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### Book Review: Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne

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## **Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne**

**Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower (Eds.): Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 256 pp, \$72 (hb)**

**Isaac Choi**

It is no exaggeration to say that the name and work of Richard Swinburne should be known to most of the readers of this journal, since he has been a leader in revitalizing analytic philosophy of religion during the past half century. His prolific output, extending long past his retirement from Oxford University, has repeatedly extended and deepened virtually every subarea of natural theology and philosophical theology. The papers in this volume were originally presented at a conference at Purdue University, organized by the volume's editors, in honor of Swinburne's eightieth birthday. The contributors are all prominent and senior scholars in the field, and several begin with personal reminiscences and tributes to how Swinburne's work inspired and even helped to initiate their interest in philosophy of religion.

Jonathan Kvanvig starts off the collection with "The Idea of Faith as Trust: Lessons in Noncognitivist Approaches to Faith." While he agrees with the increasing number of philosophers who downplay the importance of propositional belief in their analyses of faith, he argues that faith is not trust. Instead, for Kvanvig, faith is affective and dispositional at its core, a commitment to pursuing longer-term goals despite difficulties in reaching them. In his view, faith is identified with faithfulness, with Abraham's response to God's call as an exemplar, involving action, and not merely a passive trust.

A similar approach to faith is taken in "Working with Swinburne: Belief, Value, and the Religious Life," which J. L. Schellenberg begins by praising Swinburne for how he supervised his D.Phil. at Oxford. Schellenberg contends that Christian faith "can authentically be realized entirely without the metaphysical beliefs..., so long as certain important evaluative and cognitive conditions are satisfied" (28): what is important is having Christian goals, values, and practices, and not doctrinal beliefs. He depicts what such a faith could look like with a scenario involving a woman named Esther, who has lost her Christian beliefs because of skeptical arguments. She is unsure what to think about the core Christian claims, neither believing nor

disbelieving them. Yet she continues in Christian practices, with her goals and values intact. She seeks to become more like Christ through her practices, and while not believing the incarnation happened, she values the humility and compassion the incarnation represents.

Both Kvanvig and Schellenberg construe faith as more action oriented, downplaying or eliminating the need for propositional beliefs. But to this reviewer, such faith seems impoverished, if it is still faith at all. Yes, Esther is still engaging in Christian practice, but without any confidence that such practices correspond to an actual spiritual reality. How long would she continue in such a state? It is hard to see how someone who has consciously lost her religious beliefs will continue to follow and value Christian practices and goals for long without seriously questioning them. It seems quite likely that the loss of her beliefs will soon lead to a similar loss of her Christian values and practices. Instead, a full-orbed, healthy faith includes both positive epistemic attitudes and action. In line with the swinging to opposite extremes that exemplifies much of the history of theology, Kvanvig and Schellenberg have reacted too strongly against analyses of faith that are purely cognitive. The scriptural notion of a living faith is that of a balance, a mean between these extremes, with both practice and propositional belief playing essential roles.

The next two papers deal with theistic arguments. Paul Draper, in "Simplicity and Natural Theology," points out that Swinburne heavily depends on the criterion of simplicity in his probabilistic natural theological arguments. It is one of four criteria used to evaluate which causal explanation is more likely to be true. Theism's greater simplicity contributes significantly to the conclusion that it is more probable. While Swinburne believes that simplicity as a guide to truth is a fundamental a priori principle, Draper argues that simplicity's value actually derives from a more fundamental criterion, coherence. Draper conceives of coherence as fit or inductive support between parts of a hypothesis, which often turns out to be uniformity. Once we substitute coherence for simplicity in Swinburne's arguments, a major advantage of theism over inanimate explanations disappears, since the intrinsic probability of a nontheistic explanation of temporal order or regularities of causal succession is no longer very low because such explanations are uniform and hence very coherent (as coherence is defined by Draper).

One weakness of this volume is that it does not include replies from Swinburne to objections raised by the contributors. Perhaps a reply is unnecessary for those papers that do not engage so closely or critically with his work. But for a chapter like Draper's, which does, it would have been valuable to hear Swinburne's voice in response, even if only briefly. So I can only imagine what Swinburne would say to Draper. Perhaps he would argue against simplicity's derivability from coherence, pointing out that coherence or uniformity cannot capture all five dimensions of simplicity he has delineated. Or maybe he would point out that he is appealing to theism as an explanation of observed uniformity, whereas Draper is building that uniformity into his nontheistic explanatory hypothesis.

In "Swinburne's Aesthetic Appeal," Hud Hudson argues (reluctantly) against Swinburne's suggestion that considerations of beauty and sublimity can strengthen the force of fine-tuning arguments. The high-probability premise of the standard kind of fine-tuning argument claims that on the hypothesis that God exists,

life-permitting laws and initial conditions are very likely. In analogous fashion, aesthetic perfection could be added to God's attributes and could function as a motivation for God creating an aesthetically excellent world, making the existence of beauty and sublimity highly likely on God's existence. However, on skeptical theism, which Hudson believes is overwhelmingly plausible, there is an unexpected hidden cost for the theist: we would not know what God would value and is likely to aim at in creating a universe. So we cannot say that if God exists, it would be very likely that the laws permit life. This kind of "all-in judgment" about God's goals is epistemically unattainable for us. In parallel fashion, "aesthetic skepticism" would also prevent us from making that kind of "all-in" claim about God probably making a beautiful world.

This form of skeptical theism seems to me far too strong, claiming that we are in the dark about everything concerning possible goods and evils and God's motivations. From the traditional Christian perspective, which balances mystery with revelation, God has revealed at least some ultimate goods, such as love, peace, and healing. How exactly we get to those goods in the eschaton through our current vale of tears may be unclear and hidden from us, but it is not unclear that those goods are real goods genuinely desired by God and by us.

Dean Zimmerman has the longest chapter in the volume, "Defining Omnipotence," which iteratively addresses various puzzles associated with omnipotence, inspired by Swinburne's three editions of *The Coherence of Theism* (which Zimmerman says he first read as an undergraduate, and which helped convince him to turn from studying English to philosophy). He considers Swinburne's recent suggestion to avoid Plantinga's McEer counterexample (where a creature only able to scratch its ear counts as omnipotent by one popular definition): the omnipotent being is the one with the power to bring about the greatest range of states of affairs. However, spelling out what it means to have a greater range than another when it comes to infinite numbers of states of affairs runs into measure-theoretic problems involving infinities. Zimmerman offers responses to these puzzles, but he also suggests an alternative approach: the omnipotent being is as powerful as it can be and is able to thwart the will of any other such being. Another McEer-style counterexample looms, but Zimmerman argues that it is nowhere near as powerful as the original McEer, and so this unthwartable definition may turn out to be more tractable than Swinburne's greatest range approach.

Alvin Plantinga's "Law, Cause, and Occasionalism" focuses on what laws of nature are, what kind of necessity they involve, and how they are related to God. The most common sense view with regard to this third question is secondary causation, that the laws reflect the causal powers of the creatures God has made. Though it pains Plantinga to agree with Hume, he says he cannot make sense of how creatures can cause events, arguing that we have "no clear conception of creaturely causality." So he turns to consider various forms of occasionalism, where creatures have no causal powers and the laws represent divine decrees or counterfactuals of divine freedom. Occasionalism has the advantage of our being able to conceive of God's causality as necessary in the broadly logical sense: "if God wills that  $p$ ,  $p$  occurs." Plantinga has to opt for weak occasionalism to avoid making God the author of evil: creatures cause their decisions and volitions, while God causes their bodies to move.

But once Plantinga admits that creatures must have volitional causal power, why do we need to go with weak occasionalism for bodily movement? If he acknowledges creaturely causality in one arena, why could it not exist in others?

In “Love and Forgiveness: Swinburne on Atonement,” Eleonore Stump responds to Swinburne’s *Responsibility and Atonement* by contrasting it with Aquinas’s accounts of love and forgiveness. She summarizes her interpretation of Aquinas on love as involving two interconnected desires: for the good of the beloved and union with the beloved. The good for a person is her flourishing and this is closely connected to the ultimate good of union with God. This account also applies to God’s love for us. While Swinburne’s broadly Anselmian view requires repentance, atonement, and penance on the part of the wrongdoer for forgiveness, Stump argues that forgiveness can be unilaterally granted by the one who has been wronged. In fact, in the light of what love is, she contends that such unilateral forgiveness is morally obligatory, even if reconciliation requires both sides to act. Stump then responds to several objections involving God being said to hate some people, retributive punishment, and justice.

Nicholas Wolterstorff’s “The Liturgical Present Tense” is his contribution to correcting the relative neglect of communal worship and liturgy among analytic philosophers of religion. He reflects on the widespread but “baffling” use of the present tense on Christian high holy days to refer to events in the past. Many Catholic and Protestant hymns include phrases such as “Christ the Lord is risen today.” An Eastern Orthodox Good Friday liturgy repeatedly moves from present tense to past and back again. Why? According to the reactualization interpretation, held by a number of twentieth century Catholic and Reformed liturgical scholars, the present tense liturgy is literally making the past event present again. Wolterstorff insists that this is impossible. Event types can occur again in the present, such as eating the Eucharist. But the event tokens of the Incarnation and Resurrection cannot. Wolterstorff offers a more plausible alternate: what is going on is a *sui generis* rhetorical trope, which he calls the “as-if trope.” He argues that we use this trope in certain non-religious contexts, when we do not believe that something is what we are treating it *as if* it were. We speak and act as if it were such a thing because it projects a certain attitudinal “take” and resonance on it. Since our attitudinal take about the present is very different from the take we have when speaking about the past, present-tense liturgical language functions to make the events of the biblical narrative more relevant and “present to us.”

“The Rev’d Mr. Bayes and the Life Everlasting,” a technical but interesting paper by Peter van Inwagen, responds to an argument raised by John Leslie and Don Page that it is highly unlikely that we could have a very long afterlife. To illustrate the Bayesian reasoning of this argument and of the similar Doomsday argument, van Inwagen introduces what he calls probabilistic Venn diagrams, where circles represent propositions, with areas proportional to their probabilities. Van Inwagen identifies two major problems with the argument: Religions often promise infinite afterlives, so we cannot calculate the relevant probabilities because of well-known problems with probabilities involving infinities, limits, and division by 0. Secondly, a crucial premise in the argument, that the present moment is randomly chosen from my lifespan, is false, since such an argument is far more likely to have been devised

or heard about by me (as an analytic philosopher or cosmologist) in the first hundred years of my life than much later in an extended afterlife. It would have been nice if van Inwagen had circled back to the Doomsday argument and examined if parallel considerations (about when the Doomsday argument would likely first be formulated within a society) could undermine its conclusion. He briefly mentions this possibility in a footnote, but does not explore it further.

Marilyn McCord Adams rounds out the collection with "What about Hylomorphism? Some Medieval and Recent Ruminations on Swinburne's Dualism." She summarizes the hylomorphism, cognitive psychology, and metaphysics of a number of medieval Aristotelians, including Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham, and compares them with Swinburne and his substance dualist view, identifying some surprising compatibilities among stark contrasts. Adams then introduces to the conversation Thomas Nagel's neutral monism, his shift to a teleological perspective, and his rejection of theism for allegedly not giving answers for why God would choose what he does. In response, Adams presents varied medieval views of why the physical world exists, ranging from Avicenna's necessary emanations of God to Aquinas's God freely sharing goodness and excellence to Scotus's God freely widening the friendship circle of the Trinity. Hylomorphism helps with theodicy and the question of why a physical world exists despite its great pains; we are what we are essentially, soul and body. Adams worries that substance dualism only makes the problem of evil more difficult, because embodiment would not be essential to us. Why would God then expose us to the horrors to which the body makes us vulnerable? She says she is unsatisfied with Swinburne's own theodicy, but does not elaborate here with any detailed criticism of it.

This collection is written, edited, and copyedited well, and each chapter succeeded in holding my interest. It will probably not be very useful for most undergraduate teaching, since it is not designed for the introductory level (especially the more technical chapters of Zimmerman and van Inwagen, which presuppose familiarity with probability, denumerable infinities, and measure theory), and it does not focus on one particular subarea or problem in philosophy of religion. But for some upper division undergraduates, graduate students, and specialists in philosophy of religion, it will be helpful as a survey of responses by many of Richard Swinburne's venerable academic peers to important positions and arguments he has offered during his impressive and influential career.