

C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics: Part Three: The Moral Argument

Pro: David Baggett

Con: Erik Wielenberg

"While explanation must come to an end somewhere, it seems that, all else equal, a deeper, more developed position explanation is better than a less developed one." - Wielenberg

Lewis's Argument

The Law of Human Nature. Lewis thinks that when people argue about proper behavior, they are appealing to an objective standard that both parties are presumed to accept. This is seen in arguments when people try to argue that what their actions does not violate the standard or that there is some special excuse. Quarreling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong, which presupposes some measure of agreement about what is right and wrong. Lewis thinks this law differs from other laws in that we can choose to obey or disobey the moral law, but we cannot do so with other laws like gravity and Math. Lastly, Lewis believes that we all have broken this law.

Worry: How about relativism? Look at the diversity of moral practices.

Reply: He thinks that there is not so much diversity as one thinks. Diversity can also be explained such as due to moral immaturity, mistaken worldviews, wishful thinking, factual disagreements, etc.

Worry: Is morality just herd instinct?

Reply: Herd instinct is just a desire to act. Desires describe what we feel. But the moral law prescribes how we should behave, sometimes against how desires.

Worry: Is morality just a learned social convention?

Reply: Some things we learn are not merely invented and conventional, but rooted in objective reality (eg. Math).

Reply to all three: These worries all entail that moral progress is impossible which seems implausible.

Worry: How about the evolutionary challenge to ethics? (Namely, that evolutionary moral psychology has been highly effective at explaining the formation of our moral beliefs.)

Reply (Baggett): First, moral skeptics put too much confidence in a complicated narrative to say that morality is an illusion. But even Louise Anthony says that any argument for moral skepticism will be based on premises that are less obvious than the existence of morality. Second, the argument is self-defeating since what would be undermined would not just be moral beliefs but all other beliefs.

The Lewisian moral phenomena to be explained is (1) the existence of moral laws, (2) our moral knowledge, and (3) a cluster of moral emotions such as guilt and a sense of moral obligation.

Lewis then thinks that the moral law is better explained on a theistic worldview than a naturalistic one. This is because the notion of mere matter giving authoritative, prescriptively binding moral direction strains credulity. Morality is better explained when grounded in a mind. As the source of the moral law, this being must itself be good.

Both Baggett and Wielenberg agree that morality exists, their differences is over its explanation. Baggett's view is that moral facts are best explained by God while Wielenberg thinks that moral facts are brute necessary facts.

To be specific, in this book, Wielenberg's says for example that it is a brute fact that "the fact that the act causes pain for fun *makes/causes* the act to be morally wrong." The act being morally wrong has an explanation, namely that the act causes pain for fun. *Being morally wrong* is a non-natural property that is grounded in the natural property *being an act that causes pain for fun*.

Problem of God's Goodness

Wielenberg draws an objection from Bertrand Russell. The Russellian claim is:

RC: The only way a being can be good is by conforming its actions to a oral law of which it is not the author.

Wielenberg suggests 3 ways which Lewis suggests God's goodness can be understood:

(LA1) Being identical to the moral law is a way of being good.

(LA2) Loving love, fair play, unselfishness, courage, good faith, honesty and truthfulness is a way of being good.

(LA3) Desiring that humans attain genuine happiness is a way of being good.

Wielenberg argues LA2 and LA3 is inconsistent with Lewis's argument against dualism (the view that there are two ultimate powers).

Wielenberg thinks LA1 fails because saying that God is the moral law is as puzzling as saying that God is the property of goodness. How can God be identical to the moral fact 'it is morally wrong to torture the innocent just for fun?'

Reply (B): It is true that saying God is identical to the moral law is odd, but this reading of Lewis is unnecessary. One can understand Lewis as saying that God's nature (or part of it) is identical to the Good, just as Robert Adams has suggested.

Counter (W): God as the Good is still obscure. Lewis seems to admit this. He likens this to us trying to grasp the Trinity or a flatlander trying to grasp the nature of a cube.

Reply (B): This doesn't seem obscure to me. But anyways, Lewis doesn't seem to be conceding obscurity, rather, he is saying that the ultimate truth is to some degree beyond our understanding. This epistemic deficiency is problematic only if we have good reason to expect otherwise. But there doesn't seem to be any reason to think that difficult questions would yield answers that fit nicely into our preexisting categories.

Counter (W): We accept theories that are obscure (eg. theories of quantum mechanics and Einstein's relativity theories) because they are

far superior in other relevant aspects to any competing theory. The obscurity in these theories is its weakness. This likewise applies to Lewis's theory.

Accounting for the Ontological Grounding of Necessary Truths

Alvin Plantinga, Robert Adams and Thomas Morris argue that theism can better account for necessary truths. The intuition is that it seems crazy to suppose that propositions could exist independent of minds or persons or judging beings. Necessary truths are propositions God believes in all possible worlds. Such truths are grounded in the noetic activity of God. An atheistic platonic account is not so plausible or principled. The idea that free-floating ontological truths, inert abstract objects, are just sort of out there – without explanation, without foundation – seems more obscure.

Reply (W): While ethical properties do not causally impinge on the natural world, they are causal effects of the natural world. For example, the fact that an act is a case of causing pain just for fun makes the act morally wrong, it causes the act to be wrong. The causation here is the kind theists take to hold between a state of affairs being Divinely willed and the obtaining of that state of affairs. The necessary connection between Divine willings and the truth of the willed propositions is explained by the robust nature of the causal connection between the two. Likewise, the same goes for certain natural and ethical properties.

Counter (B): *Bruteness problem*. Positing brute necessary facts seems odd.

Reply (W): On Adams theory, God is the Good. Since God has no external foundation, the Good likewise has no external foundation. So theism also posits brute ethical facts.

Counter (B): *Incompleteness problem*. Seems like there needs to be a larger story for the proposal that natural properties robustly cause moral properties.

Reply (W): Not all causal connections have a deeper story. For example, causal connection between fundamental physical entities have no deeper story. Theism also posits such causal connections (eg. God has the power to bring entities into being ex nihilo through His will).

Reply (W): I do concede that if a moral theory can explain why certain natural properties produce certain moral properties while mine cannot, then all else being equal, the first theory is preferable.

Counter (B): *Metaphysical inadequacy problem*. In the case of God, Divine conservation can make sense since God's nature is the ground of being and the universe is contingent. However, what is it about purely empirical properties that makes it reasonable to think them metaphysically adequate to generate authoritative, prescriptively binding, and necessarily true moral facts consisting of non-natural properties? We need reason to believe that the moral properties are metaphysically up to the task or the nature of morality lends itself to natural explanation.

Reply (W): Seems to have differing intuitions here. It seems to me that natural properties can cause moral properties. Furthermore, the history of science has

showed us that the causal powers of the natural world are often surprising and counter intuitive. So some skepticism on Baggett's intuitions is called for.

Counter (B): Since moral facts are causally inert, what explanatory work do they do? Moral beliefs can be explained without positing the existence of any moral truths at all. Harman and others have argued that this results in moral skepticism, rather than moral realism.

Counter (B): Lastly, Wielenberg himself admits that the strong necessary supervenience relation does not address the ultimate reason why moral facts obtain.

Accounting for Our Knowledge of Necessary Truths

Robert Adams argues that theism better accounts for our knowledge of necessary truths (with moral truths being one of them), since on theism, God could have constructed us in a way that we would at least commonly recognize such truths as necessarily true. On an atheistic evolutionary story however, it seems that there is no extra survival value in recognizing necessary truths as necessary, rather than merely as true.

Furthermore, many others (theist and non-theist alike) have argued that moral knowledge itself does not sit well on an atheistic evolutionary story.

Reply (W): Ordinary moral knowledge in some cases includes knowledge of which features of those actions make them right or wrong. Knowing that no matter how the features of the situation in which the act is performed are varied, the moral status of the act will remain the same.

Obj (B): What is the evolutionary explanation of our recognition that inflicting pain just for fun makes an action wrong?

Reply (W): It is advantageous in that it provides motivation to resist such treatment at the hands of others. Furthermore, it is advantageous to recognize that similar causes tend to have similar effects.

Reply (W): Peter Singer has argued that reason leads us to many places that are not of any direct evolutionary advantage to us.

Problem of Reasonable Non-Believers (Against DCT)

Wielenberg and others have raised this problem against DCT. Reasonable non-believers are those who do not believe in God and have fulfilled their epistemic duties. Reasonable non-believers cannot recognize moral obligations as coming from a legitimate authority.

It seems that for a moral obligation to be generated by God's command,

R1: The intended audience must recognize the command as having been issued by God.

Consider a case of picking up a note that says, "Let me borrow your car." However, you have no idea who the author is. Here it seems that no obligation is generated, even if the note is actually by a friend to whom you owe a favor to.

Hence, if DCT proponents accept R1, then these non-believers do not have moral obligations. This seems unacceptable. If DCT proponents reject R1, then their theory seems implausible.

Reply (C. Stephen Evans): I can reasonably believe that commands communicated to me create obligations for me, even in cases where I do not know the source of the command. Evans raises a case where one is lost in a remote region inbetween the border of two countries. He sees a sign saying "You must not leave this path." The commands may be from Iraq, or Iran, or some regional arm of the government, or even from a private landowner whose property I am on. In this case, it seems reasonable to think that one is obligated. Therefore R1 is false.

Counter (W): In Evans example, the lost hiker recognizes the commands he receives as commands. His background knowledge gives him good reason to believe that the commands are issued by a legitimate authority. R1 can be modified as follows:

R2: The intended audience must recognize the command as having been issued by some legitimate authority or other.

Reply (B): Firstly, even if R2 works, there are other versions of theistic ethics without DCT, such as Divine attitude theory.

Reply (B): If a reasonable non-believer receives a command through special revelation, I would agree no obligation is generated. But hearing voices in one's head and having a conscience are different things. DCT does not entail that an atheist who hears "Go to Ninevah!" has a moral obligation to do so. We need to look at moral truths accessible through general revelation where both believer and non-believer can apprehend the authority of such truths. The authority of morality is self-evident. To insist that one needs to recognize the authority of the source before standing under the demands of morality gets things backwards. Lewis argues that we all already have a sense of the authority of morality, and the question is where that authority came from. Instead, I suggest:

R3: The intended audience of binding moral demands must be warranted in thinking that morality is authoritative.

Counter (W): There is a difference between commanding someone to perform act A and causing someone to believe that he is morally obligated to perform act A. The latter does not result in moral obligations. Suppose in Evans example, the authority merely causes anyone walking down the path to believe that they are obligated to stay on the path. This fails to create an actual moral obligation.

Reply (B): One's beliefs can correspond with reality. God can structure things to ensure that one form true beliefs.

Counter (W): Not clear that the worry is gone. Still seems that reasonable non-believers are not bound by such commands.