, even if we are characters in God's story, God has inserted himself into that story, as a character, and communicates with us. Putnam's BIVs can't learn English. Disanalogously, God *can* teach us 'Godese'.

The 'philosophical moves' in this article, besides their counter-intuitive wackiness, only work if we have the linguistic and epistemic ability to understand assertions made relative to truth-standards more 'fundamental' than our own. If, like the Izhbitza, this concern overwhelms you, you can at least appreciate the Izhbitza's doctrines, not as philosophy, but as apophatic mysticism; as illuminating or gesticulating towards theological facts that can't be conventionally asserted. Furthermore, you have, on the back of the Izhbitza's assumption, a new way of framing apophaticism and the debate with cataphaticism: can figments of God's imagination meaningfully engage in theological speculation, or not?

Another form of apophaticism seems to hang upon the following question: does the word 'God' in the story that God is telling, or the dream that he is dreaming, refer to the same entity as does the word 'God' when uttered by God outside the fiction? Does 'Baker Street' in the Sherlock Holmes stories refer to the same entity as 'Baker Street' in regular English?³⁴ There are two plausible answers: (1) either all names in a fictional discourse refer to fictional entities, but some of these fictional entities, such as *Baker-Street-in-the-Sherlock-Holmes-stories*, somehow represent non-fictional ones, such as Baker Street; or, (2) some names in a fictional discourse refer to fictional entities (as does the name 'Sherlock Holmes'), and some refer to non-fictional ones (as does the name 'Baker Street').

According to the first answer, we cannot actually refer to God. We can only refer to a 'fictional' representation of God, as he appears in this world; perhaps *this* explains the Izhbitza's reading of the first item in the Decalogue. According to the second answer, there is no reason for the Izhbitza to adopt apophaticism, but every reason for him to be very humble when trying to describe God as he actually is; all we really know of him, even though we *can* refer to him directly, is how he

(albeit he himself) appears as a character in his story. Whichever side you take, we see new ways of framing the debate between apophaticism and cataphaticism.

The Izhbitza meets Hugh McCann

The philosophy that I have sketched on behalf of the Izhbitza shares important similarities with the contemporary Christian philosopher Hugh McCann (2012). Like the Izhbitza, McCann (*ibid.*, 22) adopts the strong formulation of the doctrine of Divine sustenance, which ‘calls for God’s creative activity to be *directly* efficacious throughout the world’s history’. McCann (*ibid.*, 23) is quick to see what sort of trouble this will land him in:

[God] produces immediately not just the substances that make up the world, but also their properties . . . It looks like God has to be continually creating them – perhaps even to be creating them anew at each instant. And if he produces things’ properties as well as the things themselves, it looks as though the entities that compose the universe are robbed of any legitimate functional role. What reason could God have for endowing created things with causal powers, if those powers are regularly pre-empted or duplicated by his own activity as creator?

McCann’s favoured way out of this problem is to appeal to two different varieties of causation (call them natural causation and theological causation). (1) A natural cause doesn’t confer existence upon an effect. Natural causation is, instead, ‘a process whereby conserved quantities of energy and momentum are transferred to produce new manifestations of what already exists’.³⁵ (2) Theological causation is existence-conferral. God causes everything at every moment to exist; but he grants those things real qualities and natures that lead to real interactions. As McCann puts it (*ibid.*, 41):

[T]he fire is what heats the water in the container, for its kinetic energy is transferred to the water when it and the container are brought into proximity; yet it is God whose creative activity is responsible for the existence of the process which is the water’s becoming hot, for the being of each phase of the process is owing to his *fiat* alone. Thus, to the extent natural causation can be understood to consist in physical reactions like these [i.e., in terms of energy transfer], it is a perfectly real and legitimate phenomenon. It is not, of course, legitimate as an operation of existence-conferral; that activity belongs entirely to God.

And thus, the Izhbitza and McCann both commit to a form of Divine sustenance that threatens to overwhelm the universe with God’s immanence, giving rise to occasionalism and to all of the headaches that come along with it; a problem that Paul Gould (2013) calls the problem of the Divine micromanager. The Izhbitza hopes to respond to this problem by placing a wedge between God and the world via two levels of truth; McCann attempts to perform the same feat by appealing to two notions of *causation*. According to McCann, God micromanages the world via theological causation, but *not* via natural causation (the variety of causation that interests the natural scientist, and has most pragmatic relevance to us in our

day-to-day lives). For the Izhbitza, it is true-simpliciter that God micromanages the world, but it isn't true_E (which is the notion of truth that has the most pragmatic relevance to us).

There are other similarities between the two thinkers. McCann (2012, 44–45), for instance, is moved by the metaphor that thinks of God as the world's author, and utilizes that metaphor in his account of our free will (*ibid.*, 108): 'The author of the novel never makes her creatures do something; she only makes them doing it. It is the same with us and God. He does not make us act; he makes us acting, so the freedom that goes with genuine action can still be present.' This is strikingly similar to the Izhbitza's God imagining our free agency. But, fundamentally, for McCann, the metaphor of God's being the world's author is just that: a metaphor. On certain occasions, McCann explicitly breaks free from the metaphor; in the hope of giving us more ontological significance than mere creatures of fiction (*ibid.*, 45), for example, or for the purposes of theodicy (*ibid.*, 123). What really does the heavy philosophical lifting, for McCann, isn't two notions of truth – he has only one – but two notions of causation. This difference is key and, I shall argue, it helps the Izhbitza to steal a march upon McCann.

On the Izhbitza's picture, we can remain absolutely neutral on the nature of causation. Causation in this world is whatever God imagines it to be; perhaps that is something he gives us the power to discover through metaphysical speculation. It could be a relation of existence-conferral between events, or it could be the sort of energy flow that McCann describes (or it could be something else). McCann, on the other hand, ties his theology to a very specific metaphysics. McCann's whole picture can only get going if natural causation is as McCann says it is. The Izhbitza makes much more room for different metaphysical theses about causation and other controversial matters. The Izhbitza's position is consistent with monism, pluralism, realism, anti-realism, idealism, you name it; any of those positions could be true_E; it all depends upon how God imagines things to be.

The heavy philosophical lifting, for the Izhbitza, is done by his metaphysical assumption, and by a certain understanding of what it means to be true-relative-to-a-fiction. Truth in a fiction, for the Izhbitza, isn't truth in some actually existing fictional world (a view rejected by David Lewis (1978)), nor truth in some set of worlds (Lewis's view, forcefully rejected by Greg Currie (1990), §2.3). Instead, truth and falsity relative to a fiction is dependent (directly or indirectly) upon the intentions of an author. Fundamentally, what makes Hamlet a prince of Denmark is Shakespeare's intending it so. But even these metaphysical assumptions of the Izhbitza are only supposed to be true-simpliciter. Perhaps other views about fiction are true_E; again, that all depends upon how God imagines things, including the nature of fiction, to be for us in our world.

Conclusion

The Izhbitza makes what seems to be an outlandish assumption: taking a beautiful metaphor too far. But this assumption has the power to generate potential solutions to old riddles in the philosophy of religion and gives us a new and useful perspective from which to discuss other issues in the philosophy of religious language.

We can compare the situation to that of David Lewis and his modal realism.³⁶ David Lewis makes a metaphysical posit – the existence of an infinite number of concrete possible worlds – that enables him to perform wonders in the face of various philosophical riddles. And yet the posit was just too weird for many people to accept. Lewis himself concedes that the best critical response to his world-view was the ‘incredulous stare’ (Lewis (1986), §2.8). He felt he could answer any technical problems one could raise with his posit, but he recognized how outlandish it seemed. Were the theoretical virtues worth the posit? I remain unconvinced. I remain unconvinced by the Izhbitza too, but I certainly see the potential philosophical merits of the position; a position worth further exploration, in virtue of the riddles it promises to solve, even in the face of incredulous stares.³⁷

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Notes

1. A Hindu myth describes Vishnu dreaming our world into being (Zimmer (1946), 38–39).
2. C. S. Lewis (2009, 169) plays with this analogy.
3. Max Black (1954) and Donald Davidson (1984), despite their many disagreements on the nature of metaphor, both accept that a distinction *can* be drawn between the literal and the metaphorical (even if, for Davidson, there are no such things as metaphorical meanings). Lakoff and Johnson (1999), on the other hand, would argue that all thought is, in some sense or other, metaphorical. I remain neutral: to take a metaphor *seriously*, for the purposes of this article, is either to take it literally (i.e. not as a metaphor), if you agree with Black and Davidson, or, for Lakoff and Johnson, to take it as being, in some sense, *indispensable* (i.e. more than other metaphors).
4. See e.g. Weiss (1985), Faierstein (1989), Magid (2003).
5. A status cemented for the Izhbitza by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (see Magid (2012)).
6. My sources for understanding *Rabbi Hefter's Izhbitza* include Rabbi Hefter's papers in *Tradition* (2009 and 2013) and extensive classes, lectures, and conversations with him, between the years of 2009 and 2014.
7. Leiner (1995, *Miketz*) – a translation can be found in Hefter (2013, 61). A lucid dream is one in which the dreamer is aware that she is dreaming, and, to varying degrees, is able to control the content of the dream. The Izhbitza himself doesn't say that the dream is lucid, but I think it fair to assume, for fear of committing him to all sorts of heresies unnecessarily!
8. We shall see, in the continuation of this article, that a variety of apophaticism seems to follow from this assumption, at least in conjunction with a causal theory of reference. For that reason, I had to motivate this assumption in my recent paper on apophaticism (Lebens (2014)), hence the overlap between this section and part of that paper.
9. I'm grateful to Amy Seymour for providing me with this analogy for *strong sustenance*.
10. This translation is my own. It follows the JPS translation (Margolis (1917)) in translating יְהִיבְהִינֵן as *they vanish*. English Bibles often translate it along the lines of 'they are troubled'. In defence of my favoured translation, Bresslau (1913), Gesenius (1836), using our psalm as his example, and Clines (1993) all include, as one of the meanings of the root בְּהִי, something along the lines of 'suddenly to perish'. Furthermore, regarding this phrase, Dahood (1970) reads it as 'they would expire', arguing that the root here isn't בְּהִי but is actually נָבַח. Even without my translation, it is clear that these verses from

Psalm 104 express something like the strong doctrine of Divine sustenance, leading Eichrodt (1961, 154) to say: 'It is hardly going too far to describe this Old Testament view of the maintenance of the world as *creation continua*.' For more on the controversies surrounding the Hebrew root, עָבַד, cf. Vanderkam (1977, 250), who could be seen to be sympathetic to my translation, since he would be well disposed to including 'to cease' under the meanings of the root in question.

11. Yoram Jacobson (1999, 18) attributes just such a doctrine of sustenance to the Hassidic mainstream.
12. For an account of what I mean by 'seriously', see note 3 above.
13. On the absurdity of acosmism, in a Hindu context, see Potter (1991, 163).
14. Another family of problems you might raise (put to me independently by Dustin Crummett and Rabbi Chanoch Waxman) run as follows: can God love us if we're *merely* fictional; and, what sense is there in our serving him if we're not really distinct from him? In response: it might actually be possible to love a fictional character. Don't authors talk about their relationships with their characters, even loving them? Isn't being a fan of a fictional character associated with wanting what's best for that character, and with deep affection? Furthermore: the objections concerning love and service are based upon the idea that we're fictional and not *truly* distinct from God. But, in God's dream/story, we *are* truly distinct from him. He is also a character in the story (the story in which we serve him), and, in that story we are real and distinct. At the very least, God's love for us and our service of him make sense *within* the story/dream.
15. See Hefter (2013, 46); Leiner (1995, *Vayerah* s.v. *vatechahesh*); the original Talmudic dictum comes from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Brachot, 33b.
16. See the Izhbitza's response to Amalek (Leiner (1995), *Beshallah* s.v. *Hashem*), and Hefter ((2013), 51).
17. See Hefter (2013, 59). The passage that Rabbi Hefter quotes from Leiner (1995, *Tazria* s.v. *Isha*) talks about the 'mystery' that from one perspective a phenomenon can be in our control, and from another perspective, it can be preordained. The continuation of the passage from which Rabbi Hefter quotes goes on to talk about the radical contingency of conceiving a child, in contrast with the fact that the child's birth was pre-ordained.
18. I make a similar point, for different dialectical reasons, in Lebens (2014).
19. Hassidism has often been enraptured either by panentheism or by acosmism, despite the worries raised by Problem Three. See notes 21 and 23 below.
20. This probing criticism was put to me by Robin Dembroff.
21. Indeed, many of the founders of Hassidism were panentheists. See e.g. Lamm (1999, 5).
22. It seems that we might want to adopt Response (iii) if we had a Russellian approach to fictional entities; an approach in which our talk about them entails no ontological commitment to them at all; all such talk can be paraphrased away.
23. For acosmism in Hassidic thought, see Jacobson (1998, 21-2) and Lamm (1999, 4-5, 8).
24. I'm grateful to Howard Wettstein for pointing out how evocative this phrase is.
25. An even more accurate translation of God's response would be: 'so it arose in thought'. It didn't arise in *God's* thought, but in thought itself. It wasn't God's act of thinking. Instead, he passively beheld the unfolding of a thought.
26. For a discussion of God's love for us, see note 14 above. The current discussion opens up the possibility that God doesn't have to love us other than in his role as a character in this story.
27. Once again, see note 14.
28. Thanks to Curtis Franks for help with this paragraph. Robin Le Poidevin pointed me towards a further problem that seems to arise from this conversation between God and Moses. Even if we grant that an author can put himself in the story as a fictional character, he still cannot, without paradox, appear both qua author and qua character simultaneously. When authors attempt to do otherwise, so the concern goes, they seem to create paradoxical stories, as we see in Flann O'Brien's (2005), *At Swim- Two-Birds*. In response, I think we should note that it isn't clear that stories in which characters appear simultaneously qua author and qua character are, in fact, paradoxical. I say this for two reasons. First, it isn't clear that, beyond superficial appearances, such stories actually exist (in order to give rise to a paradox). For example, I tell a story about how I created some characters, and wrote the story of their lives, and about how those characters chose to rebel against me and brutally hang, draw, and quarter me. Well, do I really appear in that story qua author and qua character simultaneously? I admit that I *seem* to, but, upon further reflection, perhaps I actually appear in that story qua a character who is, in the fiction, the author of the other characters in the fiction, when in fact, it is actually me, qua author,

who is really the creator of those characters and the creator of the fictional persona that I take on in the story; and, qua author, I *don't* appear in the story itself. Second, even if appearances are not deceptive, and there are such stories, I don't see any inherent impossibility in the events that they narrate (in which creators create and then interact with their creations, even if the creators completely determine the actions of their creations and determine those interactions). What is more, I would say that a Hassidic approach to reading the Bible, as well as to reading history, would have us seek to distinguish between occasions in which God appears qua character in his dream, occasions in which he appears qua dreamer of his dream, and occasions where he seems to appear as both at once. Without meaning to be sacrilegious, I might suggest that the challenge isn't much different from reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Timequake* (1998)! Sometimes Vonnegut seems to appear in that story qua author, sometimes qua character, and sometimes, at least seemingly, as both at once.

29. Thanks to Robin Dembroff for help with wording this concern.
30. This concern was put to me by Amy Seymour.
31. Or artifactual objects (see Thomasson (1999)), or whatever sort of objects creatures of fiction are!
32. This section echoes part of Lebens (2014), a paper in which I defend this Izhbitzan apophaticism (and related varieties of apophaticism) against concerns raised against apophaticism in general by Alvin Plantinga (2000).
33. Leiner (1995, *Yitro* s.v. *anochi*).
34. Van Inwagen (1977, 306, fn. 6) raises this question and foresees the same two possibilities.
35. As usefully paraphrased by Paul Gould (2013).
36. This comparison was suggested to me by my wife, Gaby Lebens.
37. This article owes its existence, clearly, to Rabbi Hefter, who first got me interested in Hassidic philosophy, and the world of the Izhbitza. It also owes its existence to Rabbi Chanoch Waxman, who first persuaded me to defend the Izhbitza against the four problems at the heart of this article (and more). I gratefully acknowledge them both. I presented this article in embryonic form to my peers at the St Thomas Summer Seminar in the Philosophy of Religion 2012. Thanks are due to Mike Rota and Dean Zimmerman for organizing that fantastic seminar. I also presented many of these ideas at a Limmud Conference in the UK, and workshopped them on the website of the Association for the Philosophy of Judaism (www.theapj.com). More complete drafts of this article were read and commented upon by my colleagues during a wonderful fellowship at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, and by Aaron Segal and Curtis Franks. I gratefully acknowledge them all for their advice, and for their friendship. This article gets its title from a conversation I had with Alex Rausch, in which he pointed out how, ironically, the new atheists accuse the theists of creating an imaginary friend in God, when, on the Izhbitza's view, it is the new atheists who are *God's* (somewhat rebellious) imaginary friends! Thanks are also due to Robin Le Poidevin for his kind and helpful comments. Finally, I'd like to thank Robin Dembroff, who served as research assistant to the Center for Philosophy of Religion during my time at Notre Dame. She read, commented, re-read, and re-commented, and I am ever so grateful to her for her time, her patience, and her insight.