



Apologetics: Learning from C. S. Lewis

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Clive Stapleton Lewis – ‘Jack’ to his friends – was born in the Irish city of Belfast on 29 November 1898. His father was a successful solicitor, who bought a large house (‘Little Lea’) on the outskirts of Belfast in 1905. Shortly afterwards, Lewis’ mother died, leaving his father to look after Lewis and his elder brother Warren. The two brothers spent hours alone in the vast attic of the old house, inhabiting imaginary worlds of their own making.

If Lewis ever had any Christian faith to start with, he soon lost it. After a period serving in the British Army during the First World War, Lewis went up to Oxford. He was a student at University College in the period 1919–23, taking first class honours in Greats (classics and philosophy) in 1922, and first class honours in English the following year. After a period during which his future seemed uncertain, he was elected a fellow of Magdalen College in the spring of 1925. He would remain at the college until 1954, when he was invited to take up the newly-created chair of medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge. The chair was linked with a fellowship at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Lewis died at his Oxford home at 5.30 p.m. on 22 November 1963, a few hours before

the world learned of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas.

As a young man, Lewis was an aggressive atheist. During the 1920s, however, Lewis had time to reconsider his attitude to Christianity. The story of his return to the faith he abandoned as a boy is described in great detail in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. After wrestling with the clues concerning God he found in human reason and experience, Lewis eventually decided that intellectual honesty compelled him to believe and trust in God. He did not want to; he felt, however, that he had no choice. The passage in *Surprised by Joy* describing this great moment of decision has become famous:

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

After his conversion, Lewis began to

establish his reputation as a leading authority on medieval and Renaissance English literature. *The Allegory of Love*, published in 1936, is still regarded as a masterpiece. Alongside his scholarly writings, however, Lewis wrote books of a very different nature. Aiming at clarity and conviction, Lewis produced a series of works aimed at communicating the reasonableness of Christianity to his own generation. The works brought him popular acclaim, but seemed to some at Oxford to compromise his scholarly reputation.

Lewis's first popular book was *The Pilgrim's Regress*, based loosely on John Bunyan's classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*, offering an allegorical account of Lewis's discovery of God. It was not a commercial success. Nevertheless, *The Problem of Pain*, which appeared in 1940, was well received. On the basis of its clarity and intelligence of argument, Lewis was invited to give a series of radio talks by the British Broadcasting Corporation, which raised his profile considerably. In 1942, Lewis published *The Screwtape Letters*, whose wit and insight firmly established Lewis's reputation as a leading defender of the Christian faith.

So what is the basis of Lewis's success as an apologist? And what can we learn from this? Lewis's intelligent and persuasive approach to Christianity is grounded in his core belief that Christianity makes sense of life. It commends itself by its reasonableness. Believing in God makes more sense, Lewis argued, than not believing in him. *Mere Christianity*, based on his wartime broadcasts at the BBC, is an outstanding example of a lucid and intelligent presentation of the rational and moral case for Christian belief.

For Lewis, Christianity offers a 'big picture' which weaves together the

strands of experience and observation into a compelling pattern. Perhaps this is approached is expressed most succinctly in a talk Lewis gave to the Socratic Club in Oxford: 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not just because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.' Yet although Lewis affirms the fundamental rationality of the Christian faith, he regularly appeals to the shared experience of ordinary people – such as a sense of moral obligation, or a feeling of longing for something that is deeply satisfying, yet is not delivered in or through anything that is finite or created. Perhaps this helps explain the success and long-term appeal of his best-known work of apologetics, *Mere Christianity*.

The first part of *Mere Christianity* is entitled 'Right and wrong as a clue to the meaning of the universe'. It is important to note this carefully chosen term clue. What Lewis is noting is that the world is emblazoned with such 'clues', none of which individually proves anything, but which taken together, give a cumulative case for believing in God. These 'clues' are the threads that make up the great pattern of the universe.

The book opens with an invitation to reflect on two people having an argument. Any attempt to determine who is right and who is wrong depends, Lewis argues, on recognition of a norm – of some standard which both parties to a dispute recognize as binding and authoritative. In a series of argumentative moves, Lewis argues that we are all aware of something 'higher' than us – an objective norm to which people appeal, and which they expect others to observe; a 'real law which we did not invent, and which we know we ought to obey'.

Yet although everyone knows about this law, everyone still fails to live up to it.

Lewis thus suggests that ‘the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in’ consists in our knowledge of a moral law, and an awareness of our failure to observe it. This awareness ought to ‘arouse our suspicions’ that there ‘is Something which is directing the universe, and which appears in me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong.’ Lewis suggests that this points to an ordering mind governing the universe – which chimes in with Christian idea of God.

The second line of argument in *Mere Christianity* concerns our experience of longing. We all long for something that we believe will finally satisfy us, only to find our hopes dashed and frustrated when we actually achieve or attain it. So how is this common human experience to be interpreted? Is it pointing beyond itself? Lewis argues that these earthly longings are ‘only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage’ of our true homeland. He develops an ‘argument from desire,’ suggesting that every natural desire has a corresponding object, and is satisfied only when this is attained or experienced. There is, Lewis suggested, a deep and intense feeling of longing within human beings, which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis terms this sense ‘joy’, and argues that it points to God as its source and goal (hence the title of his autobiography).

To understand Lewis at this point, the idea of ‘joy’ needs to be explained in a little more detail. From the windows of his childhood home in Belfast, the young Lewis could see the distant Castlereagh Hills. These far off hills seemed to hint at something that lay beyond his reach. A sense of intense longing arose as he contemplated them. He could not say exactly

what he longed for; merely that there was a sense of emptiness within him, which the mysterious hills seemed to heighten, without satisfying.

Lewis describes this experience (perhaps better known to students of German Romanticism as *Sehnsucht*) in some detail in his autobiography. He relates how, as a young child, he was standing by a flowering currant bush, when a potent memory was triggered off.

There suddenly rose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton’s ‘enormous bliss’ of Eden ... comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past. ... and before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had only taken a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.

Lewis here describes a brief moment of insight, a devastating moment of feeling caught up in something which goes far beyond the realms of everyday experience. But what did it mean? What, if anything, did it point to?

Lewis addressed this question in a remarkable sermon entitled ‘The Weight of Glory’, preached at Oxford in June 1941. Lewis spoke of ‘a desire which no

natural happiness will satisfy', or 'a desire, still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies'. There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied. Lewis illustrates this from the age-old quest for beauty.

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.

Human desire, the deep and bitter-sweet longing for something that will satisfy us, points beyond finite objects and finite persons towards their real goal and fulfilment in God himself.

A similar pattern is observed with human personal relationships. In love, perhaps the deepest human relationship of all, we encounter the strange longing to lose ourselves in another – to enter into a relationship which paradoxically simultaneously heightens and obliterates our own identity. Yet even love, which seems to offer all, delivers less than it seems to promise. Somehow in personal relationships there is to be found a bitter-sweet longing – something which *comes through* the relationship, but is not actually *in* that relationship. Lewis notes that pleasure, beauty, and personal relationships seem to pro-

mise so much, and yet when we grasp them, we find that what we were seeking was not located in them, but seems to lie beyond them. There is a 'divine dissatisfaction' within human experience, which prompts us to ask whether there is anything which may satisfy the human quest to fulfil the desires of the human heart.

Lewis argues that there is. Hunger, he suggests, is an excellent example of a human need of emptiness which corresponds to a real physical need. This corresponds to the existence of food by which this need may be met. Thirst is another example of a human longing pointing to a genuine human need, which in turn points to its fulfilment in drinking. Any human longing, Lewis argues, points to a genuine human need, which in turn points to a real object corresponding to that need. And so, Lewis suggests, it is reasonable to suggest that the deep human sense of infinite longing which cannot be satisfied by any physical or finite object or person must point to a real human need which can, in some way, be met. In other words, this sense of longing or desire corresponds to a real human need, and potentially to the fulfilment of that need. But how?

Lewis argues that this sense of longing points to its origin and its goal in God himself. God shoots 'arrows of joy' to awaken our sense of longing, and in doing so, helping us to realize who we really are and what we really need if we are to be truly fulfilled. In this, he echoes a great theme of traditional Christian thinking about the origin and goal of human nature. 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you' (Augustine of Hippo). We are made by God, and we experience a deep sense of

longing for him, which only he can satisfy. Although Lewis's reflections on the desire he calls 'joy' reflect his personal experience, it is evident that he considers that this sense of longing is a widespread feature of human nature and experience. Lewis does not fall into the trap of universalizing the particularities of his own experience; his wide reading of literature suggested that this was a recurring theme in human history and experience. An important point of contact for the proclamation of the gospel is thus established.

Lewis suggests that the pursuit of the clues offered by human desire only makes sense if there is a fourth dimension to human existence, served by the human imagination. The 'watchful dragon' of human reason is hesitant to allow us to speak of anything which goes beyond experience. In order to deal with this question, Lewis turns to Plato's famous analogy of the cave. Lewis transforms this familiar image into a persuasive and powerful tool for relating the world of ordinary human experience and the world that lies beyond it and through it – namely, the realm of God.

Plato's analogy invites us to think of a group of people who have been imprisoned in a dark underground cave all their lives. A fire is burning, and they see shadows thrown on to the wall of the cave. The cave is the only world they have ever experienced, and so they naturally assume that it is the real world. The shadows they see are all that there is to reality. Then one of the men escapes from the cave, and discovers the great world outside; he returns to tell the others, who cannot believe him. Can there really be another world, which transcends the one they know from experience?

Lewis develops this analogy in *The Silver Chair*, one of the *Chronicles of*

Narnia. In this book, A Narnian finds himself confronted by a witch in an underground kingdom. The witch attempts to persuade him that the underground kingdom is the real and only world. The Narnian is not impressed, and tries to persuade her to enlarge her mental horizons. His argument is telling.

Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one.

The argument here is a classic, having its origins in the Greek fathers, and finding its mature expression in Thomas Aquinas: if certain ideas in our minds cannot be accounted for on the basis of our experience of the world, they must be accounted for in terms of something beyond that world. The apparently 'real' world must be supplemented by another world, an 'imagined world' – not in the sense of an *invented* world, but a *real* world into which we must enter by our imagination.

Lewis's achievement here is to show that what we observe and experience 'fit in' with the idea of God. Lewis argues that the Christian faith interprets this profound and unsatisfied longing as a clue to the true goal of human nature. God is the ultimate end of the human soul, the sole source of human happiness and joy. Just as physical hunger points to a real human need which can be met through food, so this spiritual hunger corresponds to a real need which can be met through God. 'If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is

that I was made for another world'. Most people, Lewis argues, are aware of a deep sense of longing within them, which cannot be satisfied by anything transient or created. Like right and wrong, this sense of longing is thus a 'clue' to the meaning of the universe.

In both his arguments from morality and desire, Lewis appeals to the capacity of Christianity to 'fit in' what we observe and experience. This approach is integral to Lewis's approach to apologetics, precisely because Lewis himself found it so persuasive and helpful in making sense of things. The Christian faith provides a map that is found to fit in well with what we observe around us and experience within us, illuminating our landscape of experience. For Lewis, the kind of 'sense-making' offered by the Christian vision of reality is about discerning a resonance between the theory and the way the world seems to be. Though Lewis uses surprisingly few musical analogies in his published writings, his approach could be described as enabling the believer to hear the harmonics of the cosmos, and realize that it fits together *aesthetically* – even if there are a few logical loose ends that still need to be tied up.

So do Lewis's arguments, particularly in *Mere Christianity*, still work? Some, it must be said, are showing their age, especially when Lewis makes assumptions about the moral values of his age. Yet his approaches still work remarkably well, raising questions about the deeper meaning of life that continue to speak to many today. Both Lewis's 'argument from morality' and his 'argument from desire' continue to connect with many people's aspirations and longings, even if we might need to rephrase them and adapt their imagery to our own day and age. Lewis continues to evoke a sense of intri-

gue, interest, and even wistfulness on the part of many of his readers.

Perhaps one of the lessons that we can learn from Lewis is that apologetics is at its best when it makes people wish that Christianity were true – by showing them its power to excite the imagination, to make sense of things, and to bring stability, security and meaning to life. The final stage is to show people that it is true and trustworthy. Apologetics is not simply about trying to persuade people that Christianity is right; it is about showing that it is relevant and existentially meaningful, able to engage life's deepest questions and give rich and satisfying answers.

It's important to be able to defend our faith – but it is no less important to be able to show how it transforms our lives. As Lewis points out, there are two Greek words for life: *bios* and *zōē*. *Bios* is all about biological existence, surviving from one day to the next. But *zōē* is a life worth living, sustained by joy, hope, and meaning. Perhaps we can think of apologetics as inviting people to move beyond mere biological existence, and discover the rich world of divine truth, meaning, and beauty that lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

Alister McGrath recently retired as Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University. He is the author of two influential works on Lewis: *C. S. Lewis – A Life. Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet, and The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*. McGrath is also the lead presenter on *The C. S. Lewis Podcast*, hosted by Premier Christian Radio of London, which provides weekly reflections on Lewis: see <https://podcastaddict.com/podcast/3292449>.