HUTCHESON ON SWINBURNE'S EARLIER THEODICY

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Peter Hutcheson, in his paper "Swinburne's Earlier Theodicy," claims to have shown that Swinburne's theodicy fails. That theodicy is the one espoused for two decades, coming to prominence in *The Existence of God* in 1979 and still advocated as late as 1996 in *Is There a God?* Hutcheson points out that unlike the earlier books, the 1998 book, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, adds the notion of life after death to the mix. How odd it seems to be spending time on a theodicy abandoned by its author. Hutcheson's rationale for dealing with the earlier theodicy is that it is simpler than Swinburne's later theodicy, that Swinburne himself is a fan of simplicity, and that "Swinburne *might* have succeeded" in his earlier attempt. Of course simplicity is not everything (or we would still be trying to describe the planets as traveling in circular orbits), and Swinburne *has* written the new 1998 book on providence and the problem of evil in which he modifies and elaborates upon what had appeared in print a couple of decades earlier. The distinction between the earlier and later theodicies is that the earlier employs, in Hutcheson's words, "things atheists admit to exist and to be true," whereas Swinburne's current view includes "life after death." Life after death does not, however, constitute a demarcation between atheists and theists. Some atheists believe in life after death while some theists do not. The earlier theodicy is, however, very much worth examining because it *is* simpler and, therefore, preferable to a more complex theory if it is successful. And, more importantly, the simplicity is achieved by eliminating the most controversial element of Swinburne's current approach. It may not be quite correct even to say that Swinburne has abandoned the simpler view. Can one construct a proper theodicy without "reincarnation. . . or life after death in a new world"? He merely says in 1998 that he is "not fully convinced about that any more (xi)."

Let us, then, examine the earlier argument and Hutcheson's criticism of it. Hutcheson lays out a central part of Swinburne's theodicy (statements 25-31) as claiming that the greater good lies in the opportunity for noble acts so that "the opportunities could not be reduced without sacrificing a greater good." This, Hutcheson tells us, implies that a world with more evils would be a world with more opportunities for noble acts. In statement 31 Hutcheson says, "The premises imply that the world would be improved if it were made a giant Nazi concentration camp." The upshot, to quote Hutcheson's exact claim, is this: "By the logic of Swinburne's argument, then, making the world *worse* with more evils would *improve* the world with more of a greater good. (statement 28)" We must conclude that either Swinburne is happily but foolishly uttering a contradiction, or Swinburne's argument was not adequately represented. Part of the problem may come from Hutcheson's easy shifting between the phrase "a greater good" and the phrase "the greater good," as well as the shifting between the word "opportunity" and the word "opportunities." I do not find Swinburne saying that each and every noble act is a greater good; I do not find Swinburne saying that each and every one of our *opportunities* for doing a noble act is a greater good. In fact, I am not sure what it would mean to say that the opportunity to respond in a noble way to some terrible tragedy is a greater good. Greater than what? The opportunity is a greater good than the evil is an evil? Swinburne nowhere says anything like this. I don't find Swinburne saying that God created the world with x evils that present us with y greater goods, so that if there were $2x$ evils that would be twice as good because there would be $2y$ opportunities to act nobly. In fact Hutcheson's criticism of Swinburne is couched almost entirely in terms of the possibility

of noble acts that humans can perform when confronted by evils. That is just one *type* of opportunity that Swinburne discusses. What Swinburne does say is that it is "a great good that humans have a certain sort of free will" which he calls "free and responsible choice." Humans have opportunities "to make significant choices between good and evil, which make a big difference to the agent, to others, and to the world (*Is There a God?* 98)." Humans can produce pleasure, can form their characters, can acquire knowledge, can benefit or harm others, and can show forgiveness, compassion and self-sacrifice. "The possibilities for free and responsible choice are enormous (*Is There a God?* 99)." Swinburne believes that a world with such opportunities is brought about by God giving humans free will. But to gain knowledge and to be able to help or hurt others, we must experience evils and learn about them by the process of induction. "In such a world. there will inevitably be evil (*The Existence of God* 200)." It is good for me to learn to be compassionate, and I can learn that from the experience of encountering cruelty or disease or natural disaster. No one hopes that they experience an endless succession of tragedies so that they can chalk up more compassion-points and thus create a better world. Swinburne neither says this nor creates a theodicy that implies this.

Hutcheson's error is similar to the error made by someone looking at Mill's doctrine of liberty and saying that Mill asserts that the greatest good is achieved when I become addicted to smoking and die of lung cancer and you overeat and die from complications of obesity. Mill asserts:

> That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right ("On Liberty," Chapter 1).

To accuse Mill of saying it is good that I died of smoking and you died from obesity because it is good for government to allow us to choose these things is to fail to see that what achieves the greatest good for the greatest number is government allowing its members the opportunity to choose their own beliefs, companions, and lifestyles. Such free-will will inevitably result in many false beliefs, many friends who become partners in crime, and many people harming themselves by their activities. Those are not good things, but the greatest good for the greatest number is, according to Mill, achieved when citizens have certain classes of freedom and certain types of opportunity. We would not, however, think that what was entailed by such a doctrine was that it is a greater good if there were even more illegal drugs for citizens to choose from since that would enhance the number of lifestyle choices.

Hutcheson's discussion of how much freedom and how much suffering a good God would allow is important. Everything turns on this issue. Hutcheson says that Swinburne "believes that theodicists and their opponents draw the line in different places," but both agree that there is a threshold. Swinburne says, in talking about pain, desolation, desertion, and maiming that "limited experience is to be valued, but there would be something wrong if most of most men's lives consisted in having such experiences (*The Existence of God* 215)." Hutcheson thinks that the Belsen concentration camp would not be allowed by a God while certainly Swinburne has to think that it would since he

believes in the existence of both. Hutcheson asserts that "the harm done exceeds the value of strong responsibility in those instances." But is this not similar to saying (pardon the comparison) that the tragic loss to the world of music by the deaths of Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin exceeds the value of allowing people the responsibility for their own lives "in those instances"? What Swinburne would reply is that the harm done does not exceed the value of giving all humans strong responsibility. What Mill would reply is that the harm done does not exceed the overall value of giving all citizens the basic freedoms of choice. Either Hutcheson is implying that God would be morally required to step in at certain times and prevent certain human actions (setting up concentration camps, flying planes into skyscrapers) or that a God would at the time of creation set the limits of human freedom at a different point.

Hutcheson says that Swinburne believes that God stops things from getting too bad and supports this with a quotation in which Swinburne says that "the theodicist is in no way committed to saying that a good God will not stop things getting too bad. Indeed, if God made our world, he has clearly done so." This is not saying that God has stepped in and stopped some things that are worse than concentration camps but that God decided that concentration camps were not bad enough to stop; it is saying that God has set up the world in advance in a certain way. Consider Swinburne's comment above that "if God made our world, he has clearly done so." What this means is revealed by a further quotation

> Clearly, if there is a God, he must set a limit to the amount of suffering. Clearly too there is such a limit. There is a temporal limit constituted by death to the amount a given man can suffer. And there is also presumably a limit to the intensity of possible suffering set by the constitution of the brain through which suffering comes to man." (*The Existence of God* 219)

So Hutcheson is mistaken when he says that "Swinburne's theodicy does not provide an upper limit to the pain and suffering that good things justify."

The issue remains whether the limit is set too high. Everything depends, says Swinburne, on quantitative judgments and they are "the hardest moral judgements on which to reach a sure conclusion (*The Existence of God* 220)." (As evidence of that just think how hard it is to decide whether Mill's drawing of the limits on liberty is correct. Or consider the fact that half our nation would agree with Attorney General John Ashcroft and George Bush's desire to change the limits on our liberties.) From the human point of view, the question of whether the limit on evils is set too high is the question of whether there are evils which in our best judgment are pointless. As Hutcheson says, contemporary arguments from evil depend on the claim that it is more reasonable to believe that there is pointless evil than to believe that all existing evil is justified. Hutcheson asserts his belief in the "widespread appearance of pointless evil" and uses Swinburne's principle of credulity (we should believe that things are as they appear unless we have evidence to the contrary) to conclude that we should believe there is pointless evil, conclude that the theodicy fails, and conclude that God probably does not exist. Ignoring the fact that Swinburne's principle is meant only to apply to epistemological issues of private experience (*Is There a God?* 132), it is still instructive in this application. There are then two questions. Does it appear that there is pointless evil? Is there evidence to the contrary? Notice how much more complicated this is than, "Does it appear (to me) that there is water on the highway ahead?" and "Do I have

evidence to the contrary?" Appearance of pointless evil is a judgment call that can be made only after consideration of motives, emotions, pains, pleasures, prior conditions, future consequences, and so forth. Pointlessness is not perceptual. In the case of government, the freedom one has is the result of the principles (laws) of that government.

If someone says to us that it appears that a certain individual was allowed too much freedom, we might try to present evidence to the contrary by suggesting that instead of looking at individual cases we look at what principle led to that person's having that freedom. Similarly, if someone says that some situation is pointlessly evil, the evidence to the contrary that Swinburne provides is to suggest we look at what principle a God might employ that could lead to that situation. What kind of world would God make?

> The world would be one in which agents were greatly interdependent, one in which they were born and died, were able to increase each other's power, knowledge, and freedom, to make each other happy or unhappy, and to influence in this way distant generations. (*The Existence of God* 198)

Swinburne suggests that it would not be a "toy world," but a world where things matter very much and where we can choose and our choices made a large difference (219-220). Our world, Swinburne says, is like this.

I think that a careful consideration of Swinburne's basic claims shows that Hutcheson has neither succeeded in showing that it is reasonable to believe there are pointless evils nor succeeded in showing that Swinburne's theodicy fails.

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REJOINDER TO PROFESSOR JOY

Peter Hutcheson

At the end of his comments Joy writes "Hutcheson has neither succeeded in showing that Swinburne's theodicy fails nor succeeded in showing that it is reasonable to believe there are pointless evils." But the fact is that I did not attempt to show that it is reasonable to believe there are pointless evils. "Swinburne's Earlier Theodicy" is a criticism of Swinburne's theodicy, not a positive argument for the existence of pointless evil.

If I were to boil Swinburne's theodicy down to its bare bones, I think it comes to this: There are plausible reasons for believing that all evils that seem to be pointless are really justified evils. Thus, the belief that an O^3 God allows this world is plausible. Against this I counter: Swinburne has only given plausible reasons for believing that some evils that seem to be pointless–not all–are really justified evils. Thus, Swinburne's theodicy fails.

I consider ways Swinburne might try to close the gap between some and all. After all, one common criticism of theodicies is that they do not justify all (or many) evils that appear to be pointless. Let us call a good thing that justifies some evils a "local" justification, whereas a "global" justification is something to which a theodicy could appeal, no matter what, to try to justify all apparently pointless evils. I thought there were two "global" justifications in Swinburne's theodicy: the appeal to God's superior knowledge (our relative ignorance) and the opportunities for noble acts. Joy counters that Swinburne does not advocate the opportunities for noble acts as a justifying good. Let me grant this claim for the sake of argument. What follows? It follows that I misinterpreted Swinburne's theodicy on this point. But my overall argument against Swinburne's theodicy still stands. If it is not the opportunities for noble acts, but noble acts themselves, that justify, then the criticism I made in "Swinburne's Earlier Theodicy," namely, that there are evils that are accompanied by no noble acts, still stands. The appeal to noble acts is a "local" justification.

Joy claims "In fact Hutcheson's criticism of Swinburne is couched almost entirely in terms of the possibility of noble acts when confronted by evils. That is just one opportunity Swinburne discusses." My criticism of Swinburne's theodicy is not even close to being couched "almost entirely in terms of the possibility of noble acts." I spend some time arguing against Swinburne's appeal to our relative ignorance and God's superior knowledge. Moreover, I mention several other justifying good things in Swinburne's theodicy. I think Joy's criticism is a result of concentrating almost exclusively on a specific part of "Swinburne's Earlier Theodicy" and ignoring the rest.

I was and am aware that belief in life after death does not demarcate atheists from theists. Swinburne tries to respond to advocates of arguments from evil, who *are* atheists, and who almost without exception reject belief in life after death. I was and am also aware that the reason for considering Swinburne's earlier theodicy is that it is simpler and achieves its simplicity by eliminating the most controversial part of Swinburne's current theodicy. Swinburne's earlier theodicy is stronger, less vulnerable to objection, by leaving out life after death. Rather than being odd to consider a theodicy abandoned by its author, it is an attempt to consider theism at its best.

There is a world of moral difference between Belsen and the deaths of Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin. I wrote nothing that entails that God would have intervened in the Presley and Joplin cases. If only theists had to justify such easy examples. It is noteworthy that, while Joy and Swinburne both mention Belsen, neither offers any plausible reasons why the evils of Belsen are justified.