

THE SUFFICIENCY AND NECESSITY OF (SWINBURNE'S) NATURAL THEOLOGY

A SUFICIÊNCIA E A NECESSIDADE
DA TEOLOGIA NATURAL DE SWINBURNE

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Abstract

The conclusion of Swinburne's book *The existence of God* is that "On our total evidence theism is more probable than not". I will not dispute that conclusion, as others have done. I will concede that the conclusion is supported by Swinburne's argument and that the argument is in fact "good". I will question, however, the *impact* of that conclusion – with the use of the argument that supports it – for the epistemological enterprise of *justifying* theistic belief, that is, the belief that God exists. Developing criticism given by Alvin Plantinga (2001), I will question the *sufficiency* and *necessity* of Swinburne's probabilistic argument for the *epistemic justification* of a subject S's belief that God exists, where S is a religious person, say, a Christian.

Keywords: Epistemology of Religion. Natural Theology. Justification of theism. Existence of God. Basic theistic belief.

Resumo

A conclusão do livro de Swinburne *A existência de Deus* é que "Baseando-se na nossa evidência total, o teísmo é mais provável do que não". Eu não disputarei esta conclusão, como outros já têm feito. Eu concederei que a conclusão é suportada pelo argumento de Swinburne e que o argumento é de fato "bom". Eu questionarei, entretanto, o *impacto* desta conclusão – com o uso do argumento que a suporta – para a tarefa epistemológica de *justificar* a crença teísta, ou seja, a crença de que Deus existe. Desenvolvendo crítica oferecida por Alvin Plantinga (2001), eu questionarei a *suficiência* e a *necessidade* do argumento probabilístico de Swinburne para a *justificação epistêmica* da crença, de um sujeito S, de que Deus existe, onde S é uma pessoa religiosa, digamos, um Cristão.

Palavras-chave : Epistemologia da religião. Teologia Natural. Justificação do teísmo. Existência de Deus. Crença teísta básica.

Richard Swinburne has recognized that his book *The Existence of God* (1979/2004) “is the central book of all that [he has] written on the philosophy of religion” (2004, p. v). In fact, that book can be considered a masterpiece of Natural Theology. In it, the author notoriously claims that, in his sight, there are *no* “good” *deductive* arguments for the existence of God. (To be “good”, it is *not* enough that the argument be valid or correct, and that its premises be all true: its premises must also be “known to be true by those who dispute about the conclusion” (2004, p. 6,7)). For him, there are only good *inductive* arguments for the existence of God, that is, *probabilistic* arguments that are strong or “correct”, and whose premises are known to be true by all parties. Such probabilistic arguments, in fact, should all be considered in a *cumulative* way, so that they are really parts of *one* good probabilistic argument for the existence of God. In other words, the corresponding premises of each inductive argument – cosmological, teleological, etc. - should be construed as different pieces of evidence for this *single* probabilistic argument of Natural Theology. This is the project of Swinburne’s book *The existence of God*: to develop such an argument and to assess its power. What is the conclusion of his book? The conclusion is that, even after considering arguments (i.e. evidence) *against* the existence of God, the *balance* of probability shows that the *total* evidence *increases* the probability of the existence of God in such a way that the (conditional) probability of the proposition “God exists” is *higher than the probability of its negation*, that is, higher than 0.5 (in a range from 0 to 1). In Swinburne’s words: “On our total evidence theism is more probable than not” (2004, p. 342).

I will not dispute that conclusion, as others have done.¹ I will *concede* that the conclusion *is* supported by Swinburne’s argument and that the argument is in fact “good”; but I will question the *impact* of that conclusion – with the use of the argument that supports it - for the epistemological enterprise of *justifying* theistic belief, that is, the belief that God exists. Developing criticism given by Alvin Plantinga (2001), I will question the *sufficiency* and *necessity* of Swinburne’s probabilistic argument for the *epistemic justification* of a subject S’s belief that God exists, where S is a religious person, say, a Christian. In doing that, we will assume throughout this paper an *internalist* conception of epistemic justification (henceforth simply *justification*), that is, a conception of justification that appeals to S’s *evidence*, understood as her mental states (roughly, S’s beliefs and experiences), and where justification of a propositional attitude (belief, disbelief or suspension

¹ See, for example, Braunsteiner-Berger (2014).

of judgment) is roughly a matter of having, objectively speaking, the right response to the evidence (see FELDMAN, 2003, p. 45).²

1 SUFFICIENCY

Is Swinburne's argument, with its conclusion – the existence of God is more probable than not, or 'God exists' is probable – *sufficient* for justification of the theistic belief? The answer, I will suggest, depends on some elements and presuppositions. Depending on how we characterize these elements and presuppositions, we will have what I will call different "cases". In some of these cases, the argument *seems* sufficient. In others, the argument clearly is *not* sufficient for justification. We will see five cases below. The first three are *affirmative* ones – Swinburne's argument *seems* or *is* sufficient for justification of S's theistic belief. However, I will try to show that these three cases are either *incorrect* in their presuppositions or *irrelevant* for S's theistic belief. Cases four and five are clearly *negative*: the argument is *not* sufficient.

1.1 THE PROBABILISTIC BELIEF CASE:

In one trivial sense, Swinburne's argument is sufficient for the justification of the *probabilistic belief* that the existence of God is more probable than not, or more exactly, that 'God exists' is probable. After all, we are assuming that the argument is good, and that S's belief in the conclusion is caused by the correct use of the argument. However, what is the epistemological relevance of that justified belief – "'God exists' is probable" – for the justification of S's belief that God exists? What is the relation between the justification of "*p* is probable" and the justification of *p*? Well, for Swinburne, the belief that *p* is probable *entails* the belief that *p* (2001, p. 36; also 1981, p. 5). So when S believes that 'God exists' is probable, S (logically) believes that God exists. The relation between the two beliefs is analytic, logical, even though Swinburne now recognizes that the entailment does not hold in the opposite direction (2001, p. 36, n. 8). So presumably, the *justification* of the first belief – *p* is probable -, also applies for the second belief - *p*. However, it is disputable, as Swinburne himself recognizes, that believing that *p* is probable entails believing that *p*! As Plantinga (2001, p. 220,1) points out, when I hear the weatherman saying that the probability of rain this afternoon is 0.9, I will not *believe* that it will rain

² *Epistemic* justification or rationality has to do with the aim of achieving *true* beliefs. It must be truth-conducive, or indicate (fallibly) that the proposition considered is true. I will not discuss, in this paper, the relevance of *deductive* arguments for epistemic justification of theistic belief, although it is possible to draw conclusions, from what I say below, about that.

this afternoon; I will only believe that it is very likely that it will. Even more controversial is to accept that the *justification* of the probabilistic belief – p is probable – also holds or applies for the second belief – p. This issue, however, will be addressed in the third case, below. What can be established so far is that, given that we assume that Swinburne’s argument is good and that S makes correct use of it, S is in fact justified in believing that ‘God exists’ is probable. (This result is trivial, given our assumptions). But that is not exactly the proposition that is the focus of our investigation. We are not investigating whether S is justified in her belief that *it is probable that God exists*; we investigate, instead, whether S is justified in her *unqualified* belief that *God exists*.

1.2 THE PARTIAL BELIEF CASE:

We could instead say that Swinburne’s argument is sufficient for the justification of S’s belief that God exists, if we think of S as having a *partial* belief that God exists. In other words, assuming *degrees* of belief or confidence, S could have a degree of confidence (or strength of belief, or credence) that God exists that roughly *corresponds* to the degree of probability that Swinburne’s argument indicates concerning God’s existence – even if there are no *exact* numerical values. Swinburne’s argument, therefore, would be sufficient for the justification of S’s theistic belief, provided that S “proportioned” her degree of belief to the evidence given by the argument. For example, if Swinburne’s argument indicated that the probability of God’s existence is about 0.6 or 0.7, S would be justified in believing that God exists, based on that argument, if S had in fact a *partial* belief, with a credence of 0.6 or 0.7, that God exists. In fact, that is what the “evidentialist” requires of the believer: to proportion her belief to the available evidence (FORREST, 2014). However, although all this seems plausible, the problem is that this case does not fit very well with S’s being a religious person, with *full* belief or great confidence that God exists and helps her, at least in her best moments of religious life. S even learns, from the Bible, that faith requires *firmness*, *steadiness* (see, for example, James 1:6: “ask in faith, nothing wavering” (KJV))! According to the present interpretation, however, such attitude is *irrational*, *unjustified*, given Swinburne’s argument. Swinburne’s argument would instead commend a partial belief that is *not* the attitude S has or seeks to have. The present case, therefore, although interesting for the critical evidentialist, does not seem relevant for S.

1.3 THE WEAK CONDITION CASE:

We can hold that Swinburne's argument is sufficient for the justification of S's theistic belief, if we affirm or define that for S to be justified in believing that p it is enough that her evidence (acquired and held in a correct way) makes p probable. That is Swinburne's position in fact (see 2001, p. 56). Proposing that S is justified in believing that p *if* p is probable on S's (good) evidence, Swinburne can defend the justification of S's theistic belief, when it is (correctly) based on the probabilistic argument above. After all, the probabilistic argument – we have assumed that – makes the proposition “God exists” probable! Why deny justification for S's theistic belief, if we concede that S made correct use of the argument? Well, one can deny justification for S's theistic belief if one thinks that Swinburne's condition for justification of beliefs is not demanding enough, it is too weak. And that seems to be the case. Swinburne's condition of justification can be correct for *action*, that is, for *pragmatic* purposes. If S has to act either on the assumption that p or on the assumption that not- p , S is justified in acting on the assumption that p if p is more probable than not- p (that is, if p is probable). But that is not exactly the case for *belief*, when the purpose is not pragmatic but epistemic, that is, to achieve truth and to avoid error. Suspension of judgment is in many cases the correct epistemic response to the evidence, even if the balance of probability is not exactly 0.5. As Plantinga reminds us: “[A] belief's being probable, even highly probable, with respect to public evidence, ..., is insufficient for its being warrantably believed with *any* degree of firmness” (2001, p. 220; his italics). In fact, the famous Lottery Paradox counts against Swinburne's position here. Even if the evidence of the huge number of tickets (say, one million!) makes highly probable that my single ticket is not the winner, I am *not* justified in believing that my ticket is not the winner!³ It is true that epistemic justification comes in *degrees*, and that S *may* have *some* justification in believing that p when p is probable on her evidence. What is being denied, however, is that such degree of justification is *enough* in order for S to be entitled to *believe* that p ; in other words, we deny that S has justification *simpliciter* for her belief. Anyway, even if we concede that intuitions vary here, and that for some people S *is* justified (or rational) in believing that p *if* S's evidence (held in a correct way) makes p probable, this point is far from being undisputable.

³ I thank Professor Claudio de Almeida for reminding me of this paradox in this context. For an important book concerning this paradox, see Hawthorne (2004).

1.4 THE KNOWLEDGE CASE:

Justification comes in degrees, as we said above. S can be more or less justified in her belief that p. For those philosophers who think that (internal) justification is a necessary condition for knowledge (along with truth, belief and an anti-Gettier condition),⁴ that means that it is *not* enough to have *any* degree of justification in order for S to have knowledge. S must attain a “knowledge-level” or “knowledge-degree” justification. Although it is not easy to determine or specify exactly that degree of justification which is “knowledge-level”, virtually all internalist epistemologists agree that justification must be strong, robust, “evident” – to use Chisholm’s word (1989) - in order to give you knowledge. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case of S in her theistic belief, if all she has is the justification given by Swinburne’s argument. Even if we concede that S is (to some degree) justified in her belief that God exists because she has evidence that makes the proposition that God exists probable, it is difficult to accept that that evidence gives S a *knowledge-level* justification. To use Chisholm’s word again, S’s evidence must make the proposition that God exists “evident”, and not only “probable”, if S is to have knowledge. Swinburne’s argument is *not* sufficient for knowledge-level justification of S’s theistic belief. And that is a bad thing for S, since for her (presumably) it is important to have *knowledge* of God, especially knowledge that God exists.

1.5 THE FULL BELIEF CASE:

Since S is a religious person, it is also important for her that her beliefs about God, especially her belief that God exists, have a *high* degree of confidence. That means that S does not seek to have merely a *partial* belief, but a *full* or *strong* belief that God exists. Is Swinburne’s argument *sufficient* for the justification of such a belief? From what was said before, it is clear that it is not. Swinburne’s argument - the evidentialist would remind us -, justifies S’s theistic belief to the extent that S’s confidence that God exists *corresponds* to the probability given by the argument to that proposition. As we have seen in case (1.2), however, Swinburne’s argument justifies a *partial* belief, not a full one, since its conclusion is merely that the proposition that God exists is probable.

Before considering, in the second part of this paper, the *necessity* of Swinburne’s probabilistic argument for the justification of S’s theistic belief, we have to give some remarks about a footnote in the second edition of Swinburne’s *The Existence of God*.

⁴ See Feldman (2003) for an explanation of the Gettier problem and possible anti-Gettier conditions.

There, on the same page where he gives the conclusion of his book that theism is more probable than not, Swinburne adds: “I argue in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* that, when we take into account the detailed historical evidence about the life, death, and the Resurrection of Jesus, the probability that there is a God becomes very much greater than that” (2004, p. 342, n. 3). Unfortunately, we do not have space here to discuss that important and interesting book. We should point out here, however, that this amendment to the conclusion is of course very important for the justification of S’s theistic belief, especially concerning cases (1.2) and (1.5) – the partial and full belief cases -, which have to do with the degree of confidence with which S holds her belief. It is doubtful, however, whether this amendment to the conclusion changes the result of case (1.4) – the knowledge case -, where S does not have knowledge-level justification. After all, assuming that God exists and that we do not have a Gettier case, it does not seem that S *knows* that God exists when S’s evidence makes her belief, say, *very probable*. In any case, the results of Swinburne’s book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003) are very controversial. The conclusion that the conditional probability, on the evidence, that Jesus is God Incarnate and that He rose from the dead is as high as 0.97 is of course extremely suspicious, even among conservative Christian philosophers, like me, that would love that that conclusion were true! I suspect – although I do not have space here for this discussion – that the way Swinburne establishes his criteria for “prior historical evidence” is the most controversial part.⁵ To be fair with Professor Swinburne, however, his discussion about the importance of background knowledge or evidence for the whole issue of Jesus’s resurrection and miracles is clear and convincing, and the main lesson of that interesting book.

2 NECESSITY

Assuming that there is no good *deductive* argument for Natural Theology, and that Swinburne’s probabilistic argument for the existence of God encapsulates the good inductive ones – or if you prefer, it is the *only* good one -, the question now is: Is Swinburne’s argument, with its conclusion that it is probable that God exists, *necessary* for the justification of S’s theistic belief? In other words, can S justifiably believe that God exists without using such an argument of Natural Theology, and even without being aware of it and its conclusion? Here, the answer will be shorter. Two considerations will base a *negative* answer to the issue of the necessity of (Swinburne’s) Natural Theology for the justification of S’s theistic belief.

⁵ For criticisms of this book, see for example Martin (2004).

2.1. We can plausibly defend that the belief that God exists can be *basic*, and “*properly basic*”, to use Plantinga’s words (2000). That means that S can form and hold the belief that God exists without basing her belief on *other beliefs* (i.e., using an inference or argument), but in a *direct* way, and being *justified* in doing that (see Plantinga, 2000, p. 99ff). The most obvious way would be through *religious experience*, of varying kinds and degrees of strength. We could think, for example, that S – to quote Plantinga again –

[...] has a rich inner spiritual life...; it seems to her that she is sometimes made aware, catches a glimpse, of something of the overwhelming beauty and loveliness of the Lord; she is often aware, as it strongly seems to her, of the work of the Holy Spirit in her heart, comforting, encouraging, teaching, leading her to accept the ‘great things of the gospel’ (as Edwards calls them), helping her see that the magnificent scheme of salvation devised by the Lord himself is not only for others but for her as well (2000, p. 100f).

We could think that S forms her belief that God exists as a *direct* response to such experiences, without using an argument of the form: “I have had such and such experiences. The best explanation for those experiences is that God exists. Therefore, God exists” (see also Alston, 1991, p. 3). Her theistic belief would be basic analogously to the case of other perceptual beliefs, based, for example, on sense experience. But could theistic belief be *justified* in this basic way? Could we consider the religious experience good evidence or evidence at all?⁶ Why not? Since we are working here with an internalist notion of justification, we will not appeal to “reliabilist” or even “proper function” accounts of justification or warrant. It is enough to point out, however, that it seems completely arbitrary not to include religious experience among S’s kinds of evidence. Is it because it is private and not public that it should be disregarded? But virtually all epistemologists would agree that among the legitimate kinds of evidence available for a subject, some are private and others are public. To be exact, sense experience is private! Moreover, we should not forget that many people share the *kind* of religious experience S is told to have above! Does not S *justifiably* believe, then, that God exists based on her compelling and repeated experience that God exists?⁷ If S has strong or compelling experience as if p – we could say, as well, strong *inclination* to believe or *appearance* that p –, it seems correct, in an internalist sense, to claim that S *is justified* in believing that p, at least *prima facie* justified. In other words, there is no other correct response to that evidence, besides believing that p. That is something that even Swinburne seems to accept, when he talks about his “Principle of Credulity” (2001, p. 141; see also Huemer, 2007).

⁶ I am assuming throughout this paper that evidence can be *experiences* and not only beliefs based on them.

⁷ If you prefer, instead of saying that S has experience *that* God exists, we could say that S has experience *as if* God exists. We should also point out that the experience can be about other proposition that obviously implies the existence of God, as the experience as if God spoke to me.

If all we said above is correct, we have a decisive reason to deny that Swinburne's probabilistic argument – and, in fact, *any* other argument of Natural Theology – is *necessary* for the justification of S's theistic belief. S's theistic belief can be “properly” or “rightly” basic.

2.2 A second consideration to deny that necessity is that to require an argument like Swinburne's, in order for S to be justified in her theistic belief, seems too demanding. Relatively few people – of many who believe that God exists - would be acquainted with such an argument and even fewer people would be able to follow all the steps of the probabilistic argument, even in a popular version. It does not seem correct to say that all these people are not justified in their theistic belief. Imagine if people were required to have analogous arguments for the belief that external objects exist!

Swinburne himself recognizes that what is required for a “religious way” is only a kind of “weak belief” (1981, p. 163). He means by that that people do not need to believe (justifiably) that the existence of God is more probable than not (“strong belief”), that is, they do not need to believe the conclusion of his probabilistic argument in order to follow a religious way – that would be too much. What they need is to believe (justifiably) that the existence of God is more probable than any other alternative that is incompatible with it, for example, Buddhism (that would be “weak belief”). In this way, instead of justifiably believing that p (=God exists) is more probable than not- p , what is necessary for a religious way is to believe justifiably that p is more probable than q , r , s , etc., where q , r , s , etc. are alternatives to p . However, that still seems too demanding for the majority of people! How many religious people have undertaken such a task? How many are able to do that, even with the help of masters? Even this “weak” kind of belief – with the *justification* that it requires - seems too strong, being difficult to accept that it should be a *necessary* condition for the justification of S's theistic belief.⁸

3 CONCLUSION

If we are correct in what we said above, Swinburne's Natural Theology – that is, his probabilistic argument for the existence God – is neither *sufficient*, in some relevant senses, nor *necessary* for the justification of S's theistic belief. To affirm this conclusion, however, is *not* the same as to affirm that his probabilistic argument is not *correct* or even

⁸ Note that in one sense, seen in the first part, Swinburne's condition for the justification of theistic belief is *too weak*, when it says that S is justified in believing p when her (good) evidence makes p probable. In the other sense, however, it is *too strong*, when it says that S has to believe that p is more probable than any alternative to p .

good. Personally, I think Swinburne's impressive work undertaken in the book *The Existence of God* is a serious challenge to the confident atheist and to the person who refuses to consider the question of God's existence. Our conclusion, if correct, only shows the limits of what such an argument can do, epistemically speaking.

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