

The Miracle of Theism

Arguments for and against the Existence of God

(by J L Mackie, Clarendon Press, 1982)

This is a brilliant book. It may well be the book by which the late philosopher, and for a short time professor at Otago University, JL Mackie is best remembered, though his *ETHICS, Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin, 1977) is another classic. Both are written with Mackie's customary clarity and lucidity that makes reading this philosopher, for friend or foe, such an enjoyable pursuit. You may not like what Mackie has to say, but he says it clearly; he points out the strengths and weaknesses of his case; he dissects the arguments of his opponents; he refrains religiously from impenetrable prose, jargon, obscure ambiguities, rhetoric and all the many other obfuscating sins that plague so many writers on philosophy and law today.

The Miracle of Theism is a book that considers the many arguments which try to prove, or at least make more likely than not, the existence of God. It is a *tour de force*. But before I focus on the book itself I think it appropriate to say why a book on the philosophy of religion is being reviewed in a law review.

Natural law doctrines, whether explicit or implicit, are in the ascendant today throughout the Western world. The notion that there are objective (or mind-independent) moral truths and that these truths are necessarily related to law is the core of natural law doctrine. Adherents believe there are fundamental, basic, non-relative, 'higher' standards which govern human conduct and which, when push comes to shove, may over-ride or at least have a greater claim than man-made laws.

Natural law theory has existed since Ancient Greece. Augustine and Aquinas made it central to Christian (or at least Catholic) thought. But utilitarian and socialist outlooks had, by the 19th century, largely eclipsed natural law's attractions. Today, however, it is again the major currency of moral and political debate in the western, and perhaps too the non-western, world. This renaissance in the fortunes of natural law has manifested itself in the language of rights. It is rights — as in the ubiquitous claims to human rights — that are the dominant, arguably the sole, currency of politics, morals and law today.

Whether that renaissance, so observable in the creation of the United Nations Organization with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a causal reaction to the massive violations of the Second World War or is the result of America's new found dominance and influence (one which clearly includes a fascination with rights) or came about somehow else, is largely beside the point. The fact is rights are in their second heyday and overwhelmingly their usage pre-supposes a natural law view of the world. One need go no further than the utterances of the highest judges in the common law world to see repeated references to fundamental and basic rights to which all citizens, and occasionally it is even claimed all humans, purportedly are (not simply 'should be') entitled. These judges make only the faintest of genuflexions towards the legislature in these

pronouncements. Rather they appear to adopt an implicitly natural law standpoint.

However, the truth of natural law theory, despite the obvious emotional appeal of its claims, is surprisingly hard to defend. Its theoretical defenders fall into two camps. Some rely on God and give a theistic defence of natural law. Others forswear any explicit reliance on the existence of God and give a secular defence.

Of course, if an all-powerful, benevolent God really does exist, it is no great feat to go on to prove the main tenets of natural law thinking. An analogy has been made with magic. It is one thing to watch a magician pull a rabbit out of the hat (*i.e.* the secular defence of natural law). It is quite another to watch this after you have seen the magician put the rabbit in.

The point is this. Whereas the secular defence of natural law (like Kant's, Rousseau's or even Nozick's) runs into difficulties in trying to show where these higher, objective rights and standards come from, how humans know them, and why they are binding, all these questions are easily answered by the theist *provided a benevolent, omnipotent God really does exist*. The difficulty for the theist comes one step earlier, in proving God exists.

Mackie's book sets out to convince the reader this cannot be done. There are no good arguments, even probabilistic ones, supporting the theistic belief that an omnipotent, benevolent God exists. Hence, the title to this book, *The Miracle of Theism*, is a deliberately ironic one. "My title also echoes Hume's ironic remark that the Christian religion cannot be believed without a miracle by any reasonable person."¹

There are fourteen chapters and an introduction in this book. Chapters one to eight deal with traditional arguments for theism, for the belief that a benevolent, omnipotent God exists and created the world (in other words a God as conceived by the main monotheistic religions, most notably Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

Topics covered here include the ontological argument (*i.e.* the idea of God and the fact people can entertain the notion of a God means God must exist); miracles and whether there can ever be grounds for believing in them; Berkeley's quite unique defence of theism on the basis that the external, causal world does not exist — only minds and ideas, with sensory perceptions being excited in our minds by the will of a vastly more powerful spirit, namely God; moral arguments, particularly Kant's, for the existence of God; the argument for design (*i.e.* from evidence of how well ordered the world is to the conclusion that the world is indeed the product of design); and the philosophers' argument *par excellence* for theism, the cosmological argument (*i.e.* from the fact there is a world and features like causation to God as a sufficient and uncaused cause of the world).

These first eight chapters alone provide more than enough reason to buy the book. They take the reader through the attempts by the greatest thinkers in Western philosophy to show God exists (and in Hume's case to show God does not). Strengths and weaknesses in the various approaches are pointed out and examined. Along the way the reader cannot help but learn more about wider

¹ JL Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 12. Hereinafter I shall refer to this book as 'Mackie'.

philosophical issues. This should not be too surprising, though. The greatest minds throughout history, whatever else has interested them, have always been fascinated by the question of whether God exists. And so the reader of this book is introduced to the thought of Descartes, and Berkeley, and Pascal, and Kierkegaard, and Kant, and Hume, and others. He or she gets an interesting introduction to philosophy thrown in for free.

Chapters ten to fourteen deal with more modern approaches and ways of defending theism. These stretch from Hans Kung's massive, and virtually impenetrable, defence, to Pascal's and James's argument from prudence (*i.e.* if you cannot know for sure then play it safe and believe in God — you've got less to lose if you get it wrong), to Freud's and Marx's explanations of why so many people (erroneously in their view) believe in God. One can, while admitting the dangers that surround all generalisations, say that the moderns have given up all hope of a definite proof of God and turned to faith (without or despite reason) or to a balance of probabilities argument or (Kung again) to God as a defence against nihilism. In that move they have also sacrificed a large measure of the clarity and precision in their thinking. "Kung is obviously fond of having it all ways at once,"² is a typical condemnation from Mackie when this occurs.

Then there is chapter nine, which is my favourite. This is Mackie's discussion of the 'Problem of Evil'. Here it is the turn of the non-believer. In considering all the attempts to prove God exists Mackie argues powerfully (and for this reviewer persuasively) that:

Those who are sceptical about traditional religious doctrines can resist all the assaults of the believers; but they need not limit themselves to resistance: they can go over to counter-attack.³

As Mackie says, "the problem of evil...may be presented as a formally valid disproof of the set of propositions which constitutes traditional theism, as a demonstration that this set is internally inconsistent, so that these propositions cannot all be true."⁴ More prosaically, the problem of evil is the assertion that there is a *logical* difficulty in saying:

- a) God is omnipotent;
- and b) God is perfectly benevolent;
- and c) There is evil, misery and suffering in the world.

How can anyone believe all three of these claims together? There appears to be a contradiction. At least one of the claims has to be given up. But to give up a) or b) would be to jettison what lies at the core of theism. And to forswear c) is to disbelieve the overwhelming evidence of the senses. The problem of evil sets the theist "the task of clarifying and if possible reconciling the several beliefs

² Mackie, p. 242.

³ Mackie, p. 150.

⁴ Mackie, p. 4.

which he holds.⁵ Essentially the problem is a logical one. How can anyone believe all three?

Mackie argues that no one can, without holding contradictory beliefs. In the course of 27 pages he gives an analysis of the problem that anyone who has any interest in whether or not God exists should read. It is superb. And perhaps most interesting of all is Mackie's discussion of the concept of free will (the last refuge of the theist) which I recommend to everyone, whether interested in the existence of God or not. Be warned, however. You may come away seriously doubting the possibility of human free-will.

By the end of this book there will be few readers left who do not see Descartes' deliberately ironic tone when dedicating his *Meditations* to the Faculty of Theology in Paris:

...although it is quite true that the existence of God is to be believed since it is taught in the sacred Scriptures, and that...the sacred Scriptures are to be believed because they come from God...nevertheless this cannot be submitted to infidels, who would consider that the reasoning proceeded in a circle.⁶

And there will be a good many who find persuasive Mackie's arguments for the conclusion that there are no convincing grounds for belief in an omnipotent, benevolent God. None of the arguments, even the reliance on faith alone, stacks up.

The challenge for the theologian and theistic philosopher is clear. It is to refute Mackie. Let us lawyers, law students and legal academics leave them to that arduous task. We, meantime, can all now turn back to secular defenders of natural law doctrines, sit back, and enjoy the magic show. It is so much more entertaining when you are left wondering where the rabbit came from and how the magician got it into the hat.

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⁵ Mackie, p. 150.

⁶ As cited in Mackie, p. 6.