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Analytic Philosophical Theology and the recovery of metaphysics

An interview with Brian Leftow

La Teología Filosófica Analítica y la recuperación de la metafísica
Entrevista con Brian Leftow

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Abstract: In this interview Prof. Brian Leftow answers questions concerning the causes of the emergence of Analytic Philosophical Theology within the analytic tradition; the advantages of maintaining the traditional picture of perfect being theology with regards to divine attributes; his conception of the origin of necessary truths; the problem of evil; and the importance of university investment in research on philosophical theology.

Keywords: Analytic Theology, metaphysics, God; timelessness, necessity; evil.

Resumen: En esta entrevista el Prof. Brian Leftow responde a preguntas acerca de las causas de la emergencia de la Teología Filosófica Analítica dentro de la tradición analítica; las ventajas de mantener la imagen tradicional de la teología del ser perfecto en el tema de los atributos divinos; su concepción sobre el origen de las verdades necesarias; el problema del mal; y la importancia para las universidades de invertir en investigación en el ámbito de la teología filosófica.

Palabras clave: Teología Analítica, metafísica, Dios, atemporalidad, necesidad, mal.

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Professor Brian Leftow is since 2002 the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion in the Faculties of Philosophy and Theology of Oxford University. His areas of specialization are Philosophy of Religion, Medieval Philosophy and Metaphysics. He is the author of the books *God and Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and *Time and Eternity* (Cornell University Press, 1991). He has co-edited with Brian Davies the collective works, *Aquinas: Questions on God* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). He has published more than 90 articles on different issues of philosophy of religion. Among the more recent we could mention “Omnipotence, Evil and What’s in God,” *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, 6 (3) (2014), 39-63, “Tempting God,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (2014), 3-24, “God’s Deontic Perfection,” *Res Philosophica* 90 (2013), 69-95, “Time-travel and the Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy* July 2012. He is a member (and former president) of the Executive Committee of the British Society for Philosophy of Religion, 2003-9, and belongs to the Editorial Board of several journals such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *Philosophical Compass*, *Ratio*, *Journal of Analytic Theology*, and *Medieval Philosophy: Texts and Studies*.

Prof. Leftow visited the University of Navarra on 2-3 March, 2015, where he delivered two lectures as a part of the activities of the Cluster Group on Analytic Theology, “Philosophical and Theological perspectives on Divine Providence”, held in the Philosophy Department and supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation funded project “Analytic Theology” of the Centre for Philosophy of Religion (University of Notre Dame). Profs. Agustín Echavarría and Martín Montoya took the opportunity to have a conversation with Prof. Leftow about his work, including his ideas on the origins and perspectives of Analytic Philosophical Theology.

Agustín Echavarría / J. Martín Montoya: God seems to have a profound sense of irony, by making an important revival of philosophical and theological reflection emerge from analytic philosophy, a tradition which once was dominated by logical positivism’s strong anti-metaphysical imprint. In the meantime, the Continental tradition, apparently more sympathetic

to metaphysics, has become seemingly sterile when it comes to rational discourse about God. What do you consider to be the causes of this a priori unlikely phenomenon?

Brian Leftow: To give a good answer I need to say a bit about the history of both traditions. So, first I am going to tell the Analytic story, then I'll tell the Continental story, and then I'll tie them together. The Analytic story actually doesn't start with the rejection of metaphysics or philosophical theology. Analytic philosophy began with Russell and Moore around 1900. They were two metaphysicians rebelling against the prevailing metaphysics of their day. When Wittgenstein joined around 1913 he was another metaphysician, rebelling against that old metaphysics in the name of the new one. So, it wasn't an anti-metaphysical movement at all when it began. And it stayed metaphysical for its first 25 years. But then Wittgenstein's ideas left England and Austria and moved to Germany. When they went to Germany they came in contact with a peculiarly German virus- the Kantian rejection of metaphysics. The German philosophers looked at what Wittgenstein had done and said: "Aha, this gives us a new way to put the idea that metaphysics is just non-sense, which was better than what Kant had given us." So it was when English and Austrian metaphysics moved to Germany that the distinctive anti-metaphysical strain of logical positivism first emerged on the movement. But that was 30 years after the beginning.

Later, Wittgenstein himself turned against metaphysics and that became another current in the rejection. But Analytic philosophy's primary emphasis was always on the use of rigorous logic and careful argumentation. So, while the anti-metaphysical strain of Analytic philosophy held center stage for 20 or 30 years, the same techniques that had given birth to this movement ultimately turned against the anti-metaphysical part of it. The same rigorous analysis that characterized Russell and Moore at the outset turned to the anti-metaphysical arguments and said: "Well, this really don't hold up, there is really no good reason to abandon metaphysics." And so, actually by the 1960s the anti-metaphysical strain of Analytical philosophy was pretty much dead. At that point, philosophers began

returning to all the traditional questions of philosophy, questions of metaphysics, and the questions of philosophy of religion. At that time, there emerged a couple of really important Christian philosophers, men whose work was so good that nobody could ignore it. Those were Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. Plantinga was American, Swinburne was British. And in these two countries where Analytic philosophy was headquartered, suddenly you had a revival of philosophy of religion, in such powerful and logical terms that it couldn't be ignored. That took off in that point, and in the '70s it gained a further revival when Plantinga and some other American Christian philosophers formed the Society of Christian Philosophers. This was a society devoted to explicitly Christian philosophy and to fellowship among Christian philosophers, where they can get together and just talk about their own concerns. Philosophy of religion until that point had been dominated by the questions that atheists ask: Is talk about God even meaningful? Can you prove the existence of God? And not much else. But when the Society of Christian Philosophers formed, Philosophy of religion took a new focus. It said: "Let's talk about the questions Christians want to talk about in philosophy of religion." And so, at that point, Philosophical Theology really took off. All the traditional questions of theology began to come under the scrutiny of analytical philosophers.

This gathered force till the Society of Christian Philosophers became the second largest philosophical society in America. The American Philosophical Association, the umbrella organization, has about 10 000 members. The Society of Christian Philosophers is number two, with about 1 300, so is really a powerful movement. That's what Analytic philosophy is at the moment. It has a very heavy Christian presence; it has a very healthy Christian discourse. And this emerged strictly from within Analytic philosophy, by the proper principles of the movement, so to speak. The logical analysis of arguments, careful argumentation, first showed that the anti-metaphysical part of Analytic philosophy had no good foundation, then showed how fruitfully you can develop distinctively Christian philosophy.

That's the Analytic story. Let's go back now to the beginning with Continental philosophy. That also emerged from a rebellion

against what had been the prevailing metaphysics in the 19th Century. But, while the Analytic rebellion turned against even Kant, the origin of everything that happened the 19th Century, the Continental rebellion was not quite that firm. It rebelled against German Idealism, which was the dominant 19th Century philosophy. But it didn't rebel against Kant himself. It kept Kant's anti-metaphysical emphasis. So, the first form of Continental philosophy to develop was Phenomenology. Notice the name, 'Phenomenology'. You're studying the phenomena, the way things appear, human experience. You are not trying to do metaphysics, talking about things as they are in themselves. You are talking about how things appear to human beings. That was what started with Husserl. The greats of Continental philosophy- Sartre, Heidegger- would have described themselves as existential phenomenologists: Existentialism was a form of Phenomenology.

As the Continental movement developed further, it absorbed what's been called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', coming out of figures like Marx and Freud. And this was suspicion of many things, but particularly of religion and of metaphysics. These were supposed to be somehow inherently problematic ways of thinking. So, Continental philosophy started out in a way that had nothing much to do with religion. As it took on the hermeneutics of suspicion, it became explicitly anti-religious. And it was always anti-metaphysical. For a long time theology drew on Continental philosophy, partly because it thought that Phenomenology could be helpful in developing theology, partly because Phenomenology was less hostile than logical positivism was. But still it wasn't a natural pairing, because theology wants to talk about God, about the nature of reality, and Phenomenology abstracts from all that. It just talks about the way things appear to human beings. So, that's why you find the situation as it now is. Analytic philosophy is very friendly to metaphysics, because it was at its outset, and the anti-metaphysical part was only a phase. But friendliness to metaphysics has never been part of Continental philosophy, so it's not surprising that is not friendly now. And insofar as talking about God is a particular kind of metaphysics, or theology is developing metaphysical thought into

a realm metaphysics can't reach on its own, it's natural in a way that Analytic philosophy would be hospitable to that whereas Continental philosophy would not be.

AE / JMM: The past few decades have seen a growing interest of trained Analytic philosophers in theological issues leading to the emergence of so-called 'Analytic Theology'. Continental theologians either seem reluctant to engage with this movement or are simply unaware of its existence. Why do you think this is the case and how do you think this situation could change?

BL: As far as they are not noticing it goes, I think that's just sociological- maybe they just don't see that it's there. But rejecting it or feeling uncomfortable engaging with it has a specific conceptual root. Analytic theology in a way returns theology to what it was in Aquinas's time and what it was from Aquinas up until Kant. It's talk about God primarily and talk about Christian doctrine primarily. Not talk primarily about human experience, or about how God appears in human experience, or about how do we interpret Christian doctrine in light of human experience. Analytic theology is the old paradigm of theology that treats Kant as if he never happened. It just ignores Kant. Continental philosophy, as I said, remains very much faithful to Kant's emphasis, and so it remains within boundaries Kant set. Kant said, in effect, that you can talk about human experience, but you can't talk about God in Himself or about things as they are in themselves. So, when Continental theologians look at Analytic theology, they see a fundamentally different kind of theology than they do. And it's natural to not want to engage with something that seems to you to be just a different paradigm.

Overcoming this estrangement would be difficult. There's a natural human tendency to keep on doing what you know how to do, and that's hard to overcome. But I think there can be some progress insofar as there might be conferences and meetings where the two sides of theology listen to each other and hear what each other has to say. Some people in the Continental tradition will just have a natural interest to hear what Analytic theologians are doing and may think, "well, that sounds interesting." They might then want to

try to do it themselves. It's important that Analytic theologians who engage in these things come as people willing to listen to what the other sort has to say as well. If we come with a sense that "we've got it right, you've got it wrong and you've got to listen to us", we will turn people off, very naturally. But if we come saying "here's what I am doing and you might find it interesting" and "tell me about what you're doing and I might find it interesting", there can be a natural interchange, and maybe some people on the other side will become interested on what Analytic theologians are doing. That will take time, but it seems to me a hopeful thing to try.

Apart from that, I think there may just have to be time allowed for a sort of generational shift. If Analytic Theology looks interesting to enough students, then there will be students who want to do it, and in the course of time get jobs, and there will gradually be a change in the culture of theology generally. You can see this happening in German philosophy right now. Germany was for a long time a kind of headquarters of Continental philosophy. That's very much changing, because younger German philosophers became interested in Analytic philosophy, and as they move up in the German hierarchy there's been a shift in even what the professors are doing.

AE / JMM: Besides your work on Analytic Philosophy of Religion, you have a long track record of scholarship on classical Christian authors such as Anselm and Aquinas. To what extent do you think that knowledge of the Western tradition of philosophy and theology can contribute to the contemporary debate on Analytic Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology?

BL: Analytic Philosophical Theology is so thoroughly engaged with Medieval authors that it was once said of the main journal for it that you couldn't get published there if you didn't know Medieval philosophy. That's not quite true, but that it was said makes a point. Knowing the tradition helps us in many ways. First, we want to be talking about actual religions and theologies, not about something we've made up, and so we need to know what the contours of theology and of orthodoxy are, so that we make sure we are actually talk-

ing about real theology rather than made up theology. Second, the tradition is an incredibly fertile source of theories to think about, and if you look at a theory and say ‘hey, that sounds right to me,’ well, if you know Analytic philosophy, you often can explain it better than its originators. You can see this with Molinism. I am not a Molinist myself. I don’t think it works. But Analytic theologians have developed Molinism beyond what Molina himself was able to do. If you don’t think traditional authors got it quite right, still they are very fruitful dialogue partners to think about. You can say ‘well I can see what you didn’t get quite right, and I can do this better, and here is why it’s better’. So traditional authors provide a kind of springboard to jump off. Chesterton once said that tradition is democracy of the dead- that the dead get to speak too. We believe that, and we let them speak to us and try to get them to help us do our job better.

AE / JMM: You have defended over the years a classical view of God as a perfect being, emphasizing some attributes many philosophers of religion are prone to neglect as problematic, for instance, divine eternity as timelessness. What advantages do you find in keeping the image of classical theism with regards to divine attributes, and more specifically, timelessness?

BL: I think it helps a lot in a lot of ways. First, it just plain feels religiously appropriate to me. I guess, if I have one basic thought about God, it is that God is the ultimate reality. And that excites me. I mean, I want to pray to the ultimate reality. If I want to worship something I want it to be as big and as great as the ultimate reality. On a religious level, seeing God as timeless is seeing Him as so ultimate that He is beyond time. If God is timeless, He created time. Time is not something He is bound to. Time is something below Him. He made it, He can do without it, He lives without it. That just feels right to me. That was the most basic reason I got interested in the idea of God as timeless. But it also helps a lot in philosophy as well as religion. For one thing, I don’t see any other way to hold both that we are free and that God knows what we will do in our future. I’ve looked at all the prevailing solutions and none

of the others seem to work. So, if you want to believe that God knows our future and yet that we will be free and responsible when we act, I don't think you have any choice but to see God as timeless. Again, I think timelessness is implied by many of the main attributes Christians think are very important. I think that if you think of God as perfect, that pushes you to timelessness. Again, if you think that God is a necessary being, that He couldn't possibly not exist, that pushes you to timelessness.

*AE / JMM: In your impressive book *God and Necessity* you take your defense of divine ultimacy to the extreme of setting God's creative activity as the source and ground of every 'secular modal truth' (i.e., modal truths about created beings). Nevertheless, you seem to place yourself between Descartes and Aquinas by assigning God's nature the role of being the source of formal truths of logic and mathematics. Your proposal seems groundbreaking, but it has been subject to strong criticism, in particular accusations of voluntarism and arbitrariness. How would you reply to these criticisms?*

BL: The dominant view among believers in God, who have said that God is the ground of necessary truths, has been to say that God's nature is the ground of all of it. This was e.g. Aquinas' view. I agree with a great deal of that. I think that it holds for logic, for mathematics, for truths about good and evil. Those are all grounded in God's nature. But I make an exception for truths about the natures of creatures. Why there is such a thing as a zebra? Well, I don't think that was built into the nature of God. If you peered into God's nature long enough, you won't find zebras. God is not a zoo: you don't find animals there. So, why is there such a nature as zebra? Well, I think that God just dreamed it up. God is so creative that He could even invent the very natures of animals and plants and galaxies. Does that make me a voluntarist? I don't think so. Voluntarism would imply that that's contingent- that it is contingent that there are such things as zebras, or that zebras have stripes. The technical reasons why I don't have to say that would be more that I can develop here, but I don't in fact have to say that. I can grant that some

truths about zebras are genuinely necessary truths, even though they have their roots in God's imagination. On the other hand, if you say, "well, Leftow, there seems something arbitrary about zebras in that case," I say, "in a sense, yes." Nothing about God's nature dictated it, thinking of zebras. Zebras are really a free imagining of God. So if you ask "what is the ultimate reason that God thought of zebras"? I can't say any more than "well, He is creative and that's one way His creativity expressed itself." His nature didn't dictate His doing that. And so, if you want to say, "well, that makes it arbitrary", I'll just have to say "yes". But that doesn't mean it was irrational, that doesn't mean that truths about zebras are not genuinely necessary, and it doesn't mean that it wasn't congruent with His nature, even if His nature didn't dictate it.

AE / JMM: The Problem of Evil is one of the most difficult challenges for a theist philosopher. If God is omnipotent and benevolent, why does He permit evil? How exactly do you understand God's permission?

BL: God's permission in this case is at least just not stopping it. But you can't say only that, because there's a certain sense in which God cooperates with evil. If I am about to murder you with a knife, God could simply make the knife disappear. But instead, He conserves the knife in being, even while I drive it into you. So you can't say that God's hands are entirely apart from the evil. He is keeping the knife in being. So His permission is something a bit stronger, He keeps the instruments of evil operating, and allows me to use them in the wrong way. That makes the problem of evil harder, because God does not permit in the sense of looking the other way and not caring. Rather, for reasons of His own, He permits in the strong sense that He keeps nature running and allows me to misuse it.

Why does God permit evil? Why does God cooperate with evil and keep nature running so that we can misuse it? There, I think the best response differs depending on whether are you talking about moral evil, the evil that I do with the knife, or natural evil, evils like pain and suffering caused by being caught in a volcanic eruption or an earthquake. With regard to moral evil, I think the best kind of

answer deal appeals ultimately to free will. Again, there's a lot more to this than I can develop right now in just a couple of minutes, but the basic thought is it's very important that God allow us full scope to be free. And if that means allowing us full scope to be evil, the importance of our freedom and of what our freedom is for outweigh that. And so, a good God allows us to do evil- but I believe He also provides compensation to our victims.

As to natural evil, I favor what's called skeptical theism. I think maybe we don't and can't know the full reasons that God allows natural evils. But precisely because we can't know this, the argument from natural evil is undercut, because ultimately what that argument says is: "if we don't know what God's reasons are, there must not be good reasons". That's the inference the skeptical theist rejects. The skeptical theist says "No. God would know much more than we do. God could have reasons we can't possibly grasp." So if we can't see reasons for it, all that tells us is that if we made the universe, it would be a bad job. We would have botched it. But, what about God? God might have good reasons for allowing what we can't see reasons for allowing.

AE / JMM: Finally, why is it still important today for universities to embrace and invest in research on Philosophical Theology?

BL: There are a lot of reasons it is important. One that applies to all kinds of universities, is students are interested in this. Students want to study it. But if they are going to study it, there have to be trained teachers to teach them, and so there have to be researchers to train the teachers. So if you want to feed this natural student interest, you need research in philosophical theology to produce the people who can do it. Next there's a pair of reasons that applies to different kinds of universities. First, universities like Navarra, private universities with a religious basis: Navarra wants to produce students who understand their faith, who are secure in it, who will maintain it against the challenges of unbelievers, and who can perhaps even help share it with unbelievers themselves. Well, philosophical theology is a great way to serve that end. Students who know that can see that

there are rigorous rational arguments to be given in understanding their faith and even in supporting it. That helps them maintain their own faith against the challenges, it helps them know that they have good answers to unbelievers' arguments when they meet them in newspapers or with their friends, it helps them share their faith with unbelievers. So, if you want to equip religious students to go out and maintain their own religious lives after university, you need philosophical theology to teach them, and that means you need research in philosophical theology to train the teachers.

Turning to secular universities, you might think, "well, what reason would they have to support this kind of research". But actually they have in a way almost more reason than religious universities do. Secular universities compete for funding from the government, and they have to show why what they do is important. Humanities, in general, have a very hard time competing for government funding these days. The government wants to fund science, engineering, medicine, because these things are where the money is- they will help the national economy to grow. So governments are tending more and more not to fund Humanities these days. They can get away with this because there isn't a broad support for the Humanities among the population at large. Why? Well, people who haven't gone to university hear what's going on in the Humanities faculties, and it doesn't seem important to them. Instead, it sounds pointless, or strange and alienating and suspicious. People who have gone to universities often go to Humanities classes, and what they meet doesn't engage their interests- or does, but seems strange, alienating and suspicious. Philosophical theology engages questions everybody finds important. Whether you are religious or not, you think the questions of religion are important. So philosophical theology is the smiley face of the Humanities that can be put to the world at large. It says to anybody "here are questions you find important", "here are people saying important things about them in ways you can understand." Investing in philosophical theology is a way of building support for Humanities among the population at large. That's a way of building political support for the Humanities, and keeping funding for Humanities flowing from the government. So if you

are a secular university but you want to maintain your funding for Humanities, philosophical theology is a subject you need.

Finally, there is a reason philosophical theology is important that speaks to the broader role of universities, particularly as population changes. All European countries are seeing a heavy influx of Islamic immigrants. Sometimes these look at Western culture and are hostile to it, because they see in universities an intellectual culture that is hostile to religion. They go to university, they find that culture in many academic departments, and so they turn against the West partly because they see its intellectual culture as hostile to what a good Muslim believes. If they find philosophical theology in the universities, well, insofar as it is Christian, it won't be entirely friendly to what they believe. But insofar as it engages with theism, insofar as it treats religion respectfully enough to talk about it rationally, insofar as philosophical theologians have arguments for beliefs that Jews, Muslims and Christians share, Muslims will look at this and say: "no, Western philosophical culture is not alien to me. It's something I as a Muslim can be part of". That means, "I as a Muslim can to that extent be part of the West." As Muslim population grows, that is an important thing to get them to believe. Philosophical theology can do that, or help to do that.

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