

2014

## Review of Socrates in the City: Conversations on “Life, God, and Other Small Topics”

Crystal Hurd  
thatlewislady@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Hurd, Crystal (2014) "Review of Socrates in the City: Conversations on “Life, God, and Other Small Topics”," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 52.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1257>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol7/iss1/52>

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write this book. Readers of this journal will appreciate that when McGrath turns to theology, he often echoes C. S. Lewis (witnessed in the title of his book), as when he cites Lewis' abductive conclusion in *Mere Christianity*: "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" (96). In McGrath's final chapter, he explains how Christianity provides answers to those fundamental questions of meaning that lie beyond the purview of science. Who am I? I am a creature made in the image of and in relation with my Creator. Do I matter? Yes, I am loved by my Creator who, in the incarnation of Christ, reveals the depth of His love. Why am I here? To love God, and, eventually, to praise God in eternity. Can I make a difference? Yes: though my free will is shackled by sin, it is liberated through grace.

Only with this final chapter can I quibble. McGrath claims that in our journey to God "we *may* help others in need along life's road as we travel" (110, my emphasis). I am not sure how McGrath means the word "*may*" – love is always a graced exercise of human free will, but surely the love of neighbor remains a Christian imperative, not an option! The human call to cooperate with God's grace through love could receive a more robust treatment here. In his large body of work, including this short and readable volume, McGrath has himself evinced such love. *Surprised by Meaning* is a gift of service to both believers and non-believers. It will help any reader more gratefully to discern the wholeness and graced gift of the real.

PAUL J. CONTINO  
Pepperdine University  
Malibu, California

Eric Metaxas, ed., *Socrates in the City: Conversations on "Life, God, and Other Small Topics"* (Boston, 2011). 400 pages. Kindle Edition \$7.99. ISBN: 9780525952558.

When writer Eric Metaxas established a series of talks in New York City entitled "Socrates in the City," his goal was simply to encourage the mental gymnastics which hard thinking often stimulates. As Socrates famously alleged (and as Metaxas reminds us), "The unexamined life is not worth living." The reason for the popularity and the continued success of these talks (which have now spanned more than a decade) is Metaxas's

skillful assembly of a fascinating list of speakers – writers, academics, and intellectuals – who transcend the complicated intersection of faith and intellect over a wide range of topics. Most of these issues originate from the cultural compulsion toward moral relativism and scientific scrutiny. Each speaker boasts impressive credentials, and each of the essays presents a coherent, comprehensive examination of issues that are of interest to Christians and non-Christians alike, set against a backdrop of twenty-first century rationalism and postmodernism.

Although the entire work resonates with various themes which Lewis approached in his vast body of work, only one talk directly addresses Lewis' contribution to the conversation: that of the American intellectual and political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain. Elshtain's talk discusses the "Question of Man," or rather how man should maintain a strong code of ethics amid a flurry of scientific advances that often relieve man of the cumbersome challenges of the moral dilemma. She specifically addresses the catastrophic number of abortions performed on babies with a predicted diagnosis of Down Syndrome. Elshtain cites the well-rehearsed argument that the abortion is ultimately done "to prevent the suffering of the child"; however, such subjectivism and euphemistic language often tends to mask the real issue – an absence of ethics. The substitution of the language, and thus the logical fallacy, that terminating a life is interpreted as a move of compassion, is what was most unsettling to Lewis and many of his advocates. Such moral relativism negates the presence of "natural law" and creates a cult of subjectivism: "It is interesting and troubling that we are in an age of human rights *par excellence*, and yet there are forces at work in our world that undermine a rock-bottom claim of human dignity that alone can ground a robust, sustainable regime of human rights" (141). Elshtain cites Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, in which he discusses the Tao and the arrogance surrounding the promotion of eugenics. This is exceptionally poignant, Elshtain notes, because Lewis was writing in the immediate aftermath of an egregious world war in which the Nazi regime strived to annihilate the entire Jewish race. This, she adds, makes Lewis' title both figurative and literal.

Elshtain's closing remarks on the dangers of subjectivism illustrate the perennial debate about abortion and, by extension, moral relativism. Who decides who should live? Are humans elevating life to a privilege that

only those who are deemed “worthy” can enjoy? Perfection, she cogently argues, is an ideal which encourages certain desirable traits, but those traits, much like the pendulum of human emotions and sensations, vary by individual. Perhaps the best alternative is to accept that some aspects of life are immutable and unpredictable. This is unpopular, but nonetheless true:

I also believe that nowadays we are loath to grant the status of givenness to any aspect of ourselves. We don't like that way of talking; it suggests there are things we can't manipulate and we can't change, despite the fact that anyone who has been in contact with a human baby knows that there is a body there – a wriggling, complex little body that comes programmed with all sorts of delicately calibrated reactions to the human relationships that nature presumes will be the matrix of child nurture. (144).

Although there is a continuing magnetism toward humanistic arguments and moral relativism, Lewis reminds the reader that such thinking is truly poisonous. Elshtain illuminates the importance that a distinction must be made in the mindset, which is manifested through the language. When “to kill” becomes “*choice, consent, freedom,*” we have entered dangerous territory; we assume, with grand arrogance, the posture of God.

This collection of talks is an inspiring, enlightening, and entertaining assembly of scholarship. Each speaker displays his/her unique perspective on various issues, and yet all of the essays blend perfectly into one impressive volume. Metaxas serves as emcee, effectively sprinkling his acerbic humor throughout the lectures. This work is equally significant (and necessary) for both the firm believer and the curious seeker.

CRYSTAL HURD  
Washington County Schools  
Bristol, Virginia

Darren Oldridge, *The Devil: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012). 114 pages. \$11.95. ISBN: 9780199580996.

**D**arren Oldridge's *Very Short Introduction* to the devil is one in a series of brief explanatory books put out by Oxford University Press, which the publishers describe as “stimulating and accessible way[s] in to a new