Nicola Mößner, Sebastian Schmoranzer, Christian Weidemann (Eds.)

Richard Swinburne

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Richard Swinburne

Nicola Mößner, Sebastian Schmoranzer,
Christian Weidemann (Eds.)

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PREFACE

Richard Swinburne is one of the most influential contemporary proponents of the analytical philosophy of religion. However, his interests are very wide-ranging. He has written on almost every central philosophical and theological issue. Swinburne is particularly well-known for his perceptive defence of, some would say "time-honoured", others may prefer "old-fashioned", philosophical doctrines.

He is, above all, a traditional theist, i.e. he believes, that there exists an eternal, uncreated and immaterial perfect soul called "God" which is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, morally perfect and the creator and sustainer of the universe. As a natural theologian Swinburne also holds that belief in God does not depend on an existentialistic leap into faith, but can (and should) be confirmed by philosophical and scientific evidence. In his opus magnum *The Existence of God*—which is considered by almost everyone working in the field as a milestone—he deals extensively with various arguments for and against the existence of God, getting to the conclusion that, given our total knowledge of the world, the existence of God is more probable than his non-existence.

Two other doctrines are crucial for this project of natural theology, namely scientific realism and an aprioristic account of epistemology. To put it in a nutshell, Swinburne claims that the primary aim of scientific and philosophical research is truth, and that we have to assume *a priori* epistemic criteria, like simplicity, in order to make sense of our scientific as well as our everyday epistemic practice.

In his philosophy of mind, Swinburne tries to rehabilitate one of the most often criticised and ridiculed theories in the history of modern philosophy: substance dualism. He attempts to show by some ingenious thought experiments that human persons consist of a body *and* an immaterial soul, only the latter part being essential for personal identity. Swinburne almost single-handedly has made the persistence of the soul a seriously considered option in the recent debate on what constitutes personal identity, an option that now is at least at eye level with bodily, mental and narrative theories.

Other claims Swinburne has argued for—against the attacks of naturalistic philosophers and scientists—include the existence of libertarian free will and the objectivity of morality.

As Swinburne sees it, all these elements—theism, ontological realism, aprioristic epistemology, substance dualism, free will, objectivity of morals—contribute to the rational justification of traditional Christian belief. The wish to provide such a justification is at the very heart of his philosophy and forms the main incentive of most of his work.

There is, however, one big objection to any kind of traditional theism: Why does an omnipotent and morally perfect God permit all that horrendous suffering in the world? When confronted with the problem of evil, most Christian philosophers and theologians tend to react in the following way: the coexistence of a loving God with horrendous suffering, they say, is a mystery we cannot fully understand. This reaction is often accompanied either by an indication of Jesus Christ's death on the cross, which is supposed to solve the problem somehow, or by an emphatic confession of the gulf between God's omniscience and our limited knowledge.

However, this *asylum ignorantiae* never was a place where Swinburne felt comfortable. He always had the deep conviction that instead of hiding behind hollow phrases and arguments from ignorance, Christian thinkers should tackle the problems of their faith, not shrinking from giving irritating or unpopular answers, if necessary. His talk "The Problem of Evil" given at the 11th *"Münstersche Vorlesungen zur Philosophie"* in November 2007 presents no exception from this rule.

In line with what has become by now a venerable tradition, Swinburne gave a public lecture on the first night of the *"Münstersche Vorlesungen"* and participated in a colloquium in the following two days. At this colloquium, groups of students and faculty members from Münster presented papers dealing critically over a wide range of topics of Swinburne's works which together with Swinburne's talk and his replies are published in this volume.

The three first papers cope with Swinburne's epistemology and especially with the criterion of simplicity which, according to Swinburne, is one of the most important criteria of theory choice. Whereas the first and the third paper focus on the relation between this principle and other epistemic principles —such as the principle to be *prima facie* entitled to rely on other people's testimony—or other criteria of theory choice—such as the criterion of fit with background knowledge—, the second paper puts into doubt whether simplicity is a truth criterion.

Leaving epistemological matters behind, papers four to seven address metaphysical topics. Critical arguments are presented concerning Swinburne's conception of God as a being within time but outside space and Swinburne's abductive argument for God's existence based on the idea that the immensely improbable emergence of life is best explained by the existence of a divine creator. Furthermore, it is put into doubt whether Swinburne can stick to his identification of the metaphysically possible with the logically possible as well as to his dualism of a material human body on the one hand and an immaterial human soul on the other.

Finally, the focus of the debate turns away from theoretical to moral questions: is God allowed to let us suffer? Are there certain moral obligations which are binding for us only because God wishes them to be binding? Do we have a special obligation towards God because He is our creator and benefactor? Is there a moral reason to try to abolish or contain homosexuality?

Swinburne's opinions on those topics as well as on the more theoretical questions are subtle, from time to time unusual and sometimes even provocative. But they are always well argued and worth a closer examination. So are, we hope, the papers printed in this volume.

Of course, the publication of this volume and the *"Münstersche Vorlesungen"* would not have been possible without the support of so many people. We would, therefore, like to express our gratitude to Richard Swinburne for accepting the invitation to Münster and for the stimulating discussions about his work. We would also like to thank the students and colleagues from Münster who have invested much time and effort to prepare the papers and presentations. Furthermore, our thanks go to the many helping hands in the background which ensured that the colloquium would run smoothly. Our thanks also go to Anna Brückner for having taken and letting us print the photograph on the front page of this volume. Last, but not least, we are grateful to

Rafael Hüntelmann and the *ontos Verlag,* both for funding the *"Münstersche Vorlesungen"* for the fourth year now and for publishing the papers presented at the *"Münstersche Vorlesungen"*.

Münster, February 2008 *Nicola Mößner,*
Sebastian Schmoranzer,
Christian Weidemann

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OF RICHARD SWINBURNE’S MAJOR WORKS

CG	*The Christian God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994.
CT	*The Coherence of Theism*, rev. edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993.
EG	*The Existence Of God*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004.
EJ	*Epistemic Justification*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2001.
ES	*The Evolution of Soul,* rev. edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997.
FR	*Faith and Reason,* 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2005.
IG	*Is There a God?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996.
PPE	*Providence and the Problem Of Evil,* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998.
R	*Revelation. From Metaphor to Analogy,* 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2007.
RA	*Responsibility and Atonement*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989.
RGI	*The Resurrection of God Incarnate,* Oxford: Clarendon Press 2003.
SET	*Simplicity as Evidence of Truth* (Aquinas Lecture 1997), Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 1997.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL[1]

Richard Swinburne

I very much appreciate the invitation to deliver the 2007 Münster lecture, and to participate in the subsequent two days of discussion of my academic work. I consider it a considerable compliment that so many philosophers have devoted so much attention to what I have written on various philosophical topics. I have chosen as the topic for my lecture the strongest and most worrying objection to the truth of any theistic religion—the problem of evil; and I have sought to summarise and develop here the theodicy of which I have produced various versions over many years. This is a crucial issue for theism; for unless theism can produce a satisfactory theodicy, the occurrence of the world's evils counts very heavily against the truth of theism.

The God of traditional theism is by definition omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly free. I understand God being omnipotent as his being able to do anything logically possible—for example, annihilate the universe—but not anything logically impossible (that is, anything the description of which involves a self-contradiction)—for example, make me exist and not exist at the same time. God being omniscient, I shall understand likewise, as his knowing everything that it is logically possible to know. If it is not logically possible for anyone to know our future free choices, then God's omniscience will not include such knowledge. But of course it will only be by God's choice that we have any free choices, and so that there is such a limit to his knowledge. I shall understand God being perfectly free in the sense that his choices are in no way limited by, that is influenced by, irrational forces, as are the choices of humans. God only desires to do an action in so far as he sees a reason for doing it, that is in so far as he believes that it is a good action to do so. Being omniscient, he knows which actions are good and which are better than others. So if there is one best action for him to do in some situation he will do it. But if there are two or more incompatible equal best actions (that is two or more actions equally good and better than any other possible action) in that situation, he will have to choose between them for no reason at all (just as we have to do when in a similar situation).

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[1] This lecture summarises the main points of my book *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (1998). In the book I discuss many different kinds of evil (to animals as well as to humans) additional to those discussed here.

God however must often be in a situation where we cannot be, of having a choice between an infinite number of possible actions, each of which is less good than some other action he could do. For example, angels and planets, and herbivorous mammals are good things. So, the more of them the better (given that, in the case of mammals, they are spread out among an infinite number of planets, so that they do not crowd each other out). So however many of these creatures God creates, it would have been better if he had created more. (And he could still have created more, even if he created an infinite number of them.) It follows from this that we must understand God being perfectly good in the sense that he will do many good actions, no bad actions, and the best or equal best action where there is one. Contrary to Leibniz, we cannot understand God being perfectly good in the sense that he makes the best of all possible worlds—for there is no best of all possible worlds; any world God makes, he could have made a better world. The problem of evil is not the problem that this world is not the best of all possible worlds. It is the problem that it looks as if God allows to occur or brings about many intrinsically bad states of affairs—suffering and wrongdoing.

I shall now argue however that it is not a bad (or evil) act to allow or bring about bad (or evil) states of affairs so long as certain conditions are satisfied, and I shall suggest that they are satisfied in the case of the evils of this world. Hence the evils of the world, the suffering and wrongdoing which (in virtue of his omnipotence) he could certainly prevent if he so chose, do not provide evidence against the existence of God.

A human is none the less good for allowing some evil to occur (e.g. allowing someone to suffer) so long as allowing that evil is the only way in which he can promote some good, so long as he does promote that good, so long as he has the right to allow the evil to occur (i.e. it is morally permissible for him to do so), and so long as the good is good enough to risk the occurrence of the evil. For example a human parent may take a child to the dentist and allow him to suffer a tooth being filled, for the sake of his subsequent dental health so long as that is the only way in which he can promote this good state, and as a parent, he does have the right to do this for the child. The latter clause is important. No complete stranger has the right to take a child to the dentist to have his tooth filled without the permission of the child's parents, even if she thereby promotes a good state. Now we humans cannot always give a child dental health without the child having to suffer, but God could. It is only the logically impossible that he is unable to do. So extrapolating from the case of suffering to the case of evils generally, and from that case to the case of God who can do anything logically possible, I suggest that God can allow an evil E to occur, compatibly with his perfect goodness, so long as four conditions are satisfied.

First, it must be logically impossible for God to bring about some good G in any other morally permissible way than by allowing E (or an evil equally bad) to occur. For example, it is logically impossible for God to give us libertarian free will to choose between good and bad (i.e. free will to choose between these despite all the causal influences to which we are subject); and yet also cause us to choose the good. It is logically impossible for God to bring about the good of us having such a free choice without allowing the evil of a bad choice to occur (if that is what we choose). Secondly, God does bring about G. Thus if he brings about pain in order to give us the opportunity of freely choosing whether to bear it courageously or not, he has also to have given us free will. Thirdly, he has to have the right to allow E to occur (that is, it is morally permissible for him to allow E to occur). And finally, some sort of comparative condition must be satisfied. It cannot be as strong as the condition that G be a good better than E is an evil. For obviously we are often justified, in order to ensure the occurrence of a substantial good in risking the occurrence of a greater evil. A plausible formal way of capturing this condition is to say that the expected value of allowing E to occur—given that God does bring about G—must be positive. (Or, more loosely, the probable amount of evil which would result from allowing E to occur must be less than the goodness of G.) I shall summarise the claim, with respect to some evil E, that if there is a God, he could, compatibly with his perfect goodness, allow it to occur in order to promote a good G, as the claim that E serves a greater good.

It follows that if the only good states were sensory pleasures, God would not be justified in allowing any of the world's evils to occur; for not even the first condition would be satisfied with respect to those evils. God could eliminate all the sensory pains, and all the grief and mental distress and whatever else is wrong with the world, and give sentient creatures (including ourselves) endless blissful sensory states of the sort caused—I am told—by heroin. Hence the existence of the world's evils would count conclusively against the existence of God. So what a theist must maintain is that there are many good states additional to sensory pleasures which God cannot (logically) bring about without allowing evils to occur.

Now it is not plausible to suppose that we know what are all the possible good states which evils could serve; and so it might seem that there is no irrationality in a theist claiming that all the world's evils serve greater goods, although he cannot for the most part say what they are. For if there is a God, these evils must serve a greater good. (Otherwise God would not have allowed them to occur.) And if you have very strong reason to suppose that there is a God, you have very strong reason to suppose that they do serve a greater good. The trouble is that it seems to many people at first sight fairly obvious that many of the world's evils could not be such as to serve any greater good. To many people it seems that incurable pain, cruelty to children, the eighteenth century slave trade, etc. could serve no greater goods—not because they claim to know what all the possible goods are, but because they claim to know enough about them to know that at least one of the conditions could not be satisfied with respect to some of the evils—e.g. that a God would not have the right to allow them to occur for the sake of *any* greater good, or that the only goods which some of these evils could serve are ones which do not in fact occur (although, given the evils, God could have brought them about). Almost all people, including in my view most religious believers, who do not have an overwhelmingly strong belief that there is a God, are inclined to think at first sight that many of the world's evils do not serve greater goods—and so that the existence of evil seems to constitute a strong argument against the existence of God. It is to such people that theodicy is addressed.

Theodicy is the enterprise of showing that appearances are misleading, and that (probably) all the world's evils do serve a greater good, and so their existence does not provide evidence against the existence of God. I believe that the task of theodicy is an achievable one. I think that the four conditions are satisfied with respect to all known kinds of evil. Clearly I cannot show that in detail in a short lecture; but I can give reason to believe that these conditions are satisfied for some main kinds of evil from which humans suffer, and begin to make it plausible that the argument from evil against the existence of God does not work.

I begin by pointing out ways in which the first condition is satisfied for various kinds of evil. I begin with moral evil (that is, the evil which either deliberately or through negligence humans cause to each other). I have already alluded to the traditional free will defence which points out that a (libertarian) free choice between good and evil (logically) can only be brought about by allowing the agent to bring about evil. But a free choice which made no difference to the world would not be nearly as valuable a choice as one which made a difference. It would be a great good for humans to have libertarian free choices which allow us to exercise genuine responsibility for other humans, and that involves the opportunity to benefit or harm them. God has the power to benefit or harm humans. If other agents are to be given a share in his creative work, it would be good that they have that power, too (although perhaps to a lesser degree). A world in which agents can benefit each other but cannot do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. If my responsibility for you is limited to whether or not to give you a camcorder, but I cannot cause you pain, stunt your growth, or limit your education, then I do not have a great deal of responsibility for you. A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all-important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details. He would be like a father asking his elder son to look after the younger son, and adding that he would be watching the elder son's every move and would intervene the moment the elder son did a thing wrong. The elder son might justly retort that, while he would be happy to share his father's work, he could really do so only if he were left to make his own judgements as to what to do within a significant range of the options available to the father. A good God, like a good father, will delegate responsibility. But in order to allow creatures a share in creation, God has to allow them the choice of hurting and maiming, of frustrating the divine plan. So by allowing such hurting and maiming God makes possible the great good of humans freely choosing to benefit (rather than harm) each other and thus co-operate in God's plan.

But human good choices are not merely good in themselves and in virtue of their immediate consequences. All human choices are character forming—each good choice makes it easier to make the next choice a good one—agents can form their own characters. Aristotle famously remarked: 'we become just by doing just acts, prudent by doing prudent acts, brave by doing brave acts.'[2] That is, by doing a just act when it is difficult—when it goes against our natural inclinations (that is our desires)—we make it easier to do a just act next time. We can gradually change our desires, so that, for example, doing just acts becomes natural. Thereby we can free ourselves from the power of the less good desires to which we are subject. But again the great good of us having the free choice of character formation (choosing the sort of people we are to be) can (logically) only be had if there is the danger that we will allow ourselves to corrupt our characters (to become bad people).

Now consider natural evil, that is evil of a kind unpreventable by humans, such as the evil of suffering caused by disease of a kind currently unpreventable. What is known as the "higher-order goods" defence points out that certain kinds of especially valuable free choice are possible only as responses to evils. I can (logically) only show courage in bearing my suffering if I am suffering (an evil state). My suffering from disease when I have the strong temptation to self-pity gives me the opportunity to show courage. It is good that we should have the opportunity (occasionally) to do such actions which involve resisting great temptations, because thereby we manifest our total commitment to the good. (A commitment which we do not make when the temptation to do otherwise is not strong is not a total commitment.)

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[2] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b.

It is good too that among the good actions which we should have the (occasional) opportunity to do is to help others who are suffering and deprived by showing sympathy to them and helping them to cope. Help is most significant when it is most needed, and it is most needed when its recipient is suffering and deprived. But I can (logically) only help others who are suffering if there is the evil of their suffering. In these cases, if there is a God, he makes possible the good of free choices of particular kinds, between good and evil, which—logically—he could not give us without allowing the evils (or evils equally bad) to occur. Or rather, it is the only morally permissible way in which he could give us this freedom. He could, it is true, give us the choice between trying to help others or refusing to do so (a choice which plausibly would give just as much opportunity for manifesting our commitments to good or evil) without the possibility of any actual suffering. For God could make a basically deceptive world in which other people appeared to be in great pain when really they were not. But in such a situation, first we would not have the real responsibility for others which is a great good. And secondly it would not be morally permissible—in my view—for God to make a world where people are moved to help others at great cost when the others do not really need help at all. God, if he is not to deceive us and yet give us a real free choice between helping and not helping others, must make a world where others really do suffer. And merely allowing the suffering caused by moral evil would not give very much opportunity for the choices which involve resisting great temptations; for this we need disease, accident, and the weakness of old age.

It is good too that among the choices available to humans should be the choice, not merely of helping others to cope with natural evils such as disease, but of whether to reduce the number of such natural evils in future, e.g. prevent diseases. But to have this choice we need to know what causes these evils. The normal way in which we (the scientists among us, supported by money from the rest of us) try to discover such things is the inductive way. That is, we seek to discover the natural processes (bacteria, viruses etc.) which bring about diseases, and then construct and further test theories of the mechanisms involved. But scientists can only do that if there are regular processes producing the diseases, and they can only learn what these are by studying many populations and studying under which circumstances some disease is transmitted and under which it is not. So for the great good of this choice of investigating (or, alternatively, not bothering to investigate), there is required the necessary evil of the actual disease. If humans are to have the great opportunity of devoting their lives to scientific research for human benefit or not bothering to do so, there have to be sufferers from disease to make this possible. Many of the early Christian Fathers saw rationality (of which the ability to pursue such scientific inquiry is a paradigmatic example) together with free will as the two things which humans had which constituted their being made 'in the image' of God.[3]

All the same, you may ask, would it not be better if God planted in us strong true beliefs about the causes of all diseases and other natural evils, and then just left us with the choice of curing them or not? Is having the opportunity to exercise rationality in the inductive way worth the price? However if God abolished the need for rational inquiry and gave us strong true beliefs about the causes of things, that would greatly reduce the difficulty of making moral decisions, and so make it much less easy for us to show total commitment to the good and form heroic characters. As things are in the actual world, most moral decisions are decisions taken in uncertainty about the consequences of our actions. I do not know for certain that if I smoke, I will get cancer; or that if I do not give money to some charity, people will starve. So we have to make our moral decisions on the basis of how probable it is that our actions will have various outcomes—how probable it is that I will get cancer if I continue to smoke (when I would not otherwise get cancer), or that someone will starve if I do not give (when they would not starve otherwise). These decisions under uncertainty are not merely the normal moral decisions; they are also the hard ones. Since probabilities are so hard to assess, it is all too easy to persuade yourself that it is worth taking the chance that no harm will result from the less demanding decision (that is, the decision which you have a strong desire to make). And even if you face up to a correct assessment of the probabilities, true dedication to the good is shown by doing the act which, although it is probably the best action, may have no good consequences at all.

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[3] Thus John of Damascus wrote that God 'creates with his own hands man of a visible nature and an invisible, after his own image and likeness: on the one hand man's body he formed of earth, on the other his reasoning and thinking soul ... The phrase "after his image" clearly refers to the side of his nature which consists of mind and free will, whereas "after his likeness" means likeness in virtue so far as that is possible' (*On the Orthodox Faith,* 2.12, translated by S. D. F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church,* vol. 9, James Parker and Co: 1899.).

So both in order to give us the opportunity to deal with all-important matters by exercising our rationality and in order to give us the opportunity of showing our commitment to the good most strongly by making our choices in a situation of uncertainty, it is good that God should not cause us to be born with strong true beliefs about the consequences of our actions, and so that we should have the opportunity to choose whether or not to seek more certain knowledge of the consequences of our actions. That will involve getting more data about the consequences of events, e.g. data from the past about what has happened to people who have smoked in ignorance of the possibility that smoking causes cancer. Seeking more certain knowledge, in other words, involves once again relying on normal induction; and that requires the existence of natural evils.

What next about criterion (2)? I have shown that various kinds of evil are necessary for the exercise of a (libertarian) free will which makes important differences to ourselves, each other, and the world. But do we really have free will at all in this sense of freedom to choose what to do, given all the causes which influence us, such that our choices make a difference to our brain states and so to which public actions we perform? As we make our choices, it seems to us that it is up to us how we choose, and it is a basic principle of rationality that it is probable that things are as they seem to be in the absence of contrary reason. I do not think that there is any adequate reason for denying that things are as they seem to us in this respect. It used to be claimed that science has shown that nature is deterministic and so our choices must be caused. Even if science had shown that this holds in the physical (that is, public) world, a full description of what there is in the world will have to include mental events (that is sensations, thoughts, intentions, etc.). Mental events are so different from physical events (including the brain events with which many mental events are correlated), that it would be totally unjustified to argue from the deterministic character of the physical to any deterministic character of the mental. But then it is claimed that science has shown that the physical