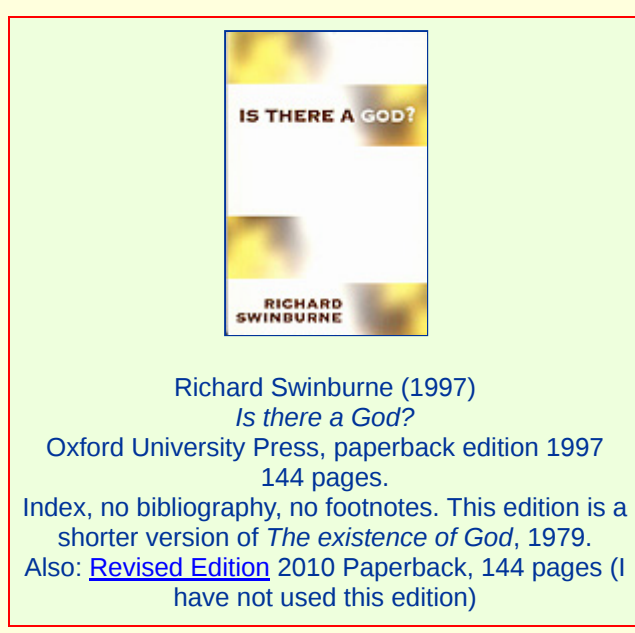
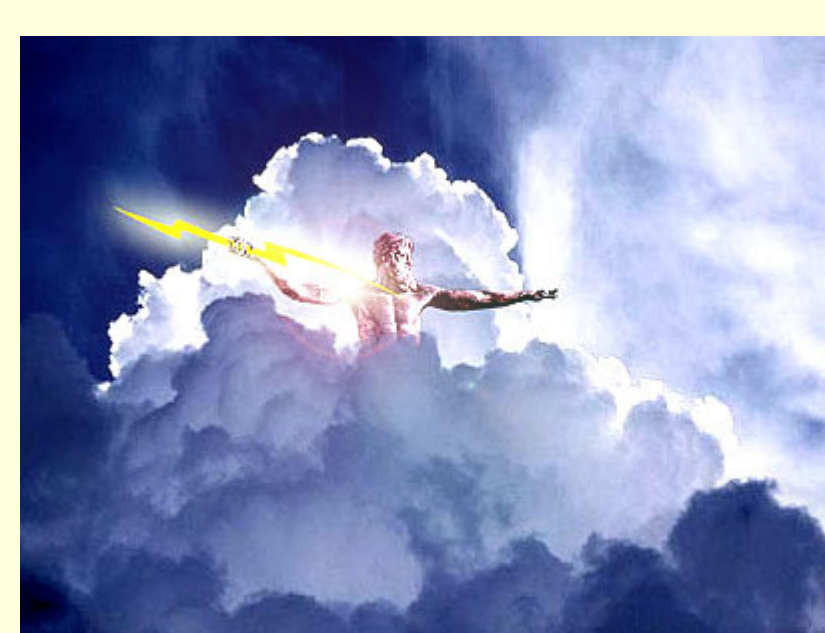


Is there a God?

a review by Gert Korthof
updated 25 Jun 2012 (first published: 4 June 1998)



Professor Richard Swinburne formulates theism as a theory to explain facts. This sharply contrasts with the view that theology deals with revealed truths. This fact alone deserves respect and interest. Theism can now be examined as a theory. It wouldn't make sense to evaluate revealed truth. Now there is a theory available to compare with evolution theory. This book is an answer to Richard Dawkins's *The Blind Watchmaker* and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. It also shows that it is possible for a theist to accept evolution and Darwinism [\(1\)](#).



Swinburne gives a clear, modern and general account of theism, accessible to a wider public. Professor Richard Swinburne is one of the most influential English philosophers of religion of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1: God

To many God is a theory in crisis. Swinburne is going to refute that claim. In the first chapter he explains what the 'God theory' is. Swinburne is quite confident in his knowledge of God. He knows quite a lot about God, including rather personal details (6) such as God's reasons for doing or not doing things. How could Professor Swinburne know, from a scientific point of view, God's reasons? It looks as if all this information results from pure thinking, because Swinburne does not (openly) use the Bible as a source of information. In fact he sees his activity as formulating a scientific hypothesis to explain all the facts of the world. But one cannot simply observe reasons. On the other hand if Swinburne uses reasons as explanations for facts, how does he test if it is a correct explanation? So Swinburne should show where his information comes from and how he did validate it or eliminate it from his theory altogether.

Chapter 2: How we explain things

Swinburne explains how science explains things. It is a short description, but well done. In the end he decides to use 'simplicity' as the criterion to choose between possible scientific hypotheses. Nothing wrong with that. He tries to show that theism is an explanation of the facts of the world, and does not violate the standards of scientific explanation. The scientific language he uses demonstrates his intention: 'the evidence gives a significant degree of **probability** to the claim that God exists'.

Chapter 3: The 'simplicity' of God

Swinburne claims that humans seek ultimate explanations. Materialism fails to give ultimate explanations, whereas theism provides the ultimate explanation of all phenomena. It appears that God has all the properties to explain the universe.

Chapter 4: How the existence of God explains the world and its order

A fact that needs to be explained by both materialism and theism is that the world is orderly. Matter behaves. The existence and regular behaviour of material objects provide good evidence for the existence of God, says Swinburne. God made an orderly world to make it suitable as a theatre for humans. He (unofficially) accepts Paley's argument from design: "This analogy of animals to complex machines seems to me correct, and its conclusion justified." (2 see also too). By conclusion he means that animals and humans must have had God as their maker). However, he says, this argument does not give any reason to suppose that God made humans and animals on one particular day in history, rather than through a gradual process of evolution. (This is in direct conflict with the creation story in Genesis). Remarkably he accepts Darwinism as told by Richard Dawkins, including the involvement of chance in evolution. It seems to me in conflict with his own statement that chance cannot produce beautiful adapted organisms (Paley's argument from design). It is unlikely that he did read creationists like Johnson or Denton. It is amazing that he did not detect any atheism in Dawkins, where creationists like Johnson found it with great ease. The explanation for his paradoxical acceptance of Darwinian evolution is that according to Swinburne evolution theory does not give an **ultimate explanation**. The laws of nature and especially the laws of evolution were set up to produce life. The universe is a machine to produce animals and humans. God did not directly create humans and animals, but indirectly via the laws of nature, via the law of natural selection. This explains why Swinburne is a theist and an evolutionist. For Swinburne evolution is not the crucial point. After reading Philip Johnson I tried to get to the idea that a theist accepts evolution. The beneficial effect as I see it is that scientists can now study the origin of humans, animals and plants without being hindered by supernatural intervention.

Materialism cannot explain the fine tuning of the laws of nature, it is a brute fact for materialism. Theism claims the fine tuning was done by God. Swinburne objects to the Anthropic Principle because it explains away the need for fine-tuning. It is true that we would not be there if there was no order, but the fine tuning itself is still in need of an explanation. If we find such arrangements, that is reason for supposing that a person is doing the arranging. Swinburne objects also to the many worlds theory as an explanation of the fine tuning. "To postulate a trillion other universes, rather than one God in order to explain the orderliness of our universe, seems the height of irrationality". Swinburne states not to postulate a "God of the gaps".

Four ways to create life

1. Direct and individual creation of non-self-reproducing artefacts or living individuals
2. Direct and individual creation of self-reproducing artefacts or living individuals
3. Creation of first life only. Evolution creates the rest of life
4. Creation of natural laws and initial conditions that guarantee the origin of life and its evolution

An example of method 1 is the creation of artefacts like watches. Since they cannot reproduce themselves, they must be created one by one.

Similarly, God *could* create every human being one by one (4).

An example of method 2 is the creation of Adam and Eve who subsequently produced all human beings. And another example is that, to my amazement, Paley considered self-reproducing watches! (3,4). This implies that every watch does not have to be created individually. God could "make things make themselves" (4). Furthermore, add heritable variation and natural selection to this, and one has the natural origin of geographical varieties, subspecies and species. (Paley did not know about evolution, because he wrote his *Natural Theology* before Darwin's *Origin of Species*).

An intermediate between method 2 and 3 are the so-called 'created kinds' or 'basic types' such as the 'dog basic type' from which the species dog, wolf, fox, coyote evolved.

Method 3 is the creation of first life with the capacity to evolve all other species.

Method 4 adds to method 3 the natural origin of life caused by the laws of nature ('fine-tuning for life'). Swinburne believes in this method of creation. It means no direct creation of any individuals. Therefore, he must reject method 1, 2 and 3. So he must reject Paley. It would be helpful if Swinburne had made the above distinctions and discussed Paley in his book.

Swinburne defends body-soul dualism. Humans and animals have two parts: body and soul. The body is material, the soul is immaterial. The soul is connected to the body. He uses 'soul' as synonymous with consciousness and mental life. By definition the mental is that to which the subject has privileged access. At some stage of animal evolution an animal brain became so complex that that caused the existence of the soul. Darwinism can explain the evolution of animal bodies and human bodies. But neither Darwinism nor any other science can explain how the bodies came to be connected to the soul. Theism can provide an explanation of these things. God, being omnipotent, is able to join souls to bodies. He can make souls in the first place and choose to which brain each soul is to be connected. He may have a reason to join this body to that soul, or He may have no reason at all and leave it to chance.

Problems are:

1. Swinburne *defines* the soul in such a way that it is not measurable, and then concludes that science can never explain body-soul connections. So, Swinburne defines a body-soul dualism and subsequently concludes that science cannot connect the two. Science accepts mental life and consciousness, but not the soul defined as a non-material substance.
2. Even if we accept his definition of a soul, the question is: does God really explain the soul-body connection if the assignment of a particular soul to a particular body can be random?
3. Swinburne: "when the foetal brain reaches a certain state of development it gives rise to a soul connected with it." (p.89). Here he admits that a *brain can produce a soul*. Mystery solved. He continues: "But what it could not cause is which soul is connected with it." (p.89) Which soul? The soul that is produced by the brain, of course! That soul naturally and intimately belongs to that individual. There is no need to postulate a pre-existing soul anymore! We don't need God to create a soul and connect it to a body.

Swinburne about Darwinian evolution

Swinburne accepts to a large extent standard evolutionary reasoning:

1. The Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection is able to provide an explanation of human and animal bodies (p.80)
2. At some stage of animal evolution, an animal brain became so complex that that caused the existence of a soul connected to it. All vertebrates have a mental life because all have a brain similar to the human brain. (p.79)
3. Darwinism explains why animals with true beliefs are more likely to survive than animals with false beliefs. Desires and purposes are similar to beliefs. (p.87) (4)

By evil Swinburne means the pain and suffering of humans and animals. An omnipotent and perfectly good God could have prevented this evil. So why is there evil? That is called 'the problem of evil'. In this chapter Swinburne gives an explanation of why God allows evil. This is called a 'theodicy' (2). According to his theodicy God gives us free will to have a choice between morally good and bad. This is called "free will defence". Humans have genuine and profound moral responsibility for each other, because they could severely harm each other. "The possibility of humans bringing about significant evil is a logical consequence of their having this free and responsible choice." A world in which humans can help or damage each other is better than a world in which people can only do good. Solar only *moral evil* has been discussed. Moral evil is all evil caused deliberately by human beings.

But there is also *natural evil*, all evil which is not deliberately produced by human beings: diseases, volcano eruptions, tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes. According to Swinburne all these events give opportunities for humans to perform good actions. Life would be too easy without natural disasters. They provide us the opportunities to show courage.

However, "there must be a limit to the amount of suffering" and to the extent that humans can hurt each other. The limit is provided by "the short finite life" of humans and other creatures: "One human can hurt another for no more than 80 years or so".

Why does God allow animals to suffer? asks Swinburne. Animals have no free will (according to Swinburne). "Animals do not choose freely to do such actions, but the actions are nevertheless worthwhile." (p.111) (1).

Comments:

- The positive side of the Free Will defence is that every human has responsibility to do something against all kinds of evil (12). This also gives responsibility to science, especially medical science, to fight against disease (12). (atheists also fight against disease and disaster).
- On the negative side is the overwhelming amount of evil which is beyond human abilities. There is too much disease and disaster in the world. It does not seem to be fine-tuned for humans. If Napoleon or Hitler decide to start a war, than that is included in the right amount of evil humans can endure? When a dictator in North-Korea decides to change its country into one huge prison, than that is not exceeding the limit? In Swinburne's view, the limits of the amount of evil happen to be precisely the amount we observe in this world. Since Swinburne does not give an independent criterion for determining the maximum amount of evil, it makes his argument unfalsifiable. There can never be a mismatch between the theoretical limit and the amount we observe. In Swinburne's theory, by definition, there can never be too much evil. That is frightening.
- Everybody accepts the idea that humans need to take responsibility *given* the fact that diseases and disasters occur. This is reasoning *after* the fact. That is quite different from *before* they have occurred. *Intentionally designing* disease and disaster is immoral.
- The Free Will Defence gives human free will the highest priority. Why? Fairness, justice, equality, compassion have lower priority.
- The Free Will Defence seems to imply God's non-interference in human affairs. But a God who never interferes is operationally indistinguishable from a non-existent God.
- The Free Will Defence seems to imply God's non-interference in human affairs. But God asks us to behave in a moral responsible way, that is to interfere in the very same events God himself does not interfere. For example: God did not prevent the Holocaust.
- The distribution of evil seems to follow geographical boundaries. In Africa a lot of tropical diseases occur which do not occur in countries with a moderate climate. Earthquakes and hurricanes are clearly geographically restricted. There seems to be no plan to distribute suffering equally among humans worldwide.
- Theism is extremely weak at explaining indiscriminate suffering. Scientific explanations are more reasonable. Diseases are accidental and unintended and science has good explanations: diseases have genetic, or bacterial, or viral or environmental causes. Disasters such as volcano eruptions, floods, tornadoses, earth quakes, droughts and forest fires are satisfactorily explained by physical, geological and climatological causes.
- Swinburne redefines human experience to such an extent that his story ceases to be a neutral description of the facts (14). It is not only a reinterpretation of facts. People, their values and emotions need to change to make his theory come true. It becomes a normative ethical theory. And quite an unethical theory for that matter. If both making a bad or good choice is a good thing, then our current morality is destroyed.
- The notion that God *enforced* free will upon us is a paradox. We had no choice. Furthermore, we did not choose to be born. Neither did we choose the place, time and circumstances. Swinburne did not address these problems.

In my view this chapter unintentionally gives the strongest possible arguments against theism (2, 12), alternatively that God is not a morally perfect being. In my view nobody would try to explain pain and suffering by a designer, if one had not already accepted a designer to explain perceived design. Although Swinburne made a serious attempt to explain evil, the chapter gives the impression of being an exercise in explaining away troublesome matters. No wonder that his conclusion is negatively formulated: "the facts do not count against the God-theory" instead of: "the facts do positively support the God-theory". It seems to me that the problem of pain and suffering in this world is partly caused by the assumption that there is only one God (monotheism) who is both good and all-powerful. There is nobody else to blame for pain and suffering. Polytheism partly 'solved' this problem. For example the goddess of smallpox, known as 'Shitala' in North India and 'Mariamman' in South India, is responsible for smallpox. Of course this solution does not answer the question why do smallpox gods exist? (2).

A miracle is a violation or suspension of natural laws, brought about by God. An example of a miracle accepted by Swinburne as real is 'the shadow cast by the sun reportedly went backwards ten steps' (2 Kgs. 20:11). An important factor in the validation of miracles is the background knowledge that there is a God able and having strong reason sometimes to suspend the operation of natural laws.

Chapter 7: How the existence of God explains miracles and religious experience

Using a person (a creator) as an explanation provides Professor Swinburne with all the explanatory flexibility he needs. The concept of a person has the additional advantage of being an extremely familiar concept, since everybody is a person. However, Swinburne next removes essential properties of his 'explanatory person', such as having a body, being born, having parents, growing up in a family, thereby transforming his explanatory person to the very opposite of a natural person and transforming it into a highly abstract unobservable theoretical entity. He does not hesitate to be a neutral abstraction of the facts (14). It is not only a reinterpretation of facts. People, their values and emotions need to change to make his theory come true. It becomes a normative ethical theory. And quite an unethical theory for that matter. If both making a bad or good choice is a good thing, then our current morality is destroyed.

The notion that God *enforced* free will upon us is a paradox. We had no choice. Furthermore, we did not choose to be born. Neither did we choose the place, time and circumstances. Swinburne did not address these problems.

Conclusion

The advantage of theism is that it claims to give human existence meaning. The disadvantage is that it tends to give **everything** a meaning, including things that don't have a meaning (accidents, coincidences, rainbows, solar eclipses, Siamese twins, Down syndrome, cancer, death). Theism has not been able to separate meaningful and meaningless events. Furthermore, explaining the world and giving everything a meaning are quite different activities. However, in theology they seem intimately linked.

A remarkable 'explanation' of something not in need of explanation is Swinburne's claim that God is sustaining matter and the laws of nature **from moment to moment**. Is this matter-sustaining activity really the most simple hypothesis to explain matter? Why did God fail to create self-sustaining matter? The claim is in conflict with the sciences and with his Swinburne's statement that the universe is a machine. It would be a bad Watchmaker who needs to adjust his watch from moment to moment. If there is something in need of sustaining on this planet, it would be a safe environment for life and –maybe– health, peace, and justice.

If theism is a testable theory about reality, and that is the point of view Professor Swinburne adopted in his book, what would falsify theism? If the atrocities of the Second World War are not enough, what on earth would induce Professor Swinburne to abandon his God-theory?

Did Swinburne answer the question in the title of his book *Is there a God?* Even if God is the best theory to explain the facts of this universe, does that imply that God exists? God might be *just a theory* (4).

Notes

1. This is in contrast to a creationist-theist like Philip Johnson who devoted his *Darwin on Trial* to attack evolution and Darwinism.
2. An excellent introduction to many of the problems in Swinburne's *Theology of Religion: Chapter 7 (The Philosophy of Religion)* of John Hospers' *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. Subjects discussed are: Arguments for the existence of God, The problem of evil, and Meaning and Truth in Religion. A good introduction to the problem of evil is: David O'Connor (2008) *God, Evil, and Design. An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues*. Another volume is: Michael Peterson et al (2001) *Philosophy of Religion. Selected Readings* (second edition). Part Five is devoted to the problem of evil, with 6 famous essays. (p.58). See for a critical discussion of Paley's argument for design on this site: "[Relevant difference between organisms and artefacts destroys analogy](#)".
3. William Paley: *Natural Theology*, in: *Philosophy of Biology*, 1998, edited by Michael Ruse, pp36-40.
4. I guess Swinburne follows Paley in this respect, although I didn't find it in his book. Paley inferred personal details about God from his works of creation, not from the Bible.
5. This would have a clear advantage because reproduction involves mistakes (mutations). The problem of mutations (and consequently of disease) is absent if God created every individual directly. Furthermore, it would be clear that every individual (including all properties) has a purpose, because he/she was directly designed and created by God.
6. There is a good discussion of the explanation of suffering (reward and punishment, wishful thinking) in chapter 3 of Matt Young (2001) *No Sense of Obligation*.
7. "If, when I tried to move my foot, my hand moved instead, predators would soon overtake me." (p.88) is a funny and beautiful example of Swinburne's evolutionary reasoning. This is an example of desire, or purpose: a mental activity. A Darwinian explanation sufficiently explains these.
8. Creationists in the USA keep repeating that evolution is *just a theory* and therefore unproven (Science 29 February 2008: 1188).
9. In a public lecture May 21 2012 at the Free University Amsterdam, Swinburne insisted on not talking about or answer questions about the problem of evil. See account on [Gelooft en Wetenschap Forum C](#) (in Dutch).
10. If animals don't need free will to act in a worthwhile way, why doesn't the same hold for humans? In other words: what is the use of free will? The whole idea of free will defence is destroyed.
11. "That our choices matter tremendously, that we can make great differences to things for good or ill, is one of the greatest gifts a creator can give us" (p.103).
12. A complication is that the more diseases we are eliminating, for example polio by vaccination, the less opportunities humans have to make good or bad choices. If no diseases are left, no opportunities are left.
13. "I am fortunate if the natural possibility of my suffering is eliminated. If you choose to hurt me is the vehicle which makes your choice really matter" (p.103).
14. Charles Kingsley (1819 - 1875): a God who could "make things make themselves" was more admirable than one who simply made things" from: Ronald Numbers (editor) (2010) "[Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion](#)", page 227.
15. Gottfried Leibniz coined the term [theodicy](#) in an attempt to justify God's existence in light of the apparent imperfections of the world.

Further Reading

- **Homesite of Richard Swinburne**.
 - **Response to Dawkins: The God Delusion**: "Dawkins's claim that 'I attempted to justify the Holocaust' is highly ambiguous between the claim (1) that I attempted to justify the Holocaust by conducting the Holocaust and (2) that I attempted to justify the Holocaust by trying to stop the Holocaust. I certainly did not attempt to justify the very wicked conduct of the Nazis, but I did and do attempt to justify God's non-interference". Did Dawkins say this about Swinburne? Not quite. The full quote is:
 - "Swinburne at one point attempted to justify the Holocaust on the grounds that it gave the Jews a wonderful opportunity to be courageous and noble" (p.64 Bantam Press paperback edition *The God Delusion*).
 - Instead, Dawkins did not make the distinction. Does theism solve anything? If Swinburne himself doesn't want to justify the Holocaust, why ascribe that justification to God? This is the core of the problem with Swinburne's theodicee: God did not interfere in something which is morally wrong in the extreme.
 - **God and Morality**: "I shall argue that the existence and actions of God make no difference to the fact that there are moral truths, but that they make a great difference to what those moral truths are."
- **A review of Swinburne's *Is there a God?*** (1996) by John Polkinghorne in *Scientific American*, Nov 1996 pp102-104.
- **Review by Laura L. Garcia** (teaches philosophy at Rutgers University).
- **The Existence of God: A useful collection of books and links about theism, atheism, the Anthropic Principle.**
- **Design Arguments for the Existence of God** by Kenneth Einar Himma in: [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). Contents: The Classical Versions of the Design Argument (including Paley's Watchmaker Argument and Guided Evolution), Contemporary Versions of the Design Argument (including The Argument from Irreducible Biochemical Complexity, The Fine-Tuning Arguments). (28 Mar 2004).
- A.N. Wilson (1999) *God's Funeral*, Murray, 402 pp. Wilson is a prolific journalist and brilliant biographer and this book includes a whole chapter on Swinburne. This book sets out to revisit the Victorian experience of faith and doubt. Thomas Huxley coined the word agnostic. The title God's Funeral is taken from a poem by novelist Thomas Hardy, a man of natural religiosity who lost his faith in the face of pointless suffering. Darwin became an agnostic largely through the premature death of a beloved daughter. This book was reviewed in *Nature* 401, 211-212, 16 Sept 1999.
- **The Craig-DiGiulucci Debate: Does God Exist? Dr. Craig's Opening Speech**
- Massimo Pigliucci "[God as a Falsifiable Hypothesis](#)"
- Richard G. Swinburne (2002) "[The Justification of Theism](#)", 14 July 2002. This online article presents in summary arguments given in more detailed form in Swinburne's book *The Existence of God*, and seeks to rebut criticisms of those arguments given in J.L. Mackie's book *The Miracle of Theism*. This article shows again that Swinburne accepts evolution. (23 Aug 2004)
- Francis Tremblay (2004) [Swinburne's Justification for Naivete](#) is a critique of Swinburne's "The Justification of Theism" (above). (23 Aug 2004)
- Richard G. Swinburne (1998) [Providence and the Problem of Evil](#) OUP Paperback. "This book offers an answer to one of the most difficult problems of religious belief: why does a loving God allow humans to suffer so much? Swinburne argues that God wants us to learn and to love." This is the most detailed treatment of the problem of evil. (21 Feb 2006)
- Richard G. Swinburne (2003) [The Resurrection of God Incarnate](#) OUP Paperback. calculates the probability that God has resurrected as 97%. (21 Feb 2006)
- Richard G. Swinburne (2007) [The Evolution of the Soul](#), Oxford University Press, USA; Revised edition 376 pages.
- Richard Swinburne (2010) [Is There a God? Revised Edition](#), Oxford University Press, paperback 144 pages. [link](#) including free Introduction. The chapter about the problem of evil has not been extended, as far as I can see, maybe shortened.
- Richard G. Swinburne (2011) [Free Will and Modern Science](#), Oxford University Press, paperback.
- Gert Korthof (2013) [God, Freedom and the Free Will Defence](#): about the existence of the God of the sanctity of human life, and the God of the Free Will Defense.
- Does God Exist? a dvd with Christopher Hitchens (Actor), William Lane Craig (Actor), Lad Allen (Director).
- Alvin Plantinga (1974) [God, Freedom and Evil](#). W. B. Eerdmans, paperback 112 pages. The first chapter is: Why Does God Permit Evil? Chapter 4: The Free Will Defense. Chapter 9: Is God's Existence Compatible with the Amount of Moral Evil the World Contains? Chapter 11: Does the Existence of God Make It Unlikely That God Exists?
- Grahame Oppy (2013) [The Best Argument against God](#), 96 pages. Oppy seems to answer the same question as Swinburne. Publisher says: "The best way to work out whether or not to believe in God is to compare the best theory that says that God exists with the best theory that says that God does not exist, taking into account all of the relevant data. This book compares Theism – the best theory that says that God exists – with Naturalism – the best theory that says that God does not exist – on a very wide range of data. The conclusion of the comparison is that Naturalism is a better theory than Theism: for Naturalism is simpler than Theism, and the data considered at least as well by Naturalism as it is by Theism." The argument for Naturalism is novel both in outline, and in the details of the case that there is no data that Theism explains better than Naturalism does." (11 Oct 2013)
- D. Z. PHILLIPS: [The Problem of Evil: A Critique of Swinburne](#).

Korthof Blogspot	home: The Third Evolutionary Synthesis	https://wasianwong.com/korthof4.htm
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