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Philosophy and Religion

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OF THESE FOUR BOOKS,* the first three are, to a greater or lesser extent, occupied with advancing or rebutting versions of the familiar philosophical arguments for theism. In the fourth, Professor Mitchell is professedly neutral on this issue. He devotes himself to an examination of the logical structure of the case so presented, claiming that it is not what its advocates and critics have sometimes understood it to be and that illuminating analogies can be traced between the logic of religious argument and that of debate about fundamental disagreements in other fields, notably science. It may be instructive, therefore, to examine the case attacked by Sir Alfred Ayer and defended by Dr. Ewing and Dr. Hudson to see how far they exemplify his thesis.

In his Gifford Lectures for 1972-3, Ayer is mainly concerned to argue the case for a metaphysic of sophisticated realism, based on the distinction between a 'primary system', consisting of the organised data of experience, and 'secondary systems' which posit entities having properties that cannot be immediately perceived and which depend for their validity upon their power to explain the way in which the percepts of the primary system present themselves. It is as a secondary system that the common-sense world of material objects finds its philosophical justification, and similarly with the forces and particles of science. There is no need, on the other hand, to posit a substantial ego, since self-consciousness can be explained in terms of the compresence of experiences. 'An entity which is neither observable nor fulfils any

**The Central Questions of Philosophy.* A. J. Ayer. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973. 243 pp. £3.50.

Value and Reality: The Philosophical Case for Theism. A. C. Ewing. George Allen and Unwin, 1973. 292 pp. £5.50.

A Philosophical Approach to Religion. W. Donald Hudson. Macmillan, 1974. 200 pp. £4.95.

The Justification of Religious Belief. Basil Mitchell. Macmillan, 1973. 180 pp. £3.95.

explanatory function can have no interest for us' (p. 121). If this is true of the self, it is true *a fortiori* of God. Mystical experience is had by too few and described too variously to allow us to count the divine as directly observable, and the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments by which God's existence is allegedly demonstrated either rest on conceptual muddles or else fail to explain any particular event that we can observe. Nor is the concept of God necessary for, or capable of, explaining moral obligation, which rests on nothing but our own decision to follow a particular moral policy.

The Central Questions of Philosophy of Ayer's title are those posed by our claim to know that material objects exist. The problems posed by our common-sense belief that values are in some sense objective are brushed aside, along with the difficulty of fitting the intentional character of our thought life and its rule-guided character into a basically Humean analysis of mind. He might reply that he has made sense of those areas of our experience where men generally do reach agreement about what is and what is not; the rest is, inevitably, peripheral, and its peripheral character is marked by our inability to explain it in the only way that can be countenanced, viz., in terms of laws or trends.

Ewing starts from the same point as Ayer, that the justification of a metaphysical theory is its explanatory power, but he ends with the opposite conclusion, namely that, while no demonstration of God's existence is possible, nevertheless religious belief, either theistic or pantheistic, is reasonable in that it alone provides viable answers to questions like 'Why does the universe exist?' or 'What is the link between fact and value?' His argument relies to a considerable extent on the contention that, though 'is' cannot entail 'ought', nevertheless the reverse is possible. Thus, in using the cosmological argument he claims to avoid the traditional counter-arguments, since God as First Cause is a necessary being, but not a logically necessary one: the only explanation that can be offered for His existence is that it is good that He should exist.

Arguing like this raises formidable problems of theodicy, which Ewing answers in a way that has more in common with Hinduism than traditional Christianity. He seems also to involve himself in a vicious infinite regress, since he defines 'good' in terms of rational justification (p. 102), and it is hard to see what his argument amounts to except for a demand that there must be some overall rational explanation for everything. And this demand, as Ayer points out, is not itself rational if the brute facts defy all available attempts to explain them.

Dr. Hudson's approach is via the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. For a language-game to be playable, it must pass three tests, of objectivity, relevance and rationality. The key concept of the religious language-game is that of 'god', conceived as transcendent, conscious agency (Buddhists might disagree). Hudson rejects the traditional

'proofs' but holds that we have as much warrant to make the ontological choice to believe in 'god's' objectiveness as in that of material objects, though it might be objected that we have no choice but to believe in the latter. The question of relevance is dealt with through a critique of radical theology, which Hudson judges either to have failed to fulfil its programme or to have thrown out the baby with the bath-water. Given his formulation of the concept of 'god', this is perhaps inevitable, though his judgments, on Tillich especially, might have been milder if it had been formulated otherwise. In the final section Hudson discusses the rationality of religion. He recognises that the concept of a transcendent agent presents grave problems. The idea of agency implies mind-body dualism, but it also requires a physical locus of activity. Hudson suggests that in the case of 'god' this may be found in a series of spatio-temporal events, such as the Exodus. The events are held together in a series (and substance given to 'god's' personality) in so far as a common purpose appears to run through them, and in that case a physical body need not be required.

According to Mitchell, the trouble with much traditional argument on both sides of the theistic issue is that it has assumed that a valid case must conform to the patterns of deductive or inductive reasoning of the logic text-books, and that in their absence we must fall back on an 'ontological choice'. When the standard 'proofs' are deployed in this fashion, it is not hard to fault them, but this is to miss their real point, which is to form part of a 'cumulative case'.

Mitchell illustrates the notion of a cumulative case from literary criticism and history. Denied the opportunity of a crucial experiment, the critic typically bases his interpretation of a work on an insight into a particular passage. The test of its rightness is the ease with which the rest can be made to fit. His opponents similarly draw attention to passages which cannot plausibly be fitted in, or to linguistic or other considerations that make the interpretation untenable. At the same time they advance rival views for testing by the same criteria. The theologian and the metaphysician do the same, only their purview is not a particular literary field but the whole of our experience.

However, literary and historical arguments, as Mitchell admits, can not implausibly be made to fit into a formal logical pattern. They are relatively inconclusive and hence need cumulative support because they rely on (largely tacit) generalisations about human behaviour which admit of exceptions and therefore of counter-argument. Hence Mitchell quotes a further example, that of the conflict between scientific paradigms; between Newtonian and post-Newtonian physics, for example. A paradigm governs a whole body of scientific laws and also the way in which we formulate the evidence for or against them. To change the paradigm involves redescribing the evidence. What makes us decide for one against another, therefore, cannot be the result of any particular experiment, but rather our assessment of them and the

structures of theory and experiment built upon them, in terms of criteria that are not dependent upon acceptance of any particular paradigm, criteria such as consistency, coherence, simplicity, elegance, explanatory power and fertility. These same criteria, Mitchell argues, provide the rational basis for evaluating rival metaphysics or theologies. Rationality is to be defined in terms of these 'values', which are themselves indefinable but can be learnt through apprenticeship to any intellectual discipline, rather than in terms of obedience to the rules of any particular logical system.

If Mitchell is right, important consequences follow. The first is that currently fashionable attempts to justify religious discourse as a separate world of its own, only to be discussed in its own terms, are illegitimate; for Mitchell's 'values' apply to all discourse, or at least to all that purports to explain. The pressure upon the theist to take this stance (or alternatively to accept that God-talk expresses an attitude to the world but should not be taken as offering an explanation of it) comes very largely from the belief that the criteria of rational explanation must be capable of being specified, and that, as this cannot be done except within the terms of particular systems of explanation, therefore all explanation is system-relative.

Even so, the theistic paradigm has its peculiar problems, which Mitchell minimises, concerned as he is to trace the likenesses between theology and other, respectable, intellectual pursuits. A limit must exist to the consistency and coherence of our understanding of a transcendent, self-disclosing God, and hence to our ability to justify our beliefs. This limit only God can extend. At best, therefore, the theist can offer a paradigm that accounts for its own incompleteness and that offers not so much a more rich and coherent world-view here and now as the reasonable prospect of the emergence of one for those who accept it.