On Emily Paul On Brian Leftow

MATTHEW JAMES COLLIER
Oriel College, University of Oxford
matthew.collier@oriel.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: Emily Paul has recently argued that Brian Leftow's account of why the import of God's becoming Incarnate is not temporal but modal fails. She argues that Leftow's required modal variation is not satisfied. That is, we do not have the required variation across logical space concerning the Incarnation. Paul examines her argument on two possible worlds theories: theistic ersatzism and (what I call) Lewisian theism. She thinks that both possible worlds theories face difficulties. I argue that Paul fails to provide a compelling argument against Leftow because, firstly, her defence of one her premises fails, and, secondly, she misjudges what is required for some of Leftow's claims to be true. I also argue that some of the problematic consequences that Paul raises for theistic ersatzism and Lewisian theism either are not problematic or can be avoided.

Keywords: Incarnation, the Son, libertarian freedom, Lewisian theism, theistic ersatzism

Paul's (2019) recent paper, in this journal, concerns the following passage in Leftow (2002, 299):

> The import of the 'taking on' [flesh] claim on God's side is modal, not temporal. That God took on flesh does not entail that he changed. It entails only that he could have been God without being incarnate, and that if he could have refrained from becoming incarnate, he could have not had a body. Here I simply bat the ball back onto the temporalist's side of the net: why isn't this enough to make orthodox sense of the claim that God the Son took on flesh?

Paul takes the above passage to constitute an account of how an atemporal God can take on flesh; specifically, she interprets Leftow as contending that we can make sense of an atemporal God 'becoming' Incarnate exclusively by virtue of modal variation.[1] Paul, moreover, interprets Leftow through the possible worlds framework. She writes:

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[1] 'Becoming' and its cognate terms will be in inverted commas throughout to indicate that 'becoming' should not be read temporally in a literal sense.

> Understanding Leftow's claim in terms of possible worlds tells us that there are possible worlds that are exactly the same as ours, except that they lack a divine incarnation, meaning that they also presumably lack atonement for any sin that takes place there. According to Leftow, we therefore have variation across logical space regarding the incarnation. . . .Leftow . . .seems to think that . . .this cross–worldly variation regarding the incarnation is all that we need to make sense of a timeless Son 'becoming' incarnate. (Paul 2019, 91)

Paul argues that, firstly, Leftow's account, when explicated, does not provide Leftow with the modal variation he needs, and so his account fails, and, secondly, his account impinges upon libertarian freedom and has baleful consequences for two types of possible worlds theories: theistic ersatzism and theistic modal realism (which I shall call *Lewisian theism*).

Herein I argue: firstly, Paul fails to provide a compelling argument against Leftow's account, since one of her arguments for a premise therein fails; and, secondly, some the consequences she attests for Lewisian theism and theistic ersatzism can be avoided. Here is the paper's roadmap: In section two, firstly, I present Paul's argument for the falsity of Leftow's account, and her defence of what I take to be its most dubious premise, and, secondly, I raise problems for its most dubious premise, and contend that Paul has not supplied the reader with sufficient reason to believe that it is true. In section three, I highlight problems with Paul's analysis of theistic ersatzism and Lewisian theism. And, finally, in section four, I conclude by underscoring several oddities in Paul's paper.

2. Paul's argument against Leftow's Modal Variation account

Here is Paul's (2019, 93) argument against Leftow's account:

(P1)   The Son takes on a body in the actual world to redeem us from sin, and because of His omnibenevolence.

(P2)   There are other possible worlds that contain as much/more sin than ours.

(P3)   If the Son takes on a body in *no* other possible worlds, then there are possible worlds that contain as much, or more, sin than ours, in which there are no incarnations.

(P4)   There are no ways, besides incarnation, that salvation can be achieved.

(P5)   If God becomes incarnate at a world w, but not at other worlds with as much or more sin than w, then He isn't omnibenevolent.

(C1)   (*From P1*, *P3*, *P4* & P5) If the Son doesn't take on a body in all the possible worlds with as much/more sin than ours, then He isn't omnibenevolent.

(P6)   God is omnibenevolent.

(C2)   (*From C1 & P[6] via modus tollens*) The Son takes on a body in all the possible worlds with as much/more sin than ours.[2]

(C3)   (*From C2*) Quantifying over all worlds with as much or more sin than ours, the Son necessarily takes on a body.

Now, I shall not concern myself with the validity of the argument, and shall assume that the tacit premise, 'God's being omnibenevolent entails that He is omnibenevolent in all worlds', is true, or that every instance of 'omnibenevolent' is silently prefixed with 'necessarily' (save, perhaps, the instance in (P1)). Indeed, here I am only interested in (P4), which I take to be its most dubious premise.

On (P4), Paul (2019, 94) takes herself to have demonstrated that the only way in which atonement for humanity's sins could have been achieved, and thus humanity's relationship with God could have been restored, is through the Incarnation; thus, she takes herself to have demonstrated the truth of (P4).

A problem here is that there are numerous ways to interpret (P4). (i) *It is necessary that God 'becomes' Incarnate if humanity is to be atoned for its sins*. (ii) *It was necessary, in our world, that God 'became' Incarnate if humanity, in our world, was to be atoned for its sins*. (iii) *It is necessary that God 'becomes' Incarnate in worlds that contain equal or greater values of sin compared with our world if humanity in those worlds is to be atoned for its sins*. (iv) *It is necessary that it is possible that God 'becomes' Incarnate if humanity, across all of logical space, is to be atoned for its sins*. (If we use KT5 as the appropriate modal logic, then this reading of (P4) will entail that there must exist at least one world in which God 'becomes' Incarnate if *humanity, across all logical space, is to be atoned for its sins*). (v) *It is necessary that God 'becomes' Incarnate in the actual world, if humanity, across all logical space, is to be atoned for its sins*. (vi) *It is necessary that God 'becomes' Incarnate in the actual world, if humanity, in the actual world and in worlds similar to the actual world, is to be atoned for its sins*. No doubt there are more ways to interpret the premise; however, I hope to have shown that, given that there are many different interpretations, we require clear indication from Paul as to how we ought to interpret the premise. In the absence of clear indication, the reader is not in a position to evaluate its truth (without going through all the (perhaps most plausible) interpretative permutations and evaluating each one).

But, even if Paul had supplied an unambiguous rendering of the premise, we would still require from her an argument for its truth: but, we do not get that. Indeed, I see no argument in Paul (2019) to the affect that (P4) is true. Let us assume that the most plausible ways to read (P4) are to interpret it as expressing either (ii) or (iii) above. However, concerning (ii), several philosophical

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[2] In the original, Paul (2019, 93), "P[6]" is in fact "P5" – I take this to be a typing error and have corrected it accordingly.

theologians do not believe that it was necessary that God 'became' Incarnate in our world if humanity, in our world, was to be atoned for its sins; indeed, within the philosophical discourse on the atonement, the modal properties of the atonement is a live debate. If it is not necessary that God 'became' Incarnate in our world if humanity, in our world, was to be atoned for its sins, then it seems likely that (iii) will also be false. Moreover, Paul (2019, 91) notes at the top of her paper that Leftow's claim that God need not have 'become' Incarnate is "independently important", since "it helps emphasise the supererogatory sacrifice that the Son made for us". This observation, however, seems to run counter to Paul's believing that (P4) is true: indeed, (P4) claims that it is necessary, in some sense, that God 'becomes' Incarnate—but here, Paul seems to think that God's 'becoming' Incarnate is supererogatory. Thus, we can ask: can the performing of a certain action be supererogatory, yet morally necessary? That is, is there an action, the performance of which is both supererogatory and morally necessary? Paul must elucidate this.

Now, Paul (2019, 95) grants some of the above; she says "there could simply be other ways . . .in which the Son could atone for our sins, besides taking on flesh". To deal with this worry, Paul (2019, 96) proposes that instead of 'Incarnation', we use the phrase "*any* soteriological gesture on behalf of the Son". Paul (2019, 96) thinks this would still generate problems for Leftow's account, since Leftow would still face the result that "at all worlds with as much or more sin tha[n] ours, the Son engages in *some sort* of soteriological gesture". I do not see this. Why ought we to assume that "*any* soteriological gesture" necessarily requires the Son to *seemingly* be temporal? Could the Son not simply forgive humanity's sins in such a way as to not even *appear* temporal? So, again, we need an argument from Paul for this conclusion. Thus, (P4), firstly, is not disambiguated enough to aid our understanding of which exact proposition the premise expresses; secondly, it is not argued for; and, thirdly, Paul's response to a potential objection to the affect that the Incarnation, *qua* soteriological gesture, is not necessary fails, since she simply and dubiously assumes that "*any* soteriological gesture on behalf of the Son" will seem temporal.

There is an additional problem with Paul's argument, however. The problem rests with Paul's insisting upon quantifying exclusively over worlds that are 'relevantly similar' to our world (regarding their values of sin). Paul notes that if (C2) quantified over, say, worlds that had values of sin below what would necessitate an Incarnation (assuming that an Incarnation in a world is necessary given a certain value of sin in that world), then Leftow's desired modal variation would be satisfied. However, Paul (2019, 94) argues that we must quantify exclusively over worlds relevantly similar to our world (regarding their values of sin) if "we wish to generate a sufficiently substantial sense in which the Son 'could have refrained' from being incarnate". Thus, necessarily, all worlds

quantified over contain an equal or a greater value of sin compared with our world—with, perhaps, the qualification that such worlds also contain worldly denizens who enjoy freedom in the same way that the denizens of our world enjoy freedom. Paul contends that such a claim is not *ad hoc*: Leftow's espousal of the Son's libertarian freedom purportedly delivers this. Indeed, Paul argues that when we inspect what one could have refrained from, we look to the closest worlds; thus, if we wish to evaluate the claim that the Son could have refrained from 'becoming' Incarnate, we should look to the closest worlds, and all such worlds will have equal or greater values of sin compared with our world. So, even though Leftow's claim of modal variation is satisfied when we look to distant worlds, Paul thinks that we should look to relevantly similar worlds exclusively; at the relevantly similar worlds, the variation is not satisfied.

I do not think that Paul's argument for the quantificational restriction to relevantly similar worlds (in terms of value of sin) is justified, textually or modal metaphysically. Let us look at the relevant part of Leftow's (2002, 299) passage again:

> The import of the 'taking on' [flesh] claim on God's side is modal, not temporal. That God took on flesh does not entail that he changed. It entails only that he could have been God without being incarnate, and that if he could have refrained from becoming incarnate, he could have not had a body.

All that Leftow requires for his claim to be true, as Paul notes, is that there exists a world in which God does not 'become' Incarnate; what Leftow needs to demonstrate is that it is possible that God *is God* in the absence of the Incarnation, and that if it is possible that God refrain from 'becoming' Incarnate, then it is possible that He not have a body. On the first claim, all that Leftow needs for its truth is a world in which God is not Incarnate; a world in which all that exists (besides the necessary beings) is an armchair would tick this off. On the second claim, all that Leftow needs for the truth of the conditional, if it is possible that God refrain from 'becoming' Incarnate, then it is possible that He not have a body, is a world in which God chooses to not be Incarnate, where His not being Incarnate entails that He lacks a body; a world in which all that exists (besides the necessary beings) is an armchair would tick this off—in such a world, for example, God chooses to not sit on the armchair in an Incarnate state. Leftow says nothing about its being necessary or contingent that God 'become' Incarnate *in worlds that are equal to or greater than our world in terms of their values of sin*; to think otherwise is to put words into Leftow's word–processor. Thus, Paul's (2019, 91) following interpretation of Leftow, presented above, is hermeneutically dubious: "Understanding Leftow's claim in terms of possible worlds tells us that

there are possible worlds that are exactly the same as ours, except that they lack a divine incarnation".

Now, Paul seems to think that to make sense of sentences of the form '*x* could have refrained from doing *A*' we should only look to the closest worlds in which (not) doing *A* is available to *x*. This is not clearly the case, however; it does not seem to generalise. When examining whether I could have refrained from, say, not murdering each member of my family, I will have to go quite far out to come across a world wherein I do not refrain from murdering each member of my family. Perhaps the same import holds for the Incarnation: it may be that in all the worlds close to ours God 'becomes' Incarnate, but we can still make sense of the claim that God could have refrained from 'becoming' Incarnate. If I utter the sentence 'God could have refrained from creating the physical world', clearly I should not just go to the closest worlds from ours to see if that claim is true, since if I were to, the claim would be rendered false when, in fact, it seems true—I need to look upon logical space, and see if I can find a world in which God does not create the physical world; such a world will be rather distant from ours. Certainly, considerations of closeness of worlds is required when we are evaluating the truth of counterfactuals (on the Lewis–Stalnaker account).[3] But here we are not dealing with a counterfactual. We are only evaluating the truth of the claim that it is possible that God refrain from 'becoming' Incarnate. Certainly, the truths of claims about freedom are sensitive to qualifications: for example, if I utter the *de re* modal claim 'I could refrain from eating chicken', all I need to do to see that that claim is true is find a world in which I refrain from eating chicken, where eating chicken is available to me. If, however, I utter the *de re* modal claim 'I could refrain from eating chicken *in a world where one is shot for not eating chicken*', what I need to do to see that that claim is true is find a world in which I refrain from eating chicken, where eating chicken is available to me, *and where one is shot for not eating chicken*. This latter world renders true both the above *de re* modal claims concerning my possibly refraining from eating chicken. The same should be true of freedom–concerning predications of God. When I utter the *de re* modal claim 'God could have refrained from 'becoming' Incarnate', all I need to do to see that that claim is true is find a world in which God refrains from 'becoming' Incarnate, where His 'becoming' Incarnate is available to Him. If I utter the *de re* modal claim 'God could have refrained from 'becoming' Incarnate *in a world with an equal or greater value of sin compared to our world*', all I need to do to see that that claim is true is find a world in which God refrains from 'becoming' Incarnate, where His 'becoming' Incarnate is available to Him, *and the value of sin is equal to or greater than our world's*.

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[3] See Lewis (1973) and Stalnaker (1968).

So, it seems that Paul elides two questions: one, 'is it possible that God refrains from 'becoming' Incarnate in worlds that are like ours in terms of their values of sin?' and, two, 'is it possible that God refrains from 'becoming' Incarnate?'. Leftow, at least in the above passage, seems just interested in the latter claim; he just wants to highlight that all that is entailed by God's 'becoming' Incarnate is, firstly, that God would still be God if He did not 'become' Incarnate, and, secondly, that if it is possible that God refrain from 'becoming' Incarnate, then it is possible that God not have a body. In the passage, Leftow is not delving into the debate concerning the necessity of the Incarnation in some world, w, if w has a value of sin equal to or greater than our world's; he is delving into the debate concerning whether God's 'becoming' Incarnate entails that God is in time.

And so, Paul's exclusive quantification over worlds similar to ours in terms of their values of sin is not justified: firstly, there is nothing in Leftow's passage to suggest that we ought to do this, and, secondly, we do not need to do this to make sense of the claim that 'God could have refrained from 'becoming' Incarnate'— all we need is a world in which He refrains from 'becoming' Incarnate, where 'becoming' Incarnate is available to Him, and to think otherwise is to elide the two questions above, or to falsely think that when we evaluate sentences of the form 'x could have refrained from doing A' we should only look to the closest worlds in which (not) doing A is available to x.

3. Paul's Implications for theistic ersatzism and Lewisian theism

Let us, however, assume that Paul's argument works. She believes that, if her argument is sound, there are baleful consequences for two possible worlds theories: theistic ersatzism, the view that possible worlds are abstract and God exists, and Lewisian theism, the view that possible worlds are concrete[4] and God exists. I shall very briefly examine some problems with Paul's analysis of the baleful consequences for theistic ersatzism before I discuss the problems with Paul's analysis of the baleful consequences for Lewisian theism.

Paul (2019, 99) claims the following:

> Given divine omnibenevolence (P6), I venture that He'd desire to actualise the world containing the least amount of sin possible. Ersatzists ought therefore to assume that God has actualised, or created, the *best* of all possible worlds: so all of the others will contain more (or the same amount of) sin than our own.

This seems rather dubious: God's creating the best world does not seem morally obligatory—at least not without argument. However, Paul argues in footnote 15 that she follows Rowe (2004) in arguing that it is necessary that God create the

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[4] This is quite a simplification, but it will do for my present purposes.

best even if it is not morally obligatory that He do so. The problem I wish to highlight with Paul's (2019, 99–100) discussion here concerns her subsequent paragraph:

> The ersatzist will thus interpret (P2) as being potentially even *stronger* than it first appeared, because *all* possible worlds will contain as much, or more, sin than our own. Any worlds containing less sin than our own are *impossible*, for otherwise they would have been actualised. For the ersatzist, (C3) therefore wouldn't merely mean that all of the worlds with as much, or more, sin than our own contain divine incarnations—but that *all* other possible worlds contain divine incarnations.

The obvious response to the above is noted by Paul in footnote 16: she notes that many will point to worlds that, for instance, contain no created creatures at all. In reply, Paul (2019, 100, fn.16) writes: "I'd respond that equally, these worlds contain no sin either". There is a problem here. To wit: is a zero value of sin not less than a positive value of sin? It seems so. However, the claim is that it is *impossible* that there be worlds with less sin. Unless Paul can provide an argument as to why 0 is not less than, say, 1, I am inclined to think that this response miscarries.

So, let us now examine Paul's discussion of Lewisian theism.

For Lewisian theism, Paul raises two problematic consequences: one concerns relevantly similar worlds and the other concerns the uniqueness of the Incarnation. Since I have already discussed issues concerning relevantly similar worlds, I shall focus on Paul's uniqueness objection.

Before I begin, I shall briefly outline Lewisian theism. Here is Collier (2018: 3–4) on the 'Lewisian' part:

> . . .there exists an infinite plurality of possible worlds, where worlds are *maximal mereological sums* of *spatiotemporally connected individuals*, ontologically alike in kind to the world—the 'actual world' (hereafter '@')—in which we reside, where such worlds fail to spatiotemporally and causally relate to worlds other than themselves, and whose parts, similarly, fail to spatiotemporally and causally relate to world–parts other than their own (worlds, thence, fail to *overlap*).

Here is Collier (2018: 1) on the 'theism' part:

> God is unitary, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, simple . . ., a creator and sustainer of all that exists, and necessarily existent.

Thus, Lewisian theism is the conjunction of modal realism and traditional theism.

Paul (2019, 107) notes a problem for Lewisian theism in relation to her argument. The Incarnation happened once and will never happen again—this she calls the *uniqueness requirement*. However, Paul thinks that there is a problem here: Lewisian theists who believe in the Incarnation face problems over the uniqueness requirement. Given Lewisian theism's ontology of possible worlds (specifically, since worlds are inhabited by concrete *possibilia*), she thinks that just one other–worldly Incarnation is sufficient to deny the uniqueness requirement. She thinks that what is required from Leftow's account is that there is no other world in which there is an Incarnation. But, since God is (necessarily) omnibenevolent, if there exists a world with an equal value of sin compared with our world, then it is required of God that He 'become' Incarnate in that world. Such a world exists, thinks Paul, and so the uniqueness requirement is denied (or the omnibenevolence requirement is denied).

Now, I think Paul has misunderstood what is required by Leftow's account regarding the Incarnation—but putting that worry aside (since I have already covered such hermeneutic issues), I think that Paul errs here. Indeed, (A) why should we think that the Incarnation should not just be unique for each world? And, indeed, (B) why should we think that the Incarnation should necessarily be a unique event at all? On (B), it is not clear that even Paul thinks that the Incarnation should necessarily be unique, since in footnote 24 Paul (2019, 107, fn24) appears to grant the possibility that there be "multiple incarnations within a world". However, within the same footnote, Paul (2019, 107, fn24) writes: "but this isn't something that I'm considering here". But, why the uniqueness requirement then? If she thinks that it is possible that there be multiple Incarnations within a single world, then why is denying the uniqueness requirement so bad? It cannot be bad simply because Paul does not want to delve into debates on multiple incarnations within a world. On (A), there is a plausible answer: it is possible for there to be other–worldly Incarnations—however, each world must have at most one Incarnation. We can understand this modal claim through counterpart theory, since the intrinsic properties of God Incarnate will change from world to world (excluding the possibility of identical worlds), despite the fact that (let us suppose, *pro* Paul) God exists from the standpoint of worlds rather than as a world–part. That is, God exists from the standpoint of all worlds, where to exist from the standpoint of worlds is to be included as a member of the least restricted domain that is generally regarded as being suitable for evaluating truth values of quantifications in worlds, but there are Incarnations in multiple (but not all) worlds, since there will be Incarnate counterparts in different worlds, where counterparts are considered

counterparts by virtue of sufficient resemblance (where resemblance respects intrinsic and extrinsic properties).[5]

Paul (2019, 108) entertains this very idea. However, she thinks that it does not work. She thinks that this response is problematic, since it will increase the number of Incarnations. But, Paul has just accepted that the above response is a plausible response to the uniqueness requirement objection. Given that she thinks that it is a plausible response to the objection to say that there could at most be one Incarnation *per* world where we can analyse the modal properties of the Incarnation through counterpart theory, she cannot then demur that *this denies the uniqueness requirement since there will be more Incarnations*—Paul has just entertained the idea that there *may* be other–worldly Incarnations and we use counterpart theory to analyse the modal properties thereof. In the absence of an argument for why in all logical space there should only be one Incarnation, I do not see that it is viable to reject this response simply because it would lead to more Incarnations—accounting for the possibility of more Incarnations is the very point of the response.

There is, however, a very interesting point that arises from Paul's discussion of Lewisian theism: viz., can we make sense of the claim that the Incarnation is analysed through counterpart theory but God is analysed through the standpoint of worlds mechanism? If the Incarnation is to occur in worlds distinct from our own, and the Incarnation's intrinsic properties change across worlds, then counterpart theory will have to be employed. The challenge then, is to make sense of this claim. For what it is worth, I like this response—but there are manifest difficulties. Unfortunately, I am unable to delve into them here. The point, however, is that Paul does not either: she does not say why such a response would not work—she merely says that such a response would increase the number of Incarnations; but that is the very point of the response: to retain the uniqueness requirement, but interpret it in a way that is harmonious with other–worldly Incarnations.

And so, as it stands, Paul's uniqueness objection lacks bite.

4. Conclusion

Herein, I have argued that Paul misinterprets Leftow; provides a dubious premise ((P4)) without argument; is inaccurate in her dealings with how we can make sense of something's being free in a libertarian sense; should not exclusively restrict her quantifier to 'relevantly similar' worlds in respect of their values of sin; supplies an unsupported rebuttal of a response to the claim that the

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[5] For more on existing from the standpoint of a world, and for more on counterparts, see Lewis (1983; 1986).

theistic ersatzist must say that it is impossible that there be worlds with less sin than our own; does not argue for a specific reading of the uniqueness requirement in relation to Lewisian theism; and, deals with a plausible response to the uniqueness requirement in a way that does not take the response on its own terms.

However, I would like to make a few closing remarks concerning some oddities in Paul's paper. Since it is evident that Paul reads Leftow's passage through the lens of his other works, which concern libertarian freedom, it is surprising that Paul does not examine her argument through the lens of Leftow's (2012) own theistic modal theory. Perhaps Paul thinks that her argument should be able to be applied to all possible worlds theories, and so examining her argument on the most well known types of possible worlds theory is enough to demonstrate the generality of her argument, and if her argument is fully general in this sense, it will also be applicable to Leftow's own modal theory. However, some arguments that concern possible worlds will be rendered unsound on some possible worlds theories: for instance, if I make an argument for the conclusion that the devil could create worlds of miserable suffering, such an argument will be rendered unsound on modal theories that deny the existence of, or deny predicating that power to, the devil. So, it *might* be that Paul's argument, although (let us suppose) devastating for theistic ersatzism and Lewisian theism, does not adversely affect Leftow's modal theory. If it does not adversely affect Leftow's theory, then Paul has not shown Leftow to be inconsistent—and, clearly, she wishes to target the consistency of Leftow, since she cites his various other works. Thus, the goal of demonstrating that Leftow's account is problematic *for Leftow* is not clearly achieved.

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