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Samuel Lebens, THE PRINCIPLES OF JUDAISM

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the property without actually changing. For example, if you remain 5'4" but your son has a growth spurt and is now taller than you, you no longer have a property you had before (taller than your son). You, however, have not actually changed. Love is remarkably unlike this, though; if you stopped loving someone, the change would reside in *you*, and not in something or someone external to you (though the change in you would naturally result in a change in the relationship). Similarly, we can imagine a scenario where God creates for some reason other than love, and does not love us; the difference between this scenario and one where God does love us is in God, and not in something extrinsic to God. Thus, love is an intrinsic characteristic of God, and by saying that God is contingently loving, Murphy attributes to him an accidental intrinsic characteristic, thus violating divine simplicity.

III. Conclusion

Overall, Murphy offers compelling arguments for his account of divine holiness. His adoption of Otto's account of holiness as an experience of the *tremendens et fascinans* accommodates many intuitions about the concept of holiness, and Murphy's reconciliation of this account with potential difficulties, such as the Incarnation or creation, is both interesting and well-argued. However, some of his arguments for rejecting the morality framework or the love framework of divine motivation are lacking, which leaves room for readers to still reject Murphy's position in favor of these others.

The Principles of Judaism, by Samuel Lebens. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xvii. + 331. \$100 (hardcover)

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The stated goal of this remarkably ambitious and erudite book is to provide a "minimal axiomatization" of Orthodox Judaism (henceforward, OJ). Lebens seeks to articulate in a logically rigorous manner those doctrines which are necessary for the foundations of OJ. Lebens regards this effort as not merely a philosophical exercise but also a religious one, for he considers that there is a Biblically based commandment to *know* God, which presumably includes knowledge of important doctrines about God



and his relationship with the world. Periodically, Lebens states that other minimal axiomatizations may be possible, but, clearly, he thinks the one he offers is the best one available. Indeed, at the end of the book (275) he claims that the principles which he has identified are both necessary and sufficient for underwriting Orthodox Judaism. This may leave the reader wondering how sincerely Lebens means to allow that other axiomatizations are genuinely possible.

Although he states that he will not *argue* for these principles, his intention is to present those principles in a plausible manner. To the degree that a plausible articulation constitutes a defense, it must be said that Lebens does offer a defense of those principles. A summary of the book is as follows. A brief preliminary chapter notes that the notion that God is ineffable has a long history in Jewish literature, and so Lebens confronts the question of how one can even begin to speak at length about an ineffable God. Here we shall not dwell on this chapter, except to note that perhaps Lebens overstates the problem by not sufficiently acknowledging that thinkers such as Maimonides who endorse the ineffability of God's *essence* see no problem whatsoever with talking at great length about God's *actions*. Thereafter, following Yosef Albo (1380–1444), Lebens proposes that these are the three major foundational doctrines of OJ. 1) *God created the world*. Lebens argues that the best way to understand creation is to regard the world as an idea in God's mind, but he admits that this particular way of understanding creation is not necessary for qualifying as Orthodox. 2) *God revealed himself and his commandments to the people of Israel at Sinai, and endorsed the ensuing Jewish interpretive tradition regarding how to understand and fulfill the commandments*. Here Lebens insists that an Orthodox Jew must regard the Pentateuch as divinely given word for word, or at the very least, one must regard the text of the Pentateuch *as if* it were so given. 3) *God is good and he exercises providential care over the world and especially the people of Israel, and there will eventually be a redemptive Messianic era in which some great end will be realized, as understood by certain traditional Jewish texts, including Maimonides' Code of Law*. Here Lebens insists that if one understands the Messianic era differently than does Maimonides, one will not qualify as Orthodox. Having identified the requisite doctrines, Lebens closes by addressing the nature of the commitment or "stance" which a person must have toward them. More on that issue follows, toward the end of this review.

While there is much to applaud about this book, the remainder of this review offers several criticisms of various aspects of the book. One worry concerns the very project of the book. Bluntly stated, the worry is that there is no objectively valid way of defining "Orthodox Judaism." This is an English phrase (borrowed from German)—not a Hebrew phrase. It has a very short history within the Jewish tradition and nobody owns the "correct" definition of OJ. So, by what criterion would we know whether Lebens' proposal is minimally sufficient or not? Perhaps what Lebens' real project is, or should be, is to articulate a plausible version of *Judaism*. It is

a version of Judaism if it is well-grounded in Jewish texts and traditions, and if it matches what a substantial number of Jews who identify as religious would be willing to endorse. One can then concede (as Lebens happily does) that there are other versions of Judaism, but also maintain that the offered version is the most solidly grounded in the texts, and perhaps that it has some philosophical virtues as well. Indeed, if this is what Lebens is taken to be doing, he succeeds in his project to a large extent.

Nevertheless, in what follows, let us set aside this worry and assume that somehow we know what counts as Orthodox Judaism. One general question is, why does Lebens insist that there are *three* principles, when really there are many more? As Lebens himself notes, each of the three principles entails or presupposes other subsidiary claims. For example, underlying the doctrine of creation is that *God exists, God has a mind, God is very powerful* and that *God is an agent of some sort (God has free choice)*. Underlying the doctrine of revelation is that *God communicates to humans in words* and that *God has chosen the people of Israel for a special mission*. Finally, underlying the doctrine of redemption is that *God is good* and *God is involved in directing human history*. Hence the reader may wonder why Lebens gives privilege to these *three* doctrines.

Arguably, if we are anxious to discover a minimal set of axioms underlying Orthodox Judaism, it should ideally be *one* maxim—granted, with many implications. Ideally, it must be some doctrine to which all and only Orthodox Jews are committed. Surely, the central doctrine unique to Judaism is something like Lebens' principle #2, that the Torah represents God's revelation and that its teachings are true. But this needs to be strengthened in order to qualify as *Orthodox*. I suggest (though I cannot prove) that the single fundamental doctrine which underlies OJ is as follows, which we may label, #2': *The Written and Oral Torah represents valid theological teachings and practical guidelines for how any Jew should live to this very day; the phrase "Written and Oral Torah" is defined ostensibly by pointing to the Hebrew Scriptures, and to the Talmud and the ensuing Rabbinic legal works such as Maimonides' Code of Law and Joseph Caro's Shulchan Aruch (= Set Table) as interpreted and expounded by specific legal authorities (Hebrew: poskim) to this very day*. This last point is a critical aspect of Orthodox Judaism which Lebens seems to underplay. The Oral Torah is not really a set of texts but rather a living tradition which is taught and interpreted by living Rabbis who are known as "great ones of the generation" (Hebrew: *gedolay ha-dor*). It is perhaps the task of a Jewish philosophy of law to explain how and why certain Rabbis rather than others get to be in this position, and what (if any) is the rationale for committing oneself to the rulings of such authorities. That is a complex matter that is well beyond the scope of this review.

If Principle #2' describes the fundamental doctrinal commitment of the Orthodox Jew, one can then attempt to flesh out what are the (innumerable) theological teachings that follow from this principle. These include that God exists, God is in control of human affairs, and that there will be

some kind of redemption of the world in the future. These also include that God took the Israelites out of Egypt and chose them for a special divine mission. One can also debate such matters as to whether belief in creation is necessary, whether belief in a physical afterlife is necessary, whether literal interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures is necessary, and if so to what degree, etc. One can also note that even within the framework of Orthodox Judaism there is room for some differences both in doctrine and practices among Orthodox Jews.

For the moment, let us set this alternative suggestion aside and focus on some particular points regarding Lebens' three principles. Regarding principle #1, one might wonder why a commitment to *creation* is necessary for being an Orthodox Jew. What seems necessary is a commitment to the claim that *God is in control of what happens in the world*. Or at least, that *God is in control of important things*. What counts as "important" is debatable but it would include the affairs of humans on both a social and individual level. And even though the book of Genesis seems to indicate creation, as Maimonides famously wrote, one can always interpret that non-literally. Perhaps someone might argue that complete control requires creation. That may or may not be correct. But even if it is correct, someone who (wrongly) rejects creation could still count as Orthodox as long as he is committed to the doctrine that God is in control of what happens in the world.

Regarding Principle #2 as articulated by Lebens, it seems too strong in one way and too weak in another way. It seems too strong in that one might question whether it is necessary for an Orthodox Jew to be committed to the notion that the Pentateuch should be treated as if every word was stated by God to Moses. Although many who self-identify as "Orthodox" may believe this, it seems sufficient to be committed to the alternative Principle #2' as articulated above. All that is needed is a commitment to the claim that the people of Israel have been divinely ordained to a life of fulfilling the Torah—as understood in accord with a specific interpretive tradition.

On the other hand, it is not clear how Lebens' principle #2—as articulated in the text—rules out all forms of Liberal or Conservative Judaism. (It does rule out any form of Judaism which holds that the teachings and practices of the Written and Oral Torah are not divine at all or are substantially mistaken from the very beginning.) But what about people who think that #2 (together with #1 and #3 are) true, but also there is no good reason to obey the dictates of any religious authorities today (or they obey the dictates of self-proclaimed authorities who break radically with Maimonides' Code and/or the Code of Joseph Caro)? Would they count as Orthodox Jews? It also doesn't seem to rule out the religion adopted by so-called "Jews for Jesus." These are Jews who believe that Jesus is/was the Messiah, but that the commandments of the Torah are still binding in much the same way that Orthodox Jews practice them. Again, the only way of blocking this is by resorting to Principle #2', that is, to specify

particularly which codes of law Orthodox Jews hold fast to, and which authorities (*poskim*) they follow. (Interestingly, in principle #3, Lebens specifically mentions Maimonides *Code of Law* as definitive for describing what minimally counts as “redemption” from an Orthodox viewpoint. Perhaps he should have done something similar in #2.)

So much for a critical discussion of Lebens’ three principles. After identifying the three principles of Judaism, Lebens discusses what stance one needs to take toward these principles in order to be Orthodox. Lebens claims that belief is not required. Instead, he articulates a notion of faith that is based on the work of Howard-Snyder (“Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, 4 (2013): 357–372). On this account, propositional faith in *p* involves four elements: i.) a positive evaluation of *p*, ii.) a positive conative orientation towards *p*, iii.) a positive cognitive attitude toward *p*, and iv.) resilience to counter-evidence for *p*. Basically, this amounts to the requirement that a person believe there is at least some non-zero probability that the doctrines are true, and that the person must want/hope not only that the doctrines are true, but also that *others* want/hope them to be true as well.

It appears that this notion of faith is in a certain way too strong, and also in a certain way too weak for Lebens’ purpose. It is too strong because it is not clear why a person who actually wishes the doctrines were false couldn’t still qualify minimally as an Orthodox Jew. Granted, such a person may be called a “begrudging” Orthodox Jew, and this is not ideal from an Orthodox standpoint. But if a person lives his life in accord with Principle #2’ then he still counts as “Orthodox”—just as much as a husband is faithful to his wife even if he does so begrudgingly.

On the other hand, this conception of faith is too weak in that it does not seem to require adopting any of these principles as *action-guiding*. Lebens’ purposes might be better served by the pragmatic conception of religious faith as articulated by Golding (“Toward a Pragmatic Conception of Religious Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7, 4 (1990)). On this notion, a person who has faith that *p* does those actions which are appropriate to do if *p* is true—for the sake of attaining or maintaining a good relationship with God. Thus, for example, one has faith that the Torah is true if one pursues a good relationship with God by doing those actions recommended or required by the Torah. To qualify as Orthodox, it is not enough to want or hope that certain theological doctrines are true—it is to take those doctrines as guiding principles for one’s behavior. Incidentally, such a notion of faith leaves ample room for cognitive doubt about those doctrines. (However, shortly we shall see that while a person may qualify as minimally Orthodox if he has pragmatic faith in certain doctrines, a person who does not have a *genuine belief* in God cannot be a “robust” Orthodox Jew.)

Having claimed that *belief* in the doctrines is not necessary for qualifying as Orthodox, Lebens goes on to claim that in order to be a genuinely

religious Orthodox Jew, one needs to adopt a stance of “make belief” at least on some occasions. By this he means that the person must “experience the world” as if certain things were true, even though he actually does not (yet? or ever?) believe that those things are true. This is necessary for generating Jewish “religiosity”—that is, certain emotional states that Orthodox Jews are supposed to experience. Whatever Lebens means by this, it feeds grist to the atheist’s mill to say that in order to be religious one needs to engage in “make belief.” Certainly this is not a terminology that is likely to gain widespread use among Orthodox Jews.

Instead of talking about “make belief” Lebens should perhaps confine himself to talking about the need for focus, meditation, and, granted, the use of the imagination. Indeed, use of the imagination is important for being a religious Orthodox Jew. For example, as Lebens notes, it is important to imagine what it must be like to experience the exodus from Egypt. But why call that “make belief”? Also, if it is necessary at all, it is only necessary for people who have *weak* real belief. Such people need to conjure up certain images in their mind in order to access certain religious emotions. But if a person has genuine belief, why would they need to “make believe” anything? Rather, what they need to do is focus, meditate, and, indeed, engage their imagination to vivify what they already believe.

Having said all this, it still seems that to be a “robust” Orthodox Jew one actually needs to *genuinely believe* certain doctrines about God. A “minimal” Orthodox Jew is one who adopts an Orthodox lifestyle by keeping a substantial number of Torah-based commandments (whether in accord with Principle #2’ above, or in accord with Lebens’ view that there are three primary doctrines). A “robust” Orthodox Jew is one who fulfills all (or nearly all) the commandments (that are possible to fulfill in our day). Now, there are certain commandments which cannot be properly fulfilled unless one actually has a belief in God. These include the commandments to know God, to love God, and to revere God. It seems patently true that one can only know x , or love x , or revere x , if one believes that x exists. In fact, as Lebens himself wrote at the beginning of the book, OJ ultimately demands *knowledge*, not just belief. Thus, while a person may minimally qualify as Orthodox if he has pragmatic faith in certain doctrines, a person who does not have genuine belief in God cannot be a “robust” Orthodox Jew.

Despite these criticisms, about which surely the author has much to say in response, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in Jewish philosophy, and a very worthwhile read for anyone interested in philosophy of religion.