Richard Swinburne, EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

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Richard Swinburne tells us that his book has two major concerns. The first is to explicate what it is for a belief to be justified, or (equivalently) what it is for someone to be justified at a certain time in holding some belief. The second is to explain the difference between mere true belief and knowledge. Regarding the first issue, Swinburne follows William Alston in holding that there is no univocal concept of epistemic justification. Rather, different epistemologists treat different senses of justification. The question that becomes important, then, is which kinds of justification are worth having. Regarding the second issue, Swinburne does Alston one better, endorsing an analogous pluralism about the concept of knowledge. “There are . . . different kinds of warrant, and so of knowledge” (p. 4). Again, the salient question becomes what kinds of knowledge are worth having. An important distinction for Swinburne is that between synchronic justification (what it is for a belief to be a justified response to the situation in which a believer finds herself at a given time) and diachronic justification (what it is for a synchronically justified belief to be based on adequate investigation). Other important distinctions regard the different senses in which a belief can be “probable,” and the different senses in which a belief can be “based” on its evidence. These distinctions, in turn, lead to different kinds of internalist and externalist justification.

Although various kinds of justification are distinguished, a focus is on what Swinburne calls “synchronic objective internalist justification.” A belief is justified in this sense just in case “it is rendered logically probable by the subject’s rightly basic beliefs . . . and based on the latter, both in the sense of being caused by them and in the senses that the subject believes that it is caused by them and renders them [sic.] (logically) probable” (p. 158). A belief that is justified in this sense, Swinburne explains, is “the consciously rational response to evidence in the form of basic beliefs that would be made by a logically omniscient being” (p. 158). According to Swinburne, this sort of justification has both instru-
mental and intrinsic value: beliefs that are justified in this sense are objectively likely to be true, and are valuable in their own right, even if not true. On the other hand, no kind of external justification has intrinsic value. Externalist justification is of instrumental value only (pp. 163–4). When Swinburne investigates diachronic justification he reaches similar conclusions. “There is no intrinsic value in a subject pursuing a course of investigation that as a matter of fact usually leads to better justified beliefs, unless the subject believes that this kind of investigation usually does have this result and is pursuing it for that reason” (p. 185). On the other hand, “we value diachronic objective internalist justification for its own sake” (p. 185).

One helpful feature of the book is that it is divided between a main body of text and several additional notes at the end of the book. These additional notes and an appendix explore special issues (usually in probability theory) that will be of more interest to the expert than to the average undergraduate taking a course in epistemology. There are some unusual features as well. For example, chapter two is a long discussion about the nature of belief, even though Swinburne admits that the views presented there are not of central concern to a book on epistemic justification (pp. 52, n14; 55). Similarly, many of the additional notes treat problems that are not clearly epistemological. These include discussions about decision theory, randomness, the status of laws of nature, and computational accounts of simplicity. The book also contains short (and to my mind inadequate) discussions of contextualism and virtue theory. All of these features can be traced to Swinburne’s Bayesian approach to epistemology. Within that approach, some issues that are commonly considered to be of central importance become marginal, while issues associated with probability theory take pride of place.

Swinburne’s version of this approach requires that all contingent propositions have an a priori, intrinsic probability. It also requires that there are objective, a priori relations of support between any two propositions; that is, a measure of support “quite independent of other facts about the objects referred to in those propositions” (p. 64). Many philosophers will balk at these assumptions, and Swinburne does little to allay their worries. As far as I can see, his only argument for the assumptions is that they are required for rational inquiry. Here is a typical passage.

If science is really a rational enterprise in the sense that certain evidence really does make one hypothesis more probable and another hypothesis less probable, and so there are indeed correct criteria of inductive inference, . . . there must be principles of probability additional to the Bayesian axioms, and in particular a priori principles for ascribing intrinsic probabilities. . . . But if there are no such a priori criteria, we should give up studying science, history, and every other subject of university study. For no one will be able to produce evidence that others can correctly recognize as making one hypothesis in the field more probable than any of an infinite number of rivals; and no retroduction or prediction as any more probable than any other (p. 122).
The implicit argument can be reconstructed as follows:

Rational inquiry is possible only if there are a priori criteria for ascribing intrinsic probabilities.
Rational inquiry is possible
Therefore,
There are such criteria.

This argument would be a good one if both its premises were acceptable, but what reason do we have for accepting the first premise? Many philosophers will think that there are clear alternatives. One that comes to mind is that contingent propositions have no a priori or intrinsic probability. Rather, their epistemic status is entirely a function of contingent features of the knower and her environment. For example, the epistemic status of perceptual beliefs is a function of contingent features of the perceiver and of the perceptual situation. Likewise, there are no (or few) necessary or a priori relations of support between contingent propositions. Rather, evidence relations are a function of contingent features of the reasoner, together with contingent facts about what is a reliable indication of what. On this view, there would be “correct criteria of inductive inference,” but these would be tied to contingent features of human cognition and of the actual world, as opposed to a priori facts about intrinsic probabilities. Given the current popularity of such a view, one would like to see Swinburne say more about it.

In summary, Swinburne has provided us with a clearly written, well-developed version of a Bayesian approach to epistemology. The book explores many issues that are relevant to such an approach, while spending less time with others that would typically get more attention in an introduction to epistemology. Accordingly, readers who want to learn more about Bayesianism in epistemology, or who want to explore relevant issues more deeply, will be well served by this book. Those who come to the book with doubts about that approach, or about Swinburne’s version of it, might be less satisfied.


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This is a remarkable collection of articles. Some atheists have argued that the concept of God is meaningless, and others have argued that God’s existence is improbable, but the editors of this collection say that they have gathered articles which argue that the existence of God is logically impossible, impossible in the same sense in which round squares are impossible. The editors helpfully introduce each section of the book, providing a summary of the central thesis of each individual paper, but