

Lessons from C.S. Lewis

Two issues which vex Christians today are moral subjectivism and the origin of the world. Through a couple of his recorded lectures, C.S. Lewis provides helpful insights and answers to the challenges we face.

The Poison of Subjectivism

C.S. Lewis was both a serious scholar who could tangle with the great minds of his day and a popular author who had the wonderful ability to write for children. Lewis, who died in 1963, is still an intellectual force who is well worth reading.

I want to dig into Lewis's thinking on a few subjects which are still applicable today. Studying writers like Lewis helps us love God with our minds.



Are Values Created by Us?

Let's begin with a very pertinent issue today, that of *subjectivism*. Subjectivism is the belief that individual persons—or subjects—are the source of knowledge and moral values. What is true or morally good finds its final authority in people, not in an external source like God. Today there is more of an emphasis on groups of people rather than individuals. However, truth and morality arise from our own ideas or feelings.

Over the last few hundred years there have been many attempts to work out ethical systems that are grounded in our subjective states apart from God but somehow provide universal moral values. That project has been a failure. The individual is now left to his or her own devices to figure out how to live, except, of course, for laws of the state.

In a lecture titled “The Poison of Subjectivism,” Lewis scrutinizes subjectivist thinking with a special focus on what he calls “practical reason.” Practical reason is our capacity for deciding what to do, how to act. It has to do with judgments of value. It is different from theoretical reason which deals with, well, theories. Practical reason answers the question, What should I do?

It sounds odd today to talk about moral values as matters of reason since people tend more to go with what they *feel* is the right thing to do. But this is just the problem, Lewis says. “Until modern times,” he wrote, “no thinker of the first rank ever doubted that our judgements of value were rational judgements or that what they discovered was objective.”{1} In other words, matters of value have not always been separated from the realm of reason.

Lewis continues:

Out of this apparently innocent idea [that values are subjective] comes the disease that will certainly end our species (and, in my view, damn our souls) if it is not crushed; the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its ‘ideology’ as men choose their clothes.{2}

Just as we don’t measure the physical length of something by itself, but rather use a measuring instrument such as a yardstick, we also need a moral “instrument” for deciding what is good or bad. Otherwise, what we do isn’t good or bad, it’s just . . . what we do.

Cultural Relativism

A prominent form of moral relativism today is *cultural relativism*. This is the belief that each culture chooses its own values regardless of the values other cultures choose. There is no universal moral norm. This idea is supposed to

come from the observation that different cultures have different sets of values. A leap is made from there to the claim that that is how things *should* be.

We're often tempted to counter such a notion with the simple answer that the Bible says otherwise. Lewis provides a good lesson in doing apologetics by subjecting the belief itself to scrutiny. Cultural relativism is based on the assumption that cultures are very different with respect to values. Lewis claims that all the supposed differences are exaggerated. The idea that "cultures differ so widely that there is no common tradition at all" is a lie, he says; "a good, solid, resounding lie." He elaborates:

If a man will go into a library and spend a few days with the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* he will soon discover that massive unanimity of the practical reason in man. From the Babylonian *Hymn to Samos*, from the Laws of Manu, the *Book of the Dead*, the Analects, the Stoics, the Platonists, from Australian aborigines and Redskins, he will collect the same triumphantly monotonous denunciations of oppression, murder, treachery and falsehood, the same injunctions of kindness to the aged, the young, and the weak, of almsgiving and impartiality and honesty. He may be a little surprised . . . to find that precepts of mercy are more frequent than precepts of justice; but he will no longer doubt that there is such a thing as the Law of Nature. There are, of course, differences. . . . But the pretence that we are presented with a mere chaos . . . is simply false.{3}

Someone might ask whether the Fall of Adam and Eve made us incapable of knowing this law. But Lewis insists that the Fall didn't damage our *knowledge* of the law as much as it did our ability to *obey* it. There is impairment, to be sure. But as he says, "there is a difference between imperfect sight and blindness." {4}

We still have a knowledge of good and evil. The good that we seek is not found within the subject, within us. It is rooted in God. It is neither above God as a law *He* has to follow, nor is it a set of rules God arbitrarily made up. It comes from His nature. And, since we are made in His image, it suits our nature to live according to it.

Is Theology Poetry?

In 1944, Lewis was invited to speak at a meeting of the University Socratic Club at Oxford. The topic was, “Is Theology Poetry?”[\[5\]](#)

Lewis defines poetry here as, “writing which arouses and in part satisfies the imagination.” He thus restates the question this way: “Does Christian Theology owe its attraction to its power of arousing and satisfying our imagination?”[\[6\]](#)

Why would this question even be raised? This was the era of such scholars as Rudolph Bultmann who believed the message of the Bible was encrusted in supernatural ideas unacceptable to modern people. Bultmann wanted to save Christian truth by “demythologizing” it.

Some Problems

It has been assumed by some critics that until modern times people didn't know the difference between reality and fantasy. But this is a condescending attitude. People know the difference for the most part, even premodern people—and even Christians! In fact, Lewis believes there are elements in Christian theology which work *against* it as poetry. He says, for example, that the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't have the “monolithic grandeur” of Unitarian conceptions of God, or the richness of polytheism. God's omnipotence, for another example, doesn't fit the poetic image of the hero who is tragically defeated in the end.[\[7\]](#)

Critics point out that the Bible contains some of the same elements found in other religions—creation accounts, floods, risings from the dead—and conclude that it is just another example of ancient mythology. Lewis says there are notable differences. For example, in the pagan stories, people die and rise again either every year or at some unknown time and place, whereas the resurrection of Christ happened once and in a recognizable location.

However, we shouldn't shy away from the fact that our theology will sometimes resemble mythological accounts. Why? Because we cannot state it in completely non-metaphorical, nonsymbolic forms. "God came down to earth" is metaphorical language, as is "God entered history." "All language about things other than physical objects is necessarily metaphorical," Lewis says.[{8}](#)

Did early Christians believe the metaphorical language of Scripture literally? Lewis says "the alternative we are offering them [between literal and metaphorical] was probably never present to their minds at all."[{9}](#) While early Christians would have thought of their faith using anthropomorphic imagery, that doesn't mean their faith was bound up with details about celestial throne rooms and the like. Lewis says that once the symbolic nature of some of Scripture became explicit, they recognized it for what it was without feeling their faith was compromised.

The Myth of Evolution

Lewis had a wonderful way of turning criticisms back on the critics. So they believe Christian doctrine is mythological because of its language? They should look to their *own* beliefs! These critics, Lewis says, believe "one of the finest myths which human imagination has yet produced," the myth of blind evolution. This is how he describes this myth.[{10}](#)

The story begins with infinite void and matter. By a tiny chance the conditions are such to produce the first spark of life. Everything is against it, but somehow it survives. "With infinite suffering, against all but insuperable obstacles," Lewis says, "it spreads, it breeds, it complicates itself, from the amoeba up to the plant, up to the reptile, up to the mammal. We glance briefly at the age of monsters. Dragons prowl the earth, devour one another, and die. . . . As the weak, tiny spark of life began amidst the huge hostilities of the inanimate, so now again, amidst the beasts that are far larger and stronger than he, there comes forth a little naked, shivering, cowering creature, shuffling, not yet erect, promising nothing, the product of another millionth millionth chance. Yet somehow he thrives." He becomes the Cave Man who worships the horrible gods he made in his own image. Then comes true Man who learns to master nature. "Science comes and dissipates the superstitions of his infancy." Man becomes the controller of his fate.

Zoom into the future, when a race of demigods rules the planet, "for eugenics have made certain that only demigods will be born, and psychoanalysis that none of them shall lose or smirch his divinity, and communism that all which divinity requires shall be ready to their hands. Man has ascended to his throne. Henceforward he has nothing to do but to practice virtue, to grow in wisdom, to be happy."

The last scene in the story reverses everything. We have the Twilight of the Gods. The sun cools, the universe runs down, life is banished. "All ends in nothingness, and 'universal darkness covers all.'"

"The pattern of the myth thus becomes one of the noblest we can conceive," Lewis says. "It is the pattern of many Elizabethan tragedies, where the protagonist's career can be represented by a slowly ascending and then rapidly falling curve, with its highest point in Act IV."

“Such a world drama appeals to every part of us,” Lewis says. However, even though he personally found it a moving story, Lewis said he believed less than half of what it told him about the past and less than nothing of what it told him about the future.[\[11\]](#)

This kind of response to the critic of Christianity doesn't prove that the critic is wrong. Just to show that he has his own mythology doesn't prove he is wrong about Christianity. That's called a *tu quoque* argument, which means “you too.” It serves, however, to make the critic hesitate before making simplistic charges against Christians. What is important about a belief system isn't first of all whether it contains poetical elements. It's whether it is true.

Naturalism and Reason

Having pointed out that the critic has his own mythology, Lewis examines another aspect of the issue, that of the reliability of reason, the primary tool of science.

Critics were purportedly looking at Christian doctrine from a scientific perspective. They believed that the findings of science made religious belief unacceptable. Lewis was no outsider to the atheistic mentality often found among scientists; he had been an atheist himself. Yet even as such, he didn't have a triumphal vision of science as being the welcomed incoming tide that overtook the old mythological view of the world held by Christians. Lewis had accepted as truth the “grand myth” of evolution which I recounted previously, but he came to see a serious problem with it quite apart from any religious convictions. “Deepening distrust and final abandonment of it,” Lewis wrote, “long preceded my conversion to Christianity. Long before I believed Theology to be true I had already decided that the popular scientific picture at any rate was false.”[\[12\]](#) There was “one absolutely central inconsistency” that ruined it. This was the inconsistency of

basing belief in evolution on human reason when the belief itself made reason suspect![{13}](#)

What Lewis calls “the popular scientific view” or “the Scientific Outlook” is based on naturalism, the view that nature is all there is; there is no supernatural being or realm. Everything must be explained in terms of the natural order; the “Total System,” Lewis calls it.[{14}](#) If there’s any one thing that *cannot* be given a satisfactory naturalistic explanation, then naturalism falls.

Lewis contends that reason *itself* is something that can’t be explained in naturalistic terms. This is an especially pertinent matter, because reason is one of the primary tools of science, and science is the great authority for evolutionists.

Science, Lewis says, depends upon logical inferences from observed facts. Unless logical inference is valid, scientific study has no basis. But if reason is “simply the unforeseen and unintended by-product of mindless matter at one stage of its endless and aimless becoming,” how can we trust it? How do we know our thoughts reflect reality? How can we trust the random movement of atoms in our brain to reliably convey to us knowledge of the world outside us? “They ask me at the same moment to accept a conclusion,” Lewis says, “and to discredit the only testimony on which that conclusion can be based.”[{15}](#)

In short, then, if reason is our authority for believing in naturalistic evolution, but the theory of evolution makes us question reason, the whole theory is without solid foundation.

The science of the evolutionist cannot explain reason. Christianity, however, can. In fact, it explains much more than that. Lewis ends the lecture with one of his famous quotations, one that is hanging on my office door: “I believe in Christianity,” he says, “as I believe that the Sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see

everything else.”[\[16\]](#)

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 73.
2. Lewis, 73.
3. Lewis, 77.
4. Lewis, 79.
5. C. S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), 116.
6. Ibid., 117.
7. Ibid., 118.
8. Ibid., 133-34.
9. Ibid., 131.
10. Ibid., 123-25.
11. Ibid., 125-26.
12. Ibid., 134-35.
13. This argument is found at the end of “Is Theology Poetry?” A lengthier discussion is found in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), chap. 3.
14. Lewis, *Miracles*, 17.
15. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 135-36.
16. Ibid., 140.