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The Reasonable Faith: C.S. Lewis's Argument for Christianity from the Characteristics of Human Reason

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C. S. Lewis regarded his task as a Christian apologist to be one of *praeparatio evangelica*, which literally means "preparation for the gospel" (Heck 235). Many people, both in Lewis's time and our own, casually dismiss Christianity because they believe other worldviews can better explain reality. Not only did Lewis disagree with this view, but he was also able to remove such intellectual barriers to the Christian faith ("Christian Apologetics" 99). One of the strongest arguments that Lewis gave against this belief was that secular worldviews could not explain certain aspects of human reason. As was his custom, Lewis first exposed this problem and then offered his readers a solution. Through many of his writings, C. S. Lewis prepared his readers to listen to the gospel by showing that modernism—the dominant worldview of his lifetime—and the ideas that would grow into postmodernism could not account for important characteristics of human reason, and that the justification for our reason is found in Christianity.

Lewis began his argument by establishing that in order for any of our thoughts to be rational, we must have a foundation for our ability to reason. Reason is what allows us to recognize truth, and the most outstanding characteristic of human reason is its ability to recognize *necessary* truth. Logically necessary truths are those which do not depend on the natural order of the world, have no time when they "began" to be true, and do not alter with age. Lewis illustrated this concept when he said that his belief in the principles of mathematics was not "based on the fact" that he had never seen them violated. Rather, mathematical

truths are things that we "see... 'must' be so" (*Miracles* 30-31). If we are to trust that such truths are valid, we must be able to justify human rationality by something apart from reason. As Lewis wrote, "If the value of our reasoning is in doubt, you cannot try to establish it by reasoning" (*Miracles* 33). A reasonable argument aimed at proving that reason does come to truth is question-begging.

To avoid this circular argument, Lewis pointed out that reason must be justified by something above reason: namely, a worldview. Worldviews are simply systems of faith that determine how we interpret the world around us, thereby determining the way we use our reason. "What we learn from experience," Lewis noted, "depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience" (*Miracles* 2). To accurately interpret any of our experiences in life, our reason must be able to discover truth. The nature of faith makes it impossible for it to be rationally justified, as faith, in the general sense, "is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods" (Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 125). Faith cannot be rationally justified because it allows us to defend our reason. However, the fact that no system of faith can be rationally justified provides worldviews with the opportunity to justify our use of reason. For an adequate justification of human reason, a worldview must provide reason with a goal and the motivation to reach that goal. To use one of Lewis's analogies, it is as if all people were members of an orchestra (*Mere Christianity* 71). Reason allows us to play our instruments, yet reason alone cannot tell us what

piece to play or why we should play at all. Lewis held that any coherent worldview would account for the existence and characteristics of rational thought, and it would apply reason to life in a meaningful way.

As secular modernism was the controlling worldview in Lewis's England, he devoted much of his writings to exposing its flaws. C. S. Lewis had a gift for cutting directly to the heart of a matter, and therefore his argument was directed against the foundation of secular modernist thinking: naturalism. The naturalist, Lewis defined, is one who views nature as a closed system of natural processes which "*is going on of its own accord*" (*Miracles* 8). Therefore, the modernist's view of the universe has no room for a Supernatural Creator who works in His creation. As illustrated by Lewis in his Space Trilogy, those who hold to a naturalistic view of the universe will accept even the most unlikely naturalistic explanations instead of believing that anything supernatural is at work in the universe (*Out of the Silent Planet* 126-127). In short, secular modernists believe that the natural world can offer a sufficient explanation for every happening in the world.

As modernists have no God in whom to place their faith, they trust in the ability of human reason to discover all truth by means of science. Lewis noted that modernists have faith that nature is a closed system, and therefore they believe that all objective truth comes from strict reasoning or scientific discoveries (Veith 368). By "den[ying] the reality of the supernatural and see[ing] humans as a part of nature," modernism teaches that people are "subject only to the laws... that [the] scientific method discovers" (Musacchio 222). Secular modernists regard Christianity as unscientific and consequently irrational; therefore, they do not readily accept arguments from "religious" perspectives. Lewis found no

reason to argue against modernism from a Christian view of the world, however, as he pointed out that modernists cannot support the truth of their own worldview.

The dilemma of modernism is this: science, the modernists' foundation for truth, depends on the reliability of reason, but it cannot explain how human reason could ever reach any truth. Trapped inside modernism, science is forced to explain reason—and everything else—according to natural processes. Thoughts—rational or otherwise—are therefore reduced to the "by-product of the movement of atoms" (Lewis, "Answers" 52). After all, one could perform scientific experiments on the chemical processes in the human brain; one could not do the same for thoughts. Modernists agree that nature has no plans or purposes, and therefore the chemical processes we call "rational thought" must simply be the impulses that proved to be beneficial to survival and were therefore preserved and developed by natural selection (Lewis, *Miracles* 28).

This is a definite problem for modernists, because natural selection is not governed by anything rational. Lewis pointed out that people do not "attach any significance" to thoughts with irrational sources, "but if naturalism were true then all thoughts... would be wholly the result of irrational causes. Therefore, all thoughts would be equally worthless" (Lewis, "Dogma" 137). For thought to be rational, it must come to logically necessary truth. As stated before, logically necessary truths are truths such as the laws of mathematics which are not dependent on the natural world. The fact that two plus two equals four is valid even if neither group of two represents any real entity. Modernists are in a bind because thought has been used to develop the naturalistic theory, yet that theory excludes the possibility of any logically

necessary truth. Modernism is at a loss to explain how anything could be necessarily true, because the natural order of the world is not necessary. Nature exists, but nothing in nature must exist. We cannot justify logically necessary truths by anything in the natural world, because, as Lewis illustrated, the fact that light *does* affect our eyes in a certain way in no way implies that it *must* act upon our eyes in that manner (*Miracles* 28-29). When a naturalistic view of the world is held we can only know that things exist, we cannot know that anything *must* be true. Therefore, we cannot know that naturalism is true. "If naturalism is true," Lewis stated, "we can know no truths" ("Dogma" 137). Lewis's insistence on this point was undoubtedly enough to make many secular modernists take another look at their worldview.

Lewis was not one to end any argument until he had dealt with all aspects of it, so he continued to argue against modernism by pointing out that this worldview could not justify its goal for human reason. Modernists are very concerned with "progress," by which they mean improving human existence by means of science. However, natural processes—the ultimate reality for modernists—in a closed natural system can have no purposes, as there would be nothing outside of nature able to grant them a purpose. Nature simply exists without interference; therefore science cannot tell us why we should work for progress. In fact, the modernist view of the world makes "progress" a meaningless word. To "progress" means that one is moving closer to doing things the way they *ought* to be done, yet the natural world provides no standard for determining the way things *ought* to be. Naturalists, Lewis noted, have "no ground for criticizing" the state of any society (*Abolition* 59). Therefore, secular modernism supplies no reason for modernists to "live and die for

the good of the human race," as any condition the human race finds itself in is just as "good" any other condition (*Miracles* 57). Although secular modernism was developed by people wanting to scientifically improve the human race, it cannot tell us what improvement is.

Just as modernism provides no goal for human reason, it also fails to provide reason with any guidance. Lewis noted that science itself only tells us what can be done; it does not tell us what should be done ("Progress" 312). With scientific advances we can both prolong life and end it painlessly, but the mere fact that we *can* do something does not mean that we *should* do it. Furthermore, secular modernism destroys the only thing that can guide our progress in science and every other area of life: the moral law. This is what allows people to say that certain behaviors are "wrong," because Lewis firmly believed that all people know that "Right is a real thing" (*Mere Christianity* 19). The moral law is reason's standard, and without it reason has "nothing to tell...of good and bad" (Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress* 58). As modernism must explain everything according to contingent natural processes, morality, which claims to be necessary, must be an "illusion" (*Miracles* 57). After all, morality deals with how one *should* and *should not* behave, and it implies that there is a universal standard for behavior that is separate from the natural order of the world.

Modernism ends up divorcing reason from morality and goals, thus causing life to become fragmented. If morality is indeed an illusion, we cannot understand ourselves. For as Lewis said, in spite of anything "we say we shall continue [to make moral judgments]" (*Miracles* 60). In the deepest part of our reason, we know that it is better to calmly discuss differences of opinion than to murder people who do not

share our views. Secular modernism cannot justify morality or the main components of human reason, however, although modernists attempt to disguise their flawed worldview under a cloak of "reasonableness." There are many who have seen beyond this disguise, however. As Lewis was well acquainted with the hopelessness of modernism, he was able to predict the basic tenets of postmodernism: a worldview that has seen how modernism cannot sufficiently explain reality (Veith 368-369). Postmodernists have discovered that modernism ends up in pieces, but instead of seeking some other way to reconcile reason with goals and morality, they embrace the pieces and attempt to rid life of the cloak of reason.

Although postmodernism was not fully developed in C. S. Lewis's lifetime, he pointed out flaws in the ideas that would grow into this worldview. Lewis argued against the core of postmodernism: the belief that objective truth does not exist, so human beings can decide for themselves what is "true" (Veith 368). As reason depends on objective truth, postmodernism rejects the validity of human reason by rejecting objective truth. Lewis illustrated this situation in his novel *The Great Divorce*, as one of his characters could not accept the idea of "some sort of static, ready-made reality which is, so to speak 'there' "(45). Without objective truth to seek after, this character's "thirst of Reason is... dead..." (Lewis, *Great Divorce* 45). For if everything is "merely subjective," Lewis wrote, there "is no reason for supposing that [logic] yields truth" (qt. in Veith 370-371). The difficulty of arguing against the postmodernist position, as Lewis predicted, is that postmodernists do not believe that reasonable arguments can lead to objective truth.

Lewis, however, did not let this hinder him from exposing the flaws of this

worldview. The rejection of objective truth is a serious barrier to the Christian faith, for, as Lewis wrote, Christianity claims to be objectively true and if this claim is true Christianity is "of infinite importance" (qt. in Veith 373-374). Lewis knew that it would be the postmodernists' wish to be free from the abuses of reason to pursue their goals. In his books, Lewis often showed his readers the result of postmodernism, and his conclusion was that the postmodern way of thinking would not free people from the abuse of reason. Reason is part of what make humans human, and it cannot be banished from life. Lewis argued for Plato's idea that humans are comprised of a "head" (reason), a "belly" (desires), and a "chest" (properly trained emotions). According to Lewis, humans are meant to function with "[t]he head rul[ing] the belly through the chest" (*Abolition* 35). As postmodernism makes morality subjective, reason has no means with which to restrain desires. Therefore, desires rule over reason in the postmodernist view of life. As Lewis would show, however, reason cannot be driven out of life and postmodernism would not be able to account for the characteristics of human reason upon which it depends.

One characteristic of human reason is the ability to discover objective truth, and Lewis showed in many different ways one cannot deny all objective truth. The first difficulty for postmodernism is that while it insists that no absolute, objective truth exists, that very statement is held to be an absolute. As Lewis wrote, "a proof that there are no proofs is nonsensical..." and so also one cannot say that it is an objective fact that there are no objective facts (*Miracles* 33). Furthermore, there are certain objective standards that must be obeyed if human society is to exist. It is impossible to imagine that a culture could survive if all the people in it would feel "proud of double-crossing

all the people who had been kindest to [them]" (Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 19). A society cannot exist without an objective standard of behavior. Continuing Lewis's example, if telling the truth was not required in a culture, then people would not trust what others said to them. Without trust, people would not be able to come to any agreements about the running of their society. A society such as this could not last very long. For a culture to survive it must demand that its members tell the truth; there is simply no way to deny this fact. Lewis saw that postmodern thinking was flawed from the very start, as objective truth does indeed exist.

Human reason not only recognizes objective truth; it is also directed towards a goal. The standard of truth telling, for example, exists *for the purpose* of maintaining a society. A worldview that attempts to rid life of objective truth cannot have any true goals for human existence. When Lewis's character in *The Great Divorce* states that "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive," he is immediately faced with the response, "If that were true, and known to be true, how could one travel hopefully? There would be nothing to hope for" (44). If there is no objective truth to "arrive" at, there cannot be any truly meaningful goal in life.

Along with postmodernism's lack of goals, it is also lacking guidelines for reason to follow. Postmodernist thinking cannot provide anything to restrain the use of reason, as reason is simply used to work towards desires. However, "[t]elling someone to follow their instinct is like telling them to follow 'people,'" Lewis recorded. "People say different things; so do instincts" (*Abolition* 49). This raises more difficulties, and Lewis was quick to observe that if desires were allowed to rule over life, there would be no rational way to decide which desire to follow. As Lewis predicted,

if desires are not restrained by reason, and reason by the standard of morality, people would be ruled by their strongest impulse (*The Abolition of Man* 76). Without a standard of morality, we cannot say that an impulse to betray one's country, "[o]r to print lies as serious research," or to kill someone can be wrong (Lewis, *Perelandra* 95). This is the appalling result of denying objective truth.

Exposing the flaws of modernism and postmodernism was only half of Lewis's defense of Christianity. After he demonstrated how modernism and the foundational ideas of postmodernism could not sufficiently explain human rationality, he showed how faith in the God of Christianity explains why our reason is what it is. Lewis made it clear that Christian faith is not like other kinds of faith. Where modernists have faith that reason and science are the only ways to discover objective truth, and postmodernists have faith that objective truth does not exist, Christian faith is based on the commitment to trust God. Lewis wrote that "[t]o trust [God] means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying that you trusted a person if you would not take his advice" (*Mere Christianity* 130-131). God has defined the proper role for reason in the life of His creatures, and Christians are committed to trusting that His way is the correct way. Lewis showed that this faith is not a blind faith because it justifies our use of reason, and that following God's restrictions and goals for reason allow us to use our reason to its fullest potential.

Christianity has often been ridiculed as an unreasonable faith because belief in God is not strictly rational. Lewis did not deny this charge, because faith in any sense is beyond the realm of reason. He simply pointed out that if we try, as modernists do, to reduce everything to the level of human

reason, we would no longer be able to call our thoughts rational. Christianity promises, among other things, to justify our ability to discover truth through reason. In order to do this, the Christian worldview must be outside the realm of human reason. Otherwise, the argument would be circular; for trying to justify faith by reason destroys both faith and reason.

Far from destroying human reason, belief and trust in God lays the foundation for our rationality. According to the biblical worldview held by C. S. Lewis, God has created human reason. Lewis saw this fact as the key to understanding our reason. As God is not part of the world He has created, He had the power to create our reason as something distinct from the natural order of the world. Lewis describes God as “the Eternal Fact, the Father of all other facthood” (*Great Divorce* 45). Christianity explains how logically necessary truth exists, and therefore it provides a foundation for our reason that cannot be supplied by either secular modernism or postmodernism. We recognize necessary and objective truths because they come from a God who has always existed and is not a part of His creation.

While our reason is something separate from nature, we are still able to discover truths about nature. Lewis explained that according to the Christian worldview, “reason—the reason of God—is older than Nature, and from it the orderliness of Nature, which alone enables us to know her, is derived” (*Miracles* 34). Because our reason is a copy of God’s perfect rationality, and God’s reason has created the world, people are able to understand (in part) the order of the natural world. Lewis illustrated this concept by stating that Christians believe “God ‘made [the world] up out of His head’ as a man makes up a story” (*Mere Christianity* 45). When we study nature, we do so as if

we were reading a book. Our reason is no more a part of nature than a reader is part of a book. We are able to examine nature’s story in detail, or to think of it in terms of the overarching plot. The fact that we are able to study nature is evidence that our thoughts are not simply natural processes, for, as Lewis wrote, “the knowledge of a thing is not one of the thing’s parts.

[Because we have knowledge of Nature as a whole] something beyond Nature operates whenever we reason” (*Miracles* 37-38).

While Christianity explains how we are able to discover truth, it also provides reason with a goal for acquiring truth: to serve God by serving others. Perhaps the best illustration of this is not any of Lewis’s analogies, but rather the kind of books he wrote. Being a highly intelligent and well-educated man, Lewis could have spent his life writing for people on his intellectual level. Indeed, many scholars wished he would have written more “important books in literary history [such as the “Allegory of Love”] instead of *that other stuff!*” (qt. in Walsh 120). However, Lewis demonstrated true humility by using his reason to write books that common people could understand, and writing in a manner that everyone could grasp did not limit Lewis’s need for reason. In fact, expressing Christian truths in the language of ordinary people increased Lewis’s need to think clearly and logically. “I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language,” Lewis said, “then your thoughts were confused” (“Christian Apologetics” 98). By submitting his reason to God’s plan for his life, Lewis was able to expose flawed arguments against Christianity while he improved his ability to write clearly. As Lewis’s life displays, when the goal of our reason is to serve God, we discover what our reason is truly capable of achieving.

However, simply having a goal for reason to work towards is useless if there is no motivation for reason to reach that goal. Christianity motivated Lewis to use his reason to serve his neighbors in two distinct ways. First, Lewis wrote that Christians should be willing to serve others because all people have been created in the image of God, and thus they possess an immortal soul. "There are no *ordinary* people" Lewis stated. "You have never talked to a mere mortal" (qt. in Jolley 95). People are going to live forever in either Hell or Heaven, and this fact leads to Lewis's second source of motivation: the fact that Christ died for all people to save them from their sins. Lewis stated that "Christianity... has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people... who do not feel that they need any forgiveness" (*Mere Christianity* 38). Well aware of his own sins, Lewis was motivated out of gratitude towards the sacrifice Christ had made for him, and he responded to God's love by serving others. Lewis knew that his work as an apologist could not save anyone, but he also knew that his arguments would prepare people to listen to the saving message of the gospel (Musacchio 213).

Along with motivating people to use their reason, Lewis argued that Christianity is the only worldview that provides reason with sufficient guidelines. Christianity allows reason to rule desires because reason has an objective standard of morality to follow. Human beings have been designed by God to function in a specific way, and Lewis wrote that "moral rules are [the objective] directions for running the human machine" (*Mere Christianity* 69). These guidelines do not hinder reason, because our reason recognizes that we must obey them. This fact, Lewis wrote, is evidenced by our idea of things we should and should not do. To say that one ought to do something is to say that there is a standard of behavior that

one is to follow. For example, Christianity explains that we know we ought to respect the dignity of each human being because all people are created in the image of God. Thus, our idea about the value of human life is justified, and we can restrain our reason from doing anything that would devalue life.

Throughout this argument, Lewis demonstrated that Christianity was the solution to the difficulties that secular worldviews face in explaining human reason. The remarkable thing about Lewis's form of apologetics is that he began his arguments strictly from the non-Christian's point of view, and showed that, along with failing to explain the most pronounced characteristics of human reason, neither modernism nor the infant form of postmodernism could give people what they were seeking. Modernists wish to perfect human society by their own reason, but modernism does not give them any standard of perfection or foundation for rational thought. Both of these things, Lewis demonstrated, are found in Christianity alone. Likewise, postmodernists simply want to follow their desires, yet their worldview gives them no ability to rationally decide which desires to follow. The moral law is only valid if God is its source. While Lewis knew that no one would be converted simply by recognizing that Christianity can adequately explain human reason, it was his hope that, after seeing how Christianity accurately interpreted reality, people would be prepared to listen to the gospel message.

Notes

Secular modernism is the branch of modernism that believes everything can be explained in terms of the natural world. It is not to be confused with other forms of modernism that accept the supernatural, for these sorts of modernism can give a more

convincing account of human reason than secular modernists can. The "modernism" that I shall refer to in this paper is secular modernism.

Lewis did not expect modernists to have a ready answer to every question, but he did hold that if modernism were correct the natural world would *be able* to explain every happening (*Miracles* 17).

C. S. Lewis died in 1963 just days before his sixty-fifth birthday, and the rise of postmodernism did not take place until after this event (Veith 368).

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