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Book Review: God And The Reach Of Reason: C.S. Lewis, David Hume, And Bertrand Russell

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faith according to the dictates of reason. In promoting agreement about Christian fundamentals, and in emphasizing the voluntary nature of religious association, Locke was acting in the spirit and reflecting the ethos of the amicable and humane republic of letters. Like his fellow writers, Locke was aware of how previous arguments for toleration had been damaged by charges of Socinianism; and this awareness ensured his own discretion on the subject of the Trinity. And Locke's toleration was generally extended to Jews, to Roman Catholics, and to Muslims, although his approaches to each of these traditions were, according to Marshall, couched in characteristically careful language. Marshall supports the argument that, while Locke denied toleration to Catholics who honored papal political authority, he nevertheless accepted the private worship of Catholics in Protestant states who rejected such authority. And he similarly argues that, although Locke denied toleration, on the same grounds, to the Islamic followers of the Mufti of Constantinople, he otherwise favored the toleration of Islam. For these and other approaches to Locke's religion, Marshall's study will long be essential reading.

God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell, by Erik J. Wielenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. vii + 243. \$75.00 (hardback), \$21.99 (paper).

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C. S. Lewis wrote extensively on philosophical issues. In books such as *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *Miracles* (1947), and *Mere Christianity* (1952), Lewis wrote at length about the problem of evil, the existence of God, the objectivity of moral judgments, the credibility of miracles, naturalism vs. supernaturalism, and other classic philosophical problems. Lewis, of course, was not a professional philosopher, and his apologetical books were directed at a general audience rather than at regular readers of *Mind* or *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Nevertheless, it can be asked whether Lewis's philosophical writings are worthy of serious attention by professional philosophers.

Until very recently, the prevailing view has been that they are not. Lewis's writings were mostly ignored by professional philosophers until the late 1970s, when Christian philosophers such as Richard Purtill, Peter Kreeft, and Gilbert Meilaender began urging that they be taken seriously. In the mid-80s, John Beversluis's sharply critical book, *C. S. Lewis and the Rational Search for Religion* (Eerdmans, 1985; rev. edition, 2007), seemed to many to clinch the case for seeing Lewis as a philosophical lightweight.

Today, the tide has turned, and there are a slew of books that make the case for Lewis's merits as a philosopher. Among the most notable are: David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls, eds., *C. S. Lewis as*

Philosopher (IVP, 2008), Adam Barkman, *C. S. Lewis and Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Zossima Press, 2008), Gregory Bassham and Jerry L. Walls, eds., *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2005), and Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (IVP, 2003).

Erik Wielenberg's *God and the Reach of Reason* is a valuable addition to this genre. Wielenberg, an ethicist and philosopher of religion at DePauw University, is a clear-headed analytic philosopher who knows Lewis's works and the relevant secondary literature well. His previous book, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), offers a careful exploration of the possibility of a secular ethics. In this book, Wielenberg puts Lewis in conversation with two leading critics of Christianity, David Hume and Bertrand Russell. Lewis's views on the problem of evil, arguments for God's existence, and the credibility of miracles are carefully unpacked and juxtaposed with skeptical rejoinders from Hume and Russell. In the book's concluding chapter, surprising points of agreement between the three figures are explored. In the final analysis, Wielenberg concludes, Lewis's arguments for Christian belief are not successful. But they are a good deal stronger than Beversluis and other critics have claimed, and they are well worthy of attention from professional philosophers.

Wielenberg discusses in detail five major apologetical arguments offered by Lewis: his responses to the problem of evil, his three leading arguments for God's existence (the moral argument, the argument from reason, and the argument from desire), and his defense of miracles. For reasons of space, I shall focus on Wielenberg's discussion of two of these topics: the problem of evil and the argument from desire.

The Problem of Evil. Critics of theism, such as Hume and Russell, often argue that the facts of evil provide a strong reason to disbelieve in God. William Rowe's well-known argument that God would not permit gratuitous evil—roughly, evil that isn't necessary for some greater good—is a powerful formulation of this evidentialist argument from evil.

Theists have responded to arguments such as Rowe's in one of three ways: (1) by denying that humans have good reason for thinking that gratuitous evils exist (the cognitive limitation defense), (2) by proposing various greater goods that might justify God's permission of apparently gratuitous evils (the greater-good theodicy), and (3) by arguing that a perfect God might allow genuinely gratuitous evils to exist (the gratuitous evil theodicy).

Which strategy does Lewis adopt? Michael Peterson has recently argued that Lewis opts for the third strategy—conceding that genuinely gratuitous evils exist, but claiming that they are justified by the great good of fallen spirits achieving personal transformation and a salvific fruition through their own free choices in a challenging natural environment that is more or less closed to divine intervention or alteration.¹ Wielenberg, by

¹Michael L. Peterson, "C. S. Lewis on the Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 189.

contrast, argues that Lewis adopts the greater-good theodicy. On his reading, Lewis's main thrust is to show how God uses pain and other apparent evils for good ends, such as to punish us for our sins and to improve us by, for example, getting us to recognize our moral shortcomings and discouraging us from making ourselves too much at home in this passing world. In sum, Lewis claims that all the evil and suffering in this life will be justified by the final end of creation: the transcendent good of a heavenly society of beatified souls who have achieved this end through an arduous process of freely given love.

Is Lewis's greater-good theodicy successful? Wielenberg finds much of it plausible, but notes one significant problem: its failure to deal convincingly with horrendous suffering by young children due to natural evils such as birth defects or natural disasters. Since such suffering can't plausibly be seen as either punitive or improving, why does God permit it? Is it because such suffering is outweighed by the great good of the final heavenly consummation? Wielenberg takes this to be Lewis's answer, but finds it unconvincing. Like Dostoevsky, Wielenberg believes that no culminating good, however great, could justify certain kinds of child suffering (p. 51).

What Wielenberg overlooks is that Lewis *combines* a greater-good theodicy with a cognitive limitation defense. For instance, in discussing animal pain, Lewis explicitly recognizes how little we can know about animal consciousness and animals' divinely intended role in this life and (possibly) the next. I think Lewis would say much the same about non-victim-improving child suffering. As Richard Purtill has noted, in the years following the publication of *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis expressed regret that he had not said more in that book about how even seemingly gratuitous suffering might mysteriously play a role in God's redemptive plans.² At the conclusion of *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis is careful to stress that "*in some degree*" God has given us data that enable us to understand our own suffering.³ Thus, he does not offer a full-fledged greater-good theodicy, but recognizes human cognitive limitations in grappling with the problem of evil.

The Argument from Desire. Lewis's argument from desire (or argument from "Joy") is a modified version of a stock medieval argument for life after death (see, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, Chap. 48, para. 11). Medieval versions of the argument centered on humans' "natural" desire for eternal happiness, a desire that, since "nature does nothing in vain," must be fulfillable in another life. Lewis's argument, by contrast, centers on a rare and fleeting bittersweet longing ("Joy") that points, he claims, to a transcendent reality and ultimate source of happiness.

²Richard Purtill, *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 56 [quoting *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), p. 234.].

³C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 133. Emphasis added.

Lewis gives slightly different versions of the argument in *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy*, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and *The Weight of Glory*. Nowhere, however, is the argument stated in detail, and commentators have disagreed about how it should be construed. Wielenberg helpfully formulates the argument as follows:

1. All normal human beings have an innate, natural desire (Joy) that is for some thing x, where x lies beyond the natural world.
2. Every desire that is innate and natural to all normal human beings can be satisfied.
3. So: Joy can be satisfied (from 1 and 2).
4. If Joy can be satisfied, then there is something that lies beyond the natural world.
5. Therefore, there is something that lies beyond the natural world. (p. 110)

Thus formulated, the argument is deductive (and valid). As Wielenberg correctly notes, however, Lewis argues inductively for the first two premises. In defense of (1), Lewis argues that Joy cannot be a desire for any natural object, because no natural object *in his experience* (or that of others as far as he knows) can satisfy it. He argues for (2) by inductive generalization, claiming that all innate natural desires can be satisfied from the fact that paradigmatically innate natural desires such as our desires for food, sex, and sleep can be satisfied.

John Beversluis has argued that Joy, in Lewis's sense, is not a *natural* desire, since many people, particularly in non-Western cultures, have never experienced it. Nor, Beversluis claims, is Joy properly described as a *desire*. (It's not so much a wish or a desire as it is a sudden undirected emotion or feeling, a rush of adrenaline or "flutter in the diaphragm," Beversluis thinks.) Wielenberg agrees that Lewis's argument from desire is flawed, but finds fault with it on other grounds.

Wielenberg notes that Lewis's argument turns on an analogy between the types of instinctive biological desires he cites (desires for food, sex, drink, etc.) and the metaphysical desire he calls Joy. But this analogy is weak, he argues, because Joy falls not only in the category of "natural desires," but also into the category of "human desires for things that are not part of the known natural universe" (p. 113). For Lewis's argument to succeed, he must show that all or most desires in this second category have objects that can satisfy them. And this cannot be done, Wielenberg claims, because it is clear that the vast majority of desires of this sort involve objects (e.g., Apollo or the Elysian Fields) that do not exist.

This is a sound criticism, and it can be pressed further. Along similar lines, we might distinguish between instinctive biological desires and what we might call natural fantasies—wishful desires that, while not necessarily innate, are so common or arise so spontaneously in normal human beings as to be endemic in our species. Examples of such natural fantasies might include desires to fly or possess magical abilities, to travel

to distant worlds, to commune with animals or nonhuman beings, and so forth. All of these can fairly be described as “natural” desires, shared by all or nearly all normal human beings. So, too, is the natural fantasy to live forever and achieve ultimate happiness in union with the *summum bonum*, God. But there is no reason to think that all or even most natural fantasies have objects that can satisfy them. Why, then, unless there is something compellingly different about it, should we think that our wishful desire to achieve infinite happiness with God has an object that can satisfy it?

Is Lewis’s argument from desire thus of no evidential value? By no means. For the convinced theist, one who reasonably believes *on other grounds* that God is loving and faithful, the experience of Joy, and more generally the desire for eternal happiness and union with God, can indeed provide support for belief in life after death. As Aquinas argues, it does seem that *if* there is a loving, all-perfect being God, he would not frustrate our deep human longing for what the Cambridge Platonist John Smith called “a blissful fruition of himself.” What this means is that Lewis’s argument must be seen—as it was almost certainly intended—as part of a cumulative case for the Christian faith.

Wielenberg’s *God and the Reach of Reason* offers an admiring yet critical appraisal of Lewis’s principal arguments for Christian belief. It is must reading for Lewis fans who value—as Lewis himself pre-eminently did—clear prose and rigorous logic.

The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd, by Matthew Bagger. Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. 152. \$36.50 (cloth)

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In *The Uses of Paradox*, Matthew Bagger examines the status of paradox in various religious and philosophical texts, concentrating especially on Pseudo-Dionysius and Søren Kierkegaard, but giving attention to Chuang-Tzu, Nāgārjuna, and Pyrrhonian sceptics as well. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory in psychology, Bagger notes that most people who have grounds to accept contradictory beliefs are motivated to avoid self-contradiction either by demonstrating that despite initial appearances the beliefs are in fact compatible or by rejecting one or more of the beliefs. What is of interest to him, however, is that despite this psychological tendency to eliminate contradiction, a number of religious and philosophical authors esteem paradox and, in doing so, actively embrace the dissonance of contradiction.

The principal argument of *Uses of Paradox* concerns cases in which individuals embrace paradox. The heart of the book, in the second and third chapters, advances two principal claims. First, Bagger wants to say that when a religious person embraces paradox, he or she typically puts