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Theism and Ultimate Explanation
The Necessary Shape of Contingency

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Topics don't get much bigger than the one indicated by my book's title: is there a true "ultimate explanation" of contingent reality, and if so, does it point in a broadly theistic direction?[1] Nowadays, philosophers are trained to shy away from addressing large themes directly, believing that substantial progress is more likely to come from chipping away at more focused matters that one supposes will bear in the end on the large topics that animate the philosophical enterprise, much as scientists interested in large questions concerning, for example, human origins will quickly find themselves devoting most of their energies to highly specialized topics within a sub-sub-discipline. I recognize the value in and inevitability of this approach, for much of our work as professional philosophers. Issues lying beneath the surface of deceptively simple questions can be complicated, and our theorizing needs to be adequate to this complexity to be convincing. That said, we also need to step back from time to time and make provisional attempts at synthesis, not least because the issues are too important to leave unaddressed until some imagined distant future in which all the questions of detail are convincingly resolved (or at least resolved into a maximally articulated set of options).

I was further motivated to attempt such a big picture assessment of this matter by the existence of a long held and firmly entrenched but (in my view) poorly supported orthodoxy in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology that the pursuit of ultimate explanation is a bankrupt enterprise. The orthodoxy is rooted in a broadly Humean orientation away from traditional metaphysics to which many continue to swear allegiance even as one after

ABSTRACT: Twentieth-century analytic philosophy was dominated by positivist antimetaphysics and neo-Humean deflationary metaphysics, and the nature of explanation was reconceived in order to fit these agendas. Unsurprisingly, the explanatory value of theism was widely discredited. I argue that the long-overdue revival of a modalized, broadly neo-Aristotelian metaphysics and an improved perspective on modal knowledge dramatically changes the landscape. In this enriched context, there is no sharp divide between physics and metaphysics, and the natural end of the theoretician's quest for a unified explanation of the universe is God, an absolutely necessary, transcendent, and personal source of all contingent reality.

1. Timothy O'Connor, *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

another attempt to articulate the perspective proves futile. Happily, metaphysics has steadily made a comeback over the past four decades. For some (especially those heavily influenced by David Lewis), this has meant merely a shift from antimetaphysics to deflationary metaphysics. But for a growing number of others, the break with the Humean legacy has been sharper. We are seeing the piecemeal return of neo-Aristotelian ideas, developed with increasing sophistication.[2] All of them give prominent place to unreduced modal features—possibilities, necessities, essences—embedded in the heart of actuality.

My book is a rather bigger step in that broadly Aristotelian direction. I want to make plausible the thesis that once one sees that unreduced modality is unavoidable for ordinary explanatory purposes, a modalized response to the question of contingent existence is both natural and *prima facie* viable, and that there is much to commend classical monotheism as the framework best suited to providing the outline of a comprehensive and nonarbitrary ultimate explanation. Following a sensible contemporary metaphilosophical outlook, I do not think of my specific arguments as in any sense "proofs." I advance them rather as seemingly powerful considerations in favor of their conclusions. Doubtless they contain some flaws of detail, and it's not unlikely that they contain bigger flaws still. The one thing I feel quite confident about is the weakness of many well-known arguments since Hume and Kant that any attempt to explain contingent existence is futile. Philosophers who still embrace that view need to come up with better arguments. My hope is that my arguments prove interesting enough to stimulate renewed, sustained reflection on the nature of contingency and the prospects for its explanation.

The book has two main parts. The first part examines the grounds for beliefs we have concerning what is (absolutely, or simply) possible and what is necessary. I might have been a roofer like my father; I could not have been a dog like Carmel sitting here beside me; two and two necessarily make four. These "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, it's unclear on reflection just *how* we know them, what the basis of our knowledge is. (A situation that infallibly signals the presence of a philosophical puzzle.) We know how to verify at least pedestrian truths about what is *actually* the case

2. For a representative sample, see Alexander Bird, *Nature's Metaphysics: Laws and Properties* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007); Brian Ellis, *Scientific Essentialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003); Jonathan D. Jacobs, *Causal Powers: A Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics*, PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2007; Robert Koons, *Realism Regained: An Exact Theory of Causation, Teleology, and the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and C. B. Martin, *The Mind in Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2008).

through observation and reflection, as when I come to believe that my dog is beside me by looking at her, 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 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 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 antirealism, Sidelle's conventionalism and Blackburn's expressivism.

All these attempts fail, I argue, and the reasons they fail suggest that any deeply revisionary project is futile. None can account for the reliability of scientific induction. The objectivity of the norms governing our standards of inductive inference and theory choice requires that the world's dynamics be an outworking of stable causal necessities or probabilistic propensities, which are irreducibly modal in character. Furthermore, the antirealist and deflationist approaches to modality in many cases tacitly rely on (unreduced) modal fact. My conclusion is that we simply are unable in our ordinary explanatory projects to do without acceptance of a rich realm of irreducible modal fact.

Assuming that there are such modal facts, I try to outline a plausible epistemology of belief concerning them. I propose a fallibilist, reflective equilibrium account of our coming to accept highly general theoretical modal judgments concerning truths of logic, mathematics, and philosophy and a causal-explanatory, scientifically-guided account of convergence on the truth concerning the modal natures (or real essences) of objects and their kinds.

Concerning the latter, I argue that the resolution of these vexed matters will turn more on *other* metaphysical and empirical 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. 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.

The forming and revising of theoretical modal judgments are those most pertinent to the rest of the book. I suggest that, starting from an assortment of basic and often implicit judgments we naturally incline to make (contradictions can't be true, facts of arithmetic and geometry are necessary, applying no matter what the empirical facts might have been, and so on) new beliefs acquire and old ones lose epistemic justification through a fallible process in which we pursue reflective equilibrium. Occasionally, we 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 for belief systematization and extension (especially in mathematics), indirect reflections on other, better-developed disciplines, the arduous process of concept development (as with the mathematical concept of continuity), and through our coming 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.

In short, I propose that we replace a traditional epistemology on which "the light of reason," a quasi-perceptual modal-truth-detecting faculty, issues in certain, and so unrevisable, judgments concerning what is possible and what is necessary, with a fallible, dynamical process of reflection in response to ongoing concept and theory development. This alternative account is consistent with maintaining, as I think we must, that substantive necessary truths play a crucial role in the justification of empirical theories. The account aims to correct two misguided tendencies that have distorted recent philosophical thinking about modal epistemology. The first is to overplay the significance of revolutions in mathematics, and the rise of non-Euclidean geometry is an overworked example. These episodes have led some to be highly skeptical of the *a priori*. 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. Second, there is a deeply-held but questionable presumption of possibility for formally consistent 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 archvillain.

I close my general discussion of modality and its epistemology by suggesting that we think of various forms of "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.

These initial chapters on the theoretical ineliminability of modality and the epistemology of modal belief lay a foundation for the book's second part, 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.

In seeking explanation for contingent existence, it is important that we ask the right question. It is sometimes posed as "Why is there anything at all?" or "Why is there something rather than nothing?" I suggest that we focus on the question that presumes the least:

> Are there contingently existing objects, and if there are, why do those particular contingent objects exist and undergo the events they do?

In considering responses to this question, we should distinguish between explanations, properly speaking, and explanation schemas (broad outlines or sketches of an explanation). We could have reason to endorse an explanation schema in the absence of a filled-in explanation if the schema seems to provide the only, or the best, possible form of answer, as measured by formal adequacy and other standards of theory comparison.

I consider a variety of explanation schemas in response to the existence question. These draw variously on broadly Spinozistic models that deem the universe itself or its fundamental constituents to be necessary, and models that accept a transcendent necessary being but conceive it to be an impersonal, purposeless causal agent. In a rather hardscrabble metaphysical excursion, I argue that 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 con-

sider three versions of a "Chaos" model of transcendent necessary being as an impersonal alternative to the purposive "Logos" model that is consistent with classical theism. 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. I tentatively conclude that the most promising explanation schema for existence is Logos, which accepts the existence of contingent beings—including the universe and all its constituents—and maintains that they are the contingent, causal, and intended product of a transcendent necessary being, one which simply must be, since *that* it is is inseparable from *what* it is. This model assumes that *necessary existence* is a substantial, distinctive property, a primitive mode of self-sufficiently existing. The natures of other things will include the property of *contingent existence*, an ontologically and explanatorily incomplete way of existing, in dependency on other things. And the difference between these two classes of things is intrinsic and fundamental. 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.

We might think of the Logos ("Leibnizian") thesis of absolutely necessary being this way. Explanations, especially the very general sorts of explanations offered in philosophy, logic, mathematics, and physics, often posit structure: spatiotemporal structure, the causal-similarity structure induced by the fundamental properties and relations of matter, and the modal structure of natural kinds. The philosopher who endorses the explanation schema involving the causal activity of a necessary being is positing an additional kind of structure to reality: a necessary *ontic* dependency of contingent things on a necessary being. Like pure mathematical structure and unlike spatiotemporal structure in physics, it is conceived to be structure that would obtain for any possible reality. Note that positing such structure in order to make space for an unconditional explanation of existence in no way competes with conditional, empirical explanations of aspects of the natural order in the sciences. Indeed, it is natural to suppose that empirical explanations will be subsumed within the larger structure of the complete explanation, consistent with the plausible, deep assumption that reality is unified.

But is my claim that a broadly "Leibnizian" picture is a promising one sustainable? Several philosophers have argued 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 specific array of fingerprints presently on my keyboard. I argue that this judgment is mistaken, by presenting a form of contingent explanation that, when incorporated into our schema, neither leads to modal collapse nor is forced to accept *brutely* contingent facts. Support for the viability of this type of explanation can be marshaled from explanatory models in two different domains, both assumed to involve

significant indeterminism: human purposive action (the closest analogue to our model) and indeterministic quantum phenomena.

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 in the book), there is quite strong reason to suppose that there must be an infinity of universes (of at least aleph-null cardinality), ordered without finite upper bound by their intrinsic goodness, and collectively instantiating every valuable kind of entity. Otherwise, we should have to countenance the scenario of a perfect being randomly choosing a particular type of universe in the face of the knowledge that there are ever so many alternatives possibilities available that were better than the one chosen to an arbitrarily large extent. If this conclusion 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. For it significantly raises the bar for creaturely suffering to count as "unnecessary." Since a perfect being has sufficient reason to actualize every kind of good, and some kinds of good (heroism, patience, compassion) necessitate the existence of suffering, there is good reason to create universes with a high risk of suffering, provided they contains goods that exceed some minimum threshold. 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 which 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. (Here I cannot resist saying say something about the origin of the book. I had the good fortune of spending 1996–97 at the University of St. Andrews while writing another book. A condition on the research fellowship was that I give a series of four "popular and public" lectures near the end of my tenure. During the year, I participated in two weekly meetings: a seminar led by Crispin Wright devoted to antirealist and deflationary theories of modality and a reading group of theologians in which we discussed a long natural-theology-bashing book that they quite liked. Given my penchant for stirring up trouble, the topic for the lecture series readily occurred to me: the cosmological argument from contingency. That was sure to make *both* the philosophers and the theologians unhappy. Indeed, one of the few people who seemed at all happy with what I was saying was a local Baptist pastor who wandered in. I don't think he understood much of it; he was just happy that someone seemed to be speaking up for God in the university.)

The metaphysical objections to natural theology common among contemporary theologians have to do with the alleged incompatibility of certain

unfamiliar attributes posited in natural theology (for example, timelessness, immutability, and especially metaphysical simplicity) 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, I say, and you'll have done away with *theism* altogether.[3]

3. Some material for this article was taken from the preface to *Theism and Ultimate Explanation*.