



# KNOWING & DOING

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## Is Bigger Better? C. S. Lewis, Atheism, and the Argument for Size

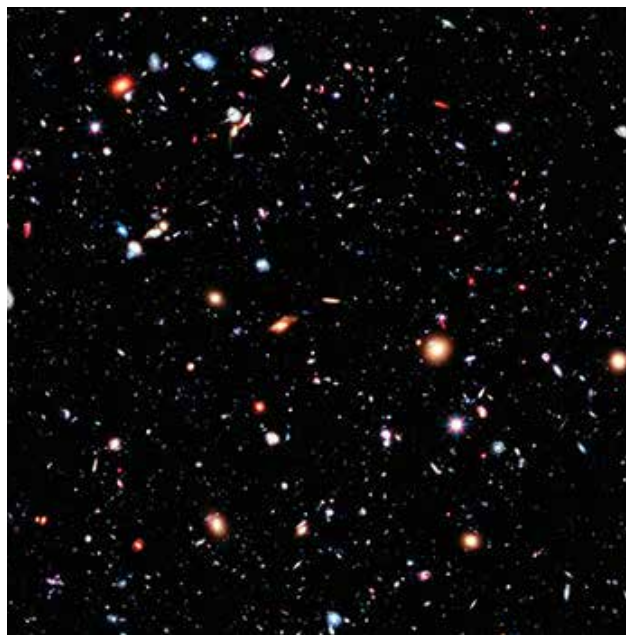
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**M**an exists on a little blue speck, hurtling through space, in a vast cosmos that is filled with billions and billions of planets, stars, and galaxies. Given the immensity of the universe and the smallness of Earth, it would seem foolish of humans to think they are somehow the focus of God's creative activity, the pinnacle of His love, and the image of His very character. It is far more likely, argues the atheist, that man is merely the accidental (and lucky) product of chance and necessity over time.

While reflecting on an image of Earth taken by Voyager I in 1990 from the vantage point of 4 billion miles, the astronomer Carl Sagan pushed this point when he said, "Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves."<sup>1</sup> More recently, given all the hoopla about the so-called multiverse, the late atheist scientist and philosopher Victor Stenger opined,

*The picture of the multiverse today starts with our own visible universe of 100 billion galaxies, each containing 100 billion stars, 13.8 billion years old... Besides that we also have the eternal multiverse containing an unlimited number of other bubble universes of comparable size... Surely, then, it is ludicrous to think that humanity... is the special creation of a divinity that presides over this vast reality.<sup>2</sup>*



Some try to find a silver lining to it all, arguing that, well, even though we are a tiny part of a vast universe, still, we are a *part* of it. Consider the science popularizer Neil deGrasse Tyson, who in 2014 hosted the television reboot of Sagan's 1980 series, *Cosmos*. He has offered this balm of comfort: "Many people feel small, because they're small and the Universe is big, but I feel big, because my atoms came from those stars." While this might make some of us feel better, it does not move me. If we are just the "outcome of accidental collocations of atoms," as the clear-eyed, old-line atheist Bertrand Russell put it, then all we can do is build our lives "on the firm foundation of unyielding despair."

## Can I Get an Argument?

The “Argument from Size” seems to be in vogue today among New Atheists and popularizers of naturalistic science. But what exactly is the argument? Or, more to the point, is there an argument to offer? How, exactly, would it go? The key premise would be something along the lines of “bigger is better” or “value is proportional to size,” as in a creator God, if there were such a thing, would value the big, the whole, not the individual planet or creature. But a moment’s reflection helps us see that that line of argument is pure folly. Value is not proportional to size. As C.S. Lewis argues in his book *Miracles*, “we are all equally certain that only a lunatic would think a man six-feet high necessarily more important than a man five-feet high, or a horse necessarily more important than a man, or a man’s leg than his brain.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many of the things we value most in life, such as goodness, truth, and beauty, are not, strictly speaking, measurable in physical terms at all.

Sure, there are good cookies and kids, true statements and beliefs, and beautiful paintings and platypuses, but these are concrete instances of something transcendent, something *beyond* the cookies and kids, statements and beliefs, paintings and platypuses. Goodness, truth, and beauty—values one and all—find their source beyond nature, beyond space. They cannot be measured by a yardstick, scale, or tachometer. In short, there is no philosophical “Argument from Size” to atheism.



## Modern Man’s Obsession with Bigness

If there is no argument, what gives? Again, C.S. Lewis provides insight. This popular difficulty advanced by atheists is gaining traction, because in modern times, according to Lewis, “the imagination has become more sensitive to bigness.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis suggests that this new sensitivity to bigness is a by-product of the eighteenth-century Romantic movement in poetry. Maybe so. What is clear is that modern man is fascinated with *bigness*. We want a bigger phone, a bigger home, a bigger car, a bigger paycheck, a bigger Twitter following. We super-size our burgers and fries and sip seventy-two-ounce Big Reds. (I am mindful of the fact that I write this while living in Texas—a big state—full of big trucks, big highways and byways, and miles and miles of bigness masquerading as cattle ranches.)

But this affair with size, Lewis points out, is not an affair of *reason* but of *emotion*. We behold the immensity of a mountain range, or canyon, or the night sky and our imagination awakens. We attach some *quality*—sublimity, greatness, big-league-ishness—to *quantity* and are thusly overcome by immensity; we look upon the night sky with awe. And rightly so. We ought, when face to face with reality, whether it be the vast universe or our own shadow, be moved to awe and wonder. As Lewis so eloquently puts it:

*It is a profound mistake to imagine that Christianity ever intended to dissipate the bewilderment and even the terror, the sense of our own nothingness, which come upon us when we think about the nature of things. It comes to intensify them. Without such sensations there is no religion.<sup>7</sup>*

When we see things in their proper light, we are moved to awe. We catch a glimpse of the enchanted world, imagination awakens, and the transcendent breaks into the mundane.

But modern man has mistaken this sign of transcendence for a philosophical principle. Since nature is all there is, this sense of awe and wonder in the face of immensity cannot point to something *beyond*. It must help us understand something *about* nature. Yes, that’s it. The bigger the better; size and importance are proportionally related.

## An Argument in the Neighborhood

The emotional response elicited from size points in the opposite direction from the Argument from Size. The feeling of awe, the awakened imagination, the sheer terror of our nothingness in a vast cosmos serve as a kind of religious experience that is suggestive of a transcendent Other. It is one of many signals of transcendence. It is an echo of the divine found within the domain of our “natural” reality that cries out for attention and points beyond that reality.

In fact, I believe these signals of transcendence are everywhere, even in the mundane gestures of our everyday human experience. Clear the dust, point the finger, shine the light, and they are easy enough to see. They are right in front of us; no excavation from the depths of our experience or mind is required. They are hidden in plain sight. Perhaps this blindness to reality is responsible for many of our problems. Perhaps the spiritual lethargy that characterizes many of us is a result of our disenchanting, overly materialistic, and hedonistic view of the world. Perhaps our evangelism so often falters because we fail to attend to, in our own life and in the lives of others, the deep mysteries, enchantments, and beauties that exist hidden in plain sight and point beyond us to God. The good news is that the solution to these problems and perhaps others is not far from us nor so hard.

Sociologist Peter Berger, in his excellent book *A Rumor of Angels*, is of some help, noting five signals of transcendence from our everyday lives and experiences.<sup>8</sup> First, there is the human propensity for *order*. Every society is burdened with the task of bringing order out of chaos. Even such commonplace acts as mowing the lawn, making a to-do list, and a mother assuring her upset child that “everything is in order, everything is all right” point to humanity’s faith in order. What best explains the observable human propensity to order reality? If there is no God, if there is nothing *beyond* nature, then everything is *not* in order, everything is *not* all right. Yet we take it upon ourselves to represent reality as ultimately in order and trustworthy. “This representation,” Berger argues, “can be justified only within a religious (strictly speaking a supernatural) frame of reference.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, Berger notes the ubiquity of human *play*. In play, time is suspended, the seriousness of the world is set aside, and a separate universe of intense joy and delight is created and entered. The experience of joyful play can be readily found in ordinary life even as it points beyond to a world where all is as it should be, the good triumphs over evil, and everyone in the end is known by his or her true name.

Third, there is the unconquerable human propensity to *hope*. Humanity is essentially “future directed,” looking forward to the fulfillment of all desires and to a day when the difficulties of the here and now will be no more. We think infinite happiness is really there. We hope that one day we will reach the rainbow’s end. Such hope is absurd if there is no God, no afterlife. As C.S. Lewis famously argued, “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.”<sup>10</sup> The human characteristic of hope, again, points beyond itself and this world. It is a signal of transcendence.

Fourth, in the face of horrendous evils, such as the massacre of the innocent, rape, or murder, there is the human demand for not only condemnation, but *damnation*. In our hearts we curse the perpetrators of such monstrous evils. No human punishment seems enough. Only eternal banishment of the guilty from God seems appropriate. Horrendous evil “raises the question of the justice and power of God. It also, however, suggests the necessity of hell—not so much as a confirmation of God’s justice, but rather as a vindication of our own.”<sup>11</sup> Both the human gesture of protective reassurance and a human counter gesture of damnation point us to a reality of something beyond this world.





Finally, there is the reality of *humor*. Life is full of the unexpected, the unforeseen. Who would have expected to find the great and serious philosopher Socrates hanging in a basket, contemplating the air (as Aristophanes portrays him in the Greek comedy *The Clouds*)? Who would have foreseen Wile E. Coyote, run over by a truck, emerge unharmed? The comic points to a discrepancy between our understanding of the world and another possible interpretation of it. We are forced to ask: which picture of the world is true to the way things are? Berger argues that at its most fundamental level, the comic reflects the “imprisonment of the human spirit in the world” and “implies that this imprisonment is not final but will be overcome.”<sup>12</sup> Comedy is a foretaste of things to come and, as such, another signal of transcendence.

Admittedly, much more could and should be said about each of Berger’s signals of transcendence. But here I want us to notice that there is an argument in the neighborhood of the atheist’s Argument from Size, pointing in the other direction, and grounded in the Christian doctrine of creation. The core premise of the argument is quite simple: *everything points to God, to something beyond nature*. That is, everything that exists—every truth discovered, every beauty (and every corruption of beauty), and every good (and perversion of good)—points to and illuminates the divine. Since God is the Creator of everything distinct from Himself, everything bears His stamp. Moreover, each of the signals of transcendence we’ve considered—bigness, order, play, hope, damnation, and humor—and many more that we have not, point not only to a transcendent reality but to the gospel story as the true story of the world. For in the gospel we find an enchanted, supernatural world where love is eternal, death is cheated, victory is snatched out of the hands of defeat, and, in the end, all turns out for the good.

Bigger isn’t always better. What bigness does point to, however, if we pay attention, is God. But so does everything else, if properly followed. My proposal is one of re-enchantment. We must begin to see everything in its proper light, not as ordinary, mundane, familiar, but as sacred, holy, a gift from our Creator. In doing so, like John the Baptist in the Gospels, we will be pointing others to the King and Creator of it all. That is *big* news! That is good news! ❖

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Many a man, brought up in the glib profession of some shallow form of Christianity, who comes through reading Astronomy to realise for the first time how majestically indifferent most reality is to man, and who perhaps abandons his religion on that account, may at that moment be having his first genuinely religious experience.

*C.S. Lewis*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Victor Stenger, "Faith in Anything Is Unreasonable," in *Is Faith in God Reasonable? Debates in Philosophy, Science, and Rhetoric*, ed. Corey Miller and Paul Gould (New York: Routledge, 2014), 66–67.
- <sup>3</sup> "10 Questions for Neil deGrasse Tyson," Time video, posted June 27, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiOwqDmacJo>.
- <sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 107.
- <sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1975), 72.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1970), 61–94.
- <sup>10</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 136–37.
- <sup>11</sup> Berger, *Rumor of Angels*, 86.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



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## RECOMMENDED READING

Alister E. McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How We Make Sense of Things* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

In thirteen short, accessible chapters, McGrath leads the reader through a nontechnical discussion of science and faith. How do we make sense of the world around us? Are belief in science and the Christian faith compatible? Does the structure of the universe point toward the existence of God?

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