Lacking, Ludicrous, or Logical? The Validity of Lewis's "Trilemma"

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*Abstract. N*o argument C. S. Lewis ever made is more well known—or controversial—than his famous "Trilemma" or "Lord/Liar/Lunatic" (not his phrase) argument for the deity of Christ. N. T. Wright observes, "This argument has worn well in some circles and extremely badly in others." Some of the sharpest critiques have come from within the believing community.

It is curious that an argument that has become a staple of Christian apologetics should be rejected as fallacious by many who accept its conclusion. With not only the validity of a much used argument but also the competence of the greatest apologist of the Twentieth Century at stake, it is time to take a fresh look at Lewis's argument and its critics. Can we still use the Trilemma? If so, how should we approach it? How does Lewis come off as an apologist? We will expose the fallacies committed by Lewis's critics and explore the conditions under which the argument is valid and can still be used effectively. Special attention will be given to the new edition of Beversluis's *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*.

Lewis's unique combination of wide learning, no-nonsense clarity, elegant language, and apt analogy remains the standard to which we should all aspire. When examined carefully, the Trilemma supports that conclusion; it is not an exception to it.

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No philosophical argument that C. S. Lewis ever made is more well known—or more controversial—than his famous "Trilemma" (not his word), or "Lord/Liar/Lunatic" (not his phrase) argument for the deity of Christ. N. T. Wright observes accurately that "This argument has worn well in some circles and extremely badly in others" (32). And some of the sharpest critiques have come from within the believing community.

It is curious that an argument that has become a staple of Christian apologetics should be rejected as fallacious by many who presumably accept its conclusion. With not only the validity of a much used argument but also the competence of the greatest apologist of the Twentieth Century at stake, it is time to take a fresh look at Lewis's argument and its critics. Can we still use the Trilemma? If so, how should we approach it? At the end of the day, how does Lewis come off as an apologist and an example to other apologists? We will try to shed some light on such questions before we are done.

First, let's remind ourselves of the argument itself as it is presented in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis is addressing a person who says, "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." We note first of all that the Trilemma is presented not so much as an argument for the deity of Christ as a refutation, a heading off at the pass, of one popular way of evading the claims of Christ. This, Lewis argues, is the one thing we cannot say.

> A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (56)

The basic problem Lewis's critics have had with this argument is their contention that it commits the fallacy of False Dilemma, the premature closure of options. Marvin D. Hinten uses it as an example of one of Lewis's alleged weaknesses: he "overlimits choices" (8). If it can be shown that there are other legitimate possibilities for how to understand the claims of Christ, it is urged, the argument fails.

The other possibilities suggested fall into basically two categories: first, the possibility that Jesus did not actually make the claims attributed to him, or that if he did, he did not mean them as the bald claims to deity for which conservative Christians have taken them; and, second, the possibility that someone could indeed be sincerely mistaken about his identity without being

truly insane in a way that would necessarily compromise his views of ethics or his status and authority as a moral teacher. We will examine each of these categories in turn.

THE CRITIQUE: BIBLICAL CRITICISM

First, it is argued, modern biblical criticism does not allow us to make the naïve assumption either that Jesus said everything that the New Testament attributes to him or that what he did say has the meaning conservative Christians have attached to it. Few believers are ready to sign up for the Jesus Seminar and question wholesale whether the words of Jesus as reported in the canonical Gospels are authentic. But believers do need to concern themselves with the fact that many secular people today will not begin with a presumption of their authenticity. Thus, Wright thinks that Lewis's argument "backfires dangerously when historical critics question his reading of the Gospels" (33).

It is more common to question whether Jesus' statements really add up to a clear and unequivocal claim to deity. All that is needed to deprive Lewis's argument of its logical force is the probability that Jesus' words should be taken in some other sense. For some, Lewis's failure to consider such a possibility robs him of all credibility. "Lewis' view that Jesus' claims were so clear as to admit of one and only one interpretation reveals that he is a textually careless and theologically unreliable guide" (Beversluis 1985, 54).

What are these other possible readings? Here things get a bit murky. It is apparently easier to suggest that a greater knowledge of, say, First-Century Jewish background would make such readings possible than it is to come up with specific examples. Thus, Beversluis: "Lewis's discussion suggests that all individuals of all times and places who say the kinds of things Jesus said must be dismissed as lunatics. But this overlooks the theological and historical background that alone makes the idea of a messianic claim intelligible in the first place" (1985, 56). How exactly a knowledge of that background would alter the nature of Jesus' claims is not made clear. The best Beversluis can manage is, "When they did dispose of him, it was not on the ground that he was a lunatic but on the ground that he was an imposter" (Beversluis 1985, 56).

N. T. Wright takes a different tack, appealing to the "strong incarnational principle" (32) which was the Jewish Temple, the sign of God's presence among his people. Lewis doesn't so much get Jesus' deity wrong as "drastically short circuits" the original Jewish way of getting

there: "When Jesus says, 'Your sins are forgiven,' he is not claiming straightforwardly to be God, but to give the people, out on the street, what they would normally get *by going to the Temple*" (33; emphasis in the original). By not taking us deeply enough into First-Century Jewish culture (at least as understood by Wright), Lewis fails to give us "sufficient grounding in who Jesus really was" (33).

BIBLICAL CRITICISM: A RESPONSE

The first thing to see in response to these criticisms is that they are more a practical than a logical critique of Lewis's argument. The argument itself simply presupposes that Jesus said and meant the things he is traditionally taken to have said and meant: It treats "a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said." The argument is presented in the form, "If Jesus said and meant these things, this is what follows." To note that the initial premise is controversial in some circles is not a refutation; a refutation would require establishing that the initial premise is false, or at least probably not true. And this has simply not been done.

Why does Lewis, though, make an initial assumption that does not appear to be one that we can actually afford safely to make? It was not because he was unaware of biblical criticism. It seems to me that most critics of Lewis have simply ignored the original audience for the Broadcast Talks that eventually became *Mere Christianity*: not college educated people but simple British laypersons during World War II. To bring up the technical issues of biblical criticism with that audience would have been a foolish introduction of questions they were not asking, unnecessary complications they did not need to deal with. With a more sophisticated audience, one would of course have to be prepared to make a case for the authenticity of the Gospel accounts and deal with alternative interpretations. That Lewis knew of this challenge and was prepared to meet it when appropriate is proved by essays such as "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism."

Beversluis in 1985 rejected this defense: "When Lewis . . . justifies the popular approach on the ground that 'if you are allowed to talk for only ten minutes, pretty well everything else has to be sacrificed to brevity,' he presents not a justification but an excuse. . . . Why not write a longer book in which 'everything else' *can* be fully and fairly discussed?" (1985,57). But here Beversluis falls prey to that regrettable tendency of reviewers to criticize the book they would

have preferred the author to have written rather than the book he actually wrote. Would Beversluis have an audience of simple laypersons remain unaddressed? Does he really think it makes sense to confuse them with technicalities that do not concern them? As for the "longer book," one could say that it exists in *Miracles* or can be reconstructed from various essays that do address different, more sophisticated audiences. In *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith*, Richard L. Purtill has a fine discussion of that larger argument gleaned from a more generous sampling of the Lewis corpus, in chapters 4-5 (45-71). Most of Lewis's critics simply ignore that context.

In his second edition of *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, Beversluis tries to respond to the arguments of Lewis and others that support a traditional reading of the Gospels as giving an accurate and reliable report of Jesus' claims. He says that all such arguments "uncritically assume that the synoptic Gospels are historically reliable sources" (2007, 116). Instead of scholarship, apologists like Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli offer "a flurry of unscholarly pseudo-questions" (2007, 118), such as why the apostles would be willing to die for what they knew was a lie. Real New Testament scholars don't ask such questions because they "know" that none of the original apostles had anything to do with the Gospels. "All mainstream New Testament Scholars agree that the synoptic Gospels are fragmentary, episodic, internally inconsistent, and written by people who were not eyewitnesses" (2007, 123).

For someone who claims to find fallacious motes in the eyes of others, Beversluis has a curious blindness to the beams in his own eyes. His whole argument here depends on the fallacies of *Ad Verecundiam* and *Dicto Simpliciter*. Even if all serious biblical scholars did agree with Beversluis, that fact in itself would not make them right. But they can only be said to agree by the sleight of hand of simply (and arbitrarily) defining a "mainstream" scholar as a skeptical one. Beversluis's unqualified generalization—*all*?—has never in fact been true, and is less true now than it has been at any time in the modern age. Richard Bauckham's magisterial *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is just one recent counter-example. A basic source like Stephen Neil's classic *The Interpretation of the New Testament* could have provided Beversluis with many more.

Beversluis in his revised edition also responds specifically to Lewis's own arguments in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism." He simply dismisses Lewis's point that people who claim to find myths and legends in the Gospels need to know something about myths and legends and his observation that source criticism when applied to modern authors where it can be

checked is almost always wrong. Beversluis patronizes these concerns as "The Argument from Personal Incredulity" (2007, 123). Nevertheless, Lewis's incredulity is not just a rhetorical ploy but has very good and specific grounds in his claim that the whole enterprise of skeptical criticism is methodologically flawed—an issue that Beversluis just fails to address. We have to conclude that the authenticity of the sources simply has not been overturned.

The alternative interpretations of Jesus' claims are not impressive either. How is "When they did dispose of him, it was not on the ground that he was a lunatic but on the ground that he was an imposter" (Beversluis 1985, 56) a problem? "Liar" is one of the implied horns of the Trilemma. Isn't an imposter just one form of liar? Isn't Liar at least as incompatible with Great Moral Teacher as Lunatic? And N. T. Wright seems to expect of his readers a sophistication in modern interpretations of Jewish culture that even the Pharisees of Jesus' day did not manifest. After Jesus' declaration that the sins of the paralytic were forgiven prior to his healing, they were not saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Where can sins be forgiven but *in the Temple* alone?" but "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but *God* alone?" (Luke 5:21; emphasis added). In other words, Lewis's argument deals with the reactions Jesus' contemporaries actually made to him—not the one Wright thinks they should have made! Wright thus tempts one to apply to him Lewis's verdict from "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism": These critics are so adept in reading between the lines that they have forgotten how to read the lines themselves.

Beversluis fares no better when he claims that all that is needed is to suppose that Jesus had been "*authorized* to forgive sins by God" (2007, 124, emphasis added). This again simply ignores the actual reaction by Jesus' contemporaries. *They* took Jesus' words as a claim to deity, and he did nothing to allay their concerns. In order to understand their reaction, as well as the significance of Jesus' allowing it to take place, modern readers might be helped by imagining the reaction of a radical Muslim Fundamentalist to a mere human being who claimed to be Allah. It is ironic that Lewis is accused of ignoring the cultural context of the Gospels' claims for Jesus by people who have obviously failed to make the effort to imagine the fierce monotheism of First-Century Judaism—a basic and essential prerequisite to any audience analysis of the words of Jesus! Far from Lewis's views of the Gospels revealing him as "a textually careless and theologically unreliable guide" to them, it would seem that the accusation would better fit Lewis's critics.

In summary, Lewis's Trilemma did not, in fact, "backfire" with the audience for whom it was intended, even if it doesn't work with negative historical critics, a "failure" that Lewis himself would have expected. Even a more sophisticated audience that objectively examined the data would have to admit that the complications raised by modern biblical criticism do not overturn the initial premise of the Trilemma. Jesus in fact claimed deity: he made the statements, and he meant what he said. Anyone using the argument today should be prepared to make the case that he did so whenever it is needed. The wise apologist will not simply repeat Lewis's paragraph from *Mere Christianity*, but rather adapt it to his own audience. This will involve notations such as "Here be prepared to insert 'Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,' along with further updated arguments." Unlike his critics, we should look to Lewis's other books and essays as evidence for how he himself would have used the argument from *Mere Christianity* in different contexts, and then follow suit ourselves.

THE CRITIQUE: MISTAKEN IDENTITIES?

The second major attempt to show that Lewis failed to cover his bases involves, amazingly, the denial that only an insane person could sincerely but mistakenly believe himself to be God, or that such a mistake would automatically disqualify him as a moral teacher. Beversluis originally asserted that "We could simply suppose that although [Jesus] sincerely believed he was God, he was mistaken" (1985, 55): not lying or insane, just mistaken. He elaborates, "If we deny that Jesus was God, we are not logically compelled to say that he was a lunatic; all we have to say is that his claim to be God was false. The term lunatic simply clouds the issue with emotional rhetoric" (1985, 55). In his second edition, he adds documentation from psychological studies of insanity to the effect that "delusional people are deluded about something . . . but they are rarely, if ever, deluded about everything" (2007, 126). Just because a person is deluded about who he is does not necessarily mean that he is deluded about the content of his moral teachings. Beversluis concludes, "The sober answer to the question is No, this is not the kind of blunder that only a lunatic would make" (1985, 55).

Well, this assertion is generally correct; but surely its application to the specific case of Jesus would take some supporting. No doubt people may be sincerely mistaken about a lot of things, even having to do with their own identity, without being necessarily insane; and they can

be insane without being wrong about morals. But make no mistake: We are being asked here to believe that a person could be mistaken about the claim that "Before Abraham was, *I Am*," a person who was in a position to be familiar with the standard translation of the Tetragrammaton, the Old Testament name of God, and still be considered a sound thinker about morals. Is this really credible? Marvin D. Hinten shows how such support might look. When he teaches *Mere Christianity*, he asks his class

> if they believe angels really did appear to Joan of Arc to say she was God's chosen instrument to save France. Half the class shake their heads no; the other (quicker-thinking) half simply sit and think it over, because they already see where it is going. None of them see Joan as insane or demonic, so if they apply Lewis's line of reasoning they will have to admit God really did send angels to Joan, which they have no intention of admitting. I then bring Mohammed into the mix, a man who genuinely seems to have felt Gabriel appeared to him with teaching from God. We discuss ways in which a goodhearted person could be genuinely mistaken about their [*sic*] role in life: an *idée fixe*, a hallucination, etc. (8)

O. K., so the argument goes, you can be mistaken about your identity without being insane. Likewise, you can be mistaken about your identity without undermining your views of ethics. Lewis "apparently thought that if certain factual claims Jesus made about himself were false, a disastrous conclusion would follow about the truth, sanity, and reliability of his moral teachings. But why say that?" (Beversluis 1985, 55). Beversluis goes on to ask, "Did Lewis think that if Jesus were not God, there would no longer be any reason for believing that love is preferable to hate, humility to arrogance, charity to vindictiveness, meekness to oppressiveness, fidelity to adultery, or truthfulness to deception?" (1985, 55). So the Trilemma fails at every point by this view. You can in theory be mistaken about your identity without being insane *and* without having false views of ethics; therefore, Lewis has failed to eliminate the "Great Moral Teacher but not God" view of Jesus and hung his apologetic on a fallacious hook. "Contrary to what Lewis claims, we *can* deny that Jesus was God and say that he was a great moral teacher" (2007, 135).

MISTAKEN IDENTITIES? A RESPONSE

Lewis's critics succeed in undermining his argument only by use of a clever sleight of hand known as the fallacy of Equivocation. The argument they are critiquing is simply not the one that Lewis made. The criticisms all deal with the *general concept* of mistaken identity, whereas Lewis is dealing with a very *specific case* of it, the false claim *to be God*. As Horner rightly puts it, Beversluis's representation of the case (if "certain factual claims Jesus made about himself were false") is hardly adequate. "The factual claims in question are of cosmic, as well as supremely personal and existential, consequence" (77). Treating such vastly different cases of mistaken identity as equivalent is illogical at best and dishonest at worst. But Lewis's critics have to do it in order to make their criticisms sound plausible.

This weakness becomes very clear when we examine the examples Hinten uses to support the claim that mistaken identity does not entail insanity. Joan of Arc and Mohammed thought they had seen angels and had a special role in history as a result. One can just imagine that they could have been victims of some kind of hallucination or had some kind of experience that they misinterpreted, and that this could all have happened without compromising their general soundness of mind, or their views of ethics. But the problem is that such examples are simply not relevant to Lewis's argument. Joan and Muhammed did not claim to be *God*. That is, they did not claim to have existed from eternity in a special relationship with God the Father that made them Lord and gave them the authority to command the elements and forgive sins. They did not claim that they had a prior existence that was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent—all of which is implied in and entailed by the specific nature of Jesus' claims. They did not claim that he who had seen them had seen the Father. *They did not claim to be the Jahweh of the Patriarchs and Moses incarnate in human flesh*!

How is it possible to miss the profound difference between all other mistakes about one's own identity and this one? One who wrongly believes that he is Napoleon has only confused himself with another finite human being. (Even this would present problems for the claim to be a great moral teacher. As Horner correctly observes [77], having correct views on ethics is a necessary, but hardly a sufficient condition for being a great moral teacher.) But to believe that one is Jahweh differs from all other such mistaken claims by an order of magnitude that is . . .

well, infinite. It compounds a mistake of fact ("I am this finite created being, not that one") with an error in metaphysics ("I am not *a* finite being at all, but the Ground of all Being"). This is not, as Lewis's critics want to believe, merely a matter of degree. The gap between any creature and the Creator is a difference of kind.

One might object that while the difference between the Creator and the creature is a difference of kind, the *claim* itself does not so differ from other claims, since all delusions are ontologically false to the same degree, that is, completely. But even if we accept this analysis and agree that all false claims are equally incorrect, it does not follow that all such errors are equally serious, much less morally equivalent. Claiming to be Napoleon, for example, does not make one guilty of blasphemy. Mistaking one creature for another is an error, conceivably innocent; mistaking a creature for the Creator is idolatry. The error attributed to Jesus would be of the latter variety, and surely not irrelevant to his status as a Great Moral Teacher!

To put it bluntly, therefore, Lewis's critics' ability to rebut his argument depends on their ability to substitute a different and inferior argument while no one is looking and get away with it. When, like Lewis, we remember the radical nature of what Jesus actually claimed, and compare it with the ridiculously inadequate examples urged against the Trilemma, the attempts to evade its force become laughably absurd.

An equal lack of attention to what Lewis actually said appears in the attempt to evade his claims about the implications of the relationship between Christ's person and his teaching. Beversluis asks, "Did Lewis think that if Jesus were not God, there would no longer be any reason for believing that love is preferable to hate, humility to arrogance, charity to vindictiveness, meekness to oppressiveness, fidelity to adultery, or truthfulness to deception?" (1985, 55). But Lewis was not evaluating the moral truth of Jesus' teaching; he was examining the claims of the *Teacher*. His whole argument presupposes the self evident truth of the teachings (cf. *Mere Christianity* 137), which is part of the evidence to be considered in evaluating the sanity of the Teacher. What is under scrutiny is the claims of the Teacher. Lewis is not saying that, if he were insane enough to wrongly think he was the omnipotent God, Jesus' moral teaching would be refuted. He is saying that the self-evident truth of those teachings and their widely acknowledged superiority to all other attempts to state the same ideals refutes, i.e., is incompatible with, the notion that their source was a blatant liar or a megalomaniac. Nothing

that his critics have said makes those propositions any more consistent than they ever were before. Beversluis's question is simply beside the point.

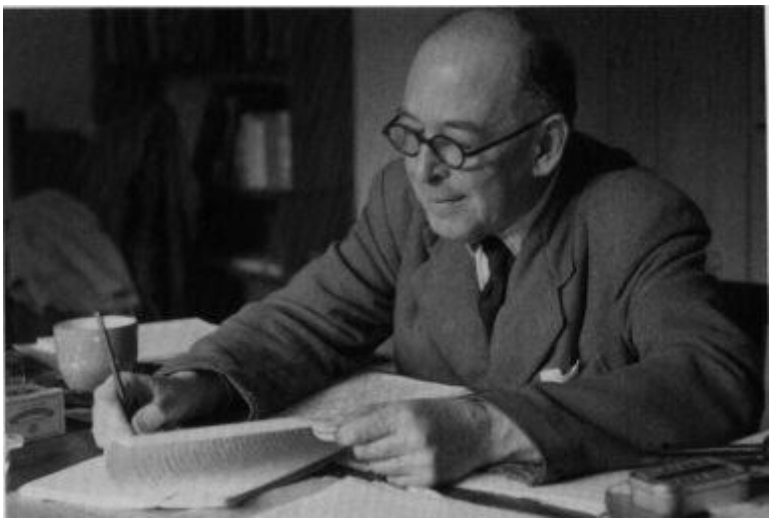
In summary, the attempts to show that the Trilemma omits valid but unconsidered options all fail. In order to reject Lewis's argument, you have to be prepared to affirm that a person in his right mind can sincerely but mistakenly believe, not simply that he has been visited by an angel, but that he is Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, and still retain any credibility on anything else he might say. Since very few people in their right minds are prepared to accept that conclusion, Lewis's critics are forced to try to undermine his argument by sneakily substituting a straw man for it. Refuting that weak substitution, they then pretend to have refuted the Trilemma. But no reader who is actually paying attention should fall for this shell game—for that is what it essentially is.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lewis's Trilemma is still a strong argument and can be used with confidence, especially if we allow it to be nuanced and strengthened by its context in Lewis's body of writings as a whole. It is unfair to take a paragraph aimed at a lay audience and complain that it is inadequate to deal with people who have a more sophisticated set of issues. Of course the classic passage from *Mere Christianity* needs to be supplemented when used with more sophisticated audiences, by Lewis's other writings and by information and arguments that have come to light since he wrote. But the basic argument is sound. It is one thing to claim that it commits the fallacy of False Dilemma; it is quite another to show that other credible and valid options actually exist. Lewis's critics have simply failed to do that.

Second, Lewis's position as the dean of Christian apologists remains unchallenged. He was not infallible, but neither was he guilty of writing something in the Trilemma that was "not top-flight thinking" (Hinten 8). His unique combination of wide learning, no-nonsense clarity, elegant language, and apt analogy remains as the standard to which we should all aspire and the example we should seek to emulate. When examined carefully, the Trilemma supports that conclusion; it is not an exception to it.

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord? Lacking, Ludicrous, or Logical? Plunk for Liar or Lunatic if you must. But let's not come with any patronizing nonsense about how Lewis gave us a fallacious argument. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.



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