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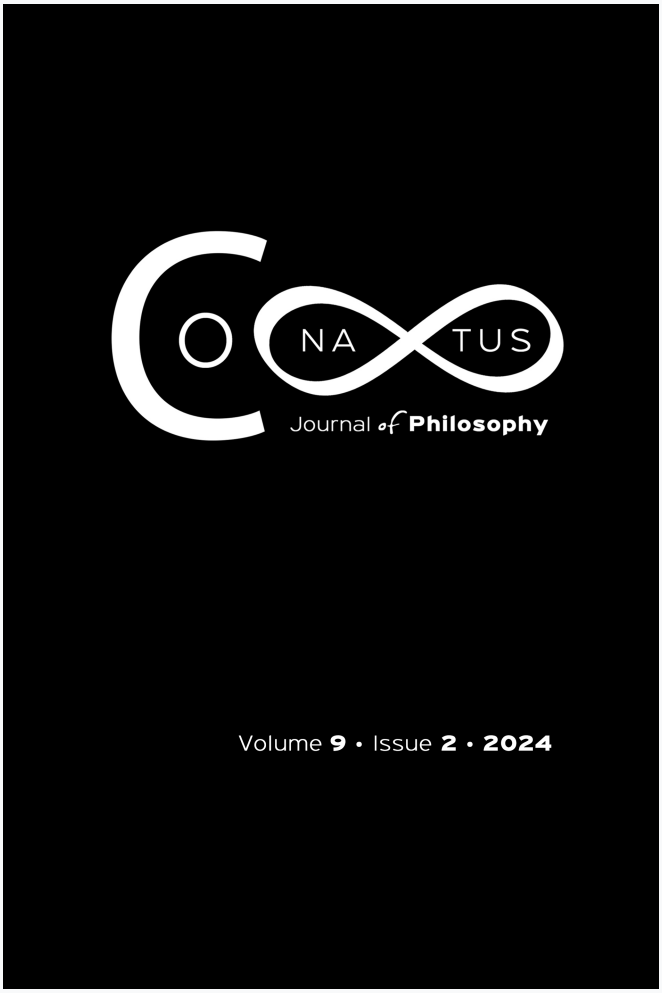
Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 9, No 2 (2024)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



Proofs for the Existence of God: A Discussion with Richard Swinburne

Richard Swinburne, Vasileios Meichanetsidis

doi: 10.12681/cjp.37535

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To cite this article:

Swinburne, R., & Meichanetsidis, V. (2024). Proofs for the Existence of God: A Discussion with Richard Swinburne. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, *9*(2), 305–314. https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.37535

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R. Swinburne & V. Meichanetsidis · *Conatus* 9, no. 2 (2024): 305-314
doi: https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.37535

Proofs for the Existence of God: A Discussion with Richard Swinburne

Richard Swinburne
University of Oxford, United Kingdom
E-mail address: richard.swinburne@oriel.ox.ac.uk
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9898-6135

Vasileios Meichanetsidis
National and Kapodistrian University Athens, Greece
E-mail address: vmeich@theol.uoa.gr
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5557-4630

Abstract

Over the last 50 years, the English philosopher Richard Swinburne (b. 1934) has been a very influential proponent of philosophical arguments for the existence of God (natural theology). His major philosophical contributions lie in the areas of philosophy of science and philosophy of religion. From a general philosophical point of view, Swinburne stimulated much discussion with his early work in the philosophy of religion. He has also played a role (a) in the recent debate over the mind-body problem, and (b) in the debate on libertarian free will. Swinburne is also noted as one of the foremost current Christian apologists, arguing that faith in Christian God is rational and coherent in a rigorous philosophical sense. My discussion with Richard Swinburne revisits the analytic and non-analytic philosophy of religion. Above all, however, it aims at shedding light on Swinburne's thought regarding some important philosophical issues, such as the Kantian arguments on the existence of God, the relationship between ratio and one's immediate experience of God (empireia), "strong possibilities" the problem of the existence of evil in the world, but also the theological significance and value of Orthodoxy in contrast to other Christian creeds or even religions.

Keywords: *analytical philosophy; analytical theology, philosophy of religion; rational element in faith; immediate experience of God; mysticism, strong possibilities; evil; free will; Orthodox theology*

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: Dear Esteemed Prof. Dr. Swinburne, thank you very much for accepting this interview. It is truly an exceptional honour to be able to share with our readers across the world this truly exceptional conversation with you. To begin with, which are the basic

foundations (premises) of analytic philosophy and analytic philosophy of religion at this moment across the world?

Richard Swinburne: "Analytic philosophy" is the name given to the kind of philosophy practised by most philosophers in the anglophone world since the 1940s. That name was appropriate to the philosophy of 1940 – 1970 since it was concerned then initially with "analysing" concepts (breaking them down into their observable components, as in logical positivism), and then with analysing the meanings of words (as in the "ordinary language" programme of, for example, J. L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein). But since 1970, analytic philosophy (now practiced much more widely than merely in the anglophone world) has taken a very different direction, although it is still described by the (now inappropriate) name "analytic philosophy." Now, what distinguishes "analytic philosophy" is very rigorous argument, sensitive to the latest discoveries of the sciences, seeking to establish the most general truths about the world (metaphysics) and the extent to which we can know about them (epistemology).

Analytic philosophy of religion since 1970, was concerned initially with whether claims that God exists or that God does not exist, were meaningful at all. Then it sought to explicate what precisely is meant by "God," and after that it turned its attention to the strength of arguments for and against the existence of God, and whether we need arguments in order justifiably to believe that there is a God. Then it began to investigate the meaning of particular Christian doctrines (and subsequently to a limited extent the meaning of the doctrines of other religions), and now it considers the extent to which such doctrines can be justified by arguments. It uses the purported results of other branches of philosophy – for example, it relies on views in philosophy of science for the criteria for a hypothesis being "probable," views in epistemology of what it is for a belief to be "justified," and views from moral philosophy about what it is for an action to be "good." It then applies such purported results to claims that it is "probable" that there is a God, that we are "justified" in believing that there is a God, and that God is perfectly "good." Most analytic philosophers of religion come from a basically philosophical background, the majority of whom are religious believers; but there are a significant number of atheist philosophers of religion, determined to prove the incoherence of the concept of God, or the non-existence of God.

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: Which are the basic tendencies of the non-analytic philosophy of religion at this moment across the world?

Richard Swinburne: The most prominent Western non-analytic philosophy of religion is that of the "continental" post-Kantian post-modernist tradition of philosophy, and so the philosophy of religion derived from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. I have enjoyed reading these two writers who bring to life extreme positions about religion. Kierkegaard expresses the extreme view that the sincere practice of religion requires total faith, and no reliance on rational argument at all. Nietzsche expresses the extreme view that "God is dead" and so therefore is all traditional morality. But, like many analytic philosophers, I have read very little of subsequent continental philosophy, because – it seems to me – writers such as Heidegger, and – on philosophy of religion – Levinas and Marion, simply express a certain (often incomprehensible) attitude to religion, without providing any rational arguments which might appeal to atheists as well as to hesitant religious believers, as to why committing oneself to religion is a rational attitude. In this respect they put themselves outside the tradition of Western philosophy deriving from Plato and Aristotle, through the Arabic philosophers, the mediaeval Christian philosophers, and modern philosophers such as Locke and Hume, Leibniz and Kant, who all sought to provide arguments for the existence of some sort of God, or (in the case of Kant), arguments for why no arguments for the existence or non-existence of God could be sound. As one who believes that human life should be guided by reason in all-important matters, I and most analytic philosophers oppose post-modernism. Now, of course, since I and most analytic philosophers have read very little of "continental" philosophy of religion, we may be missing something important, but that is the typical attitude of analytic philosophy to post-Kantian continental philosophy, and so of analytic philosophy of religion to the post-Kantian type. And I, like most analytic philosophers, know virtually nothing about Eastern philosophy, and so about Buddhist (or even Indian) philosophy.

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: Do you believe that we could now speak of a "transcendence," elimination of the Kantian arguments concerning the existence of God?

Richard Swinburne: Very few analytic philosophers (including philosophers of religion) believe that Kant's arguments against the possibility of reaching big metaphysical conclusions, including conclusions about whether or not there is a God, are cogent. A major problem with Kant (and almost all pre-Kantian philosophers) is that they are concerned only with the soundness of deductive arguments; they have no precise understanding of how inductive (in the sense of probabilistic) arguments work. They thought of induction as used by scientists, simply as

generalising from observations – for example, arguing from "all bodies of a certain kind attract each other in accordance with the law of gravity" to "all bodies of all kinds attract each other in accordance with the law of gravity." But almost everyone now realises that fundamental science consists in postulating a hypothesis which makes probable the evidence, and that may be either a hypothesis generalizing observations or a hypothesis postulating unobservable entities and properties; and that there are certain inductive criteria for which hypotheses are most probable on the evidence. It is interesting that the first scientific hypothesis (in effect, using these criteria) which postulated unobservable entities (such as atoms) in order to explain the behaviour of observable entities, was Dalton's atomic theory of chemistry put forward in 1803. Kant died in 1804. He had a deep respect for empirical science, and if he had lived long enough to appreciate the probabilistic justification for this and subsequent theories of chemistry, he might well have changed his views about the nature of science, and so more generally about the possibility of serious philosophical hypotheses about the nature of an unobservable metaphysical reality, being rendered probable (but not certain) by observable evidence. In particular, he might well have recognised that the teleological argument for the existence of God, which he considered more worthy of respect than other arguments, is a sound probabilistic argument.[1]

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: All your contribution has been a defence (an apology) of the "rational element in faith" without denying the significance of "one's immediate experience of God." Are after all rationalism and mysticism "equally" accepted within the frames of Orthodox philosophical theology and doctrinal teaching?[2]

Richard Swinburne: It is rational to believe in anything at all on the basis of one's own apparent experience of it, or on the basis of what an apparently reliable informant tells you about it, or on the basis of some argument – always in the absence of counter-evidence from other experiences, different apparently reliable informants, or counter-arguments. This applies to one's belief in God, just as much as to one's belief in any-

[1] Swinburne's paper, "Why Hume and Kant Were Mistaken in Rejecting Natural Theology," in *Gottesbeweise als Herausforderung fur die Moderne Vernunft*, eds. Thomas Buchheim, Friedrich Hermanni, Axel Hutter, and Christoph Schwöbel, 317-334 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), develops the argument that he has just presented in this part.

[2] For a nuanced discussion on non-rational beliefs that have been transformed in a Christian context, see Marina Savelieva, "Mythological Aspects of Supreme Power Concept by Eusebius Pamphilus," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2024): 157-171; for a discussion on metaphysical realism and monotheism see Åke Gafvelin, "No God, no God's Eye: A Quasi-Putnamian Argument for Monotheism," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 83-100.

thing else. If it seems to you that you have seen your friend John on the other side of the road, it is rational to believe that you have seen him. Likewise, if on the basis of your "mystical" or other religious experience, it seems to you very strongly that you are aware of the presence of God, it is rational to believe that you are thus aware. Almost all of our beliefs about geography and history are beliefs which we acquire on the basis of what we have been told by (as far as we can judge) reliable sources of information. So likewise, if the one source available to you which you trust, are your parents or the local priest, and they tell you that there is a God, it is rational to believe them. All this – in the absence of counter-evidence. But relatively few people have very deep religious experiences, strong enough to outweigh the influence of the modern world; and, while in a mediaeval village one's parents and the local priest may indeed be the most reliable source of information, in the modern world many of us are well aware of the testimony and arguments of many atheists. For this reason, many more people need rational arguments for the existence of God, and rational arguments against atheistic arguments, to persuade them of the existence of God. Some opposition to natural theology (which consists of arguments for the existence of God) has been characteristic of Orthodox teaching of very recent centuries. But this is totally out of line with the teaching of the Eastern church of the first Christian millennium; many of the great theologians much revered in the Orthodox Church gave arguments of natural theology in defence of Christian theism, as tools for convincing atheists. David Bradshaw and I recently co-edited a book of essays on this topic, *Natural Theology in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*.[3] Humans are different from each other and may come to God in different ways, but in the modern world, many atheists and also hesitant believers need rational arguments.[4]

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: All your philosophical reflection is based on the concept of "strong possibilities," if I may use this expression. Could you explain the central points of your philosophical thought?[5]

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[3] For the history of natural theology in the Orthodox Church, see *Natural Theology in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, eds. David Bradshaw and Richard Swinburne (St. Paul, MN: IOTA Publications, 2021).

[4] For a simple account of the importance of one's own experience and the testimony of others in reaching justified belief, see pages 1-4 of his paper "The Existence of God," https://users.ox.ac.uk/%7Eorie0087/pdf_files/General%20untechnical%20papers/The%20Existence%20of%20God.pdf. For a more thorough justification of the importance of experience and testimony, and so of the criteria for justified belief, which Swinburne calls "the principle of credulity" and "the principle of testimony," see Richard Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42-44, and 56-57.

[5] On the foundation of Descartes' 'strong hypothesis' for the existence of God see Justin

Richard Swinburne: My arguments are designed to show that it is significantly more probable than not that there is a God, and that the central doctrines of the creed are true. Arguments of science and history (and in particular forensic enquiry) try to show that certain evidence (the scientist's data and the detective's clues) make some hypothesis probable to different degrees. I analyse the structure of such arguments as follows. Evidence E makes a hypothesis H probable insofar as

> a. H makes E probable (that is, if H is true, you would expect to find E),
> b. not-H does not make E probable (that is, unless H is true, you would not expect to find E),
> c. H is a simple hypothesis, and
> d. H "fits in" with the rest of our knowledge about how the world works.

d. is not however relevant to very big theories purporting to explain almost everything in the world, such as quantum theory or – above all – the hypothesis that there is a God. In my writing I give various examples from science and history, to show that these are the criteria which scientists and historians use. I emphasise the crucial importance of the criterion of simplicity, because there are always an infinite number of theories which are such that if they were true, you would expect the evidence, and if they were false you would not expect the evidence. For example, any scientist will only have a small finite collection of evidence. In formulating his theory of gravitation in the late 17th century, Newton had the evidence of a relatively small number of observations on the behaviour of a few heavy bodies on Earth, a few observations of the positions of the moon and the planets relative to the Earth, and of the moons of Jupiter and Saturn relative to those planets at different moments of time during the preceding few years. On the basis of this he formed a theory of gravity, purporting to explain the behaviour of all bodies everywhere at all times, consisting of four very simple laws, the most complicated of which was the law of gravitational attraction, which asserts that all bodies attract each other with forces proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of their distance apart. But innumerable other laws could have been devised which satisfy the first two criteria equally well; what made Newton's theory by far the most probable theory was that it was

Humphreys, "Nature's Perfection: Aristotle and Descartes on Motion and Purpose," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021):87-106.

a very simple one. I apply the criteria I have analysed to arguments for the existence of God. My evidence for the hypothesis of the existence of God is the existence of our physical universe, its conformity to simple laws comprehensible by humans, those laws being such as to lead to the evolution of human bodies, and humans being conscious beings. Both theists and atheists have no doubt about the occurrence of this evidence. The hypothesis of theism is a very simple hypothesis, because it postulates only one entity (God), possessing only one essential property of being everlastingly omnipotent, from which property I claim that all the other traditional essential divine properties can be deduced. I argue that if there is a God, in virtue of that one property, it is fairly probable that he would create humans and a universe fitted for us to inhabit; but that, if there is no God, it would be immensely improbable that there would be such a universe. Hence the evidence which I have stated is such as to make the hypothesis of theism significantly probable. I apply these criteria also to the evidence about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and argue that – given also the evidence for the existence of a God – the former evidence makes it probable that the central doctrines of the Christian creed are true.[6]

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: As you have written much on the problem of evil, why does a good God allow humans to suffer so much?[7]

Richard Swinburne: God entrusts our world to humans, and so gives us free will. If the only way in which we could exercise our free will was to choose between alternative good actions, we wouldn't be really responsible for the world; God would have made all the significant choices for us. Really to entrust the world to us, God must allow us (within limits) to choose to make ourselves, our families and others with whom we interact, and the wider world better or worse. Hence, he allows humans to benefit *or* hurt each other. Since each time we make a good choice of some kind, that makes it easier for us to make a good choice of that kind next time, and each time we make a bad choice of some kind, that

[6] For the details of his arguments for the existence of God, see the simple book *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and the more detailed and more thoroughly argued book *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For the details of his arguments for Jesus Christ being God incarnate who rose from the dead, and so for his arguments for the truth of the Christian revelation see his short book *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[7] For a (rather pessimistic) discussion of the universe as a violent arena, and life as a constant struggle, see Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu, Paschal Onyi Oguno, and Princewill Iheanyi Alozie, "Dialectics of War as a Natural Phenomenon: Existential Perspective," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 129-145.

makes it harder for us to make a good choice of that kind next time. The free choices of each of us move the range within which it is possible or easy for us to make choices. And so we can gradually form either a good character or a bad character. Those who are harmed by the actions of others, and by the natural forces of disease, drought, earthquake, and so on, themselves also have choices of how to deal with their suffering. If I get ill, I have a choice of whether to deal with my illness by being patient, not complaining, not expecting everyone to be sorry for me, and doing what I still can do to help others, or to be sorry and complaining; and those whose suffering is caused by other humans, can choose whether or not to be angry with their persecutors, or to try to understand why they have done this, and be ready to forgive them. So each of us can in the course of time by our choices make ourselves either very good people or very bad people. It is by our choices when we suffer a lot that (with God's help) we can make ourselves saints, suited to enjoy the life of heaven. Although God may take to heaven others who have not freely formed their own saintly character, he will be especially glad to take those (including above all the martyrs who have been killed for their beliefs) who have deliberately made the choices which formed that character. And it is also by our free choices when we choose to impose terrible suffering on others, that we can make ourselves really bad people, who eventually eliminate any sensitivity to moral considerations, and so reject everything that God stands for. God will surely not let that happen to ordinary bad people without giving them many opportunities to do some small good action, and so begin a journey back to goodness and to God, but in the end he will respect their choices. So God would not take them to heaven – since they would not enjoy the life of heaven. While I think that talk about the damned suffering everlastingly in the fires of Hell is to be understood metaphorically, the "damned" will by their own deliberate conscious free choices have made themselves alienated from the good of heaven.[8]

Vasileios Meichanetsidis: In what sense Orthodoxy may be considered as "outweighing" other Christian denominations and even other religions? Do you believe that the analytic philosophy of the Ortho-

[8] Swinburne discusses this issue, both in chapters 10 and 11 of his book, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and in his book, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). But readers will find a more developed view of this problem in his contribution to a "debate book" with James Sterba, *Could a Good God Permit so Much Suffering?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024). The debate book takes the form of an argument between himself and James Sterba, who is an American atheist philosopher. His contribution to it is partly devoted to rejecting Sterba's argument, but also in greater part devoted to developing his own view on this topic.

dox faith can be a "deictic instrument" (*instrumentum deicticum*) of the pre-eminence of Orthodoxy against religious pluralism in the contemporary world? Can we speak with rational criteria of the uniqueness and then exclusivity of the Orthodox faith?

Richard Swinburne: Jesus founded a church to continue his work of converting and sanctifying humans; and to be a Christian, one must belong to that church. So, all baptised Christians are its members (even though some of them deny Christianity). But, alas, the Church is (temporarily) divided, and so Christians must choose to which part of the church they should belong. I argue that a society is the same society as some original society to the extent to which it preserves with the original society continuity of organisation and continuity of aim. The Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church both preserve continuity of organisation with the Church of the apostles, in that their successions of canonical bishops date back to the time of the apostles. For a church, continuity of aim consists in continuity of doctrine. I believe the traditional Orthodox view, that the Roman Catholic Church has less continuity of doctrine with the Church of the apostles because it has added doctrines which are not implicit in doctrines taught by the apostolic church. (Particular examples of such new Roman Catholic doctrines are the doctrines of papal infallibility, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the bodily Assumption of Mary – although most Orthodox believe the latter, it is not an item of doctrine binding on all Orthodox). I believe also the traditional Orthodox view that Protestants have taken away doctrines which were implicit in doctrines taught by the apostolic church – in particular, doctrines about the nature of the church and the sacraments – and, in the recent years, some of the moral teaching of the apostolic church about the sanctity of marriage. For these reasons I believe that in its organisation and doctrine Orthodoxy "outweighs" other Christian denominations. But all Christians must strive to reconstitute one Christian church, as its founder intended; and the Orthodox church is well placed between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations, to help in drawing them together with the Orthodox Church, into one Church. And of course, Orthodoxy outweighs "other religions," since the central Christian doctrine is that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and other religions do not hold that essential item of good news, to be taught to all humans.[9]

[9] Swinburne analyses the criteria for a revelation being a true revelation in Richard Swinburne, *Revelation from Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Although he does not explicitly draw the conclusion that the Orthodox Church preserves continuity with the church of the Apostles better than any other part of the Christian church, readers will probably see that this follows from the main arguments of the book.

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