

Is God Perfect?: Richard Swinburne

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Transcript - Short

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 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. The simple reason for this – humans are good things, so the more humans the better. Clearly not all concentrated on Earth, but spread around an infinite universe. Now He's got to make some number of humans. Suppose He makes a trillion humans and they all have nice, good lives – it would be a better universe if He had made a trillion and one 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 can always add to an infinite number of humans by making another one. So whatever universe God makes, it wouldn't be the best of all possible worlds because there couldn't be a best of all possible worlds.

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. The goodness of a being is not to be measured by the quantity of the goodness of its—of the effects he produces. A perfect being will 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:

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. The best of all possible beings would be omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. He is 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.