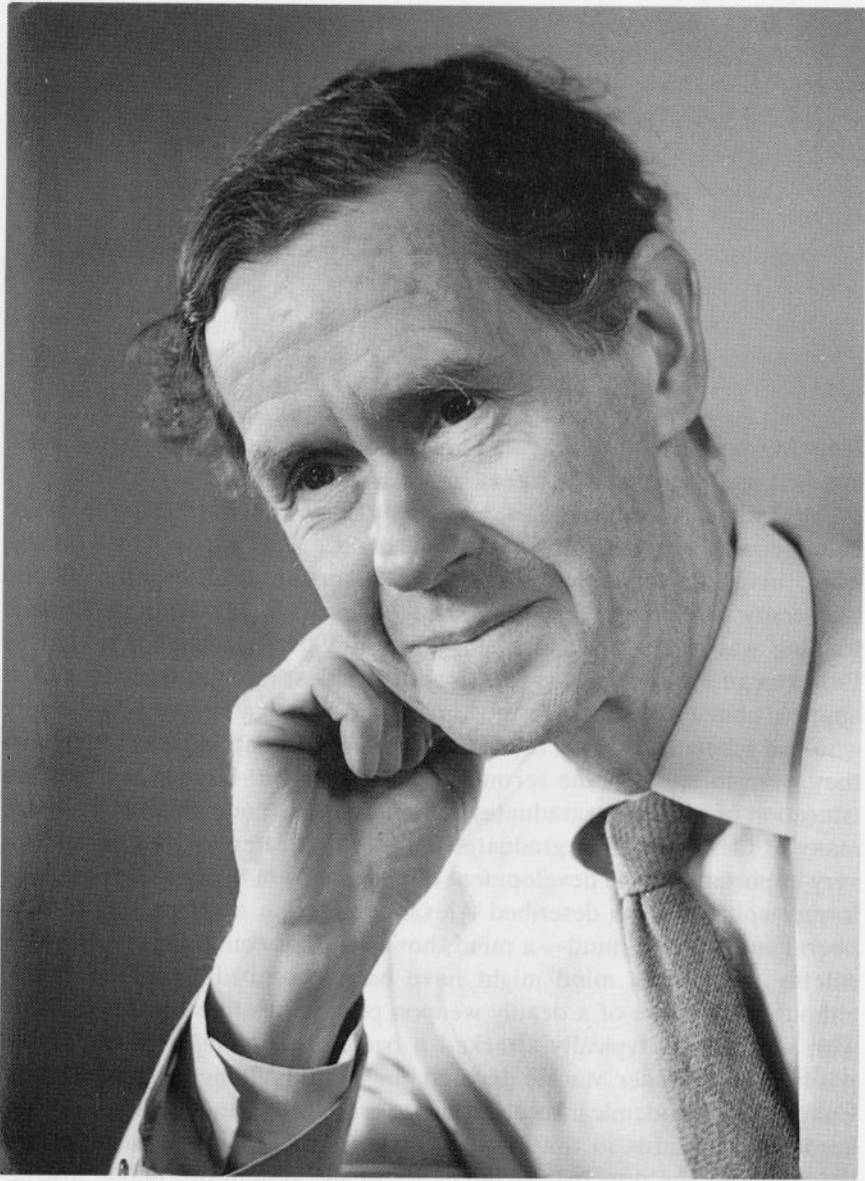


John Leslie Mackie 1917–1981

JOHN MACKIE was born in Sydney, New South Wales, on 25 August 1917. He died in Oxford on 12 December 1981.

His father, Alexander Mackie, had left Edinburgh in 1906 at the age of 30 to become Principal of Sydney Teachers' College, a post which he was later, in 1910, to conjoin with a Professorship in Education at the University of Sydney. Like his son's, Alexander Mackie's intellectual training was in classics and philosophy; in 1907 he acted for a year as Professor of Philosophy. As Principal of the Teachers' College, he had to approve courses of study for those Arts undergraduates in the University who had scholarships from the Education Department, in return for which they were to teach in the secondary school system. He insisted that the education of such undergraduates be required to include philosophy. Since many of the ablest undergraduates fell into that category, this policy was very important for the development of philosophy in Sydney. A friend and former colleague has described Alexander Mackie as possessing 'a very liberal and tolerant mind—a mind, however, that could pierce you like a stiletto'. (His son's mind might have been described in similar terms, although the image of a deadly weapon consorts badly with the geniality with which John typically attacked a bad argument or an ill-supported position.) Alexander Mackie devoted himself to building up the Teachers' College as an academic institution and to establishing and maintaining high academic standards in the State secondary school system; he has been described as 'the principal architect . . . of the system of "public instruction" (as it was then called) in New South Wales'. His teaching is recalled as Socratic. John Mackie's mother, born Annie Duncan, was a graduate of Sydney University, and a teacher before her marriage. One can imagine an early home environment greatly conducive to the development of the four-square integrity and the philosophical bent (in the original or etymological sense) that everyone recognized in the grown-up John Mackie.



J. L. MACKIE

tion" (as it was then called) in New South Wales. His teaching is recalled as Socratic: John Mackie's mother, born Annie Duncan, was a graduate of Sydney University, and a teacher. One can imagine an early home environment greatly conducive to the development of the acute intellect and the philosophical bent (in the original or etymological sense) that everyone recognized in the grown-up John Mackie.

The Mackie family house was in a leafy, hilly, outside suburb of Sydney. John attended the nearby private school, Knox Grammar, where he was educated in what was then the orthodox conventional manner, with a considerable emphasis on classics, mathematics, and the physical sciences. One of his teachers recalled him as a small, frail, lonely figure, taking no part in sport, but 'leaving everyone else for dead' in intellectual competition. This picture of John as a boy rings somewhat true to those who knew him as a man, although his small stature and formidable intellect no longer made for loneliness: at any rate not of the sort that an unathletic and clever schoolboy can suffer. But he was actually not a total abstainer from games in later years: a Sydney colleague attests to weekly 'intellectuals' tennis' throughout the fifties, and I recall John, a scampering elf-like figure, on the tennis courts in the Parks, in Oxford, in the seventies. It is, however, true that he tended to convey the impression of a single-minded concern with the things of the intellect: during his time at University College, Oxford, he was not infrequently to be found watching Wimbledon or a test match on the Senior Common Room television set, but this always used to strike the colleagues who caught him at it as surprising.

When he entered the University of Sydney in 1935, taking up residence in St Andrew's College, he did not at first embark upon the study of philosophy. There was a special reason for this. His sister, Margaret, had preceded him to the University of Sydney, as she was later to precede him to Oxford. (Like her father, she was to make her career in education.) She had, in consequence of her study of philosophy, as the young John Mackie thought, begun 'to talk a great deal of nonsense'. So in his first year at the university, he divided his time between the classics and mathematics; at the end of the year, he gained a Distinction in mathematics as well as High Distinctions in both Greek and Latin. (This meant, in the Sydney system of that time, doing a great deal of additional work in those subjects, work normally examined at the end of what was laughingly called 'the Long Vacation'.) In his second year, he dropped mathematics and substituted philosophy, having meanwhile decided that there might be a grain of sense in the nonsense. He was awarded both the Cooper scholarship in classics and the Lithgow scholarship in philosophy. As his undergraduate career went on, his interests turned more and more towards philosophy. He graduated with first-class honours in Greek and Latin, but with a High Distinction and the G.S. Caird scholarship in philosophy; and he went to Oxford with the Wentworth scholarship for general proficiency, rather than the purely classical travelling scholarship.

Philosophy at Sydney was, in his time as an undergraduate, completely dominated by John Anderson. The teaching staff was extremely small by

present-day standards; and apart from Anderson himself, it consisted of young ex-pupils of Anderson, fully committed to Anderson's philosophy, at least in its general principles. The atmosphere was that of an old-style German Institute. There was an enormous amount of discussion, most notably in staff-student societies, the Freethought Society and the Literary Society, which Anderson had helped to found. The discussions were dominated by Anderson's views and by the authors he particularly favoured, whether the classical philosophers or Marx, Freud, Joyce and Dostoevsky. Relations between teachers and students, especially the relatively small groups of students reading for Honours, were very close.

John Mackie was an independent participant in that unceasing flow of philosophical discussion. He had, already, a style peculiarly his own. There was a touch of the pedagogue about it, as might have been expected, and a degree of formal stiffness. (This description fits his mature manner too.) Naturally he was greatly influenced by Anderson, like almost every good student who came within range of him. Mackie's temperament and independence of intellect, however, did not fit him to be a disciple; and his relationship with Anderson was never one of total ease. Mackie liked best the more formal side of Anderson's teaching. (His earliest philosophy teachers were at once struck by his powers of formal analysis.) He once set out to transpose the whole of Plato's *Apology* into the canonical logical forms—the kind of exercise which Anderson's approach to logic encouraged, though by no means the sort of thing Anderson would have done himself. But when Anderson developed the theme that comedy was the supreme literary form, Mackie was genuinely shocked. He was never at home with Anderson's more speculative views in ethics, which he came indeed totally to reject except in so far as Anderson was critical of the traditional moral theories. Few of Anderson's pupils, admittedly, were wholly convinced by Anderson's claim to have formulated a 'positive ethics'; but many of them, unlike Mackie, warmed to Anderson's views on the subject, at least as a theory of culture. On the other hand, whereas many of his pupils were sceptical of Anderson's enthusiasm for a classical education, that was a point on which Mackie stood firm.

In 1938, Mackie entered Oriel College, Oxford, with Senior Status (so that he was excused the First Public Examination), to read *Literae Humaniores*; he took First Class Honours in 1940. At Oxford, he was particularly impressed by the meticulous epistemology of H. H. Price, presumably encountered in lectures. But his ordinary work for philosophy tutorials in Oriel, with W. G. Maclagan, was something that he himself evidently came to see as a formative influence on his own thinking: years later, he was to dedicate his first book jointly to Anderson and Maclagan, his 'teachers in philosophy'. In 1941, he was awarded the Cromer Prize for

an essay on the philosophy of Pythagoras, Parmenides and Heraclitus. This was an interest of his that dated from his Sydney days: Anderson commonly devoted a large part of the second year of his course to pre-Socratic philosophy. Mackie remained proud of this prize, and in general of his classical education, in later years.

After taking Schools, Mackie began work on a doctorate, but soon abandoned it to enter war service. He first embarked on civilian training for radar; but in 1942 he was commissioned as a Radio Maintenance Officer. He served in the R.E.M.E., in the Middle East and in Italy; he was mentioned in dispatches, and ended the war as a Temporary Captain. If his colleagues in later life knew anything about his war service, it was those bare details. It was utterly characteristic of him that he rarely, if ever, engaged in reminiscence about his wartime experiences. This belongs with the general fact that he was not given to self-revelation. A note that is typically struck in recollections of him, on the part of colleagues and pupils from all periods of his career, is, along with affection and admiration, a regretful sense of not having really known him. G. L. Cawkwell, in his address at the Memorial Service in St Mary's Church, Oxford, spoke for many when he said: '... his loss is for me the loss of a companion. But a curious sort of companion, for I never had a "personal" conversation with him, and from what a good number have said to me since his death, I suspect that hardly anyone ever did. He was universally liked and respected, his name was becoming celebrated, but he remained very much a private person.'

In 1946 Mackie returned to Sydney to take up a position as Lecturer in the Department of Moral and Political Philosophy. (He became a Senior Lecturer in 1951.) The Department had been set up, under Professor A. K. Stout, with a view to counterbalancing Anderson's influence. (Anderson's Chair had been assigned to a Department of Logic and Metaphysics; evidently the division followed the Scottish model.) The plan of offsetting or diluting the Andersonian influence had had little success, and in fact the two Departments worked closely together; Mackie was able to lecture on early Greek philosophy, Kant and Spinoza, as well as on moral and political philosophy. He began to publish in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, of which he served as editor in 1948. Publication was rather difficult for Anderson's former pupils. He did not like them to present his views, as they might have wanted to begin by doing, at least as their own point of departure. Perhaps this was one reason why many of Mackie's early articles were on rather out of the way topics: for instance scientific method in textual studies, the social background of Epicureanism, the logical status of rules of grammar. But his very first article—'A Refutation of Morals'—was, in that field, a declaration of independence, although in

'Logic and Professor Anderson' he defended Anderson against Ryle's criticisms. He wrote articles in educational journals, too, on the teaching of mathematics.

Life in the University of Sydney in those post-war days was difficult. The staff was still small, but there was a fourfold increase in the number of students. Anderson was tired, and the intellectual atmosphere lacked the vitality of earlier years. But Mackie established contact with J. J. C. Smart, a recent arrival in the Chair of Philosophy in Adelaide; they joined forces in two *Analysis* articles on a variant of the 'heterological' paradox.

In 1947 he married Joan Meredith, an outstanding Sydney graduate. They were to have three daughters and two sons.

At the beginning of 1955 Mackie left Sydney to become Professor of Philosophy in the University of Otago, New Zealand. As the subject of his inaugural lecture there, he chose 'Contemporary Linguistic Philosophy, its Strength and its Weakness'. Like everyone else in the field, he had to come to terms with the newer developments at Oxford. Anderson's guns had been directed against classical empiricism, idealism and pragmatism; there were at once points of connection and sharp conflicts between his position and the more recent views of Ryle (and, of course, Wittgenstein), and 'strength and weakness' is a response that might have been expected of an Andersonian. But this would probably have been Mackie's general attitude to the new style of philosophy whether he had studied with Anderson or not; he was typically suspicious of trends, well aware of their capacity to degenerate into mere trendinesses, while preserving a willingness to look for the good in anything philosophical.

Otago was a comparatively peaceful refuge after Sydney. During Mackie's time there, he worked on mastering recent developments in logic and considering their metaphysical implications. Although he stayed there only four years, this was long enough for him to make a distinctive contribution to the Philosophy Department and to the University—and indeed to New Zealand philosophy at large: these were the early years of the New Zealand philosophy conference, and Mackie, with G. E. Hughes and Arthur Prior, took a leading part in animated discussions at the then small gatherings. In the University at large, he made a mark as a formidably intelligent but always genial man; when he left he was serving as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Music. A colleague outside the Philosophy Department provides a glimpse (which fits other periods of his career just as well) of Mackie in action on University business:

Nothing got past him, though (at any rate with non-philosophers) he could express pointed disagreement, or even disapproval, with a smile—and not only without acerbity but even without emphasis, so that on the Senate one

sometimes wondered if some colleagues had realized the trenchancy of a particular criticism.

In the Otago Philosophy Department, he is remembered above all for his fervent and infectious enthusiasm for discussion of philosophical issues. He would turn up on his colleagues' doorsteps for the purpose 'at such times as 1.30 p.m. on Christmas Eve, a practice which did not always endear him to his colleagues' wives'. A colleague from those days has given an amusing description of Mackie as an examiner:

Examining became somewhat of an ordeal. John would second-mark all scripts, and return them to the first marker with the margins packed with critical comments. Some of these would be directed at Hume or whoever else was being discussed, some would be critical of the candidate, and some would be aimed at the lecturer who had taught the course. The latter in self-defence would add his own marginal comments, Mackie would reply further, and so on with ever diminishing utility.

In 1959, he returned to Sydney to succeed Anderson as Challis Professor of Philosophy. Though he attained this distinction at an early age, it might well have seemed a fit culmination of his academic career, perhaps the highest position for an Australian philosopher to aspire to. However, he held the post for only four years, during which he presided over a continuing opening up of the orientation of the Department of Logic and Metaphysics to the wider world of English-speaking philosophy, after the inward-looking period of domination by Anderson. Mackie left Sydney, and Australasia altogether, in 1963, to become the first holder of the Chair of Philosophy at the University of York. One factor that influenced his decision to leave was that the educational situation in Australia had rapidly changed, in Mackie's eyes very much for the worse; and he was determined that his children should have a good education. Besides that, his years at Oxford and in the Army had Anglicized him (and he can never have been a typical Australian). His departure from Australia aroused regret, but created no astonishment.

After only four years at York (his third four-year chair), he accepted election as Fellow and Praelector in Philosophy at University College, Oxford, exchanging the burdens of heading a department in a new university for the very different burdens of an Oxford college tutor. University College was to be his academic home until his death.

Oxford pupils remember him as a devoted and painstaking tutor, unsparring of his time and energy in helping them with their work: in his quiet and unaggressive way, he influenced the cast of many minds. In 1978 the University recognized his distinction by appointing him to a personal Readership. This set a ceiling of six hours a week on the undergraduate

teaching that the College was entitled to require of him, but he was not a stickler for his rights not to be burdened with teaching, and a tutorial 'hour'—a full six of which he would without fail and uncomplainingly undertake—was certain to end on the hour only if another was scheduled to succeed it; even then the next pupil was likely to be kept waiting, with the lost time to be replaced at the end of his hour, while Mackie made sure that everything was clear to the pupil who was supposed to be being dismissed. Quite generally, indeed, Mackie was, as G. L. Cawkwell put it in his memorial address, 'uncommonly duteous'. It was characteristic of him that when what proved to be his final illness made it impossible for him to begin his announced course of lectures at the start of the Michaelmas Term, his first response was to plan to begin at the midpoint of the term instead, and he was reluctant to accept that he had to give up the lectures altogether; as Cawkwell said, 'Having published his intention to lecture, he could not think of not fulfilling it if he possibly could'.

Mackie as a College Fellow was well recalled in the same address:

... he was supremely rational, and his judgement was never overborne by passion or pettiness. If people did not agree with him, he did not get his own back with sly digs or innuendoes. His interventions in College business, although unfailingly fair-minded and in favour of just dealing, were not frequent, but there was one affair which may be recalled, in which he took the initiative and which showed his character. Just over a decade ago he mildly surprised us by proposing that the College admit women. His arguments to the Governing Body were admirably and dispassionately arranged and within the decade had come to be generally accepted as compelling. When at that time the Governing Body thought otherwise, John showed no resentment (and I imagine felt none), and when in time his colleagues almost to a man came round to his view, he was not heard to gloat. He was above such petty feelings.

In 1971 Mackie was awarded a Radcliffe Philosophy Fellowship, which enabled University College to release him altogether from undergraduate teaching for two academic years, with a view to giving him time to devote to his own work. By then he had already published a large number of articles, some of them quite influential; but these two years were a kind of turning-point in his philosophical output. The immediate result was his first two books: *Truth, Probability, and Paradox* (1973), and *The Cement of the Universe* (1974). The second of these—a wide-ranging and sophisticated defence of an empiricist account of causation, which draws together themes from a number of earlier articles—was his first book-length study of a single topic; the first is more of a collection of essays (on various issues in 'philosophical logic'), although there is a clear linking theme. The theme

is clearly stated in the Preface, where Mackie sets out the book's 'two controlling ideas':

One is that these topics can be illuminated, and the problems that arise within them resolved, by the coherent application of fairly simple, common-sense, perhaps old-fashioned ways of thinking. I find myself defending a view of truth that goes back to Aristotle and a solution of the paradoxes that was sketched by Carneades. These topics do not need to be so difficult or so technical as they are sometimes made to appear. . . . The other controlling idea is that we need to take precautions against being fooled, in more than one possible way, by the words (and the symbols) we employ, and in particular that informal critical reflection is needed as a corrective to formal and mechanical procedures.

He was dissuaded by his publisher from putting the second controlling idea into the book's title by calling it *Wise Men's Counters*, in allusion to Hobbes's remark, which he used as an epigraph: 'For words are wise mens counters, they do but reckon by them: but they are the mony of fooles.' The faith in plain common sense, and the impatience with what he saw as unhelpful and indeed positively deceptive resorts to technicality, which he expressed in this book are characteristic of all Mackie's philosophical thinking.

Mackie was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1974.

After those first two books, he continued to write a great deal in the article format: much of the material in the two-volume posthumous *Selected Works* (1985: volume I is *Logic and Knowledge*, volume II is *Persons and Values*) was unpublished at the time of his death. But books now came in an astonishingly steady stream. *Problems from Locke* (1976) dealt carefully and sympathetically with several of the central issues raised in the work of a writer whose sober empiricism Mackie found highly congenial. In 1977 he published *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. This book—which is in a direct line of descent from Mackie's first published article—was written for 'the general reader', but it has been extraordinarily influential among professional philosophers, especially in its general opening section, whose thesis is indicated by the subtitle: along with a few other writings which appeared at roughly the same time, this work has reinvigorated discussion of the metaphysical status of value thinking. Mackie himself, had he lived to see it, might not have been altogether pleased with the nature of the impact that his book has had. In offering arguments against the thesis that value thinking might be objective, he took the thesis seriously as a possibility, something that was hardly ever considered at the time he wrote; and perhaps the most striking effect has been to encourage people not merely to take the thesis seriously but to defend it against his objections. When I say that he might not have been

pleased at this, I mean to suggest that he might have felt a disinterested regret at having unintentionally given aid and comfort to what he saw as an error; he was without the sort of personal vanity that might have led to disappointment at not being seen to have settled the issue. It is in any case a pity that many readers have focused exclusively on the metaphysical issues dealt with in the first part of the book: one should not miss the subtlety and sophistication of the remainder, in which he sets out a detailed picture of how ethical thinking can proceed, not debilitated but strengthened, even after we become aware that ordinary ethical thought embodies, as he claims to have shown, a metaphysical error.

Hume's Moral Theory, which appeared in 1980, gave a reading of Hume as the most important historical forerunner of Mackie's own approach to moral philosophy. This is surely a true picture of at least one strand in Hume's moral philosophy, and it would be unfair, given Mackie's intentions, to make it a point of objection that there are others, and that Mackie's picture is selective and one-sided. His last book, *The Miracle of Theism*, was in press at the time of his death; it represents the culmination of a long-standing, and, it must be said, hostile interest in religion, dealing with issues in the philosophy of religion from the standpoint of Mackie's consistently held and uncompromising empiricism.

The extraordinary output of Mackie's later years reflected amazing industry and intellectual energy. His writing was not achieved as a result of closeting himself off with his current project; even in the midst of writing a book on one philosophical topic, he was avid for discussion and argument on almost any other, and such discussion, away from the current main project, would itself, as often as not, lead to another publication. To quote Simon Blackburn's memorial address:

His industry was legendary. The breadth of his philosophical interests and knowledge was unrivalled. His papers range from the theory of Forms to Newcomb's paradox, from problems of textual criticism to those of special relativity. By his later years he had perfected a scholarly, sober style of great lucidity. He had a thoroughly professional way of absorbing and displaying complex argument, which he seemed able to employ when dealing with any subject. Many of us might enjoy relaxing with a book on biology and natural selection; only John Mackie, being given *The Selfish Gene* as a Christmas present, would shortly publish a paper on it, and one which has been described, by the author of that book, as making a contribution to biology. Many of us might feel that we knew vaguely what to say about, for instance, standard lines in the philosophy of religion. Only John Mackie would test such a belief by following up all the epicycles in the literature, patiently displaying them, and patiently finding them wanting. This catholic *appetite* for argument, allied with the most formidable industry and lucidity, is rare, and awesome.

His perfected style was fluent, and he was able to write very fast. I recall more than one occasion when a discussion left unfinished was continued with several pages of well-constructed prose, in typescript, appearing in my mail-box early the next morning; other colleagues had similar experiences. If I remember rightly, the typescript one received in such circumstances was a carbon copy; one knew that the original was in the archive for future use. At least once in my experience one of these lightning contributions to an ongoing discussion later appeared in print, virtually without revision (none being needed). My impression is that several of the posthumous articles began in this kind of dialogue with colleagues.

Mackie's voluminous philosophical output deals with an impressive variety of topics, but it is united by the conviction which his first book was designed to illustrate in action: a faith, which is perhaps especially unsurprising in the light of his Scottish origins, in the illuminating power of a plain, careful, reflective common sense, conceived as what rationality essentially is; with an attendant suspicion of approaches to philosophy that overplay its difficulty—either by lapsing into unnecessary technicality, or by indulging an exciting sense of depth or mystery. I shall not try to improve on Simon Blackburn's eulogy of the virtues of Mackie's way of doing philosophy:

He had a great admiration for science, and had what may perhaps be called a scientific attitude to philosophy. He believed in the right conduct of argument, and held that with rationality and patience the rights and wrongs of arguments and of positions depending on them could be made plain. This even, almost dispassionate rationality is a rare quality. There is a sense in which even philosophers hanker after something different, as if the reasonable man is not quite so rational, or only reasonably rational. Part of us looks for the guiding vision, the metaphor or image of ourselves and our relations to truth, knowledge, or value, which can inform the arguments we mount. We want to fly beyond anywhere that the wings of argument will take us. John Mackie was not a man for such voyages. He was an empiricist, but one who looked to Locke rather than Berkeley or Hume. He had too much sense to land on the wilder shores of empiricism. When lines of argument began to lead to extravagance and paradox he was, as he described his teacher John Anderson, 'essentially and characteristically in opposition'. This is not to say that he refused to recognize the forces leading to departures from good sense. It is just that he would not be unbalanced by them. He cites with approval Locke's warning that we must not let the difficulties in one hypothesis make us 'throw ourselves violently' into another, with equal or greater difficulties of its own. Of course, such even-handed rationality requires confidence in some concepts and some procedures: those which define the sensible world, from which we are not to depart too far. John Mackie had such confidence: in simple truth, in reason, in a real world of

causally acting particular things. . . . He was absolutely at his best where the rights and wrongs of argument can be analysed out and exposed. Paradoxes and puzzles intrigued him, and any aspect of our subject which yields to patient rationality. They are aspects which some of us tend to fear. It takes intellectual courage to write on the Paradox of the Liar, on the logic of conditionals, because there is little room for vagueness or evasion. Just this, it seems to me, is the ground on which John Mackie was happiest. He had great admiration not only for Science, about which he would have liked to know more, but also for Law: above all a discipline in which sober practices of enquiry lead to the truth, and in which wayward opinions and vain imaginings have no respected place, in which verdicts cannot be left in obscurity or metaphor. . . . Wherever the arguments become tangled he is a pleasure to follow; patiently, persistently unpicking the threads until he found one which could recommend itself to an acute and unbiased understanding. . . . Ultimately, his way of philosophizing is exactly that which justifies our place in society and our role as educators. We need pride in the theory and practice of criticism, in the patient and unbiased exercise of rationality. . . . We can persuade pupils into our views easily enough. But it is harder to alter their standards of argument, and to leave them with a permanent sense of the difference between reason and unreason. I can think of no philosopher better able to do that than John Mackie was, by inclination and example.

JOHN MCDOWELL

Note. The early part of this memoir is based on notes by Professor John Passmore, who was one of Mackie's first teachers in philosophy, and later a colleague at the University of Sydney. I am also grateful for help from Joan Mackie and Penelope Mackie.