

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Anselm's Argument: Divine Necessity*, by Brian Leftow. Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 317. \$85.00 (hardcover).

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In his latest book, *Anselm's Argument: Divine Necessity*, Brian Leftow explicates and defends an Anselmian argument that attempts to go from *perfection* to *necessity* to *God*. Leftow finds in Anselm's *Reply to Gaunilo* a "modal argument from perfection" (the first of its kind, says Leftow) that trades on the idea that:

PBN: If a perfect being existed, its existence would be absolutely necessary. Where 'G' is 'a perfect being,' the premises of the argument can be formally stated (I have modified Leftow's original rendering that led to confusion elsewhere):

1.  $\Box(x)((Gx \supset (x \text{ exists } \Box \rightarrow x \text{ cannot not-exist}))$ .
2.  $\Box(x)((x \text{ exists } \Box \rightarrow x \text{ cannot not-exist}) \supset \neg(x \text{ exists } \Box \rightarrow x \text{ can not-exist}))$ .
3.  $\Box(x)((\text{possibly } x \text{ exists and } x \text{ does not exist}) \supset (x \text{ exists } \Box \rightarrow x \text{ can not-exist}))$ .
4.  $\Box(x)(Gx \supset \Box((y)(y=x \supset Gy)))$
5.  $\Diamond(\exists x)(Gx)$ .

Premise (2) is the benign assumption that nothing that exists can have a contradictory pair of properties. Premise (4) is the claim that, necessarily, if a being is perfect, it's essentially perfect. Most of what Leftow says on (4)'s behalf is found in his earlier book, *God and Necessity*. Premise (5) is the key "possibility premise" that unlocks any modal ontological argument. Given its importance, Leftow defers defense of it to a sequel, *Anselm's Proof* (forthcoming). This leaves just (1) and (3).

Essential to Leftow's defense of (3) is the Brouwer system (of modal logic, where accessibility relations are reflexive and symmetric), so he devotes a chapter to defending its truth in Brouwer and Brouwer itself as belonging to the logic of "absolute modality," the broadest and most



fundamental realm of necessity and possibility (74–80). The logic of absolute modality is S5 (chs. 1–3).

The premise that earns most of Leftow's attention is (1), which is the necessitation of PBN. It would be understandable for someone to question whether PBN merits the painstaking defense Leftow gives it. Isn't it obvious? In reply, Leftow begins the book with a useful history lesson. PBN was indeed regarded as obvious since Anselm, but dropped from view following the critiques of Hume and Kant. But now it has reemerged as a "consensus view" among analytic theist philosophers. Why? Leftow explains:

It is not as if a pitched battle arose and the Knights of Necessity slew their opponents. Rather, not long after the advent of possible worlds semantics . . . most theist philosophers seemed spontaneously to acquire Anselm's intuition that absolute necessity goes with perfection. Opinion "flipped" without much argument at all. I share this intuition. But sometimes intuitions do not pan out, and sometimes one can dig into them and excavate arguments. I hope to do that, and so put . . . Perfect Being Necessity on firmer footing. (3–4)

I don't know if Leftow succeeds in putting PBN on firmer footing for anyone (I suspect, for those already with the intuition, its footing is as firm as can be), but he certainly succeeds in digging and excavating arguments. Lots of them. Some are even interesting. So many that I had to occasionally remind myself what we're digging for. (Is this how reviewers of Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* felt when, after hundreds of pages of technicalia, they were finally assured that yes, one plus one does indeed equal two?) Nevertheless, chapters six through thirteen defend PBN against objections, and chapters thirteen through seventeen give positive arguments for it.

Beginning with the former, Leftow first revisits the critiques of PBN by Hume (we can conceive of a necessary being's nonexistence) and Kant (we lack a "real definition" of necessary being), and their contemporary ally in Swinburne (of all people!), arguing none succeed. The most serious challenge to PBN that Leftow considers comes from the alleged possibility that there could have been nothing concrete. If that's possible, there could have been nothing perfect, because a perfect being would be concrete. So PBN is false. But why think there could have been nothing concrete? Because, a parallel argument goes, there could have been nothing physical, and if there could have been nothing physical, there could have been nothing concrete. But it is dubious that concreteness entails physicality, so the *argument* doesn't work. But can't we just directly imagine, or intuit, or conceive of the possibility of there being nothing concrete, or perhaps indirectly by some mental process of subtraction of concrete things down to none? The two chapters in response to this style of defense (chs. 10–11) are the real stuff of philosophy—what digging deep into an intuition looks like (Think you can imagine or conceive of nothing concrete? Spoiler alert: you can't).

Turning to positive arguments for PBN, Leftow's strategy is to refute any workable version of the alternative, i.e., that a perfect being could be contingent. If contingent, then for any world in which it does not exist, either (i) it cannot exist there, (ii) it neither can nor cannot exist there, or (iii) it can but doesn't. If (i), either Brouwer or S5 are false. But those are too high a cost. Option (ii) requires the idiosyncratic view of A. N. Prior that there are no facts about objects in worlds in which they don't exist. But Prior's view is also incompatible with Brouwer and S5, among other problems. Option (iii) is the most promising, but ultimately falters because there's no good account of what makes a perfect being possibly exist in worlds where it doesn't. The fundamental problem with any such account is that it would need to postulate something more basic in reality than the perfect being itself, be it another concrete being (or beings) or something abstract like an individual essence or Platonic world. But "nothing should be more basic in reality than a perfect being" (257). That is, a perfect being would also exist *a se*.

Here we see how aseity bears a lot of weight in Leftow's defense of PBN, more than the reader would expect until key moves are made in defense of PBN toward the end of the book. Indeed, for Leftow, necessity is not itself a great-making property. He writes:

Note what Perfect Being Necessity does not say. It does not say (or imply) that necessity makes a perfect being great. It could be true if necessity conferred no greatness itself, but were a necessary condition of some increment of greatness. Again, it does not say (or imply) that it is better to exist necessarily than to exist contingently. For a perfect being has the an [*sic*] overall best set of compossible essential attributes. So in principle, a perfect being could be necessary even if taken in isolation, it were better to be contingent. Necessity could make it into the winners' circle because something else implies it, and this thing's value outweighs the value contingency would bring. (11–12)

This last sentence proves to be no mere hypothetical; the perfection of aseity is ultimately what blocks alternatives to PBN, and buttresses his "lesser-maker" argument for PBN in the penultimate chapter. A perfect being couldn't be contingent because it would be *a se*, and no contingent being could be *a se*. So, a perfect being would be necessary. QED. Why, then, the disproportionate amount of attention given to necessity over aseity? Doubtlessly because necessity is the more obvious part of the deal offered by modal ontological arguments. Buy one possible world featuring a necessary perfect being, you get it in all the rest for free. This what Hartshorne referred to as "Anselm's discovery." Important as it is, perhaps equally as important is:

PBA: If a perfect being existed, its existence would be *a se*.

PBA is indisputably in Anselm (see *Monologion* 1–6; *Proslogion* 5), and Leftow agrees with it (215ff.). Why equally as important? Because all of

Leftow's digging and excavating has arguably unearthed 'PBN only if PBA.' That should motivate the defender of Anselm's argument to look more deeply into PBA. How does Anselm understand aseity? Is it defensible, or does it need some Chisholming? Setting aside Anselm's understanding, Leftow briefly explores weaker and stronger construals of aseity, and opts for a very strong one. A perfect being exists *a se*, he says, if it "cannot be externally caused, put together from parts, constituted, or grounded" (219) and is in no way enabled to exist by anything else (220), even a little bit. In short, *A* exists *a se* at  $t = \text{df. necessarily, nothing accounts for } A\text{'s existence at } t$ . The rationale is simple. If anything accounts (or even helps account) for *A*'s existence in any way, *that* would be more basic than *A*. But "nothing should be more basic in reality than a perfect being. In particular, if a perfect being would exist *a se*, nothing more basic should be contributing to its existence" (257).

Leftow's view of aseity is, I think, too strong. For one thing, it is incompatible with the canonical PSR that says everything has an explanation (or, if you prefer, "an account") for why it exists. If nothing accounts for *A*'s existence, nothing explains *A*'s existence, *contra* the PSR. Leftow may reject the canonical PSR (I think he does), but Anselm doesn't. (See *Monologion* 3. See further A. D. Smith, *Anselm's Other Argument* (Harvard University Press), ch. 7.) In fact, Anselm argues for the existence of a being with aseity using the canonical PSR as the main premise. So, there's tension there insofar as Leftow thinks his view of aseity is Anselmian (I think he does—he cites *Monologion* 6 after giving his full-strength view of aseity on p. 220). This is to say nothing of other costs of rejecting the canonical PSR.

Leftow's view of aseity is also incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity. There is no model of the Trinity where the Father doesn't account for the Son (at least partially). Even so, the Son is not for that reason less perfect or divine (Leftow says perfection and deity are convertible, p. 70n8) than the Father. But if Leftow's view of aseity is correct, the Son cannot be *a se*, and therefore cannot be perfect/divine. Matters are made worse if perfect love requires one divine person (Father) to generate a second (Son), as Richard of St. Victor argued in the twelfth century and Richard Swinburne argues today. The "generates" relation is certainly an "accounts for" relation. I don't know what Leftow thinks of the Richard argument, but it would show that Leftow's aseity also conflicts (albeit indirectly) with the standard perfect being attribute of love.

I have focused primarily on the philosophical goal of the book, which is offering a cutting-edge defense of PBN as a main premise of the Anselmian argument Leftow outlines. Leftow also has historical goals in the book, however, which are "to make sense of Anselm's modal metaphysics (that is, his metaphysics of possibility and necessity)" and "to show that the necessity in Anselm's Perfect Being Necessity is indeed absolute" (4). Anselm scholars will be the better judges on whether Leftow accomplishes these goals in chapters one through four, but these chapters read (to me!) more like the reconstruction of a brilliant metaphysician than, say,

a medievalist comfortable with the historical craft of engaging an author's corpus more widely and with greater emphasis on textual nuances, translation complexities, and attention to historical context.

*Anselm's Argument* is a dense and challenging read that will be of interest to philosophers of religion specializing in metaphysics and the ontological argument. Those who have labored through *God and Necessity* and now *Anselm's Argument* will have the patience to "stay tuned," as Leftow requests in the last sentence of the book (304), for the third volume that defends the all-important possibility premise,  $\diamond(\exists x)(Gx)$ . I suspect he will have more to say on its behalf than the exceedingly modest "if you carefully ponder it and objections to it and still find it compelling, we are within our rights in accepting it" (cf. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 221).

*The Humane Perspective: Philosophical Reflections on Human Nature, the Search for Meaning, and the Role of Religion*, by John Cottingham. Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. x + 245. \$90.00 (hardcover).

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In this book, John Cottingham builds on the beautiful and highly engaging approach he takes to questions of meaning, morality, and religion in his many previous books, including *On the Meaning of Life* (2003), *The Spiritual Dimension* (2005), *Why Believe?* (2009), *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a More Humane Approach* (2014), *How to Believe* (2015), and *In Search of the Soul* (2020). Unlike these previous works, however, this new book is not another monograph but instead a collection of thirteen articles Cottingham has recently published, plus one new introductory chapter. The articles, updated with helpful footnotes describing how ideas in each connect to those developed elsewhere in the volume, are neatly organized into four sections: (1) Manifesto and Method, (2) Morality and Meaning, (3) Science and Its Limits, and (4) Reaching for the Transcendent. Since I cannot comment substantively on all fourteen articles, instead I'll focus on one or two pieces from each section, emphasizing the ideas I expect will be of most interest to this journal's readers.

One of the book's overall aims is to provide a compelling example of a more "humane" approach to philosophy than is typical in the discipline. Cottingham explains what he has in mind by this in the volume's first part ("Manifesto and Method"), which comprises two chapters. The second

