

BOOK REVIEWS

God and Necessity. BY BRIAN LEFTOW. (Oxford: OUP, 2012. Pp. ix + 575. Price \$89.00.)

God and Necessity aims to draw out the metaphysical implications of a particularly demanding view of divine ultimacy. It includes a major reconciliation project: making divine ultimacy compatible with absolute necessity.

The book's topic is the challenge that necessary truths . . . pose for the claim that God is the sole ultimate reality. Its basic question is 'How do bodies of necessary (or modal) truth relate to God? It also . . . takes up a subsidiary challenge about 'abstract objects', such items as truths, attributes, and numbers: does God account for their existence? (27)

According to Leftow, the book proposes a theory according to which modal truth depends on God's nature and mental life. More specifically, the book offers a theory according to which modal truth depends on God's creativity and will. At the bottom of the explanatory edifice, we have a form of *metaphysical voluntarism* analogous to theological voluntarism.¹ Why is it right to keep your promises? The theological voluntarist: 'Because God willed that we do so'. Why does logical space have the shape that it has? The metaphysical voluntarist: 'Because God imagined and willed these modal truths'. Metaphysical voluntarism leaves (almost) all of modality up to the divine imagination and volition. It is another question altogether whether anyone could find this credible. The metaphysical voluntarist maintains that Fido is necessarily possible, but it was *in God* to make Fido impossible. The reverence in such expressions can distract from their unstable intelligibility. It is fair to say that they borrow coherence from an indeterminate modality. More on this in a moment.

Leftow's divine ultimacy entails, among other things, that all explanation terminates in what God simply 'thinks up'. This activity figures essentially in the explanation of all that exists or obtains, all that might exist or obtain, and all that must exist or obtain. All except God and God's nature, that is. God also figures essentially in explaining the persistence of all that exists over time. Leftow offers a series of principles that characterize his conception of divine ultimacy. God has the GSA (God is the Source of All) property, for instance.

GSA. For all x , if x is not God, a part, aspect or attribute of God or an event, God makes the creating ex nihilo sort of causal contribution to x 's existence as long as x exists. (p. 20)

¹ The term 'metaphysical voluntarism' is my own. It might also be called 'creative voluntarism'.

The GSA property is the property of being the source of *everything*. Outside of God, the quantifier in GSA is unrestricted, covering not only all concrete objects, but also all abstract objects: properties, attributes, states of affairs, propositions, numbers, sets, possible worlds, etc. One immediate concern for this demanding conception of divine ultimacy arises from the requirement that God makes a causal contribution to the persistence of propositions, such as $2 + 2 = 4$, and to the persistence of attributes, such as being red. It is difficult to see how abstract objects might persist at all, but GSA entails that, if there are abstract objects, they persist. Leftow's response is to reject the view that there exist abstract objects and advance a form of theistic nominalism.

... if to be a quark is to bear the quark-trope, He can make a quark-trope appear, and if to be a quark is to bear an Aristotelian universal, He can make such a universal appear. Of course, it is hard to imagine how He does this, but it is equally hard to see how He makes particulars: if 'let there be' works in the one case, why not in the other? As to Platonic universals, my own preferred move is to dissolve them into the realities behind talk of divine concept-possession: theists simply need not deal with them with the mind of God available to do the work instead. (p. 89)

In addition to GSA, we learn that divine ultimacy entails the principle FD (first in duration).

FD. Before all else existed, God existed, alone, or God and only God did not begin to exist. (p. 4)

FD has the striking implication that all truths—all modal and non-modal truths—are impermanent. All truths come into existence at some temporal point. More precisely, there are no *secular or non-divine* truths—in particular, no secular necessary truths—that do not come into existence at some temporal point, since there exists nothing that is coeternal with God. But how could necessary truths come into existence? Here is the general strategy that illustrates the unstable coherence noted above.

... God thinks up a secular state of affairs *S*. Having done so, he has an opportunity to *render S possible and one to make S impossible*, by making one or another decision. He *can* decide: this is a natural power, present prior to possible worlds. He *can* decide whether *S* is possible: this is a specified power, one God came to have by conceiving *S*. Again, this is prior in the order of explanation to there 'being' possible worlds. He *can* make *S* possible, by deciding. It is in him (we can suppose) to bring it about that *S*, once he has thought *S* up, but it is up to him whether to have the power to do so. It is in him both to give himself this power and not to do so. At this point the power does not exist; it does not exist unless and until he has it. So while it is *in him* to give himself the power, there is no power such that it is in him to give himself that ... (p. 263, my emphases).

There is no explanation for why God thinks up *S* rather than $\sim S$. He just thinks up states of affairs. And then, after he thinks them up, he can decide whether they are possible. That is the natural power that Leftow notes above, the one that God has prior to there being anything that is possible; prior to the possibility even of God deciding whether *S* is possible. So, what we are to understand is that God *can* decide whether *S* is possible despite the fact that it is *not possible* that God decides whether *S* is possible. And God can decide, instead, that *S* is impossible despite the fact that it is not possible

that God decides that S is impossible. God can further create and manifest powers that are not possible and can create objects that are not possible. He can create dogs, for instance, that at some point were not possible.

Once God thinks up dogs, God is able to think up dogs. So once God thinks up dogs, we have these truths: God is able to think up dogs; he is so endowed naturally as to not think them up; due to what God has de facto done, it is impossible [that he not think up dogs]; it was up to him whether this would be impossible, or whether on the contrary there would be no facts about dogs at all. This is not ability to do otherwise, but it is a counsin. (p. 458)

Prior to some temporal point, dogs are not possible and God is not able to think up dogs. By FD, not even possible dogs are coeternal with God. After that temporal point, God does what he was not able to do: God thinks up dogs. And after doing what he was, at the time, unable to do, God is able to think up dogs. And further, God is able to decide whether they are possible.

Theists should compare the costs of metaphysical voluntarism to the costs of deity theory—the deity theories of Thomists and Scotists, for instance—the main rivals to Leftow's view. Leftow engages deity theory at various points in the book and argues vigorously that metaphysical voluntarism is on balance preferable. But the concerns about intelligibility illustrated above seem genuine to me. And they are less challenging to the deity theorist.

This book should be read carefully and thoroughly. It contains an enormous number of challenging ideas and arguments, far more than I can mention in a short review. Defenders of deity theory and theistic defenders of an independent space of possibility will certainly have to engage the counterarguments presented in this book.

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Philosophos: Plato's Missing Dialogue. BY MARY LOUISE GILL. (Oxford: OUP, 2012. Pp. vii + 290. Price £30.00.)

The aim of Mary Louise Gill's book is to make sense of a curious absence in Plato's works: two dialogues, the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, apparently promise a discussion of the philosopher. However, there is no indication that Plato wrote such a dialogue. What happened? Gill argues that 'Plato intentionally withheld the *Philosopher*' because it is an exercise for the audience to figure out what the philosopher is—and Plato 'would have spoiled the exercise had he written it' (p. 5). This exercise is a formidable challenge, as arriving at a correct answer requires the student to understand what knowledge is (the philosopher has knowledge), what dialectic is (the philosopher's specific expertise), and what being is (the object of the philosopher's knowledge). By overcoming the challenge, the student 'becomes a philosopher by mastering his methods, and thus the target of the exercise is internally related to its pedagogical purpose' (pp. 5–6).

The idea that the *Philosopher* is not a dialogue but the name of an unwritten exercise is buttressed by the dramatic and thematic proximity of the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*, and the *Theaetetus*: all deal with knowledge of various kinds. The *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*,