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RICHARD SWINBURNE'S CUMULATIVE APPROACH IN DEFENCE OF THEISM

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL[1]

Abstract:

Richard Swinburne has certainly carved a niche for himself in contemporary philosophy of religion through his rigorous and indefatigable defence of theism. A signature novelty of Swinburne's enterprise is his cumulative approach in demonstrating the existence of God. His principal concern is whether the different inductive arguments for the existence of God cumulatively make it more probable than not that God exists; in other words, whether the cumulative force of the evidence in favour of God's existence outweighs the evidence against the existence of God. The objective of this essay is to critically examine Swinburne's approach. Rationally scrutinizing his claims, it acknowledges the undeniable merits of his endeavour, and at the same time exposes some of the unresolved difficulties Swinburne's approach still poses to the critical mind.

Introduction

Richard Swinburne's fame in the field of the philosophy of religion rests on his rigorous and sustained defence of the rationality and plausibility of theism, and particularly of the Christian religion.[2] His trilogy of philosophical theism, *The*

Coherence of Theism, The Existence of God, and *Faith and Reason* as well as his tetralogy on specific Christian doctrines, *Responsibility and Atonement, Revelation, The Christian God* and *Providence and the Problem of Evil,* have all been particularly dedicated to the accomplishment of this singular project. A signature novelty of Swinburne's enterprise is his 'cumulative' approach in demonstrating the existence of God. In his *The Existence of God,* relying on the framework of modern scientific criteria, he builds a cumulative case in defence of the existence of God, arguing that the cumulative force of the different inductive arguments in favour of God's existence makes it more probable that God exists than otherwise. While it may be difficult to doubt the perspicuity, ingenuity and intellectual fecundity evident in Swinburne's insights, this essay argues that there are still some missing gaps and unturned stones in his arguments. Among other things, it questions if Swinburne's much-vaunted *a posteriori* arguments may not only be *a priori* arguments in disguise and also if in actual fact, mere probabilistic justifications, however strong they may be, are enough to explain the profound commitment of different theistic believers to the tenets of their various religions.

Swinburne's Defence of Theism

By theism, Swinburne understands "the doctrine that there is a God in the sense of a being with most of the following properties: being a person without a body (that is, a Spirit), present everywhere (that is, omnipresent), the creator of the universe, perfectly free, able to do anything (that is, omnipotent), perfectly good, a source of moral

obligation, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship".[3] The first volume of Swinburne's trilogy, *The Coherence of Theism,* was particularly devoted to elaborating these attributes. Of course, in both philosophical and theological literature, these attributes which theism refers to God are not new; however, in the mouth of Swinburne, some of them assume peculiar articulations and construal. It is perhaps beyond the scope of the present paper to go into the contours of how Swinburne spells them out. However, worthy of note is the fact that Swinburne at this point does not yet argue whether there really exists a being with these attributes. His primary interest here is about the coherence of the claim, which of course, some philosophers, especially those of the neopositivistic and verificationist extraction, have summarily denied.[4] After considerable arguments, he came to the conclusion that all the claims of theism about God in which words are used in their normal mundane sense are logically possible, and thus coherent.[5] Even though he argues for the logical possibility of the claim that attributes necessity to God, Swinburne thinks that since the arguments for this claim require that various words be understood in their analogical sense, it would be very difficult, nay impossible, to prove their coherence or incoherence in any direct or semi-direct way. Nevertheless, he concedes that it is possible to have "an inductive proof of the coherence of this claim in so far as, on assumption that it is coherent, there is inductive evidence for the truth of the claim".[6] Swinburne thinks that while for the atheist the best hope of discountenancing the existence of God would be "to show that the total available evidence (including such apparent counter-evidence as the existence of evil) does not make it somewhat more probable than not (even on the assumption that it is coherent) that there is God",[7]

the theist, on the other hand, has to believe that the claims are coherent and that there is no way of proving them incoherent. That implies his having good inductive grounds for believing the claims to be true, that is, having good inductive grounds for demonstrating the higher probability of the claim that there is a God. Thus, Swinburne dedicates the second volume of his trilogy, *The Existence of God*, "to assess the force of the arguments from experience for and against this claim, and to reach a conclusion about whether on balance the arguments indicate that there is a God or that there is not".[8]

Of course, different arguments have been formulated in the course of history for or against the existence of God, and Swinburne is certainly not unaware of them.[9] While some people have adduced *a priori* arguments, typically represented by the famous ontological argument elaborated by St. Anselm in his *Proslogion,* others have adduced *a posteriori* arguments, exemplified in St. Thomas Aquinas's famous "five ways", though Swinburne expresses his preference for its articulation by Leibniz.[10] Having already discredited any *a priori* argument against the existence of God, that is, those ones which argue that the claim that there is a God is incoherent or self-contradictory, Swinburne doesn't also pay much attention to *a priori* arguments in favour of the existence of God, arguing that they "do not codify any of the reasons that ordinary people have for believing that there is a God".[11] Swinburne's main interest is with the *a posteriori* arguments which include the classical cosmological and teleological arguments. They include also the arguments from providence, miracle, revelation and

religious experience. The chief *a posteriori* arguments adduced by atheists against God's existence include the argument from the existence of evil in the world and the argument from hiddenness. Swinburne argues that none of the arguments in favour of the existence of God makes a good deductive argument, since it wouldn't be internally incoherent to argue against them. He accuses Thomas Aquinas of misguidedly thinking his "five ways" have deductive strength in demonstrating the existence of God. Swinburne argues that even conjunctively, they do not make a valid deductive argument. Consequently, they are to be evaluated in terms of their inductive strength, in other words, their different premises do not make the conclusion certain but rather in some sense give some support to the conclusion. Swinburne observes that depending on the strength of the evidence which constitutes the premises, an inductive argument is said to be good or strong or correct. In that case, the conjunction of the different premises of the argument in some way renders the conclusion probable. He calls a correct P-inductive argument one in which the premises make the conclusion probable, and a correct C-inductive argument one in which the premises add to the probability of the conclusion, that is, in cases where the premises make the conclusion more likely or more probable than it would otherwise be. In demonstrating the inductive probability of the claim of theism, he thinks it is important to investigate whether any of the arguments for or against the existence of God is a good P-inductive or good C-inductive argument.[12]

The strategy adopted by Swinburne was to borrow the symbols of the confirmation theory.[13] He uses lower-case letters like *e*, *h*, *p* and *q* to represent propositions, so that, for instance, P(p/q) stands for the probability of *p* given *q*. Swinburne's concern is with how probable *q* makes *p*, quite apart from who is doing the calculation, how clever he is, and his degree of confidence in the evidential force of *q*. Swinburne calls P(p/q) the logical probability of *p* on *q*, and thinks it is an *a priori* matter, since, as he argues, "If *q* represents all the relevant evidence, the value of P(p/q) cannot depend on further evidence – it measures what the evidence you have already got shows".[14] Swinburne observes that for every proposition *p* and *q*, "P(p/q) = 1 if (and only if) *q* makes *p* certain – for example, if *q* entails *p* (that is, a deductively valid argument from *q* to *p*)". On the other hand "P(p/q) = 0 if (and only if) *q* makes ~*p* certain – for example, if *q* entails ~*p*". According to this calculus, the sum of P(p/q) and P($\sim p/q$) is 1. Consequently, if P(p/q) > 1/2, then P(p/q) > P($\sim p/q$) and it is on *q* more probable than that ~*p*. Swinburne represents the hypothesis to be investigated by *h*. He considers it useful dividing the available evidence into two parts: new evidence which he represents with *e*, and background evidence which is represents with *h*. P($h/e\&k$) is then the probability of *h* on the evidence (*e&k*). The background evidence refers to everything else we know about how things operate in the world in relation to the hypothesis under investigation prior to the new evidence. Swinburne thinks it convenient, where one wishes to make the division between background evidence and new evidence, to regard background evidence, *k* as what in confirmation theory is called mere "tautological evidence", effectively that means all other knowledge which

may be considered irrelevant, and then to include all evidence derived from observation and experience in the new evidence, *e*.

With regard to theism, Swinburne considers *h* the hypothesis that God exists. The various propositions which different people have put up as evidence in favour of or against God's existence are represented by e_1, e_2, e_3 and so on, with their conjunction forming *e*, that is, the total evidence provided by experience. If we take e_1, for instance, to be "there is a physical universe", the argument from e_1 to *h* is the cosmological argument, that is, there is a physical universe (e_1), therefore God exists (*h*). In considering this first argument, Swinburne assumes that there is no other relevant evidence, and consequently, *k* will only be mere tautological evidence. Thus, $P(h/e_1\&k)$ stands for the probability that God exists given the existence of a physical universe and the background evidence, which in this case is mere tautological evidence and can thus later be ignored. If the resultant probability is greater than half, that is $P(h/e_1\&k) > 1/2$, then it means that the argument from e_1 to *h* makes a good P-inductive argument. If again it happens that $P(h/e_1\&k) > P(h/k)$, in other words, if the probability that God exists given the existence of the physical universe and the tautological evidence is greater than the probability that God exists given only the tautological evidence, then we have a correct C-inductive argument. In assessing subsequent arguments, from e_2 to e_n, Swinburne uses *k* to represent the premise or premises of the preceding argument. For instance, when considering e_2 which is the conformity of the physical universe to order, he uses *k* to represent the premise of e_1 so that $P(h/e_2\&k)$ means the probability that God exists given the existence of a

physical universe and its conformity to temporal order. Swinburne considers eleven arguments and does the same thing for all the arguments trying to find out if they present a correct C-inductive or P-inductive argument in favour of or against the existence of God.[15]

Swinburne argues that considered separately, most of the arguments are correct C-inductive arguments in favour of God's existence. In other words, they add to the probability of God's existence; they make it more likely or probable that God exists than it would otherwise be, even though some of them of course confirm the existence of God much more strongly than the others. Swinburne, however, argues that the argument from the existence of evil makes a good C-inductive argument against the existence of God, although it has limited force. He also thinks that the argument from hiddenness to the non-existence of God does not make a good C-inductive argument. The most important thing for Swinburne, however, is whether cumulatively these arguments make a correct P-inductive argument to the existence of God. As he avers, "the crucial issue, however, is whether all the arguments taken together make it probable that God exists, whether the balance of all the relevant evidence favours the claim of theism or not".[16] He argues that a significant bane of recent philosophy of religion is the tendency of considering the different arguments in favour of God's existence in isolation from each other. He thinks that even though there is nothing wrong with initially considering them individually, it is crucial to consider them cumulatively since invalid or even weak individual arguments can unite to collectively make a valid or strong argument. He considers misguided and

inadmissible the reasoning by some philosophers who, for instance, contend that since the arguments individually do not prove the conclusion that God exists, then the conclusion cannot as well be proved by them. For Swinburne instead, it is crucial to recognize that arguments can support or weaken each other. His major concern is whether the arguments for the existence of God cumulatively make it more probable than not that God exists. It is true that a particular piece of evidence may reduce the probability of a particular claim, but another piece of evidence can increase the probability. What matters is the total available evidence, the cumulative evidence and the cumulative probability. This, according to him, is also true with any far-reaching theory in the scientific or historical field.[17] Swinburne's conclusion is that "on our total evidence theism is more probable than not",[18] which means that a cumulative argument of all the evidence he considered for or against theism is a good P-inductive argument in favour of God's existence. But how did Swinburne arrive at these conclusions? How did he assess the worth of the different inductive arguments to the conclusion that it is more probable than not that God exists?

Swinburne's Justification of the Higher Probability of Theism

Swinburne drew his inspiration hugely from the scientific criteria. He observes that in the scientific circle, the probability of a particular universal statement being a law of nature is dependent on its belonging to a scientific theory whose prior probability is high and whose explanatory power is great. The prior probability of a theory refers to its probability prior to the consideration of the detailed observational evidence cited

in support of the theory. It is dependent on two *a priori* factors and an *a posteriori* factor. The *a posteriori* factor is the degree to which the proposed theory fits with background knowledge, while the two *a priori* factors include the simplicity of the theory and its scope. The intrinsic probability of a theory, that is, the probability of the theory independent of its relation to any evidence, is determined by the two *a priori* factors, that is, simplicity and scope.[19] For Swinburne, the crucial criterion is simplicity: "*Simplex sigillum veri* ('The simple is the sign of the true')".[20] Even though a theory's intrinsic probability is diminished in so far as it has a wide scope, the effect of the criterion of scope is outweighed by the simplicity of a given theory. The explanatory power of a theory, on the other hand, refers to its entailing or making probable the occurrence of different phenomena which are observed to occur, and whose occurrence would not otherwise be expected.[21] It is this latter aspect of a theory's explanatory power that Swinburne calls its predictive power. To have a great explanatory power, the phenomena which a given theory predicts has to be such that those phenomena would not otherwise be expected but for the theory. This will be the case only if no other theory with significant prior probability is able to predict the phenomena nearly as well as the said theory; and in which case the evidence will have very low probability, since only one theory, that is, the theory in question, renders it at all probable, that is, makes it to be expected at all. In essence, the point Swinburne seeks to drive home is that the probability of a given explanatory hypothesis on evidence depends directly on the prior probability of the said hypothesis and its predictive power and inversely on the prior probability of the evidence.

Evoking the symbols of the confirmation theory which we have seen above, Swinburne affirms:

> P(h/e&k) is a function of the prior probability of h, P(h/k); and of its explanatory power with respect to e. This latter is a factor that increases with the predictive power of h, P(e/h&k); and decreases with the prior probability of e, P(e/k). P(e/h&k) is a measure of how likely the observed phenomena e are to occur if the hypothesis h is true (given our background knowledge k).[22]

This draws from Baye's theorem[23] of the confirmation theory which in turn directly follows from the axioms of mathematical calculus of inductive probability which is simply stated thus:

$$P(h/e\&k) = \frac{P(e/h\&k)}{P(e/k)} \times P(h/k)$$

Swinburne claims that Baye's theorem is true, and by this, he simply affirms the truth of all statements of comparative probability entailed by the theorem. Statements of comparative probability, according to him, are statements about a particular probability being less than, equal to, or greater than another probability. From Baye's theorem, it follows immediately that $P(h/e\&k) > P(h/k)$ iff $P(e/h\&k) > P(e/k)$. Just logically moving a little further, it also follows that $P(h/e\&k) > P(h/k)$ iff $P(e/h\&k) > P(e/{\sim}h\&k)$. What this means is that evidence e confirms a hypothesis h if and only if it is more probable that the evidence will occur if the hypothesis is true than otherwise, that is, than if it is false. Swinburne is convinced that this is surely correct; it finds effective application in the historical and scientific fields; and we even implicitly apply

it in our everyday judgements.[24] With regard to theism, Swinburne sustains that theistic arguments proceed from the fact of the existence of the world together with its various characteristics and then move to establish the existence of God who is responsible for all the phenomena. In this case, e represents all the various facets of the world to which both theists and atheists lay claim in favour of or against God's existence; h is the hypothesis that God exists, and k at the onset is mere tautological evidence, as we have earlier shown. Following Baye's theorem, in each facet of observational evidence, the probability that God exists is thus dependent on how well the hypothesis that God exists is able to account for the occurrence of phenomena that would be otherwise highly improbable, and on its intrinsic probability, given that the background knowledge is merely tautological.

The intrinsic probability, as earlier indicated, depends principally on its simplicity and to a much lesser extent on its scope. The scope of the hypothesis of theism is very vast, since it concerns all that there is. But the criterion of scope is less significant; what is really crucial in determining the prior probability of theism is its simplicity.[25] What is therefore at stake is establishing the simplicity of theism. Swinburne is convinced that the hypothesis of theism is indeed a very simple one. He argues it by first showing how the different attributes which the theist refers to God fit very well together. In his view, the explanation offered by theism is a personal one, by which is meant that it is an explanation of phenomena from the point of view of the action of a person, that is, action brought about in virtue of the basic powers, beliefs and intentions of a person. The God postulated by theism is just one person and not many. Of course, it is a very

simple postulation to postulate one substance instead of many. [26] This one person, according to theism, is omnipotent, that is, infinitely powerful.[27] Swinburne argues that when there is a finite limit, there would be need for an explanation of why it just has to be that particular limit. But limitlessness does not impose a similar need. Consequently, he thinks that theism, by postulating a person of infinite power postulates a person with the simplest possible kind of power. In a similar manner, Swinburne examines all the other attributes which the theist refers to God, like omniscience, perfect freedom, necessity, moral goodness, omnipresence, etc., and concludes that "theism postulates one person of a very simple kind – a person who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free and eternal. Such a person will necessarily be an omnipresent spirit, creator of all things, and perfectly good".[28] In the thinking of Swinburne, the preeminent simplicity of theism lies not merely in its postulating the simplest starting point of a personal explanation that is possible, but also in its postulating the simplest starting point of the existence of the universe with all its characteristics. That is why he concludes that "the intrinsic probability of theism is, relative to other hypotheses about what there is, very high, because of the great simplicity of the hypothesis of theism".[29]

The second determinant of the inductive probability of a hypothesis *h*, as we have seen, is its explanatory power which, we recall, is determined by the ability of the given hypothesis to predict the phenomena which are in fact observed, and its evidence being such as would be expected iff the hypothesis is true, in other words, the evidence would not be expected if the hypothesis were otherwise. So, with regard

to theism, given the different phenomena cited in its favour, the explanatory power answers "how much more likely does the existence of God make the occurrence of those phenomena than it would be if we do not assume the existence of God".[30] This entails considering the different fillings of *e* to examine how likely or unlikely they are to occur assuming that the hypothesis of theism is not true, that is, that there is no God. Taking the cosmological argument, for instance, Swinburne asks how much likely it is that there will be a physical universe with all its complexity if there is not a God. After considerable arguments, his conclusion is that "if there is no God, the existence of a complex physical universe is not much to be expected; it is not *a priori* very probable at all – both because (it may well seem) it is vastly improbable *a priori* that there would be anything at all; and because, if there is anything, it is more likely to be God than an uncaused complex universe".[31] In other words, the explanatory power of theism given the physical universe with all its complexity is very high. He examined all the other phenomena cited by theists in favour of God's existence and concluded on the balance of probability that "the various occurrent phenomena are such that they are more to be expected, more probable, if there is a God than if there is not. The existence of the universe, its conformity to order, the existence of animals and humans with moral awareness, humans having great opportunities for cooperation in acquiring knowledge and moulding the universe, the pattern of history and the existence of miracles, and finally the occurrence of religious experiences, are all such as we have reason to expect if there is a God, and less reason to expect otherwise".[32] Thus, on the basis of the prior probability of theism and the higher explanatory power of theism, Swinburne is confident that the cumulative evidence of

theism outweighs whatever contrary hypothesis, and so, renders theism more probable than its alternatives.

Critical Appraisal

The rational rigour and intellectual buoyancy expressed in Swinburne's approach seem hardly questionable. Thus he has *ex hypothesi* been widely acknowledged as one of the leading lights (if not the foremost) in the field of Philosophy of Religion in our epoch. Some have compared his efforts to the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas.[33] Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey Brower unanimously affirm that "Although a number of figures have contributed to the contemporary revival of interest in philosophy of religion, few have done more to advance its development than Richard Swinburne".[34] Paul Draper recognizes him as "without doubt the greatest natural theologian of the twentieth century".[35] And notwithstanding their visible mutual antagonism, Alvin Plantinga succinctly submitted that "Richard Swinburne is certainly the outstanding natural theologian of our day; indeed his work over the last thirty years or so has resulted in the most powerful, complete, and sophisticated development of natural theology the world has ever seen".[36] Swinburne even himself personally claims the credit of having repositioned natural theology at the centre of intellectual discourse after centuries of suspicion and oblivion, and "edging Christianity a bit further into the forum of intellectual respectability".[37] The exceptional wisdom enshrined in Swinburne's approach, his intellectual rigour, his tough-mindedness and tenacity, the vastness and empirical appeal of his insights, and his systematic and organized way

of articulating his arguments all unite to stand him out as a formidable opponent to anyone who may wish to challenge the logical coherence of theism. From this perspective, we cannot but consider Swinburne's project a highly successful one, and unequivocally agree with Hasker that "this is a magnificent achievement, one for which we are all greatly in Swinburne's debt".[38] This notwithstanding, however, various difficulties still beset Swinburne's approach since the inception of his project. Among other things, questions have been raised regarding his construal of some of the attributes of God, his reliance on the confirmation theory, the fundamentality he accords to the criterion of simplicity, the issue of what Plantinga christens the principle of dwindling probabilities, etc.[39] While he has tried offering plausible responses to some of these difficulties, some others are still begging for attention. Without, however, overlabouring some of these issues, since much intellectual ink has already been spilled in that direction, I wish to highlight just two salient difficulties which threaten to fundamentally undermine Swinburne's cumulative approach in defence of theism.

In the first instance, Swinburne condemned all *a priori* arguments in favour of God's existence, and confidently claims to offer *a posteriori* arguments which cumulatively render it more probable than not that God exists. The critical question is, are Swinburne's arguments really *a posteriori*? Swinburne had defined *a posteriori* arguments as those "which claim that something that humans experience is grounds for believing that there is a God or that there is no God".[40] But he seems to have scored an own goal when, in concluding his *The Existence of God,* he pointed out with

reference to his arguments in earlier chapters that "I have urged that various occurrent phenomena are such that they are more to be expected, more probable, if there is a God than if there is not".[41] In other words, the direction of the arguments is no longer from phenomena to the existence of God, but the other way round, or as Alex Mbonimpa aptly frames it, "the arguments are: 'if God exists, then humans should expect to have such experience.' The arguments are not: 'given this human experience, it follows that God exists".[42] We recall that Swinburne first began enunciating the attributes of God, without questioning if a being with such attributes really exists. Then on the basis of these attributes which are so to say *a priori,* since it is not from any phenomenon of human experience that such attributes are affirmed of God, he goes on to say that given the existence of a being with such attributes, it is more likely that the various phenomena would occur than if such a being didn't exist. This seems an upturning of the *a posteriori* procedure which is well exemplified in Aquinas Five ways which Swinburne, without substantial reasons, had dismissed as "one of his least successful pieces of philosophy".[43] Herbert McCabe made the insightful observation that in "Aquinas' view, we do not know anything about the world through knowing something about God. God is never, for him, an explanation of the world. The movement is always in the other direction".[44] Thus, Swinburne's arguments seem to be *a priori* arguments in the garb of *a posteriori* arguments. This fact is further buttressed when we consider Swinburne's articulation of the probability of each argument. He states them in terms of the probability that the different phenomena will occur given that God exists and the tautological evidence ($P(e_n/h\&k)$. It is only through the application of a mathematical formula, the Bayes' theorem, that

one eventually arrives at what should be of greater interest, that is, the probability that God exists given the observed phenomenon. It is from this perspective that one wonders if Swinburne's arguments do not really share in "all the shortcomings that a priori proofs of the existence of God have been traditionally said to have including some that are stated by Swinburne himself".[45]

Leaving that aside, the probabilistic character of Swinburne's arguments in defence of theism, both individually and cumulatively, seems also to pose significant difficulty to his project. Swinburne, by his effort, is confident to have overcome the "deep scepticism about the power of reason to reach a justified conclusion about the existence of God"[46] nurtured particularly by the philosophies of Hume and Kant. He however argues that "although reason can reach a fairly well-justified conclusion about the existence of God, it can reach only a probable conclusion".[47] He then constructs the whole edifice of his defence of theism on this probabilistic basis. We remember the law of probabilism which states that in the conflict of probabilities, the more probable proposition does not destroy the probability of the less probable proposition since the less probable proposition might be the true one. In other words, even if we have to admit Swinburne's arguments in favour of the higher probability of the claim of theism, it does not *ipso facto* cancel the probability of alternative claims, and they could as well be the true claims even though they are less probable. So the question then is, do religious believers really anchor their commitments and convictions on mere probabilities, no matter how strong they may be? Swinburne's answer is an unequivocal yes. However, I think that Swinburne's stance may perhaps

only find relevance within the circle of intellectual discussions, since I doubt if in the actual practice of religion, believers really give any room for half measures in their beliefs. Plantinga made it clear in his response to the probabilistic character of Swinburne's arguments that "when examining probabilistic arguments for the truth of Christian belief, I was claiming only that these arguments are not sufficient to support full belief, the sort of belief accorded to the great things of the Gospel by those who actually believe them".[48] It seems clear that if people's religious beliefs are anchored on mere probabilistic foundation, it would definitely be difficult for them to approach God with the attitude of authentic veneration and adoration; it would be difficult for them to bow or kneel, genuflect or prostrate before God if they consider his existence only probable. People's adoration, veneration and filial subjection to God would be bereft of every authenticity and conviction. Domingos de Sousa raises this concern when he asks, "Can we treat God as an hypothesis that best explains observable phenomena and human experience? Since new evidence could arise at any time to show that the hypothesis was mistaken, would this not imply that we can only believe tentatively?" [49] Reiterating and resonating his concern, Mbonimpa submits that "if religious beliefs were matters of probability, we would have to formulate them more precisely in the form: 'I believe that it is probable that God became incarnate in Jesus.' I should think however that this is not the attitude of most people who have religious belief (i.e. they do not believe that it is only probable".[50] It is for Plantinga "an enormous and in my opinion wholly false assumption to think that beliefs in God, or more broadly, the larger set of Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) beliefs of which belief in God is a part, is, at any rate for most believers, relevantly like a scientific

hypothesis".[51] It is perhaps in this regard that William Hasker has held Swinburne to task for what he calls "his comparative neglect of the personal, existential dimension" of theistic belief.[52] Hasker observes that a striking fact about Swinburne's work is "its relentlessly objective tone". Though Swinburne does not deny the subjective, personal side of religion, he does not seem to give it much expression in his work. Hasker attributes this tendency to Swinburne's reliance on the confirmation theory. The moral here, as Hasker suggests with respect to Christianity, is not about whether Christianity is more probable or not, "not that Christianity is unworthy of acceptance, but rather that human beings who wish to reach conclusions about the general character of life and the universe are best advised to employ some method other than Swinburnean confirmation theory".[53]

These points seem to reveal some confusion of boundaries between philosophical theology which is metaphysics and revealed theology which is founded on revelation, but this lack of clear distinction between the two realms unfortunately seems to stem from Swinburne's apologetic approach. People do not believe on the basis of metaphysical reasoning, but on the basis of theological faith, a theological virtue which, though presupposes reason and so does not contradict it, surpasses human reason. Granted that Swinburne admits that since reason can only reach a probable conclusion about the existence of God and not an indubitable one, "there is abundant room for faith in the practice of religion",[54] the boundaries between faith and reason do not seem to be clearly spelled out. Swinburne seems in fact to argue that people believe on the basis of metaphysical reasoning and probabilistic considerations. In

Faith and Reason, for instance, he admits that when our belief in God rests on probabilistic basis, "our prayer will implicitly have a tentative character. 'O God, forgive me' will implicitly be short for 'O God, if you exist, forgive me'".[55] Pointing out that such a prayer may be considered absurd by some philosophers, Swinburne is firm that "I do not find this kind of prayer in the least absurd",[56] adducing arguments from the Christian New Testament in support of his claim. There thus seems evident some sort of equivocation between the realms of the rational and the theological, of nature and of grace, of reason and of faith. This lack of clear distinction between revelation and rational consideration is further evidenced in the facility with which Swinburne sometimes uncritically makes literal allusion to scriptural texts, without sufficiently considering the wealth of fresh insight brought into their understanding by biblical scholarship through the tools of textual and historical criticisms. Swinburne's natural theology is without doubt a metaphysical discourse, but metaphysics does not correspond with revealed theology. Faith doesn't ever contradict reason, it presupposes reason, but goes beyond reason, as ingeniously elaborated by Thomas Aquinas. Even though Swinburne has criticised Thomas Aquinas for what he considers his overreliance on Aristotle, Swinburne himself seems to fall victim of overreliance on the confirmation theory with attenuating consequences for his metaphysics. A comparison of the metaphysics of Swinburne with that of Aquinas certainly falls outside the scope of the present essay, however, suffice it to remark that some authors have urged that Swinburne return from the inductive-logical approach of the confirmation theory to a more metaphysical approach eminently exemplified in the efforts of Thomas Aquinas.[57] Hans Jonas has

decried what he called "auto-castration of philosophy", by which he meant philosophy denying itself totally not only the courage but even the right of expressing itself in its own terms, and trying to be as analytic as possible or thinking it must conform to the standards of science.[58] In as much as science and philosophy can reciprocally enrich each other, it may only be illusory to think of strictly conforming philosophy to the scientific criteria.

Conclusion

Swinburne's trail blazing role in contemporary philosophy of religion evidenced particularly in his cumulative approach in defence of theism remains indisputable. That his contributions have engendered beneficial evolution in philosophical reflections on religion is also without any shadow of doubt. My highlighting some of the difficulties that still attend his approach does not significantly detract from Swinburne's monumental achievement for contemporary philosophy of religion. As a reflective activity applied to all the phenomena of human experience, philosophy aims at having a synthetic vision and arriving at the truth of all that exists. Each original philosophical effort has been compared to a beam of light directed to this truth, which though never succeeds in encompassing the truth, inexorably enlightens the philosophic mind. Swinburne has without doubt provided enormous light in the philosophical search for the truth about the existence of God which definitely has not closed the search, but has opened up a lot of fresh vistas for further search and discussions for ongoing enlightenment. As testified by Richard Gale, his greatest merit

is to be found in a rare quality displayed in his works which indeed expresses the true

meaning of philosophy – wisdom.[59]

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[1] An earlier version of this article was presented in the First Annual Conference of the European Academy of Philosophy of Religion held in Bologna, Italy from 5th to 8th March 2018. I thank the participants in the panel "Modern Philosophy of Religion: Concepts - Approaches - Methods" for their insightful and enriching questions, observations and contributions.

[2] In fact, his declared program in philosophy is "to use the criteria of modern natural science, analysed with the careful rigour of modern philosophy, to show the meaningfulness and justification of Christian theology": Richard Swinburne, "The Vocation of a Natural Theologian", in Kelly James Clark, *Philosophers Who Believe* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 186.

[3] Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016[2)]), 1.

[4] In Swinburne's view, "a proposition is incoherent (that is, metaphysically impossible) iff in some way it involves a contradiction; and coherent (that is, metaphysically possible) iff it does not in any way involve a contradiction and so is true or could be true if the world were different in some conceivable way from the way it is" (ibid., 4). An incoherent proposition is not, and can never be true however differently one may conceive the world.

[5] Apart from the attribute of necessity in which Swinburne maintains that various words used in arguing for it are to be understood in the analogical sense, in his view, all the words employed in the arguments that explicate the other attributes are used in their mundane sense, that is, they are "words that have perfectly ordinary and non-ambiguous use in talking about non-theological matters" (ibid., 55). Even though omnipotence and omniscience are technical terms to which Swinburne offers very careful definitions, he claims that such definitions make use of words understood in their mundane sense.

[6] Ibid., 284.

[7] Ibid., 295.

[8] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004[2]), 1; see also Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005[2]),1.

[9] In his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Immanuel Kant had enunciated a threefold classification of the various arguments in favour of God's existence: the *physico-theological,* the *cosmological* and the *ontological* arguments. Though Swinburne recognized the permanent influence of Kant's classification, he considers it a "far from beneficial" influence". He thinks that Kant's qualification of the different classifications with the definite article "the" is mistaken, since that would entail that there is only one argument of each kind whereas in reality there are evidently many different arguments which can be put under the same heading and which are so different between themselves that it might be absurd to consider them forms of the same argument (see *The Existence of God,* 11).

[10] Whereas *a priori* arguments are ones in which the premises are truths that are logically necessary, *a posteriori* arguments are those whose premises report what in some general sense may be regarded as features of normal human experience.

[11] *The Existence of God,* 8.

[12] See ibid., 2-15.

[13] See ibid., 15-17.

[14] Ibid., 16.

[15] See ibid., 17.

[16] See ibid., 13.

[17] As Swinburne argues, "Each separate piece of evidence does not make the theory very probable, and indeed taken on its own makes some narrower theory much more probable. But the cumulative force of the evidence taken together gives great probability to the wide theory": ibid., 19.

[18] Ibid., 342.

[19] See ibid., 53.

[20] Ibid., 59. In a nutshell, the simplicity of a theory "is a matter of it postulating few (logically independent) entities, few properties of entities, few kinds of entities, few kinds of properties, properties more readily observable, few separate laws with few terms relating few variables, the simplest formulation of each law being mathematically simple".

[21] See ibid., 56.

[22] Ibid., 66-67.

[23] The introduction of this theorem by Swinburne has been considered by some authors as among his most significant contributions to the field of the philosophy of religion. Cf. G. Chartier, "Richard Swinburne", in I. Markham (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to the Theologians,* II (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 467.

[24] See *The Existence of God,* 67-70.

[25] As Swinburne argues with examples from the scientific field, it is clear that "the great simplicity of a wide hypothesis outweighs by far its wideness of scope in determining intrinsic probability": ibid*.,* 109.

[26] According to Swinburne, "It is simpler in just the same way that the hypothesis that some particle has zero mass, or infinite velocity is simpler than the hypothesis that it has a mass of 0.34127 of some unit, or a velocity of 301,000 km/sec": ibid*.,* 97.

[27] As Swinburne argues, "This is a simpler hypothesis than the hypothesis that there is a God who has such-and-such limited power (for example, the power to rearrange matter, but not the power to create it)": Ibid*.,* 97.

[28] Ibid*.,* 106.

[29] Ibid*.,* 109.

[30] Ibid*.,* 110.

[31] Ibid*.,* 151.

[32] Ibid*.,* 328.

[33] See William Hasker, "Is Christianity Probable? Swinburne's Apologetic Programme", *Religious Studies* 38 (2002): 253.

[34] Michael Bergmann – Jeffrey E. Brower, "Preface" to Michael Bergmann – Jeffrey E. Brower, *Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ix.

[35] Paul Draper, "Simplicity and Natural Theology", in Bergmann – Brower, 48.

[36] Alvin Plantinga, "Law, Cause, and Occasionalism", in Bergmann – Brower, 126.

[37] Swinburne, "The Vocation of a Natural Theologian", 199.

[38] Hasker, , 254.

[39] See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 280. Plantinga's argument is that apart from the inscrutable probabilities involved in Swinburne's cumulative argument, the fact that it involves a chain of propositions whose individual probabilities are in turn relatively dependent on the immediately preceding proposition, makes it subject to the principle of Dwindling probability. See also Hasker, 256.

[40] *The Existence of God,* 8.

[41] Ibid*.,* 328.

[42] Alex Mbonimpa, "The Providence of God according to Richard Swinburne", *Quardenos doctorales de la Facultad Ecclesiástica de Filosofia* 26 (2016), 243.

[43] *The Existence of God,* 136. See also Mbonimpa, 243.

[44] Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil: In the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (London-New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 68.

[45] Mbonimpa, 243-244.

[46] *The Existence of God,* 2.

[47] Ibid*.,* 2.

[48] Alvin Plantinga, "Rationality and Public Evidence: A Reply to Richard Swinburne", *Religious Studies* 37 (2001), 221.

[49] Domingos De Sousa, "Epistemic Probability and Existence of God: A Kierkegaardian Critique of Swinburne's Apologetic", *The Heythrop Journal,* 55 (2014), 45, cited by Mbonimpa, 244.

[50] Mbonimpa, 244.

[51] Alvin Plantinga, "On Being Evidently Challenged", in Daniel Howard-Synder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 249.

[52] Hasker, 253.

[53] Ibid., 257.

[54] *The Existence of God,* 2.

[55] *Faith and Reason,* 227.

[56] Ibid.

[57] See Mbonimpa, 259.

[58] See Hans Jonas, *Sull'orlo dell'abisso. Conversazioni sul rapporto tra uomo e natura,* italian trans. by Paolo Becchi (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), 140.

[59] See Richard M. Gale, "Swinburne on Providence", *Religious Studies* 36 (2000), 219.