



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

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OLD TRUTHS FROM OXFORD: C.S. LEWIS AND THE NEW ATHEISTS

The New Atheism



A few years ago, commuters on the streets of several major cities were met by some unusual advertisements on the side of buses. In large, friendly letters, they proclaimed: “There’s Probably No God: Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.”

The bus ads typified the approach of what’s been termed the “New Atheism,” a label coined in a 2006 *Wired* magazine article by Gary Wolf to describe the group of media-savvy secularists — men like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett — who were making waves. What’s “new” about the “New Atheism”? Not so much its arguments, which tend to be old ones, but its approach. Its advocates combine an enthusiastic, almost evangelistic, zeal for atheism and a scathing attack not just on religion but on cultural respect for religion. Gary Wolf writes: “The New Atheists condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong: it’s evil.”¹

Since Gary wrote that article, the New Atheism movement has mushroomed considerably, producing dozens of best-selling books. Yet its core ideas and attacks on religion remain much the same.

The Oxford Connection

A little-noted thread running through New Atheism is its Oxford connection. Dawkins is a fellow of New College, Oxford. Another leading New Atheist, Peter Atkins, is a professor at Lincoln College. Christopher Hitchens graduated from Balliol. Daniel Dennett studied at Hertford College. At the same time, of course, Oxford has strong Christian connections: the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics is based there, while Professors John Lennox and Alister McGrath, who have debated many of the New Atheists, are Oxford men.

Oxford, in short, lies at the very epicentre of the “god debate.” And this, too, is nothing new. Because there’s another, older Oxford atheist who is arguably just as famous — and who has certainly proved far more influential — than the likes of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. Whom am I talking about? Well, that man would be C.S. Lewis.

When we think of C.S. Lewis today, we probably think of Lewis the apologist, the theologian, the novelist, the poet, the children’s author, the academic. Lewis was amazingly prolific. But we sometimes forget that in his early life, there was also Lewis the atheist. I believe we can learn much from looking at Lewis’s atheism and his journey from it to Christ, as he engaged with the very kinds of arguments that the New Atheists are recycling today.

The Early Life of C.S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis was born in the winter of 1898 to a wealthy family living in Belfast, Ireland. His family was religious but it was an austere religiosity. Lewis would dutifully say his prayers and go to church, but he never had any real interest in God.

Religion aside, Lewis’s early childhood was a happy one. He loved the outdoors and delighted in exploring hills and woods. Early on, he caught the love of reading and would spend many a rainy day immersed in book after book, discovering how literature could open your mind to new vistas.

This idyllic childhood, however, was shattered forever at age ten, when Lewis’s beloved mother died suddenly of cancer. Lewis wrote: “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life... It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.”²



Lewis's view of God took a turn for the worse; he had prayed unceasingly for his mother, and yet his mother had died. Lewis wrote later that "the trouble with God is that he is like a person who never acknowledges one's letters and so, in time, one comes to the conclusion either that he does not exist or that you have got the address wrong."³

After his mother's death, things got worse still, for Lewis's father, unable to cope with the idea of being a single parent, packed Lewis and his brother off to a succession of boarding schools in England, places that Lewis hated with a passion.⁴

As he approached his early teens, Lewis lost the last vestiges of his faith.⁵ The final nail in the coffin was his reading of classical Greek and Roman writers. Lewis noted how his teachers considered the religious ideas in those authors to be just illusion. But if that were the case, why not take the obvious step and conclude that modern-day religious belief was equally an illusion, simply a *modern* illusion. Christianity was merely one of tens of thousands of religions throughout history, all which claimed to be true. Why believe this one to be right and all the others wrong?

Lewis quickly became not merely a disbeliever but an evangelistic atheist. He felt that the religion in which he had been raised was an "illness of long standing"; now that he'd broken free of it, he became a full-blown apostate, described by his friends as a "foul mouthed and riotously amusing atheist."⁶



When he turned sixteen, Lewis was taught by a private tutor, William Kirkpatrick, who had been his father's old headmaster. Known as the "Great Knock," Kirkpatrick was a staunch rationalist and atheist, and while Lewis described his own atheism as "fully formed" by this time, the Great Knock helped Lewis add reasons and arguments to his more experiential doubts of God. His atheism took on a pessimistic tone, and the problem of evil became a big argument for him.

"I believe in no God," Lewis wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves in 1916, asking "why would any intelligent person want to believe in a bogey who is prepared to torture me for ever and ever?"⁷

Aged eighteen, Lewis headed to Oxford University, where his atheism grew deeper. His studies, however, were interrupted by World War I, an experience that left deep emotional scars and reinforced his views, especially about how evil disproved the existence of a good, powerful God. His best friend, Paddy Moore, was killed, and then Lewis himself was invalidated out of the army when a shell exploded next to him, blowing his sergeant to bits and wounding Lewis. In all

of the horror of war, however, Lewis proudly boasted: "I never sank so low as to pray."⁸

From Atheism to Christianity

By the time Lewis returned to Oxford after World War I, to complete his studies and then to begin his teaching career, he was a deeply committed and passionate atheist. It's fascinating to note how similar his arguments were to those of the New Atheists today:⁹

- Lewis believed that there were cultural, evolutionary explanations for religion.
- He was convinced that science (especially evolution) left no room for God.
- He considered religion psychologically oppressive.¹⁰

But all this was about to change. Lewis discovered Christian writers, especially G.K. Chesterton, who began to make sense to him — and then there was something else. Lewis slowly realized, with horror, that all that he held dear made no sense if atheism were true. He wanted to believe in goodness, in beauty, in meaning, things that he found woven deeply into the literature he loved. But if atheism were true, then the universe was empty, cold, and bereft of meaning.

Lewis slowly journeyed through a succession of worldviews, moving from atheism to idealism, from idealism to pantheism, before realizing that "the least objectionable theory" was to postulate some kind of God.¹¹ The problem was, though, that



the God who began to break into Lewis's world wasn't passive but was active and questing, banging on the door. Lewis later wrote: "Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about 'man's search for God.' To me, as I was then, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat."¹² A few months later, the chase was over: "In the Trinity term I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."¹³

Although Lewis now believed in God, he was not yet a Christian, for he had no idea how Jesus fit into the scheme of things. His friend J.R.R. Tolkien, a deeply committed Catholic, helped him work most of this out. In particular, Lewis struggled with the idea that the New Testament looked like a myth. Tolkien helped him see that the New Testament is true myth. It had the qualities of the literature Lewis knew and loved, dealing with the deep structure of reality, but with the important difference that it happened in history.

Tolkien also finally helped Lewis answer a question that had haunted him since childhood: how could Christianity be true and everything else false? Lewis realized that he did not need to declare every other religion and myth *completely* false; they were echoes or anticipations of the total truth, which was known only in and through Christianity.¹⁴ Lewis would later explain this with an illustration: there is only one *right* answer to a sum, such as $2 + 2 = 4$, and there are many *wrong* answers. But some wrong answers are closer to the right answer than others. A few months after this conversation, the final pieces fell into place and Lewis became a Christian.

Lewis took years to work through the implications of his conversion. In due course, he began to gain a reputation as a Christian apologist and thinker of note, so much so that in 1941 the BBC asked him to prepare a series of radio talks on the Christian faith. These were incredibly popular, projecting Lewis onto the national stage and eventually being published as *Mere Christianity*. He went on to write dozens of works of apologetics and, of course, the Narnia books, which Lewis used as a narrative vehicle to explore aspects of the Christian faith. What marks Lewis out as writer and thinker is that he understood not just the importance of the mind and of argument, but also the imagination — something that is a bit neglected in apologetics today.



I want to explore briefly two apologetic arguments of which C.S. Lewis was very fond and that retain their power today, getting right to the Achilles Heel of the New Atheism. The young Lewis was, in many ways, a New Atheist before the term was invented, and so when he became a Christian, he was in a unique position to respond to and challenge the atheism he had once held so dear.

The Problem of Good and Evil

During his atheist years, one of the arguments that had formed a major plank of Lewis's rejection of God had been the problem of evil. Lewis later described his thinking:

Not many years ago when I was an atheist, if anyone had asked me, "Why do you not believe in God?" my reply would have run something like this... If you ask me to believe that [the universe] is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.¹⁵

Lewis's life experiences fed this thinking. Recall the loss of his mother to cancer, the terrible times at school, and especially the horrors he saw during the First World War.¹⁶

However, after the war, when Lewis began subjecting his atheism to more rigorous scrutiny, he quickly discovered a problem. Lewis wrote: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line."¹⁷



Lewis had discovered the moral argument for God's existence, which can be set out like this:

1. If there is no God, objective morals, values, and duties do not exist.

By objective, we mean morals, values, and duties that are independent of us. It's hard to see how these can exist if atoms and particles are ultimate, if all that matters is matter. As atheist Kenan Malik explains: "Science (or rather scientists) may be able to develop machines that can predict whether an individual is lying or not. But it cannot tell us whether it is a good thing that all our thoughts be monitored. That is a moral, not a scientific judgement."¹⁸ The problem for the atheist is that if God does not exist, all that remains is *preference* (either *personal* preferences or *cultural* ones).

2. Objective morals, values, and duties do exist.

As Lewis reflected on his atheism, one of the problems, he realized, was that it was obvious that real evil existed. It wasn't enough to say one didn't like the horrors of trench warfare, or murder, or rape. Rather, evil was a brute fact: "A real thing — a thing that is really there, not made up by ourselves."¹⁹

And most normal human beings would agree with Lewis: we instinctively know that objective morals, values, and duties exist. As atheist Michael Ruse put it, the person who says torturing babies is okay is wrong in the same way as the person who says $2 + 2 = 5$.



3. Therefore God exists.

The conclusion follows naturally from the premises. Now at this point, many atheists will protest and say things like "You don't need God to be good." To which one needs to respond gently: *but that is not the argument*. Rather the argument is that if God does not exist, good and evil don't exist either.

Nor is the argument that good and evil exist purely because God sits up in the sky with a big stick, to whack us if we do wrong. New Atheist writer Christopher Hitchens used to like to caricature Christian morality this way saying we don't need a policeman in the sky when "ordinary conscience will do, without any heavenly wrath behind it."²⁰

But whose conscience, Christopher? And where, incidentally, does the moral imperative to follow one's conscience come from in atheism? Why not follow one's gut or one's libido instead? Lewis anticipated this very criticism when he wrote these words:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, "If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't, I'll do the other thing." I don't think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into either a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself.²¹

In other words, we either become more or less Christlike. What defines the good? Good is what God is, what God's character is — and we, through the work of Christ and the cross, reflect more of that, or we become less.

The Argument from Desire

A second apologetic argument that became increasingly important for Lewis as he moved from atheism to Christianity was what we might term the Argument from Desire. The theme of joy and desire is one that ran powerfully through the life of the young Lewis. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells of an incident when he was standing by a flowering



bush and suddenly had a memory of the day his brother brought his toy garden into their nursery. A sensation of enormous bliss, of desire, came over him for a fleeting moment, and then it was gone. A similar thing happened when he read Beatrix Potter’s book *Squirrel Nutkin*, which gave him a powerful sensation of what he could only describe as the “Idea of Autumn.”²² And then a third glimpse of desire came when he read Henry Longfellow’s translation of a few lines of Swedish poetry:

*I heard the voice that cried
Balder the beautiful
Is dead, is dead—*

Lewis spoke of how these words opened doors to a realm he never knew existed. Nothing else seemed to matter for that fleeting moment. Lewis wrote: “I knew nothing of Balder, but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, [and] I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described.”²³

As he reflected on those experiences, Lewis realized they were aspects of the same thing: “An unsatisfied desire which is more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy.” When he became a Christian, in part through pursuing this theme and where it led, Lewis developed an apologetic around this idea. We could set it out this way:²⁴

- Every natural, innate desire in us corresponds to some real object that can satisfy that desire.
- There exists in us a desire which nothing in time, or on earth, no creature can satisfy.
- Therefore there must exist something more than time, earth, and creatures which can satisfy it.

This idea of deep desires within us for something more than this world is fairly universal across music, art, and literature. For example, the French existentialist and atheist Jean-Paul Sartre famously said, “There comes a time when one asks, even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven, ‘Is that all there is?’” Despite his deep love of books and literature — or perhaps because of it — Lewis made this realization:

*The books or music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing . . . Do what we will, then, we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy.*²⁵



When you introduce this argument with atheists, often objections will be made. A common one is to say that just because you have the desire for something doesn’t mean it exists; for example, I desire to fly like Superman. But this is a confusion. Lewis is talking about *natural* or *innate* desires, desires that are universal, that bubble up in everyone regardless of time, place, or culture.

Another skeptical response is to grumble, “Well, we don’t always get what we want,” but this is not the point. If I am hungry, I may not get food. If it’s midnight, the refrigerator is empty, and all the stores are closed. Nevertheless, my being hungry surely proves that food exists.

Finally, there is what one might term the “happy atheist” response: I am happy as I am, thank you, and I need nothing, certainly not God. Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft remarks that this “requires something more like exorcism than refutation.”²⁶ Other atheists are more honest, realizing there is an existential void that atheism simply cannot fill. For example, the famous atheist Bertrand Russell once wrote: “The centre of me is always and eternally in a terrible pain — a curious wild pain — a searching for something beyond what the world contains.”²⁷

The problem is that atheism logically entails nihilism. If you meet a “happy atheist,” a powerful question might be to ask what in your atheism is keeping you from an attitude of total despair, or are you simply living out a Pollyanna atheism, unwilling



to follow the logical consequences of your unbelief?

A few years ago, I was in Oxford, filming for a TV documentary. I had the privilege of interviewing Peter Atkins, arguably second only to Dawkins among British atheists. While we disagreed with almost everything each other said, he was very friendly. At the end of the interview, I asked Peter, “Have we covered everything you feel you want to say?” He paused and then said, “Could I give a sales pitch for atheism?” “Sure,” I replied, “what question could I ask you to let you do that?” Peter thought for a moment and said, “Perhaps you could ask what I’d say to a student who came to me and asked what they should do with their life.” I agreed and pitched Peter that question. Peter replied, “I would tell them that they should be happy (oh, but don’t hurt anybody else), keep asking questions, keep learning, especially from science, and be grateful every day for the gift that is life.” He then caught himself and said, “Well, I say ‘gift,’ but of course, it isn’t really a gift is it?”

Isn’t it interesting how the idea that there is purpose and meaning — that there is something greater than us, that life is a gift, can’t help but slip out.

Conclusion



Fifty-five years on from his death, how are we to judge Lewis? Certainly his influence today is arguably greater than ever. His books produce \$6 million in sales each year, the Narnia stories have been turned into Hollywood movies and are about to be adapted by Netflix.

Yet one of the fascinating things about the New Atheists is that they don’t really know what to do with C.S. Lewis. Dawkins more or less ignores him, simply firing a couple of cheap insults in his direction. Not one of the New Atheists engages properly with Lewis, tries to rebut his arguments — why is this?

I wonder if it’s because Lewis is a deeply uncomfortable figure for them. Dawkins, for example, wants to spin the narrative that religious people are intellectual lightweights — “died in the wool faith heads,” he calls them — unable to break free of their childhood religious indoctrination. But Lewis did break free of the sterile religion of his youth, became an atheist of deep conviction, yet then rediscovered Christianity — in the full flesh and blood variety — as an adult. And Lewis

was no dimwit; he was one of only a few in his generation to gain three Firsts at Oxford, had a deep knowledge of literature, philosophy, and language. He was an intellectual heavyweight who abandoned atheism, and conversion stories like that don’t fit with the New Atheist narrative.²⁸

But Lewis was steeped in the heady Oxford atmosphere breathed by so many of today’s New Atheists. He knew their arguments, which are old ones, and powerfully rebutted them long before Dawkins first put pen to paper. Lewis is very timely, his arguments as relevant today as ever. Not least because he understood something about apologetics that we forget at our peril: that argument is important, but that we need more than argument. We need to engage the mind, yes, but also the heart and the imagination.

If you are disturbed, anxious, or simply frustrated by the New Atheism, I encourage you to turn afresh to Lewis, to perhaps pull down old copies of *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy*, or the Narnia books from their shelves. As you read them, I trust that your mind, imagination, and heart may be stirred up, as you catch a glimpse, through their pages, of something good, beautiful, eternal, and true. ■



NOTES

- ¹ Gary Wolf, "The Church of the Non-Believers," *Wired*, November 2006, at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>.
- ² C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (1955; reprt., London: HarperCollins, 2012), 22.
- ³ Walter Hooper, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis: Family Letters 1905–1931*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 555.
- ⁴ He later said of these English schools that "I never hated anything so much, not even the front line trenches in World War I." See Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013), 25.
- ⁵ Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: The Companion and Guide* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 7.
- ⁶ See George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 64; see also Hooper, *Companion and Guide*, 8.
- ⁷ Hooper, *Letters*, 235.
- ⁸ Cited in David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis's Journey to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 11.
- ⁹ This point is made well by Peter S. Williams, *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013), 10.
- ¹⁰ Hooper, *Letters*, 371.
- ¹¹ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*, 138.
- ¹² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 227.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 229.
- ¹⁴ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*, 150.
- ¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; reprt., San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 1, 3.
- ¹⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 227.
- ¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; reprt., Glasgow: Collins, 1990), 39.
- ¹⁸ Kenan Malik, "Test Tube Truths," *The Rationalist Association*, April 14, 2011, at www.rationalist.org.uk/2538/test-tube-truths.
- ¹⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 21.
- ²⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York: Twelve, 2009), 214.
- ²¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 93.
- ²² Hooper, *Companion and Guide*, 5.
- ²³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 16–17. See also McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*; Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 18–19.
- ²⁴ I have taken this formulation of the argument from Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994), 78.
- ²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (1949; reprt., New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 30.
- ²⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Heaven, the Heart's Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 225.
- ²⁷ Nicholas Griffin, ed., *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 2: The Public Years (London: Routledge, 2001), 85.
- ²⁸ Williams, *Lewis vs. the New Atheists*, 16–22.
- ²² Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 968.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 953.



(A)theism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning...

— C.S. Lewis



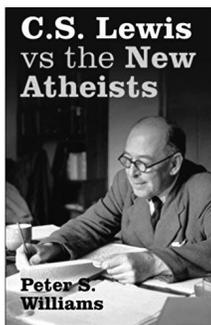
- 1 How would you explain the “moral argument for God’s existence” to a nonbeliever? How would you explain the “argument from desire”? Do you find these arguments helpful to you personally? If so, how?
- 2 Andy Bannister cites a number of books by C.S. Lewis, including *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy* and the Narnia chronicles. If you haven’t read these books, would you like to? If you have read them but not recently, would you like to read one or more of them again?



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RECOMMENDED READING

Peter S. Williams, *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013)

How might C.S. Lewis, the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century, respond to the twenty-first century ‘new atheism’ of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and company? Might Lewis’ own journey from atheism to Christian belief illuminate and undercut the objections of the new atheists? Christian philosopher Peter S. Williams takes us on an intellectual journey through Lewis’ conversion in conversation with today’s anti-theists.