

## Review of Brian Leftow's *God and Necessity*

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[Penultimate Draft; forthcoming in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*]

Suppose you believe in causally inert platonic entities—e.g., propositions, pure sets, or *ante rem* universals—and hold these entities to exist necessarily and either atemporally or eternally. Further suppose you believe in a divine being who is responsible for the creation of absolutely everything. If causally inert platonic entities exist necessarily and either atemporally or eternally, there is reason to believe they are uncreated. Theistic platonists who accept these suppositions now face a choice: either settle for a qualified understanding of God's role as the creator and sustainer of all things, treating platonic entities as a rather notable exception, or revise the standard view of platonic entities, rendering numbers and other abstract entities creatable and therefore causally active. Call this the *platonism problem* for theists.

The platonism problem is not unfamiliar, but the core of *God and Necessity* is an effort to overcome a more general yet closely related problem. Suppose there are necessary truths that are not about God—e.g., that nothing is both round and square, that if something is a leopard, it is a feline. Further suppose that if something is a necessary truth yet not about God, it has immutable ontological commitments distinct from God, either in the form of a true proposition or that truth's subject matter. Once again, a theist who views God as the ultimate creator and sustainer is forced to either qualify her understanding of God's ultimacy or deny there are necessary truths about anything other than God. Call this the *necessity problem* for theists.

The necessity problem is the starting point for Leftow's defense of a theistic nominalism, which aims to sidestep the platonism problem by disavowing the existence of platonic entities. Leftow's preferred brand of nominalism is a kind of fictionalism about properties and possibilities where face-value talk about these entities is claimed to be reducible to talk of divine mental events and, more importantly, compatible with an unqualified conception of divine ultimacy. Roughly, the attribute or property of *redness* is just the event of God spontaneously thinking up *redness*. Similarly, God's various cognitive activities—e.g., permitting that there be talking cows, creating black cows, denying that there could be round squares—and correlative divine powers serve as counterparts for possibilities and propositions. Suitably generalized, the resulting nominalism trades in serious talk of possible worlds for a commitment to divine powers to will that something (e.g., a maximal world-history) come about.

Not only does Leftow take his particular form of nominalism to overcome the platonism and necessity problems, he argues that the resulting view is preferable to all rival metaphysics of modality and abstracta, whether theist, non-theist, actualist, or possibilist. Even so, the considerable bulk of *God and Necessity* is not directed at undermining non-theist alternatives. Rather, it aims to weave together Leftow's response to the necessity problem with his case his against deity views of divine nature and agency, according to which God's creation of modal reality is exhaustively determined by God's distinctive nature or "deity." In place of deity views, Leftow

defends a non-deity view of divine agency where a limited range of necessities obtain in virtue of God's nature while the vast majority of secular modal facts are products of God's free action. Leftow's view therefore holds God's distinctive mental activities to create modal reality and, having so created modal reality, God could not have done otherwise. At the same time, Leftow allows that it is "in God" to have created or "thought up" modal reality differently insofar as doing so is compatible with God's intrinsic nature. So, while there could not fail to be possibilities regarding zebras, God's nature is compatible with God never thinking of zebras and therefore leaving zebra possibilities uncreated. As Leftow puts it, "Whereas Platonists, and so on, will say that God thought [and therefore created modal reality] as He did because He had to, I say that He had to only because He did. I add that His nature did not constrain His thinking. Rather, it was *in* Him to think otherwise. This does not imply that he could have." (496)

This distinction between modal facts, expressible using familiar operators, and a body of facts regarding what is "in God" to do—i.e., facts about the compatibility of divine actions with God's intrinsic nature—is crucial to Leftow's nominalism. Here, I'll express facts about what it is in God to do using the operator, IG. The idea here is that, if we suppose that *zergs* are impossible (i.e., nowhere in modal space but not at odds with logical truths), it is not possible that there are *zergs* even while it is true that IG: *zergs* exist.

Leftow's case against deity views turns on God's role as the creator of modal reality. Leftow argues that deity views are committed to an implausible dependence of modal facts on God's nature. Since deity views take the entirety of modal reality to issue from God's nature, deity views make the existence of arbitrary secular modal facts a precondition for the realization of God's nature. Leftow takes this result to deliver a kind of *reductio*: it is implausible that God's nature encodes necessities like the identity of heat and mean molecular motion. Moreover, it is implausible that God's nature would be unrealized were there no facts about heat in modal space. While Leftow does grant that a limited range of modal facts depend upon God's nature, he concludes that deity views implausibly overextend God's nature and should therefore be rejected.

There are, then, two tightly wound threads running through *God and Necessity*: the provision of a nominalist theist metaphysics of modality, and a defense of a non-deity view of divine nature and agency. In taking up these issues, Leftow touches on an enormous range of issues: puzzles of omniscience, modal problems of evil, the Barcan formulae, haecceitism, the status of ontological categories, the nature of brute facts, and many others. Here, my brief critical discussion focuses on Leftow's distinction between modal facts and those facts expressible using the IG operator.

For theistic platonists, the appeal of Leftow's nominalism hinges on the extent to which qualifications to God's ultimacy are objectionable and a solution to the necessity problem is required. Aside from broadly theological motivations for resisting qualified ultimacy, Leftow's positive case against theistic platonism turns primarily on an appeal to parsimony: he argues that theistic nominalism avoids the ontological cost of positing myriad platonic entities. For theistic platonists, this line of argument is unlikely to convince. Parsimony is not merely an ontological matter; it concerns theoretical

ideology—i.e., unanalyzed primitive concepts. Since facts about what is “in God” are not modal facts, these claims are intelligible only insofar as the IG operator is taken to be a piece of primitive ideology. So, even while Leftow’s nominalism may fare better in terms of ontological parsimony, theistic platonists can reasonably claim a draw with respect to considerations of parsimony since Leftow’s nominalism requires the additional ideology of the IG operator. Moreover, theistic platonists might reasonably find this bit of ideology difficult to grasp. According to Leftow, facts expressible using the IG operator are facts about compatibility between certain divine acts and God’s nature, but it is puzzling how we might understand talk of compatibility if not as a modal notion akin to compossibility.

Leftow also defends his theistic nominalism against non-theistic possibilism and actualism largely on the basis of considerations of parsimony. The preceding considerations therefore apply perforce, but, in addition, Leftow argues that platonist actualism suffers from a kind of metaphysical irrelevance since modal facts about concrete entities are not plausibly determined by abstract entities. (Possibilists will find this line of argument familiar, since a parallel argument is frequently levied against modal realism.) In contrast, Leftow claims that a theistic modal metaphysics can appeal to facts about divine permission and restriction to deliver a natural explanation of modal facts. Actualist platonists are, of course, certain to resist this line of argument likely by holding that platonism is precisely the thesis that modal facts are properly explained in terms of fundamental albeit abstract entities. But, setting this line of argument aside, there is a more pressing counter-argument that turns on Leftow’s commitment to the IG operator.

According to actualist platonists, modal locutions require an analysis in terms of abstract possible worlds. As noted above, talk about the compatibility of God’s intrinsic nature with the construction of modal reality is *prima facie* modal in character. And, while Leftow’s preferred metaphysics deploys the IG operator to explicate this talk, the actualist is likely to hold that Leftow’s account falls short of analyzing all modal claims. Specifically, the actualist platonist can claim Leftow’s account fails to provide a modal analysis of precisely those controversial claims about God’s nature—i.e., facts about the compatibility of God’s intrinsic nature with certain creative acts. Put differently, the actualist will hold that since facts expressible using the IG operator are modal and therefore require a genuinely modal analysis, there is principled reason to reject Leftow’s account as insufficiently general.

Leftow’s differential treatment of the modal features of God also casts doubt on the plausibility of his theory’s claim to ontological parsimony. Notably, Leftow takes nominalist theism to enjoy a kind of ontological conservatism over platonism, since God belongs to an especially familiar metaphysical kind, *person*, rather than a more obscure kind like *proposition* or *set*. Here, however, the significant disanalogies between the modal status of claims about God and parallel claims about concrete persons seem to undermine Leftow’s claim that theistic nominalism is especially parsimonious in comparison to realism about sets and properties.

Leftow's case against possibilism also warrants comment. According to Leftow, the reductionist ambitions of possibilism are confounded by the fact that we can make modal claims about modal reality itself (e.g., that there could have been more possible worlds). For possibilist reductionists, this will provide no reason to reject modal realism since modality is reducible and therefore non-fundamental. As such, the reductionist can allow that certain truths about the nature of modal reality transcend modal status and are neither necessary nor contingent. Dialectically, this line of argument also opens Leftow's proposal to a *tu quoque*: since Leftow fails to provide a modal analysis of *prima facie* modal claims about the compatibility of God's nature with divine actions, it is unclear why the analytic limits of modal reductionism constitute a decisive case against possibilism.

*God and Necessity* is a lengthy and often difficult book. This is perhaps unsurprising given the scope and complexity of Leftow's philosophical projects. With this in mind, those working in general metaphysics are likely better served by a more concise presentation of Leftow's distinctive views; however, those working in philosophical theology will likely find value in a sustained engagement with this book.