

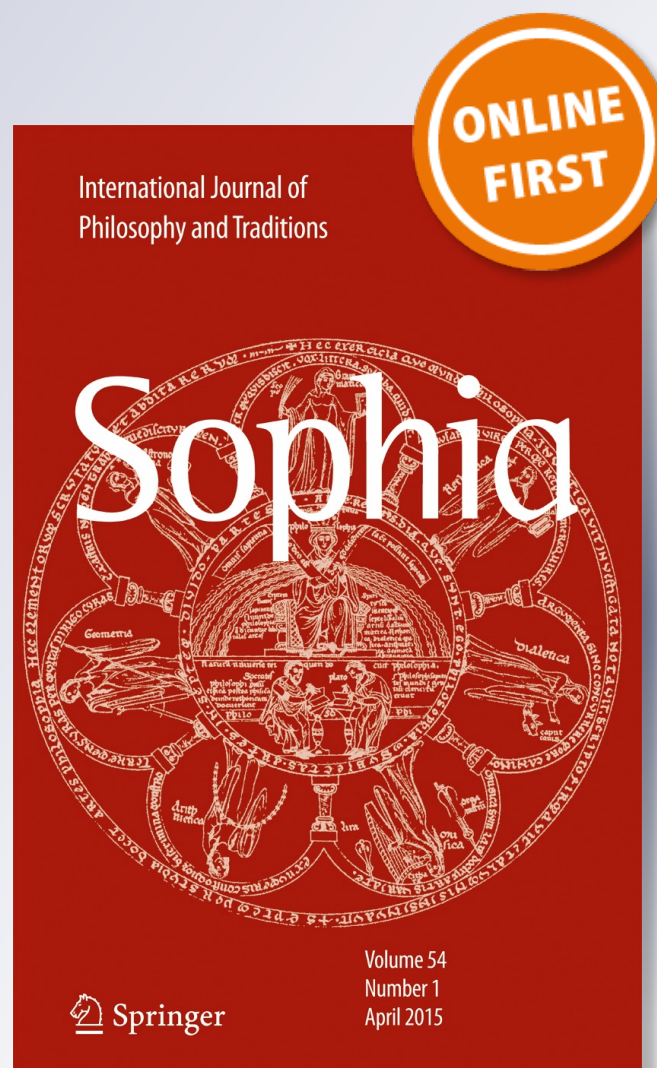
# Review of Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity*

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## Review of Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity*

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This book is concerned with ‘absolute’ necessity—what Alvin Plantinga calls *broadly logical* necessity and Saul Kripke calls *metaphysical* necessity. The main focus is on the modal status of ‘secular’ propositions—roughly, propositions, which, if true, provide no information about God. The central idea is that God voluntarily gives secular propositions (and states of affairs) their modal status.

Leftow’s theory is very innovative and is developed at great depth. The overall level of rigour in argument is high. Leftow anticipates and forestalls many likely objections to his claims.

Leftow’s main case for his theory is that it explains what needs to be explained and is superior to rival candidate metaphysics of absolute necessity and possibility (From now on, ‘necessity’, ‘necessarily’ and ‘necessary’ will always signify absolute necessity). For most of the book, the rival candidates in view are theistic-Platonist accounts and the view that the modal status of secular propositions and states of affairs is fixed by God’s *nature* (understood as absolutely essential to him). Towards the end, Leftow draws on considerations advanced earlier to argue that his metaphysics of modality is also superior to any non-theist theory dealing in possible worlds. This conclusion, he points out, amounts to the claim that realists about possible worlds should become theists. His arguments therefore add up to part of a case for God’s existence. Although he attends briefly to non-realist views, he defers a full treatment of modal anti-realism to another occasion.

From a theistic standpoint, the motivation for *God and Necessity* is the *prima facie* challenge which necessity poses for the claim that God is the sole ultimate reality and that he is unconstrained by anything outside and independent of himself. While Leftow often finds it convenient to speak of about concepts, propositions, states of affairs and possible worlds, he holds that such talk is fictional, getting at realities constituted by God’s acts of conceiving and of exercising his non-natural powers (i.e. powers that God does not have by nature).

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There is space here only for quick sketch of the theory. I begin with Leftow's expository sequence involving divine states and actions, ordered by relations of explanation and of metaphysical or causal dependence rather than time, and leading to the 'emergence' of absolute modality. The entire sequence is to be understood as metaphysically prior to the temporally first things God created.

In its first stage, God has certain concepts, causal powers and opportunities by nature, and his nature is such that, in some cases in which God does not have by nature the power to  $\phi$ ; nevertheless, it is *in God* to  $\phi$ . By this, Leftow means that (God wills to have the power to  $\phi$ )  $\supset$  (God has the power to  $\phi$ ). Leftow argues that *It is in God to  $\phi$*  is not a modal operator, or if it is, it is a 'degenerate' one. The relevant features of God's nature suffice to make a very limited array of modal propositions true; they are not explained by the theory, but are drawn on in its account of the modal status of secular propositions. The concepts God has naturally (i.e., by nature, and so of necessity) include logical ones such as conjunction; God naturally thinks in such a way that *p and q* is true if and only if *p* is true and *q* is true.

Next in the ordering comes what Leftow calls 'the Bang': God's spontaneously conceiving of ('thinking up') candidate creatures, secular states of affairs and propositions concerning them. Given that God has conceived of human beings, he prevents the truth of *There are humans and not- (There are humans)* by the way he naturally conceives conjunction and negation.

God 'then' considers the good- and bad-making features of the conceived secular states of affairs, and forms preferences towards their obtaining.

Next in the ordering comes God's deciding which non-natural causal powers to give himself and which ones to not give himself—e.g. a power to bring about earthquakes. God's deciding these matters is equivalent to his deciding which secular states of affairs to prevent with certainty 'from all eternity'—that is, to prevent with certainty independently of and causally prior to all his decisions concerning what secular states of affairs he will in fact bring about or promote or accommodate, and therefore independently of and causally prior to the actual obtaining of any secular states of affairs at all (call this *CE-prevention*). It is in God to decide otherwise.

Leftow then argues that (A) *Necessarily, it is absolutely possible that p if and only if it is, was or atemporally-is causally possible that p*. Here is one way of setting out the main line of thought:

1. God is the one and only entity that exists necessarily, and is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.
2. Necessarily, if *S* is an actual contingent state of affairs then God conceived of *S*, and had the power and opportunity to CE-prevent *S*'s obtaining, but decided not to do so. The decision, while not the cause of *S*'s obtaining, was causally prior to it.
3. Divine CE-prevention entails causal impossibility rather than mere non-actuality (Leftow provides argument for 3. He adds that he could bypass 3 by employing premises concerning divine dispositions to prevent.).
4. Necessarily, the powers and preferences God has by nature causally affect what he spontaneously conceives, what non-natural preferences he forms, and his decisions about which non-natural powers he acquires, and so they affect which secular states of affairs he CE-prevents. Hence, necessarily, every causally possible alternative history has a causally first initial segment consisting of God's having the

powers, the knowledge, and the preferences he has by nature, and his doing what he does by nature; God has or does all these things of *de re* absolute necessity (Here 'history' refers to series of events and states of affairs ordered in terms of temporal priority, causal priority, metaphysical priority or all three).

5. Thus necessarily, in order for there to be actual contingent states of affairs which were not causally possible, there would have to be ones which were not causally posterior to God's existing, having the powers and preferences he has by nature and doing what he does by nature. The latter situation is absolutely impossible.
6. Therefore, necessarily, there are no actual contingent states of affairs which are not causally possible. It is now easy to complete the argument for (A).

God's CE-preventing S renders S absolutely impossible, and accordingly makes non-S necessary. God's CE-preventing neither S nor non-S makes them both contingent.

Does what has been said so far imply that God could have reached different decisions about which secular states of affairs to make causally possible/impossible? If so, it implies that some states which are in fact necessary could have been contingent or absolutely impossible, and that some which are in fact absolutely impossible could have been contingent or necessary. Leftow thinks not.

Assume, for example, both that God initially has the natural power to give himself what we retrospectively describe as the power to CE-prevent some secular state of affairs S and thereby make S absolutely impossible, and also that God initially has the natural power to give himself what we retrospectively describe as the power to CE-prevent non-S and thereby make S necessary. It does not follow that he has either of these two non-natural powers. Nor does it follow that if God actually acquires and exercises the former of the two and thereby makes S absolutely impossible then he *could have* exercised the second and gone on to make S necessary. You cannot exercise powers you do not have.

Here is what Leftow's theory implies in relation to candidate alternative choices and distributions of modal status amongst secular states of affairs:

- (a) It was in God to have chosen differently and so to have distributed modal status differently.
- (b) Suppose that God has chosen to make S absolutely impossible. We can infer that S is absolutely impossible, and can infer further that it is absolutely impossible that God have chosen to make S possible. Nevertheless since these last two impossibilities were *brought about by* God's choice (and implementing action), they did not function as constraints on God's choice, restricting his options.

Although Leftow thinks that God could have formed different non-natural preferences 'before' deciding which non-natural powers to acquire, he argues that nevertheless, whatever God contingently were to prefer at this early stage, the same set of histories would end up being CE-permitted (i.e., not CE-prevented despite the fact that it was in God to CE-prevent them).

I recommend Leftow's book to any philosopher interested in metaphysics.