It has become common practice in some recent philosophy of religion to define God as a spirit of a certain kind (omnipotent, omniscient, and so on), and then to define a spirit as a disembodied person or an immaterial substance. We find versions of such definitions in the work of earlier writers too, for example, John Locke. In this paper I want to look at such definitions, and consider three objections to them:

1. Such definitions have travelled far from Biblical usage.
2. They seem to make God a member of a genus: He is, it would seem, the greatest of spirits, somewhat in the way that the elephant is the biggest of animals.
3. The ideas of a disembodied person or an immaterial substance do not make sense, because they are self-contradictory.

I shall conclude that it is still proper to describe God as spirit, but that this is somewhat different from defining Him as a spirit in the way just mentioned. This conclusion does not, however, commit us to agreeing with the third objection that the idea of a spirit as such is nonsensical.

Swinburne on spirits

Before looking at these three objections, however, let me start by looking at some of Richard Swinburne’s work, as exemplifying the kind of usage in question. At the beginning of his book *The Coherence of Theism* he starts out by defining God as ‘something like a “person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good ... the creator and sustainer of the universe”’.

In due course there follow chapters on each of the main attributes listed;
but very little is said about the concept of a spirit. It is true that there is a long chapter on the idea of an omnipresent spirit (ch.7). Most of this chapter, however, consists of a long disquisition on personal identity, which Swinburne has published elsewhere previously. As regards the concept of a spirit, he simply says, ‘By a “spirit” is understood a person without a body, a non-embodied person’, without more ado. There is no justification given for this definition, and no discussion of it, for Swinburne launches straight into the task of answering the objections made by Paul Edwards and others to such a concept. He repeats his definition in his later book, *The Existence of God*.3

As we shall see, similar definitions are used also by those who reject the concepts of God and of a spirit as incoherent. Before discussing them, however, I want to look more closely at the initial definition of a spirit, which is assumed without question by both Swinburne and his opponents. As I have said, he simply defines a spirit as a ‘non-embodied person’, by which he means, he tells us, ‘an individual who thought and perhaps talked, made moral judgements, wanted this and not that, knew things, favoured this suppliant and not that, etc., but had no body’. He passes on immediately to discuss the question of what it is to be an omnipresent spirit, and he tackles this in terms of a thought-experiment: we are to imagine ourselves gradually becoming aware of what is happening in other bodies and material objects so that we are able to give invariably true answers to questions about them, coming to see things from any point of view we choose, able to move directly anything we choose, uttering words that can be heard anywhere, and so on. ‘Surely’, he concludes, ‘anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an omnipresent spirit’.5

Some people may find Swinburne’s God more like the creation of a science fiction writer than the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A more philosophical objection is that he nowhere argues for his initial definition of a spirit. Perhaps he thinks that it is obviously correct, so that no argument is required. Yet other definitions are possible: for instance, St Thomas Aquinas says at one point that the rational soul ‘is called spirit according to what properly belongs to itself… namely, an immaterial intellectual power’.6 Now such a definition is not incompatible with Swinburne’s; but if we wish to accept both, we need an argument enabling us to move from one to the other. The history of philosophy will suggest many possible arguments. One might argue that in general a power can only be identified with reference to a substance or a person, in which or whom it inheres; or, more specifically, one might argue, like Descartes, that an intellectual power must inhere in an