

On The Principles of Judaism *and Apophatic Theology*

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0. *Introduction.*

Simon Hewitt was right. ‘You need to read Sam’s book’ he told me once. ‘You will love it!’. Since I purchased Lebens’ *The Principles of Judaism*, I have not read anything else. Its pages have started to look worn out, my notes on its margins are too many, and I ended up repairing the book jacket with some tape. There is no doubt that Lebens’ volume has been great company during the last years. Now, if soldiers are trained to kill, philosophers are trained to disagree. And, as an organic part of the academic franchising, yes, I will punch in and disagree as well. I want to be clear, though. Today, I am *reluctantly* performing my duty. There is so much beauty, honesty, elegance in Lebens’ work that it feels like a real shame to focus on what I think might be improved. My willingness to disagree with Lebens is nothing but the attempt to help the development of ideas in which both of us are equally and sincerely invested. Back to academic business, now.

1. *Lebens’ Principles of Judaism and Apophatic Theology.*

Apophatic theology is at least as old as the three monotheisms themselves. Its name derives from the Greek *apophemi*, meaning ‘to deny’, and accordingly an *apophatic* theology is a theology which *denies* the applicability of our words to God. Apophatic theologians are, thus, committed to the idea that God is ineffable and, as such, indescribable by means of our language.

Among the very few analytic philosophers who have tried to defend apophatic theology, Lebens has distinguished himself for the clarity and originality of his work and, in particular, *The Principles of Judaism* (2020). Not only does *The Principles of Judaism* show great historical sensitivity in recognizing the importance of apophatic theology in the Jewish tradition, but it also takes up one of the most difficult challenges of all, that is, delivering an account of apophaticism which is amenable to the palate of analytic philosophers.

The main *locus* of Lebens’ discussion of apophaticism is the first chapter of his *The Principles of Judaism*. Some more thoughts can be found in Section 5.3 of Chapter 5, and a cluster of other essays as well (2014, 2017). Even though this contribution is mainly focused on the ideas

presented in *The Principles of Judaism*, I will also venture into some other corners of Lebens' philosophical universe. My jaunting around is made possible by the fact that there is a substantial continuity in Lebens' attempt to develop a tenable account of apophaticism. And such a continuity is guaranteed by his relentless commitment to ground his apophatic theology on the following two moves:

FIRST MOVE. Whenever we claim something about God, such a claim is false (or nonsensical). Lebens writes: "Apophatic claims are falsehoods (or nonsense)" (Lebens, 2017, p. 104. See, also, Lebens, 2020, p. 20; Lebens, 2014, p. 268).

SECOND MOVE. The falsity (or the nonsensicality) of such a claim is illuminating and/or therapeutic. "You can have your apophaticism" he claims "as an illuminating and/or therapeutic falsehood [or nonsense]" (Lebens, 2017, p. 105 See, also, Lebens, 2020, p. 27)

Since these two moves lie at the very heart of Lebens' apophatic theology, let's investigate them a bit more. His FIRST MOVE is openly inspired by Wittgenstein, and whoever is familiar with the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* can immediately understand why. Both apophatic thinkers and Wittgenstein wrestle with the same kind of paradoxical situation. While apophatic thinkers argue that God is ineffable and, in so doing, they say a good deal about what, by their own lights, cannot be said, Wittgenstein argues that the relation between our language and the world is ineffable and, in so doing, he says a good deal about what, by his own lights, cannot be said. Lebens, thus, suggests following Wittgenstein in thinking that, when we attempt to talk about what is ineffable, we fail to express *any* truth *whatsoever*. We need to be careful, though. While Wittgenstein believes that our claims about the relation between our language and the world fail to express any truth because they are nonsensical *only*, Lebens believes that our claims about God fail to express any truth because they are false (or nonsense). It remains unclear why Lebens decides to divorce from a more *avant la letter Tractarian* approach.

What about the SECOND MOVE, then? Well, Lebens believes that, even though our claims about God are false (or nonsense), they are nonetheless important. In order to show that this is the case, he continues to exploit the analogy with Wittgenstein and, in particular, he takes inspiration

from the two main readings of the *Tractatus*. According to the first reading, the so-called *traditional interpretation*, Wittgenstein's attempts to speak about the relation between our language and the world produce *illuminating nonsense*, that is, a very special kind of nonsense which is able to *show* what cannot be *said*. According to the second interpretation, the so-called *therapeutic interpretation*, Wittgenstein believes that there is no illuminating nonsense. Wittgenstein, however, decides to wittingly produce nonsense in order to cure us from the temptation to engage in hopeless metaphysical enterprises. Echoing these two Wittgensteinian approaches, Lebens argues that, even though our claims about God are false (or nonsense), such claims can be illuminating (because their falsity (or nonsense) *shows* what cannot be said) and therapeutic (because their falsity (or nonsense) cures us from the temptation to engage in hopeless theological enterprises).

Lebens' account of apophaticism and, therewith, his two moves have aroused the interest of a great number of philosophers, and this is unsurprising because, contrary to many other approaches, Lebens' is simple, elegant, clear, and easy to grasp. What I believe to be more surprising is that, among the philosophers who express some reservations about Lebens' apophaticism, a serious discussion about the overall tenability of his position remains evaded. Are we sure that Lebens' apophaticism is actually successful? Do Lebens' two moves achieve what they are meant to? In the next Sections, I tackle these questions, and I argue that Lebens' position might turn out to be more problematic than it seems.

2. *The dilemma.*

In order to address the previous questions and show that Lebens' account of apophaticism is problematic, I start by discussing his FIRST MOVE, that is, our claims about God are false (or nonsense). To begin with, it is important to notice that Lebens' FIRST MOVE is ambiguous, for it contains a disjunction which can be either *inclusive* or *exclusive*. If the disjunction is inclusive, Lebens' FIRST MOVE should be interpreted as follows:

Inclusive: either our claims about God are false or our claims about God are nonsense, or our claims about God are both false and nonsense.

If the disjunction is exclusive, Lebens' FIRST MOVE should be interpreted as follows:

Exclusive: either our claims about God are false or our claims about God are nonsense, but our claims about God are not both false and nonsense.

In the first case, the inclusive disjunction admits the possibility that our claims about God are both false and nonsense. In the second case, the exclusive disjunction rules out such a possibility, for our claims about God are either false or nonsense *only*.

Even though this ambiguity is not *explicitly* addressed in Lebens' writings, his understanding of the relation between falsity and nonsense does *implicitly* suggest that the aforementioned disjunction is inclusive. In order to see why this is the case, let's notice that, according to Lebens, falsity and nonsense 'overlap'. In particular, Lebens believes that, given his Wittgensteinian framework, a necessarily false proposition is nonsense *as well*. "For Wittgenstein" he writes "the category of nonsense overlaps with the category of falsehood, since – according to Wittgenstein – any proposition that is necessarily false is also nonsensical" (Lebens, Forthcoming). Since our claims about God are necessarily false and necessarily false propositions are also nonsense, our claims about God are nonsense as well. Our claims about God are, thus, both false *and* nonsense. If this is correct, Lebens should understand his FIRST MOVE as employing an inclusive disjunction, that is, a disjunction which admits the possibility that our claims about God are, in fact, both false and nonsense.

There is an issue, though. Lebens' idea that there is an overlap between falsity and nonsense appears to be problematic for the following three reasons. First, Lebens' account of the relation between falsity and nonsense is incompatible with the Wittgensteinian framework, a framework which is employed by Lebens himself. Recall that, according to Wittgenstein, a grammatical construction is sensical when it has a meaning, that is, it is truth-evaluable. A grammatical construction is nonsense when it has no meaning, that is, it is *not* truth-evaluable (see, for instance, Moore, 2011; Morris, 2008; White, 2006). If this is the case, no grammatical construction can be both false *and* nonsense, for this would imply a contradiction, that is, the same grammatical construction would be *both* truth-evaluable (because false) *and not* truth-evaluable (because nonsense).

Second to this, Lebens' account of the relation between falsity and nonsense does not adhere to the traditional way in which such a relation has been understood. From Carnap (1931) and Ayer (2000) to Routley and Goddard (1973), philosophers and logicians have argued that a grammatical construction cannot be false and nonsense. Of course, divorcing a philosophical tradition is not *per se* problematic. Arguably, this is the essence of any proper philosophizing. However, it does become a sensitive issue when, as in Lebens' case, it is done without presenting any justification or alternative view. If Lebens aims at offering a novel account of the relation between nonsense and falsity, justifying his dissatisfaction with a more traditional account and developing an alternative one lies on his shoulders.

Finally, and the third reason for which Lebens' account is troubled is that the relation between falsity and nonsense appears to be theoretically expensive. How so? Well, it appears to contradict (one of) the most intuitive understandings of 'being nonsense', namely, 'making no sense', 'having no meaning', 'being unintelligible'. Whenever we claim that a grammatical construction is nonsense, it is natural to interpret our claim as suggesting that such a grammatical construction makes no sense. It has no meaning; it is unintelligible. If this is the case, a grammatical construction cannot be both nonsense and false, for claiming that a certain grammatical construction is false presupposes that we understand what it means. Don't we need to understand the meaning of 'there is a cup on the table' in order to claim that such a grammatical construction is false? Don't we need to understand this grammatical construction as saying that there is a cup on the table in order to claim that, since no cup is on the table, such a proposition is false? It seems obvious that the possibility of claiming that a certain grammatical construction is false requires its intelligibility.

In light of these considerations, it should be clear that, *pace* Lebens, his FIRST MOVE should *not* be interpreted as employing an inclusive disjunction, for this would welcome the problematic possibility that nonsense and falsity overlap. On the contrary, since we have good reasons to believe that no grammatical construction can be false and nonsense, Lebens' FIRST MOVE should be understood as employing an exclusive disjunction, that is, a disjunction which rules out the possibility that our claims about God are both false and nonsense. Lebens, thus, faces a dilemma. He needs to choose between two incompatible options. *Either* our claims about God are false *or* our claims about God are nonsense. *Tertium non datur*.

The relevance of this dilemma becomes clear as soon as we notice its importance for the overall development of Lebens' apophaticism. As we have already mentioned, the SECOND MOVE commits Lebens to the idea that our claims about God are very important, for their falsity (or their nonsensicality) is illuminating and/or therapeutic. Since a correct understanding of the FIRST MOVE tells us that our claims about God cannot be false and nonsense, any attempt to argue in favor of the SECOND MOVE is going to be predicated upon Lebens' stance on the nature of such claims. On the one hand, Lebens might want to endorse the idea that our claims about God are false, rather than nonsense. If so, Lebens needs to argue that it is the falsity of such claims which is illuminating and/or therapeutic. On the other hand, Lebens might want to endorse the idea that our claims about God are nonsense, rather than false. If so, Lebens needs to argue that it is the nonsensicality of such claims which is illuminating and/or therapeutic.

Since Lebens seems to favor the idea that the FIRST MOVE contains an inclusive disjunction, he very often conflates these two lines of thought. While arguing for the idea that our claims about God are illuminating and/or therapeutic, Lebens freely shifts between talking about their falsity (i.e. the first horn of the dilemma) and talking about their nonsensicality (i.e. the second horn of the dilemma). Since he believes that false and nonsense overlap, this is not surprising at all. I have, however, argued that it is problematic to read the FIRST MOVE as welcoming this kind of shift, for it is grounded on a wrong account of the relation between false and nonsense. For this reason, the next Sections try to reconstruct Lebens' arguments in a way that such a shift does *not* occur. First of all, I examine his arguments in light of the idea that our claims about God are false, rather than nonsense. Secondly, I examine his arguments in light of the idea that our claims about God are nonsense, rather than false. In so doing, it will become clear that Lebens' account of apophaticism faces some difficulties. In particular, it will become clear that, in light of Lebens' own arguments, neither the falsity nor the nonsense of our claims about God can be illuminating and/or therapeutic. And, if this is the case, his two moves struggle to achieve what they are meant to.

3. If our claims about God are nonsense . . .

To begin with, let's assume that Lebens takes our claims about God to be nonsense, rather than false. In light of this assumption, let's proceed to evaluate his arguments in favor of the SECOND MOVE, and start with the idea that, even though our claims about God are nonsense, they

can be illuminating. Now, Lebens defends this idea by arguing that our claims about God can be understood as working like metaphors. Even though they are nonsense, they can ‘point to’ features of the Divine, features which would be otherwise unsayable. He writes:

[Theological claims] are here functioning as *metaphors*, in the way that Elizabeth Camp (2006) pictures metaphors sometimes to function, as ostending toward properties that have no literal name in the language (as of yet). We point to ineffable divine properties using apophatic figures of speech. In the case of apophaticism, it is the very way in which the utterance sometimes *collapses in on itself* that helps to point to the ineffable properties it targets (Lebens, 2020, p. 20)

The idea that our theological claims ‘function as metaphors’ has, no doubt, a long and venerable history (see, for instance, McFague, 1983). However, this idea becomes immediately problematic when it is paired with the belief that such claims are also nonsense, for this would imply that a nonsensical string of words can function as a metaphor, and this is *not* the case. First of all, metaphors appear to have a meaning and, in virtue of their meaning, they can be understood or misunderstood, true or false, and the subject matter of reasoning and thought. This is not the case for a nonsensical string of words, for they have no meaning whatsoever. Secondly, it is well-known that metaphors play an important role in assertions and counter-assertions. When we assert that Trump is a wolf, and our neighbor denies this, it is clear that we are committed to the *truth* of *something* and our neighbor is *not* committed to the *truth* of *that*. Once again, this cannot be the case for a nonsensical string of words, for such a string does not have any meaning, and they cannot any truth value whatsoever.

Having addressed Lebens’ issues in arguing that our nonsensical claims about God are illuminating, let’s examine how he justifies the idea that, even though our claims about God are not true, they can be therapeutic. Lebens argues that the therapeutic nature of such claims can be best understood by appealing to the concept of *verisimilitude*. Many philosophers have argued that some propositions are more *truthlike* than others. Such propositions are *closer* to the truth, and they have a higher degree of *verisimilitude*. As an example, imagine a box which contains five balls. Since there are five balls in the box, the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is not

true. It is, in fact, false. Having said that, it is still intuitive to think that such a proposition is more truthlike than the proposition *there are no balls in the box*. There is a sense in which the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is closer to the truth; it has a higher degree of verisimilitude.

According to Lebens, our theological claims might be understood in a similar fashion. As the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is not true, our claims about God are not true either. They are, in fact, nonsense. As the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is more truthlike than the proposition *there are no balls in the box*, some of our claims about God might be more truthlike than others. In other words, some of these claims might be closer to the truth; they might have a higher degree of verisimilitude. This also means that, if apophatic theology is properly understood, it has a therapeutic effect, for it helps us to acknowledge our ‘human fallibility’ and it cures us from the temptation to exchange theological verisimilitudes with theological truths. As such, apophatic theology fosters our humility by reminding us that, since we cannot grasp any truth about God, we should aim at nothing more than the highest possible degree of verisimilitude. Lebens writes:

[Theological claims] may ultimately entail that what I say, in this book, is unsayable. To the extent that these [claims] therefore contradict themselves, I will – at least – have helped you to recognize our *human fallibility*, and helped you to exchange truth for *verisimilitude* as your ultimate goal for theological inquiry. Notwithstanding, I can still say, and plausibly hope, that these [ideas] achieve – at least – a high degree of verisimilitude (Lebens, 2020, p. 27 ; *italic mine*).

Our first clue to the nature of the problems with this approach can be seen, however, by contemplating the meaning of the term ‘veri-similitude’: truth-likeness. In appealing to the notion of verisimilitude, Lebens has us back in the business of truth, and falsity, and as already argued, these notions – truth and falsity – are difficult, if not impossible, to square with talk of nonsense. To put a finer point on it, Lebens’ attempt to argue for the therapeutic nature of our claims about God by appeal to the notion of verisimilitude is problematic, I believe, in at least three ways.

To see what these three ways are, let us begin by acknowledging that according to the common understanding of verisimilitude, to claim that a proposition is more truthlike than another is to

claim, first, that a *false* proposition (let's say, *there are four balls in the box*) is, second, *closer to the truth* than another false proposition (let's say, *there are no balls in the box*). The notion of verisimilitude demands, then, both that the relevant propositions are *truth-evaluable* and that truth-likeness *comes in degrees*.

The first problem for Lebens' approach should now be obvious. According to the Wittgensteinian framework in which he is operating, claims about God are nonsense, and nonsense is *not* truth-evaluable. The concept of verisimilitude cannot be pressed into service here, then, for what talk of verisimilitude demands is the truth-evaluability of propositions and this is exactly what nonsense cannot be, truth-evaluable.

The problems do not end here, however. The truth-evaluability of propositions whose verisimilitude is under issue demands not only that some propositions be false, but also, that some of them be true. In particular, any account of verisimilitude must rely on the idea that there is a proposition which we are willing to take to be true, against which the truthlikeness of our other propositions is measured. It is possible to claim that a false proposition (let's say, *there are four balls in the box*) is closer to the truth than another false proposition (let's say, *there are no balls in the box*) if and only if we have a truth which sets the benchmark (let's say, *there are five balls in the box*). If this is correct, we can uncover a second problem for Lebens: any account of verisimilitude appears to be incompatible with Lebens' apophaticism, for he argues that no claims about God can be true as all of them are nothing more than nonsense. Leben's apophaticism denies the possibility of true claims about God which can be used as the yardsticks by which the truthlikeness of our claims about God can be measured.

Finally, looking to the thought that truth-likeness comes in degrees, we can note a third serious difficulty for Leben's proposed approach: nonsense cannot come in degrees. Why not? To claim that a proposition has a certain degree of closeness to the truth is to claim that, even though such a proposition is *almost* true, it remains *not* true and is, therefore, false. As already discussed, nonsense is not truth-evaluable and, therewith, cannot even be said to be false. Claims about God which are nonsense, cannot have degrees of closeness to the truth because such claims must be false, which nonsense is not.

4. *If our claims about God are false . . .*

In the previous Section, I argued that there seems to be an incompatibility between the idea that our claims about God are nonsense and Lebens's arguments in favor of the therapeutic and/or illuminating nature of such claims. What if Lebens takes our claims about God to be false, then? Would his arguments be more successful by appealing to the falsehood of our claims about God, rather than their nonsensicality? Let's see why this is not the case.

To begin with, consider the idea that, even though our claims about God are false, they can be illuminating because they function like metaphors. *Prima facie*, this approach looks promising, for metaphors are well-known to be, first, literally false and, second, able to convey some insights. Even though it is literally false that Juliet is Romeo's sun, there is no doubt that this metaphor gives us a good insight in the romantic relation between the two. Even though it is literally false that my wife is an angel, there is no doubt that this metaphor can cast some light on the kind temperament my wife must have in order to tolerate my philosophical obsessions. In a similar way, Lebens could argue that, even though it is literally false that God is our father, there is no doubt that this claim can give us a good insight in the loving relation between God and us. Even though it is literally false that the Lord is our pastor, there is no doubt that this metaphor casts some light on the role played by the Lord in our lives.

Unfortunately, this strategy is unsuccessful, and the troubles begin as soon as we start wondering about *how* metaphors and, therewith, our claims about God, can deliver these insights. The reason for this is that it is possible to uncover the insights of metaphors if and only if we can claim something *true* about their subject matters, and this is exactly what Lebens' apophaticism does not allow when the subject matter of our claims is God. I believe that this is true for *any* account of metaphor, however, given the limited space at my disposal, I focus on Lebens' favorite way of explaining how metaphors can be illuminating, that is, Elizabeth Camp's account of metaphorical language (Camp, 2006).

According to Camp, metaphors can be insightful because they "set an implicit analogy between two object-property pairs, where the hearer presumably has had experience with both the object and the property in one pair but only with the object of the second" (Camp, 2006, p.11). Grasping the insight of a metaphor is, thus, solving this "analogical equation" by applying our "imaginative skills" (Camp, 2006, p.11). This means that, if we want to grasp the insight which is

hidden in the claim that God is our father, we must employ our imaginative skills in order to solve an analogical equation in which, on the one hand, a father has the property of, let's say, loving his children and, on the other, that God has a Divine feature which has no name in our language.

At this point, it is important to notice that Camp's account of metaphors necessarily presupposes the possibility of claiming something true about the metaphors' subject matters, for we can apply our imaginative skills and solve an analogical equation if and only if we can make *true* claims about its object-property pairs and their relation. Once again, consider Lebens' theological case, and the claim according to which God is our father. We can solve the relevant analogical equation if and only if we can *truly* claim that (a) God is an object, (b) God is one of the objects which appear in the analogical equation, (c) God has properties and (d) God has (at least) one property which has no name in our language. The very possibility of solving this analogical equation relies on the possibility of making these, and many other, *true* claims about God. Unfortunately, Lebens' apophaticism takes this to be impossible, for *no* claim about God can be true. All of them are, in fact, false. *Pace* Lebens, Camp's framework seems to be incompatible with his account of apophaticism.

What about the idea that, even though our claims about God are false, they can nonetheless be therapeutic? As we have already seen, Lebens argues that it is possible to make sense of this idea by appealing to the concept of verisimilitude. When our claims about God are taken to be nonsense, this idea is destined to fail because what talk of verisimilitude demands is the truth-evaluability of propositions and this is exactly what nonsense cannot be, truth-evaluable. At this point, it would be reasonable to feel more optimistic about the idea that our claims about God are false, for false propositions are, of course, truth-evaluable and, as such, they are not immediately incompatible with the concept of verisimilitude. Unfortunately, at least one issue persists.

As mentioned above, it is possible to claim that a false proposition is closer to the truth than another false proposition if and only if we can take a third proposition to be true. This third proposition is, thus, used as the yardsticks by means of which we measure the 'proximity' to the truth of the other two propositions. Without being able to take any proposition to be true, we would not be able to have a benchmark against which we can measure the verisimilitude of the other propositions. Recall that, when we considered the possibility that our claims about God are nonsense, Lebens found himself in the unpleasant situation of not having any true propositions about God at his disposal, for all claims about God were nonsensical and, therefore, not truth-

evaluable. Unfortunately, the situation does not change when we consider the possibility that our claims about God are false. Since all claims about God are false, Lebens finds himself in the unpleasant situation of not having any true claims about God at his disposal. Once again, Lebens' apophaticism denies the possibility of *true* claims about God which can be used as the yardsticks by which the truthlikeness of our claims about God can be measured. *Pace* Lebens, the concept of verisimilitude is, thus, incompatible with his apophaticism.

5. Conclusion

My remarks do not aim at showing that Lebens' apophaticism has no hope of being successful. On the contrary, I strongly believe that his way of engaging with apophatic theology is one, if not the most, promising in analytic theology. However, my remarks do want to show that *how* Lebens' apophaticism has been supported is in need of further work. As they are articulated, Lebens' arguments do not seem to be able to fully explain *why* either the falsity or the nonsensicality of our claims about God can be therapeutic and/or illuminating.

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