

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Shrock, Christopher A. (2017) "Mere Christianity and the Moral Argument for the Existence of God," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1381>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol11/iss1/5>

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# *Mere Christianity* and the Moral Argument for the Existence of God

CHRISTOPHER A. SHROCK

C. S. Lewis's moral argument for the existence of God from *Mere Christianity* has been called the "most widely-convincing apologetic argument of the twentieth century."<sup>1</sup> It is concise and commonsensical. But Lewis's argument has come under heavy fire in past decades, most notably from John Beversluis and Erik Wielenberg. In *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, Beversluis accuses Lewis of committing a logical fallacy, affirming the consequent.<sup>2</sup> In more than thirty years since publication, Beversluis's attack has faced little opposition, and his analysis appears unchanged in the 2007 revised edition of the same book.<sup>3</sup> Wielenberg is more charitable to Lewis in his analysis and assessments, but his *God and the Reach of Reason* also declares the moral argument a failure.<sup>4</sup> For Wielen-

<sup>1</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 347.

<sup>2</sup> John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, rev. ed. (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007), 99-100. To affirm the consequent is to reason as follows: If A, then B; B; therefore, A. But this is wrongheaded. For example, if a certain pet is a Chinese pug, then that pet is a dog. Now, learning that the pet is a pug will justify the conclusion that the pet is also a dog. But learning that the pet is a dog will not justify that the pet is a pug. After all, it could be a French bulldog.

<sup>3</sup> Compare John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 50-1, and Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, rev. ed., 99-100. Hereafter, references are to the 2007 edition.

<sup>4</sup> Erik Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 63-4.

berg, Lewis's moral argument is a fine attempt at abduction—positing God as the best explanation for morality—but he thinks that Lewis neglects several better explanations.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Wielenberg understands Lewis as identifying the moral law with God, a position that he finds incoherent and therefore detrimental to Lewis's case.<sup>6</sup>

This article offers an alternative reading on which the moral argument from the opening chapters of *Mere Christianity* is not only valid but also original and defensible. Unlike other moral arguments, Lewis deals in neither metaethics nor moral pragmatics. So he avoids prickly objections related to Divine Command Theory and accusations of wishful thinking. In *Mere Christianity* and other works, Lewis offers considerable justification for each of the argument's premises and mounts an impressive case for God's existence, one that warrants full and careful consideration.

Lewis's argument debuted in a radio address in 1942. This, among other things, might help to explain why academic philosophers have been slow to take serious notice of Lewis's moral argument. Beversluis's analysis appeared in 1985, but it has received little scholarly response. Richard Purtill's 1981 work, *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith*, glosses over the subject in a mere five paragraphs.<sup>7</sup> Art Lindsley's *C. S. Lewis's Case for Christ*, which has a twenty-year hindsight advantage over Beversluis, neglects both the moral argument from *Mere Christianity* and Beversluis's criticisms of it.<sup>8</sup> Steven Jon James Lovell's dissertation treats Beversluis's take on Lewis's argument for God's existence from desire but not the moral argument.<sup>9</sup> In other words, those one would expect to write in Lewis's defense have been largely silent on this point.

There are two exceptions to the silence. First, Victor Reppert mentions Lewis's moral argument in a review of Beversluis's book. But rather than

<sup>5</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 91-3.

<sup>6</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 65-8.

<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Purtill, *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 17-19.

<sup>8</sup> Art Lindsley, *C. S. Lewis's Case for Christ: Insights from Reason, Imagination and Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005). Curiously, Beversluis's name appears in the index of this work, but there seems to be no reference to him in the text, excepting one small passage on the Lewis-Anscombe debate. See Lindsley, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Jon James Lovell, "Philosophical Themes from C. S. Lewis" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield 2003).

defending Lewis, Reppert substitutes for Lewis's argument a probability-based argument from C. Stephen Evans.<sup>10</sup> Along the same lines, David Baggett writes in favor of Lewis, but his interpretation follows Wielenberg's reading. His chapter's opening includes the line, "If one is looking for a strict *proof* of God's existence, Lewis's argument is bound to disappoint."<sup>11</sup> Such concessions are premature and rooted in long-neglected misinterpretations. Wielenberg does not say what constitutes "strict proof", but, contrary to the above-mentioned interpreters, Lewis's argument is deductively valid.

Beverluis outlines the moral argument from the fourth chapter of *Mere Christianity* as follows:

[B1.] If there is Something behind the facts observed by science, it cannot manifest itself externally as one of those facts. Hence either it must remain entirely unknown or it must make itself known in some other way.

[B2.] We find within ourselves an internal command urging us to behave morally. Since this internal phenomenon cannot be observed by science, it provides us with exactly the kind of clue we would expect if there were Something behind the facts.

[B3.] Therefore there is Something behind the facts that speaks to us through the Moral Law. This Something is the Power behind the Moral Law.<sup>12</sup>

Immediately, the fallacy reveals itself. If this is Lewis's argument, then he has affirmed the consequent of the first premise. As Beverluis maintains, premise B1 does not say that wherever one finds a moral law there must be a god, but the converse, that whenever one has a god one should expect a moral law. It says that theists should believe in a moral law, not that the morally aware should become theists.

Wielenberg interprets Lewis in a more forgiving tone, but he does not

<sup>10</sup> Victor Reppert, "John Beverluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*," *Sehnsucht* 3 (2009): 111-16, especially 114.

<sup>11</sup> David Baggett, "Pro: The Moral Argument is Convincing," 121, in *C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Boston, Mass.: Brill/Rodopi, 2015), 121-40.

<sup>12</sup> Beverluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 99-100.

find a valid deductive argument in *Mere Christianity* either. He casts the argument in an abductive form, seeking the best explanation for the phenomenon of morality. Wielenberg formalizes his interpretation:

[W1.] Lewisian moral phenomena exist.

[W2.] The best explanation of the existence of Lewisian moral phenomena is the existence of a Higher Power that created the universe.

[W3.] So: There is a Higher Power that created the universe. (from W1 and W2)<sup>13</sup>

The moral law, which Wielenberg terms “phenomena,” forms the datum, and W2 suggests a way of interpreting that datum. God or the “Higher Power” offers a solution to the puzzle of moral phenomena. Logically, everything seems intact, even if it is not a proof per se.

Despite his appreciation for the structure of Lewis’s argument, as he understands it, Wielenberg sees two problems with its content. First, he finds W2 open to objections, especially one from David Hume, who suggests human emotion and fame-seeking as an alternative source of the moral law. Recasting Hume’s observations in terms of evolutionary psychology, Wielenberg speculates that moral phenomena may have arisen from natural, rather than supernatural, processes.<sup>14</sup> He considers Premise W2 too narrow in its presumed field of competing explanations and so not obviously true. This, for Wielenberg, makes Lewis’s argument unconvincing.

A second problem Wielenberg finds with Lewis’s argument involves the relationship between the Higher Power and the moral law. He interprets Lewis as identifying God as the “ultimate source of objective rightness and wrongness.”<sup>15</sup> That is, according to Wielenberg’s reading, Lewis considers the moral law to be the very same thing as (that is, numerically identical to) God. Such a claim, Wielenberg thinks, generates a number of

<sup>13</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 63 and 76-7. The argument is extended with three additional premises, which narrow this “Higher Power” to something good, mind-like, and creative. But these play no substantial role in Wielenberg’s discussion and so have been omitted here.

<sup>14</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 82-93.

<sup>15</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 65-7.

insurmountable problems for Lewis. How obscure, he remarks, to identify God as a conjunction of moral facts.<sup>16</sup> Would it not make more sense to conceive of the moral law as a non-theistic collection of necessary moral truths together with some contingent facts about the world and whatever follows from the combination of these?<sup>17</sup> In other words, he criticizes W2 for positing a poor explanation for the moral law as well as for failing to consider obvious alternative explanations.

My response is that Wielenberg and Beversluis misread Lewis's case. They fail to consider the argument in its entirety, so their formalizations of Lewis's case are incomplete. Lewis directs his readers' attention to the moral law as a principal bit of evidence for discerning the true nature of the universe and that which transcends the universe. With regard to the validity of Lewis's argument, consider two key commitments heretofore unmentioned in this paper (or by Lewis's interpreters): L1 and L2 in the analysis below. These, when combined with the claim to a moral law, form a deductive argument for theism. It runs as follows:

- L1. Either theism is true or materialism is true.
- L2. If materialism is true, then there is no moral law.
- L3. There is a moral law.
- L4. Therefore, materialism is not true. (from L2 and L3)
- L5. Therefore, theism is true. (from L1 and L4)

This argument is valid, a disjunctive syllogism.<sup>18</sup> But again, both Lewis's critics and his supporters have ignored L1 and L2. To be fair, Lewis intentionally puts off any mention of God as long as possible, so it is easy to overlook L1. But both L1 and L2 are nonetheless there and key to the argument.

In L1, Lewis insists that one must choose between the "materialist"

<sup>16</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> A disjunctive syllogism runs as follows: Either A or B; not B; therefore, A. This is a rational line of thought. For example, suppose that Fifi is either a Chinese pug or a French bulldog. Then, learning that she is not a French bulldog will justify the conclusion that she is a pug. The other option has been eliminated.

and “religious” views. He writes,

Ever since men were able to think, they have been wondering what this universe really is and how it came to be there. And, very roughly, two views have been held. First, there is what is called the materialist view. People who take that view think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed. . . . The other view is the religious view. According to it, what is behind the universe is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know.<sup>19</sup>

He continues, “We want to know whether the universe simply happens to be what it is for no reason or whether there is a power behind it that makes it what it is.”<sup>20</sup> Either the religious or the materialist view is true. There is no room for a third position. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis builds his readers’ allegiance to L1 in two ways, one weak and one strong. In his weaker attempt, he takes it as a historical fact that there have been no other proposals—again, “very roughly, two views have been held.” He offers little in the way of supporting historical examples or details.<sup>21</sup>

If Lewis had limited his justification for L1 to the historical claim, the critic would have ample room for complaint. Western history abounds with non-materialist, non-theistic metaphysical theories. Pythagoras’s transmigrating souls, Plato’s heavenly forms, and Aristotle’s hylomorphisms all seem to defy the constraints of L1. The Greco-Roman world offers a host of mystery religions and anthropomorphic gods, whose immaterial natures bear precious little resemblance to the theistic God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These pagan cults adhere to gods, but their deities hardly fit the description of “what is behind the universe.” Moreover, L1 ignores dualistic religions (like Manicheanism) and pantheistic materialisms (like

<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: Combining the Case for Christianity*, *Christian Behaviour, Beyond Personality* (New York: MacMillan, 1960), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Although Lewis does not list them, there have been prominent thinkers throughout Western history who have endorsed this premise. For example, Thomas Reid, *On the Animate Creation*, ed. by Paul Wood (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 132, says, “Materialism has been from early Ages considered as one of the Chief Bulwarks of Atheism. Therefore while Epicurus and Hobbes and their Disciples have endeavoured to defend it, Theists and Christians have pointed their batteries against it, with great success as has been believed by the Friends of Religion.”

Stoicism). This is not to mention non-Mediterranean religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Germanic paganism, Wicca, and Native American cults. At first glance, L1 seems wide open to counterexamples.

However, perhaps in anticipation of this objection, Lewis appends a “Note” to the fourth chapter of *Mere Christianity*, urging the reader to reject a particular view, Henri Bergson’s Creative Evolution, as a genuine alternative to the disjuncts named in L1. In this note, Lewis effectively offers a second, philosophical case for his first premise:

When people say [that they ascribe “purposiveness” to a Life-Force] we must ask them whether by Life-Force they mean something with a mind or not. If they do, then ‘a mind bringing life into existence and leading it to perfection’ is really a God, and their view is thus identical with the Religious. If they do not, then what is the sense in saying that something without a mind ‘strives’ or has ‘purposes’? This seems to me fatal to their view.<sup>22</sup>

Creative Evolution, Lewis says, appears to carve out a middle ground between the materialist and religious options, but this path turns out to be a mirage. Lewis does not offer an outright objection to Bergson, although his distaste for the Life-Force philosophy is manifest. Instead, Lewis introduces Bergson’s philosophy in order to show that even this peculiar case turns out to be a species of either theism or materialism. He does not bother to say to which species it belongs, nor does he need to. All that matters is that it falls into one category or the other. The critical question, explains Lewis, is whether the Life-Force Philosophy posits the existence of a mind-like entity at the root of the moral law. Those who say that the Life-Force is like a mind are simply disguised theists. Those who say that the Life-Force

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 35. Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1911), 29, summarizes his position in contrast to traditional theism and materialistic determinism: “We should willingly accept [that life is a creation]; but by creation must we understand, as [M. Seailles] does, a *synthesis* of elements? Where the elements pre-exist, the synthesis that will be made is virtually given, being only one of the possible arrangements. This arrangement a superhuman intellect could have perceived in advance among all the possible ones that surrounded it. We hold, on the contrary, that in the domain of life the elements have no real and separate existence. They are manifold mental views of an indivisible process. And for that reason, there is radical contingency in progress, incommensurability between what goes before and what follows—in short, duration.” For Bergson, living things consist of a self-create element in addition to an inanimate, material body.



is not a mind subscribe to “a blind force, with no morals and no mind,” which amounts to materialism, albeit of a mystical variety.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of how Bergson or anyone else understands the nature of the Life-Force, it is not an alternative to the religious and materialist views and, therefore, not a counterexample to L1.

Lewis’s argument concerning the Life-Force Philosophy, if successful, can also be made without loss of generality. That is, by the Law of Excluded Middle,<sup>24</sup> any proposed alternative to the disjuncts of L1 either posits the existence of a mind-like something or does not. If it includes something like a mind, then, according to Lewis, it is religious. If not, then it is a species (although perhaps a peculiar one) of materialism. Seeming alternatives to theism or materialism ultimately reduce to one or the other. So Lewis reasons, the materialist and religious views exhaust the possibilities. There is no escaping L1.

Beverluis, Wielenberg, and others also overlook L2, Lewis’s contention that the moral law falsifies materialism (see the formal versions of their interpretations above). However, Lewis clearly contends for L2. One passage from the third chapter of *Mere Christianity* reads,

Consequently, this Rule of Right and Wrong, or Law of Human Nature, or whatever you call it, must somehow or other be a real thing—a thing that is really there, not made up by ourselves. And yet it is not a fact in the ordinary sense, in the same way as our actual behaviour is a fact. *It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality* [emphasis mine]; that, in this particular case, there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men’s behaviour, and yet quite definitely real—a real law, which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us.<sup>25</sup>

For Lewis, the discovery of an objective moral law opens up new frontiers for metaphysical exploration. It falsifies materialism as, on Karl Popper’s view, a certain occurrence might falsify some proposed scientific theory.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> The Law of Excluded Middle says that, for every proposition, either it is true or its negation is true. In this case, either there is a mind-like entity behind the moral law or there is not.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 30 (emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Routledge, 2002), chapter 4.

Apparently, human beings have cognitive access to more than the external material world, since they know about how things ought to be in addition to how things happen to be.

Here, the moral law differs from other types of knowledge because of its *a priori* discoverability. Lewis contrasts natural laws, which are abstractions from or generalizations of empirically observable events, with the moral law, which does not depend on the material facts of the universe. In other words, one can tell that the moral law represents a different sort of reality, because field and laboratory observations can neither corroborate nor falsify it. Lewis explains,

The so-called laws [natural laws] may not be anything real—anything above and beyond the actual facts which we observe. But in the case of Man, we saw that this will not do. The Law of Human Nature, or of Right and Wrong, must be something above and beyond the actual facts of human behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

A scientist might perceive fellow humans engaged in particular behaviors, and she might characterize those behaviors according to patterns or natural laws. However, her characterization is only of the material world, what humans tend to say and do, not a reliable guide to the moral law. In fact, human outward behavior often conflicts with the moral law, because humankind is by-and-large a moral failure. Lewis says that one finds the moral law “inside” oneself,<sup>28</sup> privately known to each person. If materialism were true, then one could discover nothing beyond externals, since there would be nothing beyond externals to discover. Yet, looking inward, one does find something more. For Lewis, *morality* is a puzzling concept that cannot be discovered with public, empirical, or scientific methods.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 33. In Lewis’s claim, there is an echo of Bergson’s opening line, “[O]ur perception of ourselves is internal and profound.” See Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Here, Lewis’s understanding of the universe is also in conflict with contemporary Naturalism. Fred Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), x, explains Naturalism: “Naturalism in philosophy—as I understand it—has the goal of articulating the application conditions of puzzling concepts (like *knowledge* and *perception*) so that empirical (scientific) methods can be used to answer questions we have about the things to which we apply these concepts.” Simply put, Naturalism requires that minds and thoughts be investigable and analyzable

A critic of Lewis might find fault with L2 by assuming that L2 involves some form of Divine Command Theory. If it did, then Lewis's moral law might make him vulnerable to all the objections typically aimed at certain simplistic versions of that view, namely, those that base morality on God's unqualified command or will so as to make morality seem arbitrary or volatile. Divine Command and Divine Motivation Theorists have presented some powerful arguments for their position,<sup>30</sup> but they continue to face formidable objections. For example, mistaking Lewis for a Divine Command Theorist, Beversluis demands that Lewis address a host of realist metaethical theories—that is, views on which morality is objective and independent of human beliefs and attitudes—that ground morality in something besides God before insisting on Theism. Among these realist theories, he lists, “Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, hedonism, natural law theories, Kantianism, act utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, act deontology, rule deontology, virtue ethics.”<sup>31</sup> Wielenberg takes Lewis to be offering a metaethical account on which God is numerically identical to—that is, is exactly the same thing as—the moral law or “a conjunction of ethical facts.”<sup>32</sup> After reading it into Lewis's writing, Wielenberg labels the theory “obscure” and confusing. He goes on to question whether moral principles, being necessary truths, require any explanation at all.<sup>33</sup> If Lewis were looking for God to ground morality or to be the moral law, he would face some stiff opposition.

Fortunately for those who get squeamish around Divine Command Theory, Lewis does not advocate that view. In a letter to Beversluis, Lewis expresses open hostility to some varieties of Divine Command Theory. He thinks that the moral law must be absolute in every sense, even apart from

entirely in terms of biochemistry, neuroscience, and anatomy. If Lewis is right that morality cannot be addressed by science, then Naturalism can never be entirely successful.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Mark C. Murphy, *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Katherine Rogers, “God and Moral Realism,” in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (2005): 103-18.

<sup>31</sup> Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 96. Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 91-2, makes a similar point.

<sup>32</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 91.

God, or it is not truly moral—essentially the view that Wielenberg suggests. Lewis writes,

Things are not good because God commands them; God commands certain things because He sees them to be good. (In other words, the Divine will is the obedient servant of the Divine Reason.) The opposite view (Ockham's, Paley's) leads to an absurdity.<sup>34</sup>

Lewis rejects theories that make God's unqualified command or will or nature the metaethical foundation of good and evil. To my knowledge, he never entertains the identity view that Wielenberg ascribes to him. Unless Lewis is inconsistent on this point, the position he calls "religious" cannot be Divine Command Theory or any of its relatives.

How, then, does Lewis tie morality to the existence of God? By focusing on moral knowledge rather than the grounds or nature of morality. Lewis discusses the moral law as a message from God about what is good and evil, a kind of knowledge or divine disclosure about moral facts or principles. He does not identify the moral law with good or evil features of the world. Since the moral law is a message about morality rather than morality itself, Lewis effectively has nothing to say about the nature of morality in his moral argument. So he sidesteps Beversluis's demand to respond to non-theistic metaethical theories as well as the controversy surrounding Divine Command Theory.

Evidence for reading Lewis's moral law as a message or communication appears in three respects. First, Lewis speaks of the moral law as something inhabiting humans—a psychological phenomenon—not a feature of God. Consider the following excerpts, which emphasize Lewis's concern with human knowledge of and belief in the moral law rather than morality's existence:

<sup>34</sup> Letter of 3 July 1963, from C. S. Lewis to John Beversluis. Quoted in full in Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 296. Lewis attacks the Occamist version of Divine Command Theory even more violently in *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan, 1962), 37-8, 66-7, 100. Matt Douglass has pointed out to me in conversation that Lewis's claim here, that God commands certain things because He sees them to be good, does not necessarily exclude more sophisticated, contemporary versions of Divine Command Theory. For example, perhaps God understands the good because God "sees" something *within Godself*—God's own essentially good nature. Regardless of whether Divine Command Theory turns out to be philosophically viable, it is obvious that Lewis is not committed to it.

Have [non-absolutists] not let the cat out of the bag and shown that, whatever they say, they really *know* [emphasis mine] the Law of Nature just like anyone else?<sup>35</sup>

The point is that [excuses] are one more proof of how deeply, whether we like it or not, we *believe* [emphasis mine] in the Law of Nature. If we do not believe in decent behaviour, why should we be so anxious to make excuses for not having behaved decently? The truth is, we believe in decency so much—we feel the Rule of Law pressing on us so—that we cannot bear to face the fact that we are breaking it, and consequently we try to shift the responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

These, then, are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious *idea* [emphasis mine] that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it.<sup>37</sup>

. . . [W]e know that men find themselves under a moral law, which they did not make, and cannot quite forget even when they try, and which they know they ought to obey.<sup>38</sup>

In speaking of the moral law, Lewis expounds on the content of human thought. The relevant question is not the metaethical “Whence morality?” but the epistemic “Whence our notions concerning morality?”

Second, Lewis treats the moral law as a communication. The most telling example features a metaphor likening the law to the contents of a letter:

The only packet I am allowed to open is Man. When I do, especially when I open that particular man called Myself, I find that I do not exist on my own, that I am under a law; that somebody or something wants me to behave in a certain way. I should expect, for instance, to find that the stone had to obey the law of gravity—that whereas the sender of the letters merely tells me to obey the law of my human nature, He compels the stone to obey the laws of its stony nature. But I should expect to find that there was, so to speak, a sender of letters in both cases, a Power behind the facts, a Director, a Guide.<sup>39</sup>

Other characterizations of the moral law as a message, command, or in-

<sup>35</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 34.

struction abound. For example,

The only way in which we could expect [a controlling power outside the universe] to show itself would be inside ourselves as an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way. And that is just what we do find inside ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

You find out more about God from the Moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he has built.<sup>41</sup>

Lewis's moral law, then, is a psychological fact about human beings and a message from the supernatural world.

Third, Lewis contrasts his explanation of the moral law with other proposals concerning the origins of moral ideas, not morality itself. The second chapter of *Mere Christianity*, for instance, challenges the view that the moral law is a product of evolution, a social convention, or an untrustworthy accident of one's education. Lewis replies that neither biological instincts nor social conventions carry the imperative weight of the moral law. His entire discussion focuses on its uncompromising authority, not mere awareness of moral norms. Lewis's justification for L2 is that God is the explanation for human knowledge of the moral law, as well as its imperative preeminence, as a speaker's utterance explains a hearer's testimonial knowledge. Lewis does not offer God as an analysis of or explanation for the nature of morality.

Still, one might object to L2 by saying that Lewis ignores non-theistic attempts to account for human knowledge of morality, both causally and methodologically. Causally, might not the abilities to reason and know about morality have arisen from natural, or at least non-theistic, means? And methodologically, are there not ways to investigate moral matters and discover moral truths without theistic considerations? Lewis owes the skeptic some explanation about the sense in which materialism precludes the moral law. His observations about materialism's shortcomings, both causal and methodological, are mentioned below. Before considering Lewis's thoughts on materialism's inadequacies in detail, however, note that he does not have to win on both fronts. That is, L2 finds support if materialism

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 37.

fails to generate moral knowledge through material-causal mechanisms or if it cannot offer a logic of moral discovery.

Although he does not include L2 in his analysis of Lewis's moral argument, Wielenberg offers a non-theistic suggestion about the causal origins of human moral knowledge, piggybacking on Peter Singer's claim that, although evolution generated human reason as a mechanism for enhancing biological fitness, reason reliably reveals other truths as well. Singer likens reason to an escalator that takes thinkers beyond their immediate biological needs to scientific and mathematical truths,<sup>42</sup> and Wielenberg extends that escalator to moral principles. Perhaps, he says, human beings can understand their own rights and duties, as well as the similarity between themselves and one another, and, from there, deduce universal ethical principles.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Wielenberg challenges L2 by suggesting a mechanism by which a merely material world can, in principle, produce knowledge of a moral law.

How might Lewis respond? On the one hand, he might accuse Wielenberg and Singer of making a category mistake, based on the type of explanation they purport to offer. In his later work, *Miracles*, Lewis draws a sharp line between explanations of human thinking based on "ground and consequent" and those from "cause and effect." Ground-consequent explanations describe moves from evidence to conclusion in a truth-preserving and suitably normative manner, often resulting in knowledge. For example, one realizes that two numbers are equal to each other because one sees a mathematician show that each is equal to a third.<sup>44</sup> Cause-effect explanations, on the other hand, do not preserve truth and generally preclude beliefs from counting as knowledge. Lewis regards the explanation types as mutually exclusive. His example: "You say that *because* (Cause and Effect) you are a capitalist, or a hypochondriac, or a mere man, or only a woman," effectively means that you did not reach your conclusion by way of ground and consequent, so you do not really know.<sup>45</sup> So in response to

<sup>42</sup> Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995), 226-7; quoted in Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 90.

<sup>43</sup> Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason*, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, *Miracles; A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 15.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 15.

Singer and Wielenberg, Lewis might say that the escalator analogy errs by conflating disparate explanation types. If human beings possess bona fide knowledge about science or morals or anything else, then these so-called discoveries cannot find their ultimate explanations in quasi-random causal processes like evolution. They need ground-consequent explanations. Instead, Wielenberg and Singer begin with a cause-effect evolutionary story (reason developing to enhance biological fitness) and end with a ground-consequent conclusion (reason extending its reach beyond fitness to science and morals). If the two explanation types are mutually exclusive, especially when it comes to moral knowledge, then Wielenberg's proposal loses its plausibility. Thus, as one might expect, leaning on *Miracles* for support makes Lewis's moral argument a special case of his celebrated argument from reason.<sup>46</sup>

There is another, subtler response to Wielenberg's escalator theory, based on Lewis's description of the moral law in *Mere Christianity*. The subtler response says that Wielenberg mischaracterizes the moral law. His escalator theory describes the moral law as knowledge of necessary moral principles, certain contingent facts about the world, and implications of those principles and facts. But this approach regards the moral law as a *mere* body of knowledge, akin to mathematics or ecology. As mentioned above, for Lewis, the moral law is essentially imperative. It commands and admonishes. It is not an idle truth. For this reason especially, Lewis finds materialism inadequate.<sup>47</sup> Consider his description of the moral law: "There is nothing indulgent about the Moral Law. It is as hard as nails. It tells you to do the straight thing and it does not seem to care how painful, or dangerous, or difficult it is to do."<sup>48</sup> Lewis also says,

I think we have to assume it [the Something directing the universe] is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know—because after all the only other thing we know is matter and you can hardly imagine a bit of matter giving instructions.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Victor Reppert's *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 34. Baggett, "Pro: The Moral Argument is Convincing," 129, also stresses this point.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 34.



In addition to its truth, the moral law carries an authority or normative force unlike that of other knowledge. Without physically compelling one to follow its dictates, the moral law demands unflinching obedience and returns guilt and discomfort for wrongdoing. Other sorts of knowledge may be true or even necessary, but they do not carry such significance.<sup>50</sup> The moral law seems to present a wholly different kind of knowledge than that available to reason alone. Can the evolutionary escalator of reason account for the imperative force of the moral law? It seems not, so materialism fails to account for perhaps two causal aspects of the moral law.

In addition to materialism's causal shortcomings, Lewis has at least some resources to address materialism's methodological problems. In this case, the potential objector argues that certain philosophical theories offer non-theistic heuristics and thought processes for finding moral truths, a logic of moral discovery. For example, Kant presents formulas to help his reader discover which maxims fit the categorical imperative, and utilitarianism employs another calculus—the net balance of pleasure over pain. Ethical theories convey moral knowledge. Given the right theory, perhaps God becomes superfluous to the acquisition of moral knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Lewis might respond by pointing out that philosophical theories explain *already-and-otherwise-known* moral truths. Except in very rare cases, moral deliberators do not work from philosophical theories. In fact, Lewis thinks that nearly everyone, not just moral philosophers, possesses an awareness of the moral law. He writes,

[The moral law] was called the Law of Nature because people thought that every one knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it. They did not mean, of course, that you might not find an odd individual here and there who did not know it, just as you find a few people who are colour-blind or have no ear for a tune. But taking the race as a whole, they thought that the human idea of decent behaviour was obvious to every one. And I believe they were right.<sup>52</sup>

Lewis identifies the moral law as something known to all, not the result of esoteric theorizing, which would make the moral law a specialized ac-

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> The possibility of this objection was brought to my attention by David P. Hunt.

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 18.

ademic field. Furthermore, Lewis's claim lines up with philosophical approaches to moral theorizing. Philosophers typically identify the morally good with the pleasurable or the rational or the flourishing. But in order to theorize this way, they must have some prior awareness of the good, or there would be no reason to propose an identity relation between it and anything else. "Good" and "pleasurable" would simply be synonyms. Furthermore, if theories offered the most obvious and certain approach to the moral law, then philosophical thought experiments, which test theoretical conclusions against moral intuitions, would be moot. Theories purport to systematize the moral law and to solve difficult cases, but they do not replace the rudimentary moral knowledge Lewis attributes to everyone. No theory of ethics serves as an exclusive conduit of moral knowledge.

Premise L2 turns out to be more defensible than some have supposed. Since Lewis regards the moral law as a type of knowledge, his argument for the existence of God is not vulnerable to attacks associated with Divine Command Theory. Moreover, Lewis has good reason to regard materialism as incompatible with the moral law, both causally and methodologically. Causally, materialism struggles to say why human beliefs about morals rise to the level of knowledge, as well as whence comes the moral law's authoritative status. Methodologically, non-theistic, theoretical approaches to morality often attempt to extend human knowledge of morality, but the theories themselves rely on commonsense moral intuitions for their support. So again, whence humankind's knowledge of the moral law? Materialism, Lewis thinks, fails to account for it; hence L2:

The content of L2 says that if materialism were true, then there would be no moral law. Lewis's next move is to observe the existence of the moral law. This sets him up to make what logicians call a *modus tollens* argument or denying the consequent. Take any principle where one circumstance guarantees a second circumstance. Investigate whether the second circumstance is realized. If it does not, then the first circumstance cannot be realized either. For example, if a certain pet is a Chinese pug, then it is a dog. But suppose we discover that it is not a dog. Then, clearly it is not a pug either. In Lewis's case, the principle L2 predicts that human subjects living in materialist worlds or universes will not find a moral law. However, L3 says that there is a moral law. Hence, L4, materialism is false. The key to Lewis's reasoning is the term "moral law." Lewis must mean exactly the

same thing in both premises. As explained above, in L2 the moral law is a near-universal knowledge of or communication about a realist morality. It must be the same in L3—near-universal and realist.<sup>53</sup>

Lewis bears a reputation for championing moral realism, but it is not easy to find a full-scale argument for it in *Mere Christianity*. He works from anecdotes and stereotypes. However, he raises the issue often, and in several instances, he connects moral realism to certain commonly held opinions, including these:

Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.<sup>54</sup>

What is the sense in saying the enemy were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practiced?<sup>55</sup>

If your moral ideas can be truer, and those of the Nazis less true, there must be something—some Real Morality—for them to be true about.<sup>56</sup>

But if treaties matter, and if there is no such thing as Right and Wrong—in other words, if there is no Law of Nature—what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one?<sup>57</sup>

[D]o you think that the morality of one people is ever better or worse than another? Have any of the changes been improvements? If not, then of course there could never be any moral progress. Progress

<sup>53</sup> Beversluis says that Lewis treats his subjectivist opponents unfairly and so fails to convincingly establish objectivism in opposition to their views. Hugo Meynell, “An Attack on C. S. Lewis,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991), 306, has responded on Lewis’s behalf, and Beversluis includes a rebuttal in the revised edition of his book. Treating that discussion would be a detour from this article’s objective. A fair consideration of Lewis’s moral argument should focus on Lewis’s positive case for moral objectivism, not his treatment of moral subjectivists.

<sup>54</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 18-19.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

<sup>57</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 20.

means changing, but changing for the better.<sup>58</sup>

If no set of moral ideas were ever truer or better than any other, there would be no sense in preferring civilised morality to savage morality, or Christian morality to Nazi morality. In fact, of course, we all do believe that some moralities are better than others.<sup>59</sup>

In the same way, if a man asks what is the point of behaving decently, it is no good replying, 'in order to benefit society,' for trying to benefit society, in other words being unselfish (for 'society' after all only means 'other people'), is one of the things decent behaviour consists in; all you are really saying is that decent behaviour is decent behaviour. You would have said as much if you had stopped at the statement, 'Men ought to be unselfish.'<sup>60</sup>

[T]he very idea of something being imperfect, of its not being what it ought to be, has certain consequences.<sup>61</sup>

We do believe that some of the people who tried to change the moral ideas of their own age were what we would call Reformers or Pioneers—people who understood morality better than their neighbors. Very well then. The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another, you are, in fact, measuring them both by a standard, saying that one of them conforms to that standard more nearly than the other.<sup>62</sup>

Lewis finds moral realism lurking in the background of quarrels, criticisms of Nazis, evaluations of treaties, considerations of progress, comparisons of cultural norms, interests in societal benefit and unselfishness, notions of perfection and imperfection, and the elevation of so-called heroes. These involve commitments to certain moral facts—that is, to objective and public moral truths. Lewis does not bother to argue that the Nazis are in fact wrong or that any particular treaty is fair or unfair. He merely wants to point out that if one is committed to Nazis being wrong, then one is also committed to moral realism.

All this amounts to a tacit observation that many commonly held

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24-25.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

<sup>60</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 29-30.

<sup>61</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 27.

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

opinions presuppose moral realism. In other words, Lewis offers many ways to verify moral realism. One might characterize his case for L3 as what logicians call a *modus ponens* argument, or affirming the antecedent, with a long disjunctive list of widely accepted claims as the antecedent and moral realism as the consequent. Moral realism follows from the truth of any item on the list. This logical hair trigger helps Lewis to show how deeply most readers may already be invested in L3. Affirming anything on the list locks one into the premise in question.

Lewis's moral law in L3 is of a realist morality, but is the law near-universal? Lewis answers "yes" for two reasons: (1) the moral convictions of various cultures in fact conform to a common pattern and (2) biological constraints limit diversity among moral-cultural norms. According to Lewis, humankind by-and-large endorses the moral law. If they did not, then they would reject one another's moral standards rather than quarrelling about particular facts.<sup>63</sup> Despite an apparent diversity among surface-level customs, Lewis points to a deep homogeneity among the accepted moral principles of various social groups. He catalogs some of these principles in the *Abolition of Man*, to which *Mere Christianity* directs the reader.<sup>64</sup>

Natural selection, thinks Lewis, also limits moral-cultural diversity. He explains,

Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to—whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or every one. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first.<sup>65</sup>

Of course, some have challenged Lewis's canon of universal morals. Ayn Rand, for example, praises selfishness as an engine for widespread social improvement.<sup>66</sup> She believes that altruism or concern for the common

<sup>63</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 19. Since the universality of moral standards is an empirical claim, that part of Lewis's work is best evaluated by sociologists rather than here.

<sup>65</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> For example, see Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness*:

good works against fundamental drives for discovering happiness and ensuring survival. But Lewis seems right in saying that there could never be an entire people who praised Rand's ethic.<sup>67</sup> Without altruism and genuine concern for one's neighbor, how could such a people find soldiers to defend its territory or police to enforce its laws? Perhaps it would ultimately prove to be politically or biologically non-viable. A country dedicated to cowardice and backstabbing would soon extinguish itself. Lewis's moral law in L3 fulfills both features of the moral law in L2—realist and near-universal. So Lewis correctly infers L4 and then L5 from these.

This new reading of *Mere Christianity* takes C. S. Lewis's moral argument for the existence of God as a valid disjunctive syllogism, pitting theism against materialism. According to the argument, one should reject materialism in favor of theism. If materialism were true, then there would be no "moral law," no common human knowledge of the good and its demands. Lewis insists that one cannot obtain such knowledge empirically, just by observing human behavior. So the moral law represents a special type of knowledge and thereby falsifies materialism. Hence, theism is vindicated.

Lewis leaves no premise undefended. His is a noteworthy argument that philosophers should appreciate as much for its novelty as its cogency. Typically, arguments for the existence of God take either of two approaches, pragmatic or metaethical. Some pragmatic moral arguments say that moral living requires belief in God, because thinking beings cannot bring themselves to do good without believing that someone will reward their goodness.<sup>68</sup> Other pragmatic moral arguments claim that humankind, al-

*A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 13-39.

<sup>67</sup> Privately, David P. Hunt has pointed out the relevance of Plato's *Republic* 358e-359b on this matter. There, Glaucon takes up Thrasymachus's view, saying that human beings adhere to the moral law publicly but harbor private ambitions for evil. If this were the case, then societal adherence to the moral law would be a farce. Such a possibility, most likely, highlights a potential weakness in Lewis's argument.

<sup>68</sup> The most famous version of this argument appears in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956). More recently, Linda Zagzebski has made a similar case in "Does Ethics Need God?" in *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 294-303. An anonymous editor of this paper has suggested that Lewis's character of Vertue represents this line of thought in *The Pilgrim's Regress*. If so, then perhaps Lewis accepts certain pragmatic arguments for the existence of God, but that is not his approach in *Mere Christianity*.

though aware of the moral law, cannot fulfill it, so they must seek help from, and therefore believe in, God.<sup>69</sup> Metaethical arguments, on the other hand, posit God to explain morality itself. God grounds morality, as in Divine Command Theory.<sup>70</sup>

Pragmatic arguments can fall prey to objections that deny moral obligations or pragmatic necessities as legitimate justifying reasons for belief. "Pragmatic necessity" sounds a great deal like "wishful thinking." On the other hand, taking the metaethical route and saying that God grounds morality, even if true, means taking a rhetorically treacherous path, as mentioned above. It entrenches one in metaethical squabbles. Lewis, on the other hand, treats the moral law as a non-empirical kind of knowledge about a realist morality, without attending to the metaethical details. Then, he targets materialism's incompatibility with that knowledge. This approach makes Lewis's argument compatible with pragmatic and metaethical moral arguments, but it also sports some rhetorical advantages.

On the downside, Lewis's argument leaves one with a mere "Something" that communicates via a moral law. Omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence never feature. This god could be the God of the great monotheistic religions, but it might be only a thinking Life-Force. A more detailed description of a particular religion or doctrine lies beyond the scope of the argument. Lewis concludes with the existence of a morally-concerned Mind in communication with and giving orders to humankind.

<sup>69</sup> For example, see John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>70</sup> The best example is perhaps Paul Copan, "A Moral Argument," in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview: Essays in Honor of Norman L. Geisler*, ed. by Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 108-23.