

# Is God Perfect?: Richard Swinburne

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## Transcript - Long

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Richard, do you believe in God?

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yes.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Do you believe that God is omnipotent?

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yes.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Do you believe that God is perfectly good?

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yes.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And, therefore, don't you conclude that God made the best possible world?

**Richard Swinburne:**

No, I don't, for the reason that there couldn't be a best possible world. It's not logically possible that there be a best possible world, because any world that God might have made, there is a better world that He could have made instead. Simple reason for this. Humans are a good thing, so the more humans, the better. Clearly, not all concentrated on earth but spread around an infinite universe, the more humans the better. Now he's got to make some number of humans. Supposed that He makes a trillion humans and they all have nice, good lives. It would be a better universe if He made a trillion and one univer— humans, and so on forever. You might think, well, this could be so by supposing He could make an infinite number of humans. But you could always add to an infinite number of humans by making another one. So, whatever universe there makes— God makes, there could— it wouldn't be the best of all possible worlds because there couldn't be a best of all possible world [sic].

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Okay. Then if God has not made the best of all possible worlds, how then can you define God's perfection?

**Richard Swinburne:**

God's perfection consists in doing nothing bad in making many good things. A good being will spread goodness. He will make lots of it. He can't make a maximum, because there isn't a maximum, but he'll make lots of it and he'll do nothing bad. And that's what perfection consists in.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Can't you use the same argument, that you made to exclude the possibility of a best possible world, to similarly exclude the possibility of a most perfect God? By saying whatever defines the perfection, there could always be an increment to that.

**Richard Swinburne:**

No, because it's the ma... The goodness of a being is not to be measured by the quantity of the goodness of its, of the effects He produces. If it's not logically possible that the being can make a certain sort of effect, then He can't be less than perfect for failing to do so. A perfect being will be as good as a being can be, and he'll be as good as a being can be if He just makes a lot of goodness. Because although the effect of His perfection would be greater, He wouldn't be any the more perfect for making that.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

So, you are defining God's perfection strictly in terms of God's goodness?

**Richard Swinburne:**

I am... Well, you could say... I mean, I thought that was what we were talking about. He is perfectly wise in the sense that He knows all true propositions, and he's perfectly powerful in the sense that He can do anything. But perfection in this context is usually meant by moral perfection. What I'm doing, actually, is spelling out the notion of God in a coherent way. And clearly, it's part of God being who he's supposed to be that he's very good. Now the question is how you spell that out. And if I'm happy with spelling it out as His being perfectly good but then I want to understand perfectly good in a coherent way, and if one tried to understand perfectly good as making the best of all possible worlds, then that wouldn't be a coherent way. But if you were to understand it as making lots of good things and doing nothing bad, then that is a coherent way. And that's, as it were, all one could expect of, with respect to goodness, of a God. The best one could expect, He would be no better if He had made a trillion and one humans than if He had made a trillion humans. He wouldn't be a better person for that; He would be, His goodness would consist in producing goodness, and recognizing that however much He produced, He could produce more, and therefore producing a good amount of it, and that's it.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

The world that exists, which is not the best possible world because the best possible world is impossible, is that a perfect world? Can you use perfect in that sense because God created it?

**Richard Swinburne:**

No. It's... Once again, one would need to think of different senses in which it could be perfect, but clearly one sense is best of all possible worlds. And in that sense, it couldn't be. Another sense in which one might use it is by saying that it would be perfect if there is nothing bad in it. But clearly, there are bad things in it. And I would think, as it were, it's better overall for containing some of those bad things, and allowing the possibility of some of those bad things, but if you, let's say, well, you can't say that it's perfect in the sense of containing nothing bad. So, I don't see any very natural use of the word perfect for describing a world. I do see a natural use of it with regard to describing God. He's morally perfect if He does nothing bad, everything He does is good. He does a lot of good. I can't see any sort of further coherent sense in which He could be more perfect than that.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Some philosophers would say that this so-called perfect being theology is an artificial problem that has been introduced, that causes some contradictions, the problem of evil and different things, that if you just reduce the perfection that you have in your God, you can solve a lot of these problems.

**Richard Swinburne:**

Well, that is true, but I think the simplest sort of God is, and therefore the one to be adopted is, omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly free from which it follows that He will be perfectly good in the sense in which I have described. What you've described as perfect being theology in a sense originates from Anselm, and the supposition a way to understand God is the best of all possible beings. I'm happy with that, so long as you understand the best of all possible beings cannot be a being who creates the best of all possible worlds because there isn't one. The best of all possible beings would be omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good in the sense I have described.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Which is possible.

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yes.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

It is, therefore, possible to have a perfect being in the best possible sense in the, at least in those three categories...

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

...omniscience, omnipotence, and perfectly free.

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yeah.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And you can, you can reach an ultimate maximum of which there is no greater in those categories.

**Richard Swinburne:**

[crosstalk] maxima, have maxima. Best of all possible worlds does not have maximum.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And that's the fundamental difference.

**Richard Swinburne:**

Yeah.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

How important for believers, or for people who are, aspires to want to believe, is the concept of God's perfection?

**Richard Swinburne:**

They want to know that God, everything God does is good. They won't feel inclined to worship a God in whom there is quite a bit of bad mixed up. It's very important for them that God is good and therefore, very concerned for their wellbeing. And this is, therefore, very important. Yes. But He doesn't have to be a creator of the best of all possible worlds for them to be able to worship Him.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

I think one could worship a God who was the creator, and very omnipotent, and very concerned about me, but maybe not being able to reach a maxima [sic] in any of those categories.

**Richard Swinburne:**

I think that might be the case. Certainly, I accept that but I think the arguments do lead to someone who is the maxima in those cases.