IS THEISM REALLY A MIRACLE?

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In this paper I outline and discuss the central claims and arguments of J. L. Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism*. Mackie argues, in essence, that none of the traditional theistic arguments is successful taken either one at a time or in tandem, that the theist does not have a satisfactory response to the problem of evil, and that on balance the theistic hypothesis is much less probable than is its denial. He then concludes that theism is unsatisfactory and rationally unacceptable. I argue that he is mistaken in nearly all of his major contentions.

John Mackie's aim, in his posthumously published *The Miracle of Theism*[1], is to "examine the arguments for and against the existence of God carefully and in some detail, taking account both of the traditional concept of God and of the traditional proofs of his existence and of more recent interpretations and approaches." Mackie assumes that the rational acceptability of theistic belief depends upon the outcome of this examination: if on balance the evidence favors theism, then theistic belief is rationally acceptable; if, on the other hand, the evidence favors atheism, then theism is not rationally acceptable. He is less than sanguine about the prospects of theism on this point; how *much* less can be gathered from the fact that the title of the book is taken from Hume's ironic suggestion that

> upon the whole, we may conclude that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one.... Whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.[2]

Like Hume, Mackie apparently believes that it is only by way of a miracle that a rational person could accept the belief that there is such a person as God, let alone the much more extensive claims of any of the theistic religions.

The book displays many virtues. Like Mackie's other works, it is forcefully argued and for the most part clearly written. Many writings about religion betray a tacit assumption to the effect that if what you say is clear enough to be

understood, it is probably too superficial to be worth saying; there is no hint of this deplorable attitude in this book. Further, Mackie takes theism and theistic religion as involving genuine claims about the world, rather than as expressions of attitude, or of moral resolve, or some such thing; he takes with real seriousness the question of the rationality of theistic belief, and he tries to give both sides a fair and honest hearing. He holds that the topics he discusses are properly approached by way of careful and clear argumentation: "It is my view that the question whether there is or is not a god can and should be discussed rationally and reasonably, and that such discussion can be rewarding, in that it can yield definite results. This is a genuine, meaningful question, and an important one— too important for us to take sides about it casually or arbitrarily" (1). There is about Mackie's book an engagingly straightforward character; he is impatient with obfuscation and muddy thinking in others and does his best to avoid it himself. Mackie makes some telling points in considering Swinburne's prob- abilistic theistic arguments; there is also a good discussion of D. Z. Phillips' work, and a penetrating account of William James, with whom he apparently has some sympathy.

I must add, however, that I find myself in disagreement with Mackie with respect to nearly all of his main contentions and claims. His treatment of some of the main topics he considers, furthermore, seem to me to be deeply flawed and fundamentally unsatisfactory. Still further, in approaching these matters as he does, he makes several enormous assumptions, apparently without so much as noticing that these assumptions are both eminently debatable and in fact widely debated. On balance, therefore, I think the book leaves a great deal to be desired.

In Part I of what follows I shall outline and critically evaluate what Mackie has to say about some of the arguments for the existence of God; in Part II I shall consider what he has to say by way of offering evidence against the existence of God; then in part III I shall point out and comment upon the debatable (and in my view false) assumptions upon which the whole work depends.

I. *ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD*

The subtitle of the book is "Arguments for and against the existence of God." The topic of the book is not just these arguments, however; the topic is really theistic belief, and in particular the rationality of theistic belief. Mackie clearly holds that the rationality of belief in God stands or falls with the *arguments* for and against the existence of God: if the arguments *for* God's existence are stronger than the arguments against his existence, then theism is rationally acceptable; on the other hand if the arguments *against* God's existence are stronger, then it is irrational or somehow improper to believe in God.

(a) *THE ARGUMENT FROM MIRACLES*

The first argument Mackie considers is "an argument whose main premiss is that such and such remarkable events have occurred, and whose conclusion is that a god of the traditional sort both exists and intervenes, from time to time, in the ordinary world" (13); not surprisingly, he finds the argument wanting. Here (apart from a qualification or two) Mackie follows Hume, who apparently held that no one could rationally believe in a miracle. "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."[3] Mackie follows Hume in holding that a miracle must be (among other things) a violation of a law of nature: "we must keep in the definition the notion of a violation of natural law" (p. 19). The latter, he says, is a description of the way "in which the world—including, of course, human beings—works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it" (20).

This is, of course, a deistic rather than a theistic conception of a law of nature; on the theistic conception the world is never "left to itself" but is always (at the least) conserved in being by God. Nor can we take Mackie's suggestion counter-factually, as the suggestion that a law of nature describes the world as it *would* be if it *were* left to its own devices; for (again, on the theistic conception) if the world were left to its own devices, apart from the conserving activity of God, it would no longer so much as exist; it isn't possible that the world exist apart from the conserving activity of God. So there are substantial initial problems with the account of miracle and natural law.

The main problem, however, lies in a different direction. For Mackie also endorses Hume's claim that any miracle runs contrary to "firm and unalterable experience," so that a miracle will be maximally improbable:

> it is therefore not enough for the defender of a miracle to cast doubt (as well he might) on the certainty of our knowledge of the law of nature that seems to have been violated. For he must himself say that this *is* a law of nature: otherwise the reported event will not be miraculous. That is, he must in effect *concede* to Hume that the antecedent improbability of this event is as high as it could be, hence that, apart from the testimony, we have the strongest possible grounds for believing that the alleged event did not occur. This event must, by the miracle advocate's own admission, be contrary to a genuine, not merely a supposed law of nature, and therefore maximally improbable. It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony would have to

overcome (25).

Here Mackie seems to endorse the following two premises:

(1) A miracle is a violation of a law of nature
(2) The antecedent improbability of any violation of a law of nature is maximal;

he then concludes, naturally enough, that the defender of miracles has a tough row to hoe.

This argument, however, is considerably less than imperforate. Suppose we ignore, for the moment, the difficulties afflicting the first premise and for purposes of argument temporarily concede Mackie's deistic conception of laws of nature. Why should we suppose that a violation of a law of nature, (taken Mackie's way) is maximally improbable (prior to testimony) on our evidence? On Mackie's conception, a law of nature describes the way the world works when it is not interfered with (for example, by God); but why should we think it is particularly improbable that it be interfered with? The antecedent probability of a miracle, for me, depends upon what I know and believe about the world; but perhaps I have no reason to suppose that the world is not regularly interfered with. Why couldn't interferences with nature be the rule rather than the exception? Perhaps God doesn't ordinarily leave nature to herself, but takes a hand in what happens. (Indeed, if you accept both Mackie's account of laws of nature and a theistic conception of the relation of God to the world, you will suppose that it is only by reason of a continuing miracle that the world continues to exist; *everything,* not merely theistic belief, is a miracle.)

But secondly, suppose we go even further with Mackie. Suppose we concede that violations of laws of nature almost never occur; indeed, suppose we concede, for purposes of argument, that laws of nature are in fact exceptionless. It still won't follow either that they all enjoy a particularly high probability with respect to what I know, or that violations of them are extraordinarily improbable. Perhaps it is true that all A's are B's; how does it follow that this proposition has maximal probability with respect to my evidence? My experience with A's may be limited. Perhaps it is a law of nature that all quarks have some property P—charm, or delight, or winsomeness, let us say; why should it follow that the proposition *All quarks are winsome* is maximally probable (or even more probable than not) with respect to what I know? I may (and in fact do) know next to nothing about quarks and their properties, and a few years ago, the same was true for everyone. No doubt at present there are laws of nature such that none of us know much of anything about the sorts of entities they involve; violation of those laws, then, need not be particularly improbable with respect to what we know.

As a matter of fact it could be that what is in fact a violation of a law of

nature not only wasn't particularly improbable with respect to our evidence, but was in fact more probable than not with respect to it. Suppose (as has been the case for various groups of people at various times in the past) we knew nothing about whales except what can be garnered by rather distant visual observation. Now it might be a law of nature that whales have some property P (mammalian construction, for example) that can be detected only by close examination; but it might also be the case that we know that most things that look and behave more or less like whales do not have this property P. Then the proposition S *is a whale and does not have P* could very well be more probable than not with respect to our evidence, even though it is contrary to a law of nature. It is therefore wholly mistaken to assume, as do Mackie and Hume, that any violation of a law of nature will be maximally improbable with respect to our evidence.

Taken this way, therefore, the argument has little enough to recommend it; it's second premiss seems flatly false. But perhaps we can improve the argument by revising that premiss. Perhaps (so Mackie and Hume should say) what is maximally improbable is not the proposition that E, (which is in fact a violation of a law of nature) has occurred, but rather the proposition *E has occurred and E is a violation of a law of nature*. But this brings us back to the above point about interferences with nature: why should a theist think such a proposition is maximally improbable? (Indeed, why should anyone think so? We aren't given *a priori* that nature is seldom interfered with.) Even if a theist thinks of miracles as violations of laws of nature (and that is probably not the best way to think of them) she needn't think it improbable *in excelsis* that a miracle occur; so why couldn't she perfectly sensibly believe, on the basis of sufficient testimony, that some particular miraculous event has occurred?

A bit later in his discussion, Mackie seems to retract his claim that violations of laws of nature are maximally improbable for all of us; since theists agree "that there is an omnipotent deity, ...they cannot find it absurd to suppose that such a being will occasionally interfere with the course of nature" (27). He goes on to suggest that the claim does hold for atheists and agnostics. This too, however, seems mistaken, both for the reasons given in the whale case above, and because an agnostic (or even an atheist) need not think it particularly unlikely that God exists; such a person could then think it *false* that there are violations of laws of nature, but not maximally improbable that there are. Mackie's discussion of the argument from miracles, therefore, is wholly inconclusive.

(b) *THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT*

In Chapter 2 Mackie discusses the theistic argument to be found in Descartes' Third meditation; he concludes that its prospects are not bright. In Chapter 4 he turns his attention to some versions of the ontological argument. One would not

initially expect him to be wildly enthusiastic about this argument, and indeed he is not. Mackie appears to think Kant showed that any version of the ontological argument must be unsound:

> Our argument has vindicated his [Kant's] thesis, showing that, even if, contrary to what Kant would allow, our concept of an object does contain existence, and involves it inextricably, as Descartes demands, we must still go outside that concept in order to ascribe existence to the object. Even if Xness includes existence in just the way that Descartes postulates, it is still a further question whether there is an X or not, since the judgement that there are no Xs would, even on this supposition, involve no contradiction. It is this that establishes the impossibility of an ontological proof (49).

Now this argument, if it is correct, shows at most the impossibility of a certain *kind* of proposed proof: one which, so to speak, proposes to prove the existence of God by finding *existence* included in the concept of God or in the property *being God*. (A property P includes a property P* if and only if it is not possible that there be an object that exemplifies P but does not exemplify P*; a property P includes *existence*, therefore, if and only if it is not possible that there be an object that exemplifies P and does not exist.)

Mackie is right, I think, in rejecting arguments of this kind. Such an argument would proceed as follows: on analysis we can see that (1) the concept of God (or of the being than which it is not possible that there be a greater) includes existence (in the above sense); but then (2) it will be necessarily false that God does not exist, and hence (3) it is necessarily true that God does exist. A powerful objection to this style of argument is that it is either straightforwardly fallacious or else implicitly presupposes that there are or could be things that do not exist. For given step (1), what follows at step (2) is only that it is not possible that the concept of God be exemplified by a thing that does not exist; but then we can move to step (3) only if we are given that the property of being God is indeed exemplified. One who argues in this way must therefore be understood as beginning with the supposition that the property of being God is indeed exemplified (if only "in the mind"); he then goes on to argue that the being that exemplifies the property or concept in question must also exist in reality—i.e., exist.

Suppose we use the term 'actualism'[4] to denote the view that there neither are nor could have been things that do not exist. Then the chief problem with this style of argument is that it presupposes the falsehood of actualism. For if actualism is true, *every* concept or property includes existence; no concept is or could have been exemplified by something that does not exist, since it is not possible that there be a thing that does not exist. So the property *being the meanest man in*

North Dakota, for example, includes existence; but of course it will not follow that there exists a meanest man in North Dakota. The problem with the above style of ontological argument, from an actualist perspective, is just that its initial assumption—that the property *being God* (or *being the being than which it is not possible that there be a greater*) is exemplified—whether or not the thing that exemplifies it exists in reality—must be rejected. If actualism is true, that property is exemplified if and only if there *exists* something that exemplifies it; since it is not possible that there be something that does not exist, it is not possible that this property be exemplified by something that does not exist.

Kant's puzzling and obscure but suggestive *obiter dicta* on these matters can most charitably be seen, I think, as an early endorsement of actualism. Perhaps what Kant is claiming, when he says that existence is not a real property or predicate, is just that existence is included (in the above sense) in *every* property or concept, so that it can only be redundantly added to a concept. But that suggestion is equivalent to actualism, (given the obvious premise that anything there is will exemplify at least one property). And if actualism is true, then the above style of ontological argument will fail; at any rate on a very plausible interpretation of that argument[5] it presupposes that there are or could have been things that do not exist.

But of course the ontological argument comes in a wide variety of versions, and this point suffices to refute only some of them. It is therefore incorrect to say, with Mackie, that this point "establishes the impossibility of an ontological argument" (unless what he means is that there is an ontological argument such that this point establishes the impossibility of *that* argument.)

Mackie goes on to note that there are contemporary versions of the ontological argument put forward by Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcolm, and myself. He then turns his attention to the version of the argument I endorsed in *The Nature of Necessity*. That argument certainly has its problems (some of which are set forth with style and clarity in Peter van Inwagen's "Ontological Arguments"[6]), but I can't see that Mackie manages to identify any difficulties for it here. Briefly, the argument in question goes as follows:

(1) The proposition *there is a maximally great being* is possible in the broadly logical sense.

Hence

(2) There is a possible world in which there is a maximally great being.

Now

(3) Necessarily, a being with maximal greatness would be necessarily existent and would have (at least) omnipotence, omniscience and

moral perfection essentially.

But given the relatively uncontroversial further premiss that

> (4) What is necessary does not vary from possible world to possible world (so that if it is possible that p is necessary, then p is necessary).

it follows that in fact there does exist a being that is necessarily existent and essentially omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good.

Now while it is clear that Mackie disapproves of this argument,[7] it is not easy to see precisely where his objection lies. He begins as follows:

> If we choose to play with possible worlds at all…, we ordinarily assume that for any logically possible statement or conjunction of statements there is at least one possible world that realizes it. That is, we do ordinarily expect to be able to argue from non-contradiction to possibility and thence to a possible world. What has ruled out this pattern of inference, in Plantinga's system, is the introduction of world indexed properties. For the admission of these makes features of one world dependent in part on features of all other possible worlds. If each possible world were independent of every other, then we could allow the existence of a possible world for every maximal set of consistent sentences, and hence could say that every logical possibility is realized in at least one possible world (60).

A page later he summarizes the objection:

> The admission of world-indexed properties, which is also essential for his version of the ontological proof, undermines both what I have called the crucial step [above, (3)] and the crucial premiss [above, (1)].

How, exactly, shall we understand this objection? It is by no means easy to make it explicit; I am inclined to think, however, that it essentially contains the following four assertions. (a) The above version of the ontological argument presupposes the existence of world-indexed properties (i.e., properties of the sort *has P in W*, where P is a property and W a possible world), (b) the only reason we might have for accepting the inference of (2) from (1) in the argument is the idea that whatever is logically possible is true in some possible world, (c) if we hold that there are such things as world-indexed properties, then we will be obliged to deny that whatever is logically possible is true in some possible world; hence if we introduce world-indexed properties, we cannot properly make the step from (1) to (2), and (d) if we hold that there are world-indexed properties, then we will be obliged to give up (4), the premiss of the argument according to which what is possible or necessary does not vary from world to world. In a

nutshell: either we accept world-indexed properties or we do not. If we do not, then the argument immediately collapses; but if we do, then we lose premiss (4) as well as the inference from (1) to (2), so that once again the argument fails.

Now (a) is clearly false; the above formulation makes no mention of world-indexed properties. (Indeed, it is easy to state the argument just in terms of possibility and necessity, with no explicit reference to possible worlds at all.) It is perhaps easier to see how the conclusion follows from the premises by thinking in terms of world-indexed properties, but appeal to such properties is a dispensable luxury.

(b)-(d) furthermore, have equally grave problems. Consider (b) and (c). Mackie apparently holds that any proposition that is *free from contradiction* is logically possible, and hence true in some possible world. If we introduce world-indexed properties, however, then (he thinks) we lose this truth; for the introduction of such properties "makes features of one world dependent in part upon features of all other possible worlds" (60); and it will follow, Mackie thinks, that there will be logically possible propositions that are not true in any possible world (60). So if we introduce world-indexed properties, then, says Mackie, the resulting "system of possible worlds does not and cannot correspond to the full range of logical possibilities" (60). But then we can no longer say that a proposition is logically possible if and only if it is true in some possible world; there will be logically possible propositions that are not true in any possible world. And hence the fact that the proposition *there is a maximally great being* is logically possible (because it is free from contradiction) gives us no reason to suppose that there is a possible world in which this proposition is true; but then there is no reason to accept the step from (1) to (2) and the argument collapses.

What shall we make of these claims? In particular, what shall we make of his claim that we "expect to be able to argue from non-contradiction to possibility and thence to a possible world"? Here we must ask first what Mackie means by "non-contradiction" and "freedom from contradiction." He doesn't say what he means, but an informed guess would go as follows: a proposition is free from contradiction if and only if no explicit contradiction follows from it in ordinary logic—first order logic with identity, say. So a proposition is free from contradiction if it is consistent in first order logic.

But if this is what he means, then isn't he clearly mistaken? It isn't true at all that we ordinarily think we can argue from absence of contradiction in this sense to possibility and thence to truth in some possible world. There is no contradiction of this sort in the proposition that something is both red and green all over; but that wouldn't persuade us that this was possible. The resources of first order logic do not enable us to deduce a contradiction from the proposition $2+1=7$ or *some prime numbers weigh more than Jackie Gleason*; but that does not lead us to think these propositions possible. We certainly don't in general

think that theoremhood in first order logic and logical necessity are coextensive; first order logic codifies and systematizes just a *part* of necessity.

But secondly, Mackie seems to think that if we stick with what we might call "purely logical possibility" (i.e., freedom from contradiction in first order logic) then we will reject the idea that there are world-indexed properties. His idea seems to be that if we are thinking of purely logical possibility, and if we take a possible world to be something like a set of propositions that is maximally consistent with respect to first order logic, then we will not properly suppose that there are any such things as world-indexed properties. But why not? It isn't nearly as easy as *that* to get rid of world-indexed properties. Perhaps Mackie is forgetting that possible worlds are *maximal*. Given maximality, for any proposition p and world w, either p is true in w or p is false in w; but then either way p has a world indexed property: either it has *truth in w* or it has *falsehood in w*. And it isn't only propositions that have world-indexed properties under those conditions; consider any object x you like—Socrates, let's say—any property you like—*wisdom*, say—and any possible world w in which the proposition *Socrates exists* is true. Either the proposition *Socrates is wise* is true in w or the proposition *Socrates is unwise* is true in w; so either Socrates has the world-indexed property *being wise in w* or the world indexed property *being unwise in w*. In either case, again, Socrates has a world-indexed property. So even if we construed possibility as purely logical possibility, we would still be stuck (more likely, blessed) with world-indexed properties. The maximality property of possible worlds is sufficient for the existence of such properties. Possible worlds are connected with each other in such a way that what is true at one world partially determines what is true at other worlds just by virtue of the maximality property; whether we construe possibility as broadly logical possibility on the one hand or as strictly logical possibility on the other has nothing to do with the matter. Hence it is a mistake to say, as Mackie does, that if we suppose there are world-indexed properties, then we will be committed to supposing that there are possible propositions not true in any possible worlds; and hence it is also a mistake to say, as Mackie's (c) does, that we can properly infer (2) from (1) only if we eschew world-indexed properties.

Finally, consider (d). Mackie's idea seems to be that (4) of the argument—the premiss according to which what is logically possible does not vary from possible world to possible world—holds only for worlds construed in terms of purely logical possibility and necessity, and does not hold if we suppose that there are world-indexed properties. But this suggestion seems to be based on Mackie's mistaken notion that if we restrict ourselves to purely logically possible worlds, then we will not properly suppose that there are world-indexed properties; at any rate it is hard to see any other reason for accepting the suggestion, and Mackie gives none.

So far as I can see, there is here no objection at all to this version of the ontological argument. Mackie's only surviving objection, then, is just that (1) is not an obvious truth and that it is more abstemious and parsimonious, less profligate and extravagant, to accept the denial of (1) rather than (1) itself. I find this at best dubious; when we are dealing with propositions of the sort *Possibly p* and *Not possibly p* it becomes difficult to see which is the more abstemious, the less profligate. Consider, for example, the propositions *it is possible that there be a necessarily existing being that is essentially omniscient* and its denial. The first is equivalent to the proposition that there is at least one necessary being that is essentially omniscient; the second is equivalent to the proposition that there are no such beings. Now which of these is the more cautious and abstemious? The existential proposition says only that there is at least one such being; it therefore rules out just one of the possible answers to the question "How many beings of that sort are there?" The negative answer, on the other hand, is maximally strong: it rules out all the answers *but* one. It is thus not easy to see why the positive answer should be thought more extravagant than the negative. Why should we suppose that there *is* something more extravagant about saying that there *is* a being of a certain sort, than that there is *not*? Further, is there some reason to think intellectual abstemiousness the cardinal intellectual virtue? Do we have reason to think, for example, that it is more likely that there are fewer things than more things?

In any event, one who finds it plausible to think that indeed it *is* possible that there be a maximally great being ought not to be much impressed by the claim that it is more abstemious to think that this is *not* possible. The real question, so far as this argument goes, is whether it is or is not reasonable to think that the premiss of this argument is true; Mackie has given no reason at all, so far as I can see, to think that it is not.

(c) *OTHER THEISTIC ARGUMENTS*

There follows a chapter on Berkeley, and a relatively laborious chapter on cosmological arguments for the existence of God. Here Mackie considers the sort of argument Swinburne gives in Chapter 7 of *The Existence of God*. This argument is an inductive, or at any rate a nondeductive argument; the evidence in question is that there is a complex physical universe, and the hypothesis allegedly to be confirmed by this evidence is that there is such a person as God. Confirmation, here, can be taken in two ways: we may say the e confirms h if and only if $P(h/e) > 1/2$, or that e confirms h if and only if e raises the probability of h—if and only if, that is, $P(h/e\&k)) > P(h/k)$ (where k is our background information). Arguments of the latter kind Swinburne calls "C-inductive" arguments; and the argument in question is taken to be an argument of that kind. So

the Swinburnian claim is that $P(h/e\&k))>P(h/k)$, where h is the hypothesis that God exists, e is the evidence that there is a complex physical universe, and k is our background knowledge. Here we encounter "the problem of old evidence": k must not be taken to include e (otherwise $k\&e$ will be logically equivalent to k, in which case $P(h/(e\&k)$ could not be greater than $P(h/k)$). We are therefore asked to evaluate the probability that there should be such a person as God on our *diminished* background knowledge—all the things you and I know minus the knowledge that there is a complex physical universe[8]; then we compare this probability with the probability of the existence of God on our unreduced background knowledge (which includes the existence of a complex physical universe.)

There are problems here, but Mackie does not pursue them. Instead, he objects (among other things) that it is hard indeed to see how to determine what either of these probabilities might be. And here it is easy to feel sympathy for him. Swinburne's approach to the matter makes sense only if we suppose the existence of God has an *a priori* (or intrinsic) probability (see below, p. 129-130), a probability on necessary truths alone. Now the bulk of the theistic tradition has held that necessarily, if God exists, then God exists necessarily—i.e., in every possible world. If this is so, then the *a priori* probability of the existence of God is either 1 or 0; 1 if God exists, and 0 if not. The Swinburnian style of argument, therefore, can be of use only if we are supposing that it is *not* the case that if God exists, then he is a necessary being. But then we face the following extremely difficult question: if we suppose that there is such a thing as the *a priori* probability of God's existence, how do we make any kind of estimate at all as to what this probability might be? Furthermore, is there any reason to think that such a proposition as *there is such a person as God* or *there is a complex physical universe* has an *a priori* probability at all? Is there any reason at all to think that these propositions have a probability—an objective and intrinsic probability—on the proposition that $7+5=12$? I can't see that there is; indeed, there is excellent reason to think that they do not. But even if there are such probabilities, it would seem to be pretty much anyone's guess as to *what* they are. I think Mackie raises some interesting and important issues; his discussion suffers, however, from failure to come to grips with the basic issues here, which have to do with the nature of probability.

Chapter 6 contains an interesting discussion of various moral arguments for the existence of God. Here Mackie credits Sidgwick with seeing the fatal flaw in any moral argument for the existence of God:

> ...he has put his finger on the basic weakness of almost every form of moral argument for the existence of a god. A set of beliefs, even if they are called 'intuitions,' about how one ought to act cannot be a good reason for settling a factual issue, a way of determining what is

the case, or even for deciding what to 'believe for practical purposes.' Practical choices must be based on factual beliefs, not the other way round, though beliefs alone, of course, will not determine choices (112).

The idea seems to be this: suppose you accept some moral belief—the belief that you ought to treat your dean with more respect, perhaps, or even the belief that you do in fact have moral obligations. Suppose, furthermore, that you see that the moral belief in question entails some factual belief. It is then improper or incorrect, says Mackie, for you to accept the factual belief on the basis of your knowledge of the moral truth and its implication of the factual proposition. Why so? Perhaps I believe that I ought to do something or other, and also see or think I see that I am obliged to do that thing only if I *can* do so: why can't I properly conclude that I can do it? Mackie's answer is that

> There is a direction of supervenience: since what is morally and prac-
> tically rational supervenes upon what is the case, what it is rational to
> *believe* with a view to practice, or to *choose* to do, must similarly
> supervene upon what it is rational to believe about what is the case (113).

He neglects to give us a characterization of supervenience (a notoriously difficult concept) but he seems to take it along the following lines: a proposition *A* supervenes upon a proposition *B* if and only if *A* is true *because B* is true (and perhaps not vice versa). This is extremely vague: how shall we take the 'because' here? But in any event Mackie's argument for the epistemic priority of the non-moral seems inconclusive at best. Presumably the *Detroit Free Press* says that the Tigers won the World Series because in fact the Tigers did win (and not *vice versa*); but surely it would not be the path of true philosophy to conclude that one should not believe that the Tigers won on the basis of what the *Free Press* said. Much more needs to be said before this argument could be taken seriously as presenting a general problem for moral arguments to the existence of God.

Next, there is an interesting chapter on a theistic *argument from consciousness*; here Mackie considers versions by Locke and Swinburne, who also figures in the following chapter on arguments from design. It may come as no surprise to learn that by Mackie's lights

> the argument from design cannot be revived. The advance of science
> has destroyed the starting-points which made it initially attractive in the
> eighteenth century, while the general philosophical objections which
> were brought against it even then by Kant and, above all, by Hume,
> remain in effect against Swinburne's restatement of it, and, I surmise,
> against all possible reconstructions (140).

II. *ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF GOD*

In the longest chapter of the book, Mackie restates and develops his claim that the existence of evil constitutes an intellectual difficulty for theists. It is not easy, however, to see just what the alleged difficulty *is*. He begins by saying that "The problem of evil, in the sense in which I am using this phrase, is essentially a logical problem: it sets the theist the task of clarifying and if possible reconciling the several beliefs which he holds" (150). The beliefs in question, of course, are

(1) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God,

and

(2) There is evil.

((2) may sometimes be specified to some particular form or variety of evil.) Mackie says that the question whether the theist holds inconsistent views is the one he means to consider; but he sometimes seems to forget *this* question and instead argues something else—that the theist does not have an adequate answer to the question: why does God permit evil? Thus, for example, he considers Demea's claim that "This life is but a moment in comparison of eternity. The present evil phenomena, therefore, are rectified in other regions and in some future period of existence."

Mackie comments as follows: "But, as Cleanthes says, these are 'arbitrary suppositions'; we cannot rely on them when the issue whether there is a just, benevolent and all-powerful deity is still in doubt" (158). Here he has gone astray: if what we are considering is the advertised *logical* problem then these suppositions are entirely in order. Mackie seems to be confusing a *defense* with a *theodicy*. What is relevant to the *logical* problem—the question whether the theist is guilty of inconsistency—is a *defense*: an argument to show that the propositions in question, contrary to the atheological allegation, are not in fact inconsistent. A *theodicy*, on the other hand, is an attempt to "justify the ways of God to man." Less impertinently, it is an attempt to answer the general question, why does God permit evil? or the attempt to answer the question, with respect to a particular and perhaps peculiarly appalling kind of evil, why does God permit *that* evil?

These two enterprises are clearly distinct. A defense is perhaps most easily thought of as an application of a simple theorem of propositional modal logic:

(3) $[\Diamond(p\&r) \ \& \ ((p\&r) \Rightarrow q)] \Rightarrow \Diamond(p\&q)$

To show that p and q are compatible (that their conjunction is possible) it suffices

to find a proposition r which is clearly compatible with p and whose conjunction with p entails q. This proposition r need not be a proposition we *know* to be true; nor need it even be probable with respect to our evidence. In fact r can do its job perfectly well even if we know that it is false. Suppose we propose to argue that Paul's having the experience he does have is compatible with his holding nothing but false beliefs about his surroundings: we might then say: "it is (broadly logically) possible that Paul is a Putnamian brain in a vat on Alpha Centauri, serving as subject in an Alpha Centaurian experiment in which the experimenter gives him just the experiences and beliefs he would have if he were home in Grand Rapids watching television: then he would be having just the experiences he is having (Paul is now home watching television) but all of his beliefs about his surrounding would be false." It would not be apposite, here, to remark that the supposition that Paul is being thus mishandled by Alpha Centaurians is a merely arbitrary supposition, or known to be false, or unlikely with respect to our evidence. It can be all those things and still perform its function perfectly well. To do that, it needs to meet only two conditions: it must be compatible with one of the propositions we are trying to show consistent, and in conjunction with that one must entail the other. (I apologize for thus belaboring the obvious.) It is thus clear that a defense and a theodicy should be clearly and sharply distinguished: I might have a good argument to show that (1) is not incompatible with (2), but no good idea at all as to why, as a matter of fact, God does permit the evil we find. In particular, the r you propose in your defense might serve its function perfectly well even if it isn't a successful contribution to theodicy. (Perhaps you have no reason to think r is true; perhaps, indeed, r is wholly implausible.)

To return to Mackie and his comments on Demea's arbitrary suppositions": if what is under consideration is, as Mackie says, the *logical* problem of evil, then presumably we are thinking of these suppositions as playing r in the above theorem with (1) and (2) as p and q. But then the fact that these considerations are merely arbitrary is neither here nor there. It is not necessary that the considerations in question be true, or known to be true, or probable, or plausible, or non-arbitrary, or anything of the sort. These considerations are relevant to a *theodicy*, but not to a *defense*. If, on the other hand, Mackie is addressing himself here to questions of theodicy, then (contrary to his advertised intentions) he is no longer concerning himself with the *logical* problem of evil; he is instead suggesting that the theist seems to have no very good answer to the question: why does God permit the evil he does permit? This may be true (I think it is true) but it isn't at all clear either that this constitutes something like a philosophical *difficulty* for the theist, or that it somehow renders theism improbable or unlikely.

Suggesting that the free will defense is "the only solution to the problem of

evil that has any chance of succeeding": Mackie turns his attention to that defense, aiming to show that this hope is doomed to disappointment. But here again there seems to be pervasive confusion of issues of defense with issues of theodicy. Considering the extension of the free will defense to natural evil (by taking as *r* a proposition making reference to the malevolent activity of Satan and his cohorts) Mackie says:

> Formally, no doubt, this is possible; but it is another of what Cleanthes called arbitrary suppositions. While we have a direct acquaintance with some wrong human choices—our own—and our everyday understanding extends to the recognition of the like choices of other human beings, we have no such knowledge of the activities of angels, fallen or otherwise: these are at best part of the religious hypothesis which is still in dispute, and cannot be relied upon to give it any positive support. This is at most a *possible* explanation of natural evils...(162-163)(Mackie's italics).

This leads us to suspect, once more, that Mackie is proposing to discuss, not defense, but theodicy:[9] two pages later, however, he says "Since I am charging the theist with holding incompatible beliefs, it is *his* conception of good, evil and so on that are in play..."; this suggests, on the other hand, that it is defense, not theodicy that is relevant. There is therefore considerable difficulty in seeing just what aspect of the problem of evil Mackie means to address.

In any event the theist will be likely to concede that the free will defender's *r* is, as Mackie says, only a *possible* explanation of evil—that is, only a defense. But he also attempts to argue that it is not even that. He begins by pointing out (in effect) that the free will defense clearly requires a *libertarian* conception of freedom—a conception according to which it is not possible both that all of a person's actions be causally determined by factors outside his control and that some of them be free. He then suggests that "There are two great difficulties for this position, that of giving evidence for it, and that of even saying just what contra-causal freedom would be" (166). The first of these difficulties, again, is not relevant to the free will defense taken as *defense*. The second alleged difficulty, so far as I can make it out, is that Mackie thinks that if a person is not *caused* to make the choices he makes, then these choices must be merely *random*, in something like the way in which certain quantum effects are random; but if a person's free action stem from merely random choices, then presumably they would have no special value. Here there are several interesting and important topics; I have no space to enter them. Let me just note that the theist is *already* committed to the idea that some actions are not merely random even though the agent in question is not caused to perform those actions (or if caused to perform them, is caused to do so only by himself): *God's* actions would fit this category.

God isn't caused to perform the actions he does; he could have done otherwise than he has done; but of course his actions are in no relevant sense merely random.

What is needed here is an *argument* for the claim that necessarily, if an agent is not caused to do what he does, then his action is merely random or chance; this isn't just obvious after all. (As a matter of fact it seems closer to being outrageous than obvious.) Why shouldn't it be, for example, that I am not caused to write this review by forces outside my control and (even given the past causal history of the world) could have refrained from doing so, while nonetheless my action is not merely random? Why should we think that if God was not *caused* to create the world, or to provide redemption for his creatures, then his actions in so doing were merely random? I can't see any reason at all for making this supposition. If Mackie *had* a good reason, however, then he would have an initially good argument against theism itself (not just the free will defense), for it is clearly part of most varieties of theism to hold that God's actions are not caused by anything outside himself but nonetheless are not random.

Mackie next examines a specific formulation of the free will defense—the formulation I gave in *The Nature of Necessity*. I shall resist the temptation to engage in extensive self-justification; let me say simply that Mackie's discussion is vitiated by his misunderstanding transworld depravity:

> Plantinga assumes that Curley is so corrupt that 'every world God could have actualized is such that if Curley is significantly free in it, he takes at least one wrong action.' Curley Smith suffers from what Plantinga calls "transworld depravity": in whatever world he exists, if he is significantly free he commits some wrong actions: this Plantinga takes to be a fact about Curley's essence (174).

But here there is an unfortunate lapse. If Curley suffers from transworld depravity, then *every world God could have weakly actualized* is such that if Curley is significantly free in it, then he performs at least one wrong action in it. Mackie quotes this, and then apparently attempts to restate it by saying that if Curley suffers from transworld depravity, then *every world in which Curley exists* is such that if he is significantly free in it, then he goes wrong in it. But of course the second isn't a paraphrase of the first and does not follow from it. The second would follow from the first only if the proposition *every possible world is a world God could have weakly actualized* were a necessary truth. The central argument of the free will defense, however, is just for the conclusion that this proposition is not necessarily true. Indeed, the burden of the Free Will Defense is that this proposition is necessarily *false*; the conclusion of its central argument is that it is *necessary* that there are some possible worlds God could not have weakly actualized. As Mackie puts the matter, a person suffers from transworld depravity if and only if he goes wrong in every world in which he exists and is

significantly free. But if this were correct, transworld depravity (as defined for persons, not for essences) would be a property that could be had only by beings (abstract objects such as numbers, and (more contentiously) material objects) that had essentially the property of lacking significant freedom. But then, of course, it would not be possible that there be significantly free creatures that suffer from transworld depravity, so that the whole free will defense would collapse.

But to say that I suffer from transworld depravity is not to say that there is no possible world *at all* in which I am significantly free and always do only what is right; it is only to say that none of the worlds God could have weakly actualized is one in which I am significantly free and always do only what is right. If I suffer from transworld depravity, then for any such world W there is an action A such that I am significantly free with respect to A in W, and such that

> (a) if God had strongly actualized T(W), (the largest state of affairs he strongly actualizes in W) then I would have gone wrong with respect to A.

Such counterfactuals of freedom as (a) are *contingently* true, not necessarily true. Suppose God knew in advance (before he created Adam and Eve) that if he were to create Eve and cause her to be significantly free with respect to the action of choosing the apple, then she would take the apple. This bit of knowledge on his part is knowledge of a contingent truth, not a necessary truth. What he knows is what Eve would in fact freely do, if he were to do certain things; it would of course be *possible* that he do those same things and Eve *refrain* from taking the apple. But to say that someone suffers from transworld depravity is really to assert that a lot of such counterfactuals of freedom are true of her. Transworld depravity, therefore, is not, as on Mackie's account, an *essential* property of those (if any) who are afflicted with it; it is instead a *contingent* property of such unfortunates. Even if Curley suffers from transworld depravity, there are plenty of possible worlds in which he exists and is significantly free and always does only what is right.

Now Mackie's main objection to the Free Will Defense seems to be the claim that on his (mistaken) understanding of transworld depravity, it is not possible (contrary to the Free Will Defender's claim) both that God be omnipotent and that there be free creatures all of whom suffer from transworld depravity. Here, of course, he is right; indeed, given *his* conception of transworld depravity it is not possible that there be any free creatures who suffer from transworld depravity at all, whether or not God is omnipotent. This objection, therefore, has nothing but misunderstanding to recommend it.

So far as I can see, the only comment of any significance Mackie makes on the free will defense is a question:"how could there be logically contingent states

of affairs, which an omnipotent god would have to accept and put up with?" This is really the question whether there are or could be counterfactuals of freedom of the sort mentioned above; more particularly, it is the question whether it is possible that any such counterfactuals of freedom are *true*, and *were* true prior to God's creating free creatures. Robert Adams has interesting things to say about this question.[10] I am inclined to believe that Adams' arguments against counterfactuals of freedom are inconclusive.[11] The important point to see here, however, is that the atheological objector needs counterfactuals of freedom more than the free will defender does. If there are no true counterfactuals of freedom, the free will defender's task should be *easier*, not harder; for on that supposition God would not have been able to have as detailed knowledge of what would happen if he were to strongly actualize various states of affaiars T(W) for any possible world W as he would on the contrary supposition (*Op Cit*. pp. 379). In particular he would not have been able to have the same detailed knowledge as to what would happen if he were to create free creatures.

III. *IS THEISM A HYPOTHESIS*?

In his final chapter ("Conclusions and Implications") Mackie argues that the balance of probability lies against theism and in favor of atheism. He also considers the moral and practical effects of theism versus atheism, suspecting that there is "positive correlation between atheism and virtue" (255). Believers will be grateful, however, for his magnanimity in generously conceding that "even theists are not necessarily narrow minded dogmatists, intolerant perse-cutors, or propagators of timid credulity and a crudely calculating selfish version of morality itself." (260).

Rather than explore this unpromising line, I wish in this last section to register and explain some misgivings about Mackie's whole enterprise. I have argued so far that his treatment of specific issues (the argument from miracles, the ontological argument, the problem of evil) is unsatisfactory; but it is also clear, I think, that Mackie's whole project makes presuppositions that are deeply ques-tionable. The most important and debilitating of these is his taking it for granted that theism or belief in God is a scientific hypothesis, or a quasi-scientific hypothesis, or relevantly *like* a scientific hypothesis. Before turning to that topic, however, I shall first point out a serious incompleteness in Mackie's project and a serious problem with probability. (On all three of these topics I will have time to do no more than ask some questions and issue what may appear to be unduly dogmatic *obiter dicta*.)

(a) First, the incompleteness. Mackie concludes that "In the end, therefore, we can agree with what Laplace said about God: we have no need of that hypothesis" (253); he goes on to claim that "The balance of probabilities, there-

fore, comes out strongly against the existence of a god." He clearly takes it for granted, furthermore, that if the balance of probabilities comes out as he says it does, then there is no case for theism and the theist stands revealed as somehow irrational or intellectually deficient or perhaps intellectually out of line; as he puts it, "it would appear from our discussion so far that the central doctrines of theism, literally interpreted, cannot be rationally defended." Some of the most interesting issues surrounding the book arise here.

Now Mackie believes he has shown that the central doctrines of theism are not rational or rationally defensible because they are not probable with respect to what he takes to be the relevant evidence. But what does he mean here by "rational"? How is he using this protean term? Suppose he is right in thinking that it would be irrational to be theist if theistic belief is not probable: what is this property of irrationality that would then afflict theism or theists? Mackie doesn't say. Is a belief rational if and only if it is among the deliverances of reason? or is rationality, instead, to be construed as a matter of epistemic duty fulfillment, as Roderick Chisholm suggests? Or should it perhaps be thought of as a matter of coherence, construed in Bayesian fashion or some other way—as with Lehrer, for example? Or is it instead a matter of reliability of belief formation, as with Goldman, Dretske and Alston? Or (still another possibility) is it a matter of a belief's being formed by cognitive faculties working properly in an environment for which they are suited? Or what? Mackie doesn't say. These questions are hotly debated by contemporary epistemologists. The answers to them, furthermore, are of obvious and intense relevance to Mackie's project. Nevertheless he doesn't discuss the questions at all; he doesn't ask what rationality is, or what it is to be rational; he proceeds as if all this is perfectly clear. This gives the whole discussion an air of superficiality or ungroundedness.

(b) Although Mackie does not discuss the nature of rationality, it is clear that he thinks theistic belief is irrational if it is not appropriately probable, probable with respect to the relevant body of evidence. This brings me to my second comment. Suppose we knew which body of propositions it is with respect to which theism must be more probable than not in order to be rationally acceptable: how shall we understand *probability* here? We are thinking of the probability of theism, the belief that there is such a person as God. What is the relevant conception of probability? Mackie gives us a cryptic hint:

> The probabilities with which we shall be most concerned are epistemic ones: the epistemic probability of a certain statement relative to some body of information is a measure of the degree of support that that information gives to that statement, or, equivalently, of the degree or belief that it is reasonable to give to that statement on the basis of that information (10).

One further clue: his frequent appeals to the calculus of probabilities suggests that he thinks probability, however exactly it is to be construed, conforms to that calculus.

But how, more specifically, is he construing probability? First (contrary to the above quotation) he cannot sensibly take probability as a measure of degree of *rational* belief; for then it would be circular *in excelsis* to argue, as he does argue, that since theistic belief is not probable with respect to the relevant evidence, it is not rational to accept it. Secondly, a *subjectivist* or *personalist* conception of probability, according to which probability is relativised to a person and serves substantially as a measure of degree of belief, won't be relevant to his considerations. On the personalist conception, a conditional probability $P_s(A/B)$ is to be seen as at any rate equivalent to $P_s(A\&B)/P_s(B)$, where P_s is S's credence function; thus $P_s(A/B)$ tells us what the ratio is between S's degree of belief in $A\&B$ and S's degree of belief in B. But then given the *theist's* credence function, theism will not be at all improbable on the relevant evidence. Of course it will be improbable on the relevant evidence given *Mackie's* credence function; but then his claim that theism is improbable on that evidence would be a merely autobiographical remark about his own credence function, having the philosophical interest characteristic of autobiographical remarks.

So clearly enough Mackie must be accepting some objectivist conception of probability. But presumably frequency and propensity accounts will not be relevant when our question is the probability of the existence of God with respect to the body of evidence in question.[12] This leaves only the logical theory of probability[13]; and this seems to be the one Mackie has in mind. On this conception, there is a quasi-logical, wholly objective relation of probability between any two statements, or any two statements of a relevant domain.

But here the problem is with *prior* probabilities. In the first place, the bulk of the theistic tradition has held that God is a necessary being; a being such that there is no possible world in which he does not exist. If so, however, then according to the logical theory the *a priori* probability of God's existence will be 1; and it follows by the probability calculus that the same goes for the *conditional* probability of God's existence on any evidence you care to specify. Mackie's approach is therefore irrelevant to the bulk of traditional thinking about God. True, he offers some (mainly confused, as I see it) objections to the ontological argument; but of course we have the example of Aquinas and others to show that one needn't accept the ontological argument to hold that God is a necessary being, in the above sense.

But suppose we ignore this difficulty; suppose we join Mackie in assuming, for the nonce, that if there is such a person as God, he is a contingent being. Suppose we let T be the "hypothesis" that there is such a person as God, and E

be the relevant body of total evidence, whatever exactly that is. Then according to a simple form of Bayes' Theorem,

$$P(T/E) \; = \; \frac{P(T) \; X \; P(E/T)}{P(E)}$$

where $P(T)$ and $P(E)$ are the intrinsic or *a priori* probability of these propositions: their probability on tautological evidence such as $PV{\sim}P$. But here we strike a problem of considerable significance: is there any reason to think that such propositions as E and T *have* a probability on a tautology, or any other necessary truth? Is the idea that there is some ratio or proportion m/n such that m/n possible worlds contain God? I don't see the slightest reason to think there are any such proportions or any such *a priori* probabilities; in fact there is good reason to think that there aren't any.

A brief argument: if contingent propositions in general have an *a priori* probability on tautological evidence, then presumably the members of any collection of mutually exclusive (in pairs) and jointly exhaustive propositions of equal content should have the same *a priori* probability.[14] But then the members of a countably infinite collection of the sort *There are no horses, there is just 1 horse, there are just 2 horses,...*will all have the same *a priori* probability, in which case their probability will be zero. (*Loc cit.*) (It is for this reason that Carnap and others have held that the *a priori* probability of universal generalizations should be thought of as zero; such a generalization is equivalent to the first member of such a set of propositions.) It follows that for any kind of object such that, for any natural number n it is possible that there be just n objects of that kind, the *a priori* probability, for any number n, that there are just n objects of that kind is zero. Now say that a person S has been created* by God if and only if S has been created by God or created by some being who has been created* by God. If traditional theism is true, it is a necessary truth that any nondivine persons have been created* by God. But it is *possible* (if, as we are assuming, God is not a necessary being) that there be human beings who are not created* by God. Indeed, for any number n it is possible that there be n such human beings. The *a priori* probability that there are *no* such human beings, then, is zero, and hence the *a priori* probability that there is at least one such person is 1. But then it follows that the *a priori* probability of the existence of God is zero. On the other hand, it is also possible that there be human beings created by God; and for any number n it is possible that there be n such human beings. But then the *a priori* probability of the existence of God is 1. So suppose the proposition that there is such a person as God is contingent and has an *a priori* probability: then it looks as if there is excellent reason to hold that the probability in question is 1, but equally good reason to hold that it is zero. There seems to be no satisfactory way to assign *a priori* probabilities to this proposition.

I am therefore disinclined to think that such propositions have an *a priori* probability at all.

But let us suppose that they do. How would we tell what that probability was? Mackie estimates this probability as low:

> Against the rival theistic hypothesis we should have to score the (significant) improbability that if there were a god he (or it) would create a world with causal laws, and one with our specific causal laws and constants, but also the great improbability of there being a process of the unmediated fulfillment of will, and, besides, the basic improbability of their being a god at all. Whatever initial improbability there may be in the unexplained brute fact that there is a world, there is a far greater initial improbability in what the theist has to assert as the unexplained brute fact that there is a god capable of creating a world (252-253).

But how does Mackie (or anyone else) estimate these probabilities? Do we have any way at all of making even a reasonably good guess? Imagine possible worlds as uniformly distributed throughout a sort of bounded logical space (a giant sphere, let's say.) What is the proportion of that space occupied by possible worlds in which God exists? The theistic tradition (for the most part) has held that God exists in all possible worlds, but suppose we continue to assume that false: what would a good guess be? 1/4? 24/25? It seems to be anyone's guess, and any guess will be about as good as any other. Mackie thinks this probability is very low; but why wouldn't it be equally sensible to estimate it as very high—.99, for example?

My guess is that Mackie's answer to a question such as this would be in terms of *economy*. Swinburne, on the other hand, opts for simplicity in this context: he thinks the *a priori* or intrinsic probability of a hypothesis is a function of its simplicity. But both of these seem deeply problematic. What reason is there to think that reality is fundamentally simple? If we believe the world was created by God, we may also plausibly think that it will display a sort of rationality and simplicity (even though, as Einstein said, the Lord God may be subtle). But if we have nothing of that sort to go on, why should we think that what is simple is more likely than what is complex? Similar remarks apply to Mackie's penchant for the economical. Why should we suppose that reality prefers economy? Desert landscapes and the Sonoran wilderness are indeed attractive; but so are luxuriant tropical gardens and the Olympic Peninsula. Mackie seems to think it is *a priori* likely that there are fewer things than more. Others disagree; indeed, many have thought it likely that there be as many things as there can be, a view which receives a bizarre sort of support from recent developments in contemporary physics. But is there really any reason to suppose that either of these views is correct?

Mackie's procedure and modes of argument, therefore, require that we make these estimates of *a priori* probabilities. There seems no reason at all, however, to think there *are* any such probabilities; and even if there are, it is anyone's guess as to what their value might be.

(c) I turn finally to my most serious misgiving about Mackie's project. Perhaps we can best proceed by asking a couple of questions. First: he seems simply to take it for granted that the correct way to go about evaluating the rational acceptability of belief in God is to evaluate arguments for and against the existence of God. But presumably this would not be appropriate with respect to our belief, say, in the past, or in an external world, or other minds. Why is it appropriate here? Second, Mackie assumes that if none of the arguments for theism of the sorts he considers are successful, then there is no "case for" theism, and theists stand revealed as somehow cognitively subpar or intellectually out of line. But why make an assumption like that? It certainly isn't just obvious or self-evident; it is both controversial and controverted. Why does he make this assumption?

Third, Mackie thinks the balance of probability lies against theism: theism is not as probable as its denial. But probable with respect to *what*? What is the body of belief or knowledge or evidence such that theism is rationally acceptable or rationally defensible if and only if it is probable with respect to *that* body of propositions? With respect to what body of knowledge or belief must theism work to show itself approved? Mackie says nothing at all on this head; yet surely it is one of the most important issues in this entire area. What shall we take, here, to be the relevant total evidence? (If the theist's total evidence includes, say, the proposition that there is such a person as God, then obviously enough his theism will be more probable than not with respect to his total evidence.) So what is the total evidence? Mackie's practice indicates that he takes it to include a certain amount of logic and probability theory, common sense beliefs in an external material world, other persons, and the past, the main outlines of contemporary science, and perhaps some maxims of proper theory construction, such as that one ought to prefer the more economical hypothesis to the less. But why suppose that theism is rationally acceptable only if it is more probable than not with respect to *that* body of evidence?

The answer to these questions, clearly enough, is that Mackie throughout assumes that theism is or is relevantly like a *scientific hypothesis*—something like Special Relativity, for example, or Quantum Mechanics, or the Theory of Evolution. (And when we see this point, it helps to explain the attraction of economy for Mackie; presumably if a pair of scientific hypotheses are otherwise on a par, the more economical one gets the nod.) Speaking of religious experience, he makes the following characteristic remark: "Here, as elsewhere, the supernaturalist hypothesis fails because there is an adequate and much more economical naturalistic alternative" (198). Clearly this remark is relevant only if we think

of belief in God as or as like a sort of scientific hypothesis, a theory designed to explain some body of evidence, and acceptable to the degree that it explains that evidence. On this way of looking at the matter, there is a relevant body of evidence shared by believer and unbeliever alike; theism is a hypothesis designed to explain that body of evidence; and theism is rationally defensible only to the extent that it is a good explanation thereof.

But why should we think of theism like this? Clearly there are perfectly sensible alternatives. Consider our beliefs about the past: obviously one could take a Mackie-like view here as well. One could hold that our beliefs about the past are best thought of as like a scientific hypothesis, designed to explain such present phenomena as (among other things) apparent memories; and if there were a more "economical" explanation of these phenomena that did not postulate past facts, then our usual beliefs in the past "could not be rationally defended." But here this seems clearly mistaken; the availability of such an "explanation" wouldn't in any way tell against our ordinary belief that there has really been a past. Why couldn't the same hold for theism?

In responding to Hume, Thomas Reid brilliantly discusses a similar network of questions. Here the topic under discussion is not God, but material objects or an external world. Suppose it is proposed that my belief in material objects is "rationally defensible" only if it is more probable than not with respect to a body of knowledge that includes no physical object propositions but only, say, self-evident truths together with experiential propositions specifying how I am appeared to. Add (as the history of modern philosophy strongly suggests) that it is impossible to show that physical object statements are more probable than not with respect to such a body of evidence; or add, more strongly, that in fact physical object propositions are *not* more probable than not with respect to such propositions. What would follow from that? It is one of Reid's most important and enduring contributions to point out that nothing of much interest would follow from that. In particular it would not follow that belief in physical objects ought to be discouraged as somehow improper, or irrational, or intellectually out of order.

But why, then, should we think it follows in the case of theism? Suppose theistic belief is not more probable than not with respect to the body of belief with respect to which Mackie evaluates it: why should we conclude that it is not rationally defensible? Perhaps it is perfectly rational to take belief in God in the way we ordinarily take belief in other minds, material objects, the past, and the like. Why isn't it perfectly sensible to *start with* belief in God? Why does belief in God have to be probable with respect to some other body of evidence in order to be rationally defensible? Mackie doesn't say; he doesn't so much as raise the question.

NOTES

1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

2. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1956), p. 145.

3. *Enquiry* p. 126.

4. See R. Adams, "Theories of Actuality" *Nous* 8 (1974) p. 211; and my "Actualism and Possible Worlds" *Theoria* 42 (1976) p. 143.

5. See my *God Freedom* and *Evil*, pp. 101-104.

6. *Nous* 11 (1977) pp. 375-395.

7. ...perhaps St. Alvin will eventually take his place beside St. Anselm; at least he would have no difficulty in meeting the miracle-working requirement for canonization, after the success that he has achieved in subverting (as Hume would say) all the principles of the understanding of so many intelligent readers (55).

8. Strictly speaking, of course, this isn't correct; we must also appropriately delete items of knowledge that entail that there is a complex physical universe. What is needed (to a first approximation) is a sub-body of knowledge that is relevantly maximal with respect to not entailing the proposition that there is a complex physical universe. This is at best a *first* approximation; other candidates for deletion will be such propositions as *it is more probable that there is a complex physical universe than that there are horses* which we accept only because we believe that there is a complex physical universe. It is extremely difficult to say just what the appropriately reduced body of knowledge is.

9. And even this isn't clear; a theodicist, in attempting to answer the question why God permits evil, is surely within his rights in presupposing that theism is indeed true; he has a perfect right to appeal, for example, to God's intentions. Furthermore, a theodicist presumably wouldn't take his answer to this question as positive *support* for theism. It looks as if in this passage Mackie is considering neither theodicy nor defense, but an attempt of some sort to *argue* for theism.

10. See his paper "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil" in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 14 Number 2 (April, 1977) pp. 109-117; see also his "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil" in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 230-232.

11. See my reply to Adams (*op. cit.*, pp. 372-383).

12. See my paper "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil" *Philosophical Studies*, 1979, pp. 35 ff.

13. See Richard Swinburne's *An Introduction to Confirmation Theory* (London: Methuen and Co., 1973) for a development of the logical theory of probability.

14. See "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil", pp. 25-30.