

Richard Swinburne

Mind, Brain, and Free Will.

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Richard Swinburne teases out the relationships between such philosophical theses as mind-body dualism and libertarian free will, defending them within an integrated theory in which human beings are understood as immaterial souls interacting with bodies. According to Swinburne, our souls are essential to us, whereas our bodies are not, so it is at least logically possible that we could survive our bodies' destruction.

Such a position has much traditional support, but it is now unfashionable among analytic philosophers. Is *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* likely to change this? Probably not, since Swinburne's opponents will find much that is unconvincing in his key arguments. For example, he asks us to rely on what he calls "the Principle of Credulity" (p. 42). He formulates this in various ways that are not obviously equivalent, but the general idea is that whatever beliefs a person finds herself with — beliefs not inferred from other, more basic, ones — are probably true. Such a sweeping principle is supposedly required to account for our confidence in items of general knowledge whose provenance as *our* beliefs we can no longer recollect.

In fairness to Swinburne, we cannot seriously doubt every fact that we were ever taught and that comes to memory when prompted. However, we do have considerable knowledge of when our memories and perceptions are likely to be reliable and when they are not. If you can clearly bring to mind the year when the Battle of Hastings was fought, your answer is probably correct, but that is partly because facts like this are taught to children by adults who are not likely to be mistaken or dishonest about such things. Conversely, many other things that are taught to children, such as moral rules and religious doctrines, are highly contentious. Likewise, many impressions that we form from involvement in fast-moving sequences of everyday events may be hopelessly distorted, as shown by the notorious unreliability of eyewitness testimony.

The Principle of Credulity is no substitute for a nuanced and well-informed understanding of when our impressions are probably reliable and when they are probably not. This is crucial because Swinburne eventually wants to apply the Principle of Credulity to such philosophically controversial issues as whether we have experiences of exercising agent-causal free will. Our interpretations of our streams of consciousness in such respects may be precisely one area where we are not reliable. For example, it is not at all clear what differences there would be in how it feels to exercise agent-causal free will, event-causal libertarian free will, compatibilist free will, or no free will at all.

Swinburne's attempt to defend mind-body dualism is one of the most interesting aspects of the book. At pp. 67-68, he offers definitions of mental and physical properties that would appear to rule out physicalist accounts of mind:

So I define a mental property as one to whose instantiation in it a substance necessarily has privileged access on all occasions of its instantiation, and a physical property as one to

whose instantiation in it a substance necessarily has no privileged access on any occasion of its instantiation.

To put this in easier language, a property such as, say, “has a toothache” is classified as “mental” only if nothing will count as having a toothache unless the conscious being concerned is able to experience the pain of toothache. Abigail really does have a toothache if she is consciously experiencing the toothache, or is at least able to do so. The rest of us can know about it only through other means such as listening to her testimony, drawing inferences from her behavior, or examining an up-to-date X-ray image of her teeth.

What about a property such as “hates her mother”? If we accept the existence of entirely subconscious hatreds of mothers — hatreds not available to conscious experience — this should not be classified as a mental property. It is not available to “privileged access” on *all* occasions when it is instantiated. But nor is it a physical property. Recall that a property will be classified as “physical” only if no property bearer can *ever* access it through inner experience. Perhaps “hates her mother” meets Swinburne’s definition of a neutral property on p.70, but even this seems doubtful.

Similar worries might apply to many commonplace beliefs and desires. If asked, Abigail might experience her settled belief that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066. However, there may be many circumstances in which she has this belief (and thus the property of possessing it), but is not currently able to access it experientially, perhaps because she is asleep or unconscious. Nonetheless, Swinburne will treat having a (specific) belief as a “continuing mental state”; possession of a belief falls within his definition of a mental property in that, even when Abigail is asleep, she has a way of bringing her belief to consciousness. That is, she can wake up and think about it.

The positions that Swinburne argues against have well-known problems. Among them is the conceptual difficulty with any claim that an experience, such as feeling pain, just is (and is not merely caused by) some neural process. However, Swinburne’s method of exposing the problems runs into its own difficulties, or at least complications. Much detailed engagement with his arguments will be needed to conclude whether he has challenged physicalists and others in an especially penetrating or troubling way.

The weakest chapters of *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* are those relating to free will and moral responsibility. These add little to past attempts to make agent causation seem plausible and to undermine the attraction of compatibilist views in particular. Swinburne concludes that we can exercise agent-causal free will in a limited class of cases where we choose between acting either on our strongest desires or in accordance with our moral beliefs. Imagine, then, that Abigail is in a situation where one course of action (D-ing) would benefit a loved one (an outcome that she greatly desires). However, she considers herself objectively required to conform to a standard of behavior that prescribes a contradictory course of action (M-ing). According to Swinburne, the intention that she forms and acts upon is not caused by anything pre-existing, including her own brain states or neural events, her beliefs, desires, or character, or any combination of such things. Instead, Abigail, as an agent, simply causes her intention to D or to M.

Many commentators, dating back at least to Hume, have regarded anything like this as a mysterious account of free will or moral responsibility. In such an account, if Abigail decides to D rather than to M, the decision does not reflect, or flow from, what she is like or what she wants. She could have had exactly the same desires and dispositions but have M-ed. Likewise, if she forms, and acts upon an intention to M, rather than to D, this is not because she is a morally good person; instead, it just seems to happen. She could have had precisely the same moral character and yet D-ed. But in that case, how does the outcome express Abigail's *will*, and how can she be said to be *responsible* for what happens? Swinburne offers no new or satisfying answers to this kind of concern.

Interestingly, he is prepared to assume — and he seems to accept it as plausible — that our intentions usually *are* caused by such things as our beliefs and desires (which have prior causes in neural events). But once we reach this point, it is pertinent to ask why Abigail's beliefs about binding standards of conduct, together with her desire to conform to them, do not simply go into the mix of things that determine her intentions and conduct. If they do, her conduct can be traced to neural events after all.

Mind, Brain, and Free Will provides a comprehensive defense of an unfashionable, though historically important, position. It draws on sophisticated concepts in ontology, epistemology, and the philosophy of personal identity, and it has the merit of being relatively well-written and accessible.

Only “relatively,” because it gives an impression of needing one more draft to knock the arguments into the best form to hold the attention of readers. Swinburne seldom offers examples to clarify the meaning of his abstract arguments and conclusions, provides nothing in the way of humor or lighter moments, and frequently presents daunting walls of text in the form of page-long paragraphs. Too often, material that could easily have been worked into the main text has been shunted into long, distracting footnotes. Many readers who are already out of sympathy with Swinburne's views may lose patience with this style of exposition.

They ought to persevere. Sentence by sentence, Swinburne writes plainly and clearly enough, and *most* of the difficulty is inherent to the subject matter. The arguments in *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* deserve patient study, and the book should provide one touchstone in future debates about dualism, free will, and personal identity.

Russell Blackford

University of Newcastle, NSW