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978-0-521-70710-7 - God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and  
Bertrand Russell

Erik J. Wielenberg

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Plato tells us that Socrates, facing execution in 399 B.C., declared that “the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.”<sup>1</sup> Writing nearly two thousand years later, Michel de Montaigne remarked that “all the wisdom and reasoning in the world boils down finally to this point: to teach us not to be afraid to die.”<sup>2</sup>

If the measure of a philosopher is the ability to face death without fear, then Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963), David Hume (1711–1776), and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) were great philosophers indeed. In the penultimate paragraph of his brief autobiography, “My Own Life,” David Hume relates that he has been “struck with a Disorder in my Bowels” which has “become mortal and incurable.”<sup>3</sup> He remarks on his state of mind as follows:

I have suffered very little pain from my Disorder; and what is more strange, have, notwithstanding the great Decline of my Person, never suffered a Moments Abatement of my Spirits: Insomuch, that were I to name the Period of my Life which I [should] most choose to pass over again I might be tempted to point to this later Period.<sup>4</sup>

Samuel Johnson’s biographer James Boswell was simultaneously fascinated and horrified by Hume’s calm acceptance of his own impending death. This was because Boswell knew that Hume did not believe in an afterlife. Boswell visited Hume repeatedly while Hume was on his deathbed, questioning him on the topic of annihilation. Hume’s death on August 25, 1776, sent Boswell into “a mental crisis during

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which he sounded the depths of moral degradation.”<sup>5</sup> Hume’s death, it seems, was harder on Boswell than it was on Hume.

C. S. Lewis also faced impending death as a result of poor health, and in one of his last letters he expressed sentiments remarkably similar to those expressed by Hume: “Yes, autumn is really the best of the seasons; and I’m not sure that old age isn’t the best part of life.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis’s brother reports that Lewis faced death “bravely and calmly,” at one point remarking, “I have done all I wanted to do, and I’m ready to go.”<sup>7</sup> Lewis died peacefully on November 22, 1963; his death was overshadowed in the press by the assassination of John F. Kennedy on the same day.<sup>8</sup>

Bertrand Russell was by far the most politically active of the three thinkers who are the focus of this book. He wrote letters and articles, gave speeches, started a school, won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and spent time in prison, including six months in 1918 for writing an antiwar article. His activism was triggered by the outbreak of the first World War in 1914, an event that, according to Russell, shattered the “Victorian optimism” that had been taken for granted when he was a young man.<sup>9</sup>

In the Postscript to his autobiography, Russell reflected on his long life, remarking that “[m]y work is near its end, and the time has come when I can survey it as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> Assessing his life, Russell noted both failures and victories. But his final remarks indicate an underlying optimism:

I have lived in the pursuit of a vision, both personal and social. Personal: to care for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is gentle: to allow moments of insight to give wisdom at more mundane times. Social: to see in imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them. These things I believe, and the world, for all its horrors, has left me unshaken.<sup>11</sup>

Russell’s pursuit of a personal and social vision seems to have sustained him in his old age as death loomed, in much the way he described in an essay called “How to Grow Old”:

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An individual human existence should be like a river – small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man who, in old age, can see his life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things he cares for will continue.<sup>12</sup>

One feature common to the deaths of Hume, Lewis, and Russell is that they were *philosophical* deaths. By this I mean that each thinker faced his death armed with a comprehensive view about the nature of human beings and their place in the universe that had been carefully developed and considered over a long period of time. Yet these worldviews were quite different from one another. Lewis's view was a fairly traditional version of Christianity, centered on a personal God who created, loves, and interacts with human beings. Hume and Russell both rejected the notion of a personal, loving God, admitting at best a distant, largely unknowable Deity that does not fiddle about in human affairs. Lewis saw our earthly lives as merely a tiny (but important) fraction of our overall existence, whereas Hume and Russell viewed such lives as all we get. Interestingly, Lewis spent many years in the Hume–Russell camp (broadly speaking) before converting to Christianity in his early thirties.

Lewis, Hume, and Russell were (among other things) philosophers, and each offered arguments for his own worldview and against competing views. This book is a philosophical examination of some of these arguments, with a particular emphasis on those of Lewis. This book is about suffering, morality, reason, joy, miracles, faith, and God. It is about the views of three great thinkers on deep and important topics.

Hume and Russell are giants in the Western philosophical tradition. Hume's work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is widely considered one of the most important works in the philosophy of religion in the Western tradition. In the introduction to a recent book devoted to examining critically Hume's views on religion, the editors

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observe that “from his day to ours, the vast majority of philosophical attacks against the rationality of theism have borne an unmistakable Humean aroma.”<sup>13</sup> Russell’s place in the pantheon of Western philosophers is similarly well established, though his reputation for greatness is due more to his contributions in logic and the philosophy of mathematics than to his work in the philosophy of religion. Lewis’s case, however, is somewhat different; while his works of fiction and Christian apologetics are widely read and adored, his writing has been largely (but not entirely) ignored by contemporary philosophers. Or at least, his Christian writing has received relatively little attention from professional philosophers *in their professional capacity*. This is despite ample evidence that contemporary Christian philosophers are familiar with Lewis’s work and, indeed, that some have been dramatically influenced by it. For instance, the prominent contemporary Christian philosopher Peter van Inwagen writes that “[l]ike many other people, I first discovered what Christianity *was* from reading Lewis.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to say that it was through Lewis that he first saw that “Christianity was a serious thing and intellectually at a very high level.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever the reason for the relative neglect of Lewis in contemporary philosophy, I believe that it is a mistake, and one of my aims in this book is to show that Lewis’s philosophical work is worthy of serious attention.

Here is a brief overview of what is to come. The first chapter focuses on the challenge that suffering poses for belief in God as that challenge is formulated by Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and addressed by Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*. I argue that while Lewis’s response to the challenge is incomplete in a certain way, that response is novel and has a richness and subtlety that has not been widely appreciated. I seek to bring out this richness by defending Lewis’s solution to the problem of pain against a variety of objections.

Chapter 2 focuses on Lewis’s three main arguments for the existence of a Higher Power. These arguments are grounded in human nature. Like Descartes, Lewis thinks that we can understand God by first understanding ourselves. He maintains that human beings have knowledge of objective moral truths, can reason, and have a desire

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that nothing on earth can satisfy. Each of these aspects of human nature constitutes the starting point of an argument for the existence of a Higher Power. Hume and Russell appear in this chapter primarily as critics of Lewis's theistic arguments. I suggest, however, that some of the most serious challenges to Lewis's arguments come from the relatively new field of evolutionary psychology, and I explain how evolutionary psychology may be drawn upon to resist Lewis's case for a Higher Power.

The third chapter is like the first in that it focuses on a challenge posed by Hume together with a direct response to that challenge from Lewis. In this case the focus is on miracles and testimony. Hume argues, roughly, that testimony (of a certain kind) never provides us with a good reason to believe that a miracle has taken place. An obvious implication of this result is that it would not be reasonable for us to believe that the Resurrection of Christ really happened on the basis of the New Testament gospels; thus, Hume's argument strikes directly at the heart of Christianity. Lewis criticizes Hume's argument and tries to show that the Resurrection has enough initial plausibility that testimony could provide sufficient evidence for its occurrence. After carefully explaining the reasoning of Hume and Lewis on these issues, I make the case that while Lewis exposes a significant weakness in Hume's argument, Lewis's own argument fails because it depends upon his case for the existence of a Higher Power, and this case is not particularly strong (as I argue in Chapter 2). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of all of this for Lewis's famous "Trilemma."

Chapter 4 involves more exposition than the preceding three chapters and focuses on some perhaps surprising areas of agreement among the three thinkers. Substantial attention is devoted to determining Hume's overall views on religion, particularly in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. I argue that despite their very different positions on the status of Christianity, the three thinkers hold similar views on the importance of following the evidence and on the difficulties humans face in doing this. I further argue that all three reject the argument from design and recognize the potential for violence of organized religion. Hume and Russell favor the abandonment of

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traditional dogma (including Christian dogma) as the way to avoid religious violence, whereas Lewis maintains that the solution to the problem lies in a proper understanding of Christianity itself.

Lewis receives the most attention in this book, with Hume a close second and Russell a distant third. This is not because I think Lewis's conclusions are correct; as the preceding outline of the book should make clear, I think that Lewis's overall case for Christianity fails. My main goal here is to put these three great thinkers in conversation with each other, shedding light not only on the views of each but also on the quality of their various arguments. It is in part because I believe that Lewis's views have received the least serious philosophical treatment of the three that I give those views the most attention here. But this book is not just for those interested in Lewis, Hume, or Russell; it is for anyone interested in thinking seriously and thinking hard about God. We study great thinkers not just to learn about them but also to learn from them. As Lewis said in a different context: "The silly things these great men say, were as silly then as they are now: the wise ones are as wise now as they were then."<sup>16</sup>

We begin with suffering.

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## ONE

### THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE SUFFERING OF HUMANITY

#### 1.1 THE PROBLEM

On Sunday, December 26, 2004, an earthquake off the western coast of Indonesia's Sumatra Island triggered a massive tsunami that subsequently struck several countries, killing over 200,000 people. The hardest-hit countries included Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India. The tsunami struck with little or no warning. Entire villages were wiped from the face of the earth, and whole families were swept out to sea. The casualties were so overwhelming that little attempt was made to identify most of the corpses. Instead, they were buried as quickly as possible in mass graves.

In the aftermath of the disaster, one of the topics to which the popular media turned its attention was the problem of evil, a problem that philosophers and theologians have thought about for over two millennia. The problem of evil is often posed as a question: If there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God, then why does the world contain the assorted evils that it does? The problem may be posed more aggressively as a challenge: If there *were* an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God, then the world *wouldn't* contain the assorted evils that it does. Hence, no such God exists. A one-page article in the January 10, 2005, issue of *Newsweek* titled "Countless Souls Cry Out to God" hinted that the tsunami disaster constituted evidence that such a God does not exist, ending with these lines:

Whole families, whole communities, countless pasts and futures have been obliterated by this tsunami's roiling force. Little wonder that

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from Sumatra to Madagascar, innumerable voices cry out to God. The miracle, if there is one, may be that so many still believe.<sup>1</sup>

The 2004 tsunami is not without precedent. On November 1, 1755, an earthquake struck the Portuguese city of Lisbon, one of the largest and most beautiful cities in Europe at the time. This quake, like the one off the coast of Sumatra Island, was followed by large tsunamis as well as widespread fires that burned for days. More than 100,000 people lost their lives as a result of the Lisbon earthquake.

The earthquake was featured in Voltaire's satirical 1759 work *Candide*, which recounts the misadventures of Candide and his companion Pangloss. The latter is a philosopher who consistently maintains that ours is the best of all possible worlds, despite the various horrors the two experience.<sup>2</sup> The fictional Pangloss represents the actual philosopher Leibniz, who really did maintain that ours is the best of all possible worlds.<sup>3</sup> Voltaire means to illustrate the absurdity of this proposition in *Candide*, and the Lisbon earthquake is offered as evidence in that regard. Leibniz thought that ours must be the best of all possible worlds because a perfect God must create the best of all possible worlds. So Voltaire's ridicule of the Leibnizian claim that this is the best of all possible worlds may ultimately be seen as ridicule of the idea that a perfect God exists.

Hume and Lewis both grappled with the problem of evil.<sup>4</sup> Lewis's first book of Christian apologetics, *The Problem of Pain*, is devoted to dealing with the problem, and Lewis's discussion there is pretty clearly a direct response to Hume's presentation of the problem in Parts X and XI of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. While it is Lewis's attempt to solve the problem of evil that is the focus of this chapter, it is helpful first to examine Hume's presentation of the problem.

## 1.2 HUME'S PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

Hume worked on the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* off and on over a period of almost thirty years. At the urging of his friends, many of whom read a draft of the work in the early 1750s, Hume



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did not publish it during his lifetime. His friends feared that because of the controversial nature of the *Dialogues*, publication would have a detrimental effect on Hume's life and reputation. Hume had good reason to take his friends' advice seriously. The writing on religion that Hume did publish during his lifetime drew the ire of many of his religious contemporaries. As a consequence of his writing on religion he was denied the chair of logic at Glasgow University in 1752, and about five years later the Church of Scotland attempted to excommunicate him.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Hume specified in his will that the *Dialogues* be published posthumously, and it first appeared in print in 1779, three years after his death.<sup>6</sup>

The *Dialogues* is an extended conversation among three characters, Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea, as reported by Cleanthes's student, Pamphilus, to Pamphilus's companion Hermippus. As the title suggests, the topic of the discussion is natural religion – religion based on human reason alone, without the aid of divine revelation or other supernatural activity. Much of the conversation focuses on what human reason alone can determine about the existence and nature of God. Each of the three main characters has a distinct view on these issues, and one of them, Philo, goes so far as to question the existence of God altogether. Presumably this is at least part of what made the work so controversial in the eyes of Hume's friends.

Ascertaining Hume's own views on the basis of the *Dialogues* is a tricky business. In particular, there has been much debate over whether any one of the three characters speaks for Hume and, if so, which one. One popular view has been that Philo is Hume's mouth-piece.<sup>7</sup> However, even if this is correct, more work is needed to determine just what Hume's views are, because ascertaining the views of Philo is itself a less-than-straightforward matter.

In Chapter 4 we will delve into the tricky business of ascertaining Hume's own views in the *Dialogues*, but for the moment we can safely avoid this task, for the following reasons: In Parts X and XI of the *Dialogues*, the problem of evil is raised by Demea and Philo. The challenge raised here is never satisfactorily answered in the *Dialogues* nor, indeed, in any of Hume's works. This suggests at the very least that Hume considered the problem of evil to be a serious challenge,

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one to which he himself had no satisfactory answer. Furthermore, it is the discussion of the problem of evil in these two sections of the *Dialogues* that sets the stage for *The Problem of Pain*. Our interest, then, is in understanding the problem as it appears in the *Dialogues* and evaluating Lewis's response to that problem. The question of Hume's own view on the problem is one that we can safely set aside, at least for the moment.

In the parts of the *Dialogues* preceding Parts X and XI, two types of arguments for the existence of God are discussed. Cleanthes defends a type of design argument (dubbed "the argument *a posteriori*"), and Demea defends a cosmological argument (dubbed "the argument *a priori*"). Philo, playing the role of skeptic, criticizes both arguments, alternately joining forces with Demea or Cleanthes, depending on the topic. For the most part, Philo pretends to share the views of Demea. Although the fact that Philo's apparent agreement with Demea is mere pretense is made sufficiently clear both to Cleanthes and to the attentive reader, it is not recognized by Demea until Part XI.

Having seen his cosmological argument subjected to scathing criticism at the hands of Cleanthes and Philo in Part IX, Demea begins Part X with a new tack. He suggests that it is a "consciousness of [their own] imbecility and misery rather than . . . any reasoning" that drives people to believe in God.<sup>8</sup> This suggestion leads Philo to make the following ironic remark: "I am indeed persuaded . . . that the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a due sense of religion is by just representation of the misery and wickedness of men."<sup>9</sup> While Demea and Philo agree that reflection on human suffering will lead to a "due sense of religion," they disagree on just what this "due sense" is. Demea thinks that such reflection will lead to awe and submission to God, whereas Philo thinks it will lead to doubt of the existence of a good God altogether. However, Demea does not recognize the irony of Philo's remark, instead taking it as a straightforward agreement with his own view.

Philo's remark launches an extended discussion of the assorted evils of the world. Here is Demea's colorful description of human life: