

# Must God Be Perfectly Good?

Jay Michael Arnold

## *Introduction*

Richard Swinburne, in his seminal book, *The Coherence of Theism*, claims “I propose to argue that not merely is perfect goodness compatible with perfect freedom, but that it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good.”<sup>1</sup> Swinburne’s argument consists of delineating definitions of omniscience and perfect freedom and claiming that perfect goodness necessarily follows from the possession of these properties.

Swinburne is careful to note that the properties of omniscience and perfect freedom are contingent, that is, “If he [God] exists, he just happens to have the above properties; it is a fortunate accident that he does. He might not have existed or might not have possessed these properties.”<sup>2</sup> Swinburne does not argue that God must necessarily possess these properties or that one property necessitates the other. Rather, Swinburne argues that if God happened to be omniscient and perfectly free then it would logically follow that God be perfectly good.

With regards to perfect goodness, Swinburne claims there are two kinds of morally good actions, the obligatory and the supererogatory, and that “Perfect moral goodness includes doing both the obligatory and supererogatory and doing nothing wrong or bad in other ways.”<sup>3</sup> According to Swinburne, obligatory good actions are those

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993), p. 188

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185

actions a person is under obligation to do, or bound by duty to perform. Supererogatory good actions are those that go beyond obligation or duty.

I agree with Swinburne that God possess the contingent properties of omniscience and perfect freedom. However, initially I will argue that another premise is needed, in addition to omniscience and perfect freedom, for perfect goodness to logically follow. The axiom, 'to know the good is to do the good' must be included in order for Swinburne's claim to hold. If not included, I will attempt to maintain that perfect goodness does necessarily follow from omniscience and perfect freedom. Initially I will attempt to demonstrate that Swinburne's claim is dependent upon the inclusion of the premise 'to know the good is to do the good'. However, despite my attempt to prove Swinburne's claim is false, in the end I will conclude that his claim is true.

In Part I of this paper I will present Swinburne's argument, delineating the properties of: (1) omniscience (2) perfect freedom and (3) perfect goodness which follows from these contingent properties. In Part II, I will examine two arguments. The first is Swinburne's Argument concerning the logical necessity of Perfect Goodness. The second is a Platonic Ethic argument claiming that Swinburne's argument requires a third premise, namely the axiom 'to know the good is to do the good'. I will conclude, for now, that Swinburne's argument holds, that is, "...it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good" is true.

## Part I – Swinburne’s Claim

### *Omniscience*

“Traditionally, God is said to be omniscient. Omniscience, like omnipotence, apparently belongs to persons at this or that time. What does it mean to say of a person *P* that he is omniscient at time *t*? The obvious account is that to say that *P* is omniscient at *t* if he knows all true propositions.”<sup>4</sup>

Swinburne delineates omniscience in the following way:

“A person *P* is omniscient at a time *t* if and only if he knows every true proposition about *t* or an earlier time and every true proposition about a time later than *t* which is true of logical necessity or which he has overriding reason to make true, which it is logically possible that he entertains then.”<sup>5</sup>

God knows everything that has happened before *t* (past) and everything that is happening at *t* (present). Furthermore, God will know future events logically necessitated by the past or present. “Past and future are subject to God- but what God already knows is beyond him making a difference to, and what he can make a difference to, he does not yet know...the past is subject to his knowledge the future to his control.”<sup>6</sup>

An omniscient God knows all true propositions, that is, knows every fact, including moral facts. Omniscience does not therefore include knowledge of the future, because the future is not yet factual; unless the future is logically necessitated by events in the past. The future is not yet known because it does yet consist of facts that could be logically known. “Although there could be a being who was omniscient in a stronger

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 167

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 180-181

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 181

sense- for example, one who knew at  $t$  all the actions which he would do subsequently, (described in a way which it is logically possible that he entertain at  $t$ )- such a being could not have the other divine property of perfect freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Perfect Freedom*

“The theist believes that everything which God brings about he brings about intentionally; everything he does, that is, is an action... There are no unforeseen consequences of God’s actions. The theist also normally holds that all God’s actions are free.”<sup>8</sup>

Swinburne delineates perfect freedom in the following manner: “...everything that  $X$  does,  $X$  does intentionally, [and] no agent or natural law or state of the world or other causal factor in any way influences  $X$  to have the intentions on which he acts, that is to choose the act as he does.”<sup>9</sup>

Swinburne suggests a logical limit upon the freedom of a perfectly free agent. “If an agent’s actions are uninfluenced by non-rational factors, rational considerations alone influence them.”<sup>10</sup> As already established, perfect freedom means that God’s actions are intentional. And unlike humans, God is not influenced by non-rational, in other words, causal factors such as physical duress, psychological deficiency, or a finite knowledge of true propositions. To say, then, that God’s actions are intentional means that when God brings something about, he means to do it.

When an agent means to do something, it is usually understood that he has a purpose for doing it, a good rational reason. “An agent has always to have a reason for

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 181

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 145

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 149

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 152

doing an action, even if it is only the minimal reason that the agent wanted to do it. The suggestion that an [agent] performed an action, without having any reason at all for doing it, is incoherent.”<sup>11</sup>

Swinburne then makes a distinction between causal factors and reasons. Causal factors are outside of one’s control, whereas reasons are considered, by rational choice. Causal factors influence one from without, reasons influence one from within. Thus while God is perfectly free from causal, non-rational factors, God is influenced by rational factors, or reasons.

A free agent has a choice of whether to do *A* or refrain from doing *A*. If the free agent chooses to do *A*, rather than refrain from doing *A*, then it follows that the free agent had overriding reason(s) for doing *A* rather than refraining from doing *A*. These overriding reason(s) are rational, that is, not causal factors influencing the person. God therefore, being perfectly free, is influenced only by rational factors, i.e. overriding reason(s) for doing an action. One might wonder at this point if human agency would causally influence what God would do. However, Swinburne might respond that God would still do the rational thing, but it would be the rational thing *under the circumstances*, brought about, in part, by humans.

Swinburne then asks, “Can an agent still do action *A* if he judges that he has an overriding reason for refraining from doing *A*?”<sup>12</sup> That is to ask, is it possible for God to do the opposite of what he has overriding reason for doing? Swinburne maintains it would be irrational for God to act in such a way. Furthermore, “We could not understand an agent who claimed to acknowledge ‘overriding reason’ for refraining from doing *A*

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 149

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

and also claimed to be uninfluenced by anything other than the reasons which he acknowledged, and yet did A.”<sup>13</sup> We would conclude that such a claim was contradictory, and thus irrational.

Overriding reasons or rational considerations can alone affect the choice of a perfectly free being. However, Swinburne claims, God may not acknowledge the existence of overriding reasons in any or all particular circumstances. “His freedom of choice only operates for choice whether to do an action *A* when he does not acknowledge overriding reasons for doing *A* rather than refraining, or for refraining rather than doing *A*.”<sup>14</sup> An overriding reason is thus a logical limitation on perfect freedom. Therefore, God is a perfectly free agent who is not influenced by outside causal factors or non-rational factors.

Therefore, in harmony with his perfect freedom, God will always do *A*, if he has overriding reason for doing *A*. And conversely, “It follows that a perfectly free agent will never do an action if he judges that overall it would be worse to do the action than to refrain from it; he will never do an action if he acknowledges overriding reasons for refraining from doing it.”<sup>15</sup> Here is the connection for Swinburne, between omniscience, perfect freedom and perfect goodness.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 150

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 152

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 151

### *Perfect Goodness*

“A theist normally holds that God is by nature morally perfectly good...I suggest that in our sense of ‘moral’ all theists hold that God is perfectly good, and that this is a central claim of theism.”<sup>16</sup>

Swinburne delineates perfect goodness in the following way: “In claiming that God is by nature morally perfectly good, I suggest that the theist be interpreted as claiming that God is so constituted that he always does the morally best action (when there is one), and no morally bad action.”<sup>17</sup>

Swinburne distinguishes between good (right) actions those actions which are obligatory and those which are supererogatory. Obligatory good actions are those actions a person is under obligation to do, or bound by duty to perform. I am obligated to pay my debts, and it would be an obligatory good to pay those whom I owe. “Obligations are a limited set. They arise out of certain relations we have to other animate beings.”<sup>18</sup> For example, obligations accompany parental or marital relationships. Swinburne asserts that if God had not created humans beyond himself, he would have no moral obligations. “But if he [God] does create animate creatures, he may have certain obligations to them (for example, to keep any promises he makes to them). And perfect moral goodness surely involves fulfilling one’s moral obligations.”<sup>19</sup>

However, supererogatory actions are those that beyond obligation or duty, such as giving one’s life for another, an action impossible for God. “Praiseworthiness...belongs to the agent of supererogatory acts.” By contrast to the limited set of obligatory acts,

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 184 & 187

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 184

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 185

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 185

“...the range of possible supererogatory acts open even to us often stretches without obvious limit; and those open to an omnipotent being may be quite limitless.”<sup>20</sup>

Swinburne claims “Perfect moral goodness includes doing both the obligatory and supererogatory and doing nothing wrong or bad in other ways.”<sup>21</sup> That is, a condition for being perfectly good is doing both obligatory and supererogatory actions.

Swinburne’s original claim “...it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good”<sup>22</sup> can perhaps be delineated as follows:

“... a perfectly free being will always do an action if he judges that there is overriding reason for doing it rather than for refraining from doing it. [A]n omniscient being will- of logical necessity- makes those judgments about overriding reasons for doing actions which are true judgments. Hence if he [God] is perfectly free he will do those actions which there is overriding reason to do and refrain from those actions from which there is overriding reason to refrain.”<sup>23</sup>

For the purpose of this paper I will grant Swinburne’s claims concerning moral objectivity, which are vital to the success of his overall argument. Swinburne is correct when he states that in order to prove his point he must show that “...judgments about overriding reasons for doing actions, about one action being over all better than another, are statements which are true or false.”<sup>24</sup> That is, morality must be objective if one action is to be judged better than another.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 185

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 185

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 188

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 188

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 188

## Part II – The Inherent Premise

*To know the Good is to do the Good.*

In Part II, I will examine two arguments. The first is Swinburne's Argument concerning the logical necessity of Perfect goodness. The second is what I call a 'Platonic Ethic' argument claiming that Swinburne's argument requires a third premise, namely the Platonic Ethic 'to know the good is to do the good'. The two arguments can be delineated as follows:

### **Swinburne's Argument:**

*Necessarily, if Omniscience, and Perfect Freedom, then Perfect Goodness.*

*If Premise 1 (Omniscience):* An omniscient being knows all true propositions. An omniscient being will, of logical necessity, make those judgments about overriding reasons for doing actions which are true judgments.

*If Premise 2 (Perfect Freedom):* A perfectly free being will always do an action if he judges that there is overriding reason for doing it rather than for refraining from doing it.

*Then Perfect Goodness:* God will do those actions which there is overriding reason to do and refrain from those actions from which there is overriding reason to refrain.

**Platonic Ethic Argument:**

*Necessarily, if Omniscience, Perfect Freedom, and Platonic Ethic, then Perfect Goodness.*

*If Premise 1 (Omniscience):* An omniscient being will- of logical necessity- make those judgments about overriding reasons for doing actions which are true judgments.

*If Premise 2 (Perfect Freedom):* A perfectly free being will always do an action if he judges that there is overriding reason for doing it rather than for refraining from doing it.

*If Premise 3 (Platonic Ethic):* To know the good is to do the good.

*Then Perfect Goodness:* God will do those actions which there is overriding reason to do and refrain from those actions from which there is overriding reason to refrain.

Swinburne's argument supposes that perfect goodness is necessarily entailed by either the premise of Omniscience alone, or Perfect Freedom alone, or more likely both premises Omniscience and Perfect Freedom combined. Thus, first I intend to argue that Perfect Goodness is not entailed by Omniscience alone. Second, I intend to argue that Perfect Goodness is not entailed by Perfect Freedom alone. Finally, however, I intend to argue that Perfect Goodness is indeed entailed by combining the two premises Omniscience and Perfect Freedom and that the Platonic Ethic argument is therefore false. I will conclude, for now, that perfect goodness is indeed entailed by Omniscience and Perfect Freedom and therefore Swinburne's argument holds. And based upon this

conclusion, I intend to propose one way to argue against Swinburne's claim, to demonstrate that the axiomatic Platonic Ethic 'to know the good is to do the good' is perhaps a dubious premise and in need of clarification.

*Is the Platonic Ethic Entailed by Omniscience Alone?*

According to Swinburne, an omniscient God knows all true propositions, that is, knows every fact, including moral facts. Therefore, if an action is the good action, that is, the morally right action, an omniscient God would know it. Therefore, Omniscience alone supposes the first part of the Platonic Ethic, '*to know the good...*' God, possessed of the contingent quality of Omniscience, would necessarily 'know the good'.

However, Omniscience is perfect knowledge, which entails nothing with regards to action. That is, Omniscience reveals no facts about God's ability or inability to perform the good act known, only that God knows it as a matter of fact. Since the qualities comprising Swinburne's claim are contingent, that is, "if God possesses them, God just happens to possess them"<sup>25</sup>, then it is possible for God to possess Omniscience and not possess Perfect Freedom, which would limit God's ability to perform the known good action. Thus, God *could* know the good action, and *not be able* to perform the good action. This would not be true if the Platonic Ethic 'to know the good is to do the good' were entailed by Omniscience.

One might offer a rejoinder here, perhaps an attenuated version of Perfect Goodness that states, 'to know the good is to *be inclined* to do the good'. If this were true, an omniscient God would know the good action and be inclined, despite his limited

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 4

freedom, to the performance of the good action. However, the axioms “to know the good is to be inclined to do the good” and “to know the good is to do the good” are intrinsically different claims. The former entails no action, the latter the performance of an action. And for the purpose of this paper I will address only the latter.

The Platonic Ethic entails more than just knowledge of the good. If it did not, the Platonic Ethic would read simply ‘to know the good’. But the Platonic Ethic entails something more than knowledge, and that is action based upon knowledge. Omniscience explains everything about knowledge and nothing about action. Therefore, the Platonic Ethic does not follow from God’s possession of the contingent quality of Omniscience alone.

*Is the Platonic Ethic Entailed by Perfect Freedom Alone?*

Second, I will argue that the Platonic Ethic does not follow from Perfect Freedom alone. Perfect Freedom explains everything about God’s ability or inability to perform an action, based upon logical limitations. Therefore, Perfect Freedom alone supposes God’s ability to fulfill the second part of the Platonic Ethic, ‘...to do the good’. God, possessed of the contingent quality of Perfect Freedom, would necessarily be able ‘to do the good’.

However, Perfect Freedom explains nothing about God’s knowledge. Again, theoretically, God could possess the contingent quality of Perfect Freedom and not possess Omniscience. If God just happened to possess Perfect Freedom and not possess Omniscience, then God would be free ‘to do the good’ but limited in his ability ‘to know

the good'. Therefore, I conclude that the Platonic Ethic does not follow from the contingent quality of Perfect Freedom alone.

*Is the Platonic Ethic Entailed by Omniscience and Perfect Freedom Combined?*

I will now question whether the Platonic Ethic is entailed by the combination of the two premises Omniscience and Perfect Freedom. It has already been established that an omniscient God knows all true propositions, that is, knows every fact, including moral facts. Therefore, if an action is the good action, that is, the morally right action, an omniscient God would know it. Therefore, Omniscience alone supposes the first part of the Platonic Ethic, '*to know the good...*' God, possessing the contingent quality of Omniscience, would necessarily 'know the good'.

Perfect Freedom explains everything about God's ability or inability to perform an action, based upon logical limitations. Perfect freedom alone supposes God's ability to fulfill the second part of the Platonic Ethic, '*...to do the good*'. God, possessing the contingent quality of Perfect Freedom, would necessarily be able 'to do the good'.

If the contingent qualities of Omniscience and Perfect Freedom separately suppose both parts of the Platonic Ethic, then does it necessarily follow that both qualities together entail the Platonic Ethic? Is the Platonic Ethic inherent in Swinburne's argument?

In opposition to Swinburne's argument, one might ask, is the proposition, 'God knows the good and God is able to do the good', which supposes Omniscience and Perfect Freedom, different from the proposition, 'God knows the good and God always

does the good' which supposes Omniscience, Perfect Freedom, and the Platonic Ethic. The former proposition seems to be making a claim about a general state of affairs, namely that God knows the good and is capable of doing the good. The latter proposition seems to be making a claim about what God *actually* does. The former proposition suggests the *possibility* of performing the good action; the latter suggests *actual* performance of the good action.

With regards to the former proposition, consider a world where only God existed. In such a world God could be perfectly good *without* doing any good actions. However, God does not exist in such a vacuum or 'general state of affairs'. That is, God's existence is such that he does exist with others. This supposes that he is obligated to actions, and makes choices accordingly. And even refraining from performing an action is a choice.

But remember, God would not refrain from doing an action if God had overriding reason(s) for doing an action. According to Swinburne, "We could not understand an agent who claimed to acknowledge 'overriding reason' for refraining from doing A and also claimed to be uninfluenced by anything other than the reasons which he acknowledged, and yet did A."<sup>26</sup>

The million dollar question should then be asked. Why would God refrain from doing the good action if he knew what the good action was? Swinburne's reply would be that it is incoherent to claim that God knew the good and refrained from doing it. Thus, the Platonic Ethic seems to be entailed by the contingent properties of Omniscience and Perfect Freedom, and it logically follows (as Swinburne maintains) that God is perfectly good. The Platonic Ethic 'to know the good is to do the good' is inherent in Swinburne's argument, and his logic seems coherent.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 150

## *The Nature of the Good*

If, as has been concluded, Swinburne's logic is coherent, then I suggest one avenue of recourse for the critic of Swinburne's argument. One could call into question the nature of the good. To begin this monumental task, which comprises a philosophical dialogue dating back to ancient Greece, two initial questions should suffice.

First, is what is meant by the good in the Platonic Ethic to be understood as 'advantageous' or 'best'? If an action is advantageous this could mean the best for the individual alone, or for everyone else except the individual, or for both. If a starving person steals food from his neighbor, it would be advantageous to him, but morally wrong. And that same starving person might refrain from stealing food from his neighbor, which would be morally right, yet not advantageous. Does God's perfect knowledge and performance of the good mean that God always chooses the most advantageous action for himself and everyone involved? And furthermore, is this 'best of all situations for everyone' even a possibility, given Swinburne's delineation of Omniscience?

Second, is the nature of the good such that all true propositions or moral facts are *always* good, and can be known by an omniscient God at a time  $t$  if and only if he knows every true proposition about  $t$  or an earlier time and every true proposition about a time later than  $t$  which is true of logical necessity? I am not suggesting subjective morality, for I have already granted Swinburne's claims concerning objective moral facts. Rather, given a specific set of subjective circumstances at time  $t$ , can an objective moral fact be consistently applied with regards to the good of everyone involved?

Swinburne has inherited the Platonic Ethic ‘to know the good is to do the good’ from a long history of classical philosophy beginning with Plato. At first the axiom might seem counter-intuitive because possessed of a finite knowledge of good and evil, humans often believe themselves to know the good, but willingly choose otherwise. Like Plato, Swinburne maintains that if humans knew the good, as does God, then humans would have overriding reasons for doing the good. But since humans are neither omniscient nor perfectly free, humans cannot be perfectly good.

Swinburne and many before him have accepted the Platonic Ethic ‘to know the good is to do the good’. But if the nature of the good is not clearly delineated then the Platonic Ethic is a dubious claim. And further, if finite humans cannot know the good perfectly, then the Platonic Ethic ‘to know the good is to do the good’ is provable only by God.

### *Conclusion*

I conclude that Swinburne’s claim, “...that it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good”<sup>27</sup> is logically coherent and does entail the axiom ‘to know the good is to do the good’. However, I also conclude that a viable criticism of Swinburne’s claim would be to call into question the nature of the good. If the Platonic Ethic could be shown to be a dubious claim, then Swinburne’s argument could be challenged. Such an undertaking would be both a worthwhile pursuit and a monumental philosophical task, for Swinburne has the majority of the tradition of western theism behind him. Until then, it seems Swinburne has built an impenetrable fortress of contingent qualities proving the perfect goodness of God.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 188

## *Epilogue*

I began this paper with the intention of disproving Swinburne's claim C1. And being an optimist, I believed I would succeed. From the moment I first read those words, "...that it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good" I was convinced Swinburne was wrong. And it is possible that he might be. However, in concluding this paper, I concede that Swinburne is correct.

I do not view my concession as a failure, for the simple reason that I learned so much in my attempt. Through the course of this past semester I have learned more about the basic tenets of theism than I thought possible. I have learned not only about omniscience, perfect freedom and perfect goodness, but what it means for these qualities to be contingent. I have explored the difference between supererogatory goods and obligatory goods. But perhaps most importantly, I have laid the foundation for future study on this and many other related topics.

I gratefully acknowledge and thank Dr. Peter Hutcheson "Dr. Evil" and Dr. Dean Geuras for their invaluable criticism, encouragement, and patience with me during this often grueling project. Also, I would be remiss if I did not thank my wife Joanna, and my friend Shodd Twilligear for hours of discussion and debate about my paper, and for all the philosophical rabbits chased somewhere in between. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my admiration for Richard Swinburne and his continuing work in the field of philosophy.

