



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Coherence of Theism. by Richard Swinburne
Peter van Inwagen

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Now, as I read Hume on causation, his argument turns on a *conceivability* claim, where “conceivable” is being used in the standard 18th century sense of *not self-contradictory*. So Hume is arguing that *a* and *b* are, as cause and effect, separable in the logical sense. But Hume also argues, on the basis of nominalistic principles deriving from Ockham, that *a* and *b* are *ontologically separable*, which amounts to the claim that *a* and *b* cannot be related:¹ it is in effect to deny that relations have anything but ideal existence. For Hume the nominalist, then, events that are causally related must be separable, and cannot be parts of a relationally structured continuous process. Hume the nominalist thus disagrees with Mandelbaum’s views on causation. But logical separability does not entail ontological separability. One can therefore reject Hume’s nominalism, reject Hume where he disagrees with Mandelbaum’s account of causation, and yet accept both a Humean analysis of causal relations and Mandelbaum’s account of causation. Mandelbaum’s belief that there is conflict between the latter two positions derives from his not clearly distinguishing Hume’s nominalism from Hume’s logical atomism.²

There is much more in this significant volume than I have been able to indicate. Always lucidly written, crammed with clear arguments, and full of apt illustration, this book will, I am sure, be indispensable to anyone interested in the topics it discusses.

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THE COHERENCE OF THEISM. By RICHARD SWINBURNE. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977. Pp. 302. \$21.00.

Professor Swinburne’s book is so densely packed with argument and definition that to give an accurate description of its content would be impossible in a short review. I shall therefore attempt only two things: I shall give a brief description of what Swinburne attempts to do, and I shall mention what seems to me to be a defect in his method.

As his title indicates, Swinburne attempts to establish the coherence of theism. I am not at all sure what “coherence” is, despite a long attempt by Swinburne to explain it. But, whatever this attribute may be, here is how one proves a priori to one’s audience that a given thesis has it: one tells a story that (one hopes) one’s audience will agree is possible

¹ See the first two essays in J. Weinberg, *Abstraction, Relation and Induction* (Madison, Wisc., 1965).

² Cf. F. Wilson, “Weinberg’s Refutation of Nominalism,” *Dialogue*, 8 (1969), pp. 460–474.

and then one deduces—by steps the validity of which one’s audience grants—the thesis under consideration. As to Swinburne’s proving the coherence of *theism*, this comes down to his proving the coherence of the thesis that there exists a *personal ground of being*, that is, a person who created the universe, is a source of moral obligation, always exists, and is always perfectly free, perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. (All these words are to be understood in their everyday senses, or as defined in obvious ways from words understood in their everyday senses.)

Swinburne believes he is able to show a priori by his story-telling method that the thesis that there exists a personal ground of being is coherent, but thinks that a stronger thesis that many theists would want to accept is in fact incoherent: that *personal ground of being* is a *kind* to which a certain person belongs essentially. (Many theists would want to accept something like the second thesis because the first is consistent with the theologically monstrous view that the Personal Ground of Being is such that He *might not have been* perfectly good, is only *accidentally* omnipotent, and so on.) The incoherence of the second or “essentialist” thesis, Swinburne thinks, can be seen if one considers carefully the “semantic and syntactic rules” that govern our use of the word *person*: “For it seems that, given those rules, the only ‘persons’ which it is coherent to suppose that there could be are ones which could have or lack omnipotence, omniscience, or perfect freedom, while remaining the same persons” (p. 272).

Though the “essentialist” thesis is incoherent when taken literally (Swinburne contends), it *might* be possible to use the words that express it to state a coherent thesis, provided some of these words—and in particular the word “person”—are understood *analogically*. That is, suppose we were to “loosen up” the rules governing the use of “person” (and were correspondingly to loosen up the rules governing the use of “person”-related terms like “knows,” “acts rightly,” “brings about”) in such a way that sentences like “Some persons are essentially omnipotent,” “There is a good person who could not possibly have been a bad person,” and so on, are not prevented from expressing truths by the meanings of the words they contain. Then, perhaps, the essentialist could state his position coherently. Whether he can or not depends on whether one really *can* “loosen up” the concept of a person in the way suggested. (A similar case: some philosophers have thought that one could remove the semantical rule, “A cause cannot be later than its effect,” from the rules governing the use of “cause” and still have a coherent concept; others have denied this.) The essentialist who chose this option would, according to Swinburne, be predicating “person”

analogically of God, since, in effect, he would mean by “person,” “something *like* a person in the ordinary sense except that . . .” where the ellipsis is to be filled by the qualifications the essentialist needs in order to state his thesis coherently. Swinburne does not take a stand on the question whether the essentialist thesis (analogically interpreted) is indeed coherent. In fact he argues that we could have good grounds for supposing this thesis to be coherent only if we could have good grounds for supposing it to be *true*. He admits that there *might* be a way of telling a story to show a priori that the essentialist version of theism (understood analogically) is coherent, but thinks this unlikely because of a general feature of analogically stated theses:

[O]nce we give analogical senses to words, proofs of coherence or incoherence become very difficult. The less syntactic rules we have for the use of a word, the harder it is to deduce a conclusion from a statement expressed by a sentence which contains the word, or to deduce from some other statement a statement expressed by a sentence containing the word. Yet . . . to prove coherence or incoherence we need to do just such deducing. (p. 61)

This, in very broad outline, is what Swinburne attempts to do. Does he do it? Or does he at least come as close to doing what he sets out to do as philosophers ever do? In my opinion he does not, and the fault is not in his execution but in his design. Questions about whether something is possible, in even the very broadest sense of “possible,” are not to be answered by telling stories. (A good general discussion of the weakness of the story-telling method can be found in an important and neglected article by George Seddon, “Logical Possibility,” *Mind*, LXXXI [1972] pp. 481–494.) Let me give an example to show why I find Swinburne’s epistemology of modal statements unsatisfactory. Swinburne’s argument for the coherence of the notion of an *omnipresent spirit* (obviously an important part of his proof of the coherence of theism) takes the form of an invitation to the reader to imagine that he, the reader, turns into one:

Imagine yourself . . . gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, your thinking being equally coherent however men mess about with your brain. Imagine too that you cease to feel any pains, aches, and thrills, although you remain aware of what is going on in what has been called your body. You gradually find yourself aware of what is going on in bodies other than your own and other material objects at any place in space—at any rate to the extent of being able to give invariably true answers to questions about these things, an ability which proves unaffected by men interfering with lines of communication, e.g. turning off lights so that agents which rely on sight cannot see, shutting things in rooms so that agents which rely on hands to feel things cannot do so. You also come to see things from any point of view which you choose, possibly simultaneously, possibly not. You remain able to talk and wave your hands about, but find yourself able to move directly anything which you choose, including the hands of other people . . . You also find yourself able to utter words

which can be heard anywhere, without moving any material objects. However, although you find yourself gaining these strange powers, you remain otherwise the same—capable of thinking, reasoning, and wanting, hoping and fearing. . . . Surely anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an omnipresent spirit. (p. 105)

Well, *I* can't. I can't imagine any of this. *I* can't even imagine myself ceasing to be affected by alcohol, in any sense that will help Swinburne. I can, of course, imagine my never again drinking any alcohol and thus "ceasing to be affected" by it; but clearly that isn't what Swinburne has in mind. Or I can (perhaps) imagine myself drinking alcohol which is removed from my system by Martians before it reaches my brain; but this gets us no forwarder. Can I imagine alcohol permeating my brain but having no effect on it, say because the structure of my brain is different or because the laws of nature have been altered? Can I imagine alcohol having its usual effects on my brain but no effect on my sobriety? I can't and I am sure that anyone who thinks he *can* "imagine" these things has just not thought the matter through. (Seddon's paper is very good on this.) Now I don't wish to be dogmatic. Perhaps there is *some* sense of *imagine* in which I *can* "imagine" them. If so, in that same sense of "imagine," I can imagine that, say, Goldbach's Conjecture is false. (I imagine an enormous computer printing something out; I imagine respected mathematicians crying, "It's a counterexample to Goldbach's Conjecture!") But such a feat of imagination would not even be relevant to the question whether it is coherent to suppose that Goldbach's Conjecture is false. Or not in any sense of "coherent" that would be of interest in natural theology.

Obviously, if I can't imagine myself ceasing to be affected by alcohol, then I can't imagine *any* of the things Swinburne wants me to imagine in the quoted passage. Am I somehow deficient in my powers of imagination? I don't think so: I think that I can't follow Swinburne's stories because my imagination is too active. For example, Swinburne claims (p. 3) that it is coherent to suppose that the moon is made of green cheese. I think that anyone who thinks he can imagine that the moon is made of cheese has a very sluggish imagination: the active imagination demands a pasture for the antecedently necessary thousands of thousands of millions of cows, demands a way to preserve a piece of cheese in broiling heat, freezing cold, and vacuum for thousands of millions of years, demands some off-stage *machina* to protect a piece of cheese thousands of miles across from gravitational compression into non-cheese, demands . . . But any *serious* attempt to imagine the moon being made of green cheese—and what besides a serious attempt could prove "coherence"?—must, like the unimaginable object itself,

soon collapse under its own weight. Only a philosopher of very little imagination would think he could imagine the moon being made of green cheese; only a philosopher of very little imagination would think he could imagine turning into an omnipresent spirit. *Many* of Swinburne's stories could be accepted only by philosophers whose imaginations were very nearly quiescent. Therefore, his arguments do not prove that theism is in any sense *possible*; and therefore they do not prove that theism is in any interesting sense "coherent."

The tone of the last part of this review has been rather sharp. Let me forestall a suspicion that may have been growing in the minds of some readers. My disagreements with Swinburne have entirely to do with his views on the epistemology of modal statements. I am not myself at all tempted to believe that the theses of traditional theism are in any sense impossible or incoherent.

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