

SWINBURNE'S HYPOTHESIS OF THEISM¹

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Abstract. Richard Swinburne has over many years sought to provide rational foundations on which religious belief can rest. Perhaps his most discussed book is 'The Existence of God' (1979; revised 1991). In this he formulates a theistic hypothesis, along with arguments of natural theology, and subjects it to modern probability theory. I argue in the article that the way in which this hypothesis is formed undermines it in relation to the very criteria used by Swinburne.

1. Introduction

The second book of Richard Swinburne's philosophy of religion trilogy is 'The Existence of God' (1979) in which he deals with the theistic arguments and their cumulative force. It exemplifies a very formal natural theology using a technical theorem in modern probability theory (Bayes' Theorem) to work out the degree of confirmation given to theistic belief by the theistic arguments taken separately and together. He concludes that only when taken together and in connection with the argument of religious experience do the arguments make it more probable than not that God exists.

In this article I shall concentrate specifically on the hypothesis of theism itself. I argue that the very criteria that Swinburne holds are not fulfilled in relation to the hypothesis. This is because there is an inconsistency, if not contradiction, rooted in the way that the hypothesis comes to be formed. I hold that Swinburne has, at least, two concepts of God within his argument and that the use of one of these concepts to formulate the other as a hypothesis is inconsistent. The reason for this is that the same concept which is used to help formulate the other concept (the hypothesis of theism) actually undermines it.

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2. Background

It is difficult to summarize all of Swinburne's methodology and terminology within so short a space. So I shall only give an illustration of the relevant criteria for my purposes. The hypothesis of theism is a kind of explanation which is distinguished as *personal explanation* (the other kind being scientific explanation). Personal explanation is characterized as explanation in terms of a rational agent doing some action intentionally. So the hypothesis of theism is simply personal explanation in terms of a rational agent, i.e. God. What is being explained are various phenomena such as the fact the universe exists or the fact of consciousness. The hypothesis holds that these phenomena are brought about by God. He is held to be their cause and explanation.

Now this explanation or hypothesis has to be justified in relation to various criteria. Swinburne holds that when a hypothesis has high *prior probability* and great *explanatory power* then we have grounds for believing it. Prior probability is a theory's probability before the evidence of observation is considered. Prior probability itself rests on three principles – *simplicity, fit with background knowledge, and scope*. For large scale theories or explanations, such as the hypothesis of theism, the crucial principle comes down to simplicity. Explanatory power entails or makes probable the occurrence of diverse phenomena which are all observed to occur, and the occurrence of which is not otherwise expected. The crucial principle here comes down also to simplicity. For Swinburne "The simple is the sign of the true'. (Simplex sigillum veri)." (Swinburne 1991:56).

If the hypothesis of theism is to have any consequence then it must be *coherent*. The hypothesis has to be understandable to us and so must be logically and conceptually coherent. This is important because if it is not so then there will be difficulties with its prior probability. (In the case of the hypothesis of theism when considering its prior probability we are also considering its intrinsic probability. This is because the evidence to be observed is *all* empirical data). Difficulties with prior probability will raise difficulties in relation to the principle of simplicity – and hence with the truth of the hypothesis of theism. So coherence is important.

I can now give my argument against Swinburne's hypothesis of theism. My contention is that the hypothesis contains an inconsistency in its formulation involving differing conceptions of God. I hence believe that the hypothesis itself is not coherent. I hold that whilst it may be possible to distinguish between philosophical and religious conceptions of God one cannot involve *both* within a philosophical argument. I believe that Swinburne does just this. If he is to sincerely claim that the hypothesis concept of God represents a true explanation of phenomena then he must also claim *that* God as really existing. But to do so would be to deny, or ignore, the other concept of God which I believe is used to formulate the very hypothesis he puts forward as true.

3. The Hypothesis of Theism

I shall describe two of the three properties or divine attributes that Swinburne holds as essential. They are essential in the sense that all of the other attributes follow from them. These three essential properties (perhaps 'central' would be a less misleading term) are *omnipotence*, *omniscience*, and *perfect freedom*. For my purposes I consider only the first two.

3.1 Omnipotence

God's omnipotence means that He is not limited by the laws of nature as it is He who has made them and can change or suspend them if He so chooses. – "God is omnipotent in that whatever he chooses to do, he succeeds in doing." (Swinburne 1994:129). However, Swinburne introduces an important restriction to the common and normal understanding of God's omnipotence. Taking such propositions as '2+2=5'; 'Make a shape square and round at the same time'; 'God changes the past'; 'God makes something green and red all over'², it is asked whether God can do these things if He is all powerful?

Swinburne says no. But not because God isn't as almighty as we first supposed. These propositions simply do not describe anything sensible, i.e. they are logically impossible.

But, despite appearances, we are not describing a limit to God's power; we are saying that certain sentences – for example, 'God changes the past', – do not make ultimate sense; or that certain thoughts – for example, that God changes the past – contain implicit contradictions. We cannot coherently describe publicly or think privately some action which the rules of logic prevent God from doing – for our sentences and our thoughts which purport to do so prove incoherent and we fail to describe or think anything. (Swinburne 1994:129).

Swinburne is claiming that it is not the case that the laws of logic are more final than God, but simply that any such sentence does not describe anything that could count as an action. It is *our* confusion. God being 'omni-', does not get confused and "sees the consequences of all sentences; and thus sees which do and which do not make ultimate sense." (Swinburne 1994:129). God therefore remains omnipotent even if we restrict our understanding of His omnipotence by the laws of logic. For God it is not a restriction but rather a more accurate understanding of what his omnipotence actually consists in.

² Swinburne wishes to use these example propositions as propositions that it makes no sense to suppose God could fulfill because they describe nothing. The last two example propositions are, I think, already dependent on Swinburne's point of view.

3.2 Omniscience

God's omniscience is his knowing everything. Whatever is true God knows it. God's beliefs are thus all true (and as such constitute knowledge), and God believes everything that is true. Again this is clarified by Swinburne.

Swinburne suggests that we should understand God being omniscient as *God knowing at any time all that is logically possible to know at that time*. Hence God cannot know what someone will do freely tomorrow. This does not mean that God is not *omnipotent*, but that in so far as He doesn't know what someone will do freely tomorrow, it is a consequence of His freely chosen omnipotent act of creating free agents. *The limitation on His omnipotence is thus a chosen one, a consequence God knew of His own choice to create free agents.* – "So there cannot be a necessarily omniscient being existing at the same time as some free agent, if 'omniscient' is construed as 'knowing all true propositions'." (Swinburne 1994:131). According to Swinburne, God's omniscience should be understood, "not as knowledge at each period of time, of all true propositions, but as knowledge of all propositions that it is logically possible for God to know then without the possibility of error." (Swinburne 1994:133).

I marked what I think is the difficulty here. Swinburne is requiring a hypothesis of theism which is logically and conceptually coherent, and so modifies the divine attributes so that they meet this coherence. But the way that this modification is met is by claiming that God *chooses* to place these logical constraints on Himself. So there is another concept of God operating outside the concept that is being formulated as the hypothesis. We have a logically coherent concept of God (the hypothesis) being formed by another concept of God not so logically bound. For can we make sense of this God who chooses to place logical constraints on His nature? From where is He coming from before making these choices? Can He choose to relieve Himself of these logical constraints? Should not this God then be considered the 'really existing' God – not the 'Hypothesis God'?

I shall now look at one final divine attribute which I think brings out well the difficulty here.

4. Eternal

Swinburne argues that God's being eternal can be understood in one of two ways. God can be said to be eternal in the sense of His being *everlasting*. This is to say that He has existed at each moment of past time, exists now, and will exist at each moment of future time. God is in time everlastingly. Swinburne claims that this understanding of eternal can be found in the Biblical writers.

The second sense of God's being eternal is that He is *timeless*, i.e. outside time. This understanding developed from the 4th to 14th centuries. The reason for

this later development was because the view that saw God as everlasting, in time, seemed to make God somehow lesser. As Swinburne puts it: "It seems to imply that time stands outside God, who is caught in its steam. The cosmic clock ticks inexorably away, and God can do nothing about it." (Swinburne 1994:138). It is 'God as time's prisoner.' Later theologians hence took from neo-platonism the view that God is timeless, becoming the normal view with Saint Augustine at the end of the 4th century.

The view that God is timeless amounts to this. "Everything God knows or does is done all-at-once in a moment of time which has no beginning or end. Hence there are no limits to God's knowledge or action. He knows 'at once', in his eternal present, everything; but since that present is not 'before' (i.e. not in the temporal order) the time of any human action he foreknows no human action." (Swinburne 1994:139).

To put it quite briefly, Swinburne sees this view as incoherent because we cannot understand God in His one timeless 'moment' 'simultaneously' causing and knowing the events of both 1998 A.D. and 587 B.C. For these are surely two different times.

What Swinburne argues for then is that in so far as the view of God as everlasting has the consequence that He is time's prisoner, this is because God has *chosen so to do*. So, "although God and time exist together – God is a temporal being – those aspects of time which seem so threatening to his sovereignty *only occur through his own voluntary choice*... It is God, not time who calls the shots." And, "(t)he unwelcome features of time... may indeed invade God's time; but they come by *invitation*, not by force – *and they continue for such periods of time as God chooses that they shall*." (Swinburne 1994:140).

God chooses to be a temporal being, eternally everlasting. But if God chooses so to be then surely this means He is not obliged to? He could have chosen otherwise than to be a temporal being (and we must talk in such a way if Swinburne believes God really exists), otherwise than to be everlasting. And if He so chose to be - where was God before He made the choice? Was God outside time then chose to step in? Or did time not exist at all?

Swinburne takes the everlasting view and adopts it and adapts it to show that God is still quite magnificent and not really a prisoner of time but more of a visitor. But in so doing he does not really refute the possibility that God is timeless for it is implied in His having a choice about the matter. Then why should we insist that God *is* everlasting? For Swinburne it is because "the rival view is incoherent", and we should "adopt the view that God is everlasting." (Swinburne 1994:144).

So the only reason why we should maintain the view that God is everlasting is because *we* cannot understand God as timeless. It would be better to adopt the view that is coherent and simpler. This despite the curious implications of it being God's choice so to do (within the argument), i.e. that God is still understood in such a way as to imply modes of being other than everlastingness.

What Swinburne's presentation should really lead us to say is that God can be both everlasting or timeless depending on His choice. He has the power and ability to be either. Having chosen to be in time He is subject to those conditions of time as long as He 'chooses that they shall.' It is not satisfactory even on Swinburne's account of the matter to insist that we should take God as everlasting, but not as timeless, just because the latter is incoherent to us.

5. Summary and Conclusion

Swinburne's concept of God, as presented as the hypothesis of theism, rests on an inconsistency in its formulation which, I believe, renders the hypothesis itself incoherent. The hypothesis as such, which is needed to be coherent, postulates various divine attributes logically constrained. As such they are sought to overall cohere together which they must if the hypothesis is to have any application. Swinburne's reasons and justifications for presenting the hypothesis in such a way are that God chooses to make such decisions as to freely subject Himself to these various limits and constraints – choosing to be in time; choosing to have His omniscience curtailed as a result of a foreseen consequence of creating free agents; having the choice to end His being subject to time's condition if and when He chooses.

I have argued that this conception of God as having such a choice available to Him to be able to do, undermines the very hypothesis that Swinburne wishes to take as his theistic hypothesis. For it is seen that the concept of God which supposes that He has a choice whether to impose or relieve logical constraints on Himself, is surely much more *primary* than the God Swinburne is putting forward in the hypothesis. As such the claim that the God of the hypothesis is really existing, that it is true considering all the various criteria and principles of the probability argument, cannot be sincerely held. The difficulty is increased by the fact of the intrinsic role which the 'God of choices' has in the formulation of the 'God of the hypothesis.' It is a role which is used to *create and justify* the detail of the hypothesis, but which actually undermines it.

Hence, I conclude that the hypothesis of theism which is presented by Swinburne is incoherent via its formulation and therefore fails his own crucial test of simplicity. 'God exists', as presented in Swinburne's hypothesis of theism, cannot be a true proposition.

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