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Epistemology and Metaphysics à la C.S. Lewis

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Epistemology and Metaphysics á la C.S. Lewis

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Picture, if you will, a group of students sitting in an undergraduate course on the first day of class. As they turn the pages of the syllabus, they are confronted with the following description of some of the major course requirements.[1]

Philosophy of Integration Paper and Core Issue Papers. A series of three papers will be written during the course on:

- The nature of knowledge (epistemology)
- The nature of the world (cosmology)
- The nature of humanity (philosophical anthropology)

These three papers will be turned in at various points in the semester and given a preliminary grade. As a final assignment, revisions of these three papers will be combined into a statement of the student's personal philosophy of integration in the following format: An introduction, the three revised papers, and a personal philosophy of integration thesis.

One can easily imagine the glossy-eyed stares and the heightened level of anxiety in the room.

The foregoing is a scenario played out each spring in a class offered by the current author. The first challenge is to calm the anxiety of the students, followed swiftly by the second challenge of getting them to see the assignment as a provocative and interesting opportunity rather than an overwhelming chore--or worse yet--a boring ex-

ercise in futility. While professorial skill and good pedagogical technique can supply some enthusiasm for the task, it is also essential that the textual material be engaging and informative. Fortunately, several of the writings of C. S. Lewis lend themselves well to the topic at hand, especially *Miracles* and *The Problem of Pain*, as well as excerpts from some of Lewis' other works. Making use of these materials provides not only engaging and informative texts, but a uniquely Christian viewpoint that itself supports the concept of faith learning integration.

C. S. Lewis and Epistemology

Epistemology is the "branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presuppositions and basis, and the general reliability of claims to knowledge." [2] As such, epistemology is concerned with *how we can know anything about the world, by what means we can come to have knowledge, and the limitations and veracity of knowledge claims*. Epistemology clearly precedes metaphysical speculation and is thus foundational to further inquiry. Unfortunately, Lewis did not publish any works that extensively addressed epistemology, so students in the class do not have the benefit of protracted engagement with Lewis regarding epistemic issues.[3] However, at the point in the class when students are shifting their attention from epistemology to the metaphysical issue of cosmology, they begin reading *Miracles*. By using *Miracles* as an introduction to cosmology, students are reminded at the outset of the importance of

the epistemic task. Lewis opened *Miracles* with a story about a woman who claimed to have seen a ghost, but who nonetheless did not believe in the immortality of the soul. Lewis concluded, "Seeing is not believing. For this reason, the question of whether miracles occur can never be answered simply by experience . . . our senses are not infallible." [4] Without explicitly discussing epistemology, Lewis implicitly noted the connection between the pursuit of knowledge—by whatever means—and the limitations inherent in the epistemic quest. By implicitly bringing the topic of epistemology to the question of miracles, a transition between epistemic considerations and cosmological questions is created for students in the class.

While Lewis' purpose in *Miracles* was primarily cosmological, it contains gems of considerable epistemic significance. For example, Lewis highlighted an important epistemic principle about the impact that assumptions have in shaping our conclusions: "What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience." [5] Further, in the following passage, Lewis noted that experiential knowledge is impossible without rational knowledge, an observation that is of considerable importance to psychology as a scientific enterprise.

It is Reason herself which teaches us not to rely on Reason only in this matter. For Reason knows that she cannot work without materials. When it becomes clear that you cannot find out by reasoning whether the cat is in the linen-cupboard, it is Reason herself that whispers, "Go and look. This is not my job: it is a matter for the senses." [6]

Having thus clarified the epistemic framework of the task, Lewis was free to discuss

the metaphysical questions underlying the possibility of miracles, thus creating a segue between epistemology and metaphysics for students in the class.

C S. Lewis and Metaphysics

While psychology is defined as a science, psychologists cannot escape metaphysical reflection, or at least making metaphysical assumptions. Metaphysics "is broader in scope than science" and "more fundamental, since it investigates questions science does not address but the answers to which it presupposes." [7] Especially important among these metaphysical presuppositions are the nature of the world (cosmology), and the nature of humanity (philosophical anthropology). As was previously stated, students in the class are introduced to these issues through discussion of *Miracles*, leading to the consideration of the following questions. What is the nature of the cosmos? How did the world come to be? If the world was created, what is the nature of its Creator, and is the world then open to input from the supernatural realm? Lewis' views on such cosmological issues will now be addressed.

C. S. Lewis and Cosmology

Cosmology is a branch of philosophy that seeks to understand the origin and nature of the universe. In *Miracles*, Lewis proposed to develop a *philosophical* viewpoint from which one could assess the reliability of historical accounts of miracles. [8] In *Miracles*, then, Lewis can be said to have been engaged in cosmological reflection. While the focus of his task was to demonstrate that miracles are possible, Lewis approached this task philosophically, progressively arguing for the existence of the supernatural, [9] the supernatural as the ultimate cause of the natural world, [10] the

possibility of the supernatural intervening in the natural world, [11] and ultimately for the propriety of the Incarnation as the consummate and foundational Christian miracle. [12] What remains to be demonstrated is how Lewis' cosmological reflections are relevant to the task of engaging psychology students in faith-learning integration. Every discipline makes assumptions about the nature of the world, and psychology is no exception. As Lewis pointed out in *Miracles*, the bedrock of all knowledge claims must be the reliability of Reason. Reason allows us to think about the world and use logic to come to sound conclusions. Reason allows us to evaluate the data of our senses, without which empiricism would be impossible. Deny the validity of Reason, and all disciplines—including psychology—crash into futility. "Unless human reasoning is valid," wrote Lewis, "no science can be true." [13]

Lewis argued persuasively that Reason could only be understood or defended as something that originates outside of the realm of mechanistic natural causation. "If [Reason] won't fit into Nature, we can't help it," he wrote. "We will certainly not, on that account, give it up. If we do, we should be giving up Nature too." [14] This recognition is critical to a Christian understanding of psychology for at least two reasons. First of all, many psychologists (as well other scientists and philosophers) have argued that science is incompatible with supernaturalism. Christian students of psychology need to be able to rationally defend their belief in the supernatural against such criticism. Secondly, psychology--perhaps more than any other discipline--must confront the age-old problem of the relationship of the material physical body and the immaterial mind or soul. Here, too, Lewis provided significant insight, even if he did not solve the mind-body problem entirely. "We

can admit, and even insist," he wrote, "that Rational Thinking can be shown to be conditioned in its exercise by a natural object (the brain). It is temporarily impaired by alcohol or a blow on the head. It wanes as the body decays and vanishes when the brain ceases to function." [15] Lewis further emphasized the point as follows:

The rational and moral element in each human mind is a point of force from the Supernatural working its way into Nature, exploiting at each point those conditions which Nature offers, repulsed where the conditions are hopeless and impeded when they are unfavourable. A man's Rational thinking is just so much of his share of eternal Reason as the state of his brain allows to become operative; it represents, so to speak, the bargain struck at the frontier fixed between Reason and Nature It is conditioned by the apparatus but not determined by it. [16]

This bargain of which Lewis spoke allows for the Christian to recognize the divine origins of the creation, while allowing him or her to study the mechanistic functioning of the creation. For the Christian psychologist, the bargain allows him or her to believe in the immaterial soul while studying deterministic conditions of physiology, environment, and so forth.

If Lewis' argument has been sound to this point, it has been established that the reasoning faculties of human beings are supernaturally derived but naturally expressed. In Lewis' words, "Theology offers you a working arrangement, which leaves the scientist free to continue his experiments, and the Christian to continue his prayers." [17] The Christian psychologist is thus free to use experimentation and reason to understand the natural determinants of

behavior, while still believing in the supernatural. This freedom allows one to move beyond the cosmological consideration of the nature and origin of the world, to the more focused question of the nature and origin of human beings.

C. S. Lewis and Philosophical Anthropology

When one reflects on the origin and nature of human beings, one can be said to be engaged in philosophical anthropology. [18] In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis tackled theodicy (which he chose to discuss under the more colloquial term “the problem of pain”), defined as follows: “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.” [19] While in one sense theodicy is a *theological problem*, in another sense it has significant implications for an understanding of what it means to be human. In their practice and in their theories, clinical psychologists are confronted with how to make sense of human pain. A woman is inexplicably fired from her job, and there is pain. New parents wake up to discover that their child has died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and there is anguish. A woman is diagnosed with major depression or a young man is diagnosed with schizophrenia, and there is suffering and turmoil. In the midst of this pain, anguish, suffering, and turmoil, there is often the cry, “And where is God?” Books written on this topic are numerous and varied in their solution to the problem: Rabbi Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and Phillip Yancey’s *Where Is God When It Hurts?* come to mind. Lewis is an intriguing author on this subject because his more philosophical reflections (*The Problem of Pain*) can be bal-

anced by the more visceral *A Grief Observed*, several of his poems, and his own life story. Lewis’ philosophical reflections help to make these existential issues accessible and interesting to students, while his life story gives flesh and blood to the existential angst of suffering.

At the outset of *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis stipulated that “the only purpose of the book is to solve the *intellectual problem* raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude or patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified” [20] Characteristically, however, Lewis proceeded to offer some sage advice: “[W]hen pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.” [21]

In the first chapter of *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis pointed out that Christianity “creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain.” [22] If there is no God, there is no problem. If God exists but is not good, we have no problem. But if “side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we [have] received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving,” [23] then we have the problem of pain.

Lewis’ solution to theodicy was multifaceted, but in part hinged on an argument that the gift of free will intrinsically contains the possibility that free creatures may misuse their freedom to cause pain to other creatures. God arranged the world in such a way that certain natural laws exist. If matter has a fixed nature and obeys constant laws, then humans with free will can use its laws for good or for evil. The hardness of a log may make it useful for making a timber-

framed home, but the same log can be used as a weapon. When human beings thus use their freedom to damage or injure other creatures, we have the problem of pain. Lewis then introduced the Christian doctrines of creation and fall as the backdrop from which to understand human suffering.

The problem, then, is not an absence of God's goodness but the reality of *human* evil, and by extension, the results of living in a world fallen through the rebellion of its creatures. Lewis' answer to the *theological problem* of pain thus involved *biblical anthropology*. The resulting picture of human nature as created in the image of God but suffering as sinful creatures in a fallen world is quite relevant to the questions of psychology, and to students who struggle to make sense out of suffering in the face of the claim that God is good.

For those of us who suffer, or those of us who enter the suffering of others, the intellectual problem of suffering is dwarfed by the existential experience of suffering. Too often we mistake the cry "Where is God?" for an intellectual problem, when it is in fact a cry of emotional despair and anguish. It is at this juncture that students need to move beyond intellectual engagement with the problem of pain to the existential task of encountering the suffering soul. In this context Lewis again proves instructive, through his own life story and his reflections on his experience. As a boy of ten Lewis lost his mother to cancer, and soon after lost his brother to boarding school. Unable to grieve with his father, Lewis seems to have become detached and inwardly focused. One of his first true friends, Paddy Moore, was killed in the bloody hostility of the First World War. Marrying late in life, Lewis lived with his wife through her own fatal battle with cancer. It is out of his bereavement that

Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed*. Here is to be found no mere intellectual response to a philosophical problem, but the visceral anguish of a grieving widower. Here students encounter not mere intellect, but the palpable pathos of Lewis' grief. At a memorable point in *A Grief observed*, Lewis turned his anger toward God:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? [24]

Lewis' poetry also reflects the pathos of his bereavement. In his poem *Joys That Sting*, Lewis reflected on living without his beloved.

*Oh doe not die, says Donne, for I shall hate
All women so. How false the sentence rings.
Women? But in a life made desolate
It is the joys once shared that have the stings.
To take the old walks alone, or not*

at all,
To order one pint where I ordered
two,
To think of, and then not to make,
the small
Time-honored joke (senseless to all
but you):
To laugh (oh, one'll laugh), to talk
upon
Themes that we talked upon when
you were there,
To make some poor pretence of go-
ing on,
Be kind to one's old friends, and
seem to care,
While no one (O God) through the
years will say
The simplest, common word in just
your way. [25]

In his poetry, as in the pages of *A Grief Observed* the intellect of Lewis is maintained, but it is holistically coupled with emotion and experience. This is an important coupling for students of psychology to observe, since human beings too easily hide the depths of their emotions behind rationalization and intellectualization.

In confronting the suffering of C. S. Lewis, whether in *A Grief Observed*, his poetry, a biography of his life, or in the film, *Shadowlands*, students learn that honesty in suffering before God is preferable to pat answers issued forth in emotional denial. To those of us who enter the suffering of others, such honesty reminds us that we must allow the process of grieving to work itself through over time. It is this process that eventually allowed Lewis to arrive at the following conclusion.

*I have gradually been coming to feel
that the door is no longer shut and bolted.
Was it my own frantic need that slammed it*

*in my face? The time when there is nothing
at all in your soul except a cry for help may
be just the time when God can't give it: you
are like the drowning man who can't be
helped because he clutches and grabs. Per-
haps your own reiterated cries deafen you
to the voice you hoped to hear. On the other
hand, 'Knock and it shall be opened.' But
does knocking mean hammering and kicking
the door like a maniac? And there's also
'To him that hath shall be given.' After all,
you must have a capacity to receive, or even
omnipotence can't give. Perhaps your own
passion temporarily destroys the capacity.
[26]*

Again, continuing his journey of grief, Lewis eventually concluded that the intellectual solution to the problem of pain did not solve the existential problem of pain.

*When I lay these questions before
God I get no answer. But a rather special
sort of 'No answer.' It is not the locked
door. It is more like a silent, certainly not
uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook
His head not in refusal but waiving the
question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't un-
derstand.' Can a mortal ask questions
which God finds unanswerable? Quite eas-
ily, I should think. All nonsense questions
are unanswerable. How many hours are
there in a mile? Is yellow square or round?
Probably half the questions we ask--half
our great theological and metaphysical
problems--are like that. [27]*

In the face of suffering, Lewis reminds the student of psychology that sometimes answers are elusive or even empty, but yet God stands in the breach with outstretched arms, ready to extend a peace that transcends understanding.

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To order one pint where I ordered
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To think of, and then not to make,
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Time-honored joke (senseless to all
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To laugh (oh, one'll laugh), to talk
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To the problem of pain, Lewis finally offered one more solution: the promise of heaven. This promise of heaven is not given to assuage our grief with the anticipation of a reunion with our departed loved ones, but rather heaven is the promise that we will finally encounter our God and ourselves fully, as never before.

All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of [your deepest desire]—tantalising glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest—if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself—you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say “Here at last is the thing I was made for.” ...If we lose this, we lose all. [28]

It is at this point that the existential question of suffering meets the teleological reality that we shall either encounter ourselves in heaven, or lose ourselves in hell. Lewis, like the apostle Paul, reminds the student, the professor, and anyone who will listen, that the sufferings of the present must be balanced against all of eternity. [29]

Conclusion

At the end of the semester which began with glossy-eyed stares and anxiety, students have usually come to see epistemology and metaphysics as neither too frightening to be grasped, nor as so ethereal as to be boring. Instead the students have come to see these issues as embodying questions that are fundamental to the human experience, and hence to the field of psychology. It is in no small part due to the engaging and overtly Christian deliberations

of C. S. Lewis that glossy-eyed stares have been transformed into the bright eyes of understanding and serious reflection.

Notes

1 The author is grateful to Dr. Stephen K. Moroney for critiquing an earlier version of this manuscript and to Dr. Shawn D. Floyd for helping to clarify philosophical terminology. While their feedback was helpful, any deficiencies in the manuscript are, of course, the responsibility of the author.

2 “Epistemology, History of,” Hamlyn, D. W., in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 ed., Vol. 3, p. 8-9

3 One might argue that Lewis’ 1947 *The Abolition of Man* and his 1961 *An Experiment in Criticism* deal with epistemic issues. The present author would agree that epistemology is at least implicitly dealt with in the books, and indeed in several of Lewis’ other works. However, they contain, at best, a restricted epistemology focused on narrow subjects. They do not deal with the broader issues inherent in the general search for knowledge through diverse means such as rational inquiry, empiricism, appeals to authority, mysticism, etc. Even if the books did address the broader issues of epistemology proper, however, they are of somewhat limited appeal and accessibility to the average undergraduate psychology student.

4 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* (1947; New York: Touchstone, 1996) 9.

5 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 9-10.

6 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 120.

7 “Metaphysics,” Butchvarov, Panayot, in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Diction-*

- ary of *Philosophy*. 1995 ed., p. 489.
- 8 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 9-11.
- 9 Roughly chapters 1 – 6 of *Miracles*.
- 10 See especially pages 44-47 of *Miracles*.
- 11 Roughly chapters 10 – 11 of *Miracles*.
- 12 Roughly chapters 12 – 14 of *Miracles*.
- 13 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 23.
- 14 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 35.
- 15 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 55.
- 16 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 56, (Italics in original)
- 17 Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* 140.
- 18 The author is indebted to Dr. Shawn D. Floyd for suggesting the term “philosophical anthropology” to clarify this subdivision of metaphysics.
- 19 Lewis, C. S., *The Problem of Pain* (1962; New York: Touchstone, 1996) 23.
- 20 Lewis, C. S., *Pain* 10, italics mine.
- 21 Lewis, C. S., *Pain* 10.
- 22 Lewis, C. S., *Pain* 21.
- 23 Lewis, C. S., *Pain* 21.
- 24 Lewis, C. S., *A Grief Observed*, (1961, Lewis, C. S. under the pseudonym, N.W. Clerk; New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 17-18.
- 25 Lewis, C. S., “Joys That Sting,” *Poems*, C. S. Lewis, ed. W. Hooper, (1964; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992) 108.
- 26 Lewis, C. S., *Grief* 58-59.
- 27 Lewis, C. S., *Grief* 81-82.
- 28 Lewis, C. S., *Pain* 131.
- 29 See Romans 8:18-22.

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