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INFINITE REGRESSES OF RECURRING PROBLEMS & RESPONSES[1]

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Some infinite regress arguments are presented or analyzed in terms of recurring problems and solutions. Such arguments are typically characterized in this way:

> The first step to be taken is to raise a certain problem; the second step consists in providing a solution to that problem. However, it is immediately shown that the type of problem raised at the first step may be raised once more. This is the third step. The fourth step leads to the solution of this problem along the lines provided by the second step, and so on *ad infinitum*.[2]

The logic of such regress arguments has generally not been discussed in the sparse literature on infinite regress arguments.[3] This is rather surprising given the striking differences between such regress arguments and typical

[1] I would like to thank professors Derek Allen and Robert Tully for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] George Schlesinger, *Metaphysics. Methods and Problems* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983) p. 221.

[3] Roman Clark, "Vicious Infinite Regress Arguments" *Philosophical Perspective* 2 (1988) pp. 369-380; Martin Gardner, "Infinite Regress", *Scientific American*, 212 (1965) pp. 128-132; Claude Gratton, "Circular Definitions, Circular Explanations, and Infinite Regresses", *Argumentation*, 8 (1994) pp. 295-308, and "Vicious Infinite Regresses and the Inability to Complete Infinitely Many Tasks", in *Analysis and Evaluation*, eds. F.H. van Eemeren et al. (Amsterdam: International Centre for the Study of Argumentation) pp. 39-45; Henry W. Johnstone, "La régression à l'infini et l'*argumentum ad hominem*", in *L'Argumentation, Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. Alain Lempereur (Liège: Fardaga) pp. 31-36, "Question-Begging and Infinite Regresses", *Argumentation*, 8 (1994) pp. 291-293; Dale Jacquette and H.W. Johnstone, "Dualities of Self-non-Application and Infinite Regresses", *Logique et Analyse*, 125-126 (1989) pp. 29-40; John Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1970) 2nd ed.; Jay Rosenberg, *The Practice of Philosophy. A Handbook for Beginners* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978); David Sanford, "Infinite Regress Arguments" in *Principles of Reasoning*, ed. J.H. Fetzer (Totowa N.J.: Barnes and Nobles Book, 1984); D.C. Yalden-Thomas, "Remarks about Philosophical Refutations", *The Monist*, 48 (1964) pp. 501-512.

infinite regress arguments. To illustrate these differences, I shall first describe McTaggart's famous regress argument against the reality of time. I shall not evaluate it in detail because this has been done elsewhere.[4] Secondly, I shall describe a typical infinite regress argument, and contrast it to McTaggart's regress argument.

The few philosophers who have examined regress arguments whose regresses can be described or analyzed in terms or recurring problems and solutions[5] have overlooked that there are logically relevant differences among these arguments. For some problems can recur in different ways, recurring solutions can have different functions, and these differences affect our evaluation of these arguments. I shall illustrate these differences by first describing Mackie's regress argument against an attempt to explain the presence of evil in a world created by an infinitely powerful and benevolent God; I shall then contrast the structure of the regresses in McTaggart and Mackie's arguments, and the functions of the recurring solutions in these regresses. I shall show how these differences require that we evaluate these two arguments differently, even though their respective regresses can both be described or analyzed in terms of recurring problems and solutions.

To facilitate my discussion, I shall generally speak of recurring responses rather than recurring solutions. For the recurrence of a problem shows that we have failed to solve it, yet to speak of solutions suggests that we have solved it. This awkwardness is avoided if we speak of responses rather than solutions.

I have devised a simple diagram to represent the general structure of an infinite regress of recurring problems and responses.

[4] For example, see David J. Farmer, *Time & McTaggart's Paradox*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virgina, 1988-89; Quentin Smith, "The Infinite Regress of Temporal Attributes", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 24 (1986) pp. 283-396. For a criticism of D.H. Mellor's defense of McTaggarts' argument in *Real Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), see David Sanford, "Infinite Regress Arguments", in *Principles of Philosophical Reasoning*, ed. J.H. Fetzer (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984).

[5] Schlesinger, *op. cit.*. Timothy Day, "Infinite Regress Arguments" *Philosophical Papers*, 16 (1987) pp. 155-163, and *Infinite Regress Arguments: Some Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems, Doctoral dissertation*, Indiana University, 1986.

DIAGRAM 1

PROBLEMS	RESPONSES
Problem 1.	
	Response 1.
Problem 2.	
	Response 2.
Problem 3, ad infinitum	

Since a problem must arise before there can be a response to it, and given our convention of reading from left to right, it seems appropriate to place the column of recurring problems to the left of the column of recurring responses. I shall sometimes refer to the recurring problems as the problem side of the regress, and to the recurring responses as the response side. I shall call the group of statements constituting a problem, or a response, a "stage" of a regress.

Responses can be related to problems in different ways. The following example illustrates a causal relation between responses and recurring problems. Suppose I have a flat tire. This is a problem for all kinds of reasons, e.g. I shall not arrive on time to give a lecture. Suppose I have a way of repairing flats such that each puncture in the air tube is repaired, but in the process of patching up a puncture, I unintentionally make another puncture. I have solved a specific problem, but I cause the same kind of problem: each response(n) causes problem(n+1). We can represent the structure of these recurring problems and responses with the following diagram.

DIAGRAM 2

PROBLEMS	RESPONSES
Problem 1.	
	Response 1.
Problem 2. ←	
	Response 2.
Problem 3. ←	

The arrows in this particular case represent a causal relation. But, as we shall see in the next section, a response can be related to a problem in a different way, namely, by a relation of entailment between a statement in the response and a statement in the problem.

1. *McTaggart's regress.*

McTaggart has presented a famous infinite regress argument of recurring problems and responses in which he attempts to show that time is not real. It consists of a succession of exchanges between opposing arguments, and the recurring problems is a conclusion (that time does not exist) that recurs in each argument of the problem side of the regress. I shall present the first three stages of the regress in order to explain clearly how each problem is intended to recur.

At *stage* (1) of the regress, McTaggart says that the predicates "past", "present", and "future" are incompatible, and then adds the following:

> But every event has them all. If *M* is past, it has been present and future. If it is future, it will be present and past. If it is present, it has been future and will be past. Thus all the three characteristics belong to each event.[6]

From the contradiction that every event *M* has these logically incompatible predicates (simultaneously), he infers that time is not real. This conclusion at stage (1) is the first problem. It is a problem in the sense that it seems false and contrary to common sense.

Stage (2) of the regress is a response consisting of an argument intended to eliminate or solve the problem. I therefore describe the response as having an *eliminatory function*. In this case the response is an attempt to refute the argument supporting the problematic conclusion. According to the response, it is never true

> that *M is* present, past and future. Or it *is* past, and *has been* future and present, or again *is* future, and *will be* present and past. The characteristics are only incompatible when they are simultaneous, and there is no contradiction to this in the fact that each term has all of them successively.[7]

Stage (3) of the regress is an argument that is supposed to show that a premise of the response at stage (2) re-creates the same kind of contradiction that entails the unreality of time. According to McTaggart, in using these terms to argue that the past, present, and future occur successively,

[6] *The Nature of Existence,* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1921) Vol. 2, Book 5, Chapter 33, p.20.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

one uses the very same terms that create the problem at stage (1) of the regress.[8] His argument at stage (3) goes as follows. The response at stage (2) to the problem that some event *M* is simultaneously past, present, and future, is to claim that *M is* past, *was* present, *will* be future. The response makes use of the same predicates that supposedly create the problem encountered at the first step. McTaggart believes that "*is*", "*was*", and "*will be*" all occur simultaneously at stage (2), just as the predicates "past", "present", and "future" are supposed to occur simultaneously at stage (1).

The following is the gist of the first three stages of McTaggart's regress of recurring problems and responses:

DIAGRAM 3

PROBLEMS	RESPONSES
1) Any event *M* has the incompatible predicates "past", "present", and "future" simultaneously. [Further premises.] So, time does not exist	
2)	Event M is past, has been future, etc ... So, M has these predicates succesively So, the first premise of argument (1) is false
3) So, event *M* has the incompatible predicates "past", "present", and "future" simultaneously. [Further premises.] So, time does not exist	

Though the first three stages of the intended regress provide enough information to enable us to see that any response similar to the first one is supposed to recreate the same kind of problem, this information is insufficient to establish McTaggart's belief that the regress of recurring problems and responses is infinite. Diagram 3 can help us to understand why it is not infinite: *no* problem entails the next response. So, each new response recurs only contingently. Each response is contingent upon the responder's failure to see that the same kind of response (supposedly) entails a contradiction,

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 22, in footnote #1.

and consequently that each response is refuted. Such a failure and repeated responses do not arise as a matter of logical necessity. There would be an infinite regress of recurring problems and responses only if there were endlessly many such failures. There would be such a quantity of failures only if the responder were immortal. Assuming that the responder is mortal, it follows that the regress is not infinite.

Of course there *could* be an endless regress in the sense that it is *logically possible* for these two disputants to advance endlessly the same kinds of opposing arguments. However, such a regress would be superfluous because, as illustrated in Diagram 3, McTaggart's goal of refuting any one of those responses is attained *without* requiring an infinite regress of recurring problems and responses.

Diagram 3 can also help us to understand why the following description of McTaggart's regress misrepresents the structure of the regress:

> On the one hand, we may be inclined to conclude that we are facing an inescapable difficulty, for no matter how many contradictions we eliminate among statements assigning temporal properties to moments, new contradictions may be generated among statements involving other moments. On the other hand, it is possible to conclude that there is no real problem here, since no matter how many contradictions are pointed out we are sure of being able to eliminate them.[9]

The difficulty, however, is not that the contradictions "*may* be generated" (emphasis added) but that they *are* generated, for they are entailed. Moreover, it is a mistake to say that all the contradictions are eliminated, for each argument attempting to eliminate a contradiction has a premise that entails a contradiction, and so the premise is false; thus, each argument intended to eliminate a problem in a prior stage is unsound. These unsound arguments do not eliminate the intended problem, even if there infinitely many such arguments.

Diagram 3 can also help us to see why certain commentators on the regress's viciousness misrepresent McTaggart's argument. According to him,

> It may be worth while to point out that the vicious infinite has not arisen from the impossibility of defining past, present, and future, without using terms in their own definitions. On the contrary, we have admitted these terms to be indefinable. It arises from the fact that the nature of the terms involves a contradiction, and the attempt to remove

[9] Schlesinger, *Metaphysics*, p.227.

the contradiction involves the employment of the terms, and the generation of a similar contradiction".[10]

The regress is supposed to be vicious because a statement in each attempt to eliminate the problem entails a contradiction. However, according Arthur Prior, the intended regress is not vicious for the reason that there are contradictions only half the time —at the odd-numbered stages (i.e., the arguments on the problem side); and it seems that we could stop the regress anywhere along the even-numbered stages (i.e., the arguments on the response side), where there is no contradiction.[11] However, this description misrepresents McTaggart's argument. Since a premise in each response is supposed to *entail* a contradiction (i.e., Event *M* has the logically incompatible predicates past, present, and future simultaneously) that is used in each argument on the problem side to show that time does not exist, one does not have the logical option of staying at any stage of the response side. For one always has another problem with which to contend. If one were to stop at any stage of the response side, there would still always be one unresolved problem at the next stage. Such a mistaken view results from having overlooked the structure of the regress as illustrated in Diagram 3.

2. *The structure of a typical infinite regress argument.*

I have used McTaggart's argument to illustrate the structure of an infinite regress argument whose regress consists of recurring problems and responses. I shall now describe the *core* of a typical infinite regress argument, and afterwards contrast both arguments.

The core consists of at least three arguments. The first argument is intended to generate the infinite regress. In the second argument, the regress, sometimes along with other premises, is intended to entail a result. The third one aims to show that this result is unacceptable. A result is *unacceptable* if it is a false statement, or if it conflicts with a statement or rule that we are unwilling to abandon.[12] When the regress is derived from one or more premises, the final conclusion is a rejection of at least one of those

[10] *Op. cit.*, footnote, p.22.

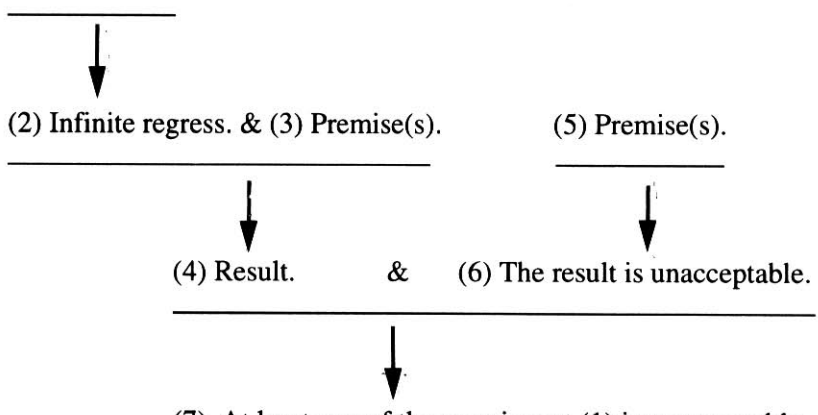
[11] *Past, Present, and Future* (Oxford: 1967) pp. 5-6. Prior's argument is considered by Schlesinger to be "the most instructive objection" against McTaggart. *Metaphysics*, p. 227.

[12] For example, Occam's Razor: a rule according to which entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.

premises. Sometimes an infinite regress is not derived but simply assumed for the purpose of rejecting the regress itself. For example, from the assumption that there is an infinite regress of justification, John Post has argued that the regress entails the conclusion that any statement can be justified; this conclusion is unacceptable because some false statements would be justified; he then infers that infinite regresses of justification do not exist.[13]

The following diagram represents the general structure of a typical infinite regress argument. The arrows represent inferences.

DIAGRAM 4



The premise(s) at (1) are intended to entail an infinite regress at (2). For example, the conjunction of the premises, "For any thought there is a prior thought", and "There is a thought(1)", entails the infinite regress, thought(2) is prior to thought(1), thought(3) is prior to thought(2), thought(4) is prior to thought(3), *ad infinitum*. I shall use this example to illustrate the other core components in Diagram 4. The label, "infinite regress", does not denote a single statement but rather all the statements that constitute the infinite regress. The infinite regress at (2), sometimes in conjunction with the premise(s) at (3), entails a result at (4). Sometimes intermediate steps are required to reach (4). For instance, the infinite regress, thought(2) is prior to thought(1), thought(3) is prior to thought(2), *ad infinitum*, entails the intermediate step that before one can have a

[13] John F. Post, "Infinite Regresses of Justification and of Explanation" *Philosophical Studies*, 38 (1980) pp. 31-32.

thought, one must have infinitely many prior thoughts. Given that we cannot have infinitely many thoughts, the infinite regress entails the result at (4) that we never have a thought. The premise(s) at (5) are independent of the derivation of the infinite regress and have the important function of showing that the result is unacceptable. The result in the example under discussion is false because we do have thoughts. Assuming that the premises at (3) and (5) are true, and that all the inferences are valid, the conflict resulting from the conjunction of (4) and (6) entails at (7) that at least one of the premises at (1) is unacceptable. Thus, the premise that for any thought there is a prior thought is false.

Here is another simple example. The premises, "All things are [properly] defined by a definition, and all definitions are things", entail an infinite regress of definitions, which entails the unacceptable result, according to Sextus, that "we shall define nothing"[14]. Since people do and will define things, the statement that we shall define nothing is false. Consequently, either "All things are [properly] defined by a definition" or "All definitions are things" is false, or they are both false.

Of course, there can be variations on the general structure of Diagram 4. For example, the premises entailing the regress might themselves be derived. The number of premises at (3) and (5) can also vary from argument to argument; the premises at (3) and (5) can be backed up by further premises. The inferences represented in Diagram 4 could be replaced by a succession of intermediate inferences.[15]

There are some striking differences between a typical infinite regress argument and McTaggart's infinite regress argument.

(1) The infinite regress of a typical infinite regress argument is used to refute at least one of the premises that entail the regress. The kind of premise that would entail McTaggart's regress would have the following general form: for any problem u of the kind v, there is a specific response w to u that entails a contradiction that in turn entails a new problem x of the kind v. But there is no need for such a premise in McTaggart's argument. For his goal is not to refute such a premise but rather to refute a response intended to solve a problem. Though the regress begins with a response, the response does *not* entail the regress.

(2) In a typical infinite regress argument its regress is *entailed*, but as argued earlier, McTaggart's regress is not.

[14] *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, in *Sextus Empiricus, Vol.1*, trans. R.G. Bury (London: William Heineman, 1933), Book 2, 207, p. 285.

[15] For a more detailed discussion of a typical infinite regress argument, see my article, "What is an infinite regress argument?", forthcoming in *Informal Logic*.

(3) The regress in a typical infinite regress argument *must* be infinite if the argument is to be cogent, but as argued earlier, not only is McTaggart's regress not infinite, it need not be infinite.

(4) Given the preceding comments, such expressions as "*ad infinitum*", "and so on endlessly", etc., must be used differently to describe typical infinite regresses and regresses of recurring problems and responses. In the former cases these expressions indicate that the regress either *is* infinite or *is* extending endlessly, but in the latter cases they indicate that a regress *could* extend endlessly, and that *any* similar response *would* be similarly refuted.

(5) These arguments have different structures. As shown in Diagram 4, a typical infinite regress *as a whole* entails an unacceptable result that is then used to refute at least one of the statements that entail the regress. In McTaggart's regress the unacceptable result occurs *within* the regress: a premise *in each response* entails a contradiction. His regress thus consists of successive refutations or each response.

(6) Though both arguments are a species of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, the preceding differences obliges us to proceed differently in our evaluation of each argument, and so these differences are logically relevant.

In this section I have contrasted McTaggart's infinite regress argument of recurring problems and responses to a typical infinite regress argument, and have identified some logically relevant differences. My discussion of McTaggart's argument cannot be generalized to all arguments that are presented or analyzed in terms of recurring problems and responses. For some regresses of recurring problems and responses can recur differently from those represented by Diagram 3. We shall examine such a regress in the next section.

3. *Mackie's regress.*

J.L. Mackie's regress argument in "Evil and Omnipotence"[16] has been described in terms of recurring problems and solutions by Schlesinger.[17] We shall see that, despite the fact that we can describe the regress arguments of Mackie and McTaggart in such terms (or, better, in terms of recurring problems and responses), there are some logically relevant differ-

[16] *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) pp. 46-60.

[17] *Metaphysics*, pp. 224-226.

ences between the arguments. I shall first present Mackie's argument, and then identify these differences.

Mackie uses an infinite regress argument to reject a theist's proposed solution to the problem of evil. Whether or not any theist has ever proposed the solution that Mackie criticizes is irrelevant here, for my goal is to use Mackie's argument in order to explore the logic of a regress argument that is presented in terms of recurring problems and responses. The central problem facing Mackie's theist is to explain how there can be evil in a world created by an infinitely powerful and infinitely good God. Since it appears that evil should not exist, but does, the theist's world view is inconsistent. Mackie presents the theist's attempt to eliminate the inconsistency as follows:

> But let us see exactly what is being done here. Let us call pain and misery 'first order evil' or 'evil (1).' What contrasts with this, namely, pleasure and happiness, will be called 'first order good' or 'good (1).' Distinct from this is 'second order good' or 'good (2)' which somehow emerges in a complex situation in which evil (1) is a necessary component -- logically, not merely causally, necessary. (Exactly *how* it emerges does not matter: in the crudest version of this solution good (2) is simply the heightening of happiness by the contrast with misery, in other versions it includes sympathy with suffering, heroism in facing danger, and the gradual decrease of first order evil and increase of first order good.) It is also being assumed that second order good is more important than first order good or evil, in particular that it more than outweighs the first order evil it involves.
>
> Now this is a particularly subtle attempt to solve the problem of evil. It defends God's goodness and omnipotence on the ground that (on a sufficiently long view) this is the best of all logically possible worlds, because it includes the important second order goods, and yet it admits that real evils, namely first order evils, exist.[18]

In short, according to the theistic solution, the "universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil".[19] For the presence of evil, such as pain and disease, makes possible the existence of higher spiritual goods of sympathy, benevolence, heroism, etc.. Mackie responds as follows:

[18] *God and Evil.*, pp. 53-54.

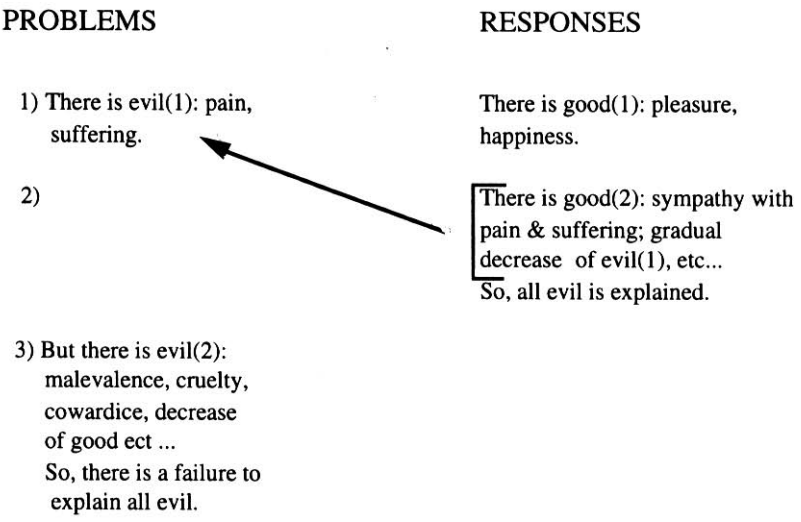
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

> [T]he fatal objection is this. Our analysis shows clearly the possibility of the existence of a *second* order evil, an evil (2) contrasting with good (2) as evil (1) contrasts with good (1). This would include malevolence, cruelty, callousness, cowardice, and states in which good (1) is decreasing and evil (1) increasing. And just as good (2) is held to be the important kind of good, the kind that God is concerned to promote, so evil (2) will, by analogy, be the important kind of evil, the kind which God, if he were wholly good and omnipotent, would eliminate. And yet evil (2) plainly exists, and indeed most theists (in other contexts) stress its existence more than that of evil (1). We should, therefore, state the problem of evil in terms of second order evil, and against this form of the problem the present solution is useless.
>
> An attempt might be made to use this solution again, at a higher level, to explain the occurrence of evil (2): indeed the next main solution that we shall examine does just this, with the help of some new notions. Without any fresh notions, such a solution would have little plausibility: for example, we could hardly say that the really important good was a good (3), such as the increase of benevolence in proportion to cruelty, which logically required for its occurrence the occurrence of some second order evil. But even if evil (2) could be explained in this way, it is fairly clear that there would be third order evils contrasting with this third order good: and we should be well on the way to an infinite regress, where the solution of a problem of evil, stated in terms of evil (n), indicated the existence of an evil (n + 1), and a further problem to be solved.[20]

The following diagram represents the first three stages of the argument. The numbers to the right of the words "evil" and "good" represent the different levels of good and evil; the arrow represents the relation of entailment.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

DIAGRAM 5



This diagram illustrates two noteworthy features. The first one is that second order good entails first order evil because first order evil is logically and causally *necessary* for second order good. The second feature is that since each response is the theist's attempt to explain why there is evil, each response has an explanatory function.

However, according to Mackie, second order evil "plainly exists", hence such evil remains unexplained by second order good, and so the theist fails to explain all the evil in the world. Thus, the same kind of problem recurs: some form of evil still remains to be explained. A second response would similarly fail because, according to Mackie, there would also be third order evil that would remain unexplained by the third order good. If the theist were to continue with the same kind of response, Mackie believes that it would be refuted in a similar way. And so he concludes implicitly that the theistic solution is refuted.

In order to facilitate my comparison of the regress arguments of Mackie and McTaggart, I shall examine whether Mackie and the theist are "on the way to an infinite regress"[21], and expose some debatable assumptions in his regress argument.

Mackie's regress is infinite only if two assumptions, overlooked by him, are granted. The first one is that each recurring problem of evil is suffi-

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

ciently serious to require a response.[22] What I mean by "sufficiently serious" can be explained with a simple example. Let us assume that the theist shows that there is good at some level(n). If the only unexplained evil at that level were white lies, then this would not be the sort of serious problem that would require the theist to seek out some higher good. Hence, the regress would not extend beyond level(n). So, if there is to be an infinite regress, Mackie must assume that each new level of evil is sufficiently serious.

The intended infinite regress rests on a more contentious assumption. To identify it, let us first examine the logical structure of Mackie's regress. As illustrated in Diagram 5, no statement at the stages on the problem side of the regress entails a statement in the next stage of the response side. And no statement in the response side of the regress entails a statement in the next stage of the problem side. The regress is supposed to extend in the same manner described in these first stages. Thus, given any problem, the regress does not logically extend to the next response, and given any response, the regress does not logically extend to the next problem. (These conclusions are not affected by the fact that a statement in each stage of the response side entails a statement in the *previous* stage of the problem side.) Since no level of evil (or good) entails the next level of good (or evil), and good and evil are not mere possibilities but actualities, they recur on successive levels only contingently. Hence, the infinite regress extends only contingently. Therefore, there is an infinite regress only if there actually are infinitely many levels of good and evil in the world. It would be extremely difficult to prove that there are so many levels of good and evil. There is not only the empirical difficulty of finding them, but also the conceptual challenge of clarifying the nature of these levels of good and evil. For example, what would evil or good at the thirtieth level consist of?[23] It therefore seems that there are no grounds for accepting Mackie's belief that there is an infinite regress of recurring problems and responses.

In fact, Mackie's regress must be *finite* if it is to be sound. If the regress were infinite, each level of evil would be explained, and thus, the regress argument would fail to show that there is some unexplained evil.

If the regress is finite, Mackie's argument is successful against the theist's position only under certain conditions: (1) there is a final level where there is both good and evil, and the evil is sufficiently serious to

[22] Schlesinger makes a similar point in *Metaphysics*, p. 62.

[23] Schlesinger makes a similar point in *Metaphysics* with respect to evil, p. 62, but he overlooks that it also applies to good. Another assumption here is that good and evil are quantifiable beyond the first few steps.

require an explanation from a higher level good, but no such level of good exists; (2) there is a final level where there is sufficiently serious evil but no good. In both cases there is a failure to explain all evil. However, Mackie's argument fails to refute the theist's responses under the following two conditions: (3) there is a final level where there is good and no evil. In this case all evil is explained; (4) there is a final level where there is both good and evil, but the evil is insufficiently problematic to require an additional higher level of good.

If Mackie's argument is an infinite regress argument, it is an odd one. For it is sound only if the regress is finite. My discussion of it shows that an argument that is presented as an *infinite* regress argument *can* be sound even if its regress is finite. What makes such an argument odd has nothing to do with logic but rather with our philosophical heritage, according to which logically menacing regresses are supposed to be infinite. But Mackie's regress is finite, yet logically menacing (to the theist) when conditions (1) and (2) of the preceding paragraph are satisfied.

We have seen that we can describe the regresses in the arguments of McTaggart and Mackie in the same general way: they are regresses of recurring problems and responses. Despite this identical general description, there are differences between these two arguments, and these differences are significant because they affect our evaluation of these arguments.

(1) In McTaggart's argument a premise in each response purportedly entails a contradiction, and consequently the regress consists of a succession of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments against a premise in each response; thus, each argument constituting a response is unsound. There is no such entailment in Mackie's regress: a statement in each response entails a *true* statement that is a premise in the *preceding* problem. Hence, Mackie's regress cannot be evaluated as successive *reductio* arguments.

(2) In McTaggart's argument, the function of each response is to *eliminate* a problem, while the function of each response in Mackie's regress is to *explain why there is* a problem. When responses have the latter function, the only kind of inadequacy that would invite one to use a regress of recurring problems and responses would be each response's failure to explain all significant aspects of a problem. Such an inadequacy never arises in the cases where the function of a response is to *eliminate* a problem. So, again, the regress arguments of McTaggart and Mackie must be evaluated differently.

I have identified some logically relevant differences between McTaggart's infinite regress argument of recurring problems and responses and a typical infinite regress argument. I have also shown that despite the fact that the regresses in the arguments of McTaggart and Mackie can be described or analyzed in terms recurring problems and responses, they

have different structures, their responses have different functions, and only Mackie's regress must be finite. As a result of these differences, these arguments must be evaluated differently. I cannot use the arguments of Mackie and McTaggart to make general claims about other infinite regress arguments of recurring problems and responses. For I have found very few such arguments, and so I cannot determine to what extent their arguments are representative. However, if arguments using regresses of recurring problems and responses are sufficiently different from a typical infinite regress argument to form a distinct class of regress arguments, then my discussion shows that there can be some logically relevant distinctions among some arguments within this class.

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