

Mackie on the Argument From Design

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Reviewing J. L. Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982), Galen Strawson says that 'philosophical resistance to the theologians' argument has dropped to a low ebb in recent years' because 'most philosophers think the topic is simply not worth discussing any more' (*The Sunday Times*, 16 January 1983). This is fair comment, though its truth entails no conclusion to the credit of 'most philosophers'. But Mackie, at any rate *did* think theology worth discussing. Hence *The Miracle of Theism* (written shortly before Mackie's death in 1981), which is a sustained discussion of arguments for and against God's existence. The book is a rich one deserving of serious study. Here I am concerned only with a small part of it: its critique of the design argument offered by Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979). Swinburne thinks well of an argument which belongs to the family of arguments commonly lumped together under the (dubious) title 'the argument from design'. Mackie thinks otherwise of the argument. Here I wish to defend Swinburne, though I shall also be disagreeing with him at one point.

Swinburne offers what he calls a 'teleological argument from the temporal order of the world'. That there is temporal order in the universe is, says, Swinburne, very evident. This is explained as follows:

Regularities of succession are all-pervasive. For simple laws govern almost all successions of events. In books of physics, chemistry and biology we can learn how almost everything in the world behaves. The laws of their behaviour can be set out by relatively simple formulae which men can understand and by means of which they can successfully predict the future. The orderliness of nature to which I draw attention here is its conformity to formula, to simple, formulable, scientific laws. The orderliness of the universe in this respect is a very striking fact about it. The universe might so naturally have been chaotic, but it is not — it is very orderly. (P 136)

And from all this Swinburne concludes that some explanation is called for. Why is the universe characterised by 'vast all-pervasive temporal order, the conformity of nature to formula, recorded in the scientific laws formulated by men'? (p 138) That is Swinburne's question. And his answer is that if the universe's temporal order requires explanation, it can reasonably be explained by some-

thing analogous to human intelligence imposing order. This is because in Swinburne's view there are only two kinds of explanation for phenomena: scientific explanation (in terms of scientific laws) and personal explanation (in terms of the free conscious choices of a person). Scientific explanation of the universe's temporal order is out of the question, in Swinburne's view. For 'in scientific explanation we explain particular phenomena as brought about by prior phenomena in accord with scientific laws; or we explain the operation of scientific laws (and perhaps also particular phenomena)' (p 138). Yet 'from the very nature of science it cannot explain the highest-level laws of all; for they are that by which it explains all other phenomena' (p-139). So, if we are to account for the fact that there are such laws, we will have to appeal to a personal explanation. Someone has brought it about that the universe exhibits a high degree of temporal order.

Now Mackie, as I have said, is unhappy with this. Why? Because he cannot see why we need to pass from the temporal order of the universe to an explanation beyond it. Here he thinks 'we are forced back into reliance on *a priori* judgements' (p 147), and, in Mackie's view, however we decide on the question of temporal order and explanation, we must rely on 'an *a priori* assumption about probabilities' (ibid). We have experience of temporal order, all right. But whatever we say about the explanation of this depends on judgements which cannot be based on experience. And in Mackie's view, Swinburne is in no position to say that the universe's temporal order is more likely if there is a God than if there is not. Indeed, Mackie adds, there is 'a strong presumption that the universe is really completely random' (p 148) and, therefore, it is unreasonable to say that the temporal order of the universe is evidence for God. Furthermore, says Mackie, there are intrinsic improbabilities, either *a priori* or in relation to our background knowledge, in the theistic hypothesis itself (p 149). Given what we know about our own intentional actions, it is unlikely that there should be a God able to create a universe and maintain its regularities by unmediated fulfilments of intention, as Swinburne supposes. And, if God is more than just '*that which* would account for temporal order', he must be 'something of a specific sort, with specific ways of working', and if these are 'in time', then 'the problem of temporal order has merely been re-located' (ibid). It might be said that they are outside time. But 'then we have an even more obscure and antecedently unlikely supposition than that of immediate intention fulfilment' (ibid). So, it is 'much more probable' that temporal order is 'an ultimate, not further explainable, brute fact' (ibid). The only way to avoid this conclusion is, says Mackie, to suppose *a priori* that a god is self-explana-

tory whereas everything else is in need of further explanation' (ibid). But this would lead us to say that something can exist of logical necessity, which is false.

What are we to make of Mackie's position? To begin with, there is a point in saying that experience does not furnish us with reason for supposing that the temporal order of the universe is unlikely without God. It is not as though we knew of patches of disorder uncaused by God, and bits of order caused by God (or something analogous), in the light of which we could argue that any temporal order is likely to be caused by God.

Yet the fact remains that we do suppose that in very many cases temporal order is to be explained in terms of intention. Some temporal regularity we normally try to account for with no reference to intelligent agency. When people display symptoms of pneumonia, we explain this by talking about the ways in which we can expect certain inanimate things to behave, given certain conditions. And we do the same when we account for the waxing and waning of the moon and such like phenomena. But when we listen to a song on the radio, we suppose that we are dealing with something the regularity of which is intentional. We suppose that we are dealing with the product of intelligence (though we may be much in the dark about what the owner of this intelligence is like, or just how intelligent he or she is). And so on, for many things. And this is one of the points to which Swinburne is appealing in the development of his argument.

Now the obvious reply to this point is that it really gets us no further forward because the agents to which we appeal in offering explanation of regularity in terms of intention are themselves part of the spatio-temporal world the regularity of which Swinburne is trying to explain or account for.

But does this reply dispose of Swinburne? I think not. For Swinburne's argument is an argument from analogy, and it relies on the following principle formulated by Swinburne before he wrote *The Existence of God* but present in it. The principle runs thus:

A's are caused by B's. A*s are similar to A's. Therefore – given that there is no more satisfactory explanation of the existence of A*s – they are produced by B*s similar to B's. B*s are postulated to be similar in all respects to B's except in so far as shown otherwise, viz. except in so far as the dissimilarities between A's and A*s force us to postulate a difference.

(‘The Argument from Design’, *Philosophy*, 43, 1968, 205. Cf. *The Existence of God*, p 148.)

I take it that Swinburne does not have to deny that in our experience the agents to which we appeal in explaining regularity with reference to intention are part of the spatio-temporal world the regularity of which Swinburne is trying to explain. His point is that if the temporal order of the universe requires explanation, if it is not to be accepted as a brute fact, it is reasonable to argue by analogy in the direction of theism. Why? Because as well as accounting for certain temporal regularity in terms of laws of nature we also frequently account for it in terms of intention. The temporal regularity of the universe is not explained by appealing to laws of nature, for these are examples of the temporal regularity of the universe as a whole. If, then, this regularity is to be explained, why not explain it with reference to something analogous to human intention but not itself part of the temporally regulated universe? For it is indeed true that there are very many orderly operations which we account for, in part at least, by appealing to intelligent or purposive behaviour. The behaviour of machinery is the classic example, but there are others like the regularity in a piece of music or the regularity involved in people dancing, performing rituals, writing, producing examples of logically valid arguments, and so on. All of these orderly operations depend on there being general order in nature which is not, so far as we can tell, brought about by any human being. But they also require what we can intelligibly call 'personal explanation', i.e. explanation with reference to intelligence and purpose. And since this is so, it seems reasonable to suppose that personal explanation can be invoked in attempting to account for the order in nature. Given that this order can be thought of as brought about, it seems reasonable to say that it is brought about by virtue of intelligence and purpose.

In response to all this, the Mackie line would, presumably, be as follows:

- 1) There is a strong presumption that the universe is completely random.
- 2) If the temporal order in the universe is explicable in terms of intention, the problem of temporal order has merely been re-located.

But what is the strength of (1)? It may be true that the universe's temporal regularity is a brute fact, just as it may be true that some human being sprang into existence without a cause. But it seems arbitrary to suppose that any human being is 'just there' and that no causal questions arise about his existence. And it seems to me equally arbitrary to suppose that the temporal order of the universe is 'just there' and that no causal questions arise

about why it is there. We have no experience of the origin of the universe (a Humean point, which seems to be echoed by Mackie), but we do have knowledge of this one, which exhibits a high degree of temporal order. Disorder is normally more puzzling than order, as watches on heaths are more puzzling than stones. But the fact that there is vast temporal order is surely something we ought to wonder about. The existence of an orderly universe is not logically necessary, for the existence of nothing is logically necessary. Or, if you do not accept that, there is no contradiction in supposing that there might not have been a universe. So why is there an orderly universe? This is evidently a causal question, and Swinburne is asking it. Is he unreasonable to do so? It seems to me unreasonable not to. Quite how one can defend this judgement is hard to say, and you can, if you like, hold that to suppose that one may ask causal questions until it becomes plainly absurd to do so is to make an *a priori* judgement incapable of being proved certainly true. But there are many unprovable assumptions which we rely on in reasoned discourse, and we normally do ask causal questions unless they are plainly absurd. To say that it is not reasonable to proceed in this way is to throw an almighty question mark over our very use of the word 'reasonable'. And that fact has to be reckoned with.

Yet do we not now fall victim to (2)? Have we not now merely re-located the problem of temporal order?

Swinburne, I think, can defend himself here again by appealing to the analogical nature of his argument. He can deny, for a start, that the cause of the universe's temporal order is a body obeying this or that natural law. For bodies obeying natural laws are part of what he is trying to account for.

But Swinburne does seem to be left with God as, in the expression of Mackie, 'something of a specific sort, with specific ways of working'. And, as the reader of Swinburne will quickly discover, this 'something' exists in time, for Swinburne thinks that the doctrine of God's timelessness is questionable and he conceives of God's eternity in terms of endless duration (cf. *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford 1977, Ch. 12). And this, I think, does raise a problem for his argument from design. Even if one postulates great differences between God and human beings, given that God is something exhibiting temporal regularity, as he seems to be for Swinburne, and given that temporal regularity is taken to require causal explanation, why not account for God in causal terms? In other words, who designed God? Here Mackie has a point. On Swinburne's account God shares with the universe a feature (the very feature) which, in the case of the universe, is held to require explanation. But when one asks what accounts for this feature in

God, one is left without an answer.

But this does not mean that Swinburne is wrong to ask what apart from the universe accounts for the order displayed in the universe. And that is my chief objection to Mackie's discussion of him with reference to design. Nor does Swinburne have to say that if God is not to be accounted for causally, then God is a logically necessary being. He could say, with, for example, Aquinas, that we are in no position to call God logically necessary since (a) we lack the requisite understanding of what is referred to by 'God', and (b) since God is not an individual exhibiting a nature and enduring through time. Swinburne does not actually say this, but he *could*. And, as I have already argued in these pages, he would be justified in doing so (see *New Blackfriars*, 64, March and May 1983). And with all of this in mind, my suggestion is that the argument from design is not quite so weak as Mackie supposes. It needs to be developed beyond the point where, in Swinburne's presentation, it stops short. But that is no proof of its lack of cogency.

How may it be developed? It ought to be developed in more detail than is possible here, but, briefly, my answer is: with reference to the Cosmological Argument. In the first of the two articles just referred to I outlined a case for claiming (a) that we may reasonably ask why things exist, and (b) that the answer to our question cannot be an individual or a being with a nature. Nor can it be something the existence of which raises causal questions of an intelligible kind. In the second article I indicated why this non-individual cause must be timeless. So I hold that we may reasonably believe in the existence of a non-individual and timeless cause of the existence of everything (Aquinas would have called it 'God'). And at this point the argument from design, the argument of which Swinburne at least presents the germ, can be carried on. For the vast temporal order in the universe cannot be distinguished from the existence of the universe, and our question about its origin can now be answered not by appealing to 'something of a specific sort, with specific ways of working', but with reference to what one may reasonably suppose to be true in the light of the mere existence of things.

Perhaps the point is better put like this. May we not reasonably say that the reason why there is order in nature of the kind suggested by Swinburne is not distinguishable from the reason why there is anything at all, given that, as I have argued previously, there is a reason why there is anything at all? I think the answer to this question is 'Yes'. And this is because whatever it is that accounts for the fact that there is anything at all must account for the fact that things are as they are. For the things we have in mind when we ask 'Why is there anything at all?' are not, as one

might put it, 'pure existents'. The point is very familiar, but as philosophers since Kant and Frege have taught us, there is no such thing as existence as such. To say that things exist is to say that various descriptions are satisfied, that, to put it more technically, there are values of X such that functions like 'X is red' or 'X is a man' are true. In other words, we cannot say of something, a dog for example, that it is furry and canine and existent, as if having existence were like having a property which one could lose or acquire while remaining around throughout the whole operation. Existence is not a property of individuals. And this means that in wondering why there is anything at all we are actually wondering why there are things describable in the way they are. And this in turn means that whatever accounts for the fact that there is anything at all also accounts for the order displayed in the universe, an order which, as Swinburne suggests, we have reason to regard as causally explicable. The order that things display is not like a coat which covers some already existing thing which we may call their existence. In other words, our question about the existence of things incorporates, once one comes to think about it, our question about the order observed by things. And there are no grounds here at all for supposing that the answer to the first question can be something different from the answer to the second.

I am suggesting then that it is reasonable to ask both why there is anything at all, and why things exhibit the kind of regularity noted by Swinburne. And I am suggesting that the answer must be the same in both cases, which means that it is not what Mackie seems to think it must be, viz. something alongside everything else about which one perversely refuses to ask the very kind of causal question upon which one at one point laid such stress. This suggestion, as I have offered it in this short article, is nothing like a full-scale defence of the argument from design, but I hope that even what I have said may encourage the reader to see that Mackie has not offered the last word on the subject, that Swinburne has something going for him over and against Mackie, and that matters can be taken even further than Swinburne seems to suppose.