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Bruce Langtry

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MACKIE ON MIRACLES

Bruce Langtry

The Miracle of Theism[1] is at present the best general survey of traditional and recent arguments for and against the existence of God. Mackie's chapter on miracles does not examine any particular argument for theism based on evidence for any particular miracle. Rather Mackie discusses background questions which bear on the general prospect of there being a good argument of that kind; and he claims that there are formidable impediments to the success of any such argument.

I will adopt Mackie's view that an interventionist concept of miracle is coherent, and will concentrate on epistemological concerns. I will argue that Mackie fails to establish the chief conclusion of his Chapter 1, namely that (C) 'it is pretty well impossible that reported miracles should provide a worthwhile argument for theism addressed to those who are initially inclined to atheism or even to agnosticism'.[2] (p. 27)

One preliminary comment. Mackie conceives of himself as expounding and refining the argument of David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X. However I believe that Mackie's argument, while inspired by Hume's, is significantly different from Hume's. Therefore, I shall make little or no mention of Hume in what follows, but will confine my attention to what Mackie says.

1. The main argument

Mackie's main argument for C can be construed as having two premises, each supported by further arguments. The two premises are:

(1) In evaluating testimony for some event, we have to weigh the intrinsic improbability of the event reported against the improbability that the witnesses are mistaken or dishonest. (pp. 16, 23)

(2) From the viewpoint of someone who does not yet concede the existence of any supernatural power, the intrinsic improbability of a miracle is very great. (p. 27)

Why should we accept (1)? On p. 23 Mackie asserts that (1) is 'a corollary of a still more general principle of accepting whatever hypothesis gives the best overall explanation of all the available and relevant evidence'. However

1 J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1982. All page references are to this book.

2 On p. 23 Mackie claims that it will be 'very hard' for the advocate of a miracle to sustain the double burden of showing both that the event took place and that it would have violated the laws of nature.

he does not elaborate this point; in particular, he does not show us how we can derive (1) from the still more general principle. I will return to Mackie's assertion below.

Another argument for (1) may be found on p. 16. It has three premises:

(a) Whenever we accept someone's testimony, our basic reason must be that it is improbable that he would have told us this if it were not so.
(b) The probability that our informant would have told us this if it were not so is equal to the probability that he is either mistaken or insincere.
(c) We must also take into consideration the intrinsic probability or improbability of what our informant reports.

Mackie does not provide a further level of argument, for each of (a), (b) and (c). They require careful scrutiny.

Let us suppose that our informant is a telephone operator, of whom we have asked a friend's phone number. She tells us that the number is 587-7658. Suppose that we know that operators give incorrect phone numbers about once in every 2000 inquiries. Then presumably we should adopt 1/2000 as our estimate of the probability that the operator has on this occasion given mistaken or insincere testimony. But this is not the same as the probability that the operator would have told us that our friend's phone number was 587-7658 if it were not so. The latter will be much lower than the former. This is because for each case in which the operator gives some incorrect number or other, there are many incorrect numbers that she could give.

We can, then, distinguish between the probability that our informant is either mistaken or insincere and the probability that our informant would mistakenly or insincerely tell us such-and-such if it were not so. Armed with this distinction, we can replace the falsehood (b) by the unsurprising truth:

(b′) The probability that our informant would have told us this if it were not so is equal to the probability that he would have mistakenly or insincerely told us this if it were not so.

Let us now consider (c). What does Mackie have in mind by the intrinsic probability or improbability of what our informant reports? Surely he must have in mind the epistemic probability or improbability of the event reported relative to our background knowledge. What is to be counted as part of our background knowledge is not completely clear. A first approximation would be to say that it comprises our total body of relevant beliefs excluding our informant's present testimony. But for present purposes this won't quite do.

For example, suppose that we are considering an argument from certain testimony to the occurrence of a miracle, and then to the existence of the Christian God. In that case, to avoid begging the question, even if we are theists we should count neither 'God exists' nor propositions which for us are epistemically posterior to 'God exists'—such as 'Either God exists or snow is black'—as part of our background knowledge; while even if we are atheists we should count neither 'God does not exist' nor propositions which for us are epistemically posterior to 'God does not exist' as part of our background knowledge. On some other occasion, when it was not one of our tasks to

evaluate an argument to the existence of God, it might be quite proper to regard either 'God exists' or 'God does not exist' as part of our background knowledge. Of course even if on methodological grounds 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' are excluded, there will be included many propositions which bear on whether God exists—such as the propositions that there are great evils in the world, and that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God.

Assume that (a), (b′) and (c) are all true. Do they jointly entail (1)? Obviously not. To begin with, (1) would need to be modified to talk of the improbability that the witness would have mistakenly or insincerely told us this if it were not so. Moreover, while (c) tells us that we should take into account the probability of the event reported relative to our background knowledge, neither (c) itself nor its conjunction with (a) and (b) imply anything much about *how* we are to take this probability into account.

Let us agree with Mackie that in evaluating testimony for some event, we need to take into account both the improbability that the witness would have told us this if it were not so, and also the improbability of the event reported relative to our background knowledge. But are these the *only* things that we need to take into account? No, there is at least one other.

Suppose that someone tells us, 'The Foreign Minister's unlisted home phone number is 523-3477'. Assuming that the number given has no other significance that we are aware of—e.g. we do not recognise it as our informant's passport number—then the probability that our informant would have told us this if it were not so is low. But this fact gives us little assurance that the number given is correct. (The probability would be low even if our informant had simply picked a number at random.) There is something else that we need to know about our informant: how probable is it, supposing that the Foreign Minister's unlisted home phone number is indeed 523-3477, that our informant would be both able and willing to reveal it to us? If my daughter Emily were our informant, then we would dismiss her report as some kind of joke, saying that surely she has no access to such information. That is, we also need to consider the probability that our informant would have told us this if it *were* so.

We have identified several factors that seem relevant to assessing whether it is reasonable to believe an informant's report. How are these factors related? I think that a clue is provided by Bayes's Theorem. Let h be the hypothesis to be evaluated, k be background knowledge, and e be our information concerning the report—such as its content, and also what we know about the informant and how he came to give his testimony. Then Bayes's Theorem says that

$$\mathrm{p}(h/e\ \&\ k) = \frac{\mathrm{p}(h/k)\ \mathrm{p}(e/h\ \&\ k)}{\mathrm{p}(e/k)}$$

From this follows the following theorem, which I shall call T:

$$\mathrm{p}(h/e\ \&\ k) > \mathrm{p}(\sim h/e\ \&\ k) \text{ if and only if } \frac{\mathrm{p}(e/h\ \&\ k)}{\mathrm{p}(e/\sim h\ \&\ k)} > \frac{\mathrm{p}(\sim h/k)}{\mathrm{p}(h/k)}$$

Since the value of $\mathrm{p}(h/k)$ determines that of $\mathrm{p}(\sim h/k)$, and vice versa, there

is an important sense in which the right hand side of T involves just the three independent factors identified above.

In applying T we take k as fixed. Of course testimony for *h* might lead us to revise *k*. For example, if we asked the telephone operator for our friend's number, and she said '587-7658', but did so with a giggle or added the words 'moreover the moon is made of green cheese', we might remove from *k* the assumption that she was both sober and sincere. In applying T now we employ our present *k*.

The meaning of statements of epistemic probability, and the usefulness of Bayes's Theorem in the evaluation of claims about God and his actions in the world, are matters of controversy. However the use that I intend to make of T is *ad hominem*, and does not require me to enter into the controversy. Surely Mackie would admit the applicability of Bayes's Theorem to epistemological questions concerning miracles. This is suggested, for example, by Mackie's discussion on pp. 95–101 of the application of principles of inductive reasoning to Richard Swinburne's cosmological argument. Moreover, if Mackie did reject the use of T, it would be hard to see how to construe his argument in Chapter 1.

Many questions arise concerning just how the result of a comparison of $p(h/e \,\&\, k)$ with $p(\sim h/e \,\&\, k)$ might bear on a decision as to whether we should *believe h*. I shall sidestep all such questions.

I note in passing that T fits in rather neatly with Mackie's first, undeveloped argument, found on his p. 23, for his original premise (1). For many philosophers would say that any hypothesis which gives a good overall empirical explanation of all the available and relevant evidence will be such that the right hand side of T is true.

So let us suppose that Mackie's premise (1) is replaced by T, and evaluate the argument from T and Mackie's premise (2) to his conclusion C. We can begin by asking whether premise (2) is true.

'Very great' is a rather vague term. The prior improbability of my sister's winning the lottery might be said to be very great; so might the prior improbability that the next taxi driver will be an Arab born in Rio de Janeiro on 25th January 1946. But so what? These facts offer little impediment to believing relevant testimony.

Mackie uses the phrase 'very great' on p. 27. But on p. 25 he uses the stronger term 'maximal'. Now on p. 25 Mackie's reason for saying that the prior improbability of a miracle is maximal seems to be that a miracle is a violation of a law of nature (in Mackie's own sense of 'violation'), and the prior improbability of a violation of a law of nature is maximal. But Mackie provides no further reason for this last premise. (Remember that Mackie concedes that violations of laws of nature are *possible*.)

Surely Mackie does not really hold that the prior improbability of a miracle is maximal. Maximal improbability is zero probability. Bayes's Theorem implies that a hypothesis which has zero prior probability will have zero probability relative to any augmented body of evidence whatsoever. So if miracles have maximal prior improbability then no new evidence whatsoever

could make it reasonable to believe that a miracle had occurred—not even the evidence of one's own senses, together with other people's testimony, together with photographs, instrument printouts, etc. Not only is such incredulity incredible, Mackie himself does not share it. For on p. 28 he says, 'Nevertheless anyone who is fortunate enough to have carefully observed and carefully recorded, for himself, an apparently miraculous occurrence is no doubt rationally justified in taking it very seriously indeed; but even here it will be in order to entertain the possibility of an alternative natural explanation'. This grudging admission suffices to rule out maximal improbability.

Suppose that you and I do not yet concede the existence of any supernatural power. (For brevity's sake, let us simplify the discussion by treating God as the only candidate supernatural power.) Then how low will be our estimate of the prior probability of a specific hypothesis *h* about an event whose occurrence would be miraculous? Here some care is needed in specifying what counts as part of our background knowledge. Let us suppose that, to avoid bringing the discussion of *h* too quickly to an end, we decide that on this occasion we will not treat 'God does not exist' as part of our background knowledge, although we will treat data bearing on the existence of God as part of background knowledge. Then our estimate of the prior probability of *h* will depend crucially on—or, at least, vary with—our estimate of the prior probability of 'God exists'. Now even if we are atheists or agnostics we might well assign a fairly high prior probability to 'God exists', say 1/20. This figure is a lot less than 1/2, but in comparison with the prior probability that the next taxi driver will be an Arab born in Brazil, it is fairly high. Our figure of 1/20 certainly does not seem to constitute a great obstacle in principle to our believing testimony to the truth of *h*. Of course the prior probability of *h* will be a lot lower than that of 'God exists'. But does this constitute a serious difficulty?

It might be argued that there is no way in which we can assign a significant prior probability to *h*, even if we include 'God exists' within our body of evidence. Consider: p(Jesus rose from the dead/ God exists & *k*) > p(Judas rose from the dead/ God exists & *k*). Could we ever be justified in accepting *k* such that this probability statement was true? Well, I can imagine epistemological theories according to which we could not. (Maybe Hume's, in the *Enquiry* Section XI.) But the claim that we could not is a strong one and I do not know of any convincing arguments for it. Nor does Mackie show signs of believing it.

On p. 27 Mackie admits that in a discussion between theists it may be proper for the participants to treat 'God exists' as included within background knowledge, and then they might reasonably conclude on the basis of testimony that a certain miracle had occurred. Consider now a theist who is wondering whether testimony for a miracle constitutes fresh evidence, augmenting his previous basis for belief in God. For the purposes of this question our theist will exclude 'God exists' from background evidence. But of course his evaluation of the hypothesis *h* will vary with his estimate of the probability

of 'God exists' relative to his previous basis for belief in God, and this estimate will be high—say 19/20. Surely it will be hard for Mackie, given what he says on p. 27, to avoid conceding that in such an enquiry the theist may be justified in concluding that $p(h/e\,\&\,k) > 1/2$. But if someone who estimates the prior probability of 'God exists' as 19/20 may be justified in holding that $p(h/e\,\&\,k) > p(\sim h/e\,\&\,k)$ can Mackie plausibly claim that there is some deep reason of principle preventing someone who estimates the prior probability of 'God exists' as 1/20 from doing so?

I conclude that Mackie's premises (1) and (2)—or T and (2)—do not constitute a strong argument for C.

2. The secondary reasons

On pp. 14–16 Mackie expounds and refines certain secondary reasons which Hume gave for doubting reports of miracles. Mackie says of these reasons that 'between them they certainly provide grounds for a high degree of initial caution and scepticism about every alleged miracle'. (p. 16) They fall into three groups: (i) reasons arising from deeply entrenched features of human nature (ii) reasons arising from other features which as a matter of historical fact have applied to all or most miracle reports that we have studied so far (iii) an argument starting from the contrariety of different religions. I shall here ignore (iii), saying only that Mackie's discussion seems to me quite confused.[3]

In Group (i) come Mackie's claims about the human inclination to believe what is strange and marvellous, and about aspects of religious contexts which reinforce this tendency. Do these facts support Mackie's main conclusion C? Perhaps they do so by suggesting that the quotient $\frac{p(e/h\,\&\,k)}{p(e/\sim h\,\&\,k)}$ will always be low. (In what follows I shall call this quotient 'Q'.)

Now the facts—if they are facts—that Mackie cites certainly predict and explain the general truth that there occur many false reports of miracles. But this does little to show that Q will always be low.

An analogy will illustrate why. Suppose that your aunt Alice is partially deaf, and becoming senile. These facts enable you to predict and explain the truth that in most cases Alice's reports of conversations are to some extent garbled. Alice is in general an unreliable guide as to what other people have said to her. You would not expect to discover that Alice's next transmission of a rather complicated verbal message would be correct. Suppose, however, that one day Alice tells you, 'Dr Campbell phoned while you were out, to see if he could borrow your copies of Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* and Dennett's *Elbow Room*'. Surely you would believe Alice. It is true that, for this *e*, *h*, and *k*, $p(h/k)$ is very low and so $\frac{p(\sim h/k)}{p(h/k)}$ is very high. (Your colleague Dr Campbell is hostile to you, and moreover works almost entirely on Plato.) But on the other hand, Q is even higher. For even though Alice's

3 I have discussed David Hume's argument in my articles 'Hume on Miracles and Contrary Religions', *Sophia* 14, No. 1, March 1975 and 'Miracles and Rival Systems of Religion', *Sophia* 24, No. 1, April 1985.

general unreliability means that $p(e/h \,\&\, k)$ is fairly low, $p(e/\sim h \,\&\, k)$ is extremely low. (Alice up till yesterday had never heard of Dr Campbell, Parfit or Dennett, and did not even know that you were a philosopher.) So for this e, h and k, $\frac{p(e/h \,\&\, k)}{p(e/\sim h \,\&\, k)} > \frac{p(\sim h/k)}{p(h/k)}$ and so $p(h/e \,\&\, k) > p(\sim h/e \,\&\, k)$. Afterwards you might be interested to seek an explanation of Alice's accuracy on this particular occasion, and we can imagine various possible explanations. (Dr Campbell asked Alice to repeat the message back to him many times; he taught her a mnemonic, etc.) But one need not possess the explanation before one could be justified in concluding that the message was accurate.

Let A be 'The report that Alice gives on this occasion involves e, h and k such that Q is very high'. Alice's general unreliability is reflected in a low prior probability of A. The low prior probability of A will depress the posterior probability of A—i.e. A's probability relative to our total evidence after we have received Alice's report and digested its contents. Nevertheless the low prior probability of A does not constitute much of an objection to our eventually concluding that the posterior probability of A is high. Every day we assign high posterior probabilities to hypotheses whose prior probability was low.

To sum up the Alice example: Alice's general unreliability should generate a good deal of advance caution, and perhaps scepticism about her next report, and is, in a sense, an obstacle to our eventually believing it. But not an obstacle which presents itself as just about insurmountable. Not an obstacle which will lead the judicious to doubt her report concerning Dr Campbell and his message.

Let us agree with Mackie that miracle reports are generally unreliable, for fairly deep-seated reasons. We shall have a high degree of confidence that the next arbitrarily selected miracle report that we examine will turn out to provide little reason to believe that a miracle indeed occurred. If this is all that Mackie intended to say by the words quoted, at the beginning of my Section 2, from his p. 16, then he is right. But so what? How much support does this fact provide for his main conclusion C?

Let us assume that Mackie has abandoned the claim, made on p. 25, that the prior probability of a miracle is zero, and that he now says only that it is very low. If $p(h/k)$ is very low, then $\frac{p(\sim h/k)}{p(h/k)}$ is very high. Mackie is committed to saying that it is 'pretty well impossible' that the next arbitrarily selected miracle report will after detailed examination be found to have features such that for this e, h and k, Q is even higher. It should be obvious from the Alice example that there is a big gap between what Mackie has established about this next report and what he is committed to concerning it.

Suppose that you and I do not yet concede the existence of God, and that we are talking to a religious apologist who is about to advance an argument from human testimony to the occurrence of some particular miracle. Mackie's secondary reasons from Group (i) establish that we should be highly confident that the testimony will on detailed investigation be found to be such that Q is not very high. There is a sense in which this is an obstacle in the apologist's

path. But does this consideration help us much in evaluating the argument once it is before us? Not much! Predicting the result of an evaluation of an argument is not the same as evaluating the argument.

Mackie's secondary considerations from Group (i) do not constitute a good objection to the apologist's argument. Nor do they show that it will be very difficult for the apologist to succeed in both finding evidence *e* such that Q is very high and in persuading us atheists and agnostics that Q is very high. After all, it is unlikely that anyone will discover a new manuscript by Leonardo da Vinci; but this does not show that if a new one is discovered then the finder will have had great difficulties in finding it; nor does it show that the finder will have great difficulties in persuading scholars that the manuscript is Leonardo's. By contrast, to have established that the prior probability of a miracle was zero *would* have helped us evaluate the apologist's argument; it would have constituted a decisive objection.

So far I have discussed only Mackie's secondary reasons falling into Group (i). But augmenting them with the reasons from Group (ii) will not alter the position in any essential way. The argument of the preceding paragraphs will carry over.

I conclude that the counter-apologetic impact of Mackie's arguments should be, if not minimal, then very low.

University of Melbourne Received December 1986