Chapter One

The Coherence of Theism

This chapter serves as an introduction to Swinburne's *The Coherence of Theism* (hereafter, *CT*), which is a comprehensive examination of the logical consistency of the central claim of theism – which is the claim that there exists a God with attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness. Swinburne aims to demonstrate that these attributes are logically coherent and can coexist within a single being. The chapter introduces readers to the central aim and structure of Swinburne's arguments, situating them within the broader context of the philosophy of language. It outlines the major sections of the work, including an analysis of the logical coherence of the divine attributes, the philosophical and theological foundations of religious language, and a defence of theism against various logical challenges. By providing this overview, the chapter prepares readers to engage deeply with Swinburne's systematic and rigorous examination of the logical consistency of the central claims of theism.

The Coherence of Theism: Background

Central Aim

The central aim of *CT* is to investigate and demonstrate the coherence of theism. Swinburne seeks to establish that theism – the claim that there exists a God possessing certain defined attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, perfect freedom, perfect goodness and others – is logically (metaphysically) possible and thus coherent. He

argues that these divine properties can consistently coexist within a being that satisfies the theistic concept of God. *CT* is structured to address various philosophical challenges and objections to the coherence of theistic claims – with it involving a detailed examination of religious language, and the attributes that compose a 'contingent' and 'necessary' God. Through rigorous analysis and argumentation, Swinburne aims to show that theism is a rational and philosophically defensible position by countering claims that it is inherently contradictory or incoherent.

Historical Significance

CT was published in 1977 as the first work in Swinburne's trilogy on theism. The immediate historical context of *CT* involves debates about the logical consistency of theistic claims within the emerging field of analytic philosophy of religion, which had been reinvigorated a decade earlier through the work of Alvin Plantinga (specifically through his work *God and Other Minds*). Philosophers such as those in the logical positivist tradition famously challenged the meaningfulness of theological statements about God, arguing that such statements are not empirically verifiable and therefore lack cognitive significance. Antony Flew, on the other hand, in his essay, 'Theology and Falsification',[1] formulated the falsifiability challenge to religious claims, arguing that for a claim to be meaningful, there must be some way to falsify it, which he believed was often not possible with religious assertions. *CT* can, therefore, be seen as a response to these challenges, as it aims to show that theistic beliefs can be formulated in a meaningful, and thus logically coherent, manner. *CT* thus provided a comprehensive philosophical framework for addressing the meaning and coherence of theism.

The influence of *CT* over the decades thus led to significant scholarly engagement and debate, necessitating a revised edition in 1993. However, by 2016, Swinburne had the opportunity, through the publication of a second edition of *CT*, to refine his arguments in light of further ongoing discussions in the field of metaphysics and religious

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1. Flew, Antony. "Theology and Falsification." In *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, pp. 96-99. London: SCM Press, 1955.

language (which included advancements in the understanding of modality provided by the work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam).

Literary Structure

The literary structure of *CT* is divided into three main parts: 'Religious Language', 'A Contingent God' and 'A Necessary God'. However, in following the 'philosophy-first approach' detailed in the previous chapter, it will be helpful to follow, in our exploration of *CT*, a dual structure of 'philosophical framework' and 'theological application', which we now state more fully as follows:

1. *Philosophical Framework – Modality and Language*: The first part of *CT* focusses on an analysis of modality, the nature of language and the conditions that must be satisfied for a sentence to express a coherent proposition. This part thus involves a rigorous examination of the modal notions of logical and metaphysical possibility/impossibility and necessity/contingency, the nature of religious language, and the definitions and uses of words in both mundane and theological contexts – where Swinburne analyses different accounts of how words used to describe God mean what they do, arguing that, while some theological propositions can be expressed using words in their ordinary senses, others require words to be used in analogical senses to maintain their coherence.

2. *Theological Application – The Concept of God*: The second part of *CT* focusses on applying the established philosophical framework to specific theological claims concerning the nature of God. Swinburne investigates the coherence of various divine properties such as omnipotence, omniscience, perfect freedom, perfect goodness, creative action, eternity and necessity. In performing this investigation, Swinburne examines whether it is coherent to claim that a non-embodied spirit with these properties exists and maintains that, while traditional theism's claims are complex, they can be shown to be coherent through careful philosophical analysis and, ultimately, inductive reasoning (which is introduced by Swinburne in the follow up to *CT*, *The Existence of God*).

We shall now unpack in greater detail the various areas covered in both parts of *CT*.

Themes

Philosophical Framework: Modality and Language

In this section, Swinburne introduces the philosophical framework underpinning his examination of the concept of theism. Swinburne begins with an exploration of the nature of modality and establishes criteria for assessing coherent propositions. He then extends this analysis to metaphysical possibility, discussing the roles of necessity and possibility as discovered through empirical investigation. Swinburne also analyses the nature of religious language by examining how words used in religious contexts can express coherent propositions about divine attributes. Furthermore, he also explores medieval and modern accounts of religious language, highlighting their approaches to religious language. Finally, Swinburne addresses attitude theories, critiquing the view that credal sentences merely express intentions or attitudes rather than factual propositions.

Logical Possibility

A sentence is a string of words that have meaning when put together according to grammatical rules, and words and sentences derive their meaning from the usage of a large group of speakers. A proposition is determined by the meaning of the type sentence that expresses it and the truth conditions of the token sentence that expresses it. Moreover, understanding the truth conditions of a sentence involves knowing the criteria that determine under what conditions the sentence would be true, including the commitments (or 'mini-entailments') to which a speaker is committed by asserting the sentence. This leads us to the way the meanings of words and sentences are learned through syntactic and semantic rules, i.e. we form an understanding of a word's or a sentence's meaning by learning rules for their use, which are divided into 'syntactic' and 'semantic' rules. These rules reflect the shared beliefs of the language community and define the criteria for meaning. Such rules can be explicitly taught or learned through exposure to language use. Syntactic rules state the 'mini-entailments' of a word, while semantic rules describe paradigm examples of the substances or properties to which a word correctly applies. Thus,

different people might derive different beliefs about the sense of a word based on different sets of rules or paradigm examples. Nonetheless, understanding the meanings of words and the conditions under which sentences are true involves learning which sentences imply others and when sentences are true or false. If one sentence implies another, the speaker is committed to the implied sentence even if they do not fully understand it.

Now, in understanding the modal status of a proposition, one can understand that a proposition is metaphysically impossible if it involves a contradiction and metaphysically possible if it does not involve a contradiction and could be true if the world were different in some conceivable way. A metaphysically necessary proposition is one that is true regardless of how different the world could be. The primary type of metaphysically possible/impossible/necessary proposition is a logically possible/impossible/necessary proposition, which is expressed by a logically possible/impossible/necessary sentence. A logically impossible sentence must be false by virtue of purely *a priori* considerations, meaning it entails a contradiction based on the rules of the language in which it is expressed. Conversely, a logically possible sentence does not entail such a contradiction. In addition to this distinction, a proposition could be metaphysically impossible without being logically impossible if it could only be true if some other logically impossible proposition were true. Similarly, a proposition could be metaphysically necessary without being logically necessary if its negation could only be true if some different logically impossible proposition were true. Thus, a metaphysically contingent proposition is one that is neither necessary nor impossible, and a logically contingent proposition is one that is logically possible but not logically necessary.

To further refine our understanding of the nature of modality, the logical modality of sentences can be examined through the method of reflective equilibrium, a process, as noted in the previous chapter, that involves one finding a balance between different beliefs and principles. The method of reflective equilibrium involves discovering broader criteria for the application of a sentence type by considering numerous examples of its correct use. This method thus helps in determining the logical modality (possibility, necessity or impossibility) of sentences by reflecting on more and more examples of their correct application and understanding how these sentences would be used under different circumstances. More specifically, reflective equilibrium

assumes that the simplest account of the use of sentences in various narrowly described sets of circumstances is the account that most likely describes how such sentences would be used under all circumstances. This approach allows us to refine our understanding of the meaning of sentences and the conditions under which they are true or false. Hence, by systematically considering paradigm examples and counterexamples, we can develop a coherent set of beliefs about the logical status of sentences, as we encounter new examples and counterexamples. This process involves an iterative examination of our initial beliefs and the logical entailments of sentences, where we adjust our understanding to achieve a balance between different beliefs and principles. Hence, by reflecting on the use of sentences in various contexts, we can better grasp their logical modality and ensure that our beliefs are coherent and justified. However, if *a priori* arguments do not lead to agreement about a sentence's logical modality, it may be possible to use an 'indirect', inductive method – based on empirical evidence and probabilistic reasoning – to show that the sentence is probably logically necessary, possible or otherwise. This approach, as with the more 'direct' approaches detailed above, assumes that logical modality can be discovered through 'armchair' reasoning, even if it requires superior cognitive abilities to survey all possible entailments and scenarios.

Metaphysical Possibility

As noted previously, the logical modality of a sentence – that is, whether it is logically impossible, necessary or possible – is constituted by whether it or its negation entails a contradiction, and is something discoverable *a priori*, at least by a superior being if not by ordinary humans. Traditionally, it was taken to be the case that there is no stronger form of impossibility than logical impossibility, and there is no stronger form of necessity than logical necessity. However, in the 1970s, the philosophers Saul Kripke, in his work *Naming and Necessity* (1980),[2] and Hilary Putnam, in his paper 'The Meaning of Meaning',[3] highlighted the existence of many sentences and their negations which did not seem to entail any contradiction but appeared to be necessarily true or necessarily false with a strength equivalent to logical necessity or impossibility. These sentences are referred to as '*a posteriori*'

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2. Kripke, *Naming*, pp. 96-105.
3. Putnam, " Meaning.", pp. 140-143.

metaphysically necessary or impossible because their necessary truth or falsity is dependent on logically contingent facts. These facts are discoverable only through empirical investigation, such as scientific or historical research, rather than through mere reflection on the meanings of the sentences used to describe the world. Thus, these sentences' metaphysical necessity or impossibility is determined by their dependence on logically contingent facts, making their modal status discoverable only *a posteriori*. Putnam demonstrated the idea that some sentences are metaphysically necessary but not logically necessary with the example 'water is H_2O'. In the early nineteenth century, 'water' was used to refer to the clear, drinkable liquid found in rivers and seas, but people did not know its chemical composition. They used 'water' as a term for the substance, not knowing it was H_2O. Once it was discovered that water is H_2O, this fact was now taken to be a metaphysically necessary truth because the substance in our rivers and seas is essentially H_2O. That is, this fact does not entail a contradiction if negated, making it logically contingent but metaphysically necessary. Before this discovery, the necessity of 'water is H_2O' was not known *a priori* but only subsequently through scientific investigation. Moreover, according to Kripke, the same could also be said for identities such as 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' (where, as noted previously, Hesperus and Phosphorus both refer to the planet Venus), which are metaphysically necessary but logically contingent because their necessity is based on the contingent fact that Hesperus and Phosphorus are the same object. That is, this fact is discoverable only through empirical observation and not through *a priori* reasoning.

To shed further light on the notion of identity across possible worlds, Kripke and Putnam introduced the concepts of rigid and non-rigid designators. Rigid designators, as noted previously, are terms that refer to the same object in every possible world where that object exists. For example, proper names such as 'Aristotle' or 'Hesperus' are considered rigid designators because they refer to the same individual or celestial body in all possible worlds where they exist. On the other hand, non-rigid designators, such as 'the teacher of Alexander the Great' or 'the evening star', may refer to different objects in different possible worlds, depending on the circumstances. These distinctions help to clarify the nature of identity statements and their modal status, as the necessity or contingency of such statements can be determined by the rigidity of the designators involved. Despite the apparent

clarity of the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* necessities, one can challenge the notion of *a posteriori* necessities altogether through the introduction of 'informative' and 'uninformative' designators – where for an informative designator to be provided, it is necessary that anyone who understands the term also understands the conditions under which it applies (or the defining words used). Conversely, uninformative designators refer to terms where there may exist situations where we are uncertain about its appropriate application. For instance, 'red' is an informative designator because we can recognise something as red if it looks like a known red object under normal conditions. Similarly, properties such as 'fragile' or '10 metres long' are informative because we can determine their truth through observation or experience without needing to know their underlying essence. In contrast, 'jade' is uninformative because it can refer to a wide range of things such a colour, the minerals nephrite or jadeite, a flirtatious girl or a disreputable woman etc., requiring further analysis to determine its exact nature. So, given this distinction in designation, the appearance of *a posteriori* necessity arises from the use of uninformative designators in identity statements. Consider Kripke's example of 'Everest' and 'Gaurisanker': these two names refer to the same mountain, but this fact is discoverable only through empirical investigation. In earlier times, explorers named a mountain seen from Tibet 'Everest' and a different-looking mountain seen from Nepal 'Gaurisanker'. These names referred to the same mountain, but this was only learnt through exploration. Hence, the statement 'Everest is Gaurisanker' is necessarily true because it refers to the same mountain, although this necessity was discovered empirically and not through *a priori* reasoning. Thus, Kripke argues that the statement 'Everest is Gaurisanker' is an example of an *a posteriori* necessary truth.[4] However, it can be understood that the apparent necessity of this statement is due to the uninformative nature of the designators 'Everest' and 'Gaurisanker' – that is, these names do not convey any information about the essential (intrinsic) properties of the mountain they refer to. In contrast, if we replace these uninformative designators with informative ones, such as 'the tallest mountain in the world' for 'Everest' and 'the mountain located at such-and-such coordinates' for 'Gaurisanker', the necessity of the identity statement becomes accessible *a priori*. Hence, by using 'informative designators'

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4. Kripke, *Naming*, p.100.