

Replies to Rabbi Dr. S. Lebens

In this paper Lebens makes an admirable attempt at crafting what he considers to be a more robust form of religious epistemology; in particular, by focusing on the concept of “religiosity,” Lebens claims that much more than mere attention to propositions is needed for an appreciation of what it takes to be a religious individual. In this respect Lebens must be commended for not only drawing our attention to the limiting nature of current religious epistemology, but also for providing an insight into a larger kind of project that religious epistemology could be. Propositional attitudes will only take us so far; we must also investigate “the nature of the relations that stand between us and the content of our belief/knowledge.” To believe that God exists is one thing; to orientate one’s behavior in light thereof is another matter.

It is worth stating upfront the ideas at the core of Lebens’s position:

1. Even when belief is important to being a religious person, it's never sufficient, because you also need to make-believe the things that you believe.
2. Belief is an impoverished notion; the most important things that we know are not mediated via propositions, or beliefs – you have a relationship with God; that isn't mediated via beliefs or propositions, to think otherwise would be to adopt an autistic form of faith.
3. There are lots of situations in which belief isn't important and yet make-belief is still important; where the make-believe can have corrective effects irrespective of the truth or falsehood of the proposition in question.

Here are some thoughts on each of these claims.

Belief and Make-Belief:

According to Lebens, believing that God exists is not a sufficiently absorbing epistemic state to make one a truly religious person. One also needs to make-believe that God exists, where engaging in such make-believe involves a lot more—one is acutely aware of God’s existence and acts according. Thus, a religious epistemology must demand more of us than mere propositional attitudes with the appropriate credentials; it must demand a mode of existence that is appropriately borne out of holding a set of propositions.

In this respect I have no qualms with Lebens’s idea. But does the appropriate mode in which the religious individual should engage with the world call for a different model for religious epistemology? Must it force upon us a “metaphysics of epistemology” in which there is so much more to religious epistemology above and beyond the attention to the epistemology of basic propositional attitudes? I wish to suggest that it does not. The person who holds a set of beliefs {p1, p2, p2, ...} but who fails to adopt a mode of existence that intuitively arises out of holding that set of beliefs has failed to appreciate the psychological import of those beliefs. For instance, if I believe that this dog is dangerous, but fail to run for safety, then I have failed to take up the appropriate psychological stance to the content of my belief. On the surface there is no further epistemology needed here. It goes without saying that there is an interesting kind of psychological disconnect here that is worthy of study. But this a

matter for the psychologist, not the epistemologist. While not wishing to trespass on the psychologist's territory, I hesitatingly suggest that the kind of person who believes a certain set of propositions but who doesn't take up the relevant mode of existence warranted by said beliefs is engaged in a form of cognitive dissonance or akrasia.

Belief as an Impoverished Notion

Here Lebens claims that propositional knowledge does not do justice to the kind of knowledge that is involved in having a relationship with God: "What makes a person really religious is a personal relationship with God. There are no propositions that mediate that." Again, the spirit of Lebens's claim is admirable but the upshot he draws seems overstated. It is true that many recognize a personal relationship with God as a central feature of the religious life. But, this need not call for a religious epistemology that supersedes the fixation on propositions. Many epistemologists in the twentieth century recognized the rough epistemic division between propositional knowledge, know how, and knowledge by acquaintance. The last two were not the stuff of the first; that is, knowing that w is a way to ϕ does not entail that one knows how to ϕ . Similarly, knowing that Obama is the President of the United States does not entail that you know Obama personally. But those who worked on these different kinds of knowledge did so within the confines of mainstream epistemology. My point is that mainstream epistemology, where propositions and our attitudes to them are the objects of analysis, is sufficiently versatile and dynamic to cater for a robust discussion of the kind of relationship theists ought to have toward God.

The Corrective Effects of Make-Believe

Here is where I think Lebens departs so radically and so interestingly from mainstream epistemology. To make believe that p where one does not have sufficient evidence for p , or worse, when one knows that p is false, is blatantly irrational by the standards of mainstream epistemology. And someone who acts on the basis of such irrationality ought to be censored for doing so. But it is clear that the "utilitarian" upshot of make-believe is a very positive one for much good can come about a good dose of make believing. (In this respect I am reminded of James's "Ethics of Belief" where we are told that we ought to act in ways beyond the evidence. The epistemology of faith is particularly relevant at this point.) But I think Lebens (and James) draws the conclusion too far. One can remain rational and yet adopt an emotional stance that engenders sufficient sensitivity toward a wide range of issues. We do not have to make-believe that we left Egypt to get ourselves in the right frame of mind to display the kinds of sensitivities Lebens thinks that such make-believing engenders. Rather, we can remain bound by the norms of mainstream epistemology but remain committed to the idea that our beliefs ought to engender an appropriate psychological state. The person who fails to take up the appropriate psychological state or mode of existence is, again, a person with a form of cognitive dissonance or akrasia. This is then the domain of the psychological, not the epistemological.

I am inclined, therefore, to conclude, in agreement with Lebens, that Orthodox Judaism seems more concerned with the appropriate psychological state to be in. This makes it a form of religion in tune with the psychological needs and goals of its adherents. But that does not mean that mainstream epistemology is impoverished vis-à-vis Orthodox Judaism

for Lebens stresses that the requisite epistemic states are necessary for the requisite psychological/emotional states. While the relationship between emotions/modes of existence/ psychological states and our propositional attitudes remains a fascinating topic, it seems like this kind of discussion goes beyond the confines of mainstream epistemology. And so it should for epistemology has some clearly defined boundaries. I also agree with Lebens that a study of religiosity ought to go beyond the propositional level. But that does not make mainstream religious epistemology “impoverished” any more that focusing on the microbiology of viruses makes that study impoverished for ignoring the emotional condition of someone who is ill with a virus. To conclude, mainstream epistemology must be the first port of call when examining the religious epistemology of Orthodox Judaism. Thereafter, psychological considerations should become central. A robust picture of religiosity within the context of Orthodox Judaism will have both elements—the epistemic and the psychological.