

Is God a "Person"?: Richard Swinburne

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Richard, if we want to discuss God, what characteristics does that word name?

Richard Swinburne:

Well, clearly there have been various societies in which God, written with a small G, denotes some being with, who is invisible and has a certain amount of power to rearrange the material world. But the sort of God that's treated of by Christianity, Judaism, Islam, some forms of Hinduism, is a very special sort of God. He is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, perfectly good being. He's a person. We are persons. What is it for us to be a person. Well, persons have to be able to do things. They have to have powers. They have to have purposes about how to use their powers. And they have to have, therefore, beliefs about how things are and how their purposes will change things. So God, like us, has powers, purposes and beliefs. But unlike us, he has no limits to these. That is to say, we have pretty limited powers over our bodies, and we use our bodies in certain ways over the world beyond our bodies. But the sort of God that traditional theologians of all these kinds believe in is an omnipotent God. And being who can, whose powers are unlimited, who can do anything. And we have beliefs. God has beliefs. But our beliefs are about only some matters, not all matters. And some of them are true and some of them are false. God's beliefs are supposed to be unlimited about everything. And not to be a mixture of true and false, but to be all true. He has true beliefs about everything. That is to say, he knows everything. He's omniscient. We have purposes. But our purposes are subject to influence. That is to say I may have a purpose of doing what I believe to be right, and therefore not eating too much and not eating the cream cake. But on the other hand, I am subject to an inclination which tends to lead me to eat the cream cake. We have, we are as rational creatures, we believe certain things are good to do and certain things bad to do. And recognizing something as good means that we have an inclination to do it, but we are subject to irrational inclination, so we don't necessarily do it. We have to choose between these inclinations. God is supposed to be not subject to any such inclinations. And therefore in that sense he's perfectly free. But that means that insofar as he believes something to be good, he will do it. And in consequence, because he's perfectly free, will do what he believes to be good. Because he's omniscient, he will have true beliefs about what is good. And therefore he will always do the good. His perfect goodness therefore follows from his omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect freedom. Now what I am saying is traditional Christian view about God. I've sort of, as it were, rearranged the elements a bit, but this is the core, core of that view.

Richard Swinburne:

Each of those characteristics, do they, are they independent? Are some derivative from others that are more fundamental? Are they all characteristics at the same level of importance?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, as I say, every other property about God follows from his omnipotence, omniscience and perfect freedom. I've illustrated that by, from perfect goodness. But you can derive his omnipresence, his being everywhere, and other things, all the other traditional properties of God from that, from that definition. Those are independent in the sense that you could have a being, for example, who is omniscient, but not all powerful. Or you could have a being that...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

You'd be frustrated.

Richard Swinburne:

Yes, indeed. Or you could have a being who was omnipotent in the sense that he could do whatever he chose to do, but whose choices were subject to influence, and therefore wasn't perfectly free. But how you divide up three properties, and we say there are only three properties, you can, as it were, see that they have a lot in common so that you would naturally call them as one property. And it seems to me that you could, there is a property from which they all follow. That is to say the property of unlimited intentional power. Now intentional power is power to do

things intentionally. There is, that follows from that that he's omnipotent. And if it's just intentional power, then there's no irrational influences constraining it, and you can't, if you are to be able to do everything, you must know everything. For example, if there's something you didn't know, if you didn't know whether it snowed in New York on the first of January 2 A.D., then you wouldn't have a choice between telling the truth and telling falsity if somebody asked you did it snow and so on. So it's, for perfect omnipotence, there is necessary perfect omniscience. And you can see that these therefore fit together as pure, intentional, limitless power.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Another characteristic that's talked about is God's simplicity. Now to some people that sounds odd because God seems so, has all these characteristics, God would be very complex. But God is very simple. What does that mean?

Richard Swinburne:

Well, as I said, God has postulated as a personal being. But he's the simplest kind of person in this respect. That to the features that make us persons, powers and purposes and beliefs, he has them in infinite degrees and infinite is the opposite of zero. That is to say there are zero limits to these. When scientists put forward theories about things, they always prefer theories which postulate infinite degrees of properties rather than theories which postulate very large finite degrees of properties when these are equally compatible with the data. For example, Newton's theory postulated that gravity exerted an influence with infinite velocity. That is to say if I move something on earth, that has immediate affects on some distant planet. Just the data would be equally compatible by supposing that gravity traveled at a trillion miles a second. But he didn't postulate that because it was simple to suppose that it had zero velocity. Of course, later data turned up incompatible with that. But my point is, infinity is a simple notion because it's the opposite of zero. And it's to postulate an infinite degree of something is to postulate something simpler than a very large finite degree. And, of course, if God is to be the creator of the universe, he's got to have pretty large degrees of power, etc. anyway. And the simplest form of that is the infinite. So it is simple because he's the simplest form of a person that there can be. He's not subject to these complicated desires and limited degrees of knowledge.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Does God have parts?

Richard Swinburne:

No, indeed not. It would be a feature of simplicity that there are no parts. And parts make for complexity. And God, since God is omnipotent, he can do anything anywhere. But a being which has parts, their ability to do things will depend on the operation of those parts. And therefore will be dependent on different things which are separate from themselves. So, no, God does not have parts.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Does that mean that God's substance, if we can even say that, is homogeneous?

Richard Swinburne:

God has no parts. He is not there. He's there for not extended, only extended things. That is to say things that take up a volume are made of stuff. God isn't made of stuff any more than ghosts, if there are ghosts, are made of stuff. They are immaterial things. An other way of putting it is, God is the maximum, the possible greatest being. His power, his greatest power can be, his knowledge is as great as knowledge can be, his freedom is as great as freedom can be. And that means that he is perfectly good, he's everywhere, present, all the divine properties follow.