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THE  
COHERENCE  
OF THEISM

*Second Edition*

RICHARD SWINBURNE

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Richard Swinburne

SECOND EDITION

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Preface to the Second Edition

*The Coherence of Theism*, first published in 1977, is concerned with the meaning and internal coherence of the claim that there is a God. It proved to be the first volume of a trilogy on theism, together with *The Existence of God* (1979), which analyses the strength of arguments for and against the existence of God, and *Faith and Reason* (1981), which considers the relevance of arguments to religious faith. An extensively rewritten 'second edition' of *The Existence of God* was published in 2004, and an extensively rewritten 'second edition' of *Faith and Reason* was published in 2005. There was a 'revised edition' of *The Coherence of Theism* in 1993, but the revisions were relatively minor. The present volume constitutes a far more extensive revision, and so also deserves the name of a 'second edition'.

While the structure and main conclusions remain the same as in the first edition, I have largely rewritten the text in order to take account of recent discussions of its topics and of topics in other areas of philosophy relevant to them, to bring my terminology into line with that used in my own later writings and in philosophy more generally, and to defend some relatively minor changes in my own views. The most important recent discussions of the topics of this book have concerned the analysis of omnipotence, and the Molinist solution to the problem of reconciling God's foreknowledge and human freedom, and I have reacted to these in Chapters 9 and 10. The most important discussions of topics in other areas of philosophy are those concerning 'metaphysical possibility'. Philosophers have come to recognize that there are propositions that are logically possible, but are nevertheless impossible in as strong a sense as logically impossible propositions; and many philosophers have called all such propositions which are impossible in that strong sense 'metaphysically impossible'. It follows that my concern with the 'coherence' of theism must be a concern, not merely with its logical possibility, but with its metaphysical possibility. I have restructured Chapters 2 and 3, so that Chapter 3 is a short chapter devoted to metaphysical possibility; and I make it clear there why—despite the general importance of this distinction—almost all the propositions with which I am concerned in

this book are such that, if they are logically possible, they are also metaphysically possible. Thereafter I discuss only the logical possibility of propositions except in a few cases to which I draw attention, where the metaphysically possible may diverge from the logically possible. I have brought my terminology into line with that used elsewhere by using ‘divine’ rather than ‘a personal ground of being’ to characterize the nature of God, distinguishing a sentence being ‘analytic’ from it being ‘logically necessary’, and describing what sentences express as ‘propositions’ rather than ‘statements’.

The changes in my own views include my recognition (justified in the 1993 edition) that my account of the divine nature is straightforwardly compatible with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (and does not require Christians to say that there can be three divine ‘persons’ only in a very stretched sense of ‘person’.) Except for repeating my arguments for this compatibility, I do not discuss that doctrine further here, since I discuss it at length in my book *The Christian God*. I have a more thoroughly developed theory of the nature of moral propositions, which I provide in Chapter 11. Also, I have developed the idea that God might be a ‘necessary being’ in a considerably deeper sense than I allowed in 1977, though not (in the normal contemporary sense) a ‘metaphysically necessary being’. In view of all the new material that I have added, I have kept the book at approximately the same length by abbreviating and sometimes omitting passages that are not so central to the main argument or that deal with issues that are not nearly as controversial now as they were in the twentieth century. For example, I have reduced radically the discussion of verificationism in Chapter 2, since, in view of the decline of the influence of verificationism in philosophy generally, the view that religious language ought to satisfy a verificationist criterion of meaning no longer has much appeal. Having transferred the discussion of kinds of necessity from Chapter 13 to Chapters 2 and 3, I have expanded the discussion of the necessity in and of God over two chapters, 13 and 14—which required me to give a new title to Chapter 13.

Many thanks to all the philosophers whose comments and criticisms of papers containing previous versions of some of the arguments of this book have saved me from many mistakes. Some of the new material comes from six new published articles—‘Gregory Palamas and our Knowledge of God’, in A.Schumann (ed.), *Logic in Orthodox Christian Thinking* (Ontos Verlag, 2013); ‘Time and Causation’, *American*

*Philosophical Quarterly*, 51 (2014), 233–45; ‘Could God be a Necessary Being?’, in Jon Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 6 (Oxford University Press, 2015); ‘Necessary Moral Principles’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 1 (2015) 617–34; ‘God’s Omnipotence’, in B. Göcke (ed.), *Infinite Properties* (University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming); ‘Causation, Time, and God’s Omniscience’, *Topoi*, forthcoming. (I should add that the view about God’s necessity that I reach in this present book is somewhat different from that reached in the article ‘Could God be a Necessary Being?’) Also, I have reused a few passages from other books of mine that discuss issues discussed also in the present book—passages from *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2013), from *Revelation* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 2007), and from *The Christian God* (Oxford University Press, 1994). I am grateful to the editors and publishers concerned for permission to reuse the material. Thanks once again to Sarah Barker for typing and retyping the new material, and once again to Peter Momtchiloff for ushering a book of mine through Oxford University Press.



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# 1

## Introduction

By ‘theism’ I understand the doctrine that there is a God in the sense of a being with most of the following properties: being a person without a body (that is, a spirit), present everywhere (that is, omnipresent), the creator of the universe, perfectly free, able to do anything (that is, omnipotent), knowing all things (that is, omniscient), perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship. There are different forms of theism, according to which of the above properties are ascribed to God, and how those properties are understood. Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all in the above sense theists. Many theists also hold further beliefs about other properties possessed by God, and in respect of these properties Christians, Jews, and Muslims differ among themselves; and yet further beliefs, in which some members of each group differ from others. Christians assert, and Jews and Muslims deny, that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Catholics assert, and Protestants deny, that Christ is ‘really’ present in the bread and wine consecrated in the Mass. With beliefs of the latter two kinds this book is not concerned. It is concerned solely with the central core of theistic belief, that God (in the sense defined above) exists, that there is a God. It is not concerned primarily with whether this belief is true or with whether we can know it to be true, but with the prior question of which of the many forms of theism are coherent.

Here is a very brief account of what it is for a proposition to be ‘coherent’; a much fuller and more rigorous account (with several more examples) will follow in Chapters 2 and 3. A declarative sentence is one that expresses a proposition about how things are or were or will be; declarative sentences are to be distinguished from commands or questions. ‘The Battle of Hastings took place in 1066 CE’ states that there was a battle called ‘The Battle of Hastings’ and that it took place in a certain year, 1066 CE. One may have various attitudes towards a

proposition—one may believe it, or doubt it, or desire it to be true. But in normal contexts, when a declarative sentence is uttered or written without being enclosed within a larger sentence (as, for example, in ‘I doubt whether the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066 CE’), it is being asserted; the speaker or writer is making a claim that the proposition is true. But while expressing a proposition, a sentence may not express a coherent proposition.

The main way in which a proposition can be incoherent is if it is logically impossible—that is, it is such that it does not make any sense to suppose that that proposition is true, and that will be because it is self-contradictory or entails a proposition that is self-contradictory. By a self-contradictory proposition (which I shall call in future simply a ‘contradiction’) I mean a proposition of the form ‘both  $p$  and not- $p$ ’—for example ‘John is over 6 foot tall and also not over 6 foot tall’. By a proposition  $p$  entailing a different proposition  $q$ , I mean that the meaning of  $p$  is such that it could not be true unless  $q$  were true: someone who asserts ‘ $p$ ’ is (explicitly or implicitly) committed thereby to ‘ $q$ ’. For example, ‘John is under 5 foot tall’ entails ‘John is under 6 foot tall’. It may often be obvious that some proposition entails a contradiction and so is logically impossible merely by reflecting on the meanings of the words of any sentence that expresses it and the way in which those words are put together (the form of the sentence). It is obvious that ‘my box is a cube with all its edges 6 foot long which is simultaneously in Oxford and a hundred miles away’, or ‘John is taller than James, James is taller than George, and George is taller than John’, entail contradictions. But sometimes it may require much reflection and argument to show that some proposition entails a contradiction; and I shall consider in Chapter 2 the kinds of reflection and argument needed to show that.

I shall go on to point out in Chapter 3 that there are some propositions that are such that, even when we know what the sentences that express them mean, it requires empirical investigation to discover what it would be like for them to be true. Some of these propositions are such that, when we do come to understand this, we can see that they could be true only if some other logically impossible proposition were true. So they are just as strongly impossible as are logically impossible propositions. I shall call these propositions ‘a posteriori metaphysically impossible’ propositions; and I shall call both these propositions and logically impossible propositions ‘metaphysically impossible’ propositions. All metaphysically

impossible propositions are incoherent. We can come to know that a proposition is logically impossible a priori (that is, merely by reflecting on what some sentence that expresses it means and what is entailed by that sentence.) But, as their name indicates, we can come to know that a posteriori metaphysically impossible propositions are metaphysically impossible only a posteriori—that is by acquiring some information, not merely about the meanings of words, but also about the world to which the words refer.

In summary, a proposition is incoherent iff in some way it ‘involves’ a contradiction, and so is not true and could not be true, in whatever conceivable way the world was different from the actual world. (‘Iff’ means ‘if and only if’.) I understand by a coherent proposition one that is metaphysically possible. Coherent propositions may be true or false; they may be such that they must be true, however the world differed in any conceivable way from the way it actually is—as is ‘all squares have four sides’ (in which case they are ‘metaphysically necessary’) or such that whether they are true (‘David Cameron was Prime Minister in 2014’) or false (‘George Osborne was Prime Minister in 2014’) depends on how the world is (was, or will be).

This book is concerned with sentences that say that there exists a being with one or more of the properties listed in the first sentence of this chapter, possessed by him either contingently or necessarily (that is, essentially). Such sentences are ‘There is a holy being, creator of the universe’, or ‘an omnipotent and eternal spirit exists’, or ‘God exists’, where ‘God’ is defined in terms of some or all of the above properties. (Until I reach Chapter 14, I shall always understand ‘God exists’ as meaning the same as ‘There is a God’, a being of a certain kind. I shall not understand ‘God’ as the proper name of a certain individual.) Such sentences I will term credal sentences. Some philosophers of recent years, especially ones writing in the middle years of the twentieth century, have argued that, despite appearances, these sentences are not declarative sentences, but rather expressions of intention to live in a certain way or exhortations to others to pursue a certain course of life. In Chapter 6 I shall very briefly consider and reject such accounts of credal language, and I will argue that credal sentences do, as they appear to do, express propositions.

Many other philosophers of recent years, while agreeing that credal sentences express propositions, have argued that many such sentences

(or conjunctions of sentences) do not express coherent propositions, because it is incoherent to suppose that things are as described by them. For example, they have claimed that it is incoherent to claim both that God is essentially (that is, in some sense necessarily) both omnipotent and perfectly free, and also essentially perfectly good; since, their argument goes, if he were both omnipotent and perfectly free, he would be able to do evil, and if he were essentially perfectly good, he would not be able to do evil. This book is devoted to examining the different propositions (including the ones just mentioned) that may be expressed by creedal sentences and so the different propositions that may be expressed by the sentence ‘God exists’, and to reach conclusions about which such creedal propositions are coherent ones—that is, ones that do not involve any contradiction—and which ones are incoherent. Although, as I wrote above, the book is not concerned primarily with whether the belief that there is a God is true or with whether we can know it to be true, it will, however, reach the conclusion that the question of the coherence of a traditional form of theism cannot altogether be separated from the question of its truth.

I consider in Part I general questions about how theological language works. In Chapters 2 and 3 I investigate the conditions that need to be satisfied for a sentence to express a coherent proposition. I go on in Chapters 4 and 5 to analyse different general accounts of how words used to describe what God is like mean what they do. The words used to describe what God is like are all ordinary words or technical theological terms defined by ordinary words. On one account of religious language the ordinary words are used in their ordinary senses, while on a different account they are used in ‘analogical’ senses. I shall be arguing in the course of the book that, while some creedal propositions can be expressed by sentences using words in ordinary senses, other creedal propositions can be expressed only by sentences that use words in analogical senses.

Having thus examined very general problems about the view that creedal sentences express coherent propositions, I turn in Parts II and III to investigate in detail the various propositions expressed by creedal sentences. In Chapter 7 I consider whether it is coherent to claim that there exists a non-embodied person, a spirit, who is omnipresent (that is, present at every place.) In Chapter 8 I consider whether it is coherent to suppose that there exists an omnipresent spirit who is perfectly free and

created and sustains the universe. And so on. In the case of each new property examined I consider whether it is coherent to suppose that a being could have that property as well as the other properties previously examined. The conclusion of Part II is that it is coherent to suppose that ‘there exists eternally an omnipresent spirit, who is perfectly free, the creator of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation’, when all of these words or the words by which they are defined are understood in ordinary senses—given certain definitions of these words rather than other definitions.

The God of Part II is, however, a contingent God. If he exists, he just happens to exist and happens to have most of the above properties; it would be a fortunate accident if he does. He might not have existed or might not have possessed exactly those properties. However, writers in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition who have thought about their theism in any depth have wanted to deny that God just happens to exist or just happens to have such properties as those listed above. They have wanted to claim that in some sense of ‘necessarily’ God exists necessarily and has most of the above properties necessarily. In Part III I investigate these claims. I find that it could be coherent to suppose that there exists—in certain senses of ‘necessary’ and ‘necessarily’—a necessary being who has necessarily the properties considered in Part II, but only if that being is supposed to be a ‘person’ and to be the ‘cause’ of his own existence only in analogical senses of those words. If those words are being used in analogical senses, I cannot prove for certain that any proposition that there exists such a God is or is not coherent. I can only indicate the considerations which are relevant to showing the coherence or incoherence of such a proposition. My main conclusion will be that it is probable that any such proposition is coherent iff it is somewhat more probable on observable evidence that—if that proposition is coherent—it is true. Whether (and to what degree) a proposition affirming the existence of such a God is—if coherent—probably true on the observable evidence available to us is a question that lies outside the scope of this book, but that I examine in the second volume of the trilogy, *The Existence of God*. Normally we can show a proposition to be coherent without having to produce any grounds for supposing it to be true. Not so for the propositions considered in Part III.

Although the overall topic of this book lies squarely within the field of the philosophy of religion, I have found it necessary, in order to answer

the questions with which I am concerned, to write lengthy sections on many general philosophical topics and then apply the results to the claims of theism. There are detailed discussions of such topics as logical possibility, personal identity, causation, and the objectivity of morality—topics generally considered to lie within areas of philosophy other than the philosophy of religion. I have tried to discuss these topics in ways that do not presuppose previous acquaintance with current philosophical discussions; and I refer from time to time to books and articles where the issues may be followed up more fully.

The programme of this book, if not its results, will seem a natural and useful one to many interested in philosophy and lacking religious commitment. They rightly feel that bold and puzzling claims about the universe that command some measure of support need to be put under the philosophical microscope. Yet many religious people will view this programme with grave suspicion. Religion, they will tell us, is a matter not of affirming creeds, but of a personal relationship to God. The religious person may tell us that she knows that she at any rate has such a relationship, and that she knows what she means when she says that she has this relationship; on these points she ‘cannot be mistaken’. In reaction to this suspicion, I have two points to make. The first point is that, although the religious person claims to know that she has a personal relationship to God, many people have claimed to know things about which they have subsequently been found to be confused or mistaken. If large numbers of people are very sceptical about some claim that you make to knowledge of a very important matter, it is no bad thing to check your claim by considering whether their objections provide you with grounds for sharing their scepticism. And a major objection to the claim that there is a God is the objection that the claim is simply incoherent and so could not be true. The second point is that, even if the religious person has no need to question the truth, let alone the coherence, of her beliefs and of the claim that she has a personal relationship to God, she has, at any rate on Christian and Islamic views, a duty to convert others. If those others are to come to believe that there is a God, they need to have explained to them what the theist’s claims mean. They often doubt the coherence of these claims. If the religious person could show the claims to be coherent, she would remove a stumbling-block that stands in the way of the conversion of the unbeliever.

Questions about the nature of God and whether such a God exists can, like all big questions, be answered at different levels of sophistication. A simple answer to a young child's question 'What does "God is omnipotent" mean?' would be 'it means "God can do anything"'. A slightly more sophisticated answer to the same question from a somewhat older child would be 'God can do anything, the description of which does not entail a contradiction', and it would go on to explain what 'entail' and 'contradiction' mean, and then illustrate this by examples of what God can and cannot do—as, for example, 'he cannot make me exist and not exist at the same time'. The answer to be given in Chapter 9 of the present book is both longer and more sophisticated than either of these answers. This book seeks to answer such questions at a level at which fairly intelligent and well-educated people, prepared to concentrate on some somewhat complicated arguments, can understand.

I concluded my Introduction to the first edition of this book with these sentences:

It is one of the intellectual tragedies of our age that when philosophy in English-speaking countries has developed high standards of argument and clear thinking, the style of theological writing has been largely influenced by the continental philosophy of Existentialism, which, despite its considerable other merits, has been distinguished by a very loose and sloppy style of argument. If argument has a place in theology, large-scale theology needs clear and rigorous argument. That point was very well grasped by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, by Berkeley, Butler, and Paley. It is high time for theology to return to their standards.

While I was mistaken in focusing my criticism of continental philosophy merely on its Existentialist variant, I maintain my criticism of the influence possessed by continental philosophy generally, on 'systematic theology' as taught in most faculties of Theology. This influence is, I am glad to report, less than it was in 1977, but still dominant. By contrast, there has been a remarkable growth of interest in rigorous treatment of religious claims among so-called analytic philosophers—that is, philosophers of the English-speaking world whose style of philosophy is now spreading to many other countries. When published in 1977, *The Coherence of Theism* was the first book in the new analytic philosophy of religion tradition to attempt a detailed account of the meaning and coherence of theism. Over the subsequent nearly forty years there have been quite a number of other books that have had the same programme, some of them reaching conclusions not greatly different from mine,

others purporting to show that most forms of theism are incoherent—that is, that possession of some of the purported divine properties is incompatible with possession of other such properties. And there have been many books, and very many articles in academic journals, on individual divine properties—such as omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. Unfortunately, some of this writing is couched in difficult philosophical terminology with the aid of much formal logic. Sometimes it is necessary to use such terminology, but in such a case it is crucially important to bring out by sentences of ordinary non-technical language what is the philosophical claim being made, and to make sense of what it would be like for that claim to be true. If this is not done, the philosophical terminology may be hiding nonsense. Of course, if there is a God of the kind postulated by theists, humans will not be able to understand in any way fully what he is like; but, if we cannot understand at all what he is like, there would be no difference between a theist and an atheist, and no point in worshipping God.

The medieval philosophers who also produced complicated accounts of the divine properties recognized that in doing so they were using and needed to use words in analogical senses. Aquinas, for example, wrote that God is ‘good’ or ‘wise’ only in analogical senses of these words. The medievals then went on to produce accounts of the nature of analogy, in order to justify their claims that their use of words to talk about God was a comprehensible use of words in analogical senses. It is, therefore, strange that there has been so little discussion in the recent literature of analytic philosophy of religion of the nature and permissible use of analogy. By contrast, the present book begins with a full discussion of the nature and justification of the analogical use of words. Although I do not think that Aquinas gave us a very useful account of analogy, I do think that theology does use words in an analogical sense in a different sense of ‘analogy’ from that of Aquinas, and that it needs to do so in crucial places in order to talk coherently about God.

PART I

Religious Language



## 2

# Conditions for Coherence: Logical Possibility

### Definitions

In the next two chapters I shall analyse the criteria that must be satisfied for a sentence to express a coherent proposition. I begin by describing the senses in which I shall understand the crucial philosophical expressions used in this analysis. And I begin this latter task by repeating and amplifying some of the definitions given in Chapter 1. A proposition is incoherent (that is, metaphysically impossible) iff in some way it involves a contradiction; and coherent (that is, metaphysically possible) iff it does not in any way involve a contradiction and so is true or could be true if the world were different in some conceivable way from the way it is; a metaphysically necessary proposition is one that is true, and would still be true, however different in any conceivable way the world was from the way it is. The main kind of metaphysically possible/impossible/necessary proposition is a logically possible/impossible/necessary proposition, which is one expressed by a logically possible/impossible/necessary sentence. A logically impossible sentence is a declarative sentence that must be false in virtue of purely a priori considerations; that is, a sentence that is such that, merely because of what it means in virtue of the rules of the language in which it is expressed, it entails a contradiction. A logically possible sentence is a declarative sentence that is not logically impossible. A logically necessary sentence is a declarative sentence that must be true in virtue of purely a priori considerations, because its negation (the sentence 'not- $p$ ' which says of it ( $p$ ) that it is not true) entails a contradiction because of what the sentence means in virtue of the rules of the language in which it is expressed. A metaphysically impossible proposition is therefore either a logically impossible proposition or any

proposition that is as strongly impossible as a logically impossible proposition. We shall see in Chapter 3 that the reason why a proposition could be metaphysically impossible but not logically impossible is that, although it does not itself entail a contradiction, it could be true only if some different logically impossible proposition was true, and so it too in a wide sense ‘involves’ a contradiction. A metaphysically possible proposition is one that is not metaphysically impossible.

A metaphysically necessary proposition is either a logically necessary proposition or one that is as strongly necessary as a logically necessary proposition. We shall see in Chapter 3 that the reason why a proposition could be metaphysically necessary but not logically necessary is that, although its negation does not itself entail a contradiction, that negation could be true only if some different logically impossible proposition was true, and so that negation too in a wide sense ‘involves’ a contradiction. A metaphysically possible proposition that is not metaphysically necessary is metaphysically contingent—that is, it is neither necessary nor impossible; and a logically possible proposition that is not logically necessary is logically contingent.

I shall use ‘conceivable’ in the same sense as ‘logically possible’; a ‘conceivable’ proposition is one that it makes sense to suppose could be true.<sup>1</sup> To ‘conceive’ some proposition is to suppose that proposition, which does not entail a contradiction, to be true. To suppose a proposition to be true is not the same as to imagine it being true, in the sense of visualizing it in one’s mind. Humans cannot (in this sense) imagine a figure having a thousand sides or a block of iron being solid, in that we cannot have a mental image of a thousand sides or of the solidity of the iron. (A block of iron with holes inside it would look the same as a solid block.) But we can conceive there being such things, because we can suppose there to be such things, without that supposition entailing a contradiction. It makes sense to suppose that there could be such things as a thousand-sided figure or a

<sup>1</sup> Hence some state of affairs is apparently conceivable if it seems to be logically possible, if it seems to make sense to suppose that it is true. Sometimes ‘conceivable’ is used to mean ‘apparently logically possible’ or ‘apparently metaphysically possible’; I shall not use it in either of these senses. In understanding ‘logical possibility’ as ‘conceivability’ I am giving an account of logical possibility similar to that of David Chalmers, ‘Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?’, in T. S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds), *Conceivability and Possibility* (Oxford University Press, 2002). See also S. Yablo, ‘Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 53 (1993), 1–14.

solid block of iron. What we can conceive is conceivable. But a proposition that some particular person cannot conceive, because he or she does not fully understand what it would be like for it to be true, may be conceivable because any person who does fully understand this can suppose it to be true without contradiction; but what is inconceivable cannot be conceived by anyone. In this chapter I proceed to analyse in more detail what it is for a sentence to be logically possible (that is, conceivable), and so to express a logically possible proposition.

A sentence is a string of words that have senses, strung together so as to have a meaning. (Rules of grammar codify the ways in which words can be put together so that the whole string has a meaning. For example, a sentence must contain a verb, and any adverbs must qualify verbs and not stand in the subject place.) A sentence is a sentence of a particular language—French, or English, or Latin, or whatever. The forms of declarative sentences include subject–predicate sentences such as ‘John is bald’, universal generalizations such as ‘all humans are mortal’, conditional sentences such as ‘if John has finished writing his report, he will come to dinner’, and other forms that grammarians and logicians have codified. Words and sentences of a language mean what some large group of its speakers mean by them. If there are two or more large groups of speakers that mean different things by some word or sentence, then the word or sentence is ambiguous. In the case of technical terms of a discipline, it is the experts of that discipline whose use determines the sense of its terms—it is physicists whose use determines what ‘quark’ means.

A token sentence is a particular utterance or inscription of a sentence on a particular occasion. Any token sentence consisting of the same words in the same order is a token of the same type sentence. Thus each utterance or inscription of ‘all humans are mortal’ is a different token of the same type. As I shall use the word ‘proposition’ in this book,<sup>2</sup> a proposition is the proposition it is in virtue of the meaning of the type sentence that expresses it, and of the truth conditions—that is, which state of affairs would make it true—of the token sentence that

<sup>2</sup> This seems to me the sense in which most philosophers use the word ‘proposition’ today, although sometimes they use ‘statement’ and ‘thought’ in this sense. In another book of mine (*Revelation* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 2007)) it was important for me to make a certain distinction that is not so important for this book, and so I used ‘thought’ in the sense in which I am using ‘proposition’ here; and used ‘proposition’ in a different sense.

expresses it. The type sentence 'The Prime Minister is young' means that a prime minister to whom it refers is young; the token of that sentence uttered by me today has, as its truth conditions, that David Cameron (the Prime Minister to whom I am referring in this utterance) is young. By the 'meaning' of a (type or token) sentence, I mean what you would know in knowing the criteria determining under what conditions it would be true. To know these criteria always involves knowing to which other sentences anyone who asserts the given sentence is thereby explicitly committed by it. I call these commitments to which a speaker is explicitly committed by a sentence its 'mini-entailments'; ' $p$ ' mini-entails ' $q$ ' iff someone who asserts ' $p$ ' thereby explicitly commits himself to ' $q$ '. 'John is older than James' mini-entails 'James is younger than John'; 'he is over 6 feet tall' mini-entails 'he is over 5 feet tall'. So if  $p$  mini-entails  $q$ , someone who sincerely utters the sentence ' $p$  but not  $q$ ' would not have fully understood either what ' $p$ ' means or what ' $q$ ' means, since that sentence could not but be false. But knowing the criteria determining the truth conditions of a sentence may also involve being able to recognize, when you are favourably positioned, your faculties are working properly, and you are not subject to illusion, when that sentence is true or false. You would not know what 'that surface is red' means unless under those favourable conditions you could recognize a 'red' surface.

The sense or meaning of a word is a matter of how that word affects the meaning of any sentence that contains it. Thus the sense of 'square' is a matter of the difference it makes to the meaning of sentences such as 'this box is round' if you substitute 'square' for 'round'. The sense of 'if' is a matter of how the meanings of such sentences as 'if he is in London, he will not be at home for dinner' differ from the meanings of such sentences as 'he is in London, and so he will not be at home for dinner'. I shall say that a word ' $P$ ' mini-entails a word ' $Q$ ' iff any sentence ' $p$ ' that contains ' $P$ ' mini-entails a sentence ' $q$ ' that is the same as ' $p$ ' except for ' $Q$ ' being substituted for ' $P$ '. Thus 'square' mini-entails 'four-sided', because any sentence such as 'this area is square' mini-entails 'this area is four-sided'. The sense or meaning of a word may be called a 'concept'. While sentences are composed of words, the propositions that they express are composed of concepts. The sentence 'all humans are mortal' expresses a proposition that relates the concepts of being human and being mortal to each other; it claims that any instance of the concept of being human (that is, any human) is also an instance of the concept

of being mortal (that is, is mortal). To believe that a word or sentence has a certain meaning entails using it in certain ways; and the way you use it shows what you believe about its meaning.

I shall understand by a ‘substance’ a particular thing, capable of causing or being caused, such as Richard Swinburne, or a particular table, or a particular electron, or the planet Venus. I shall understand by a ‘property’ either a monadic property that is a characteristic (a feature) that can be possessed by one substance, such as being a person or a table or square or clever; or a relation that one substance can have to another substance (or substances), such as being-60-miles-away-from it. A property (as I shall understand the term) is a ‘universal’ or is defined in terms of universals; the same property can be possessed by many different substances (or multiples of substances). ‘Square’ and ‘being-60-miles-away-from’ are properties because many different substances can be square, and many different pairs of substances can be 60-miles-away-from each other. But being ‘the oldest living human’ is also a property, because, although it can be possessed by only one substance, it is defined in terms of features—‘oldest’ (that is, ‘older than any other’), ‘living’, and ‘human’—that can be possessed by many substances (or multiples thereof.) I shall understand by an ‘event’ a particular state of affairs or a change of state; more formally, an event consists in the possession of a certain property by a certain substance at a certain time (for example, my tie being red on 7 January 2014), or a certain substance having a certain relation to another substance (or other substances) at a certain time (for example, Oxford being-situated-at-a-distance-of-60-miles-from London now), or the coming into existence or ceasing to exist of a certain substance at a certain time. Two events are the same iff they consist in the occurrence of the same state (or change of state) of the world (for example, if they involve the same substances having the same properties at the same time), however that state is described.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> More precisely, I shall assume that two events are the same iff their canonical descriptions (that is, ones that pick out the substances, properties, and times involved by informative designators) are logically equivalent; and that two substances, properties, or times are the same iff they can be referred to by logically equivalent ‘informative designators’. This terminology is explained in Chapter 3. For fuller explanation of this terminology and justification for using these criteria for the identity of properties, see my *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 9–14.

What constitutes the truth conditions of a sentence that refers to a substance, property, or time depends on the criteria for something being that substance, property, or whatever. Two token sentences express the same proposition iff the two type sentences mean the same and the token sentences would be made true by the same state of affairs—that is, the same event. Thus ‘Cicero was in Rome on the Ides of March AUC 693’ expresses the same proposition as ‘Tully was in Rome on 15 March 50 BCE’, given that ‘Cicero’ and ‘Tully’ are names of the same person (with the same criteria for being that person), and ‘the Ides of March AUC 693’ and ‘15 March 50 BCE’ are names of the same day (with the same criteria for being that day). Whereas, ‘The most famous Roman orator was in Rome on 15 March 50 BCE’ does not express the same proposition as those propositions; this is because, even though Cicero was in fact the most famous Roman orator and so the two token sentences would be made true by the same event, nevertheless the two type sentences do not mean the same as the former sentences. This is because the criteria for being Cicero are not the same as the criteria for being the most famous Roman orator; Cicero might not have been the most famous Roman orator but he could not fail to have been Cicero.

A given type declarative sentence normally expresses the same proposition, whoever utters it in whatever circumstances. ‘The Battle of Hastings took place in 1066 CE’ expresses the same proposition, whoever says it and whenever they say it. In this book I shall normally be concerned with sentences of this kind. But there are some type declarative sentences, tokens of which express different propositions, varying with who says them, when, and where. For example, ‘I am ill’ expresses a different proposition, varying with who says it, when, and where. If I say it now, it means that Richard Swinburne is now ill; if John said it yesterday, it meant that John was ill yesterday. And so on. Words that determine how the meaning of a sentence varies with who says it, when, and where, such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘now’, ‘yesterday’, or ‘here’ are often called ‘indexicals’. I shall need on occasion to draw attention to sentences of this kind.

Almost all sentences that grammarians would classify as ‘indicative sentences’ are declarative sentences and so express propositions; but there are a few that are not. One kind of indicative sentence that does not express a proposition is a ‘performative utterance’. If someone says ‘I promise to pay you £10’, she is not making a claim about what is the

case whether or not she had uttered that sentence; rather, she is bringing about an obligation that would not have existed without the sentence being uttered. If someone says ‘I advise you to tell him what happens’, she is not reporting the giving of advice, she is giving it. And so in neither case does the sentence express a proposition.

A proposition, unlike anything else expressed by a sentence, is true or false. Commands, questions, or performative utterances are not true or false. Many philosophers have argued that indicative sentences of various kinds that might seem to express propositions do not in fact do so but do other jobs instead. They have argued, for example, that ‘moral judgements’—that is, sentences that say that actions are ‘morally’ ‘good’ or ‘right’ or ‘ought to be done’—do not express propositions, but merely express approval or give advice. On this view, if someone says ‘capital punishment is wrong’, he is not making a claim about how things are, but merely expressing his disapproval of capital punishment or advising people to campaign for its abolition. Of course moral judgements may often do these latter jobs as well as the former job, but the philosophically interesting doctrine is the doctrine that they do not do the former job at all—that is, do not express a proposition, do not make a claim about how things are in the world. This account of moral judgements is much debated in philosophy, and in Chapter 11 I shall have occasion to reject it. In Chapter 6 I shall consider and reject the view of a few recent philosophers that credal sentences do not express propositions.

## How We Learn the Meanings of Words and Sentences

We acquire a belief about the sense of a word or the meaning of a sentence or sentence form by learning a few rules for their use of two kinds, which I shall call ‘syntactic’ and ‘semantic’ rules. The belief will be true (the word or whatever will have that meaning in the public language) iff it is a belief shared with most other users of the language. These rules consist of some of the criteria that determine the meaning of a word or sentence. We may learn such rules by being taught them explicitly or we may simply ‘pick them up’ by listening to conversations. I shall now explain the nature of such rules, primarily by showing how they work in respect of words, and thereby affect the meanings of sentences that

contain those words. I shall consider only the senses of those words (or longer expressions) that designate substances or properties, since these alone are relevant to the issues discussed in this book. Their senses are a matter of which are the substances or properties that they designate, and how they contribute thereby to the meanings of sentences that say something about those substances or properties. In this section and always thereafter, unless I specify otherwise, I assume that words are being used in their ordinary senses; I ignore the possibility of their being used in analogical or metaphorical senses, until I come to Chapter 4.

A syntactic rule for the use of such a word states some of the mini-entailments of the word. It will tell you to which other sentences of a given form or containing a given word some sentence commits you—for example, ‘if you affirm that you “know that so-and-so”, that commits you to “so-and-so is true”’; ‘if you affirm “I know that John is in London”, that commits you to “John is in London”’. The mini-entailments of a word include definitions—that is, words (or phrases) that have the same meaning—for example, ‘a philatelist is someone who collects postage stamps or who knows about different kinds of postage stamps’. If you are taught the sense of a word by means of many different syntactic rules, some of those rules may prove inconsistent with others of those rules. For example, you may learn what it is for a substance to be a ‘table wine’ by learning the syntactic rules that being a ‘table wine’ mini-entails being ‘a beverage’, being ‘fermented once’, ‘intoxicating’, ‘made from fruits’, and ‘made from either Pinot grapes or rice, and not made in New Zealand’. Clearly the last two conditions are inconsistent. In such a case it may seem to you that there is a sense of the word to which you can naturally extrapolate from almost all the rules, which leads you to discard one or two of them. ‘Made from either Pinot grapes or rice, and not made in New Zealand’ seems a condition whose disjuncts (‘Pinot grapes’ or ‘rice’) and conjuncts (‘made from either Pinot grapes or rice’, and ‘not made in New Zealand’) have no connection with each other, and so is not as simple as the ‘made from fruits’ rule. Hence a sense of ‘table wine’ that mini-entails the latter but not the former will seem a more natural sense of that word.

A semantic rule for words picking out substances or properties or sentences is one that points out or describes in other words (which already have a meaning in the language) paradigm examples of particular substances or kinds of substance or properties to which the word is

correctly applied, and perhaps also examples of substances or whatever to which the word is not correctly applied. The semantic rules for the use of a word 'P' tell you that being P just is being like the paradigm examples. A very simple semantic rule for the use of a name referring to a particular substance may point out the substance to which the name is correctly applied—for example, 'John is that boy'; a less simple one will describe the substance—for example, 'John is the boy who always arrives late at our class'. A semantic rule for the use of a word such as 'sweet' referring to a property of edible substances is one that identifies various paradigm substances as 'sweet' by getting you to taste them or listing substances, such as sugar, honey, treacle, or ripe peaches, which are sweet, where it is assumed or stated that a substance is 'sweet' iff it resembles these substances in the respect in which they resemble each other. A more informative rule contrasts such substances with various substances that are not 'sweet', such as vinegar or dark chocolate, where it is assumed or stated that a substance is 'sweet' iff it resembles the former substances in the respect in which they resemble each other, and does not resemble the latter objects in the same respect. An even more informative rule would indicate how similar to the paradigm examples a substance needs to be for the word to apply to it—for example, 'a substance is sweet iff it resembles paradigm sweet substances as much as they resemble each other'. But, analogously to the case of syntactic rules, it may follow from the belief about the sense of a word that you acquire partly by means of semantic rules, that one or two of the paradigm examples by which you learn that sense are not objects to which that word applies. You may have been taught the sense of 'cat' (in the non-technical sense of domestic cat) by examples, and then come to acquire a belief about what a 'cat' is that rules out one of the paradigm examples from being a 'cat', because it is not at all like the other examples. Maybe it was in reality a tiger cub.

Although we can learn how to use many words (and the resultant sentences) solely by acquiring some syntactic rules for their use, we can do so only if we already understand the words used in the syntactic rule. Unless the words to which a given word is related by a syntactic rule are themselves logically related to other words, and these are logically related to other words and so on, until we come to words that also have semantic rules for their use, we would not know what the former words meant. To understand the syntactic rule that 'the rate of inflation' mini-entails

(indeed is definitionally equivalent to) 'the average rate at which prices are increasing' you need to know what 'price' means. You could not have a belief about what a 'price' is unless you had a belief about what it is to 'buy' and 'sell'; and you could not have that belief unless you had a belief about what it is to 'exchange' objects (for money or another object); and you could not have the latter belief unless you had a belief about what it is to 'give' or 'take' objects; and you could not have that belief unless you had some semantic rule that would enable you to recognize someone 'giving' something to someone and to recognize someone 'taking' something from someone.

This process of proceeding from a few syntactic and semantic rules for the use of a word to a belief about its sense (and so to a belief about how it contributes to the meaning of sentences) is quite likely to produce the same belief about the sense of the word in two people who begin with the same set of rules, because, as a result of nature or nurture, all humans have similar cognitive mechanisms. But it is still possible that, while acquiring the same few syntactic and semantic rules for the use of a word, two people may come to have different beliefs about some other mini-entailments of that word or different beliefs about which other objects the word applies to, and so acquire different beliefs about the sense of the word, and so acquire different concepts. For example, two people may be taught what 'red' means by means of paradigm examples of 'red' things, all of which we would consider dark red, and as a result one may come to understand 'red' as applicable only to dark red objects, and the other may come to understand it as applicable to all objects that we would consider red. And this can happen even if both people are given a rule stating that to be 'red' an object must be as similar to the paradigm objects as they are to each other, because different people may count different objects as similar to the paradigm objects to the degree to which they are similar to each other.

But it also often happens that two people acquire the same beliefs about the senses of words by extrapolating from different sets of syntactic and semantic rules. They may extrapolate from different sets of syntactic rules, each of which is a subset of the set of all the mini-entailments of some word that has a public sense in the language. And clearly people often acquire the same beliefs about the senses of words from different paradigm examples of their application. Two people may acquire the same belief about the sense of 'red' from two different sets of paradigm

examples, one of which consists only of light red objects and the other of which consists only of dark red objects. Some people might be taught what a 'boat' is by a syntactic rule, that 'boats are vehicles for conveying people and goods across water'; while other people might be shown rowing boats, canoes, and dinghies, and told that these are boats, and that might (or might not) give them a narrower concept of 'boat' from that provided by the syntactic rule. How people extrapolate from some syntactic and semantic rules to a belief about the sense of a word and so to beliefs about other of its mini-entailments and other examples to which it would apply depends on what they regard as the most natural (that is, the simplest) account of that sense underlying the rules from which they have learnt to use it—a point to which I shall return later in this chapter. But because most of us have similar cognitive mechanisms and have acquired our linguistic beliefs from similar rules, we make similar judgements about the senses of words and the meanings of sentences that use them. Correction by authoritative persons (parents, teachers, and compilers of dictionaries) may greatly reduce any resultant differences, but it is inevitable that minor differences will remain.

Sometimes the learning process may lead groups of speakers to understand a word in two sharply different ways. In that case the word is ambiguous and has two distinct senses. Or sometimes the learning process may enable only some speakers to grasp the sense of a word, while others do not have the sensory or intellectual capacity to do this. Thus, suppose that many of us know nothing about wines. An expert then invites us to taste some wines, which, he tells us, are 'full-bodied', an expression that, let us suppose, has not been used before; and he invites us to taste other wines, which, he tells us, are not 'full-bodied'. If, as a result of this process, only some of us come to agree in our subsequent judgements about which wines are 'full-bodied', then 'full-bodied' has still been given a sense in the language, while those who cannot recognize 'full-bodiedness' will acknowledge that they have palates too poor to recognize full-bodiedness. Further, it may sometimes happen that, when the learning process leads some people to use a word in a way sharply different from others and to assert propositions that use it, those others insist that those propositions have no conceivable meaning. Disputes about which sentences entail which other sentences, which I will consider shortly, are consequences of different understandings of the senses of words. And in some of these cases it may be, as disputants claim, that