Book Review: Mind, Brain, And Free Will

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A major new work from Richard Swinburne is always worth paying close attention to. In *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* Swinburne revisits some issues he treated earlier in *The Evolution of the Soul*. However, the new book is genuinely new. Although Swinburne still defends a form of substance dualism as the right account of the mind-body problem, the new work presents arguments for this position that are much more developed and refined, and he successfully links problems in the philosophy of mind with problems in the philosophy of action dealing with human freedom and moral responsibility.

Swinburne begins, as he often likes to do, by laying out his views on basic underlying issues in ontology and epistemology. Ontologically, he claims that to tell the “history of the world” requires only substances, properties, and events, with “events” being used to refer not only to changes but also to state of affairs that do not involve change. The history of the world can be told in many different ways, since there is more than one correct way to cut the world up into events. However, assuming some consistent procedure for deciding what counts as an event, all that is needed to give a complete history of the world would be to give a subset of the events whose occurrence “entails the occurrence of all the events” (9).

In chapter 2 Swinburne gives a succinct account of the epistemological position he relies on, which is a form of internalism on which the strength of a belief ought to be proportioned to the evidence one has. To avoid skepticism, Swinburne argues we must accept a “principle of credulity,” which allows us to have justified “basic beliefs.” According to this view, “what seems to us to be so probably is so” (42), unless we have some other evidence that calls this into question. He provides a helpful list of the sources of justification, both direct and indirect, and applies all this to our beliefs about logical modalities.
Swinburne’s account of when properties are identical or distinct depends crucially on the notion of an “informative designator,” which is a rigid designator, for which it is also true that “anyone who knows what the word means (that is, has the linguistic knowledge of how to use it) knows a certain set of conditions necessary and sufficient (in any possible world) for a thing to be that thing (whether or not he can state those conditions in words)” (12). Swinburne holds that two properties are not identical if and only if their informative designators are not logically equivalent. A mental property is defined as “one to whose instantiation in it a substance necessarily has privileged access on all occasions of its instantiation” (67). Swinburne claims that it is clear from this that mental properties are not identical to physical properties, because “the criteria for being in pain are not the same as the criteria for having some brain property (e.g., ‘having one’s c-fibres fire’), or behaving in a certain way in response to bodily stimulus (e.g., crying out when a needle is stuck into you). The criteria for being in pain are how the subject feels, and the criteria for brain and behavioural events are what any one could perceive” (69–70). There are thus mental properties (and mental events in Swinburne’s sense of “event”) that are not identical to physical properties and events. Swinburne argues that David Papineau’s view that what we call physical and mental properties simply represent two distinct ways of apprehending the same reality in the end requires us to admit two distinct types of properties which enable us to make the distinction (98).

In chapter 4 Swinburne argues carefully against the idea that physical events are “causally closed” by arguing that we must believe that intentions (which must be mental events) cause actions. This chapter gives a clear and careful rebuttal of various philosophical arguments for the causal closure of the physical (CCP), and includes a detailed look at recent neuroscience and physical theory, arguing that nothing from these fields makes dualistic interaction impossible or even improbable. The chapter concludes with an argument that no conceivable scientific findings could establish the causal closure of the physical, because such scientific findings must rely on apparent memory, but “virtually all apparent memories could only be believed on the assumption that (CCP) was false” (119). (I assume that Swinburne here means “rationally believed.”)

Chapters 5 and 6 move from property/event dualism to substance dualism by arguing that, strictly speaking, it is persons who form intentions which bring out the brain events that lead to actions. Here Swinburne defends an account of the fundamental laws of nature (and therefore also of causation) which understands the regularities as “regularities in the causal powers and liabilities of substances” (129). Such an account is argued to be superior both to Hume-inspired views as well as accounts which see laws of nature as regularities between universals. Intentional causation cannot be understood at all in terms of a regularity between types of events, and Swinburne’s account of causation allows us to see
agent causation and what is often called event causation as two species of the same (somewhat mysterious) relation.

A mental substance is “one for which the possession of some mental property is essential,” which means that for a mental substance to exist it must have “some beliefs or desires or at least a disposition to have sensations or thoughts or form intentions” (141). A physical substance is simply one for which no mental property is essential, and a “pure mental substance” is one whose existence is logically possible without its having any physical properties. Human persons are first argued to be mental substances, because some mental properties (connected to the fact that human persons “co-experience” diverse things as part of a unified consciousness) are necessary to “delimit the physical boundaries of the substance” (143). Obviously human persons are closely linked to their brains (and bodies as a whole), but Swinburne argues that, however close the relationship, humans are essentially pure mental substances, as Descartes thought. (Interestingly, Swinburne argues that Aquinas’s view is not significantly different from this, contrary to many Aquinas interpreters.) This part of the argument relies on Swinburne’s claim that the “simple” view of personal identity is correct. A number of thought experiments are used to argue that neither physical continuity nor psychological continuity are necessary for personal identity (though both provide evidence for identity). A person is a continuing mental substance, even if that substance cannot (contingently) exist without a body. In these chapters, as in the rest of the book, Swinburne pays close attention to recent neuroscience and argues his view is completely consistent with scientific findings.

In the last two chapters, Swinburne argues first that humans have libertarian freedom, and then that such freedom is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. Here he includes an account of how to deal with Frankfurt-type counter-examples, and also a response to Fischer’s “semi-compatibilism.” Although humans have free will, the scope of its exercise is limited. When humans have strong desires to do a certain act, and no reason to do otherwise, including no moral reasons, it is inevitable that they will try to perform the act. (Intentions are treated as “tryings.”) Similarly, if a person thinks an act is morally good, and has no desire to do otherwise, what the person will do is inevitable. However, there are cases in which our desires and our moral beliefs about what is good are at odds, and in some such cases our actions are freely determined by us. Swinburne thinks, as did such philosophers as C. A. Campbell, that our power to overcome our desires depends partly on the strength of the desires, and partly on the strength of our wills. There are certainly cases then where a person will be unable to act freely, either because the will is too weak or the desires are too strong. One might think that this kind of libertarian freedom is inconsistent with the view (which Swinburne seems to take for granted) that our actions are proximately caused by our brains. However, Swinburne argues that physical indeterminacy implies that the laws governing the brain can only be probabilistic, and that the
probabilistic regularities discovered (or that are likely to be discovered) are consistent with this kind of narrow exercise of free will.

This book is a notable achievement. It is true that in some ways Swinburne’s arguments are traditional: recognizable descendants of Descartes, appealing to thought experiments and also to phenomenological facts about consciousness. However, what is original is the care and precision with which Swinburne develops the arguments, along with the careful attention paid to contemporary philosophical arguments against his views and contemporary neuroscience. Given the kind of dogmatic allegiance many philosophers today have for scientific naturalism and physicalism, Swinburne’s arguments are unlikely to create a major shift towards substance dualism. However, the book deserves a serious hearing, both by religious and non-religious readers. (Swinburne nowhere appeals to theism or any religious doctrines in making his case.)

In closing I shall mention a few things that the book does not do. It would not be right to call these criticisms, since one book cannot do everything, but I think some attention to these areas would strengthen the case for substance dualism. First, Swinburne does not say a lot about the nature of a mental substance, but some will find this concept puzzling and obscure. (Although, as Locke argued, probably no more obscure than the notion of a physical substance.) Second, although Swinburne argues for interactionism, he says little about how the interaction takes place. Presumably, there must be basic causal laws that connect mental and physical substances, and perhaps since they are basic these laws cannot be further analyzed or explained. However, since this is often alleged to be the chief weakness of substance dualism, more could be said about it, and about the general relation of the mind to the body. It is obvious that Swinburne thinks that there is a close relation, but there is little discussion of how interaction might occur. I myself think that dualistic philosophers should think more than they have about the concept of embodiment or incarnation (not understood as a theological term.) If, like Swinburne and Descartes, we take the human person to be a pure mental substance, rather than a composite of body and soul, could we nevertheless think of the body as in some way the mode of existence the mind takes in this life, rather than a separate “entity” or “part” of the person? This might allow us to agree that the person is distinct from his or her body, but still see the person and body as intimately fused.

Finally, Swinburne says very little about how his version of substance dualism coheres with evolutionary theories of how human persons came to exist in their present form. Perhaps to treat this subject adequately he would have to turn to broader metaphysical issues, and think about the relation between God’s creative activity and the evolutionary process.

Although I wish Swinburne had said more than he does about all these issues, this book presents a powerful and elegant case for very traditional views of the human person. Both those who are sympathetic to these views and those who are critical are in Swinburne’s debt.