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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is God's creation a fictional world?

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Abstract

Samuel Lebens argues that we may understand God's act of creation by analogy with an author's creation of fictional characters. I argue that, in the relevant sense of 'fictional characters', authors do not create such beings; rather, they invite us to imagine that such beings exist. I also argue that Lebens's view would make authorship morally problematic in implausible ways. Along the way I briefly offer an account of the being of fictional characters and consider the relations between truth-in-fiction and truth.

Keywords: Lebens; fiction; existence; creation; Hassidism

It is sometimes said that we are characters in God's story. This is generally treated as a metaphor; indeed, it has been said that the idea 'is clearly metaphorical because it is clearly false'.[1] Samuel Lebens suggests that it is literally true: that we exist, not in the way we usually think about it, as beings of first-order reality, but in the way that fictional beings do.[2] We are creations of God's story, in just the way that Holmes is a creation of Doyle's. That way, God's relation to us and to the rest of creation is intelligible. God did something that human beings do all the time: he created a story, and that was enough. Enough, that is, to ensure that we exist in some way, namely in fiction. We do not inhabit God's reality, but we have our own.[3]

I say that Lebens 'suggests' these things, because he emphasises that his is an exercise in boundary pushing. He identifies a strand of thinking in Hassidic idealism along these lines and wants to see where it may go. He brings to bear on that tradition resources from contemporary analytical metaphysics, as well as ideas about the nature of fictional characters from philosophical aesthetics. The critical comments I will make coexist with an admiration for the project, which, as he notes, is philosophically and theologically consequential. It leads him to argue that humans are free agents (126) and that the Jewish people, despite their distinctive relationship to God, 'would be wrong to think that their chosenness gives them any sort of fundamental spotlight' (176). I won't question these and other implications; I aim to focus on whether the fundamental tenet of the doctrine is true. Nor will I comment on the tradition of Hassidic thought that he calls Extreme Hassidic Idealism (100) and is the basis for the view he proposes. Lacking a shred of scholarly standing in that area, I say nothing about the historical-theological context of the view. If its historical dimension offers responses to the points I will make, I hope to have them pointed out.

I have identified Lebens's theory as saying that we are characters in God's story in the way that Holmes and Watson are characters in Doyle's story, and Hamlet and Gertrude in Shakespeare's. Sometimes Lebens asks whether we are characters in God's *dream* or story; he also says that we exist in God's imagination. This sounds like several options; it is not obvious that a dream is the same kind of thing as a fictional story and the connection between what the author imagines and what is fictional is complicated.[4] Since it is fiction that gets the bulk of his attention in presenting the view, that is what I will focus on.

Existence

We do commonly speak of Holmes and Hamlet as if they were real people; we discuss their motives and their characters. Pressed, we often say that, of course, they exist 'only in fiction'. Ordinary conversation rarely gets much beyond that. A next step might be to ask, 'Does that mean they exist?' If, as Lebens suggests, God's creation can be modelled on the activity of fiction makers, the answer ought to be yes, and that is the answer he gives; we, God's creation, exist (of course), and we exist as fictional characters do. Our region of reality is of a lower grade than God's, just as Holmes and Hamlet do not exist at the same level as their creators:

> we *can* maintain that finite minds and material objects really do exist. They exist at the level of...*what God imagines* (101, emphasis in the original).
>
> it need only be true that we are real relative to the world in which *we* live, and we are (108).
>
> 'the world is merely an illusion' is *false*, when uttered by *us*, on our level of reality, even if true when uttered about us by *God* from his level of reality (117).

In response I say this. Doyle did, of course, make it fictional that Holmes exists and is a detective, along with a lot of other things. But all that is required for that to happen is for Doyle to write a story in which readers who follow with interest and understanding can be expected to recognise an invitation to imagine there being such a detective as he describes.[5] It does not bring into existence any detectives or other sentient beings. If it were otherwise there would be concerning issues to do with the morality of fiction making. Anyone can make up a fiction (it does not have to be a good one) in which the characters undergo terrible suffering. That's no problem from my point of view. Making up such a story simply invites people to imagine terrible suffering; it does not create terrible suffering.[6] On Lebens's view, it creates suffering; suffering in a fictional world, but suffering nonetheless. Lebens does offer a response:

> According to Extreme Hassidic Idealism, our suffering isn't real from God's transcendent perspective; it is no more real to God than the suffering of fictional characters is to their author. The fact that fictional pain is fictionally real for fictional characters creates no obligation upon real authors to refrain from imagining fictional pain (110).

Our suffering may not be suffering in God's world, but why would that make it 'unreal' for God? Lebens holds that God loves us (111), saying that 'it *is* possible to love a fictional creation'. If we love them, do we not regret their suffering? If God loves us, is he not alive to our suffering? Lebens must grant that the pain of fictional characters is real for them, for on his account *we* are fictional characters and he is not in the business of denying our experience of suffering. Now, I hold that authors have no obligation to refrain from including suffering

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in their stories. But I am in a position to say that, because I deny that there are any such characters who might be suffering in those stories. There is, for me, only an invitation to readers to imagine suffering. Lebens is not in that position.

Fictional characters reconsidered

I have steamrollered over some difficulties. I said very confidently that fictional characters don't exist. But do we not acknowledge the existence of fictional characters when we say that Doyle created the most famous character of detective fiction? Some argue that fiction makers create characters, not as sentient beings but as abstract entities; 'abstract artefacts', as they are sometimes called.[7] They are what we quantify over when we say that there are some nineteenth-century characters that are more realistic than any eighteenth-century characters.[8] Such a view has its problems, but I won't quarrel with it here, and Lebens recognises a distinction along these lines:

> inside [Anthony] Burgess's stories, it is true to say that his characters are sentient persons. And, outside of our story, it is true to say that we are merely abstract objects – fictional characters; figments of God's imagination. Outside of God's stories, we are not sentient (134).

If authors do create characters as abstracta, perhaps we can say they are abstracta outside the story, but within it they are conscious beings.[9] That is suggested by what Lebens says in the passage directly above: inside the story, characters are sentient persons. But an alternative is to say that the author makes it fictional, of this abstract entity, that it is sentient. Making it fictional that something is sentient does not, I have said, make anything sentient. If someone kindly writes a novel in which I figure as the discoverer of important philosophical truths, this does not create a way or a place for me to do those things. It simply is an invitation to us to imagine that I do them.

This point should remind us that real people and things do occur as characters in fictions; think Tolstoy, or any fantasy you construct about yourself. So my earlier insistence that fictional characters who are sentient beings do not exist needs correction; some of them, like Napoleon in *War and Peace*, do. This does not help Lebens. Fictional characters that exist, as Napoleon does, do not depend for their existence on the story-making activity of the author. Tolstoy did not create Napoleon in the course of making up his story. Tolstoy might have put into his story someone whose creation he was (partly) responsible for – his son perhaps. But that act of creation was not an act of fiction making. Some, it is true, deny that real people and things can be characters in fiction; they say that the character in *War and Peace* is not Napoleon but a genuinely fictional character in many ways like Napoleon.[10] I don't accept this view. But if correct it would also not help Lebens, as everything I have previously said about characters like Holmes and Hamlet would also be true of Tolstoy's Napoleon.

A conclusion

Making something fictional is easy. Most of us can make up a story according to which people solve baffling mysteries, meet their father's ghosts, have disastrous affairs with Russian army officers; most of these stories won't be very good. The stories, good or bad, make it fictional that there are people who do these things. What does one create in the process? Obviously, a story. Also, and by way of story production, fictional characters.[11] Are these fictional characters people who inhabit a special realm of fiction? No. The most that a fictional character can be (and not everyone grants even this) is an abstract entity, the creation of

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Shakespeare or Doyle or Tolstoy or some other writer, and hence by no means a person or, in other kinds of cases, a dog (Lassie) or an estate (Tara). Hamlet, the creation of Shakespeare, is not the person referred to in the play, for there is no such person. What the play does is invite us to imagine there being such a person. That is why the activity of fiction makers is not a good model for thinking about God's creation.

I'll end with a few ideas that will, I hope, clarify the proposal, deflect some criticism, and acknowledge some limitations.

Matters arising

I said earlier that making it fictional that Holmes exists does not bring about the existence of Holmes, even if that existence is supposed to be 'in the world of the story'. Why might someone resist that conclusion? Why is it very natural to infer from 'It is fictional that Holmes exists' to something along the lines of 'Holmes exists in fiction'?[12] One reason (perhaps there are others) is that we think of 'it is fictional that' as a phrase that functions in ways significantly like 'it is true that', encouraging the view that what we call 'being true in fiction' is itself a kind of being true. Discussing the proposition 'Hamlet was a Danish Prince', Lebens says 'we are dealing with two senses of truth and falsehood: truth-relative-to-the-Hamlet-fiction...and truth simpliciter' (126). I disagree. While we do often say that something 'is true-in-the-fiction', the way this expression works in inference is different from the way that 'is true' does. If P is true, anything that follows from P is true. But if P is true in some fiction and Q follows from P, we cannot conclude that Q is true in that fiction.[13] A fictional story can have it that seven plus five does not equal twelve. 'Seven plus five does not equal twelve' is a contradictory statement, and everything follows from it. But the fiction need not be one where everything is true in it. Something's being true-in-a-fiction behaves much more like 'being true according to Hannah'. If P is true according to Hannah and Q follows from P, it need not be true that Q is true according to Hannah, who may have no view about Q.[14] Being true according to Hannah is not a kind of truth, and neither is being true-in-a-fiction.

It might be said that, when it comes to creative powers, I am ignoring God's unique position. Certainly, authors like Doyle and Shakespeare cannot create sentient beings simply through their story-making activity. Perhaps God can. Such an approach requires some suggestion of what it is that enables God to do this. What powers, in addition to fiction making powers, would God be exercising? As I indicated above, Lebens does not wish to argue in this way. The advantage of his approach is that it depends only on God being able to do what we know ordinary fiction makers do. Lebens says that if God

> 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'?[15]

As I see it, Shakespeare did not make Hamlet be a prince; he invited us to imagine there being such a prince.

I'll briefly note a couple of objections to what I have said – surely not the only ones.

It may be objected that I have chosen my metaphysical framework carefully. With more exotic framing perhaps things would go differently. Metaphysics is awash with speculations about impossible worlds, theologically possible worlds,[16] true contradictions, distinctions between creatures that exist and those that merely have being of some kind. Perhaps going for a more adventurous metaphysics would create room to accommodate Lebens's view

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– perhaps not. I note that Lebens shows no signs of wanting to reach for these sorts of options.[17] If at a later stage they seem useful to the project, we can consider them.

Finally, I need to grant that there are outstanding puzzles posed by the modest metaphysics I have signed up to. I said that Shakespeare invites us to imagine that Hamlet is a prince. On my account there is no Hamlet,[18] so I cannot be asked to imagine that *Hamlet* is a prince. The invitation seems to collapse into paradox. This is a deep and disputed issue. I simply note that interesting things have been said on related topics, for example that there can be successful acts of reference without there being a thing referred to.[19] Being uncertain about how to solve the problems of empty reference and nonexistence should not, I say, encourage us to accept a view according to which we might be the creations of an act of storytelling that involves no magical or miraculous add-ons, and depends simply on God having told a story in just the way that human storytellers regularly do.[20]

Notes

1. Bauerschmidt (2015, 573).
2. In this journal (Lebens 2015) and in Lebens (2020) and Lebens (2022). Page numbers in brackets in the text and notes are to the online version of Lebens (2020).
3. Lebens speaks of 'two-tiered reality' (126), of 'different levels of reality' (109), of 'our level of reality' (109), even of 'degrees of reality' (117).
4. For example, many things an author imagines in the course of creating a story do not end up as part of the story.
5. A complication: garden path stories, like *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (Ambrose Bierce), encourage us to imagine things that, as it turns out, are not true in the story. To count as something true in the story the invitation would need to be steadfast – not taken back at the end of the telling.
6. There are genuine moral issues raised by fictions that describe violence and the suffering it causes. The worry there concerns the welfare and behaviour of readers and other inhabitants of the real world, not of characters.
7. See, e.g., Thomasson (1999); Kripke (2013). For scepticism see Everett (2013).
8. See van Inwagen (1977).
9. Nathan Salmon has a theory of fictional entities with similarities to this view (1988). For criticism see Sawyer (2002).
10. See, e.g., Bonomi (2008); Kroon (1994).
11. Recall, I accept that to narrow the scope of my dispute with Lebens.
12. The comment of a referee was helpful in formulating this thought.
13. Often of course if P is true-in-a-fiction, various consequences of it will be true in the same fiction. The point is that this does not follow by logic alone.
14. Other locutions of this kind include 'It is said that' and 'Joseph wonders whether'; there are many others.
15. Lebens (2015, 185).
16. See Sheehy (2006).
17. On Meinong's doctrine of being, see Lebens (2020, 111).
18. That is, there is no such person as Hamlet; I have granted existence to fictional characters as abstract objects.
19. See, e.g., Sainsbury (2005). For an approach through the idea of mental files, see Recanati (2014).
20. Thanks to Samuel Lebens for discussion.

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