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# WHAT SWINBURNE SHOULD HAVE CONCLUDED

In *The Existence of God* (1979), Richard Swinburne gave formal expression to his utilization of the cumulative case argument and his application of the probability calculus to the theistic arguments. It is generally agreed, I believe, that this work is meticulous in detail and rigorously argued; it is also, I believe, generally agreed that the conclusion is disappointingly bland – particularly in light of the high-powered apparatus brought to bear on the question of God's existence. It is my intent to show that, perhaps, those disappointed by Swinburne's conclusion were justified in so feeling and that a stronger conclusion follows directly from Swinburne's own arguments and methodologies. Let me state at the outset, however, that this paper is not intended to be either an endorsement or a rejection of cumulative case arguments in general or of the employment of the probability calculus in such applications as the question of God's existence. Rather, I merely seek to assess Swinburne's conclusions on the grounds he lays out in *The Existence of God*.

It is at the beginning of chapter 14 that Swinburne gives a brief summary of the findings of his study: there were six good C-inductive arguments, the argument from morality was disregarded, and the problem of evil does 'not count against the existence of God' (277). Nevertheless, on page 290, Swinburne concludes that, apart from the evidence of religious experience, the probability of theism is 'none too close to 1 or 0' (290–1). However, Swinburne goes on to assert that the evidence of religious experience, by way of the principle of credulity, makes the case because the testimony of religious experience overall is to be believed unless 'the probability of theism on other evidence is very low indeed' (291). Consequently, since the probability of theism, apart from religious experience, is not 'very low indeed', all the evidences together render a P-inductive argument for God's existence.

Now, as I noted at the outset, it seems to me the theist ought to be ambivalent, at best, about this conclusion. On the one hand, she will be happy that Swinburne has concluded that, in light of all the evidence, it is more likely than not that God exists. On the other hand, she will be struck by what seems a rather anticlimactic conclusion to a very well argued book. In fact, the claim that the probability of theism, in the absence of religious experience, is not particularly close either to 0 or 1 seems disconsonant with Swinburne's evaluation of the various arguments. Swinburne argues that

theism is a very simple hypothesis, which gives it a very high probability *vis-à-vis* its rivals; he argues with regard to many evidences that either God is the explanation or the evidence is itself simply a brute fact; and he adds a persuasive argument from human consciousness to the classical arguments. Yet, it seems that Swinburne holds theism, *sans* religious experience, no more likely than not (or if so, not much). Is he consistently applying his own principles? As Swinburne has laid out the case, it seems theism would be ruled highly probable on the basis of its simplicity alone. To the question of why there is a cosmos, the atheist must respond that it is simply a brute fact; to why there is order, that it is a brute fact; to why there is human consciousness, well that is a brute fact, too; etc. etc. The theist answers all of these questions with single response: because God made it so. And thus, as Swinburne points out, explanation ends where we have come to expect it to end: with the activity of a free agent. It is hard, then, in light of these facts to understand Swinburne's bland conclusion. Nevertheless, the theist may be mistaken in her intuitions; perhaps Swinburne is simply trying to draw his conclusions cautiously. There is, however, a more serious problem: a much stronger conclusion than Swinburne's follows directly from his approach.

Consider Bayes's Theorem, the theorem of the probability calculus that Swinburne employs, which says that the probability of a hypothesis $h$ in view of some evidence $e$ and some background data $k$ is equal to the predictive power of $h$ as regards $e$ times the intrinsic probability of $h$, or symbolically:

$$P(h/e.k) = \frac{P(e/h.k)}{P(e/k)} \times P(h/k).$$

For the moment, let us assume that $e$ is as likely to occur with or without $h$, i.e. $P(e/h.k)/P(e/k) = 1$. This simplifies the equation considerably for in this diminished case, the probability of $h$ on $e$ and $k$ is simply equal to the prior probability of $h$. Now, it is 100% certain that either God exists or he does not:

$$P(h/k) + P(\sim h/k) = 1,$$

i.e. the probability that God exists given $k$ plus the probability that he does not given $k$ equals 1. Let us say, then, that:

$$P(\sim h/k) = P(\text{rivals to theism}),$$

i.e. let us say that the probability that God does not exist is equal to the probability that rivals to theism are true. At the end of chapter five, Swinburne tells us that '[t]he intrinsic probability of theism is, *relative to other hypotheses* about what there is, very high' (106). Symbolically this means that:

$$P(h/k) > P(\text{rivals to theism}),$$

or reversing our substitution:

$$P(h/k) > P(\sim h/k).$$

However, if

$$P(h/k) > P(\sim h/k)$$

and if

$$P(h/k) + P(\sim h/k) = 1,$$

then

$$P(h/k) > \tfrac{1}{2}.$$

So, it seems to follow from Swinburne's position that the intrinsic probability of theism is greater than $\tfrac{1}{2}$.

We must now return to our simplifying move above, namely assuming that:

$$P(e/h.k)/P(e/k) = 1,$$

for surely this is unreasonable. One would hardly claim that some $h$ had explanatory power with regard to some $e$ if $e$ were as likely to occur whether or not $h$ were true. Further, in each of the individual arguments referred to as C-inductive, Swinburne concludes that $P(e/h.k) > P(e/k)$ (otherwise, of course, it would be absurd to claim $e$ was confirming of $h$. In fact, on occasion Swinburne claims that $P(e/h.k) \gg P(e/k)$). But, if for all the arguments:

$$P(e/h.k) > P(e/k),$$

then

$$P(e/h.k)/P(e/k) > 1,$$

and therefore for all the arguments:

$$P(h/e.k) = (> 1) \times (\tfrac{1}{2}) > \tfrac{1}{2}.$$

In other words, every individual argument is itself a good P-inductive argument. Therefore, it seems that Swinburne is entitled to a stronger conclusion than he claims.

There are a couple of different lines of objection that one might raise to this analysis, and both have to do with the question of the intrinsic probability of theism. First, one might argue that I have unfairly collapsed a number of theories into what I called 'the rivals to theism.' Perhaps, the objector says, there are 49 different rival theories to theism. If all were equally likely, each (including theism) would have a probability of 1 in 50 or 0.02. Even if theism were more likely than its rivals, the objector continues, it might come nowhere near $\tfrac{1}{2}$. It seems from Swinburne's own language

('many other hypotheses j about what there is', 106) that he might have had this concern in mind. However, I think the objection is flawed.[1] There really are not multiple ultimate theories of explanation about what there is; there really are only two: either what exists[2] is an ultimate brute fact or God is the ultimate brute fact. In fact, Swinburne comes close to claiming this explicitly himself in several places. In his discussion of the teleological argument, he writes that 'either the orderliness of the universe is where all explanation stops, or we must postulate an agent of great power and knowledge' who brings about this order (140–1). Also, in the concluding chapter, Swinburne asserts that '[t]he only plausible alternative to theism is the supposition that the world with all the characteristics which I have described just is' (287). While it would be worth considering the possibility of alternative hypotheses with regard to each of Swinburne's evidences, in many cases it seems there are only two alternatives – theism or brute fact. To the extent this is the case, the preceding analysis applies. However, the objector may say that, even if there are only two theories, she finds the latter more probable than the former, and thus, the probability of theism is not more than $\frac{1}{2}$. The question, then, turns on the issue of simplicity.

Since my contention is simply that, using Swinburne's own concepts and arguments, a much stronger conclusion follows than the one he advances, we could conclude here by reiterating that Swinburne's position on the simplicity of theism is that it 'postulates the simplest kind of being there could be' (94). However, let us, for the sake of argument, grant that theism is no more likely than the alternative, i.e. let us assume that both $h$ and $\sim h$ have probabilities of $\frac{1}{2}$ (surely, however, we do not have to assume $h < \frac{1}{2}$ in light of the simplicity of theism *vis-à-vis* any other conception). Even in this case, every $e$ proposed by Swinburne would have to be no more likely on $h$ than not, since any time $e$ makes $h$ more probable $P(e/h.k)/P(e/k)$ will be greater than 1 and, once again, theism will have a probability of greater than $\frac{1}{2}$, and thus be more probable than not. It is precisely at this point that I find the cumulative case argument most effective, for according to $\sim h$ many of the aspects of existence Swinburne outlines is a separate brute fact (order, material, consciousness, etc.). However, for $h$ these all have the Utterly Simple, Uncaused One as their cause. Both $h$ and $\sim h$ attempt to account for the same phenomena, but, for the reasons Swinburne outlines (particularly

[1] Swinburne notes that '[p]erhaps it seems odd a priori vastly improbable … that there should exist anything at all logically contingent' (106). Maybe this is true, but this is not the question in which we are interested, for in all our probability considerations we have something given, which is represented in the various equations by $k$ – the background information.

[2] 'Exists' is meant here in a very broad sense. Perhaps what exists is order or consciousness or material stuff or so on. I do not want to import the cosmological argument into the debate at this point. However, all of our probability considerations assume that something ($k$ – the background information) exists. What exists might be as little as the consciousness of the inquiring individual or it might be the entire cosmos in the case of considering the presence of laws of order in the given cosmos. In other words, $k$ varies from argument to argument, but it does not vanish, for to even ask the question of the probability of something is to assume the one inquiring is given.

in chapters 5–9), $h$ is a vastly more simple theory; and is, thus, the one to be accepted. Consequently, Bayesian rationality seems to require that theism is to be affirmed until analysis presents a more probable hypothesis.

This analysis, if correct, shows that, on the grounds established by Swinburne, several of the arguments examined are, in fact, good P-inductive arguments for God's existence in and of themselves. Consequently, it follows that Swinburne is entitled to conclude that the arguments he examines cumulatively provide a very strong P-inductive argument (the sum of several individual P-inductive arguments) rather than that they provide a marginal P-inductive argument (several C-inductive arguments made P-inductive by subjective assessment of the evidence of religious experience). As noted at the outset, the question of whether or not it is reasonable to use the formal probability calculus with regard to the issue of God's existence is not the subject of this paper. To the extent such utilization is appropriate, however, this paper shows that Swinburne's conclusion in *The Existence of God* is far too weak.

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