

# Theism and Ultimate Explanation

The Necessary Shape of Contingency

TIMOTHY O'CONNOR

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# Preface

This is a book in two parts. In the first part (chapters 1–2), I examine the propriety of beliefs concerning what is (absolutely, or simply) possible and what is necessary: I might have been a roofer, I could not have been a whale, two and two necessarily make four. If such beliefs are rationally justified, as it seems, how do they acquire this status? I contend that such ‘modal’ beliefs are justified by a process of reflective equilibrium on the jumble of basic and often implicit modal beliefs that we find ourselves with at the outset of theoretical inquiry. At times, this process will lead us to abandon or revise previously foundational beliefs, as we hone and uncover methods for belief systematization and extension, for example, or as we come to see the space of possibility as constrained by necessities, acceptance of which is justified in part by the explanatory role they play within a plausible metaphysical framework. The epistemology of modal belief is a topic of fundamental philosophical importance in its own right, and I hope that what I say concerning it is sufficiently original and well argued to be of interest to the specialist on contemporary discussion of the topic. But these chapters are also meant to lay a foundation for the book’s second part (chapters 3–6), in which I consider the traditional metaphysician’s quest, nowadays much neglected, for a true *ultimate* explanation of the most general features of the world we inhabit. More accurately, the search is for a metaphysical framework that can be seen to allow for the *possibility* of an ultimate explanation that is correct and complete, even if (as is plausible) significant details must forever remain beyond our ken. Drawing upon my views concerning the role of necessities in ordinary explanations, I defend a version of the ‘Leibnizian’ cosmological argument from contingency for the existence of transcendent necessary being as the source, and basis for ultimate explanation, of contingent beings and their interconnected histories.

Let me now elaborate on the very general summary of the book I have just given. The motivation behind the first part of the book will not be readily apparent to the philosophically innocent. Many modal claims seem boringly obvious, and the evident justification of our corresponding beliefs seems hardly worth remarking on. Who could doubt that I justifiably believe that it is absolutely possible that I might have been a roofer? But, though we seem to know many such truths (without having to work up a mental sweat), it is unclear on reflection just *how* we know them. We know how to verify at least pedestrian truths about what is *actually* the case through observation and reflection, as when I come to believe that my dog is on the couch by looking in that direction, and that my wife is not nearby by calling her name and receiving no answer. But how do I go about ‘verifying’ that my dog *might* have been in the yard instead, or that my wife not only is not but *could not* have been simultaneously in this room and upstairs? These truths are not observable, or obviously inferable from what can be observed. Traditional philosophers sometimes spoke of ‘seeing’ the necessity of certain propositions and the possible truth of others, but, in these sober days of naturalizing the mind, it is hard to credit the idea that there is a primitive capacity to grasp modal facts in a quasi-perceptual fashion. And when we consider that there is some causal story or other to be told concerning how modal beliefs are formed and sustained, the epistemological worry seems to deepen: if the truth in modal matters is independent of the process by which we come to believe them – and it can seem that it must be – then, even if those beliefs are largely correct, this seems accidental, epistemically speaking. And what is in this sense accidentally believed is plausibly not an instance of knowledge.

For reasons such as these, many recent philosophers consider the source of a priori beliefs concerning such matters to be deeply puzzling, enough so that it puts in doubt the traditional status of certain modal propositions as simple and basic truths whose acceptance must underlie our acceptance of other, empirical truths. In Chapter 1, I take a tour of the main strategies for doing away with modality as a realm of fundamental truth. I consider and criticize Quine’s modal nihilism; the modal reductionism of Tarski, Armstrong, and Lewis; reductionism’s cousin, modal deflationism, as developed by Rosen and Sider; and two varieties of modal anti-realism, Sidelle’s conventionalism and Blackburn’s expressivism. A common moral running through my critiques is that we simply are unable in our ordinary explanatory projects to do without acceptance of a rich realm of irreducible modal truth.

The next chapter thus assumes that there is such a realm of irreducible fact and tries to outline a plausible epistemology of belief concerning it. The failure of two previous attempts (those of Yablo and Peacocke) under-

scores the need to integrate our accounts of the justification of modal and nonmodal beliefs and to appreciate the role that necessities sometimes play within explanations. (In much contemporary thought, there is a deeply held but questionable presumption of possibility for nonmodal assertions that leads one to suppose that basic possibility claims are easier to establish than claims that place significant constraints on the scope of possibility. If we are to make headway towards a viable modal epistemology, we must abandon this presumption. (Here, as elsewhere in philosophy, David Hume is the arch-villain.)

I divide modal beliefs into two basic categories. The first concerns highly general – often, but not always, formal – *theoretical* modal judgments. Here, I suggest that, starting from an assortment of basic intuitions, new beliefs acquire and old ones lose epistemic justification through a fallible process of reflective equilibrium. Occasionally, we simply have to weigh the relative strength of conflicting modal intuitions. Our judgments are also refined through many avenues, including the creation and honing of formal methods (especially in mathematics), indirect reflections on other, better-developed disciplines, and the sometimes arduous process of concept development (as with the mathematical concept of continuity). There has been a strong tendency to overplay the significance of revolutions in mathematics, and the rise of non-Euclidean geometry is an overworked example. I try to show how such developments are perfectly congruent with traditional acceptance of the primacy of a priori beliefs in developing our theoretical understanding even of the empirical realm.

My second category is *objectual* modal judgments, concerning ontological categories and individual and kind essences. I argue that the resolution of these vexed matters will turn more on *other* metaphysical issues than is commonly appreciated – in particular, on the nature of causation and the partly empirical question of whether some form of reductionism or a robustly ontological type of emergence is correct, and correct for which high-level kinds. Given particular commitments on these matters, there is a plausible method for resolving questions of essence. (I note that, given the broader metaphysical views I myself hold, it is quite plausible to be conventionalist about some, though not all, high level entities and their ostensible kinds.)

I close the second chapter by suggesting that we think of various “possibilities” in terms of concentric spheres. The outermost layer encompasses all propositions not deemed impossible by purely logical considerations, and inside that is a layer restricted to those that remain consistent once the meanings of nonlogical terms are fixed. But these are not distinct kinds of possibility, just indicators of two groups of necessities that constrain simple

possibility. In both science and metaphysics, we uncover further necessities that show the space of possibility to be smaller still. This much is a familiar picture, if controversial. But this way of looking at matters leaves open the question whether there are any constraints on possibility even deeper than those commonly acknowledged, necessities that are invoked in global explanations beyond the reach even of our most fundamental sciences.

The stage is thus set for a consideration of that most fundamental metaphysical question, or set of questions, concerning existence itself. The best form of the question – one that presumes the least – is this: are there contingently existing objects, and if there are, why do those particular contingent objects exist and undergo the events they do? I consider a variety of options for providing an outline of an answer to this question. I argue that the only one that is not beset by fundamental problems is one that accepts the existence of contingent beings and maintains that they are the causal product of a purposive, transcendent necessary being, one for whom existence and essence are inseparable, one that simply *must* be. Ever since our nemesis Hume, it has been argued by many that the concept of necessary being is either incoherent or devoid of meaning; I argue that there is no basis for either of these claims along the lines that are commonly given. It has been further argued, especially in recent discussion, that the claim that contingency is the product of necessity, if followed consistently, will lead to ‘modal collapse’: all is necessary, right down to the fingerprint presently on my keyboard. I argue that this judgment is mistaken, by presenting a schema of contingent explanation that is not forced to accept *brutely* contingent facts.

In defending the acceptability of this view, I consider and reject several alternatives. In a rather hard-scrabble metaphysical excursion, I argue that broadly Spinozistic views that deem the universe itself or its fundamental constituents to be necessary are not sustainable, given only minimal assumptions concerning the character of the universe. I then consider versions of a ‘Chaos’ model of transcendent necessary being as an impersonal alternative to the purposive ‘Logos’ model. I draw upon the contemporary ‘fine-tuning’ design argument – one that in my judgment is not probative as a stand-alone argument for theism – to defeat the most probable version of Chaos.

In Chapter 5, I revisit the question of the scope of contingency given the foregoing claims. I contend that, if we identify our purposive necessary being with the absolutely perfect being of traditional philosophical theology (something I do not argue here), there is quite strong reason to suppose that there must be an infinity (at least aleph-null) of universes, ordered without finite upper bound by their intrinsic goodness. If this is correct, there could not have been, for example, just one universe, or none at all. I note that this thesis has some relevance to the problem of evil. Finally, I

suggest that there is reason to take seriously Leibniz's seemingly outlandish view that the ontological ground of the most fundamental modal truths is the cognitive activity of the one being that is necessary in itself.

In a final chapter, directed as much to academic theologians as to philosophers, I reflect on the relationship of natural or philosophical theology to the revealed theology of the Bible. Natural theology is highly unfashionable among theologians, on both epistemological and metaphysical grounds. The latter have to do with the alleged incompatibility of certain unfamiliar attributes posited in natural theology (e.g., timelessness and immutability) with the God of the Bible, who is portrayed as engaged with and responsive to His people. I give reason for agreeing that *some* contentions made by natural theologians do not cohere with the Biblical portrayal of God, at least given the assumption that human beings have free will. However, I also go on to argue that the denial of the central natural theological thesis I have argued in this work – that the source of contingent things must be conceived to be a necessary being – is flatly inconsistent with the Biblical conception of God's sovereignty over Creation. Do away with 'onto-theology' altogether, and you'll have done away with theism altogether.

My thinking on the topics of this book has been informed by conversation and written comments from a wide range of individuals. The book grew out of a series of public lectures that I delivered at the University of St Andrews while I was a Gifford Research Fellow in the Department of Logic and Metaphysics during the 1996–7 academic year. There I received helpful feedback from philosophers John Haldane, Crispin Wright, and Tim Kenyon, and theologians Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart. Since then, I have given papers on related material at Wheaton and Franklin and Marshall Colleges and at the following universities: Free (Amsterdam), Notre Dame, Seattle Pacific, Western Washington, Beijing, Oxford, Colorado at Boulder, Central European (Budapest), St Louis, Soochow (Taipei), Azusa Pacific, and Trinity College, Dublin. I thank all these audiences for their discussion, and in particular Dan Howard-Snyder, Hud Hudson, Jon Jacobs, Rob Koons, Brian Leftow, Scott MacDonald, Michael Murray, Ted Sider, Richard Swinburne, Michael Tooley, Peter van Inwagen, Ed Wierenga, Hong Yu Wong, Rene van Woudenberg, and Dean Zimmerman. I have also benefited from excellent criticisms and suggestions from three anonymous Blackwell referees.

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