

# DIVINE CONTINGENCY

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Brian Leftow's *God and Necessity* is interesting, full of details, bold and ambitious. Roughly, the main question at hand is: assuming there is a God that is the source of all secular truths, i.e. all truths not involving God, as per some forms of theism, how should we understand secular *modal* truths of the form possibly p, impossibly p, and necessarily p? In particular, if p is metaphysically necessary, p just could not have been false, so how could God be the ultimate source of it? If p just could not have been false, it seems God had no choice but to comply with it, and as such he cannot really be its ultimate source.

Roughly, Leftow's solution goes as follows,<sup>1</sup> where the modality in 3-5, but not in 2, is the traditional metaphysical modality of secular truths:

- (1) A perfect, personal God, having a limited deity, exists.<sup>2</sup>
- (2) It's in God to  $\Phi$  if, and only if, God allows himself to  $\Phi$ .<sup>3</sup>
- (3) Possibly  $\Phi$  if, and only if, God allows himself to think  $\Phi$ .<sup>4</sup>
- (4) Impossibly  $\Phi$  if, and only if, God disallows himself to think  $\Phi$  (or simply, on the basis of 3: not possibly  $\Phi$ ).
- (5) Necessarily  $\Phi$  if, and only if, God disallows himself to think not  $\Phi$  (or simply, on the basis of 3: not possibly not  $\Phi$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> This is of course not the whole story! Due to space, I must here leave out too many details. But I hope to have captured what's needed for the more critical points to come.

<sup>2</sup> Limited in the sense of not determining all God does.

<sup>3</sup> Leftow's (2012: 252) official definition is this: God has it in him to do A =<sub>df</sub> God is intrinsically such that (if God wills to have the power to do A, then God has the power to do A). I have simplified this definition, but nothing here hinges on it.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more accurately: if, and only if, God allows himself and uses the power to think  $\Phi$ ; and correspondingly with impossibility and necessity in claims 4 and 5 below.

Leftow (2012: 494) accepts three and only three *brute* necessities: (i) that a perfect, personal God exists; (ii) that God has a limited deity;<sup>5</sup> and (iii) that God allows himself to think the thoughts he does and not some others. Leftow calls the latter *the Biggest Bang*, or simply *the Bang*.

I have argued against the perfect being theology behind (i) elsewhere (Bohn 2012); and I have nothing intelligent to say about (ii), but I will here, for the most part, simply assume (i)-(ii), and hence 1, and focus on (iii), and what it and issues surrounding it says about the success of Leftow's solution to the initial problem.

### I.

First, note, as reflected in 2-5 and (i)-(iii), that Leftow's account is not an explanation of all metaphysical modality in terms of non-modality, but only a reduction of the metaphysical modality of secular truths to whatever kind of modality is involved in what it is in God to do and not to do; Leftow (2012: 352-353, 476) calls it *causal* modality. But it's not clear that's a good term for it, since it is not just our more or less ordinary notion of causal modality (cf. Leftow 2012: 352-353), but a causal modality in the sense of what it's in a perfect, personal God (with a limited deity) to do and not to do. At least it is not obvious to me, as it seems to be for Leftow (2012: e.g. 476), that our best analysis of more or less ordinary causation carries over to what it's in a perfect God to do and not to do. So, to keep that in mind, I'll henceforth call it *divine* modality. Leftow thus explains secular metaphysical modality in terms of divine modality:<sup>6</sup> what it's in God to do and not to do; and, in particular, what God allows/disallows himself to think. Divine modality, in turn, is brute.

Second, note that logical and mathematical truths are traditionally taken to be metaphysically necessary truths, but, according to Leftow (2012: 251), they are not secular truths, so they fall outside the domain of the present account, which is only concerned with secular truths.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> (i) and (ii) thus jointly entail that claim 1 holds of brute necessity.

<sup>6</sup> By 'secular metaphysical modality' and 'secular metaphysical modal space' I henceforth simply mean the metaphysical modality of secular truths and the metaphysical modal space of secular truths, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Leftow (2012:251) claims they are not secular truths because they involve unrestricted quantification, which brings God into their domain. I'm not sure I follow the

(Leftow (2012: 366-367) suggests locating the metaphysical necessity of logic and mathematics in the nature of God, but he leaves its defence for another time.)

Third, note that whatever God in fact allowed/disallowed himself to think, determines secular metaphysical modal space as per 3-5 above, but, for all that has been said, and in fact according to Leftow (2012: e.g. 252, 291, 368-373), it's nonetheless in God to have thought differently, and hence it's in God to have determined a different secular metaphysical modal space. In other words, God *divinely could* have thought up something that is in fact *metaphysically impossible*; but he just didn't, and therefore it is in fact metaphysically impossible. For example, Leftow (2012: 367) claims that Socrates not being a number is such a case. Leftow also seems to think it is in God to have made possible that something is red all over and blue all over at the same time. For he (2012: 253) claims: [it is in God to make it the case that p & it's in God to make it the case that q] iff [it's in God to make it the case that p & q]. Clearly, being perfectly powerful, it's in God to make it the case that a given billiard ball is red all over at time t and it's in God to make it the case that it is blue all over at t, so it immediately follows by Leftow's claim that it's in God to make it the case that the billiard ball is red all over and blue all over at t.

## II.

I believe many questions arise at this point. For example, as said above, (i)-(iii) are brute necessities, but what kind of brute necessity is it?

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thoughts here because that seems to make *any* claim that implicitly or explicitly involve unrestricted quantification into a non-secular truth. So, for example, consider the claim: 'I have no favourite object.' This is implicitly committed to unrestricted quantification: it is committed to *nothing* being my favourite object, which means for *anything*, it is not my favourite object. But is that really a non-secular truth involving God? It seems to have nothing to do with God. The problem seems to generalize, even into essentialist claims, which *is* in the domain of Leftow's account. Consider the claim below: nothing can be red all over and blue all over at the same time. This too is implicitly committed to unrestricted quantification, and is therefore non-secular according to Leftow. Leftow might blame this on them being negative existentials without ontologies, but there is still a problem as to how to identify negative existentials, given the interdefinability of the quantifiers, as well as that all impossibilities are then ruled out of his account, given the interdefinability of the modal operators. Unfortunately, I cannot go further into this here.

According to Leftow's account, (i)-(iii) is true in all possible worlds,<sup>8</sup> and hence they are metaphysically necessary, but it's nonetheless in God to have determined a different secular modal space by simply having thought differently, so, in some sense or other, at least (iii) could be false: it's in him to have had other thoughts.<sup>9</sup> In other words, at least (iii) is metaphysically necessary, but divinely contingent; but then in what sense is it a brute necessity? To the extent it is a necessity, it is not brute (it's explained in terms of what God actually did), and to the extent it is brute, it is not a necessity (it's just what God actually did, but it's nonetheless in God to have done differently).<sup>10</sup>

However, the more interesting question at this point is this: is Leftow on the tracks towards solving the initial puzzle? That is, does Leftow give the beginnings of an explanation of secular modal truths, and in particular secular metaphysical necessities, in terms of God?

I think not. Traditionally understood, metaphysical modality is the widest modality there is. That is, metaphysical modal space includes *all* possibilities; none are left out. So, something is metaphysically necessary iff it *just couldn't* have failed to be the case; and it is metaphysically impossible iff it *just couldn't* have been the case; no matter what. Metaphysical modal space is thus absolute; and its absoluteness is why it is hard to explain its source. It's also why there is a puzzle to begin with for any theist who claims that God is the source of all truths. Metaphysical necessity and impossibility, even secular such truths, *just couldn't* have been different, so it seems God had no choice but to comply with it, and as such cannot be its source.

As we've seen, Leftow's attempt to solve the puzzle consists in explaining secular metaphysical modality in terms of divine modality, or what it's in God to do and not to do, as per 2-5 above; and he in turn takes such divine modality as primitive. But, as pointed out above, according to Leftow's account, it's divinely possible that secular metaphysical modal space could have been different, and in particular that secular metaphysical necessities could have been different, so, in what sense has

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<sup>8</sup> Though be aware: Leftow (2012: e.g. 444) has a fictionalist attitude towards possible world-talk.

<sup>9</sup> Presumably, there is no sense in which God could have made (i) or (ii) false, but I think we should still ask: what kind of brute necessity is it? For example, why is it not in God to annihilate himself?

<sup>10</sup> Leftow might object that this worry equivocates on 'could'; an objection we'll get back to later.

Leftow explained the source of such truths, rather than simply denied their modal status of necessity in favour of brute divine contingency?

What we traditionally take to be secular metaphysical necessity is, as far as I can tell, for Leftow simply a brute divine contingency: it's in God to have thought differently, and hence, as per 2-5 above, it's in God to have determined a different secular metaphysical modal space. So, traditional secular metaphysical necessity is for Leftow explained in terms of brute divine contingency (whatever God happened to allow/disallow himself, though he could have allowed/disallowed himself differently); but that is not so much an explanation of traditional secular metaphysical *necessity* as it is a *denial* of its necessity. A traditionalist will simply see this as no secular metaphysical necessity at all, only brute divine contingency.

The argument is simple: a secular metaphysical necessity *p* *just could not* have been false; but, on Leftow's account, it's in God to have thought differently, and hence made *p* false; so God could, *in some sense or other*, have made *p* false; so, on Leftow's account, *p* is not a secular metaphysical necessity after all.

Leftow could deny premise 1, namely that a secular metaphysical necessity *p* just could not have been false, but then he is, as far as I can tell, again simply denying that it really is a metaphysical necessity after all.

Leftow might also object that 'metaphysical necessity' just means something like truth in all possible worlds;<sup>11</sup> and all possible worlds are determined by what God happened to allow/disallow himself to think; so, in that sense, what it's in God to do does in fact determine metaphysical necessity. This allows him (2012: 373) to coherently say: 'It is in God to have had other Bangs, but none are in fact possible.' Possibility is understood in terms of possible worlds, which are determined by the Bang; but what it's in God to do and not to do is not thus determined. This amounts to denying the last step of my argument, perhaps by accusing it of equivocation on 'could'.

But this amounts to denying our traditional way of cashing out secular metaphysical necessity in terms of possible worlds. Traditionally understood, that *p* is true in *all* possible worlds is just a way of saying that *p* *just cannot* be false, no matter what; there just are no possible ways for the world to be such that *p* is false. But on Leftow's account, there *is* a way for the world to be such that secular *p* is false, namely

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<sup>11</sup> I say 'something like' because Leftow adopts a fictionalist attitude towards possible worlds-talk.

the way it would have been if God had just thought differently. So, it seems Leftow's secular metaphysical necessity is no real necessity, but rather a contingency under a different name. On Leftow's account, all possible worlds fail to capture all possibilities; but on a traditional way of cashing out metaphysical necessity that is exactly what all possible worlds are intended to capture.<sup>12</sup> So, on a traditional understanding of secular metaphysical necessity in terms of truth in all possible worlds, the last step of my argument is valid, not equivocating on 'could'.

Leftow might also object that God could not have made *any* secular metaphysical necessity  $p$  false, only some of them. For example, according to Leftow (2012: 334), it's not in God to have made it the case that  $a \neq a$ , for some particular possible secular  $a$ .<sup>13</sup> But then, if *some* secular metaphysical necessities are brute, not due to God, Leftow's account is very *ad hoc*, not much of a principled explanation. At best, we only have an explanation of some, but only some of secular metaphysical modality in terms of divine modality, while some (other parts) of secular metaphysical modality is left brute (along with all other non-secular metaphysical necessities?). That is *ad hoc*, not much of a principled explanation; one is left wondering: why not just think all of it is brute then? Especially given what's argued above, namely that even the secular metaphysical necessities that are explained in terms of what God allowed/disallowed himself to think are really brute divine contingencies.

Leftow could complain, or rather insist, that I wrongly treat divine modality as a form of metaphysical modality. For example, he (2012: 253) says: 'One might wonder whether "it is in God to bring it about that" is a new sort of modal operator. If so, it is not a very exciting one.' Letting 'I' symbolize it, Leftow (2012: 253) goes on to say that 'If there are worlds, there are no I-worlds as a layer beyond possible worlds ... At no time in any possible world has anything *only* status I.'

This again assumes metaphysical necessity is equivalent with truth in all possible worlds, but restricts the set of all possible worlds to the Bang – a Bang it is in God to have done differently – and thus in turn restricts our notion of metaphysical necessity to a set of truths that it is in God to have made differently. But a traditionalist will, and should, simply

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<sup>12</sup> After all, if all possible worlds don't capture all possibilities, they are inadequate for understanding metaphysical modality!

<sup>13</sup> Note that ' $a = a$ ' does not obviously involve unrestricted quantification (' $a$ ' is a constant), nor is it obviously a logical truth (it does not have the form of a tautology); so it's not obvious that it is a non-secular truth, according to Leftow's account.

deny this restriction of our notion of possible worlds, and thus in turn the restriction on our notion of metaphysical necessity. A possible *world* is just a way *total* reality could have been; if it is in God to have changed the truth-value of a secular proposition *p*, then *p* is not true in all the ways total reality could have been, which means *p* is not a metaphysical necessity. Calling a contingency a necessity doesn't make it so.

### III.

I conclude that, though interesting and rewarding to study, as far as I can see, Leftow's account ultimately fails to explain secular metaphysical necessity in terms of what it is in God to do and not to do. Whether we use the phrase 'it is in God to have thought differently' or 'God could have thought differently' is of no matter: what he actually thought remains contingent, and so does whatever depends on what he actually thought. Calling a contingency a necessity doesn't make it so.<sup>14</sup>

### REFERENCES

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- Leftow, B. 2012. *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Jon Litland and Lina Tosterud.