

SWINBURNE'S EARLIER THEODICY

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Are there any plausible theistic responses to the argument from evil? Many theists use a free will theodicy (FWT), but it is vulnerable to a few objections. For example, it presupposes libertarian free will, does not include a justification for physical evil, and presupposes that free will is worth the considerable price paid for it. Richard Swinburne tries to show, rather than presuppose, that free will is worth the considerable price paid for by pointing to a variety of goods requiring evil and free will. In this paper I shall argue that Swinburne's argument fails. What are the goods requiring evil and free will? How does Swinburne argue?

Swinburne argues that free will makes possible noble acts. These noble acts, such as forgiveness, compassion, and self-sacrifice, require evils, such as something to forgive and suffering about which to be compassionate. It is better for humans to act nobly, even if it means there are various evils, than for there to be no noble acts. If God were to let us have the false beliefs that others suffer, thereby allowing noble acts (compassion, e.g.) in the absence of suffering, then God would have done something morally wrong by allowing (creating) systematic deception. But God is all good (morally perfect), and thus would not allow systematic deception. Hence, there must be real suffering as a precondition for noble acts. If humans did not have the power to harm others, then they would lack strong responsibility ("Response" 284). But a world in which humans have strong responsibility for one another is better than a world in which they do not. Physical (passive) evil is a consequence of harming others (torture, e.g.). If there is a God, it is likely that God wants us to improve the world, but does not impose a fixed character upon us. Pleasant feelings would only prompt us to try to maintain the world as it is. Only unpleasant feelings (such as pain) would prompt us to improve the world. Thus, it is likely that if there is a God, there will be unpleasant feelings to serve God's purpose. The more cases of physical evil that occur, the better our inductive evidence of how the world works, and thus of how to cause good or harm. If more people contract cancer, for example, we are more moved by compassion to search for treatments and cures than if fewer people were afflicted. Further, our knowledge of cancer is better founded, making it more likely that we will understand cancer enough for treatments and perhaps cures. Thus there must be many cases of evil to serve God's purpose of prompting us to improve the world. God, knowing everything, sees far more clearly than we do the consequences of actions and thus may have duties very different from ours ("Response" 287). Just as a parent has rights over his children that others do not, so God, being the author of our existence, has rights over us that other humans do not ("Response" 288). Thus, the antitheodist's mistake lies in extrapolating too quickly from our duties when faced with evil to the duties of a creator, while ignoring the enormous differences in the circumstances of each ("Response" 294). Thus, the supposition that evils that appear to be pointless are compatible with the existence of God is plausible ("Response" 281).

I have altered Swinburne's words a little in stating his conclusion. He writes: "the threat to theism comes, not from the existence of evil as such, but rather from the existence of certain kinds and degrees—severe and undeserved physical pain or mental anguish, for example. . . . Hence I shall conclude that it is plausible to suppose that the existence of these evils is compatible with the existence of God." ("Response" 281) Let me define "pointless evil" as "evil that an O³ God would not permit," whereas "justified evil" is "evil that an O³ God would permit." Thus any argument from evil is an argument for the non-existence of an O³ god that is based on the alleged existence of pointless evil, while theodicies are attempts to prove that the belief that all evils are justified is plausible. When Swinburne refers to evils of certain kinds and degrees, I think he means evils that appear to be pointless. Here I use the word "appear" in a neutral way. Thus, although I changed Swinburne's words a little, I do not think I altered his meaning. Since Swinburne's conclusion refers to the plausibility of theism, not just to its logical consistency, I think that he means to answer evidential arguments from evil.

There are several good things Swinburne discusses in his theodicy: noble acts, not being (at least systematically) deceptive, strong responsibility, striving for improvement, our knowledge and reasonable belief, and God's superior knowledge. Some *prima facie* virtues of this theodicy include the fact that we know that noble acts occur, and we (theist and skeptic alike) agree that these acts are sometimes worth an evil that requires them. For example, suppose someone forgives another's inconsiderateness on an occasion. Another virtue is that we all agree about the value of not being systematically deceptive, and so we can understand the plausibility of maintaining that God would not be. Anyone who has been around a pathological liar understands this truth in a firsthand way. Likewise we understand the value of striving for improvement and Swinburne's psychological point about the absence of such striving if there were no unpleasant feelings. We recognize the value of knowledge and reasonable belief, and we believe that it is sometimes worth some sacrifice. Even students who lobby for learning less (and less, and less) acknowledge this when pressed. And since we value superior knowledge, and know that it can make the difference in making one moral judgment, rather than its opposite, we can see the value of knowing even more than we do.

But there are shortcomings to this theodicy. Let me begin with the appeal to noble acts. Swinburne justifies evils in terms of either noble acts or the opportunities for noble acts. But if he meant noble acts, then it can be objected that the same number of noble acts could occur if there were fewer evils. Swinburne's justification would then not justify these cases of suffering over and above those instances in which people acted nobly. So, Swinburne must mean the opportunity for noble acts is the greater good. If so, the opportunities could not be reduced without sacrificing a greater good. The trouble is that would be more opportunities for noble acts if there were more evils. 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. Furthermore, the opportunities for noble acts could exist in abundance even if there were no noble acts.

Swinburne (and theists) would not say that such a world is as good as the actual world. Thus, Swinburne's proposed greater good actually "justifies" too much evil. The premises imply that the world would be improved if it were made a giant Nazi concentration camp. Theists (including Swinburne) would reject the claim that the world would be improved by being made a giant concentration camp. Thus Swinburne's appeal to the value of the opportunity for noble acts fails.

The objection points to the fact that there is a threshold beyond which a good thing does not justify. Swinburne does believe that there is a threshold, but he believes that theodacists and their opponents draw the line in different places ("Response" 286). According to Swinburne, an antitheodacist claims that freedom and responsibility have gone too far. "God might well tolerate a boy hitting his younger brothers, but not Belsen" ("Response" 286). Clearly Swinburne believes that God would allow Belsen, too. Swinburne thinks that God allowed a concentration camp in which the victims were starved to death, rather than gassed. Yet Swinburne also believes that God stops things from getting too bad. Swinburne writes: "The theodacist 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. . . . So the theodacist can certainly claim that a good God stops too much sufferings—it is just that he and his opponent draw the line in different places" ("Response" 286).

Well, if theodacists are warranted in claiming that a good God would allow Belsen and the like, then there must a plausible reason for God doing so. What is it? Or what are they? Swinburne would respond by appealing to one of the other good things mentioned in his theodicy. For example, he might say that it would be a good thing to strive to overcome Nazi domination, even if it meant pain and suffering. He might also say that it would be good for Nazis to have the power to harm, and point to the value of strong responsibility ("Response" 285-286).

I do not think that this response would succeed in avoiding the need to specify a threshold. Each of the good things (other than noble acts) Swinburne mentions in his theodicy (strong responsibility, striving to improve the world, knowledge and reasonable belief) are not so good as to justify any evil whatsoever, and I think that theists *themselves* believe this to be so. Consider strong responsibility. Thus, Swinburne might think that strong responsibility might be enough to justify a parent's harm to his child by misinforming her, but would think that it would be far worse to allow a parent to punish a child by starving her to death than it would be to prevent that strong responsibility on that occasion. Thus, since there are analogous examples in the Belsen case, where the harm done exceeds the value of strong responsibility in those instances, the value of strong responsibility would not justify especially horrendous evils that appear to be pointless. Strong responsibility could exist even if fewer instances of it did, and theists themselves seem to believe that it would be better if there were fewer instances.

What about the value of striving to improve the world? What about the value of knowledge and reasonable belief? The embarrassing challenge to theists is that these values could exist in unaltered (or insignificantly altered) form if

there were fewer evils. Consider striving to improve the world. At best Swinburne has given a reason for believing that an O^3 God would not create a world that is such a "hedonistic paradise" that it would destroy the motivation to improve the world. But the world could be better than it is without destroying that motivation. When it comes to knowledge and reasonable belief, the problem is that there seem to be many more cases of associated evils than are necessary to improve our understanding. It seems that there could be fewer cases of suffering from cancer, and yet our knowledge of it, or our desire to learn how to treat or even cure it, would not be diminished—or at least not enough to justify more instances of apparent pointless suffering. It appears as if there are more evils than are necessary to achieve any of the greater goods that Swinburne and other theists specify. Swinburne's theodicy does not provide an upper limit to the pain and suffering that good things justify, and yet theistic moral considerations in his own theodicy seem to require it.

At this point I think Swinburne would reply that I am appealing to what *seems* to be the case, and yet that amounts to a concession that I and other antitheodicyists do not *know*. But, because God's knowledge is vastly superior to ours, and because superior knowledge can make all the difference in moral obligations, antitheodicyists mistakenly extrapolate too quickly from our duties when faced with evil to the duties of a creator, while ignoring the enormous differences in the circumstances of each. Swinburne can avoid specifying a threshold by arguing for this agnostic stance. Only God knows what the threshold is. We cannot know.

Although Bruce Russell criticized Swinburne's appeal to God's superior knowledge, I am somewhat dissatisfied with Russell's criticism. Russell casts his objection in terms of whether we have reason to believe that (God knows that) people suffer less than they appear to suffer. Russell believes that Swinburne is committed to the claim that God knows that people suffer less than it seems (Russell 126-127). But I do not think it is a question the *amount* of suffering, but of the *kind* of suffering. That is why I think my own criticism of Swinburne's appeal to God's superior knowledge is worth stating.

Now Swinburne's appeal to God's superior knowledge is either question-begging or not. Since the argument from evil calls the existence of God into question, it might be tempting to interpret Swinburne's maneuver as question-begging. But I do not think it is plausible to say that Swinburne made this straightforward blunder. Rather, I think that Swinburne is asking us to consider what we would think if we (like an O^3 God, if God exists) knew everything. Swinburne's own words: "Let me do this by asking you to consider what kind of a world you would think it right to create if you had unlimited power and knowledge" ("Problem" 132). We might think very differently. We might refrain completely from extrapolating from our moral duties to God's.

Then again, we might not. What if we knew everything? Does this appeal support theism any more than any other stance? Although several college students seem to think that it clearly favors theism, no stance at all is supported by appealing to what we do not know. Of course, if there is an O^3 God, then every time we believe that an evil is pointless, we are mistaken. God knows

something that we do not, something that justifies every evil that seems to be pointless. But if we start from a neutral standpoint, neither presupposing the existence nor the non-existence of God, then every possibility is left open. Here again, it might be that every evil that appears pointless is in fact justified. Then again, every evil that appears justified might be pointless. Or it could be that some, but not all of the evils that appear to be pointless are in fact justified. In general, when we consider all the evils that appear to be pointless, all, some, or none might be justified. And the category "some" covers many possibilities, including every case in which there are fewer pointless evils than it seems, but there is at least one genuine pointless evil. Further, only one possibility (all evils are justified, and no evils are pointless) is consistent with theism. Therefore, the appeal to our ignorance does not support theism. If we enumerate possibilities that our ignorance leaves open, more of them are consistent with atheism than with theism. Ironically, Swinburne's appeal brings an *a priori* advantage for atheism to light. There are more theoretical possibilities that our ignorance leaves open that mesh with atheism. Only one theoretical possibility is consistent with theism.

What has been shown? Swinburne's appeal to the value of noble acts justifies too little, since fewer noble acts than opportunities for them occur. The appeal to the value of the opportunities for noble acts justifies too much, implying the paradoxical conclusion that a world rendered worse with more evil would be better because of an increased opportunity for noble acts. The other good things Swinburne mentions—strong responsibility, striving for improvement, knowledge, and God's superior knowledge (our ignorance)—all fail to avoid the need to specify a threshold beyond which good things do not justify. After all, it looks as if that threshold has been crossed for any justifying good. If, as theists say, it has not been crossed, then we need some good reasons for that claim. Swinburne's theodicy consists of (1) reasons that justify some, but not all, apparently pointless evils, and (2) an appeal to relative ignorance (God's superior knowledge) to fill in the gaps. If I am right, neither maneuver succeeds. Thus Swinburne's theodicy is unsuccessful.

Terence Penelhum argued that atheists might reject theism on moral or logical grounds with an argument from evil. A moral rejection amounts to rejecting theism because the world does not square with the atheist's own moral beliefs. That kind of rejection is of course open to the objection that the only thing that has been shown is that atheists have different moral beliefs than theists. A logical rejection of theism tries to use the theist's own moral beliefs against her, showing an apparent inconsistency between the theist's own beliefs about God and morality and the world (Penelhum 74). I have aimed for a logical rejection of Swinburne's theodicy. But the success of the rejection is of course contingent upon my hunches about Swinburne's (and other theists') moral convictions.

I have not mentioned life after death, which now plays an important role in Swinburne's theodicy. It is true that I have discussed Swinburne's theodicy prior to the book, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. I have discussed his old theodicy because it is simpler for having left out life after death. Swinburne

himself is (unlike John Hick) very concerned about simplicity, and it seems to me that it is worth our while to consider a theodicy based on things we agree to exist or to be true, such as noble acts, knowledge and reasonable belief, a desire to improve the world, psychological points about what motivates people, and our relative ignorance. After all, Swinburne *might* have succeeded in showing, merely on the basis of things atheists admit to exist and to be true, that moral considerations point to serious doubt about the soundness of any argument from evil. That would have been a tremendous accomplishment. But no theodicy that is in part based on life after death could achieve that goal. I can only promise to consider Swinburne's theodicy in *Providence and the Problem of Evil* at a later date.

Lastly, it might be objected that I gave Swinburne's point about God's superior knowledge (or, rather, our relative ignorance) short shrift. Although my point about our ignorance being consistent with any stance, including more that are consistent with atheism than with theism, is true, I do not address the main point Swinburne is making. Swinburne is pointing out that we do not know enough to know that any evil is pointless. I do not wish to dispute that claim, but I do wish to point out that most arguments from evil advocated nowadays do not assert knowledge of pointless evil, but reasonable belief that pointless evil exists.

Could Swinburne be asserting that we do not know enough even to have reasonable belief that any evil is pointless? I do not think so, since his principle of credulity [roughly, unless there are reasons to believe otherwise, it is rational to believe that things are as they seem] implies, on his own account, that unless theists have a successful theodicy, atheism would win on the basis of the widespread appearance of pointless evil. Here are Swinburne's own words: "It follows that, if it seems to someone that there is some bad state incompatible with the existence of God, he ought so to believe, and so believe that there is no God—in the absence of counter-reasons" (*Providence* 22). However, William Alston has claimed that we do not know enough even to have reasonable belief that any evil is pointless. I promise to discuss Alston's arguments in a future paper.

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