

QUIZ TWO

Write a short discussion (say 2 to 4 pages) on the following.

Although Pike is “officially” addressing the argument from evil found in Hume’s *Dialogues*, I think his article can be read as a critique of Mackie’s argument. What is Mackie’s argument? What is Pike’s critique of the argument? Do you think Pike is successful? Why, or why not?

Pike’s Implicit Critique of Mackie

Mackie’s argument is straightforward. He claims that theism is “positively irrational.”¹ That “the several parts of the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.”² And most provocatively, that the existence of God can be “disproven.”³ The argument begins in ways reminiscent of Hume in our discussion last week. The inconsistency that Mackie believes is at the heart of theism is the following.

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is wholly good.
3. Evil exists.

He claims that the theist “*cannot consistently* adhere to all three”.⁴ They constitute, according to Mackie, what we have been calling an inconsistent triad.

Mackie admits that inconsistency is not immediately apparent. He says that the “disproof” will require “some additional premises, or perhaps some

¹ J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955). Reprinted in M. Adams and R. Adams, editors, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford, 1990), p. 25.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent'.⁵ There are two of these quasi-logical rules.

R₁. Good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.

R₂. There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.⁶

We can now represent Mackie's "disproof" as follows

1. God is omnipotent.

2. God is wholly good.

R₁. Good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.

R₂. There are no limits on what an omnipotent thing can do.

3. A good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely.

4. Evil exists.

5. A good omnipotent thing does not exist.

6. God does not exist.

I think Mackie is correct in saying this argument is formally valid, so the only question is whether all of the premises in the argument are true. I take (1), (2), and (4) [this was (3) in the original triad] to be true, so the crux of the argument focuses on R₁ and R₂. Mackie immediately concedes that R₂ must be amended to say something like:

R₂*. The only limits on what an omnipotent thing can do are logical limits – even an omnipotent thing cannot do what is logically impossible.⁷

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 28.

The truth of R_1 , however, is taken as a given by Mackie. But as we shall see, it proves to be the most controversial part of the argument as implicitly critiqued by Pike.

Nelson Pike's article, though footnoting Mackie, is focused on the argument prosecuted by the character, Philo, in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Philo seems to present the same alleged inconsistent triad that Mackie began his argument with.

1. The world contains instances of suffering.
2. God exists – and is omnipotent and omniscient.
3. God exists – and is perfectly good.⁸

Pike rejects the claim of inconsistency between these three “parts of the essential theological doctrine.” He argues that a good, even a wholly good, thing could have a “morally sufficient reason” for allowing instances of suffering. Pike talks about the good parent causing suffering by administering icky medicine.

A parent forces a child to take a spoonful of bitter medicine. The parent thus brings about an instance of discomfort—suffering. The parent could have refrained from administering the medicine, and he knew that the child would suffer discomfort if he did administer it. ... [This action] is not sufficient to remove the parent from the class of perfectly good being.⁹

⁸ Nelson Pike, “Hume on Evil,” *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1965). Reprinted in Adams and Adams, *op. cit.* p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Given the theoretical possibility of morally sufficient reasons for evil, at least for human agents, Pike argues that the atheist needs to demonstrate a different inconsistent triad to disprove God's existence.

4. The world contains instances of suffering.
5. God exists – and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
6. An omnipotent and omniscient would have no morally sufficient reason for allowing instances of suffering.

(4) and (5) are assumed to be true, so the debate between the theist and the atheist focuses on (6). Pike argues that the burden is on the skeptic, the atheist, to show that (6) is, not only true, but necessarily true.

How might the skeptic show that (6) is necessarily true? Not simply by counting off the failure of this theodicy, that theodicy, yet this other theodicy, and so forth. This "inductive" strategy always leaves open to the theist to propose another theodicy, perhaps one not yet known or articulated. Skeptics may point to general features of the failed theodicies and suggest that they always depend on a lack of omnipotence, omniscience, or moral perfection. But Pike argues that even if this strategy might lead one to think (6) is true, if not necessarily true, there are in fact theodicies that do not obviously rely on a lack of any of these three divine attributes. One could argue in the spirit of Demea and St Thomas that God's morally sufficient reason is that "the best of all possible worlds must contain instances of suffering: they are logically indispensable components."¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 46.

Regardless of whether we think "Demea's theodicy" is correct or not, Pike insists that as long as we grant that it is possible, its mere possibility as an account of evil is sufficient for showing that (6) in the repaired inconsistent triad is not necessarily true. This means that even the alleged incompatibility between (4) and (5) is not really there. Thus, Mackie is wrong in his strident claims, and evil fails to disprove the existence of God, though it remains to be seen whether evil might be used to provide evidence against his existence.