**Telling the Truth through Rational Argument:**

**C. S. Lewis on the Reasonableness of Christian Faith**

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It is a great pleasure to be able to contribute to Westminster Abbey’s series of public lectures on ‘Telling the Truth’ by exploring how C. S. Lewis used rational argument to commend and communicate the Christian faith. Lewis is now firmly established as one of the greatest apologists of the twentieth century, with a continuing legacy of influence in the twenty-first. Few apologists have achieved anything approaching his impact, which transcends denominational barriers.

Lewis was British, and a layman of the Church of England. The decision to honour him here at Westminster is an important reaffirmation of his cultural and religious identity, here at the heart of the British religious and political establishment. Lewis’s genius is such that he is loved and valued far beyond the confines of Great Britain and the Church of England; yet, as the recent anniversary events here in Britain have made abundantly clear – attendances have been huge! – Lewis is both remembered and admired here, in this nation and church.

Lewis also appeals to both fans and academics. If I might borrow a phrase from John Chrysostom, an early fifth century archbishop of Constantinople, his works are such that children can paddle in them, and elephants can swim. The point that Chrysostom was making was that the Bible – or at least John’s gospel – could be read and appreciated at multiple levels, popular and academic. And that is most certainly true of Lewis! Lewis is read and loved by a wide readership. Yet this anniversary year has marked an important transition, in that Lewis is now being taken with increased seriousness by academics, especially at Oxford and Cambridge. Many of you will have read Rowan Williams’s brilliant engagement with Narnia. It is surely significant that one of the world’s greatest theologians, a former archbishop of Canterbury who is now Master of Lewis’s old Cambridge college, takes such delight in Narnia, and helps us find new depths of meaning within it.

This recognition is long overdue. The foundations for this recognition were laid as long ago as 1946, when the ancient Scottish University of St Andrews awarded Lewis the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. Professor Donald Baillie, Dean of the university’s Faculty of Divinity, declared that Lewis had ‘succeeded in capturing the attention of many who will not readily listen to professional theologians,’ and had ‘arranged a new kind of marriage between theological reflection and poetic imagination.’ The passing of time has confirmed that Baillie was right on both counts. Perhaps, to use a musical image, Lewis is better seen as an arranger than as a composer. But some of his theological ‘arrangements’ and ‘variations on themes’ seem to have captured the popular imagination, where the originals did not.

So what is Lewis’s approach to telling the truth, and why has it been so successful? In this lecture, I am going to explore Lewis’s distinctive understanding of the rationality of faith, which emphasises the reasonableness of Christianity without imprisoning it within an impersonal and austere rationalism.

Lewis himself was an atheist as a younger man, convinced of the fundamental irrationality of faith, and its incapacity to accommodate the brutality and senselessness of the Great War, in which he fought from 1917-18. Yet Lewis’s decision to limit himself to a rationalist worldview proved to be imaginatively sterile and uninteresting, leaving him existentially dissatisfied. It became clear to Lewis that pure reason offered him a bleak intellectual landscape that he could not bear to inhabit. Yet this, his reason insisted, was all that there was. To believe otherwise was pure fantasy. Lewis’s imagination taught him that there had to be more. ‘Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.’

Lewis’s study of English literature, especially the poetry of George Herbert, left him with gnawing doubts about his atheism. Herbert and others seemed able to connect up with a world that Lewis was tempted to dismiss as illusory, yet which haunted his imagination. ‘On the one side, a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other, a glib and shallow rationalism.’ Might, Lewis wondered, the deepest intuitions of his imagination challenge the shallow truths of his dogmatic reason? And even triumph over it?

So how did Lewis break free from this rationalist prison? Lewis’s understanding of the reasonableness of the Christian faith rests on a distinct way of grasping the rationality of the created order, and its ultimate grounding in God. Where some favour deductive arguments for the existence of God, Lewis offers his own distinct approach which is more inductive than deductive; more visual rather than purely rational.

Lewis’s approach is difficult to simplify, as it is highly nuanced. But perhaps we could set out the key aspects of his approach as follows. The truths of the Christian faith lie beyond the reach of human reason; yet when those truths are presented and grasped, their rationality can easily be discerned. And one hallmark of that rationality is the ability of the Christian faith to make things intelligible.

It is clear that Lewis was drawn to Christianity because of both its intellectual capaciousness and its imaginative appeal. It made sense of things, without limiting itself to what could be understood or grasped by reason. Lewis, it seems to me, echoes a theme we find in in the final canto of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where the great Florentine poet and theologian expresses the idea that Christianity provides a vision of things – something wonderful which can be seen, yet which proves resistant to verbal expression:

From that moment onwards my power of sight exceeded

That of speech, which fails at such a vision.

*Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio  
che’l parlar mostra, ch’a tal vista cede*. *Paradiso* XXXIII, 55-6.

For Lewis, there is always a sense of a ‘beyond’, a ‘numinous’ – something of enormous significance that lies beyond our reason, hinted at more by intuition than by logic. This point had been made earlier by G. K. Chesterton (who Lewis greatly admired). ‘Every true artist’, Chesterton argued, feels ‘that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.’ While the intellectual capaciousness of the Christian faith can be rationally analysed, Lewis hints that it is best imaginatively communicated.

Lewis invites us to see Christianity as offering us a standpoint (a Platonic *synoptikon*, if you like) from which we may survey things, and grasp their intrinsic interconnectedness. We *see* how things connect together. Lewis consistently uses a remarkably wide range of visual metaphors – such as sun, light, blindness, and shadows – to help us understand the nature of a true understanding of things. Where some argue that rationality concerns the ability of reason to give an account of things, Lewis frames this more in terms of our ability to see their relationships. This has two highly significant consequences.

First, it means that Lewis sees reason and imagination as existing in a collaborative relationship. Reason without imagination is potentially dull and limited; imagination without reason is potentially delusory and escapist. Lewis develops a notion of ‘imagined’ – not imaginary – reality, which is capable of being grasped by reason and visualised by the imagination.

Secondly, it means that Lewis makes extensive use of verbal illustrations or analogies, to enable us to *see* things in a new way. Lewis’s famous apologetic for the doctrine of the Trinity in *Mere Christianity* suggests that our difficulties arise primarily because we fail to see it properly. If we see it another way – as, for example, an inhabitant of a two-dimensional world might try to grasp and describe the structure of a three-dimensional reality – then we begin to grasp its intrinsic rationality. Lewis’s apologetic often takes the form of a visual invitation: ‘Try seeing it this way!’ The rationality of the Trinity needs to be shown, not proved – and it is shown by allowing us to see it in the right way.

Perhaps this helps us appreciate the special appeal of Lewis’s ‘Chronicles of Narnia’, which present a way of seeing things, embodied within stories, which turns out to be rationally plausible and imaginatively attractive. Lewis’s Oxford colleague Austin Farrer suggested that Lewis’s apologetic approach might initially look like an argument; but on closer inspection, it turned out to be an encouragement to see things in a new way, and thus grasp the rationality of faith. Lewis, Farrer suggested, makes us ‘think we are listening to an argument’, when in reality ‘we are presented with a vision, and it is the vision that carries conviction’.

For example, consider Lewis’s imaginative visualization of a theological truth – the entrapment of the human soul through sin in *The Voyage of the ‘Dawn Treader.’* Lewis’s opening line in this book is seen by many as one of its most memorable features: ‘There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.’ Eustace Scrubb is portrayed as a thoroughly unsympathetic character, whom Lewis develops as an example of selfishness. It’s difficult to like him to begin with, and it’s just as difficult to feel sorry for him when he changes into a dragon as a result of his ‘greedy, dragonish thoughts.’

The thoroughly obnoxious Eustace encounters some enchanted gold. He believes this will make him the master of all! But instead, it masters him. Lewis loved old Norse mythology, and borrowed the Norse story about the greedy giant Fáfnir, who turned himself into a dragon to protect his ill-won gain. So Eustace becomes a dragon. Now having become a dragon, how does Eustace stop being one? Lewis presents Eustace’s initial transformation into a dragon and his subsequent ‘undragoning’ as a double transformation that reveals both Eustace’s selfish, fallen nature and the transforming power of divine grace.

*The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* provides a brilliant description of Eustace realizing, to his horror, that he has become a dragon. He doesn’t like this at all, and he frantically tries to scratch off his dragon’s skin. Yet each layer he removes merely reveals yet another layer of scales beneath it. He simply cannot break free from his prison. He is trapped.

But salvation lies to hand. Aslan appears, and tears away at the dragon flesh with his claws. And when the scales are finally removed, Aslan plunges the raw and bleeding Eustace into a well from which he emerges purified and renewed, with his humanity restored. The storyline is dramatic, realistic, and shocking. But the power of the narrative brings home the Christian themes that Lewis believed could not be described as effectively through a series of well-intentioned theological lectures. And while Lewis drew his dragon imagery from Norse mythology, the story of the ‘undragoning’ draws on the rich ideas and imagery of the New Testament.

So what are we to learn from this powerful and shocking story, so realistically depicted? As the startlingly raw imagery of Aslan tearing at Eustace’s flesh makes clear, Eustace has been trapped by forces over which he has no control. The one who would be master has instead been mastered. The dragon is a symbol, not so much of sin itself, as of the power of sin to entrap, captivate, and imprison. It can only be broken and mastered by the redeemer. Aslan is the one who heals and renews Eustace, restoring him to what he was intended to be.

The immersion in the water of the well is immediately familiar, picking up on the New Testament’s language about baptism as dying to self and rising to Christ (Romans 6). (The omission of this aspect of the “undragoning” of Eustace in the recent movie version of The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader” was one of the more irritating and unnecessary of its many weaknesses.) Eustace is then tossed into the well by Aslan, and emerges renewed and restored.

You see my point. Lewis takes a classic theological doctrine, and transposes it into a narrative – a narrative that is embraced imaginatively, and not simply rationally understood. He breathes new life into a traditional doctrine by inviting us to *see* it. We are *shown* what sin is all about, not told about it.

Although some have tried to force Lewis into a purely rationalist way of thinking, this does not do him justice. Lewis does not try to prove the existence of God on *a priori* grounds. Instead, Lewis invites us to see how what we observe in the world around us and experience within us ‘fits’ the Christian way of seeing things. Lewis often articulates this way of ‘seeing things’ in terms of a ‘myth’ – that is to say, a story about reality which both invites its ‘imaginative embrace’, and communicates a conceptual framework, by which other things are to be seen. The imagination embraces the narrative; reason consequently reflects on its contents.

So how does this approach to the reasonableness of faith work out in practice? Let’s consider Lewis’s celebrated ‘argument from desire’, exploring both its rational structure and its apologetic appeal.

The starting point for Lewis’s approach is an experience – a longing for something undefined and possibly undefinable, that is as insatiable as it is elusive. Lewis sets out versions of this argument at several points in his writings, including the ‘Chronicles of Narnia’. The most important statements of the argument, however, are the following:

1. *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933), written shortly after his conversion to Christianity, in which Lewis sets out an allegorical account of his own conversion, focusing on the theme of desire.

2. The university sermon ‘The Weight of Glory’, preached in Oxford in June 1941, and subsequently published as an article in the journal *Theology*. This is the most elegant statement of the argument, which is here framed primarily in terms of the human quest for beauty.

3. The talk ‘Hope’, given during the third series of Broadcast Talks for the British Broadcasting Corporation during the Second World War, and subsequently reproduced as a chapter in *Mere Christianity*. This is generally considered to be Lewis’s most influential statement of the argument.

4. The autobiographical work *Surprised by Joy*, in which the theme of ‘Joy’ plays a significant role in arousing Lewis’s openness towards God.

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis described his childhood experiences of intense longing (which he names ‘Joy’) for something unknown and elusive, triggered off by such things as the fragrance of a flowering currant bush in the garden of his childhood home in Belfast, or reading Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem in the style of the Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér. Lewis’s epiphany of ‘Joy’ bathed his everyday world of experience with beauty and wonder. But what did it mean – if it meant anything at all? What way of seeing it might help him to make sense of it? How was he to interpret it?

While an atheist, Lewis dismissed such experiences as illusory. Yet he became increasingly dissatisfied with such simplistic reductive explanations. His growing familiarity with what he termed the ‘Christian mythology’ – Lewis here uses the term ‘myth’ in the sense of a ‘narrated worldview’ – led him to appreciate that these experiences could easily and naturally be accommodated within its explanatory framework. What if God were an active questing personal agent, as Christianity affirmed to be the case? If so, God could easily be understood as the ‘source from which those arrows of Joy had been shot at me ever since childhood.’

In the sermon ‘The Weight of Glory’, Lewis develops this theme further by exploring the human quest for beauty. Lewis argues that this is really a search for the *source* of that beauty, which is *mediated through* the things of this world, but not *contained within* them. ‘The books of the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them: it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing.’ Without a Christian way of seeing things, this longing remains ‘uncertain of its object’. Its true goal remains to be identified and attained.

Christianity, Lewis declares, gives us the intellectual framework that both interprets the experience, and leads us to its true goal. In his own way, Lewis reworks the point so famously made by T. S. Eliot in *Dry Salvages*:

We had the experience but missed the meaning.

And approach to the meaning restores the experience.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis sets out this approach in a somewhat different way, while still appealing to the elusiveness of our experiences of ‘Joy’. The experiences he had in mind are shared across the human spectrum, often expressed in quotidian language as a sense of there being ‘something there’. The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, for example, spoke of ‘a nostalgic yearning, bordering at times on unendurably poignant sorrow’, which he experienced in ‘the dreams of my heart and in the reveries of my soul.’ Bertrand Russell, one of the most articulate and influential British atheist writers of the twentieth century, put a similar thought into words as follows:

The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain . . . a searching for something beyond what the world contains, something transfigured and infinite – the beatific vision, God – I do not find it, I do not think it is to be found – but the love of it is my life . . . it is the actual spring of life within me.

Russell’s daughter, Katharine Tait, recalled that he was contemptuous of organized religion, dismissing its ideas mainly because he disliked those who held them. Yet Tait took the view that her father’s life was really an unacknowledged, perhaps disguised, search for God. ‘Somewhere at the back of my father’s mind, at the bottom of his heart, in the depths of his soul, there was an empty space that had once been filled by God, and he never found anything else to put in it.’ Russell was now haunted by a ‘ghost-like feeling of not belonging in this world.’

These are the kinds of experience to which Lewis appeals – a sense of hovering on the brink of discovering something of immense significance, linked with a sense of sorrow and frustration when what seemed to be so close tantalizingly disappears. Like smoke, it cannot be grasped. As Lewis puts it: ‘There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality.’ So what does this sense of unfulfilled longing mean? To what does it point?

Some, Lewis concedes, might suggest that this frustration arises from looking for its true object in the wrong places; others that, since further searching will only result in repeated disappointment, there is simply no point trying to find something better than the present world.

Yet Lewis suggests that there is a third approach, which recognizes that these earthly longings are ‘only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage’ of our true homeland. Since this overwhelming desire cannot be fulfilled through anything in the present world, this suggests that its ultimate object lies beyond the present world. ‘If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world’.

Here, as throughout his apologetic writings, the starting point of Lewis’s approach does not lie with the Bible or the Christian tradition, but with shared human experience and observation. How do we make sense of them? Lewis’s genius as an apologist lay in his ability to show how a ‘viewpoint’ which was derived from the Bible and the Christian tradition was able to offer a more satisfactory explanation of common human experience than its rivals – especially the atheism he had once himself espoused.

Lewis’s apologetic approach is to identify a common human observation or experience, and then show how it fits in, naturally and plausibly, within a Christian way of looking at things. For Lewis, Christianity provided a ‘big picture’, an intellectually capacious and imaginatively satisfying way of seeing things. Lewis was always emphatic that nothing can be proved on the basis of observation or experience. Yet while such observations of nature or our own experiences *prove* nothing, they can suggest certain possibilities, and even intimate what they might mean. That’s what Lewis is getting at when he writes:

A true philosophy may sometimes validate an experience of nature; an experience of nature cannot validate a philosophy. Nature will not verify any theological or metaphysical proposition (or not in the manner we are now considering); she will help to show what it means.

A similar approach is found in G. K. Chesterton, who once remarked that: ‘The phenomenon does not prove religion, but religion explains the phenomenon.’

Lewis’s approach could be framed like this. Christianity holds that the natural order – including our own reasoning – is shaped by the God who created all things. As Augustine of Hippo and Blaise Pascal had argued before him, Lewis affirms that the absence of God causes us to experience longing – a yearning for God, which we misinterpret as a longing for something located within the finite and created order. Conversion is thus partly about a semiotic transformation, in which we realize that something we believed to be pointing to one thing in fact points to something rather different.

We could set Lewis’s argument out more formally as follows. We experience desires that no experience in this world seems able to satisfy. Yet Christianity tells us that we are made for another world. And when things are seen in this way, this sort of experience is exactly what we would expect. The appeal is not so much to cold logic, as to intuition and imagination, resting on an imaginative dynamic of discovery. Lewis invites his audience to see their experiences through a set of Christian spectacles, and notice how these bring what might otherwise be fuzzy or blurred into sharp focus. For Lewis, the ability of the Christian faith to accommodate our experience, naturally and easily, is an indicator of its truth.

As Lewis states this approach from desire, therefore, it is not really an argument at all; it is more about observing and affirming the fit between a theory and observation. It is like trying on a hat or shirt for size. How well does it fit? How many of our observations of the world can it accommodate, and how persuasively? Lewis’s way of thinking also shows some similarity to a related approach within the natural sciences, now generally known as ‘inference to the best explanation’. This approach recognizes that there are multiple explanations of observations, and suggests how criteria might be identified to determine which such explanation is to be considered as ‘the best’.

The same approach is found in Lewis’s ‘argument from morality.’ This is sometimes portrayed in ridiculously simplistic terms – for example, ‘experiencing a sense of moral obligation proves there is a God.’ Lewis did not say this, and did not think this. As with the ‘argument from desire’, his argument is rather than the common human experience of a sense of moral obligation is easily and naturally accommodated within a Christian framework.

For Lewis, experiences and intuitions – for example, concerning morality and desire – are meant to ‘arouse our suspicions’ that there is indeed ‘Something which is directing the universe.’ We come to suspect that our moral experience suggests a ‘real law which we did not invent, and which we know we ought to obey’, in much the same way as our experience of desire is ‘a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage’ of another place, which is our true homeland. And as we track this suspicion, we begin to realize that it has considerable imaginative and explanatory potential. What was initially a dawning suspicion becomes solidified as a growing conviction that it makes sense of what matters to us naturally and persuasively.

So what can be learned from Lewis’s approach? Perhaps I could mention two points in bringing this lecture to a close. First, Lewis helps us see that apologetics need not take the form of a slightly dull deductive argument, but can be understood and presented as an invitation to step into the Christian way of seeing things, and explore how things look when seen from its standpoint. ‘Try seeing things this way!’ If worldviews or metanarratives can be compared to lenses, which of them brings things into sharpest focus?

And second, we need to realize that Lewis’s *explicit* appeal to reason involves an *implicit* appeal to the imagination. Perhaps this helps us understand why Lewis appeals to both modern and postmodern people. I see no historical evidence that compels me to argue that Lewis deliberately set out to do this, constructing a mediating position between two very different cultural moods. The evidence suggests that he saw things this way naturally, and never formalized it in terms of a synthesis of these two very different modalities of thought. Lewis rather gives us a *synoptikon* which transcends the great divide between modernity and postmodernity, affirming the strengths of each, and subtly accommodating their weaknesses.

Yes, Lewis affirms the rationality of the universe – but does so without plunging us into an imaginatively drab world of cold logic and dreary argumentation. Yes, Lewis affirms the power of images and narratives to captivate our imagination – but does so without giving up on the primacy of truth. As the churches face an increasingly complex cultural context in which they must preach and minister, Lewis offers insights and approaches that are potentially enriching – and, I venture to suggest, culturally plausible and intellectually persuasive.

In the end, Lewis *tells* the truth by *showing* the truth. He offers us an intellectually capacious and imaginatively compelling vision of the Christian faith, perhaps best summed up in his lapidary statement at the end of his essay ‘Is theology poetry?’ Using a powerful visual image, Lewis invites us to see God as both the ground of the rationality of the world, and the one who enables us to grasp that rationality. ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.’ This beautifully crafted sentence is a fitting memorial both to Lewis himself, and his rich understanding of faith.

I must end. Let me do so by noting a parallel between Lewis and the great Genevan reformer John Calvin. Neither Lewis nor Calvin had any children, through both were stepfathers to children from their wives’ earlier marriages. When Calvin was mocked by his critics for being childless, he offered an intriguing rebuttal. Anyone, he declared, who read his books and came to share his way of thinking was his child. And when seen that way, Calvin turned out to have rather a large family! I think the same is true of Lewis. Many of us find that our ways of thinking have come to be deeply shaped by Lewis; to put it another way, we share something of his intellectual DNA. Those of us gathered here today are Lewis’s children, meeting for a family celebration. Not one of us here today is a physical descendent of Lewis; but we are all linked to him through our imagination and reason. I think we all share in the delight of this family occasion, made possible both by the generosity and discernment of this great institution, Westminster Abbey, and by the genius and talent of C. S. Lewis himself. May both flourish in the next fifty years!

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