

Swinburne on providence

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Abstract: My review of Swinburne's elaborate and ingenious higher-good type theodicy will begin with an examination of his argument for why the theist needs a theodicy in the first place. After a preliminary sketch of his theodicy and its crucial free-will plank, its rational-choice theoretic arguments will be critically scrutinized.

Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Pp. xiii + 263. £35.50 Hbk. £14.99 Pbk.

Why a theodicy?

The problem that Swinburne addresses in this book is why a providential God, one who provides for the wellbeing of his creatures, would allow the existence of the known evils of the world, given that He is essentially omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. Many theists deny that it is incumbent upon them to answer this question, because they think either that they already know that God exists and/or that there is too big an epistemological gap between God and man for us to be able to access God's morally exonerating reasons for permitting these evils. Swinburne concedes that the former are excused from having to give a theodicy when he says that 'We may, however, have a contrary reason for not going along with this argument [from horrendous evils] as far as to reach the conclusion that there is no God. This contrary reason may ... consist of other reasons for affirming that there is a God' (23). 'In order rationally to believe that there is a God, despite this counter-evidence [based on evil], we need either strong positive evidence for the existence of God, or ...' (29).

Swinburne, however, rejects the claim of an unsurpassable epistemological gap between God and man that has been made by Alston, Plantinga, van Inwagen and Wykstra, because it has the unwanted consequence that we should not be in a better position to determine that the goods of the world attest to God's existence rather than being necessary for the realization of an outweighing evil by some malevolent deity. The sort of empirical approach to the divine that Swinburne pursued in *The Existence of God* would thereby be undermined.¹

Swinburne's argument for why a theodicy is needed begins with the observation that it will seem to any morally sensitive person that the numerous horrific evils, in lieu of any exonerating explanation for why God would allow them, count decisively against the existence of God.

If we cannot see all that [the horrendous evils] as a reason for believing that there is no all-good and all-powerful being, when we cannot think of any reason why such a being should allow it all to happen, there really is something deeply wrong with us. We have lost our sensitivity to good. (23)

The next step in his argument applies to these anti-theistic beliefs his beloved Principle of Credulity – 'that, other things being equal, it is probable and so rational to believe that things are as they seem to be', in which 'seem' means 'the way we are initially inclined to believe', regardless of the subject matter of the belief (20). From these two premises it follows that 'if it seems to someone that there is some bad state incompatible with the existence of God, he ought so to believe, and so believe that there is no God – in the absence of counter-reasons', (22). And thus the need for a theodicy that will supply the needed counter-reasons.

The epistemological-gap theologian, while granting that the Principle of Credulity rightfully applies to perceptual and memory beliefs, for the reasons given by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*,² can deny that it is applicable to beliefs about highly theoretical and abstruse subject matters, especially when there is widespread disagreement and no agreed upon decision procedure for resolving disagreements, which certainly is the case with metaphysical and theological beliefs. These factors constitute defeaters or overrides of the belief. For example, *pace* what Swinburne says on 20 and 22, the Principle does not seem applicable to existential beliefs based upon apparent direct nonsensory perceptions of God, due to widespread disagreement about what such experiences reveal and the lack of agreed-upon checks and tests for determining when they are veridical.

The epistemological-gap theologians could claim that Swinburne's application of the Principle to atheistic beliefs based on experiences of horrendous evils, begs the question against them, because it assumes that we can access God's reasons for allowing these evils. For them, but not for Swinburne, the Principle's 'all things being equal' *ceteris paribus* condition is not satisfied.

There is an apparent inconsistency in this book. On the one hand, Swinburne argues that the theist needs to construct a theodicy, unless she already has in hand a good argument for the existence of God, but, on the other hand, as will be seen, he constructs a theodicy that assumes we already have an argument for the existence, when it accepts as fact the Christian revelation that God provides for an afterlife in which people receive compensations for worldly sufferings (24). It seems that the theist both does and does not need a theodicy. There are many ways out of this apparent inconsistency. Although the theist who is armed with a good argument for the existence of God is not *required* to give a theodicy, she nevertheless is *permitted* to do so. And she might wish to do so for pastoral reasons,

out of personal curiosity, or for proselytizing purposes. For Swinburne, it is for the purpose of defeating defeaters to his probabilistic argument for the existence of God (in his *The Existence of God*) based on an agglomeration of all of the premises of the teleological and cosmological arguments, together with what is vouchsafed by religious experiences when the Principle of Credulity is applied to them.

A preliminary sketch of the theodicy

The book has a strong and a weak thesis, with the strong thesis having itself a strong and weak version. The weak thesis is that:

W Long reflection on this [evil] will make it less and less obvious that some significant suffering for the very short period of an earthly life is ruled out [by the existence of an all-powerful, loving God] (xiii).

The book succeeds admirably in supporting *W*, but *W* falls short of a theodicy since it is consistent with there being widespread gratuitous evil. A theodicy requires

S For every evil, God is justified in allowing it.

Throughout the book Swinburne sloshes back and forth between this strong version of *S*,

S_s For every instance of evil, God is justified in allowing it.

and a weak version,

S_w For every kind of evil, God is justified in allowing some instances of it.

The *kind* formulation, *S_w*, is found on 24, 28, 29 and 237 and the *every* formulation, *S_s*, on 14, 15, 17, 29, 217–219, 223, and 237. Like *W*, *S_w* fails to be a theodicy, since it is consistent with there being widespread gratuitous evil. For the most part Swinburne defends *S_s*, but as will be seen in the conclusion section, when the going gets really tough he makes an unannounced retreat to the weaker theses, *S_w* and *W*.

Swinburne gives the following formulation of the necessary and sufficient conditions under which

God may allow a bad state *E* to occur caused by either himself or some other agent:

- (a) God has the right to allow *E* to occur.
- (b) Allowing *E* (or a state as bad or worse) to occur is the only morally permissible way in which God can bring about a logically necessary condition of a good *G*.
- (c) God does everything else logically possible to bring about *G*.
- (d) The expected value of allowing *E*, given (c), is positive (14).

Immediately upon giving these criteria Swinburne makes it clear that they are true of each and every instance of evil or a bad state, which is what S_5 requires: 'The theist claims that all these criteria are satisfied with respect to each bad state which there is in the world.'

A theodicy must show that it is probable that for each evil, E , there is a good, G , that satisfies these criteria. However, the theodicy need not show that G is God's actual reason, the one that in fact motivated Him, only that it is the sort of reason that accords with the divine nature. 'I thus understand by a "theodicy" not an account of God's actual reasons for allowing a bad state to occur, but an account of his possible reasons' (15). This is something of a concession to the epistemological-gap theologian. Swinburne's theodicy falls between a Plantinga-style defence and theodicy. It differs from the latter in that the G it gives for God's countenancing an evil E is not claimed to be God's actual reason, but it differs from the former in that this G is claimed to be actual, not a mere logical possibility, as it is in a Plantinga defence.

Swinburne makes the usual botanization of evils into moral and natural, the former, unlike the latter, being caused either by the ill-intentioned actions of humans or through their negligence. The outweighing goods for these evils consist in the value of having free will and of being of service to others. Although Swinburne gives equal weight to these two values, it turns out that much of the value of being of use itself rests on the value of free will; for the outweighing good, for example, of someone's suffering from a disease is that it affords the opportunity to others to exercise their free will in showing sympathy toward and aiding the sufferer, discovering the cause and prevention of the disease. Given the centrality of free will in Swinburne's overall theodicy, it deserves to be considered separately.

Free will

Swinburne follows the libertarians by defining a free choice as 'choosing whether or not to bring about effects without being subject to causes which determine how [one] will exercise that power' (11, 33, and 127). This definition omits the murky and troublesome libertarian notion of agent-determination, which is needed to deflect the objection that such a free choice is a purely random one and thus one for which the agent is not responsible, in which the agent is some sort of nonempirical self that operates as a first cause, an uncaused causer. Swinburne's omission makes his task of establishing the reality of libertarian free will much easier than it really is; for all that he does is to advance reasons why it cannot be concluded that human choice is subject to deductive nomological explanations. But this does not address the problematic features of libertarian free will, especially its imputing a reasonless choice to the subject who chooses what kind of a character she will acquire. Thus, it is premature for Swinburne to conclude that 'Because of the weight of Christian tradition in its favour, *and the absence of good*

philosophico-scientific arguments to the contrary, I am therefore taking the doctrine that humans have free will for granted' (107, my italics).

Swinburne develops his own view of God's relation to His free creatures through a critical analysis of the writings of Plantinga, R. M. Adams and Hasker on God's middle knowledge, that is, His prior knowledge of what would result from His actualizing different possible free persons. Like Adams, he denies that God has middle knowledge and thereby makes available to Him the morally exonerating excuse of unavoidable ignorance for the moral evil wrought by His created free persons. But, unlike Adams, Swinburne holds that there is a fact of the matter as to what would result if God were to actualize different possible free persons, only God's essential omniscience logically precludes His knowing these facts. His reformation of Pike's argument to show that a contradiction results from the claim that an essentially omniscient being foreknows what someone will freely do seems to commit the same glaring *de re-de dicto* modal fallacy as is found in the argument of Boethius.

God's omniscience is saved by restricting it to what it is consistent for God to know. Just as God's omnipotence requires that He can do whatever it is consistent for Him to do, God's omniscience requires that He knows every true proposition that it is consistent for Him to know. Swinburne seems unaware that this way of restricting God's omniscience creates an especially virulent instance of the paradox of perfection. It is not just that some possible omniscient being who is not perfect because it has nonessential omniscience knows more than God, an absolutely perfect being, knows; but that, if Maximus, who is cited by Swinburne, is right, some actual nonperfect being's knowledge exceeds God's. For Maximus tells us that 'The Blessed are – not by nature, but by God's grace – omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good' (251). Maybe Swinburne would have done better by following Adams in denying that the law of bivalence applies to free will subjunctive conditional propositions, as well as categorical propositions that predict a free action, though there still are problems with this position, such as I pointed out in my book, *On the Nature and Existence of God*.³

There are many technical difficulties in Swinburne's account of God's relation to His free creatures, but, since they do not strike at the heart of his free-will theodicy, they will not be pursued. Of more moment is that there much more moral evil than is needed for the purpose of realizing the good of there being free persons. God could have had it both ways by creating free persons, but at the same time assuring that for the most part they freely go right, by making their free choices subject to statistical laws that result in them having a 0.9999 probability of going right. In spite of the very high statistical probability that they will choose rightly, they still do so freely, for Swinburne, since they are not determined to choose as they do.

Swinburne's response would be that by loading the dice in this manner God renders their free will of little value. 'Fairly clearly to do good out of very serious

free will [free will with respect to right and wrong actions] despite strong contrary temptation is the best exercise of choice' (87). He even goes so far as to claim that 'To have a free choice between a greater and a lesser good, they need a desire for the lesser good stronger than that for the greater good' (134), although on the next page he backs away from this implausibly strong claim when he writes that 'I cannot exercise a serious free choice to give money to the starving unless I have *some desire* to possess money when it would be good to give it away' (135, my italics; see also 159). Since God must supply us with reasonably strong temptation if we are to have free will at all, or at any rate truly valuable free will, He cannot determine that for the most part people freely choose what is right. 'God cannot give us certain kinds of free will (certain temptations to choose between certain kinds of important actions) and at the same time ensure that there is only such-and-such probability that we will do such-and-such bad or wrong actions' (137). Many will not share Swinburne's intuition about the great value of being tempted.

There is a worry that Swinburne's great emphasis on the need for God to place great temptations in our way clashes with criterion (c) in Swinburne's theodicy, which requires that 'God does everything logically possible to bring about *G*'. Assume that God determines that Joan is in a situation in which she is free to lie or tell the truth. There is a good, *G*, in addition to the fact that Joan exercises her free will in this situation, consisting in her freely telling the truth. Condition (c) requires that God does everything logically possible to bring about *G*. But, far from doing this, it appears as if God makes it very difficult for Joan to tell the truth, because He tempts her by inculcating in her a strong desire to lie. There is a way out of this difficulty. The 'bring about ...' in (c) is nonextensional, for the above reasons, and thus doesn't permit substitutions of coreferring or coreporting expressions in the blank space *salva veritate*. The *G* that God wants to bring about is that Joan freely tells the truth when strongly tempted not to. Even though Joan's freely telling the truth in that situation is identical with Joan's freely telling the truth in that situation while strongly tempted not to, it does not follow that God wants to bring it about that Joan freely tells the truth in that situation.

Before concluding this section on free will, it is worth pointing out a certain paradox in Swinburne's free-will theodicy. On the one hand, Swinburne gives paramount value to our having his dramatic sort of free will, but, on the other hand, he recognizes that if we properly use our free will we will develop the sort of rock-solid character that will eliminate our dramatic free will (91). It seems paradoxical that we should act so as to eliminate what is most valuable to us. Furthermore, there are those of a Sartrean persuasion who will claim that the one thing we are not free to do is to give up our freedom.

Rational choice theory

What is distinctive about Swinburne's theodicy is its employment of rational choice theory in its condition (d), which requires that 'the expected value of allowing E , given (c), is positive'. There are two cases to consider. In the case of a natural evil, God determines that it occur, but with a moral evil God only allows it to occur, though He does determine that something evil occurs, namely that the free chooser has a strong desire to do something bad or wrong, which is itself bad. To say that the expected value (or gain) of God's determining and/or allowing E (in which E can be a conjunction of evils) is positive means that the sum of the expected utilities of the different possible outcomes of determining and/or allowing E is greater than 0, in which good is given a positive utility assignment and evil a negative one and the expected utility of an outcome is the product of its value and its probability. In cases in which God determines both E and G the expected value or gain of God's doing this will be positive if and only if G is a greater good than E is an evil, the reason being that the probability of G and E is the same, namely 1.

When E is a moral evil, the expected value of God's creating a situation that makes E a real possibility is more difficult, if not impossible, to calculate. To determine the expected value of God's bringing it about that Joan is free to tell the truth while strongly tempted not to, we must determine the expected utilities of each of its possible outcomes and then add them together to get the expected gain or value of God's doing this. To begin with, we must determine the expected utility of Joan's being free in this situation, which will be the product of 1 (the probability) and whatever positive value we assign to it. But we must also factor in the expected utility of her being tempted by her bad desires, which will be the product of 1 and whatever negative value we assign to her having this character flaw. Now comes the most difficult task, that of determining the respective probabilities of E (and bear in mind that E involves not just her lying but all the evil that results from it, such as the suffering it causes to innocents) and G (which will include all the good that results from her telling the truth) relative to God's determining that Joan is free in respect to lying or telling the truth in that situation. Moreover, we must determine the respective utilities of E and G .

It could be objected that condition (d) requires too little of an omnibenevolent God. God's creative act must not only have a positive expected value but a higher expected value than that of any alternative option open to God. Swinburne has a ready rebuttal of this objection based on there be an infinite regress of possible worlds with respect to goodness. The result is that any choice God makes is such that there is an even better one open to Him, and thus He would never choose anything if He were forbidden to chose an option when there is an even better one open to Him. This paralysis of the divine will leads to a contradiction once it is realized that by making no choice at all He in effect chooses to actualize the

acosmic possible world, which is probably the worst choice He could make, given that anything is better than nothing.

Now for some more serious problems with Swinburne's vast exaggeration of the value of choosing freely under severe temptation. Because the free chooser is severely tempted, the probability that she will make the right choice is quite small; and this results in the expected utility of her so choosing being quite small, unless the value of her freely choosing under severe temptation is given an implausibly great value. A consequence of this is that the expected value of God's creating such a severely tempted free person probably has a negative value. The best way for Swinburne to escape this problem is to give up his exaggerated claim about the value of being tempted.

Another, and more serious, problem with Swinburne's use of rational choice theory is that in most cases both the utility and probability of the different possible outcomes are inscrutable, which renders his use of rational choice type reasoning a mere pretence, analogous to his pretentious use of Bayesian probability in his book, *The Existence of God*, when he admitted that the probabilities of God's existence relative to the premises of different theistic arguments are inscrutable. Both cases resemble a game played with dice that have no spots on them.

The most serious of all problems, however, is that there are many cases in which it is intuitively obvious, based on what we actually know about *this* world, that the expected value or gain of God's determining that there exists a particular free person or natural evil is on the negative side of the ledger, however inscrutable its precise value might be.

By far the most serious challenge to Swinburne's theodicy is posed by the countless persons and animals whose worldly lives are a living hell. Swinburne's first step in attempting to neutralize this challenge is to argue that their lives nevertheless have value because they are of service to others. Even if this value were sufficiently great that the expected value of God's allowing or even causing their unrelieved misery is positive, it would not go far enough, since an all-powerful benevolent God must see to it that everyone's life on the whole is a good one. Swinburne, like Hick, must avail himself of the Christian revelation that there is an afterlife in which due compensation is given to these unfortunates. Both of these efforts are seriously flawed.

The service-to-others theodicy is a skein of unintended parodies on a theodicy of the 'if it wasn't for...' variety. When I first moved to Pittsburgh in 1964 there were only two Oriental restaurants in town, and they featured dishes like chop suey and chow mein, and, for the more adventuresome, *moo-goo-gai-pan*. Today Pittsburgh is loaded with excellent, inexpensive Oriental restaurants. The other day, while I was enjoying my \$3.50 chicken *sate*, it suddenly occurred to me that if it weren't for the perverse foreign policy of the USA in south-east Asia during the '60s and '70s, there wouldn't be all these excellent, inexpensive restaurants in Pittsburgh today. The following are a number of Swinburne's unintended parodies

on a par with this and ‘If it weren’t for the fact that he burned down his house in a drunken stupor, killing his wife and five children, he never would have realized how much he loved them and have given up drink’.

‘It would have been our misfortune if there had been no starving’ (101). ‘It is good for the fawn caught in the thicket in the forest fire that his suffering provides knowledge for the deer and other animals who see it to avoid the fire and deter their other offspring from being caught in it’ (103). ‘All the ways in which the suffering of *A* is beneficial for *B* are also beneficial for *A* – because *A* is privileged to be of use’ (241). ‘Blessed be God for putting us in a world of decay, where so many of our temptations are temptations to idleness’ (158). (This should be contrasted with what Hume says about our designer creating us with a slothful nature.) It is good that God created unfortunates, since ‘he has made it possible for us to be generous’ (149). ‘The sufferings and deaths in the concentration camps... made possible serious heroic choices for people normally... too timid to make them.... And they make possible reactions of courage (e.g. by the victims), of compassion, sympathy, penitence, forgiveness, reform, avoidance of repetition, etc., by others’ (151). (If it weren’t for the fact that Hans gassed 10,000 Jews, he never would have realized what a wicked thing to do this was.) Among the most blatant of Swinburne’s unintended parodies is his justification of God’s allowing the possibility of slavery occurring because it

...made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of this culture; for slavers to choose to enslave or not; for plantation-owners to choose to buy slaves or not.... There is also the great good for those who themselves suffered as slaves that their lives were not useless, their vulnerability to suffering made possible many free choices. (245)

Furthermore, in order ‘to rescue the hard-hearted before they become incorrigibly hard-hearted’, God had to present them with very extreme cases of unjust suffering, such as is found in slavery and the Holocaust (245). And, for good measure, if it weren’t for the fact that death is inevitable, there would be no limit on the amount of suffering one person could impose on another (213). Swinburne certainly offers us a very generous array of \$3.50 chicken *sate* dinners.

Some of the unintended parodies are based on a Prometheanism run amok. ‘The redness of nature “in tooth and claw” is the red badge of courage’ (173). It is good that God gave us ‘the very deep responsibility for how long others live ... It is a mark of supreme trust to allow someone to have a gun. If God made this world, he made a world with many guns’ (150). You know that something has gone wrong with a theodicy when it reads like a National Rifle Association bumper sticker. Richard Swinburne has earned himself the distinction of being the Charlton Heston of philosophy.

Swinburne would respond that the force of my objections to his higher-good theodicy is based on an uncritical analogical argument in which it is inferred that

it is wrong for God to do that which it is wrong for a man to do. Because a man would not be morally permitted to cause or allow the preceding evils, it does not follow that God is. But even after I concede Swinburne this point, I still find his theodicy no more plausible than the ‘if it weren’t for ...’ parodies. Our Jamesian ‘sentiments of rationality’ differ in this matter.

But Swinburne does not need to resort to these unintended ‘if it weren’t for ...’ parodies, since he still has his compensation-in-an-afterlife ace in the hole. He makes this explicit when he writes that his ‘theodicy will assume that God has done and will do for us the things which Christian revelation claims, e.g. that he will provide a life after death’ (24). See also 15, 219, 236–239, 246 and 248. (The oddity of a theodicy appealing to the existence of God has already been discussed.) For the argumentative support for this he refers the reader to his book, *Revelation*.⁴ Readers may be upset by the lack of self-containment in this book, feeling that they have been sold a jigsaw puzzle missing key pieces. Swinburne’s argument in *Revelation* involves, first, showing that it is probable that God exists, and, second, that if God exists it is probable that this Christian biblical revelation is true.

I have already published my objections to Swinburne’s argument for the existence of God in my essay, ‘Swinburne’s argument from religious experience’,⁵ and will not repeat them here, especially since they have yet to be responded to. As for Swinburne’s argument for it being probable that the Christian revelation about an afterlife is true if God exists, I refer the reader to Alvin Plantinga’s powerful objections to it in his forthcoming *Warranted Christian Belief*.⁶ He shows that the argument, in addition to involving inscrutable probabilities, is subject to the Principle of Dwindling Probabilities because it involves a chain of propositions, each of which derives its probability relative to the immediately preceding proposition.

A more serious problem with Swinburne’s afterlife-compensation theodicy is that it requires too little of an all-good God. Swinburne’s claims that ‘God has the right to allow a bad state to occur to an individual if the life which he gives to that individual is on balance a good one’ (238) and that God has a ‘right to allow humans (and animals) to suffer ... so long as the package of life is overall a good one for each of us’ (235) sets the bar too low, since God could meet this obligation and still cause unjustified evils – evils which would not satisfy Swinburne’s conditions (a)–(d) for a theodicy.

Conclusion

Swinburne, in spite of the brilliance and ingenuity of his effort, has failed to construct an adequate theodicy, that is to establish:

S_s For every instance of evil, God is justified in allowing it.

He has, however, admirably succeeded in establishing the weaker theses:

W Long reflection on this [evil] will make it less and less obvious that some significant suffering for the very short period of an earthly life is ruled out [by the existence of an all-powerful, loving God] (xiii); and

S_w For every kind of evil, God is justified in allowing some instances of it.

Throughout the book the tension builds as one wonders what would result if rational choice theory actually were applied to real-life evils. It is in the final chapter, 'Weighing good against evil', that he finally attempts to do just this by presenting a number of thought experiments that are supposed show that most of us:

- (i) 'value simply existing as conscious beings, whatever (within limits) life throws at us' (240);
- (ii) do not commit suicide because we believe that 'the good outweighs the bad' (241); and
- (iii) under certain circumstances, prefer a life with some suffering in it, especially when it can benefit others, to one devoid of suffering.

Unfortunately these thought experiments, even when agglomerated, support only the weak theses W and S_w .

Although Swinburne has failed to construct a theodicy, he has, in my opinion, succeeded in accomplishing something far more important. He has presented us with a series of profound and inspiring homilies about how we should live our life and, in particular, attempt to defeat evil. Viewed as such, Swinburne has written a great book, one that displays in abundance a quality that, surprisingly, is rarely found in books on philosophy – wisdom.

Notes

1. Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* rev. edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).
3. Richard M. Gale *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
4. Richard Swinburne *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
5. Richard M. Gale 'Swinburne's argument from religious experience', in Alan G. Padgett (ed.) *Reason and the Christian Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
6. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).