

A CLUE TO THE MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE: C. S. LEWIS AND THE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR THEISM

INTRFODUCTION

In the dark days of World War II, Dr. Janes Welch of the BBC, having been impressed by Lewis's first apologetics book, *The Problem of Pain*, wrote to Lewis asking him to do a series of religious talks on the radio.¹ These "broadcast talks" eventually grew into the book we know as *Mere Christianity*. Starting from square one in trying to reconnect people with the Christian hope, Lewis began with the common human experience of trying to live with the inner sense that somehow life asks of us a certain "fairness" in our behavior, suggesting that this experience is in fact an important "clue to the meaning of the universe."² Lewis thus gave us a classic example of what is traditionally known as "The Moral Argument for Theism."

THE ARGUMENT

The argument has three steps. First, it must try to demonstrate that we find ourselves subject to a moral law. Second, it must show that secular explanations of this law—that it is purely subjective, that it is a result of conditioning or of culture, that it is a product of evolution—fail adequately to account for its actual features. Third, it argues that therefore the best explanation for this phenomenon is that there is a moral Lawgiver, that is, God. The argument will be persuasive to the extent that it successfully shows that the alternative explanations of the moral law are indeed unworkable or inadequate. The advantage of it is that, if it is successful, it points to the existence of God in such a way as to highlight our moral guilt before His law. Thus it provides a natural segue into the presentation of the Gospel, the good news that this God has provided a way of redemption from that guilt through the gift of His Son.

Lewis brilliantly begins the first step, not with abstract ideas, but with a concrete scenario everyone can relate to: a dispute over some action—cutting in line, refusing to share, failing to keep a promise—that is deemed unacceptable. People in such situations do not merely express their dislike of the act; they imply that it was wrong. It failed to meet some standard of fairness or rightness that is assumed to exist and to be acknowledged by both parties. (Curiously, even people who think of themselves as moral relativists will talk like this when faced with such a disagreement, especially if they perceive themselves to be the victim of the alleged wrong.)

Does this standard really exist, and do people feel themselves subject to it? Lewis asks those who question this proposition to do a simple thought experiment. Try to imagine a world in which people felt proud of cowardice or admired someone who stabbed people who had been good to them in the back.³ To do this experiment is to realize that differences between the moralities of different cultures are more superficial than they might appear. Some cultures are

¹ See George Sayers, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994): 277-80.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (NY: MacMillan, 1943): 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

monogamous and some polygamous, but they all recognize the institution of marriage. Lewis documents the common features of the moral sense across cultures in the appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, showing that there is indeed a sense of obligation a universal core of common moral values across the human race that it is impossible to escape.⁴

Lewis concludes that virtually all people have this strange idea about how they are supposed to act, and that none of them always acts that way. He finds this odd, and he wants us to ask where this standard came from. And he promises that the answers explored in the following chapters will be a clue to the meaning of the universe.⁵

In chapter 2, Lewis starts dealing with what he calls “objections.” These are essentially attempts to explain this moral law (or “natural law”) in secular terms. If they are successful, then there is no need to appeal to a supernatural explanation. So we have entered step two of the argument as we outlined it above. Lewis deals with three common attempts to provide a secular account. First, what if the moral sense is really just an instinct, say, the human race’s herd instinct? This would be a way of attributing it to evolution. What if it is really just a social convention, like shaking hands? This would be a way of reducing it to a part of our culture. And what if it simply a form of utilitarianism, a calculation of what kind of behavior would benefit the human race as a whole? Here the moral sense would be really just a form of enlightened self-interest. Lewis tries to show that each of these explanations ultimately fails to explain.

The theory that the moral sense is an instinct founders on the fact that an instinct is not an obligation. It is a strong innate desire to behave in a certain way. But that is not the same thing as a sense that one *ought* to behave in that way. This becomes obvious when two of our actual instincts come into conflict. Seeing a person in a dangerous situation (say, a person who is drowning) might trigger a desire to help, which might indeed be from our herd instinct. But there might also be a desire to stay clear of the situation, stemming from the instinct for self-preservation. But Lewis points out that there may well be a third impulse, an inner voice that tells us we *ought* to obey the instinct to help and ignore the instinct to stay clear. That voice is not an instinct like the first two at all, but something else that judges between them.⁶ It is the part of us that is in touch with the moral law.

The second theory, that the moral sense is really just a social convention, something we picked up from our parents, is given plausibility by the fact that there are many aspects of our culture that we learned from our parents or others, and which might be very different if we had had other parents and teachers. Westerners greet each other by shaking hands, Orientals by bowing, French people by kissing each other on the cheek. Such customs are important, but they are not moral absolutes; they might have been different and would have been different if we had been raised in a different country. Are moral laws anything more than that?

Yes, they may well be more than that, says Lewis. Just because you learned something

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (NY: MacMillan, 1947): 95-121.

⁵ *Mere Christianity*, op. cit., 17-21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

does not mean that people just made it up and could have made it up differently. We all learned things like the multiplication table or the periodic table of the elements in school. It does not follow that they are arbitrary human inventions that could be different in other cultures. Well, is the moral law like shaking hands, or is it like the multiplication table? Lewis gives two reasons why it belongs in the second class. First, the differences between the moralities of various cultures are not as great as people think. They are best interpreted as variations on a set of common themes. More importantly, cultural relativism as an account of morality leads to an absurdity: It would remove any grounds for opposition to evils such as the holocaust. If the morality of the Allies was more true than that of the Nazis, “there must be something—some Real Morality—for them to be true about.”⁷

The passage of time may have rendered Lewis’s example (the Nazis) less potent for us than it was for his original audience, who lived in the very throes of the Second World War. If so, simply substitute the morals of ISIS or Al Qaeda, which make a virtue of killing and even torturing people who do not believe in radical Islam. (This does not, by the way, contradict Lewis’s point about the universality of the moral law. It is that very universality that makes aberrations like these stand out. Without it, they would not be aberrations, and our justification for treating them as such would disappear.) Giving up the moral right to be opposed to terrorism is a high price to pay for clinging to the comfort of cultural relativism. It is in fact a price people are willing to pay only in theory. Can you recall the days after the terrorist attacks of 9/11? Moral relativism virtually disappeared from America for about six months, before it then started creeping back in. No one being robbed or assaulted thinks that the actions of his assailant are only unpleasant or inconvenient. When actually confronted with them, we immediately know that they are *wrong*. But where does that idea come from on a naturalistic basis?

The third theory, that the moral sense is simply pragmatism, that we accept these rules because we think it generally pays us to do so, certainly makes sense up to a point. We do indeed see that it is to our advantage to live in a society where murder and theft are not common. We can hardly be safe or happy otherwise. And so we agree to the rules and (mostly) follow them ourselves. But this theory fails to answer the most basic question of all: *Why* should we follow the rules that are beneficial to society as a whole in a situation where we think we would personally benefit from breaking them and think we could get away with it? *Why should* we follow the rules in such a situation? Morality reduced to utilitarianism quickly ceases to be morality at all.⁸ It practically becomes a version of “Might makes right.”

All three theories in failing have something in common: they utterly fail to account for the intuition of *oughtness* that is an essential part of our moral sense. As Lewis summarized this point in another book, you can juggle concepts like desire, compulsion, advantage, and fear (I want, I must, I would be better off, I don’t dare) forever without getting the slightest hint of “I

⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸ Ibid., 29.

ought” out of them.⁹ An ethical system that can give you no reason why you should follow it is not much of an ethical system at all. *Ought* is etymologically related to *owe*. You can only owe something to a person, and you can only have an absolute obligation to an ultimate Person.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. At this point Lewis has only established that secular explanations of morality cannot explain it. But he is finally ready to ask, “What Lies Behind the Law?”¹⁰

To answer this question, Lewis notes that there are two basic views of the universe: the impersonal universe of matter and energy is all that there is and it is just going on of itself, or there is something behind it that is “more like a mind” than anything else.¹¹ Well, the foregoing discussion of the moral law sheds light on that larger question because there is one part of the universe that we can see from the inside as well as the outside, and that part is ourselves. And when we look inside ourselves, we find two phenomena that are very hard to describe simply as cogs in an impersonal materialistic machine. One is reason itself. And the other is this sense of obligation to obey the moral law. That sense of obligation suggests that we are not on our own, and with the failures of the secular explanations, it suggests that something like a personal God makes more sense as an answer to the question of why that sense of obligation is there.

The last step is to see what else we can find out about this “something like a mind” that seems to lie behind the universe. The universe itself suggests that it is powerful (because the vast universe exists) and intelligent (because the universe is mathematically orderly and fine-tuned for life). But the moral law tells us even more, just as listening to a person talk tells you different things about him than examining something he has made. It tells us that God is fully personal, with moral character as well as intelligence, and that if these moral principles are as absolute as they would have to be in an uncreated, omnipotent, and eternal Person, then we are in serious trouble. Theism then is true because it is the best explanation for the existence of the law, and Christianity has the deepest recognition of the problem of personal guilt that the law creates and the most radical solution of it in the atonement offered by Christ.¹²

CRITIQUE

Lewis makes a good move in presenting the moral argument, not as a deductive proof, but as an argument to the best explanation. He offers The Moral Argument not as a slam-dunk proof, but modestly as a “clue” to the meaning of the universe. And certainly it is that. The difficulties in explaining the central concept of morality—its “oughtness”—on a secular basis, and the fact that the law makes more sense if we assume a Lawgiver behind it, are suggestive. They suggest that the existence of God is not an ancient myth that persists for illogical reasons, but that it can be seen as a hypothesis that makes sense of some very significant facts that are

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (NY: MacMillan, 1967): 9.

¹⁰ *Mere Christianity*, op. cit., 31f..

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30-33.

defining facts of human existence. If we find them confirmed by other arguments and by religious experience, then belief in God can be seen not as a delusion but as a reasonable act of intelligence. It is reasonable to conclude on this basis that theism—the existence of a personal God like the God of the Bible—is true.

The second step of the argument, showing the failure of naturalistic theories to account for morality, is where Lewis is often attacked. The charge is that he has committed the fallacies of False Dilemma and Straw Man by leaving out this or that naturalistic theory that is held to succeed where Lewis’s allegedly weak examples failed. As Baggett admits, any such argument “needs to avoid giving short shrift to any legitimate moral theory in contention.”¹³ But Lewis could hardly have offered an exhaustive critique of all such theories. What he did instead was to give us representative examples of such theories and show the lines along which refutations of them could be successfully attempted. He “sketches . . . the first steps” in doing so.¹⁴ If the examples are indeed representative and if we realize that Lewis is only getting us started in dealing with them, then his summary of this step in the argument can be seen as quite successful.

I think, however, that Lewis’s final step is actually the weakest one. The bridge Lewis tries to build from theism to Christianity is based on the answer Christianity gives to the problem of guilt raised by the moral argument. Lewis is insightful here. But just because Christianity theoretically offers a radical solution to the problem of moral guilt, it does not follow that it is true or that this solution is there for us. This weakness results from Lewis’s deciding to stick with The Moral Argument which is his topic in the first part of *Mere Christianity*. For, like all the classical arguments, The Moral Argument can suggest that theism is true but cannot *of itself* establish that the God of the Bible is the One who exists or that Jesus is His Son. It would have been better if Lewis had explicitly acknowledged here what we realize from other writings that he knew was the case: that in order to nail down the Christian faith as the one to which The Moral Argument points, we would need to supplement it with other arguments. Lewis’s Trilemma¹⁵ and the historical argument for the resurrection of Christ¹⁶ are required to take the theoretical bridge Lewis gives us here and add steel and concrete to it so that traffic can cross it.

What have Lewis’s critics said about his use of The Moral Argument? John Beversluis is a representative example. He argues that Lewis’s refutation of moral subjectivism is vitiated by the fact that he treats it as a single genus, when actually “there are more sophisticated and nuanced versions that . . . cannot be disposed of so easily.”¹⁷ The example we are offered is Hume’s theory of morals as based on human feeling, which Beversluis claims is not susceptible

¹³ David Baggett, “Pro: The Moral Argument is Convincing,” *C. S. Lewis’s Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con*, ed. Gregory Bassham. (Leiden: Rodopi, 2015): 132.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See chapter 4.83

¹⁶ See e Donald T. Williams, *The Young Christian’s Survival Guide: Common Questions Young Christians are Asked about God, the Bible, and the Christian Faith Answered* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2019): chapters 1 and 7. See also Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, n.d.).

¹⁷ John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, revised and updated (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007): 83.

to Lewis's "loose-cannon generalizations."¹⁸ Hume argues, "The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it."¹⁹ As Beversluis summarizes it, in Hume's theory of ethics, morality is "a completely human enterprise . . . based on dispositions that have evolved over a long period of time, have taken deep root in human nature, and are all but universal."²⁰ If Hume's explanation is plausible, Beversluis argues, then there is no reason to accept Lewis's contention that accounts of morality that lack a divine moral Lawgiver fail to account for the essence and reality of morality. And if that is the case, then his whole argument for theism becomes moot.

Well, I think Hume's theory is very susceptible to Lewis's critique. In fact, I think it can be doubted whether Hume's view is properly a theory of ethics at all, as it has absolutely no answer to Lewis's charge that subjectivist ethics is unable to account for the word "ought." That is, it offers an account of where moral feeling or sentiments might have come from, but this account gives us no reason why we ought to follow them. Why should I care that most other human beings have come to think of the act I want to do as wrong? Thus Hume is precisely susceptible to Lewis's charge that subjectivist ethics leaves us in the absurd position of having no moral grounds for our opposition to the Holocaust. His theory of sentiment is just a fancier way of way of leaving us in a position where might makes right.

Beverluis thinks Lewis is guilty of a False Dilemma because he does not explicitly refute every single version of subjectivist ethics that has ever been proposed. But when the philosophical jargon is stripped away from the allegedly "more nuanced" views, it is not clear at all that Beversluis has made his charge of False Dilemma stick. Rather, I would say, he just muddies the water. The other forms of subjectivism remain species of the genus, and they lead the same place. In my judgment, after everything Beversluis can do, the superiority of God as an explanation for the moral sense of human beings still stands.

Other attempts to provide a naturalistic basis for morality, such as Wielenberg's,²¹ fall prey to a similar problem. Such theorists think that all they need to do is produce a plausible natural explanation of how moral sentiments might have arisen. But when they have done so, they fail to notice that even if their scenario is true, it fails to account for why we should follow these sentiments. Lewis's best insight then may have been his focus on "oughtness" as the central concept in the whole discussion.

APPLICATION

Lewis shows us that The Moral Argument gives us a good reason for thinking that God exists: the Moral Lawgiver is the only explanation for the existence of the moral law that can

¹⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁹ Ibid., 84.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Erik J. Wielenberg, "Con: A Critique of the Moral Argument," *C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con*, Ed. Gregory Bassham (Leiden: Rodopi, 2015): 141-51.

account for its central feature, its “oughtness.” He also shows us some useful things about how to use that argument. His use of concrete examples, his focus on the key role of the concept of oughtness, and his example getting us started in dealing with alternative theories are all features we need to incorporate in our own apologetic. Two major issues deserve further thought as we think of applying that example in our own times.

First, the relativism and the subjectivism that Lewis was already dealing with have developed more virulent strains than even he could have anticipated eighty years ago. One glaring statement stands out as a sign of how much things have changed. “The other man very seldom replies, ‘To hell with your standard.’”²² That is not an unlikely response at all anymore. Respect for traditional morality in general is at a low ebb, and the seemingly sudden shift in the very definition of marriage calls into question the very universality of the moral law as Lewis defended it.

We cannot then make one assumption about our audience that Lewis could still afford to make about his. But does this shift overturn his point? It does not, for two reasons. First, if we look at the whole history of the human race rather than simply accepting that the last decade or so in the West is as normal as it has come to seem, we realize how abnormal our own little slice of time is. Until very recently the traditional definition of marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman was widely accepted even if not always practiced. There have always been aberrations from the norm, and we are living in one. To attend to the larger sampling of data is to realize that our own moment, far from being normal, is the exception that proves the rule.

Second, Lewis himself showed us the way to deal with those who say, “To hell with your standard.” People who say that always say it very selectively. The moment they or someone they care about is the victim of a breach of the moral law, their relativism shows itself to be the copout which is all it is capable of being. “Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later.”²³ Lewis already realized that for some people an extra step would be needed, and he showed us how to take it. Today we will need it more often and may have to spend more time and effort to make it. But Lewis has already shown us the way.

The second issue that requires thought is the step in *The Moral Argument* that demands the most work: that of eliminating competing explanations, undermining the plausibility of attempts to explain the moral law on a naturalistic basis. Unfortunately, such explanations are like the Tie Fighters in *Star Wars*: “There’s too many of them!” Fortunately, there aren’t enough of them to keep us from blowing up the Death Star.

We must be prepared to encounter any number of such theories, and we must remember that Lewis’s handling of three representative examples in *Mere Christianity* was only getting us started in dealing with them. But he got us off on the right foot. We must not assume that we can get by merely by repeating Lewis’s examples. But we should also follow him by focusing on the issue of oughtness. Plausible theories about how all but universal moral sentiments could have

²² *Mere Christianity*, op. cit., 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

arisen are not necessarily good explanations of how the oughtness of the law can attach to them. And, failing to account for that, they have failed to account for the very essence of morality.

Finally, we should follow Lewis's example in one more way—one we cannot see while we are inside the material on The Moral Argument itself. That is, it is one we will not realize he followed until we have read more of him than the section where he gives The Moral Argument. That argument will serve us best if we see it in the context of the other major arguments such as The Trilemma, The Argument from Reason, and the Argument from Desire. Some of them will confirm its suggestion that a God very like the God of the Bible must exist, and others will make the bridge from theism to Christianity stronger and more able to bear the traffic we hope we can direct across it. And getting people to cross that bridge is the whole point of apologetics.