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Book Review: C.S. Lewis As Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, And Beauty

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C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty, ed. David J. Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008. 268 pp. \$23 (paper).

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Someone at my college recently asked me whether C. S. Lewis should be considered a philosopher. The new volume *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* contains fifteen essays that support the claim that Lewis does merit the title. Most of the essays were first presented as papers at the 2005 C. S. Lewis Summer Institute at Oxford and Cambridge. Some articles offer commentary or expansions on Lewis's views. Others show the continued relevance of Lewis's arguments for our time. Still others use Lewis's ideas as a starting-point for reasoning about things Lewis himself did not touch on. A small number of them take issue with Lewis's views, and a larger number attempt to defend Lewis from his critics, especially John Beversluis.

In his Introduction, Jerry Walls makes the case that Lewis was a philosopher. Lewis held an Oxford degree in Philosophy; his first teaching position was as lecturer in Philosophy; and perhaps most importantly, Lewis was engaged by philosophers of such stature as G. E. M. Anscombe and Antony Flew in his lifetime, and he continues to be engaged by others forty-five years after his death. Taken as a whole, Lewis's work contains real contributions to philosophy in his time that continue to merit our attention.

On the other hand, the title suggests that the view that Lewis was a philosopher is not widely held. After all, no one has to write a book called *Aristotle as Philosopher* or *Quine as Philosopher*. As Walls points out, one of Lewis's friends once said that if one were to make a list of the most important Oxford philosophers, Lewis wouldn't make the list. In the second chapter of this book, Flew denies that Lewis was a philosopher at all.

But why not? What is it that makes one a philosopher? Rigor of argument? Correct use of technical jargon and familiarity with current literature? Attention to the history of philosophy? To varying degrees, these essays make the case that Lewis had all of these qualities.

Throughout the book we are reminded that Lewis held that the human mind is capable of significant comprehension of real truth, goodness, and beauty. These three transcendentals named in the subtitle also describe the organization of the book. The first section of the book loosely concerns truth, more specifically Lewis's belief in the importance of not giving up on seeking truth.

The opening essay, by Peter Kreeft, offers an overview of Lewis's thinking about truth, goodness, and beauty. Kreeft asks, "How many writers tell us more than Lewis about all three things, the only things we need to know?" (p. 26). Kreeft's essay is a celebration of Lewis and a reminder of how easy it is to forget the most important things.

The second chapter is a transcript of an interview with Antony Flew, conducted by Gary Habermas. It chiefly concerns Flew's memories of Lewis and Flew's recent shift to theism. Flew says that Lewis was a "first-rate thinker" but not a philosopher. Curiously, a little later, Flew refers to St. Paul as a "first-rate philosopher, a first-rate thinker," (p. 44) but Flew never explains what he means by these epithets.

Victor Reppert's article "Defending the Dangerous Idea: An Update on Lewis's Argument from Reason" responds to critics of his book, in which he attempted to reformulate and advance Lewis's argument against naturalism that Anscombe found lacking.

In chapter 4, David Horner provides a *very* helpful overview of the trilemma argument, a summary of the case against it, and a nice defense of it against one of its chief critics. Especially worthwhile is Horner's clearly written account of what makes a Great Moral Teacher (GMT) and, with it, his case for regarding Jesus as both a GMT and divine.

Jean Bethke Elshtain's piece is beautifully written and compelling. Inviting us to consider Lewis's prescience in *The Abolition of Man*, Elshtain argues that (a) a dogmatic belief in objective value is a safeguard against slavery and tyranny, (b) the alternative to such views is precisely the relativism—under the guise of science and civility and peace—that is being promulgated in so much contemporary education, and (c) human life as Lewis saw it is not so much a problem to be surmounted as a reality to be embraced and lived as a gift. The upshot is a defense of humanity broadly defined, over against what Elshtain perceives as successive narrowings of the definition of humanity.

The articles in the second section deal with goodness. All of them agree that Lewis's view is that the goodness of God is neither in question nor unintelligible. The question, then, is whether Lewis's position is coherent and tenable.

David Baggett defends Lewis against Beversluis's charge that Lewis was forced, after the death of his wife Joy, to abandon his belief in the goodness of God. Beversluis has argued that to be consistent, Lewis must have become an Ockhamist with regard to God's goodness. Baggett insists that this is a misconstrual of Lewis's real position, which is that though mourning may obscure God's goodness, God's goodness is nevertheless not arbitrary. Baggett's essay provides an interesting approach to the Euthyphro dilemma through the combined lenses of Lewis's life and writings.

Kevin Kinghorn tries to fill in a perceived gap in Lewis's account of faith. Lewis spoke of people becoming or ceasing to become Christians, as though those were long processes that admitted of gradations of faith. But Lewis never gave an adequate account of what faith is, so Kinghorn speculates about what Lewis's account of faith might have been. His conclusion: faith "involves becoming the kind of person who [would] plead the cross of Christ once the truth about Christ became known" (p. 142). So faith cannot be mere intellectual assent to true propositions about God. David Rozema's subsequent essay approaches belief from a different angle, one

that reads Lewis closely and critically. Rozema draws on Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein to remind us of what we already know: trust in someone reliable is itself a kind of evidence. Christian faith is not a blind leap, but it is trust in someone whom we have come to regard as deserving that trust.

Matthew Lee focuses on the problem of hell as a key component of the problem of evil. Is God a tormentor? If so, doesn't that mean God is not good? Lee argues that Lewis's belief in hell is consistent with his belief in the goodness of God, since Lewis holds that hell is not so much a place of torment designed by God as a state of willful self-torment out of which the damned refuse to be taken.

Michael Peterson's excellent article is the sort one wants to show to undergraduates as an example of clear thinking and good writing. Peterson begins with a masterful summary of the atheistic arguments from evil, focusing especially on the evidential argument from gratuitous evil. Peterson offers a fine account of the basic theistic defenses against this argument; generally they deny the factual premise that there is gratuitous evil. But this denial, Peterson claims, usually forces us to give a nod to some kind of moral agnosticism. Since Lewis refuses to make this gesture, he instead attacks the theological premise, arguing that our ignorance more chiefly concerns the way that omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence must interact. Ultimately, Peterson argues, Lewis held that the possibility of gratuitous evil is not only consistent with a good God, it is necessary in order for moral freedom to be non-trivial. By carefully attending to Lewis's argument, Peterson vividly illustrates the philosophical rigor and dimension of Lewis's thought and hints at the profundity of its roots in Anglican theology and ancient philosophical theology.

The third section of the book concerns Lewis's view of beauty. Interestingly, this book contains some very good writing, some of it quite beautiful. Maybe one of the chief philosophical virtues of Lewis is his (apparently contagious) clarity of thought and expression.

Philip Tallon observes that "Lewis's work is marked by a trust in the value of pursuing beauty in the philosophic enterprise" (p. 200). He argues, against Hick, that discussions of theodicy are strengthened, not weakened, by aesthetic considerations like the ones Lewis brings to his own writings on theodicy.

Russell Howell's contribution, "*Lewis's Miracles and Mathematical Elegance*," examines mathematical elegance as providing an argument that parallels Lewis's own defense of miracles against the challenge of naturalism. His point is that elegance, like other forms of beauty, is not a mere human convention but an example of transcendent signs in the world. Howell's chapter does not really need Lewis, and is really a defense of theism against naturalism, one that happens to be somewhat akin to Lewis's thinking.

Michael Muth's chapter, "*Beastly Metaphysics: The Beasts of Narnia and Lewis's Reclamation of Medieval Sacramental Metaphysics*" is, for my money, one of the best in the volume. Lewis, as a philosopher interested in the history of philosophy, was mostly concerned with medieval

and Renaissance philosophy. Sadly, this is the only chapter in the book that addresses this aspect of Lewis's thought. Thankfully, Muth does it excellently by examining Lewis's use of ancient and medieval bestiaries and connecting this with the Augustinian sacramental tradition in philosophical theology. A sacramental view, he argues, rescues individual creations from the ontological erasure that follows from so many other versions of metaphysics. Muth is not sanguine about the future of beauty in marketplace-driven academia, but Lewis's writing provides a hopeful—and beautiful—alternative to the current intellectual environment.

In the final chapter, Gregory Bassham, in his typically lucid style, makes a quick case for the importance of fantasy, not only for the imagination, but also for Christian philosophy. In a nutshell, Bassham argues for the important role fantastic literature plays in helping us to see familiar things from a new angle—which is, after all, one of the chief aims of philosophy.

I have two criticisms of this book. First, I found myself correcting the index quite a lot, penciling in important references that were omitted. Second, and more importantly, the book left me wanting more. Lewis devoted a good deal of his writing to arguing with philosophers like Spencer and Nietzsche. Other philosophers like Bergson and Bernardus Silvestris permeate Lewis's writing. Yet none of these figures is mentioned in the book. Even if Lewis wasn't a philosopher in some narrow sense, he constantly engaged figures like these from the history of philosophy, and surely that merits mention in a volume of this sort. Or perhaps it merits mention in a second volume. After all, taken together these essays make a solid case for considering Lewis a philosopher. If that is the case, then there may be a good deal more Lewisian philosophical writing to come.

This book should be on the shelf of every college library, and will make a helpful addition to classes on the philosophy of Lewis.

Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson. Indiana University Press, 2008. viii + 263 pp.

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The usual practice in philosophical discussions on love has been to begin with certain reflections or theories on love and then to apply these or test them against various domains such as politics and gender relations. This volume reverses this process by looking at how our very theoretical or reflective practices, philosophy and theology included, can be transformed by the discipline of love. The very etymology of 'philosophy,' in fact, presupposes that the attainment of wisdom requires the practice of love in some form. Philosophers, as the editors note in their Introduction, have tended to sever the connection between love and wisdom, seeing the former as an impediment to the attainment of the latter (love as a passion