Providence and the Problem of Evil

In *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Richard Swinburne attempts to rebut the common charge that the world we see around us (filled with pain and evil) is inconsistent with the existence of the Christian God. Swinburne’s approach is to show that (a) there are certain ‘higher’ goods God wants for us (b) some of these goods not only logically preclude the existence of other goods but entail the (possible) existence of evils (c) God has a right to allow these evils in order to attain the higher goods and (d) God will ensure that the goods outweigh the evils. So let’s run through (a) to (d) in order—after we address a rather important qualifier regarding Swinburne’s views on God’s nature.

**Swinburne’s definition of omniscience.** For the most part, Swinburne’s views on God are largely orthodox: God is perfectly good[i], a necessary being[ii], omnipotent[iii], and omniscient.[iv] The last property is the one at issue: if one thinks that it is logically impossible for there to be foreknowledge of what decisions agents (individuals) who have free will (defined in a libertarian sense—see below) will make, then there simply *is* no such knowledge and so even an omniscient being can’t know those facts. Swinburne does take this position—known as ‘open theism’—and therefore talks in terms of what is *likely* to be the case. This view of God weakens his theodicy in one respect, although I will claim that in the end this should strengthen the confidence of a more traditional theist that the problem of evil poses little problem for Christian belief.

**Higher goods.** Swinburne notes that if one adopts the position that God is really concerned with us having ‘a good time’ in the sense of sensory pleasures and the avoidance of pain, well then his existence would be disproved by any toothache, any stubbed toes, etc. After all, one could argue (1) There is pain in the world (2) God would prevent all pain if he could and knew how (3) God, being omnipotent and omniscient, would be able to and know how to (4) Therefore there is no God. Swinburne points out, however, that God is plausibly more interested in different goods than this. What he wants are persons who have chosen to (with God’s help) become the kinds of persons who would enjoy eternal life in Heaven enjoying the Beatific Vision. What, exactly, does it then mean to have the opportunity to become that kind of person? The basic idea can be summed up in one sentence: We have demonstrated a firm commitment to suppressing our evil desires and strengthen our good desires, not only in terms of ‘this worldly’ goods and evils but most importantly in ultimate matters—that is, whether we will worship God or something else. That seems simple enough. But the power of Swinburne’s theodicy comes in when he unpacks what that sentence implies about the world around us.

**Higher goods, other goods, and evils.** The first point to be made is that in many situations allowing good A to occur logically bars good B being possible.[v ] Secondly, and more importantly, some goods entail (require, presuppose) other states of affairs which themselves may be evil. Swinburne’s overall claim is that God’s intended higher order good for us does exactly that. Let’s revisit my short statement of what God’s higher order good of us amounts to:
We have demonstrated a firm commitment to suppressing our evil desires and strengthen our good desires, not only in terms of ‘this worldly’ goods and evils but most importantly in ultimate matters—that is, whether we will worship God or not.

How then does this statement entail various evils? Well, it seems to presuppose that human beings have truly free will—we can choose, on at least some occasions, to do good or evil. If humans truly have free will, then (given that it is logically impossible to make somebody freely do something) the actuality or at least possibility of evil (that is, bad choices/actions) naturally follows.

For humans to have a real choice between good and evil implies that evil is a ‘live’ option for them—which means that there must be some inclination or desire to do evil. That is, evil must in some sense be attractive (however weakly) for humans. This means that evil desires are entailed by free choices between good and evil—and surely the existence of evil desires is in itself a bad thing.

Now, if we truly saw the world totally as it is—that is, we had complete knowledge of right and wrong—then in some sense we would not be free to choose between right and wrong. For us to choose means that we cannot have such knowledge infallibly implanted within us—rather we must begin in a state of relative ignorance—which is another arguably evil presupposed by this higher order good. Rather, God would place us in a world in which regular cause-effect relationships exist and upon which we can learn what actions will lead to what effects.

Further, the greatest choices for the good involve good being pursued in the face of truly strong desire to do evil. We rightly praise the recovering alcoholic for refusing a free drink in a way we don’t praise the innate teetotaler for so doing. But this means that the greatness of a good action implies the corresponding badness of a present desire. The opportunity to gradually shape our characters to demonstrate a firm commitment to either good or evil seems to imply that there must be many such opportunities—and thus many such possible evil actions and actual evil desires.

So far, I’ve talked as if we were isolated humans. That is, of course, not true. We interact with and are responsible for other humans. This increases the opportunities to choose good over evil. Responsibility for others is a great good, but the greater the responsibility the greater the correspondingly possible evil state. The fact that we are social beings means that the number of possible goods that arise out of any given evil state of affairs is much greater than it would be if we weren’t social beings. If I am in pain, both you (as my friend) and I (as the sufferer) have the opportunity to choose good over evil in response.

And just as a truly great choice for good implies a truly strong evil desire (see preceding paragraph), so too does a truly great instance of suffering make way for the possibility of truly good acts. In a similar vein, Swinburne notes that truly great acts of evil (e.g., the Holocaust) may serve a greater good of allowing the deeply wicked to notice their moral plight, defends the providential uses to which God may put sloth, argues that allowing natural evils (e.g., earthquakes and fires) is justified in that it prevents the greater evil of truly wicked persons existing en masse, notes the goods arising even from death, unbelief in an afterlife, and ignorance of God’s existence. All of these are also intertwined with the great good revolving around
the person of Jesus Christ. [xxviii] While all of this is obviously intensely philosophical, Swinburne also provides some Biblical justification for such a ‘greater good’ theodicy. [xxix]

In summing this up, Swinburne states that “The bad state of pain is the grit which makes possible the growth of the pearl” [xxx] and “Every slight addition to our freedom and responsibility increases slightly the probability of sadness and pain; every slight diminution of the probability of sadness and pain resulting from human actions diminishes slightly our freedom and responsibility” [xxxi] and so on. [xxxii]

**God’s rights.** Swinburne then turns to the question of whether or not God would have such a right. He answers this in typically thorough fashion—but let me just pick up on a couple of central points. First, human parents (most of us think) have some right to subject their children for pain for their own greater good (e.g., going to the dentist for the sake of healthy teeth) or even for the sake of others (e.g., spending money on starving children in Africa rather than buying Johnny a new Xbox). But if human parents (read: benefactors) have this right, then God would have much greater rights. [xxxiii] God being our ultimate benefactor also means that he does not have certain duties to us that human caregivers might have. [xxxiv]

**The good will outweigh the bad.** Finally, Swinburne turns to reasons to think that the good in each life will outweigh the bad. First he notes that God is omnipotent—and he has an eternal afterlife in which to provide compensating goods. And these goods, he notes, are of a sort [xxxv] which even atheistic thinkers concede are likely to outweigh ‘lower level’ evils like pain. [xxxvi]

**Conclusion.** Does Swinburne’s theodicy work? I think that it does—he makes a persuasive case that every evil brings about (possible) goods, that God has the right to allow these evils to occur (given the plausible presupposition that he has in mind for us the higher-order good detailed above), and that God has the resources and character to ensure that the compensating goods occur (i.e., he can and will provide such goods.) But given Swinburne’s adoption of open theism, God is in a sense a ‘really good guesser’ who can simply after the fact make sure that the books balance. Someone who adopts a more robust view of God’s omniscience (one that, say, embraces both God’s foreknowledge of human actions and true human freedom) will be even more equipped to defang the problem of evil. [xxxvii]

**Footnotes**

i Although there is debate among theists regarding how moral obligations and values are to be grounded— with some like William Lane Craig rooting them in God’s own nature, and others— e.g., Swinburne—seeing them as logically necessary truths whether or not God exists—this is a debate of long standing in the Christian tradition, and so determining what position is historically ‘orthodox’ is troublesome at best. For what it is worth, my intuitions plant me more in the Craig camp on this.

ii Again, subtle distinctions lurk. God is, in Swinburne’s terms, factually (but not logically) necessary. See http://open.biola.edu/resources/what-kind-of-necessary-being-could-god-be and http://open.biola.edu/resources/what-kind-of-necessary-being-could-god-be-q-a for more of Swinburne’s views on this matter.
iii God can do all logically possible actions. Note that the atheist should grant this too—if God is able
to do the logically impossible then the problem of evil disappears! Put another way, if God can
do what is flatly contradictory then he can surely ‘handle’ the lesser problem of evidential
arguments from evil. If the meaning of that eludes you and you actually want to know what I
mean by that, let’s chat.

iv God can know all things which are logically possible to know. So far so good—but see the
paragraph following this footnote.

v “God will seek to provide all the good things and none of the bad things described in Part II.
But he cannot—for reasons of logic. For, as simple non-religious examples will make evident,
some good states are logically incompatible with each other. It is good for John to be married
monogamously to Mary for all his married life and good for John to be married monogamously
to her sister Ann for all his married life, but it is not logically possible that he be in both these
good states.”—Kindle edition, location 2061

vi “By an agent having free will in the libertarian sense, to repeat, I mean that which intentional
action he does is not fully caused—either through some process of natural causation (i.e. in
virtue of laws of nature) or in some other way (e.g. by an agent such as God acting from outside
the natural order). In that case whatever the current state of the Universe (including the agent’s
beliefs and desires) and the causes at work in the Universe (including those whose operation is
codified in laws of nature), it remains possible either that the agent will do the action in question,
or that he will refrain from doing it.”— Kindle edition, location 636

vii “It would seem logically impossible for God to give agents this freedom (to make it up to
them how they will choose) without the probability of them making some wrong choices. The
more agents who have this freedom, the more such choices they have, and the greater the
temptation to wrongdoing, the more wrong choices there will probably be.”— Kindle edition,
location 2097

viii One criticism that is sometimes made of all this is as follows: Surely it is possible that God
not really allow evil—maybe it would be sufficient that we were in, say, the Matrix. Two
responses are available. First is that some types of evil and suffering cannot be illusory. If I think
I am in pain, then I am in pain. End of story. Secondly, Swinburne argues that God placing us in
such a world would not be consistent with God as defined (perfectly good). “It is, I suggest, a
moral truth which I shall call the Principle of Honesty: God has an obligation not to make a
world in which agents are systematically deceived on important matters without their having the
possibility of discovering their deception.”— Kindle edition, location 2288. Note that this does
not mean that God will not allow us to fall into occasional error—rather it rules out systematic,
total, unavoidable error. See note ix below for more detail.

ix “The principle is a natural extrapolation to God from the similar obligations to honesty of a
human teacher. It would always be wrong for me to give a student a false piece of information,
which I state to be true. But it is not always wrong for a teacher to include misleading elements
in what he shows to his students, in order to force them to sort things out for themselves. I may give a student an apparently valid but really invalid argument, without saying either that it is valid or that it is invalid, in the hope that he will come to discover for himself that it is invalid. But it would be wrong for me to allow a student to get a false impression from my teaching if there was no possibility of the student finding out the truth. It would be wrong for a teacher to present a student with an apparently plausible account of history or geography, in which the various strands fitted with each other in such a way that the student could never find out that it was basically false.”—Kindle edition, location 2295

x “For humans to have libertarian free choice between good and bad, not merely is the possibility of moral evil required, but the actual occurrence of a certain kind of natural evil—bad desires—is required.”—Kindle edition, location 2229

xi “I cannot exercise a serious free choice to give money to the starving unless I have some desire to possess money when it would be good to give it away (i.e. a certain miserliness).”—Kindle edition, location 2236

xii On the Christian view, one who truly perceived without error God as he is would already be in love with him…that is, he is objectively loveable and worthy of worship.

xiii “This good, of it being up to us whether we acquire a morality and of what kind, involves the necessary evil to begin with of us having inadequate moral views, and those views leading to bad actions, for example to cruelty in war against enemies regarded as entitled to no human rights because they are foreigners.”—Kindle edition, location 2344

xiv “I think….there is something right in the claim that embodiment and finitude, in which creatures have an ability to learn, involve natural processes producing suffering as well as good.”—Kindle edition, location 796

xv See Chapter 10 ‘Natural Evil and the Possibility of Knowledge’, Kindle edition, location 2904

xvi It is good, as we saw in Chapter 5, that we should have the power (as apparently we do) gradually, over time, to mould our characters so as to fix them permanently.—Kindle edition, location 2360

xvii “…the great moral evil of an evil character may very well occur if we have the great good of the free choice of what character to have. But of course God would only be good in giving us this terrible choice, if he allows us some long time in which we have many (but not endless) opportunities of turning back; he must thereby ensure that our commitment to it is firm.”—Kindle edition, location 2389

xviii “…but clearly a much greater good is to have responsibility for other animate beings—and that serious responsibility involves again the ability to benefit or harm them.”—Kindle edition, location 2428
xix “The more free individuals there are and the more responsibility they have, the greater the probability of more harm to many.”—Kindle edition, location 2434

xx “The structure of this ‘higher-order-goods’ defence is as follows. A particular natural evil, such as physical pain, gives to the sufferer a choice: whether to endure it with patience, or whether to bemoan his lot. His friend can choose whether to show sympathy towards the sufferer, or whether to be callous. The pain makes possible these choices, which would not otherwise exist.”—Kindle edition, location 2680

xxi “An agent evinces his most substantial commitment to the good when he does such actions when it is hardest, when he gets no encouragement from the success of other plans, and things are happening to him which he does not desire. He makes such a commitment when he shows courage of a certain sort. And it is good that others should be involved with people at their most naked making the hard choices, for the others then show sympathy when it is hardest (because there is nothing about the appearance or success of the sufferer to make him attractive).”—Kindle edition, location 2684

xxii “But many, as a result of their own bad choices or the bad environment (in the formation of which the bad choices of others will have played their part), do not recognize much bad or wrong as bad or wrong. Only the starkest and most horribly wrong acts do they recognize as such. They have not yet reached but are close to the brink of total insensitivity to moral goodness. Their only hope is to be presented with stark choices—evils which even they can recognize; and a God as concerned for their salvation—i.e. their becoming good people (through their free choices)—as for the salvation of near-saints will, if compatibly

with his goodness he can, provide them with such choices. That means giving them the opportunity to resist temptations to do cruel acts. He will give them the opportunity to feed the dying beggar rather than leave him to starve, to disobey orders to kill a Jew imprisoned for his race, or not to torture animals. Yet of course those choices are only available if these terrible evils will happen if the chooser refuses the right choice. And there must be, as there is, a limit to the suffering which God allows anyone to endure for the sake of such a great good as the salvation of the hard-hearted. But it remains the case that it is a great privilege for anyone to be the means of making available serious choices, even or possibly especially for the hardhearted.”—Kindle edition, location 2808

xxiii “Causing people to suffer is a far worse thing than letting people suffer. And yet it is good that we should have the opportunity to do wrong. Being subject to sloth puts us in that situation where we can do wrong without actively causing it.”—Kindle edition, location 2627

xxiv “It needs those insidious processes of (currently) unavoidable accident and dissolution which money and strength cannot ward off for long to give us the opportunities, so easy otherwise to avoid, to become heroes. True, God could compensate for the absence of natural evil by subjecting humans to such temptation deliberately (or at any rate knowingly) to cause suffering to each other that there was again plenty of opportunity for courage. He could make us so naturally evil that we lacked much natural affection and had inbuilt urges to torture each other (or at any rate allow each other to suffer), in face of which we others could show courage and
sympathy. But it is, I hope, in no way obvious that it would be better for God to replace disease by such an increase of inbuilt depravity (i.e. a system of strong desires for what is known to be bad or to cause what is bad). Rather, I would have thought, the reverse. A world in which humans (and animals) lacked much natural affection for parents, children, neighbours, etc. would be a horrible place.”—Kindle edition, location 2757

xxv “The first advantage of death is that it allows agents to do or to refrain from doing to each other a certain harm (of a qualitatively different kind to other harms)—to deprive of existence….The second advantage of mortality is to give us the possibility of supreme self-sacrifice and courage in the face of absolute disaster….Thirdly, a world with natural death is a world in which an agent’s own contribution has a significance to it because it is irreversible by the agent…Fourthly, a world with birth but without natural death would be a world in which the young would never have a free hand….The greatest value of death, however, seems to me to lie in a fifth consideration, which is in a way opposite to my second one. I wrote earlier of the great value which lies in agents having the power to harm each other. Clearly for the sake of the potential sufferer, there must be a limit to the suffering which one agent can inflict on another.—Kindle edition, locations 3525-3543

xxvi “Ignorance of whether death is the end means that our choices of whether to kill another or sacrifice ourself become very serious indeed, for we suspect that they will involve deprivation of existence for ever; and the temptation to avoid self-sacrifice becomes enormous.”—Kindle edition, location 3563

xxvii “There are significant biblical passages which bring out the important role of ignorance of God in making possible serious, and especially very serious, free choice….In the parable of the sheep and the goats at the Last Judgment, as related by St Matthew, the good are rewarded for feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc., in ignorance that the beneficiary of their acts was God himself. (‘In so far as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me,’ said the king.) And the bad are punished for their failures to act in similar ignorance. Their amazement at the punishment (‘when saw we thee an hungered?’ etc.) implies that if they had known who the potential beneficiary was, they would have fed him. Ignorance of God is a precondition here for the sheep making different choices from the goats”—Kindle edition, locations 3475-3480

xxviii “The Incarnation and the Atonement: these are two doctrines which are above all the hallmark of Christianity, which each have the consequence that our sin which is so evil makes possible a very great good.”—Kindle edition, location 3566

xxix “The New Testament contains no systematic treatment of the source of all the world’s bad states, though St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans contains a lengthy treatment of one particular bad state—the rejection of Jesus Christ by the Jews. The only clear conclusion of this section of the Epistle is that this bad state is only temporary and allowed to occur only for the sake of a great future good which it makes possible. And that is the theme prominent elsewhere in the New Testament with respect to other bad states. The parable of the tares and the wheat emphasizes that the tares will be allowed to grow only until the harvest time, then they will be bound in bundles and burnt. But if the tares are dug up before the harvest, there is the risk that the wheat
will be dug up with them before it is ripe. Jesus’s reply to the question of his disciples (in St John’s Gospel) about the man born blind, ‘Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’, was: ‘Neither did this man sin nor his parents, but [it happened in order] that the works of God should be made manifest in him.’ The explanation of the world’s bad states lies not in their past causes but in the future good which they make possible.”—Kindle edition, location 757

xxx Kindle edition, location 2720

xxx Kindle edition, location 2637

xxxii “Each bad state or possible bad state removed takes away one actual good. Each small addition to the number of actual or possible bad states makes a small addition to the number of actual or possible good states. A reader might suggest that no good would be served by his suffering a headache today, but he would be mistaken: it serves as a deterrent—to studying too much, at the expense of doing other things; as an opportunity—for patience, not grumbling, etc.; as a source of information for the future, to guard him against too much study in future, to provide information for his doctor to develop a theory about the cause of the headaches more securely based than would be a theory with one less datum to support it. And so on. Of course removal of one bad state or the possibility of one bad state will not remove much good, any more than the removal of one grain of sand will make much difference to the fact that you still have a heap of sand. But the removal of one grain of sand will make a bit of difference, and so will the removal of one bad state.”—Kindle edition, location 3630

xxxiii “God who is so much more the source of our being than are our parents….has to choose the laws of nature under which we live—not merely on what affordable food we shall be fed or by which accessible education we shall be educated. Consequently, his rights to choose how we are to be benefited cover so much wider an area.”—Kindle edition, location 3773

xxxiv “Let us begin with the all-important situation… God has to decide to bodies of which kinds governed by which laws of nature to join souls. Shall he make bodies which will give to their owners only thrills of pleasure, or ones which will also give pains, and under which circumstances? Since those on whose behalf this decision is taken do not yet exist, they are totally incompetent. God has a choice of what sort of people to make and in what kinds of situation to put them. There is no scope here for the ‘advanced directive’ criterion, nor for the ‘suspended judgement’ criterion, except in the sense in which it collapses into the objective criterion. For there are as yet no persons with moral outlooks and patterns of behaviour; there is therefore no meaning in talk about how (in the more natural sense) such persons would have chosen if they had been able to choose. Only the objective criterion has application. God must choose to give each of us a life which is objectively in our best interest.”—Kindle edition, locations 3762-3766.

xxxv “Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive. (Acts 20: 35) I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be
“Some writers have claimed that certain sorts of good states, say of kind x, are not comparable in goodness with other sorts of good state, say of kind y, in that, however many prolonged states of kind y you have, it will still be better to have one state of kind x. Noah Lemos, in an important article on the comparison of kinds of goodness, cites Parfit, Brentano, and Ross as explicit defenders of this view, and Aristotle and Mill as giving it some oblique support. Thus Ross writes: ‘with respect to pleasure and virtue, it seems to me to be much more likely to be the truth that no amount of pleasure is equal to any amount of virtue, that in fact virtue belongs to a higher order of value, beginning at a point higher on the scale of value than pleasure ever reaches’. These writers hardly have a religious axe to grind. I share with Lemos the opinion that Ross’s particular claim is implausible: an enormous amount of pleasure would equal a very small amount of virtue. But Lemos uses the general idea behind Ross’s view to urge that the goodness of a life of connected goods which may indeed be far better for including ‘pleasure, consciousness, and knowledge’ would, if it was a woven-together and integrated finite life, be better than an infinite amount of pleasure. That seems to me correct, and gives more plausibility to the suggestion that a finite life of painful utility is preferable to an infinite life of low-grade kicks of pleasure, the former, say, gaining its unity from a series of hard experiences which give to others opportunities for forming their souls through choosing between good and bad. Again if before birth I had the choice between lives of these two kinds, though I doubt if (being the sort of person I am now) I would choose the former life, I can understand it being the better life. But of course I cannot choose, and God has to make the choice for me. God sometimes pays us the compliment of supposing that, if we had the choice, we would choose to be heroes.”—Kindle edition, location 3997

A professional reviewer of this book noted that “Swinburne’s argument against…middle knowledge…leave much to be desired. It seems to assume (among other things) that we free agents can have control over God’s beliefs only if we cause them, an assumption that no circumspect Molinist would sanction…the rejection of middle knowledge is especially problematic (for a libertarian) since it introduces a degree of risk into God’s creation that Swinburne seems reluctant to acknowledge.”—Review of Providence and the Problem of Evil by Richard Swinburne’ The Philosophical Review, 110 (1), pp. 120-121. Author Thomas Flint. Note that Flint has written a stellar book on middle knowledge (Divine Providence) which I also own and will (eventually!) get around to reading and reviewing.