

O N E

Taking C. S. Lewis Seriously

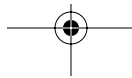
APOLOGETICS AND THE PERSONAL HERESY

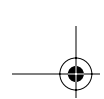
ONE OF THE FIRST PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS I ever encountered was C. S. Lewis's argument, found in his book *Miracles*, that naturalism is self-refuting because it is inconsistent with the validity of reasoning.¹ The argument fascinated me, and as a young Christian I never missed a chance to present it in discussions with skeptics. I later discovered that this argument was the subject of the famous controversy with Elizabeth Anscombe, in response to which Lewis revised his argument.² However, in my graduate studies in philosophy I discovered, with some exceptions, that the argument had received little attention even from Christian philosophers and was dismissed by many. As I analyzed the various ways in which the argument could be answered, the firmer the rock appeared on which it stood. And so when it came time to write my doctoral dissertation, I chose to defend this argument against naturalism. Even though my committee was solidly opposed to the conclusion of my argument, they nevertheless passed my dissertation.

I'm still persuaded that Lewis's argument is a good one, and this book is an attempt to show why I think this is so. Before launching into a full-dress discussion of this argument, I think some things need to be said about how Lewis's ideas ought to be adapted in the area of philosophical apologetics.

¹The most developed statement of the argument is found in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, 1978), pp. 12-24.

²G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), pp. 224-31.





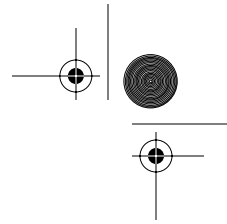
It seems to me that many discussions of Lewis's arguments treat these arguments as finished products, to be accepted or rejected as they stand. Many treatments of Lewis have been written from a friendly perspective to restate what Lewis has to say for a friendly audience.³ Others have written about Lewis from a fairly hostile perspective, pointing out, quite correctly, that a skeptical reader will hardly read what Lewis has written and simply change his or her mind.⁴ There are, of course, valid points to be made by the side opposing Lewis, but very often the hostile commentator makes these replies as if they were the last word on the subject, relegating Lewis's arguments to the outer darkness of fallacious arguments. Lewis was a thinker with what I believe to be outstanding philosophical instincts. And if he was in error in his thinking, there was usually a little more method in his madness than what would appear to someone who just gives a "refutation" to the error and leaves it at that. And this, I think, is the real test of a great thinker.

But while Lewis's arguments are suggestive, interesting and in my view often sound, he does not answer every question that a critic might ask, nor do we have from him a set of arguments sufficiently polished to persuade persons with technical training in philosophy or other disciplines. And it would be rather surprising if a popular apologist with philosophical training from the 1920s could do this for the benefit of people living in the 1940s, much less the early 2000s.

³Richard Purtill's *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) is an example of this kind of book.

⁴The only book-length critique of Lewis's apologetics that I know of is John Beversluis's *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), but there are shorter critiques of Lewis in various publications. Although Beversluis managed to upset many Lewis admirers with his criticisms, he did deal with the substance of Lewis's apologetics, sometimes using biographical material to support his points. Sometimes biographers such as A. N. Wilson and Humphrey Carpenter have offered critical assessments of the substance of Lewis's apologetic arguments with, to my mind, unimpressive results. These biographers frequently engage in ad hominem reasoning, drawing philosophical conclusions not from a real analysis of the relevant arguments, but from biographical hearsay and speculation.





Let me give an example from a philosopher with whom I disagree about nearly everything, David Hume, to help clarify what I am trying to say. It is easy to find mathematical and logical errors in Hume's famous "Of Miracles,"⁵ and Lewis is one of those who finds such errors in Hume.⁶ But it is not a complete response to Hume to point these out and leave it at that, because Hume raises important issues about the relation of antecedent probability to evidence for miracles that have to be dealt with by anyone who deals seriously with the credibility of miracles. Great thinkers are always the ones that make us think harder for ourselves, not thinkers who do our thinking for us. And the same is true for Lewis. If you think Lewis is mistaken, I believe that Lewis is a sufficiently great thinker that one must do more than point out errors on the surface. One must dig deeper, see how Lewis's thought might be developed, and try to show that no good arguments are forthcoming along those lines.

Perhaps Lewis's most famous argument is what is known as the Lewis trilemma. It is unreasonable, Lewis says, to say that Christ was a great moral teacher but not God, because he claimed, both implicitly and explicitly, to be God. If he wasn't God, he either had to be lying, which would make him wicked, or he had to be deluded, which would make him insane. Since these two alternatives are implausible, Lewis says that he must be telling the truth and really be God.⁷

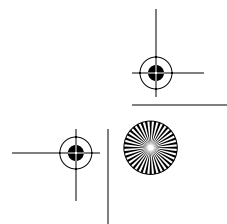
Many others have repeated this argument in their own apologetics.⁸ The argument makes four assumptions, however, and critics of the argument have challenged all these assumptions.

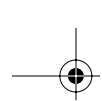
⁵David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (1902; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), see essay 10, "Of Miracles," pp. 109-31.

⁶Lewis, *Miracles*, chap. 13, "On Probability," pp. 100-107.

⁷C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, 1960), pp. 54-56.

⁸Notably Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972). Andrew Rilstone, objecting strongly to McDowell's appropriation of the argument, argues that the trilemma argument was intended as a wake-up call for those who take the claims of Christ too lightly and not as hard





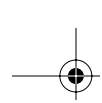
1. Jesus' claims in Scripture are best interpreted not merely as claims to be the Jews' Messiah but as claims to be God.
2. The Gospels are a reliable historical record of what Jesus said and did.
3. No sane person can form the false belief that he himself is God.
4. The claim "Jesus is God" is more antecedently probable than the admittedly improbable claim that Jesus was a great moral teacher and either a liar or a madman.

Lewis supplies some argumentation in defense of all of these claims in various parts of his writings, and it seems to me that there is a good deal to be said on both sides of each of these claims before a full assessment can be reached. If all these assumptions are defensible, then the argument is a good one. But rather than debating these assumptions, apologists have simply repeated the mantra "liar, lunatic or Lord," while opponents have cried in response "false dilemma." Neither of these responses, in my estimation, does justice to the complex issues the trilemma raises.

The trilemma, unfortunately, is not the subject I wish to discuss in this book; I mention it merely to show how Lewis can either be offered as a final answer or be offered as a spur to think the relevant issues through oneself. The way one honors Lewis's apologetic achievement, it seems to me, is not simply by repeating what he says, but by developing his ideas, asking probing questions of them and developing the discussion in ways that reflect one's own thinking as well as Lewis's. The result of such reflection on my part has persuaded me that, indeed, Christianity is credible for approximately the reasons that Lewis said it was. I believe that, to a large extent, not enough of this further reflection is present in the secondary Lewis lit-

proof that Christianity is true ("Fool, Charlatan or Evangelist? C. S. Lewis, Josh McDowell and the "Trilemma," The Life and Opinions of Andrew Rilstone, Gentleman, <<http://www.aslan.demon.co.uk/trilemma.htm>>).



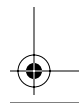
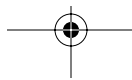


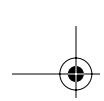
erature, and that is why I believe that despite Lewis's enormous popularity, subsequent apologists have underutilized the resources that he has provided for them.

Besides the tendency to let C. S. Lewis think for us, I must mention that another obstacle to the serious consideration of Lewis's arguments is just plain snobbery. I once presented a paper on the exchange between Lewis and Elizabeth Anscombe at a secular philosophy department where I was a visiting instructor. In that paper I argued (as I shall argue later in this book) that Lewis's argument against naturalism could surmount the challenges that Anscombe posed for it. Most of the faculty there told me that I had not persuaded them that Lewis's argument was a good one, but I had shown that Lewis had adequate responses available to him to meet Anscombe's challenge. One older professor of known positivist tendencies told me that I had written a good paper on reasons and causes, but the main problem with it was that I had chosen a "patsy" (Lewis) to devote my energies to. Never mind that I had (apparently) successfully defended Lewis against Anscombe, he was still a patsy and not worthy of serious discussion. It is sometimes presupposed by those who are familiar with the technical side of a discipline like philosophy that no one who is not similarly a "professional" has anything serious to say. But of course "professionalism" in philosophy is a rather recent development: the majority of those who have made significant contributions to philosophy over the past twenty-five centuries would not qualify as "professional" philosophers in the contemporary sense.

C. S. LEWIS AND THE "ANSCOMBE LEGEND"

A further factor inhibiting serious discussion of Lewis is that his career as an apologist is often assessed biographically, focusing on Lewis himself rather than what he had to say. So, for example, it is often suggested that Lewis was profoundly upset by his exchange





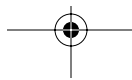
with Anscombe, and therefore he himself realized his apologetic arguments were inadequate. Analysts often arrive at this conclusion without considering the points at issue in the debate. Thus a kind of “Anscombe legend” has shrouded Lewis’s apologetic career, which in many minds seems to have outlived the actual arguments Lewis and Anscombe presented.⁹ The following passage, from Humphrey Carpenter’s *The Inklings*, is a case in point:

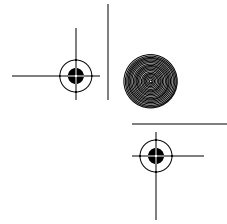
Miracles was published in 1947. Early the following year, its third chapter, in which Lewis proved that human Reason is independent of the natural world, was publicly attacked at the Socratic Club, not by an atheist, but by a fellow Christian, the Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. Lewis was unprepared for the severely critical analysis to which she submitted his arguments, for she proved in her turn that his “proof” was severely faulty. It is true that Lewis’s most fervent supporters felt that she had not demonstrated her point successfully, but many who were at the meeting thought that a conclusive blow had been struck against one of his most fundamental arguments. Certainly after it was all over Lewis himself was in very low spirits. . . .

Lewis had learnt his lesson: for after this he wrote no further books of Christian apologetics for ten years, apart from a collection of sermons; and when he did publish another apologetic work, *Reflections on the Psalms*, it was notably quieter in tone and did not attempt any further intellectual proofs of theism or Christianity. Though he continued to believe in the importance of Reason in relation to his Christian faith, he had perhaps realized the truth of Charles Williams’ maxim, “No one can possibly do more than decide what to believe.”¹⁰

⁹My use of the term “Anscombe legend” is based on a comment by J. R. Lucas, who wrote, “The received version should be treated with some caution: Professor Mitchell, who attended all the meetings of the Socratic Club at that time, has no memory of the encounter. Oxford legends often owe more to the attitudes of those who report them than to the facts which allegedly they report” (J. R. Lucas, “The Restoration of Man: A Lecture Given in Durham on Thursday, October 22, 1992,” J. R. Lucas Home Page, <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~jrlucas/lewis.html>>).

¹⁰Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1978), pp. 238-39.





Now it is important to see what is missing in this discussion: any treatment of what the arguments of Lewis and Anscombe actually were. Apparently Carpenter thinks he can draw the conclusion that Anscombe had shown Lewis's argument to be "severely faulty" without analyzing the arguments themselves, simply based on biographical considerations. Nor is it indicated here that Lewis revised the argument in the 1960 Fontana edition to meet Anscombe's objections. In A. N. Wilson's biography, the Anscombe legend is pushed to extreme lengths: the incident's psychological impact explains Lewis's "retreat" into children's fantasy (Narnia), the fact that a female witch offers skeptical arguments in *The Silver Chair* that nearly beguile the protagonists of that story, and the fact that Lewis enjoyed corresponding with American women (including Joy Davidman).¹¹

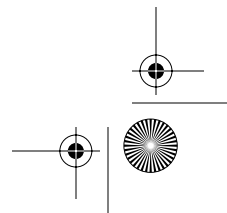
John Beversluis, in his book *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* and in his essay for *Christian History* entitled "Beyond the Double-Bolted Door,"¹² also makes a good deal of the psychological impact of the Anscombe incident and so uses the Anscombe legend to support his claim that Lewis's apologetics are woefully inadequate from a philosophical perspective. But he also argues in favor of the claim that "the arguments that Anscombe presented can be pressed further, and Lewis's revised argument does nothing to meet them,"¹³ and he does analyze the actual arguments. Very much to his credit, however, in his subsequent review of Wilson's book, he abandons the Anscombe legend entirely:

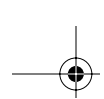
First, the Anscombe debate was by no means Lewis's first exposure to a professional philosopher: he lived among them all his adult life, read the Greats, and even taught philosophy. Second, it is simply un-

¹¹A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

¹²John Beversluis, "Beyond the Double-Bolted Door," *Christian History* 4, no. 3 (1985): 28-31.

¹³Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search*, p. 73.





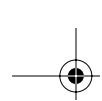
true that the post-Anscombe Lewis abandoned Christian apologetics. In 1960 he published a second edition of *Miracles* in which he revised the third chapter and thereby replied to Anscombe. Third, most printed discussions of the debate, mine included, fail to mention that Anscombe herself complimented Lewis's revised argument on the grounds that it is deeper and far more serious than the original version. Finally, the myth that Lewis abandoned Christian apologetics overlooks several post-Anscombe articles, among them "Is Theism Important?" (1952)—a discussion of Christianity and theism which touches on philosophical proofs for God's existence—and "On Obstinacy of Belief"—in which Lewis defends the rationality of belief in God in the face of apparently contrary evidence (*the* issue in philosophical theology during the late 1950s and early 60s). It is rhetorically effective to announce that the post-Anscombe Lewis wrote no further books on Christian apologetics, but it is pure fiction. Even if it were true, what would this Argument from Abandoned Subjects prove? He wrote no further books on *Paradise Lost* or courtly love either.¹⁴

Anscombe herself does not recall any devastating encounter and attributes the adverse reaction of some of Lewis's friends in terms of the phenomenon of projection.¹⁵ Anyone who has presented papers at philosophy conferences knows that the process of criticism and revision is just how things get done in that discipline. At such meetings, typically a presenter presents a paper, and a commentator offers a critical response. Sometimes the critical response is completely devastating to the arguments of the presenter. But more frequently the commentator finds difficulties with the paper that force the presenter to revise and strengthen his arguments. And this seems to have been exactly what happened in the Lewis-Anscombe controversy.

¹⁴John Beversluis, "Surprised by Freud: A Critical Appraisal of A. N. Wilson's Biography of C. S. Lewis," *Christianity and Literature* 41, no. 2 (1992): 179-95.

¹⁵Anscombe, *Metaphysics*, p. 10.





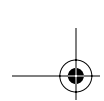
DID LEWIS DROP OUT OF THE GAME?

I do believe that Lewis, partly as a result of the Anscombe incident, came to feel ill-equipped to deal with the philosophy of his day. But this need not be looked on as a confession of general philosophical incompetence. Part of the job of a professional philosopher is to be responsive to the major philosophical movements of one's time. When Lewis received his philosophical training, the philosophy of absolute idealism was a major player in the philosophical debate, and anyone who wanted to do philosophy in that time would have to come to terms with absolute idealism. In a philosophy department today one can go through an entire Ph.D. program without ever having to come to terms with absolute idealism, except as part of a historical survey of nineteenth- or early twentieth-century philosophy. In the 1920s, if one had something to say about language, for example, that was opposed to the philosophy of absolute idealism, one would have to respond to what the idealists would say. Now, of course, the absolute idealist response can safely be ignored.

In the 1940s and 1950s in Oxford, logical positivism was the big item on the philosophical map. According to the positivist verification principle, a statement about the world is meaningful only in the case that it can be empirically verified. Using this principle, A. J. Ayer, in *Language, Truth and Logic*, declared theology and metaphysics meaningless in just a couple of pages.¹⁶ And many religious philosophers became very worried that their statements failed this criterion of meaning and would have to be abandoned as nonsense, often offering reductionist analyses of religious language that abandoned the straightforward truth claims of historic Christianity. But in philosophy the tide has turned against these types of objections to the meaningfulness of religious language, so much so that when the atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen attempted to argue that theism was

¹⁶ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 119-21.





meaningless in his 1988 debate with Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, it was agreed by most commentators on the debate, including atheists, that this strategy was a signal failure. In fact, the president of the Internet Infidels, the leading atheist site on the World Wide Web, refused to recommend purchasing the book from that debate to his fellow atheists because he thinks that Nielsen's strategy was badly misguided and resulted in a decisive victory for Moreland!¹⁷

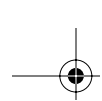
Now if you are a professional philosopher, you have to write for philosophy journals, and whether you like it or not your work has to be responsive to the main philosophical developments of your day, because that is what your referees will have been reading. So Lewis did not develop a detailed response to logical positivism, or to Wittgenstein's philosophy, or to other current developments, and so one could say with Austin Farrer that he "dropped out of the game."¹⁸ One could, it seems to me, develop a response to those movements based on elements of Lewis's thought, but Lewis did not do this, and so he can't be regarded as a "real philosopher" in at least one sense. But as our century turns, we have little need to ask how we can respond to positivist objections to Christian theism, any more than we need to know how to answer an absolute idealist. We do need to address the problems of philosophical naturalism or materialism, and with respect to these issues Lewis provides us with some important arguments.

A comprehensive materialism, while itself a position inimical to Christian theism, is nonetheless, like Christian theism, an attempt to generate a synoptic worldview and is not simply a matter of analyzing language. Such materialism would have to be rejected as nonsense by a strict interpretation of logical positivism. J. J. C. Smart, in his

¹⁷The Moreland-Nielsen debate was published in *Does God Exist?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1993). The response by Jeffrey Lowder, former president of Internet Infidels, is found at The Secular Web feedback page <www.infidels.org/infidels/feedback/1998/january.html>.

¹⁸Austin Farrer, "The Christian Apologist," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965), p. 40.





book *Philosophy and Scientific Realism*, attempted to bring philosophy back to the effort to provide a synoptic worldview based on science, and philosophers since have acknowledged that worldview development is an important role for philosophy.¹⁹

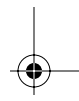
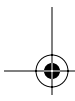
Although the secular philosophical community often sets the agenda for how philosophy will be done, in the last couple of decades Christian philosophers have taken matters into their own hands. Alvin Plantinga, in one of the earliest issues of the journal *Faith and Philosophy*, urged Christian philosophers to look at things from their own Christian perspective rather than carving out areas of thought where God-talk would be acceptable to nonbelievers.²⁰ What follows from this is that if Christians get an idea from Lewis, they need not wait for Lewis to become respectable to the philosophical community at large before exploring his ideas and arguments.

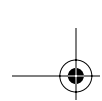
DID C. S. LEWIS LOSE HIS APOLOGETICS IN A GRIEF OBSERVED?

The screenplay, play and film *Shadowlands* paint a picture of a Lewis who abandons his Christian confidence in the face of the tragedy of his wife's death, maintaining his religious beliefs only through a leap of faith. Quite coincidentally, Beversluis, whose book came out about the same time as the screenplay, maintains that Lewis abandoned his apologetic stance in the course of his grief experience, and that to retain his faith he defended it on grounds completely alien to the grounds he had used in his other apologetic writings. In particular, Beversluis maintains that in the course of *A Grief Observed*, Lewis implicitly shifts from a Platonist to an Ockhamist conception of God and

¹⁹J. J. C. Smart, *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), chap. 1.

²⁰Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1984): 253-71; it also appears online with a new preface at <<http://www.leaderu.com/truth/itruth10/html>>.





thereby embraces a fideistic understanding of faith and reason, jettisoning his entire previous apologetic work. *Platonism* is defined by Beversluis as the view that God's goodness is to be understood in a way that is continuous with our normal conceptions of goodness. Lewis had previously argued that the conception of God as good made sense only if that concept of goodness was continuous with our own. But Beversluis maintains that in the course of his grief experience, Lewis accepted a view of God according to which God's actions are right just because it is God who performs them.²¹ With this latter view, which Beversluis calls Ockhamism, no one can complain if God, before the foundation of the world, chose a few people to be saved and all the rest to be punished everlastingly. That this is an affront to human reason, according to Ockhamism, only shows that (natural) human reason is fallen and part of our desperately wicked human nature. Indeed, it is not surprising to discover that Ockhamism is popular amongst Calvinists, including Calvin himself.

But a careful reading of *A Grief Observed* suggests that Lewis not only did not abandon his previous apologetic arguments, but in fact reaffirms his arguments, including his arguments against Ockhamism. Lewis in his youth had been an atheist who rejected theism based on the argument from evil, and he had even written poetry from that perspective.²² Echoing that earlier atheistic perspective, Lewis speaks of God in the early part of *A Grief Observed* as "a very absent help in trouble," a "Cosmic Sadist" and an "Eternal Vivisector."²³

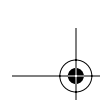
But it seems evident to me that Lewis's primary reasons for coming to accept the good God of Christianity were not that he thought he had some overwhelmingly plausible explanation for all the evils in the world, but rather that alternative worldviews had even more se-

²¹Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search*, pp. 102-3.

²²C. S. Lewis, *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

²³C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976), esp. pp. 5, 35.





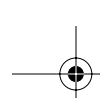
rious difficulties with them, and his treatment of these issues in *A Grief Observed* reflects this outlook on the problem. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis briefly considers three possible alternatives to belief in a God whose goodness is commensurate with the way in which we use the concept of goodness in our ordinary discourse about humans: naturalistic atheism, the cosmic sadist hypothesis and Ockhamism. All of these alternatives, however, are rejected in the course of *A Grief Observed* for much the same reasons that they are rejected in his apologetic writings. It is true that the book is primarily pastoral, addressed to the grieving believer (first and foremost Lewis himself) rather than to the skeptic. Nevertheless the book does contain some argumentation to show that his grief experience does not provide any reason to adopt a worldview other than theism that includes a Platonistic conception of divine goodness.

Let us consider the situation with respect to naturalism or materialism. In his apologetics Lewis had criticized naturalism because he considered it inconsistent with the validity of reasoning. One aspect of the argument from reason is the idea that physical states cannot be true or false. It is presented in the essay "De Futilitate":

We are compelled to admit between the thoughts of a terrestrial astronomer and the behavior of matter several light-years away that particular relation we call truth. But this relation has no meaning at all if we try to make it exist between the matter of the star and the astronomer's brain, considered as a lump of matter. The brain may be in all sorts of relations to the star no doubt: it is in a spatial relation, and a time relation, and a quantitative relation. But to talk of one bit of matter being true of another seems to be nonsense. It might turn out to be the case that every atom in the universe thought, and thought truly, about every other. But that relation between any two atoms would be something quite distinct from the physical relations between them.²⁴

²⁴C. S. Lewis, "De Futilitate," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 63-64.





In *A Grief Observed*, in explaining why in the face of his wife's death Lewis does not believe she has ceased to exist, he echoes this argument, though he talks in terms of falsity rather than truth:

If H [Joy] "is not" then she never was. I mistook a cloud of atoms for a person. There aren't and never were, any people. Death only reveals the vacuity that was always there. What we call the living are simply those who have not yet been unmasked. All equally bankrupt, but some not yet declared. But this must be nonsense; vacuity revealed to whom? bankruptcy declared to whom? To other boxes of fireworks or clouds of atoms. I will never believe—more strictly I can't believe—that one set of physical events could be, or make, a mistake about other sets.²⁵

In other words, Lewis considered materialism just as self-refuting as he always had. The argument he presents is hardly designed to persuade a skeptical philosopher like Anscombe or Beversluis, but it is a reaffirmation of his previous arguments.

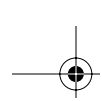
Another counterposition he considers is the possibility that God is not a good being but a cosmic sadist, and he finds this idea also unacceptable. Beversluis explains this by saying that "the shift [from Platonism to Ockhamism] occurs when Lewis begins to suspect that the hypothesis of the Cosmic Sadist is too anthropomorphic. According to such a view, God is like the man who tortures his cats, and that is unbearable."²⁶ But for Lewis, such a view of God is not simply unbearable; it is nonsensical. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis had considered the view he called dualism, according to which there is a good being and an evil being, both coeternal, who struggle for the control of the universe. Although Lewis finds this to be, "next to Christianity, the manliest and most sensible creed on the market," he finds it open to serious criticisms. These criticisms are precisely the criticisms he



²⁵Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, pp. 8-9.

²⁶Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search*, p. 150.





levels at the hypothesis of the cosmic sadist in *A Grief Observed*. Consider the following passage from *Mere Christianity*:

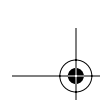
If Dualism is true, then the bad Power must be a being who likes badness for its own sake. But in reality we have no experience of anyone liking badness just because it is bad. The nearest we can get to it is in cruelty. But in real life people are cruel because they have a sexual perversion, which makes cruelty cause a sensual pleasure in them, or else for the sake of something they are going to get out of it—money, or power, or safety. But pleasure, money, power, and safety are all, as far as they go, good things. The badness consists in pursuing them by the wrong method, or in the wrong way, or too much. I do not mean, of course, that the people who do this are not desperately wicked. I do mean that wickedness, when you examine it, turns out to be the pursuit of some good in the wrong way. You can be good for the mere sake of goodness, you cannot be bad for the mere sake of badness. . . . In other words badness cannot succeed even in being bad in the same way in which goodness is good. Goodness is, so to speak, itself: badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled.²⁷

A moment's reflection will reveal that this is not only an argument against dualism, but also against the doctrine of the cosmic sadist. The idea that the creator of the universe might be evil is not plausible since evil cannot exist on its own, but is always a perversion of good. And this apologetic argument is what Lewis uses to respond to the thesis of the cosmic sadist in *A Grief Observed*.

But the picture I was building up last night is simply the picture of a man like S.C.—who used to sit next to me at dinner and tell me what he'd been doing to the cats that afternoon. Now a being like S.C., however, glorified, couldn't invent or create or govern anything. He would set traps and try to bait them. But he'd never have

²⁷Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 49.





thought of baits like love, or laughter, or daffodils, or a frosty sunset. *He* make a universe? He couldn't make a joke, or a bow, or an apology, or a friend.²⁸

Finally, and most critically, Lewis considers the possibility of replacing his good-in-our-sense God hypothesis with Ockhamism, the view that God's sadistic conduct is in the final analysis justified because we are so fallen and depraved that our ideas of goodness simply do not count. According to Ockhamism, actions and commands are right because God does them; according to Platonism, God does what God does because it is right. If God were to announce a new, reversed set of Ten Commandments, which commanded adultery, homicide and theft, an Ockhamist would say that these actions would be right because they were divinely commanded. In previous writings Lewis had harshly criticized Ockhamism. In *The Problem of Pain* he wrote:

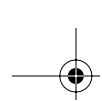
It has sometimes been asked whether God commands certain things because they are right, or whether certain things are right because God commands them. With Hooker, and against Dr. Johnson, I emphatically embrace the first alternative. The second might lead to the abominable conclusion (reached, I think, by Paley) that charity is good only because God arbitrarily commanded it—that He might equally well have commanded us to hate Him and one another and that hatred would then have been right. I believe, on the contrary, that “they err who think that of the will of God to do this or that there is no reason besides his will.”²⁹

Beverluis maintains that Lewis accepts Ockhamism in *A Grief Observed*. But actually, that is the very book in which Lewis presents

²⁸Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, pp. 139-61. The claim of this passage in *A Grief Observed* is precisely the same as the point made in the *Mere Christianity* passage: neither a wicked man like S. C. nor Satan could create anything; they can only pervert things that have already been created good.

²⁹C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, 1962), p. 100.





his most penetrating critique of Ockhamism. In most of his writings, Lewis is content to point out the morally disastrous consequences of Ockhamism. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis points out that Ockhamism has disastrous consequences for knowledge as well:

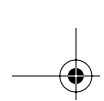
And so what? This, for all practical (and speculative) purposes sponges God off the slate. The word *good*, as applied to him, becomes meaningless: like abracadabra. We have no motive for obeying Him. Not even fear. It is true that we have His threats and promises. But why should we believe them? If cruelty is from His point of view “good,” telling lies may be “good” too. Even if they are true, what then? If His ideas of good are so very different from ours, what He calls “Heaven” might well be what we should call Hell, and vice versa. Finally, if reality at its very root is so meaningless to us—or, putting it the other way round, if we are such total imbeciles—what is the point of trying to think either about God or about anything else? The knot comes undone when you try to pull it tight.³⁰

René Descartes, in order to raise skeptical doubts about even our firmest certainties, imagined that we might be under the influence of an evil demon, and more modern philosophers have speculated about the possibility of our being brains in vats. The Ockhamist hypothesis (and surely the cosmic sadist hypothesis as well) is as epistemically damaging as the brain in the vat hypothesis. Under these hypotheses we will believe the truth only if a powerful being whose motives are either wicked or incomprehensible chooses that we should believe the truth, and not otherwise. These theses are, in Lewis’s view, equally as self-refuting as is naturalism. If they are true then no one could know this or anything else.

Of course, the above discussion does not demonstrate that these arguments are good ones, but only that Lewis continued to employ them throughout his career, even in the face of personal tragedy. I

³⁰Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, pp. 37-38.





have been at some pains to show the continuity between Lewis's apologetic writings and *A Grief Observed*, a continuity that, so far as I can tell, has gone unnoticed by many commentators and been denied outright by others. It is true that Lewis experienced a dark night of doubt and came to believe that his faith had been unreal. But what does that mean? It is my contention that it had absolutely nothing to do with the grounds of his intellectual assent to Christian theism. Rather, faith in this context should be understood as trust. The intellectual foundations of his faith were not shaken by his grief experience, as he reminded himself during the writing of the notebooks that became *A Grief Observed*. Nevertheless he experienced doubt. After reaching the conclusion that he had no real new grounds for abandoning his faith in favor of any counterposition, he still had to deal with his loss and understand why these doubts had arisen. And in doing so he concluded that he did not have the firm trust in God's wisdom that he had thought he had. But while this is a serious admission, it says nothing about the apologetic grounds on which he assented intellectually. The message of *A Grief Observed* is that those intellectual grounds remained what they had always been.

I think it is time for us to examine Lewis's thought fairly and honestly, not expecting either inerrancy or rank amateurism, but rather an incisive and powerful mind with many ideas that need to be pursued further. Moreover, we should resist, as much as possible, the "personal heresy" of focusing on Lewis himself rather than what he had to say.

