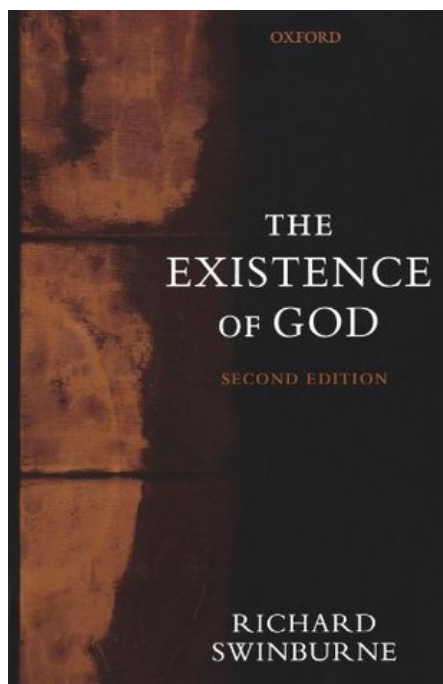




The Existence of God

Richard Swinburne

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Richard Swinburne presents a substantially rewritten and updated edition of his most celebrated book. No other work has made a more powerful case for the probability of the existence of God. Swinburne argues compellingly that the existence of the universe, its law-governed nature and fine-tuning, human consciousness and moral awareness, and evidence of miracles and religious experience, all taken together (and despite the occurrence of pain and suffering), make it likely that there is a God.

The Existence of God Details

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David M says

Theism - the thesis that there is such a person as God, and this person is the creator of the universe

What kind of person is god? disembodied, infinitely good, all-powerful*, all-knowing**

**all-powerful but subject to the rules of logic* ; god cannot do logically absurd things; for instance, cannot make $1 + 1$ equal anything other than 2. On Swinburne's account, the whole platonic paraphernalia of abstract objects then stands mysteriously apart from god; god can explain the origins of consciousness, life, and the physical universe, but not (it seems) such things as math and logic

***all-knowing* but, Swinburne adds, god cannot know the outcome of our own free choices before we make them; god gives us our free will and the power to use and by doing so thus makes him(/her?)self ignorant at least in this one area

I wonder if Swinburne is squaring the circle a bit here. Moreover, surely it's relevant that all persons of which we have direct experience are embodied, finite beings. It seems quite possible that our whole concept of personhood is inextricably bound up with this condition. In the Bible god seems to be represented as something much more akin to a human person (would it make any sense to speak of a disembodied being as a 'he' - I don't see how Swinburne's god could possibly have a sex or a gender); well, Swinburne might say those are just the expediciencies of artistic representation. It's also possible to speak of god in a more rigorous, philosophical, *literal* sense. However, at the same time, Swinburne remains an orthodox Christian. Thus he is committed to the idea that god created us in 'his' image, but if his philosophical descriptions of god are correct, god may then be a being who's radically unlike us.

In any case this book tries to show, on the basis of all available evidence, that theism is more likely true than not.

Of course this is not precisely what any believer means when they profess their faith. Theism can be defended as an explanatory thesis, but it seems like this will always be a derivative, secondary operation. Moreover, there still remains an enormous chasm between theism as a thesis and the specifics of Christianity (or any other religion). Based on this book, it's not clear if Swinburne thinks that reason can bridge this chasm, or if from there it's a matter of faith alone.

I doubt this book will make many converts, but still I think non-believers (like myself) should read it (or try to - Swinburne's extensive use of symbolic logic does not always make for smooth sailing). Are there good arguments for the existence of god? I'm still on the fence about this. I do think there are a number of really compelling and provocative cases to be made against *naturalism*, but that is not entirely the same thing. In any case, non-believers are sometimes a bit overweening in their conviction that all the good arguments are on their side. Too often, I'm afraid, this overconfidence is based on philosophical illiteracy.

*

Swinburne respects science. He doesn't go in for young earth creationism or any such nonsense. An infinitely powerful god could have created humans any way **he** wanted. Still, evolution does seem like a rather roundabout way to get to us (especially given how much stress Swinburne puts on the power of simplicity). Swinburne acknowledges this but says still god must have had a reason for doing things this way. The reason he (Swinburne) comes up with is that non-human life has value in itself. God created animals for their inherent beauty, so says Swinburne... I have to say I find this extremely implausible. Are animals really all that beautiful? I'll grant that some wild beasts do have a majestic quality, but what about the sexual lives of insects? Has Richard Swinburne ever heard of traumatic insemination?

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traumat...>)

I don't consider insect-rape a trivial issue. For this and other reasons, I must conclude that the case for god is just filled with too many gaping holes. However, in this it's not so different from any other sweeping metaphysical position - naturalism, for example. I affirm an anxious agnosticism.

Daniel A. Duran says

I removed one star due dense, laborious paragraphs, also Professor Swinburne has problems getting to the point of an issue. But, the existence of god is a rich and rewarding book for those interested in philosophy of religion.

Ben Holloway says

Swinburne's classic attempt to apply Bayes' Theorem to the hypothesis 'God exists' is a masterful example of inductive argument. If the hypothesis succeeds in offering a simpler, more powerful, comprehensive explanation that has the best fit with our background knowledge, then this book provides a powerful argument for the existence of God.

Swinburne argues that if his theory of explanation is workable, then there a good cumulative case can be made for theism by invoking variously reworked theistic arguments that seek to explain various observational truths--the existence of finite objects, the orderliness of the universe, apparent human consciousness, moral realism, intentional actions, miracles, and religious experiences. Swinburne also offered a defeating argument to counter the problem of evil.

The question of whether or not Swinburne is successful or not rests on whether or not one accepts his method of inductive argument. The value of the book is primarily as an example of the application of the combination of inference to the best explanation with Bayes' theory.

Jacob Williams says

This is the best defense of theism I've read. I'm not converted, but Swinburne is certainly more compelling than, say, William Lane Craig.

JDP says

this is a very technical philosophical defense of the existence of God. for the most part, i agree with swinburne, and i encourage those who have the acumen to digest difficult arguments to read this book. the payoff is huge! in addition to educating the reader on philosophy of religion, this book is a primer on confirmation theory, epistemology, and metaphysics.
