



## The Contribution of Donald Mackay

Paul Helm's article continues our Historical Theology series (edited by David Wright). Professor Mackay was a distinguished thinker in the area of religion and science

Donald Mackay, who died early in 1987, was Professor of Communication and Neuroscience at the University of Keele from 1960 until his retirement in 1982, when he became Emeritus Professor. He had been brought up in the Calvinism of the Free Church of Scotland (his father was both minister and doctor) and graduated from St Andrews University before moving to England. Throughout his professional life Donald strove to integrate together his commitment as a scientist to hypothesis-devising and testing and discovery based upon empirical research, and his commitment as a Christian to the God who has revealed himself in Scripture and supremely in Christ. While many Christians, and particularly many Christians in academic life, talk about the need to integrate faith and intellectual life, Mackay made great efforts to effect such integration, sometimes at considerable personal cost, part of which was the result of occasional misrepresentation and misunderstanding by fellow-Christians.

Behind the specific proposals Mackay made, to which some reference will be made later, lie two or three seed attitudes. It is worth pausing to consider these, for they invigorated and directed the whole of Donald's thinking.

### Seed Attitudes

If one looks at the history of the relationship between modern science and the Christian faith it would appear, from a certain vantage point, that Christianity has retreated before the continuous advance of science. The organisation of the heavenly bodies, the early history of mankind, the nature of the earth's crust – theologians have time and again claimed that scientific hypotheses are to be found in the Bible about each of these areas, only to be compelled to withdraw or modify such claims in the light of increased scientific knowledge. This is the familiar posture of 'the God of the gaps' approach to faith and scientific knowledge, according to which God is to be thought of as at work in areas where there are gaps in scientific knowledge.

Mackay, in common with some others, met this attitude head on, arguing that it rested upon a defective view of divine providence. God is not left with the scraps which fall from the scientists' table. Rather, he is the Lord of all, the one who upholds the whole cosmos by his Word. He is thus the God of all scientific processes and does not

preside merely over the absence of such processes. This conviction meant that Mackay was released from the vain effort of attempting to 'box' science and faith in different compartments. He exulted in the freedom that this gave.

But what is the relationship of science to faith if it is not that of one box to another? Mackay's view is that they *complement* each other. To illustrate this, let us consider an example from his own area of expertise. What is the relationship between the brain and the mind? Does the mind sit or float inside the brain like a buoy on the sea? Such a picture is wholly wrong. What references to brain and mind imply are two different languages about one multiform reality, the language of scientific description and testing (the brain) and the language of thinking and reasoning (the mind). These languages are not arbitrary creations, they are modes of description warranted by God's many-sided creation. They are not, therefore, enemies, but friends. They cannot contradict one another, for they complement one another.

### 'Nothing-Buttery'

Because of this Mackay was emphatically *anti-reductionist* in his stance, a firm opponent both of materialism and of psychological behaviourism. Both of these philosophies are examples of 'nothing-buttery'; the materialist says that there is 'nothing but' matter and events caused by matter, the behaviourist that there is 'nothing but' behaviour – no consciousness, for example. Both fail by taking a part for the whole, and thus by attempting to reduce reality to one dimension. Given the manifest multi-dimensionality of God's world, such attempts are bound to fail, but not, in Mackay's view, before they have done a considerable amount of damage.

At the same time, Donald Mackay argued against relativism, in particular against the view that there is no such thing as *objective truth*, but only different kinds of subjective or cultural truths, different 'perspectives'. Such a conclusion would be based upon a complete misunderstanding of his position. To say that the truths of physics complement those of psychology, for example, is not to say that a person may choose between the truths of physics and those of psychology. Rather, what Mackay was emphasising is the multi-faceted character of *objective truth*, a complexity which derived from the hand of the

Creator and which the creature must tap and learn in reverent submission to its author.

Creatures do not have a mastery of the facts, to invent and control and mould them to fit any theory or even the Scriptures. Donald saw that it was the human task to seek the truth about the creation God made and to think hard about how scientific and theological truths fit together. But if it is not clear how that happens this is not for us to worry about unless or until God sees fit to show us. He was fond of saying: 'When short of data, keep mind open and mouth shut', as a good precaution against engaging in fruitless, dangerous and often divisive speculation on scientific and theological issues which do not promote the health of the church.

So there is a fine but all-important line to be drawn between hypothesis and dogma, between testing and modifying hypotheses in obedient submission to the facts, and insisting that the facts *must* be such and such. To use one of Mackay's favourite analogies, theories and hypotheses are like the frame that an archaeologist might use to reassemble the shards of pottery. The frame helps the re-assembly, but only if it is pliant under pressure from the shape of the fragments as they are brought together around it.

Mackay's commitment to objective truth can be illustrated in two further ways. He resolutely opposed the 'cultural relativism' of a philosopher of science such as Thomas Kuhn if this was taken to be a logical or prescriptive thesis, whereby the science of one era either *must* be or *ought* to be incommensurate with the science of another. Kuhn's view might be more appropriate as history. But the fact that objective truth has been difficult to attain does not mean that there are not instances where it has been attained; nor does it mean that we ought not to strive with might and main to gain more truth. And truth is truth, whether we like it or not. To the response 'I don't feel the need for God' he would frequently retort 'Do you feel the need for the Andromeda nebula?'

On the theological side Mackay was equally opposed to an *a priori* approach. Although conservative in his view of Scripture he warned against what he sometimes called evangelical rationalism, a powerful but dangerous attitude of mind which combines a commitment to the authority of Scripture with a conviction of what Scripture *must* teach. Let us not say what Scripture *must* teach, let us see what Scripture *does* teach, and be as prepared to have our thinking constrained by the surprising facts of Scripture as by the unexpected facts of nature.

### **Distinctive Positions: Complementarity**

It is now time to take a closer look at one or two of Mackay's distinctive theses. He propounded these with great single-mindedness, but also with tact, patience and

Christian courtesy. Mackay seemed to possess endless resources to formulate and re-formulate his arguments, to counter misunderstandings, and think up new ways of presenting what he wanted to get across.

The idea of complementary truth has already been mentioned, but it is necessary to look at this in more detail because it had a central importance in Mackay's attempt to integrate Christian faith and the scientific method.

What is 'the soul'? Perhaps we have a picture of the soul as a gaseous, spiritual area of uncertain location, but generally to be found in the head. To this odd entity are to be attributed all of a person's 'spiritual' characteristics - for example, reason, conscience, emotions, capacity to know God. Mackay could see important philosophical and scientific objections to such a dualistic view; more importantly, he thought that it bespoke yet another attempt to prevent the scientific investigation of certain matters. In Descartes' classic formulation of dualism, which has been so influential, only what is part of the body can be investigated scientifically. More important still, perhaps, Mackay could find no scriptural warrant for such a view.

To have a soul is not to have a spiritual substance in the head, but to be endowed with a certain level of capacity and capability. While our bodies are basic, in the sense that as a matter of fact our capacities to reason and repent depend upon our having bodily powers, nevertheless we are not solely bodies. The complementarity in question is, however, not physical but categorical or, as Mackay himself put it, 'hierarchical'. So that what, on this view, occurs at death is not that the entities, the soul and the body, become separated, but that God, the giver of certain capacities, withdraws them. And what will happen at the day of the resurrection of the body is that God will re-create another body, a 'spiritual body', having capacities which have been heightened and enriched to an unsurpassed degree. To use the analogy Donald Mackay frequently used, the resurrection is as if the software of the computer is 're-embodied' in new hardware.

Mackay believed that such a view does justice to the biblical data while at the same time making it possible for the scientist to carry out his God-given task of exploring all physical aspects of the creation unhindered by false notions.

It might appear that such a view surrenders the distinctiveness of being human. Mackay would not agree. That distinctiveness is shown not by the possession of a substance, the soul, but by having distinctive capabilities. But there is a more powerful piece of evidence for that distinctiveness, according to Mackay, namely that provided by the logical indeterminacy of a free choice.

### Logic and Free Choice

If I say that the cat is on the mat, and the cat *is* on the mat, then this fact is in no way affected by who *says* that the cat is on the mat. And what is true of cats and mats is true of vast numbers of other facts. Their truth is in no way affected by who knows the truth. But is this true of *all* facts? Let us suppose, what is certainly not possible at present, that you or some clever scientist can make a true prediction of Smith's future. It may seem from this that science has shown that Smith is nothing more than a piece of sophisticated machinery. But in addition let us imagine that Smith is told what you are predicting of him. Assuming that he hears and understands what is said, Mackay maintained that now the situation is subtly but crucially changed. The change is not merely the introduction of the psychological possibility that Smith will now perversely choose not to do what has been predicted of him. Rather, the logic of the situation is now changed.

For what has happened is that the cognitive state of Smith has been altered and the basis upon which the prediction was made has been altered, for Smith now has the additional information that a particular prediction has been made of himself. Whereas, prior to the disclosure to Smith, the prediction of what he would do was correct, upon disclosure Smith would not be correct to believe this; indeed, whether or not he did as he had been predicted would now be 'up to' Smith. So there is no prediction about any of his free actions that Smith would be correct to believe before he acts.

Mackay himself, in one of the many published discussions, put the point in the following way:

The present and immediately future state of your brain, however predictable by a detached observer, has *no completely determinate specification* that you would be unconditionally correct to accept, and in error to reject, if only you knew it. In that sense your immediate future is not inevitable for you (*The Clockwork Image* (1974), p.79).

Such a view appears to have important theological implications. For example, it would seem to follow that God's decrees, that is, what God has determined shall come to pass, insofar as they affect his free creatures, not only are secret, but must *necessarily* be secret, since for God to disclose what he had decreed about Smith to Smith would in and of itself falsify what he had decreed about Smith. And what implications does the view have, for example, for the interpersonal relations between the Father and the incarnate Son? In Mackay's view the fact that the assumption of the complete predictability of human action would nevertheless do nothing to compromise freedom of choice or human responsibility provides yet another illustration of how scientific enquiry complements enquiries of other kinds if one thinks clearly about them. Finally,

what in all likelihood gave added satisfaction to Mackay about the logical indeterminacy of a free choice is that it provides no encouragement to a 'God of the gaps' mentality.

### Other Facets

Space does not permit a discussion of some of the other facets of Donald Mackay's contribution; his Augustinian conception of time, with its important consequences for the metaphysics of the creation; his more general concern that bad arguments should never be employed in good causes; the personal influence that he had with others, with students at Keele and elsewhere, with study groups of academics; his broadcasting, lecturing and preaching. Nor has anything been said about some of the intellectual influences upon him, notably those of Sir Karl Popper and Professor R. Hooykaas. It is a happy fact that Donald Mackay's influence will continue to be felt through his writings, not only those published during his lifetime, some of which are shortly to be re-published by IVP, but also by his Gifford Lectures, on the publication of which he was working with characteristic tenacity at the time of his death.

Those Christians who knew Donald personally give thanks to God for the life and gifts that he gave to him. It was a privilege to see at work someone who was so wholly committed to the obedient service of his Maker and who so readily recognised his sovereignty over his own life and the whole of creation.

\* Thanks are due to Shirley Dex for her help in the preparation of this article.