

LEFTOW ON GOD AND NECESSITY

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Time and cause both involve partial orders: there is the temporal partial order and there is the causal partial order. It is controversial how far these partial orders coincide. Questions arise about 'backwards causation', 'simultaneous causation', 'time without cause', and 'cause without time'. Leftow says: 'Anything that earlier has a property and later lacks it is *ipso facto* in time' (p. 177). I demur. We can discuss the causal order, and make perfectly good sense of 'earlier' and 'later' with respect to it, without worrying about exactly how causal order relates to temporal order. (Of course, the two orders do coincide – at least by and large – where we find ourselves; but it would be rash simply to assume that any local coincidence is replicated globally.) Moreover, we should avail ourselves of this option in the present context: for, while it is controversial whether, if God exists, God is temporal – or, at least, temporal subsequent to creation – it is not controversial whether, if God exists, God is causal.

When Leftow sets out the genesis of secular modal status as a sequence, I take it that he is setting out part of the causal order. In the causal order: (1) God exists wholly alone; and then (2) God thinks up states of affairs involving determinate non-deities; and then (3) God notes any good-making and bad-making features these states of affairs would have; and then (4) if these states of affairs would have good-making and bad-making features, God takes attitudes towards their obtaining; and then (5) God decides whether to prevent these states of affairs, either absolutely or conditionally; and then (6) God prevents states of affairs, and permits states of affairs, and also forms dispositions to prevent states of affairs and to permit states of affairs. *Thinking up*, and *noting*, and *taking attitudes towards*, and *deciding*, and *preventing* and *permitting* are all casual activities. Leftow says: 'in this context being earlier only means being presupposed by what follows' (p. 362). I demur. It's not just that the

later states ‘presuppose’ the earlier ones; it is also the case that the later states come after the earlier ones in the causal order.

Despite his occasional propensity to talk about ‘presuppositions’ and the like, there is plenty of further evidence that Leftow really does mean to be talking about location in the causal order. Consider, for example, his endorsement of the claim that God is directly or indirectly the Source of all that is ‘outside’ God (GSA): for all x , if x is not God, or a part, or an aspect, or an attribute of God, then God makes the creating-*ex-nihilo* sort of causal contribution to x ’s existence as long as x exists (pp. 20 and 78). For any truth, the ontology of which is not supplied by God, or God’s parts, or God’s aspects, or God’s attributes, *there is*, according to Leftow, ontology for which God *makes* the creating-*ex-nihilo* kind of *causal contribution*. Since, according to Leftow, neither God, nor God’s parts, nor God’s aspects, nor God’s attributes provide the ontology of secular modal status, he is plainly committed to the claim that God makes the creating-*ex-nihilo* sort of causal contribution to the ontology of secular modal status, wherever there is secular modal status.

Consider, then, the global causal order – i.e. *our* global causal order, the one to which we all belong. As I see it, the most plausible metaphysical conjecture postulates a tight connection between causal powers, chance distributions, and possibilities. At any point in our global causal order, there is a chance distribution over possible outcomes generated by the causal powers in play at that point. Moreover, all possibilities are possible outcomes of the outworking of objective chance at some point in our global causal order – every possible global causal order shares an initial history with our global causal order, and diverges from it only as a result of the outworkings of objective chance. Further, there is a range of basic powers that are always in play: the same basic powers are in play at all points in our global causal order, and at all points in all possible alternatives to our global causal order. (For the purposes of this paper, I am simply agnostic on the question whether there are locally emergent – i.e., non-basic – causal powers; and I am also agnostic on the question whether there are – or could be – any non-trivial chance distributions.)

Even at this level of generality, Leftow’s view about the global causal order is rather different from mine. Of course, where I think that our global causal order is an entirely *natural* causal order, Leftow thinks that our global causal order has an initial part that is entirely *supernatural* and some subsequent parts that are at least partly ‘natural’. But Leftow

also rejects the tight connections that I see between causal powers, chance distributions, and possibilities. In particular, on his view, there is an initial part of the causal order in which there are no possibilities – but for those for which God, and God’s parts, and God’s aspects, and God’s attributes provide ontology – but in which the exercise of divine causal power generates a whole range of possibilities. (Leftow does not discuss chance distributions, but I assume that Leftow would say the same for them: there is an initial part of the causal order in which there are no chance distributions – save for those for which God, and God’s parts, and God’s aspects, and God’s attributes provide ontology – but in which the exercise of divine causal power generates a whole range of such chance distributions.)

I find it irresistible to suppose that whatever happens at ‘downstream’ points in the causal order is at least possible at ‘upstream’ points in the causal order: if something happens at some point in the causal order, then that thing was at least *possible* at all earlier points in the causal order. Leftow disagrees. Consider an early part of the causal order, at which God has not yet ‘dreamed up’ any secular modal statuses. According to Leftow, at that early point of the causal order, all of the secular things that subsequently appear in the causal order are not so much as possibilities: even though I sit here typing this paper, at sufficiently early points in the global causal order it was not so much as possible that I should (eventually) do so.

I.

Leftow has a special locution designed to facilitate talk about God’s ‘capacities’ in that early part of the causal order in which God has not yet ‘dreamed up’ secular modal statuses. Leftow explains this special locution in a section of his book entitled ‘What it is in God to do’ (pp. 252-4). I think that it is worth paying close attention to what Leftow has to say in this section of his book.

The section begins with the observation that we sometimes make claims like this: ‘I did not have it in me to disagree’. Leftow says that what one usually would mean by this claim is that one does not have the power or motivation to disagree: ‘to have it in one to do something is usually to have the power and some motivation to do it’ (p. 252). That doesn’t sound quite right to me. I think that there is a range of cases in

which claims about what it is in one to do are claims about one's abilities; and I think that there is a range of cases in which claims about what it is in one to do are claims about one's motives; and I guess that that there is also a range of cases in which claims about what it is in one to do are claims about both ability and motivation. I might not have it in me to speak Finnish simply because I have never learned a word of the language; or I might not have it in me to speak Finnish because, while I have a good grasp of the language, I have come to hate the sound of it; or I might not have it in me to speak Finnish because, although I am keen on learning to speak Finnish, I lack the intellectual capacity to master a second language; and so forth.

Leftow claims that there are three kinds of contexts in which he will make 'non-standard' use of claims of the form 'God has it in him to do A'.

First, he will say that God has it in him to do A if God has the power to do A. Second, he will say that God has it in him to do A if, while God does not have the power to do A, the only reason that God does not have the power to do A is that God has denied himself the power to do A. Third, he will say that God has it in him to do A if, while God does not have the power to do A, and God has not yet decided whether it shall be possible for him to do A, 'God is such that if he will to be able to do A, then he will be able to do A, it will be possible that he does A, and it will be possible that he brings it about that he does A' (p. 253).

Leftow provides a 'definition of the locution in this technical sense' (p. 252) as follows: God has it in him to do A =_{df} God is intrinsically such that (God wills to have the power to do A) \supset (God has the power to do A). I think that, in this definition, the RHS is meant to be read like this: *God is intrinsically such that: ((God wills to have the power to do A) \supset (God has the power to do A))*. Since the conditional here is a material conditional, the RHS is equivalent to the following: *God is intrinsically such that either God does not will to have the power to do A or God has the power to do A*.

Consider any action A. While it is not clear exactly what it means to say that God is *intrinsically such that* so-and-so, it seems that it should turn out to be the case that God is intrinsically omnipotent. But, given that God is intrinsically omnipotent, it seems that God is intrinsically such that, for any action A, either God does not will to have the power to do A, or God has the power to do A. Think about it this way. For any action A, either God has the power to do A, or God does not have the power to do A. If God does not have the power to do A, then, certainly,

as a consequence of his omnipotence, God does not will to have the power to do A. So, either God has the power to do A, or God does not will to have the power to do A. But, if it is true that, for any action A, God is intrinsically such that either God has the power to do A, or God does not will to have the power to do A, then, by Leftow's definition, it follows that, for any action A, God has it in him to do A.

In constructing this argument, there were no constraints on A. A could be an impossible action. A could be an immoral action. A could be an irrational action. So, it seems that it is a consequence of Leftow's definition that God has it in him to do impossible, and immoral, and irrational things.

Perhaps, though it seems unlikely, the RHS is actually meant to be read like this: *If God is intrinsically such that God wills to have the power to do A, then God has the power to do A.* But consider a case in which God does not have the power to do A. In that case, by the definition, it will be in God to do A just in case it is not the case that God is intrinsically such that God wills to have the power to do A. Assuming that it is not the case that God is intrinsically such that God wills to do impossible, and immoral, and irrational things, it again turns out that God has it in him to do impossible, and immoral, and irrational things.

I am pretty sure that Leftow does not mean for his 'technical sense' to allow that God has it in him to do impossible, and immoral, and irrational things. So I conclude that something has gone wrong with Leftow's definition. In understanding what he means by claims of the form 'God has it in him to do A', we shall need to fall back on his informal tripartite explanation of uses that he makes of expressions of this form. Since his first observation – that he will say that God has it in him to do A if God has the power to do A – simply conforms to the ordinary usage of expressions of the form 'x has it in him to do A', we need only consider his second and third observations.

In Leftow's second case, he observes that he will say that God has it in him to do A if, while God does not have the power to do A, the only reason that God does not have the power to do A is that God has denied himself the power to do A. Leftow illustrates the kind of case he has in mind with the following example:

Suppose that God has the power to make items of just ten kinds. Then he does not have the power to make things of an eleventh kind. As I see it, the only reason he does not have it is that he has not thought

up an eleventh kind and done certain other things consequent on that. By not doing so, he had denied himself the power to make things of an eleventh kind. This is the only reason he does not have it. So I also say that though there is no eleventh kind, God has it in him to make things of an eleventh kind. (p. 252)

I do not find this example helpful. Sure, in the case of human beings, there is a clear distinction between the possession of a power – ability, proficiency, capability, capacity – to do something, and the possession of a power to acquire the power to do something. It is one thing to have the capacity to converse in Finnish; it is quite another thing merely to have the capacity to learn to converse in Finnish. But, in the case of an omnipotent being, it is not clear that there is a similarly clear distinction. In particular, given that God is omnipotent, God has the power to make items of as many kinds as he so chooses. Even if he has thus far only made items of ten kinds, his omnipotence surely guarantees that he does have the power to think up more kinds of things and to make things of those kinds as well. (Setting these considerations aside, there is also a threat of paradox in the proposition that an omnipotent being has the *power* to deny itself *powers*. However, I shall not attempt to pursue this line of thought here.)

In Leftow's third case, he observes that he will say that God has it in him to do A if, while God does not have the power to do A, and God has not yet decided whether it shall be possible for him to do A, 'God is such that if he wills to be able to do A, then he will be able to do A, it will be possible that he does A, and it will be possible that he brings it about that he does A'. In particular, Leftow says that he has in mind a case in which God is considering whether to make it possible that p, but has not yet decided whether to make it possible that p.

Here, again, the case is not helpful. We are invited to consider a case in which God is deliberating about whether to make it possible that p. But how are we to conceive of the *deliberations* that God is supposed to be making when trying to decide whether to make it possible that p? If we imagine that we can represent the material of God's decision in a decision matrix, then it will look something like this:

	Outcome ₁	...	Outcome _n
Make it possible that p	V ₁₁	...	V _{1n}
Make it impossible that p	V ₂₁	...	V _{2n}

But how are we to think about the outcome's? What could these be? In the standard case of human decision theory, the outcome's are required to be *possible* states of the world. But we are imagining a case in which there are no 'secular possibilities', i.e. no possibilities not fully determined by God's existence, parts, aspects and attributes. On its face, it is far from clear that we can make sense of the suggestion that God *decides* which secular things to make possible, since the very idea of rational decision presupposes that a choice is being made in the light of a range of *possible* ways that the world might be.

The conclusion that I wish to draw from this discussion is that the section titled 'What it is in God to do' does not succeed in explaining how instances of the locution 'It is in God to do A' are to be understood. When we come to later passages in the book, such as this one:

Whereas Platonists, and so on, will say that God thought 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. It implies only that he does not and could not have the power to do so only because he did not will to have it. (p. 496)

it is hard to escape the feeling that we have been led around a very small circle. Without an explanation of the locution that I have been discussing, there is no way of understanding what is being said here; but, in the end, the only explanation that we are offered of that locution seems to presuppose that we already understand what is being said in this kind of passage.

II.

Leftow defends a collection of controversial claims about necessity and dependence. In his view, real dependence – including causal dependence – is a 'modally flat' phenomenon: real dependence is 'being from', as instanced by effects 'being from' their causes. Moreover, in Leftow's view, there can be real dependence among necessary items: necessary states of affairs can 'come from', and so really depend upon, other (necessary) states of affairs. Furthermore, according to Leftow, there are cases of non-causal explanation that draw upon real dependences amongst necessary items, and there are cases of non-causal explanation that afford genuine explanations of necessary truths.

In my view, the most controversial of Leftow's claims about real dependence is his claim that real dependence – including causal dependence – is 'modally flat'. Leftow offers little by way of defence of this claim: he *says* that it might help explain the persuasiveness of transfer-based theories of physical causation, and that it has positive consequences for Frankfurt-style cases concerning alternative possibilities and freedom. Beyond this, he is most concerned to explain why causal claims often support counterfactuals even though counterfactual dependence is actually epiphenomenal.

Leftow also offers little by way of development of his theory of causation. He says that causes are producers, sources of a particular kind. He adds that if *e* causes *e**, then *e** depends upon *e* because *e** comes from *e*, because *e* is its source. He adds that it is because causes are sources that causal claims often support counterfactuals:

If the fire's burning causes the kettle's heating and the situation is simple – no failsafes, no redundant causation, and so on – then had the fire not burned, the kettle would not have heated up. This is because the heating came from the burning. If the heating came from the burning and the situation was simple, removing the burning would have removed the heating's source. Without the source, what came only from that source would not have come at all. (p. 508)

It is not clear that Leftow's theory of causation has any content at all. It is natural to think of sources and producers as kinds of causes. The OED gives us that *sources* are *originating causes*; and that *to produce* is *to bring into being or existence, or to give rise to, or to bring about, or to cause*. If that's right, then Leftow gets things backwards when he says that causes are kinds of sources. In any case, if the dictionary is to be trusted, telling us that causes are sources *at best* provides us with linguistic information about synonymy. Of course, it is true that, in simple situations, if you were to remove the cause, you would remove the effect; and it is also true that this observation provides the foundation for counterfactual analyses of causation. But these observations provide us with no reason at all for thinking that causal dependence is modally flat.

I take it that what really motivates Leftow's claim that dependence is 'modally flat' is the demands of his theory of the genesis of secular modality. If God is to be the source of secular modality, then there cannot be any secular counterfactual dependence 'supported by' that sourcing, because secular counterfactual dependence is inextricably bound up

with secular modality more generally. And, of course, his motivation for using instances of the locution ‘God had it in him to do A’ in connection with that ‘sourcing’ has a similar explanation: one alleged advantage of this locution is that it, too, is ‘modally flat’.

Against Leftow, it seems to me that the global causal order is properly described with modally loaded vocabulary. There is a web of interconnected terms – cause, chance, power, possibility, law, counterfactual – that are proper tools to employ in the delineation of the (metaphysically) fundamental structure of reality. While I acknowledge that this is controversial, and while considerations of space have obliged me to omit arguments that I would give in defence of these claims, it seems to me to be plausible to suppose that there can be no real dependence between necessary existents, and that there is no genuine explanation of any necessities.

III.

In the *Preface*, Leftow says that he offers three things to hook atheists’ attention: ‘a chance to bash theists, (part of) a new sort of argument for God’s existence, and what I hope is some decent metaphysics that is detachable from the theistic context’ (p. vii). So far, I have considered some of the metaphysics, and cast doubt on the idea that it is detachable from the theistic context. I turn now to the new argument for the existence of God (in Chapter 23).

The broad idea behind the argument is to appeal to theoretical virtue in order to decide between competing worldviews. If one worldview is more theoretically virtuous than a second, then that is a compelling reason to prefer the first worldview to the second. In particular, if the first worldview scores better than the second on an appropriate weighting of simplicity (economy of ontological and ideological commitments), explanatory fit with data, explanatory scope, predictive power, theoretical unity, and so forth, then we should prefer the first worldview to the second. Leftow’s hope is to develop an argument that shows that theism is superior to all rival worldviews.

I think that it is pretty clear that theism does not turn out to be theoretically superior to the kind of naturalistic worldview that I hinted at when sketching my conception of the global causal order. On the one hand, I claim, the naturalist has a more economical account of the global

causal order, at least equal explanatory scope, at least equal predictive power, at least equal theoretical unity, and at least parity on fit with every part of the data on a non-gerrymandered partitioning of the data. (I argue for this claim at length in Oppy (2013a), and elsewhere.) On the other hand, I claim, the naturalist has an equally economical account of what we might call ‘the abstract order’, and scores no worse than theist on all of the theoretical desiderata with respect to this domain. (I argue for this claim in my contribution to Gould (2014).) Moreover, I claim, it is obvious that, if the first two claims are correct, then, when we put the ‘two orders’ together, the naturalist has a more economical account that is at least equal in explanatory scope, predictive power, theoretical unity and fit with data on every part of the data on a non-gerrymandered partitioning of the data. So naturalism is more theoretically virtuous than theism.

Of course, my assessment of the comparative theoretical virtues of naturalism and theism is controversial. There are various ways in which it may have gone wrong. However, even allowing for the many ways in which it might have gone wrong, I think that it is pretty clear that the most that theists can hope for is a null verdict. On the one hand, it is certainly true that naturalism gives a more economical account of the global causal order than theism does; and it *may* also be true that there are some parts of the data – concerning, for example, good and evil, and divine hiddenness and divine disclosure – which fit better with naturalism than with theism. On the other hand, if there are also ways in which theism scores better than naturalism, then we are left with the algorithmically intractable problem of weighing the advantages and disadvantages against one another. As I see it, this is then a matter for judgement, and, most plausibly, for reasonably agreeing to disagree.

While Leftow announces initially that he is giving part of a much larger argument, he goes on to say that ‘my current claim is merely that if we keep our attention on modal metaphysics, God looks like a better buy than Platonism’ (p. 548). When we look at the discussion in the section ‘Against Platonism’ (pp. 546f.), we get (a) an argument that considerations about strangeness and surprisingness does not favour either theism over Platonist actualism, or Platonist actualism over theism; (b) an argument against taking considerations about evil to establish a very low prior epistemic probability for God; (c) an argument from the explanatory priority of the non-physical to the physical in modal matters; (d) an argument on grounds of ontological and ideological economy; and (e)

an argument concerning escape from Benacerraf's dilemma concerning modal knowledge. Of these, only (c)-(e) are arguments that support the claim that God is a better buy than Platonism.

In my view, the argument from the explanatory priority of the non-physical to the physical in modal matters is a non-starter. It isn't true that there could fail to be anything physical at all: on the contrary, in every world, the global causal order is a global physical order. Of course, I do not deny that people can have mistaken beliefs about what is possible: there are certainly people who believe that there could have failed to be anything physical. But those people are wrong; and we do not need to postulate more 'possibilities' in order to provide contents for the false beliefs that those people hold.

While this deserves more discussion than I can give it here, it seems to me to be pretty obvious that, insofar as we restrict our attention to properly modal matters, theism and Platonism tie on grounds of ontological and ideological economy. Leftow says that 'it would be hard to claim that an ontology of one solipsist with his thoughts is really less parsimonious than one of uncountable infinities of abstract substances' (p. 550); but it is *not* hard to say that an ontology of one solipsist with an uncountable infinity of distinct ideas is no more and no less parsimonious than an uncountable infinity of abstract substances. At the very least, if we're going to make assessments of relative parsimony, we should want to give a fair and equal characterisation of the views that are under assessment.

On independent grounds, I think that the Benacerraf dilemma for modal knowledge is pretty underwhelming. But, in any case, we have no better access to the postulated uncountable infinity of distinct ideas in the divine mind than we do to the postulated uncountable infinity of abstract substances. Leftow tells a just-so story about how we might come to have 'connections' to ideas in the divine mind via God's hardwiring us to form certain kinds of beliefs 'given suitable thought experiments' (p. 74), but we have overwhelming evidence – in the disagreements in judgements of professional philosophers who engage in thought experiments about abstract objects – that people do not actually have hardwiring of that kind. This same evidence also undercuts Leftow's suggestion that God's goodness guarantees that we have largely correct beliefs about modal ontology hardwired into us (p. 75): for those of us who care most about these matters diverge wildly in our modal intuitions.

While the argument against taking considerations about evil to establish a very low prior epistemic probability for God is strictly

irrelevant to the larger project (as I have described it), it is perhaps worth passing some comment on the things that Leftow says here. (The argument is irrelevant because ‘prior probability’ should just be cashed out in terms of economy of ontological and ideological commitments. Considerations about evil are data, and get drawn into the discussion when we examine goodness of explanatory fit with data.)

Leftow says:

Purely deductive (‘logical’) versions of the problem of evil are widely conceded to be ‘dead’, killed off by Plantinga’s free will defence. ... The debate has shifted to ‘evidential’ versions of the problem of evil, and my own view, which is not uncommon, is that these are pretty thoroughly on the ropes – what’s called skeptical theism provides an effective counter. (p. 547)

Sure, if we are thinking about *arguments* from evil – whether ‘logical’ or ‘evidential’ – there is a range of considerations that might be thought to lead to effective responses to those arguments. But, if squaring theism with the data about evil involves the postulation of fallen angels, or an afterlife, or the existence of goods beyond our ken, or the like, then those are theoretical costs that further increase the advantage that naturalism has over theism in terms of economy of ontological and ideological commitments. Of course, it may be that the cost is offset elsewhere – in terms of better explanatory fit with data, or greater explanatory scope, or greater unity, or greater predictive power – but even if this is so, it does not gainsay the fact that there is theoretical cost involved. (See Oppy (2013b) for further elaboration of this point.)

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