

# The Coherence of Theism

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Richard Swinburne's new book<sup>1</sup> "is concerned solely with the central core of theistic belief, that God 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 what it means and whether it is coherent." (p. 1) The discussion begins with a general analysis (Chapters 4-6) of the way in which talk of God is to be understood, whether it is analogical, propositional and so forth. There then follows (Chapters 7-15) a consideration of what Swinburne takes to be involved in the claim that there is a God. Swinburne concludes that theism may be coherent, but that a certain understanding of divine attributes is necessary to sustain this conclusion. In particular, God's eternity cannot be equated with timelessness, and both 'omnipotent' and 'omniscient' need to be understood in more narrow a fashion than is sometimes the case. Swinburne also maintains that the coherence of theism may only be properly affirmed where there is good, inductive evidence for the truth of theism. There is no direct proof of coherence. Consequently, "those theists who claim to believe that there is a God 'by faith', in a sense of the latter expression which entails that they do not have good inductive grounds for this belief, will, if I am right, have to face the consequence that they do not have good grounds for believing that the claim which they make is a coherent or logically possible one." (p. 296)

So much for the overall argument of the book. What about the cogency of its details? It seems to me that Swinburne's whole discussion is spoiled by a fundamental error of approach, a pervasive wrong move. On this I shall comment presently. To begin with, however, I want to indicate what seem to me particular mistakes which can be argued to be such within Swinburne's own terms of reference. The more general point I want to make about Swinburne may seem clearer if we have first, so to speak, seen him at work in the field.

## II

Let us start, then, with the topic of coherence. Swinburne writes that "A coherent statement is . . . one which it makes sense to suppose is true; one such that we can understand what it would

be like for it and any statement entailed by it to be true.” (p. 12) This passage seems to suggest an unfortunate confusing of ‘coherent’ with ‘understandable’, and it invites development.

Certainly, if it makes sense to suppose that S is true, S is coherent. And, if we can conceive of S’s truth, or if we can conceive of the truth of a statement entailed by S, then S is coherent. But S is also a coherent statement if it says that something which could be so is so, i.e. if S is possibly true. And surely S can be true even if we cannot conceive of it being so. It is not possible that S be coherent if S is inconceivable in the sense of being demonstrably self-contradictory. But it is surely possible to have true statements about things which we cannot understand (Martians, for example), statements and their entailments which we cannot therefore conceive of as true. I do not see that Swinburne has ruled out this possibility, and, as far as theology is concerned, the possibility is important. Many theological statements are such that it is hard to know how anyone can understand what it would be like for them to be true.

Swinburne might reply that, if theological statements are really coherent, they should satisfy his criteria for coherence. And he evidently seems to regard this demand as appropriate to the relation between language and understanding in religion. Thus, on p. 57, he regards it as an argument against some form of religious experience being necessary to give meaning to the terms of theological language that, if such were the case, “many who call themselves religious believers do not fully understand that language.” He adds that “those who do claim to have peculiarly religious experiences would not, I think, in general wish to say of other religious believers that they do not understand theological language.”

It is dangerous, however, to equate ‘understand’ and ‘fully understand’. And it is more likely than not (as Swinburne himself seems to allow on pp. 295-297) that religious believers would wish to say both that they understand what they say, and that they do not. By this remark, they would mean that what they say is true, but that it is often either incapable of expressing what is really the case, or else is just hard to understand.

In reply to this point, it can always be maintained that there must be some minimal understanding involved in assenting to theological statements; that theological statements must surely mean something. I agree; but it still remains possible that many theological statements say more than we can understand, and that the truth of what is being said by them is, therefore, not graspable by the understanding of those who repeat them. It is significant that Swinburne acknowledges in his closing words (p. 297) that “Maybe some truths about God are ones which involve concepts which only a personal ground of being can grasp.” Unless I have

missed something, this observation seems to stand in tension with Swinburne's original framing of the concept of coherence. For it seems to allow that a proposition may be coherent, but not be such that any created person can understand what it would be like for it or any statement entailed by it to be true.

But is it, in any case, true that Swinburne has managed to offer successful arguments for coherence based on his understanding of the concept of coherence? Here I am also sceptical of Swinburne's approach. In order to defend the coherence of certain suppositions, Swinburne sometimes asks the reader to imagine what Swinburne takes to be intelligible situations. He is, I think, perfectly justified in employing such a method in arguing for the coherence of propositions. We often argue for coherence in this way. ('How could the witch trap Hansel and Gretel?' – Well, think of Granny . . .'). But I doubt whether Swinburne's arguments for coherence always work.

Consider his discussion of the supposition that there is an omnipresent spirit. Here he asks us to imagine that "You gradually find yourself aware of what is going on in bodies other than your own and other material objects at any place in space . . . You also come to see things from any point of view which you choose, possibly simultaneously, possibly not. You remain able to talk and wave your hands about, but find yourself able to move directly anything which you choose . . . You also find yourself able to utter words which can be heard everywhere, without moving material objects." (p. 105)

What on earth is Swinburne talking about? I may be able to use expressions like 'All the so and so's that there are', or 'Every such and such'; but to conceive of myself knowing the operations of all material bodies means being able to *imagine* all material bodies. And to imagine my voice being heard anywhere means being able to imagine *everywhere*. I do not see how anybody can do either, and cannot believe that we can even begin to conceive of the viewpoint of someone who could. Nor do I see how Swinburne can begin to convince us that he can conceive such things. We would not know what possibility he was trying to get us to see, and hence would not know when he has succeeded in getting us to see it. He might say that he could see the possibility by some privileged experience. But this reply would involve appealing to the type of experience of which he says that it is "not a sufficiently public and objective phenomenon . . . to be a means of giving meaning to words." (p. 56)

### III

A further difficulty with Swinburne's discussion brings us to the topic of God's freedom. In developing his account, Swinburne maintains that since God is perfectly free, "he will never do an

action if he judges that overall it would be worse to do the action than to refrain from it; he will never do an action if he acknowledges over-riding reasons for refraining from doing it. Similarly, he will always do an action if he acknowledges over-riding reasons for doing it, if he judges that doing it would be overall better than refraining from doing it.” (p. 148) Later in the book, this view is supplemented with reference to the notion of God’s omniscience: “An omniscient person who is also perfectly free will necessarily do right actions and avoid wrong ones – since, we saw in Chapter 8, being perfectly free, he will necessarily do those actions which he believes right and avoid those which he believes wrong, and, we have now seen, being omniscient, he will hold true beliefs in this field.” (p. 202)

With respect to Swinburne, I think that all this argument is just a mistake. My major objection will emerge later; for the moment, however, it can be said that from God’s freedom and omniscience (understood in Swinburne’s sense), what Swinburne says about the reasonableness or rightness of God’s actions simply does not follow.

According to Swinburne, God is perfectly free if no agent, law of nature, state of the world or other causal factor in any way influences his choice to act as he does. Since God’s free actions, like those of any person, are presumably influenced by such facts as the fact that volitions can be effective, such a concept of freedom as is here envisaged looks suspicious. But let that pass. Swinburne reaches the conclusion I am now disputing by arguing that if God chooses to do X, he has an intention, purpose or reason for doing X. To have a reason for doing X is, he continues, to regard the doing of X as good. If God is perfectly free, he concludes, then nothing will prevent him from doing what he sees a reason for doing; and he will not refrain from doing X if there is an over-riding reason for doing X. The difficulty with this conclusion is that it overlooks the possibility that perfectly free agents may be, permanently or from time to time as they choose, malicious or perverse.

I am not denying that, to perform an action, I must see my performance as in some way a good thing. I am happy to agree with Aristotle (suitably translated) and assert that no one makes a mistake intentionally. But being malicious or perverse can be seen as a good thing by a malicious or perverse person. And if persons are malicious and perverse *and* perfectly free (in Swinburne’s sense), then they must be able to act maliciously or perversely if they choose. In that case, a person can accept that, overall, it would be worse to do X than to refrain. But the same person, if perfectly free, can do X in quest of the delight of doing so. A person can accept that doing X would be overall better than refraining. Yet the same person, if perfectly free, can refrain for the

pleasure of doing so. And the fact that a perfectly free person is also omniscient only means that, if it is objectively right that something be done, or that something be refrained from, then in not doing what is right, or in not refraining from something wrong, the perfectly free agent enjoys the privilege of knowing what is going on.

It seems then that, in terms of Swinburne's argument, all that follows from 'God is perfectly free and omniscient' is that God can do what he chooses, and that he will always know what his choices involve or entail. In that case, however, Swinburne's argument is faulty as it stands. It needs the support of arguments to the effect that God cannot be malicious or perverse, that he will always choose actions that are, irrespective of his likes, dislikes, whims and caprices, in some sense objectively right, reasonable and intelligent.

#### IV

Before passing on to more interesting matters, I want to make a final criticism of some detail in Swinburne's argument. This criticism concerns Swinburne's account of divine omniscience. My submission is that this account is internally inconsistent. It ascribes to God knowledge which, on its own admission, God cannot have.

In Chapter 10, Swinburne concludes that God cannot be both omniscient and perfectly free. This conclusion leads him to a 'modified' account of omniscience:

A person P is omniscient at a time t if and only if he knows of every true proposition about t or an earlier time that it is true *and* also he knows of every true proposition about a time later than t, such that what it reports is physically necessitated by some cause at t or earlier, that it is true." (p. 175)

Thus, God may be hard put to know the future free choices of men, if there are any choices, and he certainly cannot know what his choices will be, because they are the choices of a perfectly free agent (Cf. pp. 171-172). Yet God may be said to know now all that is now future and causally determined by the present.

The question to ask Swinburne at this point can be formulated thus: How can God know what is now future and determined by physical laws? The fact is that Swinburne cannot attribute to God knowledge of future events necessitated by physical laws. He denies that God can know what the perfectly free choices of an agent will be. He also accepts that I can only be said to know that – P if it is true that – P (p. 169). From this last admission, it follows that God can only know what is future and physically necessitated by present and past causes if he can know that in the future

there will be a continued operation of physical laws. But according to Swinburne, God is perfectly free; and it is his free choice to create or sustain that ultimately accounts for any state of the universe at any given time. Thus, he explains (p. 141) "That the particular laws of nature operate is presumably the result of a basic action of God" Yet, in terms of Swinburne's own account of God's knowledge, God cannot know his future free choices, from which it would seem to follow that he cannot know whether causal laws which depend on them will continue to operate. In fact, Swinburne's account of God's knowledge seems to entail that God can be constantly taken by surprise, that he can know nothing about the future at all, or, at least, that he can know nothing about the future of any material being.

## V

So far, I have criticised several stages in Swinburne's argument. And, in doing so, I have accepted Swinburne's frame of reference. At this point I want to broaden the discussion. For it seems to me that there is a general criticism of Swinburne's approach that needs to be made. This criticism is concerned with Swinburne's concept of God. Even if we accept the various arguments offered by Swinburne in defence of the coherence of theism, we clearly need to ask whether the sort of thing which Swinburne is defending is actually worth defending in the first place.

One can see the problem arising on p. 1. Here, Swinburne defines God as "something like a 'person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe'." It is clear, both from this definition and from the ensuing discussion, that Swinburne regards God as some kind of entity, some kind of thing. In fact, according to Swinburne, God is a person. Consequently, as we have seen, Swinburne finds it appropriate to talk about God performing actions, coming to know things, judging, being reasonable and so forth.

It would clearly be wrong for the theist to foreswear such talk altogether. As far as human beings are concerned, reality breaks down into entities, things or objects. We are only able to talk of something as real insofar as we can distinguish it from other objects. And, insofar as the theist affirms the reality of God, he is inevitably led into talking of God as object. Given the traditional attributes of God, he is also inevitably led into talking of God as a person. And, if Swinburne were only adverting to this fact, there would be no problem. Clearly, however, he wishes to do more than this. He seems to want to say that we must and can talk of God as if God were really a person, as if God really made judgments, as if he really chose between alternatives and as if he really

did act reasonably. Here is where the difficulty comes in. For it makes no sense to talk of God in this way.

One way of getting to see the point is to consider the doctrine that God is the Creator. What is involved in this doctrine? Whatever else we say about the matter, one thing is surely clear. To call God the Creator is to say that he is the Source of everything that exists. And, if this means anything at all, it has got to mean that God is the Source of every identifiable thing. To speak of a Creator is thus to talk of what is right outside the class of things; it is to talk of *no-thing*. Insofar as we can pick an object out as an item of discourse, it must be true that the object then picked out cannot be identified with God. Insofar as anything created is an object, thing or entity, God is not an object, thing or entity. In this sense, you cannot call God an object; you cannot call God a thing; you cannot call God an entity. He is the *Source* of all objects; the *Source* of all things; the *Source* of all entities. If, then, one wants to call God a person, one has to qualify one's remark: God is not really a person. And if one wants to talk of God as making judgments, as choosing and as acting rationally, the same applies. You and I choose, act rationally and make judgments; God does not *really* make judgments; he does not *really* choose and act, and he is definitely *not* a rational agent. The contrary affirmation cannot be taken seriously. The trouble with Swinburne, however, is that he actually does seem to take it seriously. And he even seems unable to appreciate when others are in disagreement with him. This fact emerges in his discussion of Aquinas in Chapter 5.

According to Swinburne, "Aquinas's official theology is that words are used in theology in the same sense (in our sense of 'in the same sense') as outside it." (p. 79) On Swinburne's account, Aquinas's position on the words applied to God "ultimately boils down to that of Scotus, but in the course of expounding it he has drawn our attention to the vast difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of Socrates, the power of God and the power of Stalin, etc." (p. 79)

I can make no sense of these observations as an interpretation of Aquinas. As is clear from the discussion in *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 3 (*de Dei Simplicitate*), Aquinas is quite clear that God is in no genus (article 5). He insists that there is no potentiality in God (article 6), nothing to undergo change (article 7). Indeed, Aquinas is clear that there is *no-thing* there at all. One cannot, for Aquinas, talk of the vast difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of Socrates. To do so would imply that the wisdom of both God and Socrates was something shared by two members of a class. But, according to Aquinas, Socrates is a man, a thing, while God is the Source of things. For Aquinas, the wisdom of God is God himself. Thus, Aquinas writes that God "is identical with his

own godhead, with his own life and with whatever else is similarly said of him.” (article 3) In 1a, 13, 9, he adds that “We do not know of God what he is. We know him only as transcending all creatures, as the cause of their perfections and as lacking in anything that is merely creaturely, as already noted. It is in this way that the word ‘God’ signifies the divine nature: it is used to mean something that is above all that is, and that is the source of all things and is distinct from them all.” Swinburne says that, on Aquinas’s view, “We learn all words from their application to mundane objects. In theology we then apply them to an extra-mundane object, God.” (p. 74) But God can never be an extra-mundane object in Aquinas’s system. As Aquinas sees it, to be an object is to be composed of form and matter. But, according to Aquinas, God is not composed of form and matter (article 2). We cannot pick him out and distinguish him from other objects. As the Source of things, God, for Aquinas, is just not a thing. *Unde manifestum est quod Deus non est in genere sicut species*, (1a, 3, 5) *Deus non sit primum contentum in genere substantiae sed primum extra omne genus respectu totius esse*. (1a, 3, 6)

Now I do not wish to suggest that Aquinas must provide all the rules for philosophical theology. And I do not want to suggest that his answers to the problems of philosophical theology have also to be ours. But with reference to the present topic he clearly has a point. And its implication is that when we talk about God we are going beyond what we can understand; we are saying more than we can understand. In that case, however, the sort of discussion represented by that of Swinburne seems largely irrelevant. For all his philosophical elegance, Swinburne, in effect, has missed the mark; he has failed to talk about God. If this judgment seems severe, put it in the form of some questions: At the end of the day, where does Swinburne’s discussion leave us? Is it with God? Or is it only with Matthew Arnold’s “infinitely magnified and enlarged Lord Shaftesbury?” As should be clear to the reader by now, the evidence favours the second alternative. And the result is unfortunate, to say the least.

<sup>1</sup> *The Coherence of Theism* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977. pp. 302. £9.00.