

Splitting the Horns of Euthyphro's Modal Relative

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Abstract

There is a modal relative of Euthyphro's dilemma that goes like this: are necessary truths true because God affirms them, or does God affirm them because they're true? If you accept the first horn, necessary truths are as contingent as God's free will. If you accept the second, God is less ultimate than the modal ontology that establishes certain truths as necessary. If you try to split the horns by affirming that necessary truths are somehow grounded in God's nature, Brian Leftow meets you with an argument. I will argue that Leftow's argument fails and that, contrary to his argument, there is a good reason to believe that necessary truths are grounded in God's nature.

Introduction

There is a modal relative of Euthyphro's dilemma that goes like this: are necessary truths true because God affirms them, or does God affirm them because they're true? If you accept the first horn, necessary truths are as contingent as God's free will. If you accept the second, God is less ultimate than the modal ontology that establishes certain truths as necessary. If you try to split the horns by affirming that necessary truths are somehow grounded in God's nature, Brian Leftow meets you with an argument. (Leftow 2009) I will argue that Leftow's argument fails and that, contrary to his argument, there is a good reason to believe that necessary truths are grounded in God's nature.

1 Leftow's Argument

A deity theorist holds that God's nature makes true all necessary truths, even those necessary truths that are about creatures only. For example, God's nature makes

the following creature-only truth necessary:

(WATER): Water = H₂O.

To deity theorists, all necessary truths have a truthmaker or truthmakers—entities in virtue of which truthbearers are true—that is/are grounded in God’s nature, or deity. There are many varieties of deity theories. A deity theorist could hold that each necessary truth has a truthmaker and that all of these truthmakers are contained in God’s nature. Or a deity theorist could hold that all necessary truths have one truthmaker that is identical to God’s nature. There are other possibilities. No matter what the version of deity theory, Leftow argues that the deity theorist must make an undesirable commitment. Here’s Leftow’s argument. (Leftow 2009, 110)

1. Deity theories commit us to the claim that God’s existence depends on there being truthmakers¹ for particular necessary truths about creatures only.
2. Theories that did not so commit us would *ceteris paribus* be preferable.
3. So, it would be preferable *ceteris paribus* to avoid a deity theory.

I’ll argue against premise (2) in this paper, but premise (2) contains reference to the commitment mentioned in premise (1). So, I’ll briefly give Leftow’s argument for this commitment, then I’ll give Leftow’s arguments for premise (2).

The undesirable (to Leftow) commitment deity theorists make is that God’s existence depends on there being truthmakers for particular truths about creatures only. Leftow argues using (WATER) as an example:²

4. If (WATER) is untrue, then nothing has deity.
5. If nothing has deity, then God does not exist.
6. So, if (WATER) is untrue, then God does not exist.

¹Leftow uses the plural here, but it is evident that he thinks his argument would work just as well against someone who holds that there is just one truthmaker for all necessary truths.

²I’ve abridged Leftow’s argument, excising portions of the argument that are unimportant for this paper’s purposes while still leaving the essence of his argument intact. The argument is in Leftow (2009, 111).

Leftow has arguments for these premises that I will not present here. I should, however, say something about (4), because Leftow will use premises just like (4) to argue for (2). Although the antecedent of (4) is necessarily false, Leftow believes that we don't have substantive reasons for inferring that something does have deity from $\langle\langle\text{WATER}\rangle\text{ is untrue}\rangle$. For semantic reasons, when antecedents are impossible, the conditional is true—but only for semantic reasons. Leftow is not concerned with semantics alone. Leftow says that, given a deity theory, we ought rather (or also) to accept (4) for reasons of substantive ontological dependence. If (4) is considered as a matter of substantive ontological dependence, (4) is true, and a conditional with (4)'s antecedent but with $\langle\text{something does have deity}\rangle$ as its consequent can be ignored as it pertains to his argument.³ The same comments (*mutatis mutandis*) apply to (6), where the antecedent is also necessarily false.

Suppose you accept (6) and also accept (1). ((1) is the principle of which (6) is an example.) What's so bad about that? Enter premise (2): theories that did not so commit us would *ceteris paribus* be preferable. Leftow gives four arguments for premise (2). I will argue against these arguments in the next section.

Leftow's first argument is as follows: if deity theory were true, we would have to accept a (non-semantic) connection between the antecedent and consequent of: *if (WATER) is untrue, then God does not exist*. However, (WATER)'s having a truth value seems to have nothing to do with whether God exists. If a conditional's antecedent is intuitively irrelevant to its consequent, we should reject the conditional for all but semantic reasons.⁴

If (WATER) is false, then God does not exist

seems just as unconnected as

Were Louis XV King of France, watched pots would seldom boil.⁵

Leftow supports the non-connection between (WATER)'s truth value and God's existence by giving an analogy to scientific theories. "Deity theories do not make

³"But even if all such conditionals are trivially true for semantic reasons, some may also reflect important facts: truths can be overdetermined to be true. I argue below that on a deity theory, [$\langle\text{if (WATER) is untrue, then God does not exist}\rangle$] is such a case. It reflects a substantive, objectionable dependence that would exist were a deity theory true; it is not an oddity of conditional semantics we can just ignore. Putting this another way: we can ignore [$\langle\text{if (WATER) is untrue, then God does not exist}\rangle$] only if the only reason we have to affirm it is semantic." Leftow (2009, 111-2).

⁴Leftow says that semantic reasons are irrelevant in these cases, because he concedes there are only semantic reasons for accepting the conditional, not substantive reasons, which deity theories would provide. Leftow (2009, 156)

⁵The objection starts on (Leftow 2009, 155); this conditional is on p. 156.

(WATER) *appear* relevant to God’s existence, and lack the claim on our acceptance which (say) a well-confirmed background scientific theory does.” (Leftow 2009, 156, emphasis his) That is, a scientific theory makes one of its applications appear to be relevant to its other applications. Deity theories do not. For example, if an apple and a rock were both to fall toward the earth, the apple’s falling and the rock’s falling appear to be relevant to each other. That is, it appears to us that these two happenings are related in such a way that we would be willing to accept a scientific theory (i.e. the law of gravity) explaining this connection. (WATER) and God’s existence do not appear to be relevant to each other in a way similar to the way the apple’s falling and the rock’s falling do.

Leftow’s second argument is similar. If a deity theory were true, denial of any necessary truth would entail the denial of *all other* necessary truths, even seemingly unrelated ones. (Of course, it trivially follows for semantic reasons that the denial of any necessary truth entails the denial of any other necessary truth, but Leftow, remember, is concerned with substantive dependence, not just semantic dependence.) Leftow argues that if we deny any necessary truth, then we deny deity, and if we deny deity, we deny all that deity truthmakes, which is every necessary truth.⁶ Leftow gives two examples of inferences the proponent of deity theory must affirm.

If hydrogen contains two protons, then it is not true that 7 is prime.

If it is false that (if anything is Socrates, it is human), then it is not true that modus ponens is valid.

Just as in the previous argument, Leftow argues that what makes the antecedents true has no connection with what makes their consequents true: “Why should a change in chemistry mess up the numbers?” (Leftow 2009, 158) Leftow concludes that deity theories are (at best) unintuitive.⁷

Leftow’s third argument is that (WATER) and deity theory are explainable apart from each other.⁸ If someone were to give an account of what deity theory is—without mentioning that deity truthmakes (WATER)—that person would not be providing

⁶“Deleting deity deletes all that deity contains. So if (WATER) were untrue, some truthmakers of every necessary truth would not exist...if deity does not exist, nothing is left to truthmake anything.” Leftow (2009, 157-8)

⁷“If a strongly intuitive truth [a truth about truthmakers for necessary truth] generates unintuitive consequences when conjoined with a deity theory, this is reason to consider deity theories unintuitive.” Leftow (2009, 158)

⁸“Necessary truth about water’s nature appears in no way shaped by the fact that it is written into deity. What there is to deity aside from this does not explain this’ [water’s nature] being just what it is, as far as we can tell. But given a deity theory, it is reasonable to expect such explanation

an explanation for (WATER)'s truth. In fact, that person would not say anything about (WATER). However, if we were to accept a deity theory, we should expect that by giving an account of deity theory we would also be giving an account of (WATER)'s truth. In addition, we can give an account of water's nature without saying anything about deity theory. Leftow says that if we accept deity theory, we would expect that in giving an account of water's nature we would mention deity theory. So, deity theory and (WATER) are unrelated, and it is implausible to commit to the view that they are.

Fourth, deity is the property that makes God divine, so it should only contain what is necessary for God to be divine. However, intuitively, (WATER) is not necessary for making God divine. If we were to list everything that is true about God's nature, arguably we would not include facts about water. So, deity does not contain the truthmaker for (WATER).⁹ The deity theorist, however, believes deity contains the truthmaker for (WATER). So, deity theories are false.

2 Replies to Leftow's Arguments for Premise 2

The first argument is similar to the second. According to both of them, the denial of one necessary truth entails the denial of another. But these denials generate conditionals whose constituents seem unconnected. For example, if someone were to deny (WATER), he would have to deny God's existence, but (WATER) and God's existence seem unconnected. We should therefore reject the non-semantic connection between the antecedent and the consequent of:

If (WATER) is untrue, then God does not exist.¹⁰

and such marks..." Leftow (2009, 156) That is, (WATER) appears in no way shaped by the claim that (WATER) is truth-made by deity—deity theory. Also, besides the claim that (WATER) is truth-made by deity, whatever there is to deity and what it truthmakes does not appear to explain (WATER).

⁹"Again, deity is the property having which makes God divine. So it should contain just things that help make God divine. Intuitively, facts about water do not help make God divine... so, facts about water are irrelevant to the job the property deity does, and should not be packed into it." Leftow (2009, 156-7)

¹⁰This conditional may not seem unconnected to someone who thinks that God's existence is identical to his nature (e.g. Aquinas). For this person, denying truthmakers for any necessary truth entails denying God's nature, and denying God's nature is identical to denying his existence. However, this response won't do for seemingly-unconnected conditionals that don't include divine attributes, such as: if (WATER) is untrue, then 7 is not prime.

Similarly, we should reject the non-semantic connection between the antecedent and consequent of:

If (WATER) is untrue, then 7 is not prime.

I will argue that even the propositions contained in this last conditional—[⟨(WATER) is untrue⟩ and ⟨7 is not prime⟩]—should seem connected. Both are propositions whose truthmaker is grounded in deity. I will offer two analogies to show why these seemingly-unconnected propositions are in fact connected. The first is between deity theory and the proposition theory of meaningfulness, and the second is between deity theory and an axiom of possible world semantics. The first analogy shows that although the meaning of ‘Water is H₂O’ and the meaning of ‘7 is prime’ initially seem unconnected, the proposition theory shows that they are connected. Similarly, the truth of (WATER) and ⟨7 is prime⟩ seem unconnected, but deity theory shows that they are connected.

According to the proposition theory of meaningfulness, a sentence ‘p’ is meaningful if and only if it expresses some proposition p . I will use the proposition theory of meaningfulness to establish the following conditional:

If ‘Water is H₂O’ is not meaningful, then ‘7 is prime’ is not meaningful.

One application of the proposition theory is: ‘Water is H₂O’ is meaningful if and only if it expresses some proposition p . Another application of the proposition theory is: ‘7 is prime’ is meaningful if and only if it expresses some proposition q . Now, let’s assume the following: if anything expresses a proposition, ‘Water is H₂O’ does. (This is the analog of (WATER)’s necessity.) Further, let us assume that ‘Water is H₂O’ is meaningless. Given proposition theory, it follows that nothing expresses a proposition. If nothing expresses a proposition, then ‘7 is prime’ does not express some proposition q . Given proposition theory, this entails that ‘7 is prime’ is meaningless. So, if ‘Water is H₂O’ is not meaningful, then ‘7 is prime’ is not meaningful.

The meaning of ‘Water is H₂O’ seems *prima facie* unconnected to the meaning of ‘7 is prime’ unless the proposition theory is given to explain the connection. The meaning of ‘Water is H₂O’ seems *prima facie* unconnected to the meaning of ‘7 is prime’ only if we are ignorant of the proposition theory of meaningfulness. If we’re not ignorant of the theory, the meaningfulness of ‘Water is H₂O’ and the meaningfulness of ‘7 is prime’ should seem connected.

Here’s another example. Assume this axiom of possible world semantics—call it “the possibility axiom”: p is possible if and only if p is true at some possible world. I will use this to establish the following *prima facie* unconnected conditional:

If it is not possible that 7 is prime, then it is not possible that President Obama is in China.

By the possibility axiom, it is possible that 7 is prime if and only if there is some possible world at which $\langle 7 \text{ is prime} \rangle$ is true. Further, it is possible that President Obama is in China if and only if there is some possible world at which $\langle \text{President Obama is in China} \rangle$ is true. Let's assume it is not possible that 7 is prime. Further, let's assume: if anything is true at a possible world, $\langle 7 \text{ is prime} \rangle$ is. It follows that nothing is true at any possible world. If nothing is true at any possible world, then $\langle \text{President Obama is in China} \rangle$ is not true at a possible world. So, it is not possible that President Obama is in China. So, if it is not possible that 7 is prime, then it is not possible that President Obama is in China. As with the previous example, the possibility that 7 is prime seems *prima facie* unconnected to the possibility that President Obama is in China only if we are ignorant of the possibility axiom.

Similarly, the truth of (WATER) seems unrelated to the truth that 7 is prime only if we're ignorant of deity theory. If we're not ignorant of deity theory, the truth of these propositions should seem connected. If anything has a truthmaker, (WATER) does.¹¹ According to deity theory, if (WATER) were not true, it would not have a truthmaker, and if (WATER) doesn't have a truthmaker, then deity does not exist. If deity does not exist, $\langle 7 \text{ is prime} \rangle$ cannot have a truthmaker, either. So, if (WATER) is untrue, then it's not the case that 7 is prime.

The proposition theory and possibility axiom analogies undermine Leftow's scientific theory analogy. For example, it may not seem as obvious to us that there is a connection between the meaning of 'Water is H₂O' and the meaning of '7 is prime' as it is that there's a connection between an apple's falling to the ground and a rock's falling to the ground. However, even if the former connections don't seem as obvious to us, there's just as much of a connection between the former two as there is between the latter two. The same applies (*mutatis mutandis*) to the possibility axiom analogy. Now I turn to Leftow's other arguments.

Leftow's third argument is that (WATER) and deity theory are explainable apart from each other. An account of deity theory does not provide an explanation for (WATER), and an account of (WATER) does not mention deity theory.

To reply, I'll again use the analogy with the proposition theory of meaningfulness (the possibility axiom could be used just as well). An account of proposition theory does not explain the meaning of 'Water is H₂O'. In fact,

(PROP) A sentence 'p' is meaningful if and only if it expresses some proposition p

¹¹That is, (WATER) is necessarily true. Leftow correctly assumes this throughout his essay.

does not contain any reference to water at all. This, however, does not count against the proposition theory's ability to explain why certain sentences (such as 'Water is H₂O') are meaningful. Proposition theory is presented at a level of generality that abstracts from the applications of the theory. That is, proposition theory is applied to explain why 'Water is H₂O' is meaningful, but proposition theory itself need not be explained by mentioning this application. The generality of the theory does not preclude proposition theory from actually explaining why 'Water is H₂O' is meaningful. Similarly, deity theory is presented at a level of generality that abstracts from the applications of the theory. This does not, however, preclude deity theory from actually explaining why some propositions, such as (WATER), are true. Further, an account of the meaning of 'Water is H₂O' does not include an explanation of proposition theory. I can even explain the meaning of 'Water is H₂O' by saying that the sentence expresses some proposition p without saying (PROP).

Leftow's last argument is that deity should only contain what is necessary for God's being divine, but, intuitively, facts about water are not necessary for making God divine. So, deity does not contain the truthmaker for (WATER).

I'll give three replies. First, it is not clear that it is intuitive that the truthmaker for (WATER) is not necessary for making God divine. If the deity theorist doesn't share Leftow's intuition, the objection has no bite. If the deity theorist does share Leftow's intuition, then one of my next two replies should work. My second reply is similar to what I said in my reply to Leftow's third argument: the description of deity that only contains what is necessary for making God divine is general enough so as to exclude reference to the truths it truthmakes. In giving an account of deity, we could even say, "Deity truthmakes all necessary truths," without mentioning (WATER). This generality nevertheless entails that deity requires certain necessary truths like (WATER). Similarly, in our account of what is necessary to make God divine we could say, "God knows all truths," without mentioning facts about water, and this, too (because of the factivity of knowledge) guarantees that deity requires certain necessary truths like (WATER). My third reply is that presumably if an account of deity theory were to include specifics about everything that makes God divine, the truthmaker for (WATER)—and for every other necessary truth—would be given in this account of deity theory.

Having responded to Leftow's objections, I should mention that not only do Leftow's arguments fail to support his premise (2)—that theories that do not commit us to (1) would *ceteris paribus* be preferable—but we actually have reason not to believe (2). Instead of (2), we have reason to believe that theories that *do* commit us to the position that God's existence depends on there being truthmakers for particular necessary truths about creatures alone would *ceteris paribus* be preferable

to those that do not. They would be preferable in the same way it is preferable for many philosophers of language to have a proposition theory of meaningfulness and for metaphysicians to have the possibility axiom: they have explanatory power, they avoid the shortcomings of other views, and they are not susceptible to the analogues of Leftow's objections to deity theories. Likewise, deity theories have explanatory power, they avoid the horns of Euthyphro's modal relative, and they, too, are not defeated by Leftow's objections. Deity theories aren't that bad after all.¹²

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References

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