

Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey Brower, eds. *Reason & Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 256 pp. \$65.00 (hbk).

Kevin Kinghorn
Asbury Theological Seminary

Richard Swinburne is one of a handful of Christian philosophers who laid the groundwork for the remarkable resurgence of philosophical theology within the analytic tradition over the past few decades. This volume is a collection of new essays first presented at a 2014 conference in his honor at Purdue University. The list of contributors is as impressive as it gets within the field of philosophy of religion; and a number of intriguing proposals are put forward, building on Swinburne's wide-ranging work.

Alvin Plantinga makes the bold claim within the volume 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 so far seen" (126). That someone could even venture such a claim should alert the reader to the significant, potential benefits of engaging with Swinburne's systematic and often seminal writings.

The volume's first two essays, by Jonathan Kvanvig and J. L. Schellenberg, respectively, take up Swinburne's 'pragmatic' account of the life of faith, which emphasizes the pursuit of purposes over intellectual assent to propositions. The authors of both essays affirm some of the insights of Swinburne's articulation of the nature of faith—and then go on to suggest that we should go even further in distancing virtuous faith from cognitive mental states.

Kvanvig notes that the pursuit of purposes "typically arises out of conative or affective aspects of human life" (11). If faith is indeed an orientation toward some goal, a "disposition to act in service of an ideal" (12), then faith is fundamentally affective. For to consider something an ideal is not to take a cognitive stance toward it, but rather to have "a felt attraction" to it (13). A firm faith, exhibited by exemplars like Abraham, is thus not achieved through further beliefs about, or even trusting reliance upon, God—but rather is achieved through a deeper affection for an ideal, which disposes one to act in service to that ideal in an array of circumstances.

Schellenberg addresses the specific, cognitive element Swinburne does insist on, in the exercise of Christian faith: namely, that in pursuing those valued goals one is pursuing through the Christian way of life, one must at least believe that no non-Christian creeds outline a path more likely to achieve these goals. Schellenberg argues

that even this minimal belief, or probability assessment, is not necessary for genuine faith. Consider a person who hears a presentation of some Christian doctrine—say, the Incarnation. The thought of God reaching out to humanity in such love and humility “evokes powerful and rich emotions;” and she thinks “it would be the most tremendously good thing for it to be true” (35). In such a case the person can begin and sustain a commitment to Christian ideals and practices, spurred by her positive “evaluations and emotions” as she considers the Christian story (35). We need not suppose her to have made judgments about the probabilities of alternative religious paths or even to have any formed opinion on whether the Christian creeds are true.

Swinburne, though, will seemingly have ways of defending his view on the indispensable element of belief within any maturing life of Christian faith. In response to Schellenberg’s example of the person who considers the tremendously good possibility of the Incarnation being true, Swinburne could point out that, surely, the person will be exposed at times to *other* good possibilities. People in our day and age find a great many competing stories about valuable goals, many of which come with a recommendation from a friend or from a book reviewer that the goal is “really worth one’s time and energy.” With these competing options brought to a person’s attention, her actions will then seemingly be guided by what she *believes* about the comparative value of these goals, as well as the likelihood of achieving them. In response to Kvanvig’s description of the exemplar Abraham, whose “faithfulness to an ideal” stems from a “fundamentally affective” attitude, Swinburne might stress the need for Abraham’s cognitive understanding of that ideal to track over time with God’s inevitably deepening revelation to him. After all, Christians understand God to have certain goals for our world, which he invites us to pursue with him in fellowship. And as evidenced by apostasy—in which one recoils at the fuller understanding that following Christ means one has to forgive *that* person or undergo *that* change—an initial commitment to a broad goal or ideal does not guarantee that a person will be committed to all the particulars of the eternal relationship into which God ultimately invites her. Nevertheless, both Kvanvig and Schellenberg offer important insights on the ways in which a response of faith can indeed have less to do with one’s beliefs than with one’s cultivated affections and ethical commitments.

The next two essays engage with two of Swinburne’s best-known contributions to natural theology and, more specifically, to the methodology of certain arguments for God’s existence. Swinburne has shown the crucial role that *simplicity* seemingly plays in evaluating competing theories. Thus, on the question whether theism or naturalism is the better explanation for our existing world, a key criterion will be which of these two theories is the simpler one.

While Swinburne’s work has helped generate much discussion on the nature of simplicity, Paul Draper challenges the idea that simplicity is actually a key criterion for evaluating causal explanations. *Coherence*, Draper argues, is “a more fundamental criterion” (48); and what seems right to us about the importance of simplicity can be derived from this criterion of coherence. As Draper uses the term, ‘coherence’ is a matter of the “good or bad fit between the various ‘parts’ (i.e., logical consequences) of a hypothesis” (53). He offers several examples, some taken from Swinburne’s own work, which purport to show why coherence is really doing the work that Swinburne (and others) want simplicity to do.

In response to Draper, Swinburne will no doubt worry that we could arrive at equally coherent theories, with no good way of adjudicating between them. But at the very least Draper's thoughtful line of argument has some force to it and advances the discussion.

Swinburne's contributions to natural theology have also centered on the fine-tuning argument for God's existence. In constructing his own version of this argument, Swinburne emphasizes that God would have reason to create a world in which rational, moral, free creatures (like ourselves) exist. Hud Hudson notes that Swinburne also introduces and endorses—but does not explore in any depth—the idea that our world, in addition to being fine-tuned for embodied life like ours, is also *aesthetically* fine-tuned for beauty and sublimity. Hudson thinks this suggestion is tantalizing, though not in the end successful. He notes the strong line of response skeptical theism makes to the problem of evil: that “we are in the dark about whether the possible goods and possible evils we are aware of are representative of the possible goods that there are” (68), to say nothing about the possible, necessary connections between them. Hudson then raises a corresponding problem for a fine-tuning argument based on aesthetics: we are surely in the dark about what scope and connections exist between “the possible beauties and sublimities and the possible uglinesses and ridiculousnesses” (74). Thus, we can have no confidence that our world is aesthetically fine-tuned.

Two essays in the collection address divine power. In the first, Dean Zimmerman critiques Swinburne's analysis of God's omnipotence. Swinburne (and many others) understands the degree of one's power in terms of the range of results one can bring about. True, some things cannot possibly be brought about (e.g., a married bachelor); but should an omnipotent God be able to bring about anything it is possible to bring about? Clearly, God does not have *this* power, for there are many things that can, and are, done by people (e.g., lying) that God cannot do.

A common move at this point, which Swinburne follows, is to say that an omnipotent being can bring about all possible outcomes that can possibly be brought about “by that very being” (100). But there remains the lurking problem of Alvin Plantinga's fictional creature McEar, whose power is limited by necessity to the singular ability to scratch its ear. As long as McEar can bring about this one event of scratching, it qualifies as omnipotent—which is of course an absurd conclusion. Swinburne's amendment, in response to this kind of example, is to say that an omnipotent being can “bring about more logically contingent states than can any other logically possible person” (104). Zimmerman, though, raises further problems for Swinburne's finalized analysis of omnipotence, including a cluster of problems with determining what it is “for one range of state of affairs to be greater than another” (104). (Many beings could each be capable of bringing about an infinite number of outcomes.) Zimmerman's interesting solution—drawing from Danto's distinction between basic and non-basic acts—is to see ‘greater power’ in terms of “basic powers” (119). We thus understand the degree of power relevant to defining omnipotence as a function of the size of the range of states an agent can bring about as basic results of his volitions.

Alvin Plantinga explores the topic of divine power by considering the ways in which God might be thought to relate to the laws of nature. Plantinga sees three

possibilities. First, there is “secondary causalism” (133), where God has created material objects “with a certain nature or certain powers” (133). We then explain, e.g., Newton’s Law of Gravitation in terms of two objects exerting a force of attraction on one another in the way described by Newton’s Law. A second possibility is “decretalism” (135), where the laws of nature are, or at least represent, divine decrees. Material objects would not actually exert any force of attraction on one another; it is rather that God decrees that they act in the law-like way Newton identified. Third, material laws could be “counterfactuals of divine freedom,” specifying how God “would freely treat the stuff he has made under various different conditions” (136).

On the second and third possibilities, the only causal activity is divine activity, which makes them variants of *occasionalism*. Plantinga’s argument is straightforward. We do not have a clear conception of how created substances might cause events and changes in the world. But we *do* understand divine causality, given the necessary connection that exists between God willing that *p* and *p* occurring. “Insofar as we have a grasp of necessity (and we do have a grasp of necessity), we also have a grasp of [divine] causality” (137). Thus, occasionalism seems the better explanation of causality in our world; and Plantinga goes on to endorse one version of it. Occasionalism remains quite unpopular today—arguably for good reasons. But certainly Plantinga’s essay does not disappoint in containing a bold claim.

Swinburne’s contributions to Christian doctrine include offering a particular version of the satisfaction model of the atonement. Eleonore Stump responds to Swinburne’s contention that God’s forgiveness and the removal of our guilt will require “reparation and penance in addition to repentance and apology” (151). Stump draws from Aquinas’s analysis of love, which links love with the mutually governing desires “for the good of the beloved and for union with the beloved” (156). She emphasizes that, since God loves every person, and since “failure to forgive involves failure to desire the good for a wrongdoer or failure to desire union with her,” then God will forgive every person” (158). Although some individuals may not accept God’s forgiveness and thereby be *reconciled* to God, forgiveness is something God can offer unilaterally—and does in fact offer to all people, given his loving nature.

The core of Stump’s objection is that, “on Swinburne’s account, a wronged person’s ability to forgive is dependent on the decisions of the wrongdoer” (166). But perhaps Swinburne can reply that God’s “ability” in this context is not a matter of God being placated by a wrongdoer’s acts of reparation and penance (which involve a person’s pleading of Christ’s passion as her sacrificial gift to God), so that God becomes inclined to forgive. Rather, the key question to ask is: *who is it* that stands as a candidate for forgiveness? If a wrongdoer needs to perform acts of penance and reparation as a way of fully owning up to the truth about herself, and as a way of fully trusting in the merits of Christ, then God is only able to forgive a wrongdoer (*qua agent who has made key self-determinative decisions about how she wants to relate to God*) if the wrongdoer offers Christ’s atoning work as penance and reparation. Given Swinburne’s long-standing emphasis on significant human freedom, this reply to Stump strikes me as a natural and consistent one for him to take.

The next essay in this volume, from Nicholas Wolterstorff, is a reflection on what Wolterstorff calls “the liturgical present tense” (171). Consider the Easter hymn

by Charles Wesley: "Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia!" Likewise the Orthodox liturgy for Vespers on Good Friday reads: "Today the most pure virgin saw thee hanging on the cross." Sometimes Christian liturgies contain "a seamless weaving back and forth between the present and the past tense" (174). Wolterstorff asks of all these instances, "What is the point? How are we to understand the use of the liturgical present tense" (173)? He surveys variants of a popular theory that past events are "reactualized"—that is, that they are "made present" or "made actual again" in some way (180). After concluding that reactualization is just not possible, Wolterstorff advances his own view that the liturgical present is a "distinct rhetorical trope," a speaking "*as if* certain event-tokens from the distant past are happening now" (183). Wolterstorff illustrates this type of speech with several non-religious examples, distinguishing it from pretending and from imagining. He concludes with a discussion of how, through the liturgical present tense, we make past events "present to us" (190), making his discussion devotionally helpful to Christians, as well as philosophically interesting.

The final two essays involve discussions of immortality and the soul. Peter van Inwagen's essay is easily the most technical within the collection—reader beware. He outlines the "Doomsday Argument," made popular by John Leslie, which is "a Bayesian argument" that "the hypothesis that the end of the human species will come within the next few centuries" is much higher than we might expect (196), given the simple assumption that our present moment is a random moment somewhere between the beginning and end of our species' total history. Van Inwagen applies the form of this argument to consider the probability that one's life (whether on earth or beyond it) will end sooner rather than later, based on the crucial assumption that "I may regard the present moment as a moment chosen at random" within the interval between my beginning and my end (204). Van Inwagen concludes that a Doomsday-type argument indeed renders our long-term prospects quite improbable. Happily, though, the crucial assumption turns out to be "at best extremely doubtful" (216); so the reader can rest easy.

Marilyn McCord Adams rounds out the collection of essays by examining Swinburne's defense of substance dualism. In particular, Adams compares and contrasts Swinburne's dualism with hylomorphism, "that family of theories which see things here below as shaped-up stuff, as constituted by matter and substantial form" (222). While there are similarities between Swinburne's dualism and the trio of hylomorphists Adams discusses (Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham), it is the differences on which Adams focuses. She stresses that the medievals would have thought Swinburne to have a "'thin' view of substance" (222). Swinburne understands a substance as a "particular subject of properties" that is "causally interactive" (222). But "for medieval Aristotelians, substances are not merely causally interactive continuant subjects of properties; rather, they are marked by functional integrity that is metaphysically underwritten by their being essentially instances of a natural kind" (232).

While Swinburne is keen to distinguish mental substances from physical substances (ensuring that the mental is not reducible to the physical), Adams notes that "neither animal bodies nor animal souls qualify as Aristotelian substances" (229-30). Again, Adams stresses, the medievals would have understood a "substance" as "a

functional integrity” (236). Humans cannot be comprised of two substances because a human being “is hylomorphic: substantial form roots its functional powers and structures matter into the organic body needed for those functions” (236). Adams concludes her discussion by offering her reason for preferring the medieval model. Unsurprisingly, her concern is the problem of evil. Given that “embodiment in this world exposes us to horrors,” it seems more difficult to understand God’s decision in creation “if human being is not a natural kind [and] if embodiment is not essential to us” (243). Adams’s pastoral concern, as well as her philosophical precision in laying out the differences between the metaphysical framework of the medievals and the framework of Swinburne and other modern thinkers, reminds the reader of her irreplaceable contributions to philosophical theology.

My briefest summation is that this is a terrific collection of essays. The reader’s knowledge of a variety of theological issues will be deepened by the philosophical rigor of the volume. At plenty of points the reader will find an invitation to explore further, through the tools of analytic philosophy, how we can more clearly understand God’s relationship to us and to the world around us—which is an invitation Swinburne has long sought to extend to those engaged in theology.