


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The God of falsehoods (or nonsense). Against Lebens' apophatic theology

Filippo Casati 

Department of Philosophy, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA, USA  
Email: [filippo.g.e.casati@gmail.com](mailto:filippo.g.e.casati@gmail.com)

(Received 15 January 2025; revised 14 May 2025; accepted 14 May 2025)

## Abstract

While apophatic theology has been quickly dismissed by the vast majority of analytic philosophers, Samuel Lebens is among the few who has tried to show that such a theological position is tenable by appealing to two main philosophical moves. The first move is that many of our claims about God are false (or nonsensical). The second move is that such false (or nonsensical) claims about God are illuminating and/or therapeutic. This article presents Lebens's account of apophatic theology, and defends it from the main criticisms. However, it also shows that, contrary to what has been suggested by Lebens himself, the disjunction which appears in the first move has to be understood as exclusive, that is, either many of our claims about God are false or many of our claims about God are nonsense. *Tertium non datur*. Moreover, this article argues that, in both cases, Lebens's account of apophatic theology stumbles upon some important issues. For, if many of our claims about God are taken to be false or nonsensical, Lebens fails to explain how such claims can be illuminating and/or therapeutic.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein; apophaticism; Lebens; ineffability; nonsense/falsity

## Introduction

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.<sup>1</sup> Not only does Lebens's *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.

In this article, I will summarize Lebens's approach to apophatic theology (Section 1), and defend it from the main criticisms to which it was subject (Section 2). I will then show that Lebens's approach to apophatic theology faces a dilemma, that is, either many claims about God are false or many claims about God are nonsense (Section 3). To conclude, I will argue that, in both cases, Lebens's account of apophaticism faces some important challenges (Section 4 and Section 5).

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

## Lebens's principles of Judaism and apophatic theology

The main locus of Lebens's 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, 2022, [forthcoming](#)). 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's philosophical universe. My jaunting around is made possible by the fact that there is a substantial continuity in Lebens's 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. Many claims about God are false (or nonsensical). Lebens writes: 'Apophatic claims are falsehoods (or nonsense)' (Lebens 2017, 104. See, also, Lebens 2020, 20; Lebens 2014, 268).

SECOND MOVE. Some false (or nonsensical) claims about God are illuminating and/or therapeutic. 'You can have your apophaticism', he claims, 'as an illuminating and/or therapeutic falsehood [or nonsense]' (Lebens 2017, 105; see, also, Lebens 2020, 27).

Since these two moves lie at the very heart of Lebens's 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. On the one hand, apophatic theologians argue that God is ineffable and, in so doing, they say a good deal about what, by their own lights, cannot be said. On the other hand, 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*.

At this point, some specifications are necessary. Regardless of the analogies between Lebens's and Wittgenstein's wrestle with the ineffable, there are two substantial disanalogies. The first disanalogy can be captured in the following way. While Wittgenstein believes that *all* claims about the relation between our language and the world fail in delivering any truth whatsoever, Lebens believes that *many* claims about God fail in delivering any truth whatsoever. Against what would be a more Wittgenstenian approach to the idea that God is ineffable, Lebens is happy to admit that, regarding some specific facts about God, our claims are false (or nonsense). However, Lebens also welcomes the possibility according to which, regarding some *other* facts about God, our claims are simply true (cf. Lebens 2022, 4–6).<sup>2</sup>

The second disanalogy goes as follows. While Wittgenstein believes that our claims about the relation between our language and the world do not express any truth because they are nonsensical *only*, Lebens believes that some of our claims about God fail to convey any truth because they are false *or* nonsense. While Wittgenstein thinks that our attempts to talk about the ineffable produce nothing more than nonsense, Lebens is less strict than Wittgenstein because he thinks that such attempts might produce nonsense as well as falsehoods (cf. Lebens 2017, 104).

What about the SECOND MOVE, then? Well, Lebens believes that, even though our claims about God are false (or nonsense), many of them 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 decides to wittingly produce nonsense in order to cure us from the temptation to engage in arrogant and hopeless metaphysical enterprises. Echoing these two Wittgenstenian approaches, Lebens argues that, even though many of 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 arrogant and hopeless theological enterprises).

### Lebens's critics and their limits

Lebens's account of apophaticism has aroused the interest of a great number of philosophers. This is unsurprising because, contrary to many other approaches, Lebens's is simple, elegant, clear, and easy to grasp. If we survey the work of the philosophers who criticize Lebens's apophatic theology, it is possible to identify three main kinds of criticisms. (1) The first kind of criticism focuses on Lebens's engagement with historical figures. (2) The second kind of criticism argues that Lebens's account of apophaticism leads to undesirable consequences. (3) The third kind of criticism claims that Lebens's position is not articulated in a sufficiently detailed way. In this section, I briefly consider these three criticisms, and I argue that Lebens has no reasons to be particularly worried about them. In the remaining sections, I try to develop a new set of criticisms which aims at showing that, given what Lebens himself claims, his account of apophaticism is not successful and its two moves do not achieve what they are meant to.

Let's begin with the first kind of criticism, and let's examine some of the thinkers who focus their attention on Lebens's engagement with historical figures. In particular, consider Simon Hewitt (2020) and Nehama Verbin (2022). Hewitt argues that the analogy between Lebens's account of apophaticism and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is far from being tight. The reason for this is that Lebens takes our claims about God to be false (or nonsense), while Wittgenstein takes our claims about the relation between language and the world to be nonsensical *only*. Verbin echoes Hewitt's remarks by focusing her attention on both Wittgenstein and Maimonides. She argues that, according to Maimonides, our claims about God are *not* false; they are nonsense. And, for this reason, she concludes that Lebens's proposal for dealing with apophaticism helps neither with Maimonides nor with Wittgenstein.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that these critical remarks should not worry Lebens. The reason is that, *pace* Hewitt and Verbin, it is clear that Lebens aims at developing a *philosophical*, rather than an *exegetical*, position. If historical figures play any role in his thinking, such role is always in service of a coherent and consistent development of his own philosophical ideas. And, if Lebens's engagement with Wittgenstein and Maimonides has any importance whatsoever, such an importance must be found in the inspirational role both Wittgenstein and Maimonides play in the development of Lebens's original views more than in his questionable exegesis of their work. For this reason, Hewitt's and Verbin's criticisms do not seem to arrive at the very heart of the matter, that is, the *philosophical* tenability of Lebens's position.

For the avoidance of any doubt, let me make a further clarification. I am *not* claiming that Hewitt's and Verbin's exegetical remarks are wrong. As the next section will show, I am absolutely convinced that, *pace* Lebens, their readings of Wittgenstein are, in fact, correct. What I am *not* happy to grant is that their exegetical criticisms are enough to represent a real threat for Lebens's account of apophaticism. Since such an account is, no doubt, philosophical, rather than exegetical, in spirit, a criticism of this very account must involve some

philosophical remarks as well. It would be, thus, necessary to show that Lebens's misreading of Wittgenstein leads him to face some philosophical issues. And this is what the next sections will try to achieve.

As we have already mentioned, there is a second kind of criticism which stands in need of discussion. This second kind of criticism questions the viability of Lebens's apophaticism by showing that it has some (alleged) undesirable consequences. Consider, for instance, Daniel Shatz (2022). Shatz believes that some issues might arise from what is implied by Lebens's account of apophaticism. In particular, Shatz believes that Lebens's apophaticism makes us indolent about theology. If our talking about God produces nothing more than falsehoods (or nonsense), why should we bother with it? Shouldn't we just abandon any attempt to talk about God? Shouldn't we just forget about theology? Well, this criticism seems to miss a crucial point. As we have discussed in the previous section, Lebens argues that, first, some of our claims about God are false (or nonsense) and, second, the falsity (or nonsense) of such claims is illuminating and/or therapeutic. Lebens's very special kind of falsity (or nonsense) is, thus, important: it does a lot of theological, philosophical, and existential work. This means that, *pace* Shatz, Lebens's very special kind of falsity (or nonsense) does not lead us to be indolent about theology, and it does not leave us without motivations for talking about God either.

Some might think that I have been uncharitable. Perhaps, Shatz does *not* want to argue that Lebens's apophaticism leaves us without *no* motivations *whatsoever*. Perhaps, Shatz believes that Lebens's motivations for talking about God are the very reasons that will *ultimately* make us disengaged with theology. In order to have a better grasp on what I am suggesting, consider Lebens's account of therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense). According to Lebens, the therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense) are important because they cure us from the temptation to engage in arrogant and hopeless theological enterprises. Right. But once we have learnt this lesson, once we have understood that we cannot blindly rely on our theological models, it is unclear why we need to *continue* to engage with theology. When we are finally cured by our arrogance and superficiality, Shatz might want to ask, what is the point of engaging with therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense)? As there is no point in curing a healthy patient, there might be no point in reminding the importance of humility to someone who is already humble. And, if so, Lebens's apophaticism seems to *ultimately* lead us to be indolent towards any theological discourse.

Even though Lebens does not address this worry, we can easily construct a reply by echoing some of the thoughts which characterize Wittgenstein's early philosophy. And, since Wittgenstein is the main inspiration for his account of apophaticism, such a reply has the advantage of being perfectly coherent with Lebens's framework. To begin with, let's recall that, according to the therapeutic interpretation of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein wittingly produces nonsense because he aims at curing us from the temptation to engage in any metaphysical enterprise. In other words, Wittgenstein's nonsense reminds us of our limits, and help us to jettison any foolish philosophical ambition. Now, a great number of Wittgensteinians have also argued that this *Tractarian* therapy is *always* necessary, for human beings have the natural tendency to slide back into their habits, including the most foolish metaphysical ones. If so, human beings are in *constant* need of a cure which helps them to avoid their recurrent and, nonetheless, foolish ambitions of philosophical glory.

At this point, it should be easy to see how the same idea can be applied to Lebens's apophaticism. According to Lebens, therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense) help us to realize that any blind trust in our theological reasoning is misplaced, and they remind us how little we know about God. Moreover, Lebens could also argue that human beings are in constant need of these therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense), for they have the natural tendency to

slide back into their habits, including the most foolish theological ones. Since human beings are, no doubt, prone to praise their theological arguments, they quickly forget how much more humble they need to be while talking about God. For this reason, human beings *always* need to be steered back on the right path, and Lebens's therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense) are meant to do exactly that. If so, it would be wrong to think that Lebens's apophaticism *ultimately* leads us to be indolent towards any theological discourse. *Pace* Shatz, apophatic theology and its therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense) are *always* necessary for keeping our human, too human, instincts at bay.<sup>4,5</sup>

To conclude, let's discuss the third and last kind of criticism, that is, Lebens's apophatic theology has not been articulated in a sufficiently detailed way. Consider, for instance, the remarks presented by Chung (2020). Now, Chung focuses her attention on the SECOND MOVE, and suggests that Lebens does not seem to properly explain *how* falsehoods (or nonsense) can be illuminating and/or therapeutic by focusing her attention on 'Why so negative about negative theology' (2014). However, this criticism can be weakened by examining many of the other works in which Lebens has tried to develop a more detailed explanation of how certain falsehoods (or nonsense) can be illuminating and/or therapeutic (2017, 2020, 2022, *forthcoming*). On the one hand, these works argue that illuminating falsehoods (or nonsense) can be understood by appealing to *metaphors*. As metaphors 'point to' features of reality without being literally true, our claims about God 'point to' features of the Divine without being literally true. On the other hand, they argue that therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense) can be understood by appealing to the notion of *verisimilitude*. Even though apophaticism teaches us that our claims about God are destined to be false (or nonsense), such claims ought to aim at verisimilitude, that is, they ought to achieve a high degree of truth without being true themselves. And this is the kind of understanding of falsehoods (or nonsense) which allows Lebens to characterize them as therapeutic, for our attempts to *truthfully* speak about God and, therewith, our relative failures will remind us that our theological enterprises should never exchange truth for verisimilitude.

Needless to say, this brief summary of Lebens's account of apophaticism is not meant to be exhaustive, and it does not do justice to the complexity of Lebens's ideas either. For this reason, his account of illuminating and/or therapeutic falsehoods (or nonsense) is discussed in more details in the next sections. Having said that, such a quick overview is meant to suggest that, *pace* Chung, Lebens does not leave his account of apophaticism without nuances, for he does, in fact, attempt to explain how therapeutic and/or illuminating falsehoods (or nonsense) might work. If so, the *real* issue is represented by the tenability of such explanations more than a lack of explanations *tout court*. Even if we assume that falsehoods (or nonsense) can be illuminating, can such falsehoods (or nonsense) be illuminating in the way Lebens wishes? Even if we assume that falsehoods (or nonsense) can be therapeutic, can such falsehoods (or nonsense) be therapeutic in the way Lebens wishes?

### The dilemma

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

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

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

**Exclusive:** either many of our claims about God are false or many of our claims about God are nonsense, but none of our claims about God are 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.

Even though this ambiguity is not *explicitly* addressed in Lebens's 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 Wittgenstenian 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 2022). Lebens, then, suggests that, since some of our claims about God are necessarily false and necessarily false propositions are also nonsense, those claims about God are nonsense *as well*. Some of 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's idea that there is an overlap between falsity and nonsense appears to be problematic for the following two reasons. First, Lebens's 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 whatsoever, that is, it is *not* truth-evaluable. 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).<sup>6,7</sup>

Second to this, Lebens's 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 Goddard and Routley (1973), philosophers and logicians have argued that a grammatical construction cannot be false and nonsense. Of course, developing and modifying 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's 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.

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's FIRST MOVE should be understood as employing an exclusive disjunction, that is, a disjunction which rules out the possibility that any claim about God is 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's apophaticism. As we have already mentioned, the SECOND



MOVE commits Lebens to the idea that some of our false (or nonsensical) 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 favour of the SECOND MOVE is going to be predicated upon Lebens's stance on the nature of such claims. On the one hand, Lebens might want to endorse the idea that our illuminating/therapeutic 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 such 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 favour 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).<sup>8</sup> Since he believes that falsity 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 falsehood and nonsense. For this reason, the next sections try to reconstruct Lebens's 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 illuminating/therapeutic claims about God are false, rather than nonsense. Second, I examine his arguments in light of the idea that such claims about God are nonsense, rather than false. In so doing, it will become clear that Lebens's account of apophaticism faces some difficulties. In particular, it will become clear that, in light of Lebens's 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.

### If some of our claims about God are nonsense ...

To begin with, let's assume that Lebens takes our illuminating/therapeutic claims about God to be nonsense, rather than false. In light of this assumption, let's proceed to evaluate his arguments in favour of the SECOND MOVE, and start with the idea that, even though some of our claims about God are nonsense, they can be illuminating. As we have already mentioned in [Section 2](#), 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, 20)

The idea that our theological claims 'function as metaphors' has, no doubt, a long and venerable history. 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 play a relevant role in our

everyday life. My wife blushes when I tell her that her eyes are diamonds because she understands this metaphor. This metaphor is, in fact, meaningful to her. This cannot be the case for a nonsensical string of words because, given Lebens's Wittgenstenian framework, a nonsensical string of words has no meaning whatsoever. Second, the overwhelming majority of linguists and philosophers agree on the idea that, even though many metaphors are *literally* false, they can be *metaphorically* true. 'Juliet is Romeo's sun' is *literally* false (because Juliet is not a burning ball of gas); however, 'Juliet is Romeo's sun' is *metaphorically* true (because Juliet nourishes the life of Romeo as the sun nourishes the life of a flower).<sup>9</sup> This cannot be the case for a nonsensical string of words, for a nonsensical string of words is not truth-evaluable and, as such, it can be neither literally false nor metaphorically true. Third, 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 neighbour denies this, it is clear that we are committed to whatever is asserted by the metaphor in question, and our neighbour is *not* committed to whatever is asserted by the metaphor in question.<sup>10</sup> Once again, this cannot be the case for a nonsensical string of words because such a string has no meaning and, for this reason, cannot assert anything.

Having addressed Lebens's 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, some of our theological claims might be understood in a similar fashion. As the proposition *there are four balls in the box* is not true, some of 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 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, 27; emphasis added)

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's 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* (see, for instance, Popper 1962, 1972, 1983; Oddie 2014).

The first problem for Lebens's approach should now be obvious. According to the Wittgensteinian framework in which he is operating, many of our 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, that is, 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, regarding a specific fact about the world, there is a proposition which we are willing to take to be true, and against which the truthlikeness of our other propositions is measured. For the sake of the argument, consider a specific fact about the world, that is, there are five balls in the box. It is possible to claim that a false proposition concerning such a fact (let's say, *there are four balls in the box*) is closer to the truth than another false proposition concerning that very same fact (let's say, *there are no balls in the box*) if and only if we have a true proposition which sets the benchmark, that is, *there are five balls in the box*. In light of these observations, we can uncover a second problem for Lebens: any account of verisimilitude appears to be incompatible with Lebens's apophaticism, for he argues that, regarding some specific facts about God, no *sensical* propositions can be articulated and, as such, no claims about such facts can be true either. This also means that, with respect to this specific cluster of ineffable facts, Lebens's apophaticism denies the possibility of having true claims which can be used as the yardsticks by means of which the truthlikeness of others claims can be measured. And, if this is the case, the very idea of verisimilitude appears to be inapplicable by Lebens.

Finally, looking to the thought that truth-likeness comes in degrees, we can note a third serious difficulty for Lebens'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.

### If some of our claims about God are false

In the previous section, I argued that there seems to be an incompatibility between the idea that some of our claims about God are nonsense and Lebens's arguments in favour of the therapeutic and/or illuminating nature of such claims. What if Lebens takes these 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 some of 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 true 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 into the romantic relation between the two. In a similar way, Lebens could argue that, even though some of our claims about God are literally false, such claims behave as metaphor and cast some light on those facts about God which cannot be captured by any true propositions.

Unfortunately, this strategy is unsuccessful, and the troubles begin as soon as we start wondering about *how* metaphors and, therewith, some of our false claims about God, can deliver these insights. For it is possible to uncover the insights of metaphors if and only if we can claim something *true* about their subject matters. However, this is exactly what Lebens's apophaticism does not allow when the subject matter is one of the facts about God which cannot be captured by true propositions. Even though I believe that this is true for *any* account of metaphor, this is certainly the case for Lebens's favourite 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, 11). Grasping the insight of a metaphor is, thus, solving this 'analogical equation' by applying our 'imaginative skills' (Camp 2006, 11). If so, Camp's account of metaphors must presuppose the possibility of claiming something true about their subject matters, for we can apply our imaginative skills and solve an analogical equation if and only if we can make some *true* claims about such subject matters. In order to see that this is the case, it is enough to mention that the necessary condition for solving an analogical equation is represented by our ability to truthfully claim that such an analogical equation is about objects (e.g. Juliet and the sun), their properties (e.g. being nourishing) and their relation. And this is exactly what represents an insurmountable problem for Lebens's apophaticism. Recall that, according to Lebens, some facts about God cannot be captured by true propositions. Now, if I am right in thinking that Camp's account of metaphors must presuppose the possibility of claiming something true about their subject matters, it follows that such facts about God cannot be the subject matter of any metaphor as understood by Camp. *Pace* Lebens, Camp's framework seems to be incompatible with his apophaticism.<sup>11</sup>

What about the idea that, even though some of 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 for two reasons. First of all, what talk of verisimilitude demands is the truth-evaluability of propositions and this is exactly what nonsense cannot be, truth-evaluable. Second, truth-likeness comes in degrees while nonsense does not, for nonsensical claims are not 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, regarding a specific fact about the world, a false proposition is closer to the truth than another false proposition if and only if we are willing to take a third proposition to claim something true about that very specific fact. This third proposition is, thus, used as the yardstick by means of which we measure the 'proximity' to the truth of the other two propositions. This also means that, regarding a specific fact about the world, the impossibility to take any proposition to be true about such a fact would forbid us to have a benchmark against which we can measure the

verisimilitude of any other proposition. Now, recall that, when we considered the possibility that, regarding some specific facts about God, our claims about such facts are always nonsense, Lebens found himself in the unpleasant situation of not having any true propositions about such facts. Unfortunately, the situation does not change when we consider the possibility that, regarding some facts about God, our claims about such facts are always false. The reason being that, since Lebens remains committed to the idea that some facts about God cannot be captured by any true proposition, Lebens continues to deny the possibility of having a yardstick which can be used to measure the truthlikeness of our claims about God. *Pace* Lebens, the concept of verisimilitude remains, thus, incompatible with his apophaticism.

Let me end on a positive note. Contrary to the case in which our illuminating/therapeutic claims about God are nonsense, and contrary to the case in which our illuminating claims about God are false, I believe that Lebens might have some resources to avoid my criticism against his employment of therapeutic *and* false claims about God. Given the very limited space at my disposal, I cannot do much more than sketch how this might be the case. In summary, Lebens could argue that, even though some facts about God cannot be captured by any true proposition, it might be nonetheless possible to have non-propositional truths about such facts. If so, Lebens could recover the therapeutic nature of our false claims about God by arguing that their verisimilitude is measured with respect to those non-propositional truths. If deemed successful, this strategy would render my criticism harmless, for there would be something, that is, a non-propositional truth, which can function as a yardstick to measure the verisimilitude of our false claims about God.

The idea that there might be some non-propositional truths about God has already been defended by Moore (2019) and Jonas (2016), although it is often taken to be a heterodox position. What I find more concerning is the idea that there can be a relation of verisimilitude between some false propositions and a non-propositional truth, for the radical difference between these two relata seems to cast doubt on the very possibility that a similarity relation could obtain. How can there be a relation of verisimilitude between something that can be expressed in propositions (i.e. a false proposition) and something that cannot be expressed in propositions (i.e. a non-propositional truth)? And, even if we assume that such a relation of verisimilitude can exist, how are we meant to understand it? How are we meant to know when it obtains? I strongly believe that these are the kinds of questions that Lebens could try and answer while attempting to address my criticisms.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explained how Lebens has tried to show that apophatic theology is tenable by appealing to what I called the FIRST MOVE (i.e. many of our claims about God are false (or nonsensical)) and the SECOND MOVE (i.e. such false (or nonsensical) claims about God are illuminating and/or therapeutic). After defending Lebens from criticism, I have shown that, contrary to what has been suggested by Lebens himself, the disjunction which appears in the FIRST MOVE has to be understood as exclusive, that is, *either* many of our claims about God are false *or* many of our claims about God are nonsense. Moreover, I have argued that, in both cases, Lebens's account of apophatic theology stumbles upon some important issues, for if many of our claims about God are taken to be false, Lebens fails to explain how such claims can be illuminating and/or therapeutic, and the same happens when such claims are taken to be nonsense.

Let me conclude with a quick clarification. This article has tried to show that Lebens's way of appealing to a Wittgensteinian framework to make sense of apophatic theology faces some issues. However, it is important to note that, even if my article is deemed to

be successful, it does not follow that *any* attempt to support apophatic theology by means of Wittgensteinian ideas is destined to fail. I strongly believe that merging these two traditions remains a philosophically fruitful path, and this is the great lesson we might learn from Lebens. How such a Wittgensteinian path can be developed and defended, if not in Lebens's way, is a story to be told on another occasion.

## Notes

1. Among the few analytic philosophers who have engaged with apophaticism, we can mention Chung (2020), Hewitt (2020), Jacobs (2015) and Keller (2018).
2. How can Lebens distinguish between what can be *truthfully* said about God and what cannot be *truthfully* said about God? Does he have any criterion by means of which he can demarcate these two kinds of claim? The answer is negative. Lebens does *not* explicitly present any criterion of demarcation and, during a private conversation, he claimed that he does *not* need it either. Any attempt to understand if this is true would go far beyond the scope of the present work, that is, showing that Lebens position is problematic in light of what he *explicitly* claims.
3. Consistently with this first kind of criticism, Van Elswyk (forthcoming) argues that Lebens's account is not *historically* faithful. The reason for this is that some of the father figures of apophaticism (e.g. Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Palamas) believe that God is *beyond assertion and denial*. Since Lebens takes our claims about God to be false, Lebens is committed to the idea that our claims about God are truth-evaluable. If so, God is *not* beyond assertion and denial.
4. Stephen Mulhall defends a similar idea in (2001) and (2016). In engaging with Jewish philosophy, Hilary Putnam (2008) defends a similar idea.
5. As an anonymous referee has rightly suggested, Shatz's criticism presupposes that *all* claims about God are false (or nonsense). This is why Shatz thinks that Lebens's account of apophaticism makes us indolent about theology *tout court*. However, this is not correct, for Lebens endorses the FIRST CLAIM and he believes that some (but not all!) claims about God are false (or nonsense).
6. This reading of Wittgenstein is endorsed by the overwhelming majority of scholars. See, for instance, Moore (2011), Morris (2008), and Sullivan (2004). Also, this understanding of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is defended by White (2006), and White is the author of the interpretation on which Lebens relies for the development of his own work. See footnote number 2.
7. *One important caveat*. A careful reader might have noted that Lebens is particularly preoccupied with all those contradictions which are concerned with the ineffability of God. Now, recall that, according to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, contradictions are *senseless*. In light of these remarks, can Lebens claim that these contradictions are *both* false *and* nonsense? The answer is negative. For Wittgenstein distinguishes between *nonsensical* grammatical constructions (i.e. grammatical constructions which are not truth-evaluable) and *senseless* grammatical constructions (i.e. grammatical constructions which are truth-evaluable because *necessarily* true or *necessarily* false). Since contradictions are *necessarily* false, they are *senseless*. However, contradictions cannot be nonsense because a nonsensical grammatical construction is *not* truth-evaluable while contradictions are necessarily false and, therewith, truth-evaluable. This means that, even when Lebens is particularly concerned with contradictions, he appears to be wrong in believing that a grammatical construction can be *both* false *and* nonsense.
8. This is clearly the case in Section 1.7.1 of *The Principles of Judaism* (2020), and in his (2017). In both cases, Lebens oscillates between talking about nonsense and talking about falsehoods.
9. This is certainly the case for the three major ways of understanding metaphors, that is, the so-called 'simile theories' (see, for instance, Fogelin 1988), the so-called 'interaction theories' (see, for instance, Richards 1936 and Black 1962) and the so-called 'Gricean theories' (see, for instance, Grice 1975; Searle 1979). An exception is represented by the so-called 'non-cognitivist theories'. However, I do not consider this last cluster of theories because it is vulnerable to the same kind of criticism I move against Lebens in this paragraph. See footnote 14.
10. A similar kind of criticism has been moved against the so-called 'non-cognitivist theories' about metaphors. See, for instance, Bergmann (1982).
11. In his (2020), Gäb suggests that Lebens's apophaticism faces some troubles, troubles which are created by the idea that some facts about God cannot be captured by true propositions. As our arguments show, I agree with Gäb. However, Gäb and I disagree on the kind of troubles such an idea creates. Gäb criticizes Lebens for not having a criterion by mean of which he can distinguish between trivial falsehoods and illuminating falsehoods. I criticize Lebens because his account of illuminating falsehoods does not seem to deliver what it promises.

## References

- Ayer AJ (2000) God-talk is evidently nonsense. In Davis B (ed), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and an Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 143–147.
- Bergmann M (1982) Metaphorical assertions. *Philosophical Review* **91**, 225–245.
- Black M (1962) *Models and Metaphors*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Camp E (2006) Metaphor and that certain je ne sais quoi. *Philosophical Studies* **129**, 1–25.
- Carnap R (1931) Überwindung der metaphysik durch logische analyse der sprache. *Erkenntnis* **2**, 219–241.
- Chung JN (2020) Apophatic language, the aesthetic and the sensus divinitatis. *Journal of Analytic Theology* **8**, 100–119.
- Fogelin R (1988) *Figuratively Speaking*. New Haven: Yale.
- Gäb S (2020) Languages of ineffability: the rediscovery of apophaticism in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. In Hüscher S (ed), *Negative Knowledge*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 191–206.
- Goddard L and Routley R (1973) *The Logic of Significance and Context*. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- Grice HP (1975) Logic and conversation. In Cole P, and Morgan JL (eds), *Speech Acts: Syntax and Semantics*. New York: Academic Press, 41–58.
- Hewitt S (2020) *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendor of Light*. London: Palgrave.
- Jacobs JD (2015) The ineffable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible God: fundamentality and apophatic theology. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* **6**, 158–176.
- Jonas S (2016) *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion and Philosophy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Keller LJ (2018) Divine ineffability and Franciscan knowledge. *Res Philosophica* **95**, 347–370.
- Lebens S (2014) Why so negative about negative theology? The search for a Plantinga-proof apophaticism. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **76**, 259–275.
- Lebens S (2017) Negative theology as illuminating and/or therapeutic falsehoods. In Fagenblat M (ed), *Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 85–109.
- Lebens S (2020) *The Principles of Judaism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lebens S (2022) Response to critics. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **14**(4), 340–358.
- Lebens S (2022) Replies to critics. Association for the Philosophy of Judaism. [www.theapj.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Responses.pdf](http://www.theapj.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Responses.pdf) (Accessed 20 November 2024).
- Moore AW (2011) *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore AW (2019) *Language, World and Limits: Essays in the Philosophy of Language and Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morris M (2008) *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Tractatus*. New York: Routledge.
- Mulhall S (2001) *Inheritance and Originality. Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mulhall S (2016) *The Great Riddle. Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oddie G (2014) Truthlikeness. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truthlikeness/>
- Popper KR (1962) *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Popper KR (1972) *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Popper KR (1983) *Realism and the Aim of Science*. Routledge: London.
- Putnam H (2008) *Jewish Philosophy as Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Richards IA (1936) *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Searle J (1979) Metaphor. In Ortony A (ed), *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 83–111.
- Shatz D (2022) Review. Samuel Lebens' the principle of Judaism. *Journal of Analytic Theology* **10**, 723–729.
- Sullivan PM (2004) What is the *Tractatus* about? In Kölbel M, and Weiss B (eds), *Wittgenstein's Lasting Significance*. New York: Routledge, 32–46.
- Van Elswyk P (forthcoming) Metalinguistic apophaticism. *Oxford studies in philosophy of religion*.
- Verbin N (2022) Do religious Jews have faith in the principles of Judaism. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. **14**(4), 360–371.
- White R (2006) *Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus': A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum.