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Book Reviews

T. J. Mawson. *Belief in God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. 272. ISBN 0-19-928495-4, Paperback, £19.99.

This new introduction to the philosophy of religion covers a reasonably traditional selection of topics, the first half of the book being concerned with the concept of God, and the second with arguments for and against his existence; many of the positions taken, on the other hand, are quite distinctive. The book is written in a chatty style, and makes much use of far-fetched examples, which will certainly please some readers while annoying others; it also contains a number of philosophical jokes which will fly over the heads of the beginners to whom it is addressed.

Mawson takes as his topic "theism," by which he understands the common core of belief shared by (orthodox) Christians, Jews and Muslims. He takes these religions to share a concept of God as a person, incorporeal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, perfectly free, perfectly good, a necessary being, creator of the world, creator of values, who has revealed himself to us, and offers us the hope of eternal life. Mawson assumes that this is the common core of belief shared by monotheistic religions; the first part of the book is taken up, not with defending the claim that this *is* the concept of God, but rather with filling out the meaning of the various elements in the definition and defending its coherence.

The second part of the book begins with a short discussion of properly basic belief, arguing, quite plausibly, that even if belief in God is properly basic for some people, it cannot be properly basic for us once we know of the challenges which it faces. There follow discussions of major arguments for the existence of God; Mawson concludes that the Ontological Argument, the Argument to Design and the Cosmological Argument are all without force, while arguments from religious experience and from reported miracles may have force, depending on how well supported the specific claims on which they depend are; as this is an empirical question he makes no attempt to resolve it. There follows a discussion of the problem of evil, which is answered by a form of the free will defence; the book concludes with a discussion of the nature of faith, which defends a modified version of Pascal's wager.

Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in the two chapters in which arguments from Hume are discussed—those concerning the Argument to Design and concerning miracles—and in the rest of this review I will focus on them.

Mawson finds four objections to the design argument in Hume; that the argument turns on an analogy between the world and human products, and the analogy is not in fact a close one; that there are many other hypotheses besides the theistic one which can explain the order of the world; that the imperfection of the world threatens the argument, as it is unreasonable to posit a perfect cause to explain an imperfect effect; and that the theistic hypothesis, arrived at on the basis of the design argument, cannot answer further questions such as those regarding, for instance, answers to petitionary prayer or life after death. Mawson dismisses the last three arguments, while allowing some force to the first. (A fifth Humean objection, the "Why stop at God?" argument, is introduced at a later point in the discussion; Mawson argues that it can be answered if we hold, as a dualist might, that mind can be self-ordering in a way in which body cannot.)

To the second objection Mawson replies that the fact that other explanations are possible does not undermine the theistic one if that is in fact the simplest; likewise, his answer to the third is that it is legitimate to posit more in a cause than is strictly needed to account for the effect, if this produces a simpler hypothesis.

However, these responses do not do justice to the full force of Hume's arguments. He does not claim merely that explanations other than the theistic one are *possible*, but that they are positively suggested by the method of analogy on which the design argument (at least as presented by Cleanthes in the *Dialogues*) rests; for instance the suggestion that the world might have been produced by a team of gods rather than an individual is based on the observation that large-scale works of human design are normally completed by a team. (One of Mawson's own reasons for rejecting the design argument is that evolutionary theory, together

with a "many worlds" view, provides an explanation of the order of the world as simple as the theistic one; he takes this to be different from Hume's point, which he sees as turning only on the existence of other possible explanations, but in fact Hume presents some of them as equally or more plausible than the theistic one.) Again, the argument from imperfection is not just that we do not *need* to posit a perfect creator to explain the world as we know it, but that it is not what we would *expect* from a perfect creator, so renders his existence improbable. In addition, the hypothesis proposed by Philo, of a creator who is powerful and intelligent, but neutral, not benevolent, in his attitude towards us, is not obviously less simple than the regular theistic one.

To the fourth objection Mawson responds simply that it is irrelevant if we are concerned simply with an argument for the *existence* of the creator; there is no reason to reject *that* simply because it does not allow us to infer other interesting things. This is undoubtedly correct, but it should be noticed that it is not a criticism of *Hume*, who, so far as I can tell, never argues along these lines against the design argument, but only against the claim that natural theology has practical consequences—in the main argument of section 11 of the first *Enquiry*, where this line of thought is developed at length, the existence of God is not questioned.

In discussing these objections, I suggest, Mawson does less than justice to Hume's arguments. In discussing the first objection, by contrast, it may be that he gives Hume more credit than he deserves. The objection is presented in the first instance in terms of analogy; the design argument turns on an analogy between the universe and works of design, and the objection arises from the weakness of the analogy. This does indeed effectively represent Philo's main argument in the *Dialogues*. However, when Mawson comes to spell the objection out in detail, he describes it in a different way, as turning on the claim that we have a naturalistic explanation of the order of the universe in terms of natural selection, and do not need to posit a divine cause. This, however, seems to be a quite different objection from Hume's, and, moreover, to be directed against a different version of the design argument. The argument criticised by Hume is an argument by analogy, and he opposes it by pointing to the weakness of the analogy; the Darwinian objection, by contrast, is best seen as directed against an argument by inference to the best explanation, as it proposes that we have a better or at least equally good explanation. Mawson seems to slip from one argument to the other by means of an ambiguity in "marks of design," in the claim that the universe displays "marks of design"; this is first taken to mean features that resemble those of designed objects, but later to mean features that can only be explained through design.

All in all, it seems that Mawson is not engaging closely with Hume's own arguments, but rather is responding to a set of standard objections to the design

argument which have come to be ascribed to Hume. A similar problem arises in his discussion of miracles. Here again, the full force of Hume's argument is not brought out. This is apparent in two ways in particular. First, in expounding Hume's a priori argument against reports of miracles, Mawson says simply that "laws of nature by definition have uniform experience—maximally good evidence—in favour of their always holding"; but he does not explain why this should be considered maximally good evidence. Hume's central point—that *all* our reasons for believing in matters of fact not directly observed, including those believed on the basis of testimony, rest on the uniformity of experience—is not brought out. Once it is recognised, it becomes clear why Hume thinks we cannot simply weigh the evidence of testimony against that of uniform experience, because the one depends on the other; we are just weighing one example of uniform experience against another. Mawson even suggests that Hume is at points in his argument assuming that we "know with absolute certainty that there cannot be a God"—presumably because without this assumption we could not be sure that there are never any breaches of the laws of nature. But Hume is not claiming that we can be sure of this, only that we can never have sufficient reason to believe that a particular breach has occurred, because without reliance on the uniformity of the laws of nature we lose our reasons for believing anything.

Second, Mawson treats Hume's a priori and a posteriori arguments simply as parallel arguments against miracles, not bringing out the dialectical structure which they exhibit, with the a priori argument setting the bar which any report of miracles will have to reach, the a posteriori ones showing that no actual report of a miracle has ever reached that bar. This makes a significant difference to our assessment of those arguments. In response to the first—that "there has never been found . . . a miracle attested to by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion"—Mawson points out, reasonably enough, that there has never been *any* event attested to by a sufficient number of people with such qualities as to *secure* us against falsehood. But this misses Hume's point; ordinary reports do not need to reach these standards; reports of miracles do, because there is a complete "proof" against them.

A similar point applies to the second a posteriori argument—that from the natural appetite for wonders. Mawson accepts that there is such an appetite, but argues that it is not universal, nor is it overpowering in most of those who have it. But in the dialectical context this does not matter; the appetite for wonders provides *some* motivation for people to invent miracle stories even if they are not true, and this diminishes the probability that they are true. (Mawson himself makes a parallel point in his discussion of religious experience.) The diminution may, in many cases, be small, but when there is a "proof" against miracles, any diminution is fatal.

Hume's arguments, when filled out in detail, can, I suggest, survive many of Mawson's criticisms; on the other hand, this may lead us to recognise the extent to which they are rooted in Hume's distinctive philosophical views—the arguments against miracles, for instance, depend on his theory of belief formation. It might be better, in a general introduction to the philosophy of religion, to discuss in a more abstract way whatever seem to be the best arguments against religious claims, without ascribing them to Hume.

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