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LACKING, LUDICROUS, OR LOGICAL? THE VALIDITY OF LEWIS'S "TRILEMMA": PRO

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No philosophical argument that C. S. Lewis ever made is more well known—or more controversial—than his famous “Trilemma” (not his word), or “Lord/Liar/Lunatic” (not his phrase) argument for the deity of Christ. N. T. Wright observes accurately that “This argument has worn well in some circles and extremely badly in others” (32). And some of the sharpest critiques have come from within the believing community.

It is curious that an argument that has become a staple of popular Christian apologetics should be rejected as fallacious by many who presumably accept its conclusion. With not only the validity of a much used argument but also the competence of the greatest apologist of the Twentieth Century at stake, it is time to take a fresh look at Lewis’s argument and its critics. Can we still use the Trilemma? If so, how should we approach it? At the end of the day, how does Lewis come off as an apologist and an example to other apologists? We will try to shed some light on such questions before we are done.

First, let’s remind ourselves of the argument itself as it is presented in *Mere Christianity*. (See Brazier 91-102 for a survey of other works in which Lewis gives a version of the argument.) Lewis is addressing a person who says, “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” We note first of all that the Trilemma is presented not so much as an argument for the deity of Christ *per se*, as a refutation, a heading off at the pass, of one popular way of evading the claims of Christ. This, Lewis argues, is the one thing we cannot say:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let

us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (56)

Many critics treat Lewis's Trilemma as original. But it is actually a refinement of a much older argument, the *aut Deus aut malus homo* ("either God or a bad man") which goes back at least to the Patristic period. (See Brazier 103-26 for a survey of its use before and after Lewis.) Lewis makes the dilemma a trilemma by subdividing the *malus homo* option into two types of badness—mendacity and insanity—which are potentially relevant to the case of the claims of Christ to be God. Later thinkers have expanded it again to a Quadrilemma: Lord, Liar, Lunatic, Legend, or alternatively, Lord, Liar, Lunatic, Innocently Mistaken. In this chapter I will use the familiar term Trilemma to refer to the *aut Deus aut malus homo* (or "Mad, Bad, or God") argument in whatever iteration we find it, because it was Lewis's tripartite form that gave it classic expression for most of us.

Lewis's version of the argument involves the following steps.

1. Jesus claimed to be God. (This is assumed in *Mere Christianity*.)
2. There are three logical possibilities in the case of such a claim:
 - 2A. He was telling the truth.
 - 2B. He was lying.
 - 2C. He was mistaken (and hence insane, given the nature of the claim).
3. A liar or a megalomaniac (the relevant form of insanity) could not be a Great Moral Teacher.
4. Therefore we must either accept Jesus' claim or reject him as immoral or insane. The merely mortal Great Moral Teacher option is logically eliminated.

Note that one could go on to argue that (5) Jesus was not a liar, (6) Jesus was not insane, therefore (7) Jesus was God. One could; many have; I might—but in the passage from *Mere Christianity* Lewis leaves it at (4). He is explicit about his purpose: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say" (55). Lewis does not claim to have *proved* the deity of Christ beyond a shadow of doubt, but only to have clarified our choices. Jesus was (A) telling the truth, and is the Son of God; he was (B) lying; or he was (C) mistaken—and one cannot be mistaken about the particular claim being made (deity) and be fully sane. The only choice Lewis claims to have eliminated absolutely is that Jesus was simply a great, but merely human, moral teacher—for a person who is a liar or a megalomaniac hardly qualifies as a great moral teacher.

Now, the argument is surely presented as *support* for the deity of Christ in that Lewis thinks that the other two choices will be hard choices for most people to make, as well as choices that give inferior explanations for the full data of the phenomenon of Christ. But people could still make them. "You can shut him up for a fool. . . ." The easy choice—that Jesus was a great moral teacher but not God—is the only one Lewis actually purports to have eliminated completely. How well did he succeed?

The basic problem Lewis's critics have had with this argument, even in this limited understanding of it, is their contention that it commits the fallacy of False Dilemma, the premature closure of options. Marvin D. Hinten uses it as an example of one of Lewis's alleged weaknesses: he "overlimits choices" (8). If it can be shown that there are other legitimate possibilities for how to understand the claims of Christ, it is urged, the argument fails.

The other possibilities suggested fall into basically two categories: first, the possibility that Jesus did not actually make the claims attributed to him, or that if he did, he did not mean

them as the bald claims to deity for which conservative Christians have taken them; and, second, the possibility that someone could indeed be sincerely mistaken about his identity without being truly insane in a way that would necessarily compromise his views of ethics or his status and authority as a moral teacher. We will examine each of these categories in turn, and then look at an additional objection: that, even if the propositions of the Trilemma are probably true individually, their combined probabilities fall below the threshold of persuasiveness (the “diminishing probability argument,” or DPA).

THE CRITIQUE: BIBLICAL CRITICISM

First, it is argued, modern biblical criticism does not allow us to make the naïve assumption either that Jesus said everything that the New Testament attributes to him or that what he did say has the meaning conservative Christians have always attached to it. Few believers are ready to sign up for the Jesus Seminar and question wholesale whether the words of Jesus as reported in the canonical Gospels are authentic. But believers do need to concern themselves with the fact that many secular people today will not begin with a presumption of their authenticity. Thus, Wright thinks that Lewis’s argument “backfires dangerously when historical critics question his reading of the Gospels” (33).

It is equally common to question whether Jesus’ statements really add up to a clear and unequivocal claim to deity. All that is needed to deprive Lewis’s argument of its logical force is the probability that Jesus’ words should be taken in some other sense. For some, Lewis’s failure to consider such a possibility robs him of all credibility. “Lewis’ view that Jesus’ claims were so clear as to admit of one and only one interpretation reveals that he is a textually careless and theologically unreliable guide” (Beverluis 1985, 54).

What are these other possible readings? Here things get a bit murky. It is apparently easier to suggest that a greater knowledge of, say, First-Century Jewish background would make such readings possible than it is to come up with specific examples. Thus, Beverluis: “Lewis’s discussion suggests that all individuals of all times and places who say the kinds of things Jesus said must be dismissed as lunatics. But this overlooks the theological and historical background that alone makes the idea of a messianic claim intelligible in the first place” (1985, 56). How exactly a knowledge of that background would alter the nature of Jesus’ claims is not made clear. The best Beverluis can manage is, “When they did dispose of him, it was not on the ground that he was a lunatic but on the ground that he was an imposter” (Beverluis 1985, 56).

N. T. Wright takes a different tack, appealing to the “strong incarnational principle” (32) which was the Jewish Temple, the sign of God’s presence among his people. Lewis doesn’t so much get Jesus’ deity wrong as “drastically short circuits” the original Jewish way of getting there: “When Jesus says, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ he is not claiming straightforwardly to be God, but to give the people, out on the street, what they would normally get *by going to the Temple*” (33; emphasis in the original). By not taking us deeply enough into First-Century Jewish culture (at least as understood by Wright), Lewis fails to give us “sufficient grounding in who Jesus really was” (33).

Readers willing to brave the technicalities of biblical criticism can easily get the impression that there is a solid scholarly consensus to the effect that we can’t really assume that Jesus said everything the Gospels present him as saying. Representative is Frances Young’s contribution to John Hick’s symposium *The Myth of God Incarnate*, “A Cloud of Witnesses.” Young takes it for granted that the New-Testament writings were produced by people trying to

come to grips with the meaning of Christ and doing it in terms of their own developing situations in their churches. Few would question that picture of things; I do not. But Young draws from it the conclusion that the picture we get of Jesus is “the result of believers searching for categories in which to express their response to Jesus, rather than Jesus claiming to be those particular figures” (15). Thus, “The titles were attributed to Jesus by the early Christians and were not claimed by Jesus himself” (17). Only in John’s Gospel are claims actually put into Jesus’ own mouth as opposed to the mouths of his disciples, and John according to Young is not a historical account at all but a later meditation on the meaning of Jesus’ life. If this conclusion is true—or is even as solidly supported by a real scholarly consensus as is implied—then the Trilemma would have great difficulty getting off the ground, with its initial premise (that Jesus claimed deity) being not only moot but incapable of ever being established.

BIBLICAL CRITICISM: A RESPONSE

Lewis’s argument as presented in *Mere Christianity* simply presupposes that Jesus said and meant the things he is traditionally taken to have said and meant: It treats “a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said.” The argument is presented in the form, “Given that Jesus said and meant these things, this is what follows.” To note that the initial premise is controversial in some circles is not a refutation; a refutation would require establishing that the initial premise is false, or at least probably not true. And this, as I will argue, has simply not been done.

Why does Lewis, though, make an initial assumption that does not appear to be one that we can actually afford safely to make? It was not because he was unaware of biblical criticism. It seems to me that most critics of Lewis have simply ignored the original audience for the Broadcast Talks that eventually became *Mere Christianity*: not college educated people but simple British laypersons during World War II. To bring up the technical issues of biblical criticism with that audience would have been a foolish introduction of questions they were not asking, unnecessary complications they did not need to deal with. With a more sophisticated audience, one would of course have to be prepared to make a case for the authenticity of the Gospel accounts and deal with alternative interpretations, because the truth of the initial premise is indeed essential to the argument. That Lewis knew of this challenge and was prepared to meet it when appropriate is proved by essays such as “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism.” Kreeft and Tacelli also recognize the necessity of having a response to the critical argument; they expand the Trilemma to a Quadrilemma: Lunatic, Liar, Lord, or Legend (161-74). Their divinity-claiming Jesus is not a legend because the documents are too early to have allowed for a long period of gradual magnification of Jesus’ reputation by later followers.

Beverluis in 1985 rejected this defense: “When Lewis . . . justifies the popular approach on the ground that ‘if you are allowed to talk for only ten minutes, pretty well everything else has to be sacrificed to brevity,’ he presents not a justification but an excuse. . . . Why not write a longer book in which ‘everything else’ *can* be fully and fairly discussed?” (1985,57). But here Beverluis falls prey to that regrettable tendency of reviewers to criticize the book they would have preferred the author to have written rather than the book he actually wrote. Would Beverluis have an audience of simple laypersons remain unaddressed? Does he really think it makes sense to confuse them with technicalities that do not concern them? As for the “longer book,” one could say that it exists in *Miracles* or can be reconstructed from various essays that do address different, more sophisticated audiences. In *C. S. Lewis’s Case for the Christian Faith*,

Richard L. Purtill has a fine discussion of that larger argument gleaned from a more generous sampling of the Lewis corpus, in chapters 4-5 (45-71). Most of Lewis's critics simply ignore that context.

In his second edition of *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, Beversluis tries to respond to the arguments of Lewis and others that support a traditional reading of the Gospels as giving an accurate and reliable report of Jesus' claims. He says that all such arguments "uncritically assume that the synoptic Gospels are historically reliable sources" (2007, 116). Instead of scholarship, apologists like Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli offer "a flurry of unscholarly pseudo-questions" (2007, 118), such as why the apostles would be willing to die for what they knew was a lie. "Real" New Testament scholars don't ask such questions because they "know" that none of the original apostles had anything to do with the Gospels. "All mainstream New Testament Scholars agree that the synoptic Gospels are fragmentary, episodic, internally inconsistent, and written by people who were not eyewitnesses" (2007, 123).

For someone who claims to find fallacious motes in the eyes of others, Beversluis has a curious blindness to the beams in his own eyes. His whole argument here depends on the fallacies of *Ad Verecundiam* and *Dicto Simpliciter*. Even if all serious biblical scholars did agree with Beversluis, that fact in itself would not make them right. But they can only be said to agree by the sleight of hand of simply (and arbitrarily) defining a "mainstream" scholar as a skeptical one. Beversluis's unqualified generalization—*all?*—has never in fact been true, and is less true now than it has been at any time in the modern age. Richard Bauckham's magisterial *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is just one recent counter-example. A basic source like Stephen Neil's classic *The Interpretation of the New Testament* could have provided Beversluis with many more.

Beversluis in his revised edition also responds specifically to Lewis's own arguments in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism." He simply dismisses Lewis's point that people who claim to find myths and legends in the Gospels need to know something about myths and legends and his observation that source criticism when applied to modern authors where it can be checked is almost always wrong. Beversluis patronizes these concerns as "The Argument from Personal Incredulity" (2007, 123). Nevertheless, Lewis's incredulity is not just a rhetorical ploy but has very good and specific grounds in his claim that the whole enterprise of skeptical criticism is methodologically flawed—an issue that Beversluis just fails to address. But that claim is central to the case against this alleged "consensus." We will have more to say about this below. So far, we have to conclude that the authenticity of the sources simply has not been overturned by this argument.

The alternative interpretations of Jesus' claims are not impressive either. How is "When they did dispose of him, it was not on the ground that he was a lunatic but on the ground that he was an imposter" (Beversluis 1985, 56) a problem? "Liar" is one of the implied horns of the Trilemma. Isn't an imposter just one form of liar? Isn't Liar at least as incompatible with Great Moral Teacher as Lunatic? And N. T. Wright seems to expect of his readers a sophistication in modern interpretations of Jewish culture that even the Pharisees of Jesus' day did not manifest. After Jesus' declaration that the sins of the paralytic were forgiven prior to his healing, they were not saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Where can sins be forgiven but *in the Temple* alone?" They were saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but *God* alone?" (Luke 5:21; emphasis added). In other words, Lewis's argument deals with the reactions Jesus' contemporaries actually made to him—not the one Wright thinks they should have made! Wright thus tempts one to apply to him Lewis's verdict from "Modern Theology

and Biblical Criticism”: These critics are so adept in reading between the lines that they have forgotten how to read the lines themselves.

Beverluis fares no better when he claims that all that is needed is to suppose that Jesus had been “*authorized* to forgive sins by God” (2007, 124, emphasis added). This again simply ignores the actual reaction by Jesus’ contemporaries. *They* took Jesus’ words as a claim to deity, and he did nothing to allay their concerns. In order to understand their reaction, as well as the significance of Jesus’ allowing it to take place, modern readers might be helped by imagining the reaction of a radical Muslim Fundamentalist to a mere human being who claimed to be Allah. It is ironic that Lewis is accused of ignoring the cultural context of the Gospels’ claims for Jesus by people who have obviously failed to make the effort to imagine the fierce monotheism of First-Century Judaism—a basic and essential prerequisite to any audience analysis of the words of Jesus! Far from Lewis’s views of the Gospels revealing him as “a textually careless and theologically unreliable guide” to them, it would seem that the accusation would better fit Lewis’s critics. Chesterton asked a pertinent question in his version of the argument: “Mahomedans did not misunderstand Mahomet and suppose he was Allah. Jews did not misunderstand Moses and identify him with Jehovah. Why was this claim alone exaggerated unless this alone was made?” (246).

Young commits the same kind of fallacious band-wagon appeal to scholarly consensus as Beverluis, and adds to it a brazen *non sequitur*. Surely the New-Testament writers were indeed struggling to understand Jesus in terms of their own problems. This is simply to say that they were human beings. It does not follow that they put their own ideas into Jesus’ mouth, or into the mouths of his close associates (like Peter in his famous confession), or that they manufactured incidents like Jesus forgiving sins, along with the reactions of those present. These are conclusions that would have to be reached independently, needing more grounds than the assumption that things just must have happened that way because that is how “real scholars” understand the evolution of the New Testament.

That Young is imposing a concept of evolution on the New-Testament documents rather than reading it out of them is suggested by the strange statement that their “dates of origin span approximately three quarters of a century” (14). First, that is very unlikely. The earliest documents are the first epistles of Paul, which are probably from the fifties. But practically the whole New Testament, including all four canonical Gospels, was already being quoted *as Scripture* by the Apostolic Fathers by the end of the First Century—meaning it had to be in circulation some time before that (Bruce 18-19, Holmes, Richardson). The actual period of composition then may be as little as half what Young suggests, and his suggestion is hardly indisputable—but it is needed to give time for the evolution of the early Christians’ understanding of Jesus that is assumed to have happened. And that is precisely the point. Included in the collection accepted by the end of the First Century are all four canonical Gospels and the undisputed Pauline epistles—all the major documents on which the traditional account of the claims of and for Christ are based. Even if later dates for a few of the disputed epistles be granted, the earlier dates we must accept for the rest make it harder to posit the kind of evolution critics like Young assume.

Young is very honest about the source of the presuppositions that drive such an understanding. “The Christians of the early church lived in a world in which supernatural causation was accepted without question.” But such a world view is “unthinkable now.” “There is no room for God as a causal factor” in the modern mind, and Christian scholars according to Young must simply bow to that situation (31). *But if we want honestly to examine the question*

whether Jesus could have claimed to be—and been—the Son of God, that is precisely the point on which we have to keep an open mind!

Young's closed mind, and that of his cohorts in the mainstream critical "consensus," renders what looks like textual scholarship an exercise in philosophy determining in advance what texts are to be allowed to say. In this he is typical of the whole enterprise of negative biblical criticism. That is precisely why that critical consensus is unimpressive to conservative believers. It is philosophically prejudiced and methodologically flawed, not to mention actually balanced by a significant body of criticism that, without the predisposing naturalistic bias, reaches very different conclusions. Recall Lewis's observation that the kind of reconstructive techniques practiced by skeptical scholars have an accuracy record near zero when applied to contemporary documents where the results can be checked ("Modern Theology" 159-61). I would argue, much as Lewis did, that Jesus' contemporaries, who were or had access to eye witnesses, are in a better position to know what he said than modern experts trying to reconstruct the documents according to their own preconceived modernist philosophies. For anyone who looks at the critical issues in that light, the initial premise of the Trilemma remains strong.

In summary, Lewis's Trilemma did not, in fact, "backfire" with the audience for whom it was intended, even if it doesn't work with negative historical critics, a "failure" that Lewis himself would have expected. Even a more sophisticated audience that objectively examined the data would have to admit that the complications raised by modern biblical criticism do not overturn the initial premise of the Trilemma. According to the *documents* (as opposed to tendentious theoretical interpretations and reconstructions of them), Jesus in fact claimed deity: he made the statements and performed the actions, and he meant what he said. This is confirmed by the reactions his contemporaries actually had to those words and deeds.

Anyone using the Trilemma today should be prepared to make the case that Jesus actually made the claims whenever it is needed. The wise apologist will not simply repeat Lewis's paragraph from *Mere Christianity*, but rather adapt it to his own audience. This will involve notations such as "Here be prepared to insert 'Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,' along with further updated arguments." Unlike his critics, we should look to Lewis's other books and essays as evidence for how he himself would have used the argument from *Mere Christianity* in different contexts, and then follow suit ourselves.

THE CRITIQUE: MISTAKEN IDENTITIES?

The second major attempt to show that Lewis failed to cover his bases involves, amazingly, the denial that only an insane person could sincerely but mistakenly believe himself to be God, or that such a mistake would automatically disqualify him as a great moral teacher. McGrath thinks that "The option that Jesus was someone who was not mad or bad, but was nevertheless *wrong* about his identity, needs to be considered as a serious alternative" (227). Along that line Beversluis originally asserted that "We could simply suppose that although [Jesus] sincerely believed he was God, he was mistaken" (1985, 55): not lying or insane, just mistaken. He elaborates, "If we deny that Jesus was God, we are not logically compelled to say that he was a lunatic; all we have to say is that his claim to be God was false. The term lunatic simply clouds the issue with emotional rhetoric" (1985, 55). In his second edition, he adds documentation from psychological studies of insanity to the effect that "delusional people are deluded about something . . . but they are rarely, if ever, deluded about everything" (2007, 126). Just because a person is deluded about who he is does not necessarily mean that he is deluded

about the content of his moral teachings. Beversluis concludes, “The sober answer to the question is No, this is not the kind of blunder that only a lunatic would make” (1985, 55).

Well, this assertion is generally correct; but surely its application to the specific case of Jesus would take some supporting. No doubt people may be sincerely mistaken about a lot of things, even having to do with their own identity, without being necessarily insane; and they can be insane without being wrong about morals. But make no mistake: We are being asked here to believe that a person could be mistaken about the claim that “Before Abraham was, *I Am*,” a person who was in a position to be familiar with the standard translation of the Tetragrammaton, the Old Testament name of God, and still be considered a sound thinker about morals (or anything else). Is this really credible? Marvin D. Hinten shows how such support might look. When he teaches *Mere Christianity*, he asks his class

if they believe angels really did appear to Joan of Arc to say she was God’s chosen instrument to save France. Half the class shake their heads no; the other (quicker-thinking) half simply sit and think it over, because they already see where it is going. None of them see Joan as insane or demonic, so if they apply Lewis’s line of reasoning they will have to admit God really did send angels to Joan, which they have no intention of admitting. I then bring Mohammed into the mix, a man who genuinely seems to have felt Gabriel appeared to him with teaching from God. We discuss ways in which a goodhearted person could be genuinely mistaken about their [*sic*] role in life: an *idée fixe*, a hallucination, etc.
(8)

Daniel Howard-Snyder has the most sustained and rigorous argument for the idea that Jesus could have been merely mistaken about being God. He admits that believing one is divine when one is not is believing something “importantly false,” but then claims that “Merely being wrong about something important, even something as important as whether one is divine, neither implies nor makes it likely that one is a lunatic, insane, deranged, or otherwise fit to be institutionalized” (463). To support this audacious claim he tries to imagine scenarios in which Jesus could have had what seemed to him adequate grounds for believing he was God, grounds that, while seemingly adequate, turned out to be fallible—grounds that could be accepted by someone who was not insane. Perhaps Satan could have given him the ability to perform miracles and duplicated in his mind the subjective experience of being divinity incarnate. Perhaps Jesus, convinced that he was the Messiah, found exegetical grounds in the Old Testament for believing that the Messiah was in some sense divine. (This would be plausible because in fact the early Christians did find such textual arguments for Christ’s divinity after the fact). For Howard-Snyder, these are “good but fallible grounds” that a person might have for believing in his own divinity (474). Jesus might have made such deductions in error, or applied them to himself in error, without being insane. Howard-Snyder does not claim that either scenario actually obtains, but simply that their possibility makes it impossible to dismiss the “sincerely mistaken but still sane” option; therefore the Mad, Bad, or God argument fails.

O. K., so the argument goes, you can be mistaken about your identity without being insane. Likewise, you can be mistaken about your identity without undermining your views of ethics. Lewis “apparently thought that if certain factual claims Jesus made about himself were false, a disastrous conclusion would follow about the truth, sanity, and reliability of his moral teachings. But why say that?” (Beversluis 1985, 55). Beversluis goes on to ask, “Did Lewis

think that if Jesus were not God, there would no longer be any reason for believing that love is preferable to hate, humility to arrogance, charity to vindictiveness, meekness to oppressiveness, fidelity to adultery, or truthfulness to deception?” (1985, 55). For Howard-Snyder, we are not in a position to say that the diabolic deception or exegetical misapplication scenarios “are significantly less likely or plausible than the God option” (478). So the Trilemma fails at every point by this view. You can in theory be mistaken about your identity without being insane *and* without having false views of ethics; therefore, Lewis has failed to eliminate the “Great Moral Teacher but not God” view of Jesus and hung his apologetic on a fallacious hook. “Contrary to what Lewis claims, we *can* deny that Jesus was God and say that he was a great moral teacher” (Beverluis 2007, 135).

MISTAKEN IDENTITIES? A RESPONSE

Let us begin by remembering the conclusion of Lewis’s Trilemma: that Jesus could not have been a great moral teacher but not God. The response of the critics is, well, why could he not have been just sincerely mistaken about God without being insane, or have been mentally imbalanced in some sense and still be a great moral teacher? So we need to be clear about what it would take to be a great moral teacher. I would suggest the following criteria: First, you have moral teachings that both resonate with humankind’s most basic instincts about right and wrong but also state them in ways both profound and challenging. Second, you have and live with admirable consistency before your followers a life that is in accordance with your own version of those teachings. Third, you must be sufficiently in touch with reality that your teachings have general credibility. Clearly, if Jesus had been lying about his claims, he would be disqualified by the second test; but few accuse him of that. More importantly for this discussion, a person who failed the third test would also have problems with the trustworthiness needed to fully inhabit the role, even if he were not morally culpable for them. This is where the rubber meets the road in evaluating the claim that Jesus could have been simply mistaken about his deity.

Most of Lewis’s critics succeed in undermining his argument only by use of a clever sleight of hand known as the fallacy of Equivocation. The argument most of them are critiquing is simply not the one that Lewis made. Most of the criticisms deal with the *general concept* of mistaken identity, whereas Lewis is dealing with a very *specific case* of it, the false claim *to be God*. As Horner rightly puts it, Beverluis’s representation of the case (if “certain factual claims Jesus made about himself were false”) is hardly adequate. “The factual claims in question are of cosmic, as well as supremely personal and existential, consequence” (77). Treating such vastly different cases of mistaken identity as equivalent is illogical at best and dishonest at worst. But Lewis’s critics have to do it in order to make their criticisms sound plausible. (Howard-Snyder does deal more directly with the specific claim to divinity, but does not take it with sufficient seriousness, as I will try to show.)

This weakness becomes very clear when we examine the examples Hinten uses to support the claim that mistaken identity does not necessarily entail insanity. Joan of Arc and Mohammed thought they had seen angels and had a special role in history as a result. One can just imagine that they could have been victims of some kind of hallucination or had some kind of experience that they misinterpreted, and that this could all have happened without compromising their general soundness of mind, or their views of ethics. But the problem is that such examples are simply not relevant to Lewis’s argument. Joan and Muhammed did not claim to be *God*. That is, they did not claim to have existed from eternity in a special relationship with God the

Father that made them Lord and gave them the authority to command the elements and forgive sins. They did not claim that they had a prior existence that was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent—all of which is implied in and entailed by the specific nature of Jesus' claims. They did not claim that he who had seen them had seen the Father. *They did not claim to be the Jahweh of the Patriarchs and Moses incarnate in human flesh!*

How is it possible to miss the profound difference between all other mistakes about one's own identity and this one? One who wrongly believes that he is Napoleon has only confused himself with another finite human being. (Even this would present problems for the claim to be a great moral teacher. As Horner correctly observes [77], having correct views on ethics is a necessary, but hardly a sufficient condition for being a great moral teacher.) As Kreeft notes, "A measure of your insanity is the size of the gap between what you think you are and what you really are" (see his discussion 59-63). Indeed. Chesterton makes a similar point: "Normally speaking, the greater a man is, the less likely he is to make the very greatest claim. Outside the unique case we are considering, the only kind of man who ever does make that kind of claim is a very small man: a secretive or self-centered monomaniac" (247).

Kreeft and Chesterton are right: To believe that one is Jahweh differs from all other such mistaken claims by an order of magnitude that is . . . well, infinite. It compounds a mistake of fact ("I am this finite created being, not that one") with an error in metaphysics ("I am not *a* finite being at all, but the Ground of all Being"). This is not, as Lewis's critics want to believe, merely a matter of degree. The gap between any creature and the Creator is a difference of kind.

One might object that while the difference between the Creator and the creature is a difference of kind, the *claim* itself does not so differ from other claims, since all delusions are ontologically false to the same degree, that is, completely. But even if we accept this analysis and agree that all false claims are equally incorrect, it does not follow that all such errors are equally serious, much less morally equivalent. Falsely claiming to be Napoleon, for example, does not make one guilty of blasphemy. Mistaking one creature for another is an error, conceivably innocent; mistaking a creature for the Creator is idolatry. The error attributed to Jesus would be of the latter variety, and surely not irrelevant to his status as a Great Moral Teacher—especially among first-century Jews! Anyone sincerely mistaken about being God would miss our third criterion for great moral teacher, being clearly out of touch with reality. Any first-century Jew so mistaken would run afoul of the second as well, being guilty of two of the most serious sins recognized by that society: blasphemy and idolatry.

To put it bluntly, therefore, Lewis's critics' ability to rebut his argument depends on their ability to substitute a different and inferior argument while no one is looking and get away with it. When, like Lewis, we remember the radical nature of what Jesus actually claimed, and compare it with the ridiculously inadequate examples urged against the Trilemma, the attempts to evade its force become laughably absurd.

An equal lack of attention to what Lewis actually said appears in the attempt to evade his claims about the implications of the relationship between Christ's person and his teaching. Beversluis asks, "Did Lewis think that if Jesus were not God, there would no longer be any reason for believing that love is preferable to hate, humility to arrogance, charity to vindictiveness, meekness to oppressiveness, fidelity to adultery, or truthfulness to deception?" (1985, 55). But Lewis was not evaluating the moral truth of Jesus' teaching; he was examining the claims of the *Teacher*. His whole argument presupposes the self-evident truth of the teachings (cf. *Mere Christianity* 137), which is part of the evidence to be considered in evaluating the sanity of the Teacher. What is under scrutiny is the claims of the Teacher. Lewis

is not saying that, if he were insane enough to wrongly think he was the omnipotent God, Jesus' moral teaching would be refuted. He is saying that the self-evident truth of those teachings and their widely acknowledged superiority to all other attempts to state the same ideals refutes, i.e., is incompatible with, the notion that their source was a blatant liar or a megalomaniac. Nothing that his critics have said makes those propositions any more consistent than they ever were before. Beversluis's question is simply beside the point.

Howard-Snyder is an exception to my dismissal of the attempts above to show that mistaken identity does not entail insanity because he does try to deal with the specific case of mistakenly believing that one is God. Yet in reading his argument I cannot escape the impression that, having used the word "God" in one sentence, he immediately forgets in the next sentence what that word means. How else could anyone write with a straight face a sentence like this? "Merely being wrong about something important, even something as important as whether one is divine, neither implies nor makes it likely that one is a lunatic, insane, deranged, or otherwise fit to be institutionalized" (463). It is not so much the "importance" as the *nature* of the claim to divinity that calls into question the sanity of any mere mortal who makes it, and guarantees the insanity of anyone who makes it falsely. Indeed, some of Jesus' opponents, and for a while even members of his own family, questioned his sanity—not surprisingly. They had not evacuated the word *God* of its meaning, or the concept of God of its transcendence. Howard-Snyder rhetorically softens the nature of the claim even with his diction: the abstraction to be "divine" rather than what is at issue, the concrete and personal claim to be *God*. I repeat: it is the claim to have existed from eternity in a special relationship with God the Father that made a person Lord and gave him the authority to command the elements and forgive sins. It is the claim that he had a prior existence that was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. It is the claim that he who had seen this one had seen the Father. It was, particularly for Jesus, the claim to be *the Jahweh of the Patriarchs and Moses incarnate in human flesh*.

Howard-Snyder also confuses the issue by introducing the word *institutionalized*. The Trilemma does not require that a Jesus falsely claiming divinity would qualify for any specific modern diagnosis of a pathology justifying institutionalization; it only requires that he be unbalanced enough to be out of touch with reality and thus disqualified as a great moral teacher. Surely megalomania would suffice as such a disqualification? And surely the false claim to be God, made sincerely, would count as megalomania? If not, perhaps our requirements for "great moral teacher" have receded as far as our concept of what it takes to be God!

If we remember what it means to be God, then, we must agree with Stephen T. Davis that we are "not prepared to allow that anybody other than God ever has sufficient reason to consider himself divine" (491). Howard-Snyder's attempts to imagine scenarios in which a sane person could be falsely persuaded that he is God fail at two points. First, they again have forgotten the full meaning of what it would have meant for a devout first-century Jew to think he was God. Howard-Snyder realizes correctly that it would not be enough for Satan to grant the power to do miracles, because prophets were believed to have performed miracles. So he has to have Satan reconstruct for Jesus the subjective experience of being God incarnate. The problem with this is that no one who has not been God incarnate could possibly know what that experience is. Hence, we have to ask, how would falsely assuming that one is having it not be megalomania? Having Jesus conclude his divinity through faulty exegesis of the Hebrew Bible runs up against the same problem. Surely a *sane* person who understands the concept of God would conclude of any text that persuaded him that he was, contrary to all his experience, immortal, omniscient, and omnipotent, that there was a problem either with the text or with his reading of it.

The second problem with Howard-Snyder's scenarios is that, to establish the reasonableness of the sincerely-mistaken option, they would have to establish it, not for just any imaginable abstract figure, but for *Jesus*. Howard-Snyder lays down two ground rules at the outset: we must not treat the historical accounts as inspired Scripture, and we must not import into the discussion any independent evidence for Jesus' divinity, such as his miracles, teaching, or resurrection, etc. (458). Many apologists are prepared to accept the first condition for the sake of argument; few are prepared to accept the second. There is a good reason for this refusal. The purpose of the Trilemma is not just to establish some abstract truth but to facilitate an encounter with Christ by clarifying the options of how we can understand *him*. And so the question is, for example, not whether Satan could persuade some abstract random person that he was divine, but whether it makes sense to say that he could so have persuaded *Jesus*. Does *Jesus* strike us as a person who had been so deluded, as a person under Satanic influence? Interestingly, Jesus had his own answer to that scenario: if he did his great works by the power of Satan, then that would mean that Satan was fighting against his own kingdom, since Jesus' works were clearly works of mercy and goodness (Mat. 12:25-28).

In summary, the attempts to show that the Trilemma omits valid but unconsidered options all fail. In order to reject Lewis's argument, you have to be prepared to affirm that a person in his right mind can sincerely but mistakenly believe, not simply that he has been visited by an angel, but that he is Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, and still retain any credibility on anything else he might say. Since very few people in their right minds are prepared to accept that conclusion, most of Lewis's critics are forced to try to undermine his argument by sneakily substituting a straw man for it. Refuting that weak substitution, they then pretend to have refuted the Trilemma. But no reader who is actually paying attention should fall for this shell game—for that is what it essentially is. Howard-Snyder's attempt to support the sincerely mistaken option must be taken more seriously, for it does attempt to deal with the claim to be God rather than merely with the concept of mistaken identity in general. But it also fails by omitting to keep the full concept of deity in the forefront of our minds throughout the discussion.

DIMINISHING PROBABILITIES?

Another attempt to find problems with the Trilemma does not attack its individual propositions but accepts for the sake of argument that they are each probably true. The problem is that when there are many such propositions, even if each is probably true, when the probabilities are multiplied together, the probability of the whole is significantly weakened. For example, if you have four propositions that are each probably true with a probability of .85, the probability of all four being true together is only .522—even odds, hardly a compelling case.

In the case of the Trilemma as Howard-Snyder analyzes it, you have to affirm that Jesus claimed to be God, that he was not lying, that he was not insane, and that he was not merely mistaken without being insane. If all four of these propositions are true, then it follows with deductive validity that he was telling the truth and was God. But all four are historical propositions, therefore only probably true because historical investigation cannot yield mathematical certainty. And all four, especially the first, are contested. Howard-Snyder gives what he considers charitable and generous ranges of probability to each proposition, ranging from .7-.9 for the claim to divinity to .85-.95 for the others, and ends with a range of only .43-.77 for the whole. Therefore, he concludes, we should “profess ignorance and suspend judgment

about the matter” rather than claiming that the Trilemma shows it to be rational to believe in Jesus’ divinity (462).

There are a number of ways in which we could respond to this case. We could argue for higher values for the probabilities; but skeptics would have their own arguments for why they should be lower, and we would really be arguing the case for the truth of each proposition, which we are going to have to do anyway. Nevertheless, we have already argued that it is not necessary to follow Howard-Snyder’s rule about excluding evidence for the deity of Christ from outside the Trilemma itself. A person who looked at these four propositions in the light of the evidence for the resurrection set forth in a book like Morison’s *Who Moved the Stone?* and in the light of the fulfillment of prophecy, etc., might well come up with high enough values that the final result would still be quite believable. Howard-Snyder’s “range” (.43-.77) is simply a recognition that people come to different conclusions. One who thought with good reason that the actual probability was .77 (or higher) would hardly be required to suspend judgment simply because people who think it is .43 exist. Still, whatever values we assign must be less than absolute certainty. So far, therefore, the diminishing probabilities argument at worst can only qualify our confidence in the conclusion of the Trilemma; it does not overturn it.

I think the analysis I just gave is correct; but I also think that there is a deeper problem with the probability argument. It is easy to forget that in the Trilemma we are not simply debating various abstract propositions but ultimately dealing with our response to a person. The purpose of the argument is to enable us more intelligently to answer the basic question Jesus puts to us: “Who do you say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Mat. 16:13-18; see Brazier 103-6). Even Howard-Snyder admits that the Trilemma is deductively valid; his problem is the extent to which we can have confidence in the individual propositions (457). But the bottom-line question is whether I trust this Person that the historical accounts and the preaching of the Gospel present to me—even when He makes the most audacious claims. And one does not decide to trust another person simply by juggling a probabilistic calculus, but by responding to the gestalt of his total personality. Of course, one is justified in doing so only as long as the propositions of the formal argument are believable both individually and together. If they were not, the gestalt would not matter; if they were not, it would be a sign that the gestalt was leading you astray. But one does not decide to trust a person on the basis of propositions and their logical relationships alone.

In making this judgment in Jesus’ case, we gain clarity by using the Trilemma: by asking, “Is he lying? Is he crazy? Could he be just simply mistaken about *this* claim?” The Christian hopes that the response will be, “In *his* case—no, I don’t think so,” and that the Trilemma will then help to guide the seeker toward the logical response of faith: “He is telling the truth.” It will not be the Trilemma alone which generates this response, but rather the totality of Christ’s person as revealed by the Gospel (aided and brought into focus by the Trilemma and its validity) and brought home to the seeker by the Holy Spirit. Nothing less has ever produced that response or ever will. I think Lewis understood this truth, for at the end of his presentation in *Mere Christianity* he hopes that his elimination of the great moral teacher copout will push us back to Christ himself: “*He* has not left that open to us. *He* did not intend to” (56, emphasis added).

The diminishing probability argument then is not as impressive as it first seems, and is ultimately irrelevant to the way the Trilemma actually works.

A similar attempt to weaken the apparent force of the Trilemma is the “Extraordinary Claims” argument: According to this argument, an extraordinary claim (like the resurrection or deity of the man Jesus) requires extraordinary support. Historical arguments, by their nature never more than probabilistic, are inherently incapable of providing such support. Therefore

such claims cannot be supported by apologetic argument and must be believed if at all by sheer blind faith.

The problem with the argument from extraordinary claims is that it cuts both ways. Is the notion that this vast, intricate, mathematically rational and fine-tuned universe just randomly popped into existence out of nothing and then proceeded to organize itself by pure chance into DNA, etc., not an extraordinary claim? Is the notion that the Disciples were all transformed from clueless cowards to men who turned the world upside down by a contention they knew to be false not an extraordinary claim? Is the notion that a merely human person can believe himself to be the omnipotent, eternal Creator of the universe and not be insane not an extraordinary claim? Surely they are. So if, when you think it through, you can avoid one extraordinary claim only by affirming another set of them, equally extraordinary, we must realize that the argument from extraordinary claims takes us nowhere and should therefore be abandoned. We simply have to make the best judgment we can on the evidence we have, however “extraordinary” the conclusion may seem to some to be.

CONCLUSION

How then do we evaluate the Trilemma as an apologetic argument? Brazier asks whether it is a failure and concludes, “No, because it generated speculation, got people talking” (186). It has certainly done at least that! And it has done much more as well.

In conclusion, Lewis’s Trilemma is still a strong argument and can be used with confidence if we allow it to be nuanced and strengthened by its context in Lewis’s body of writings as a whole and if we understand its proper role in clarifying the options. It is unfair to take a paragraph aimed at a lay audience and complain that it is inadequate to deal with people who have a more sophisticated set of issues. Of course the classic passage from *Mere Christianity* needs to be supplemented when used with more sophisticated audiences, by Lewis’s other writings and by information and arguments that have come to light since he wrote. But the basic argument is sound. It is one thing to claim that it commits the fallacy of False Dilemma; it is quite another to show that other credible and valid options actually exist. Lewis’s critics have simply failed to do that. The argument as presented by Lewis does not purport to prove the deity of Christ by itself, but it supports it by analyzing the logical options available and pointing out the difficulty of seeing Jesus as a liar or a lunatic. Attempts to see him as a liar or a lunatic are tendentious and ignore the actual facts of his life, and attempts to find other options, such as a sane person sincerely mistaken about his deity, fail in the same way and fail doubly when we understand the real magnitude of the claim being made.

Second, Lewis’s position as the dean of Christian apologists remains unchallenged. He was not infallible, but neither was he guilty of writing something in the Trilemma that was “not top-flight thinking” (Hinten 8). His unique combination of wide learning, no-nonsense clarity, elegant language, and apt analogy remains as the standard to which we should all aspire and the example we should seek to emulate. When examined carefully, the Trilemma supports that conclusion; it is not an exception to it.

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord? Lacking, Ludicrous, or Logical? Plunk for Liar or Lunatic if you must. But let’s not come with any patronizing nonsense about how Lewis gave us a fallacious argument. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

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