Socrates in Service to Christ: The Formation of an Apologist[1]

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ABSTRACT

Peter exhorts all Christians to be prepared with a defense for the faith (1 Peter 3:15). Yet the best way to train the laity in apologetics is a neglected area of spiritual formation. In this paper, I argue that much can be learned from a careful study of Oxford University's Socratic Club, under the presidency of C. S. Lewis from 1942 to 1954. I argue that, in virtue of its founding vision and the caliber of its participants, the Socratic Club has never been surpassed as a forum for examining the case for and against the Christian faith, and provides the ideal model for training Christians who wish to respond effectively to the real problems and objections raised by atheists, agnostics, and sometimes Christians themselves. After an examination of the ground-rules and work of this historic society, I move to an assessment of the Socratic spirit today. I argue that there are encouraging signs of vitality, but that a pervasive incivility and anti-intellectual irrationalism are obstacles that must be taken seriously if the case for Christ is to become again a major part of our cultural conversation.

1. Introduction

The Christian faith has come under increasing attack by militant atheists such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. In response, Christians are flocking to presentations and classes on Christian apologetics, and it is gratifying to see the laity take seriously the defense of Christian truth claims. But something is often missing: direct engagement with the concerns and objections of the unbeliever. To be faithful to Peter's call (1 Peter 3: 15), Christians must reply to the actual questions unbelievers pose, and a live, frank debate remains the best format. In this paper, I will suggest that, in virtue of its founding

[1]Versions of this paper were presented during the series "C. S. Lewis Visits Nashotah House," held at Nashotah House, Wisconsin, and at the national Evangelical Theological Society meeting in San Diego, both in 2007.

vision and principles of operation, the Oxford University Socratic Club provides an unsurpassed model for the kind of constructive debate between Christians and unbelievers which is necessary to form faithful apologists. Since the time of that Club, however, there has been a marked decline in civility (epitomized by *ad hominem* argument, electronic ghettoes, media bias, and attacks on Christian academic freedom) and a cynicism about truth and reason which present formidable, though (I think) surmountable obstacles to the emergence of a similar institution today.

2. The Founding of the Socratic Club

Socrates insisted that the unexamined life is not worth living, and exhorted honest enquirers to follow the evidence wherever it leads. The model he provided for the search for truth was one of robust, public dialogue. Socrates compared himself to a midwife, whose questioning would elicit the birth of an idea. His thought was that the true strengths and weaknesses of a viewpoint only become clear when it is developed under close, critical scrutiny. The experience is not always pleasant, and may reveal that someone's deeply held convictions are unsubstantiated prejudice. But there are many benefits as well. One may learn humility, realizing that someone with an opposing view has a better case than one thought. One has the opportunity to refine or modify one's view to overcome objections. One may finally give up an idea that simply holds no water and embrace an idea one long rejected. Like Aslan, the Socratic method is not "safe." But it is good, if one's goal is to do one's best to find truth.

While the Socratic method is completely general, the Oxford University Socratic Club chose to apply it more specifically to "the *pros* and *cons* of the Christian religion."[2]

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[2]C. S. Lewis, "The Founding of the Socratic Club," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 126.

It is well known that C. S. Lewis was the President of the Club, chairing it for 13 years, from 1942 to 1954. But it is significant that Lewis did not bring the club into existence. The club was student-driven: the club was formed because students wanted a full and open discussion of the case for and against the Christian faith, a discussion that was not happening in any of the classes or other clubs. In 1941, Stella Aldwinckle was on the Oxford pastoral staff (i.e. campus ministry), and as Christopher Mitchell recounts, a new student, Monica Shorten,

> "complained...that no one seemed ready to seriously discuss the deeper questions raised by agnostics and atheists. 'The sermons and the religious clubs just take the real difficulties as solved—things like the existence of God, the divinity of Christ and so on.'"[3]

Monica Shorten was not alone. It turned out that there were several groups of students who were favorable to the idea of the club. These included: (1) a number of atheists and agnostics, at least some of whom were generous-spirited and open to hearing the best that could be said for and against the claims of Christianity; (2) Christians who were secure in their faith, but who wanted to give better replies to the problems raised by unbelievers; (3) Christians beset with unanswered doubts of their own; (4) people of any conviction who simply enjoyed a vigorous debate where a lot was at stake.

Stella Aldwinckle called an initial meeting to discuss the idea of such a club, but realized it could not succeed without the right President. The fact that C. S. Lewis was on campus, had been an atheist for many years before coming a Christian, and had a strong interest in Christian apologetics, made him the ideal candidate. Lewis's response to Aldwinckle's request is extraordinary. Lewis treated the request not, as he justifiably might have done, as a troublesome intrusion on his absurdly busy schedule, but as a

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[3]Christopher Mitchell, "C. S. Lewis and the Oxford University Socratic Club," in ed. Angus Menuge, *C. S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), p. 330.

summons from God to serve the Oxford community with his special gifts. He wrote, "Dear Miss Aldwinckle, This club is long overdue. Come to coffee on Tuesday evening in my rooms to discuss plans."[4] The club had official approval by the beginning of 1942, and had its first meeting on January 26th, when R. E. Havard presented the paper, "Won't Mankind Outgrow Christianity in the Face of the Advance of Science and of Modern Ideologies?"

3. The Success of the Club

From its modest beginnings in a student complaint, the Socratic Club became far and away "the most flourishing and influential of undergraduate societies."[5] Although meetings were late on Monday evening, running from 8:15 to 10:30, there were "usually between 60 and 100 members in attendance at every meeting, and unless one arrived early one was lucky to find a seat on the floor."[6] In the great encounter with Professor C. E. M. Joad, "250 people crowded into Lady Margaret Hall."[7] There are a number of reasons for the Club's success.

First, the Socratic club was driven by a perceived need. When Peter delivers the apologist's mandate in his first epistle, he writes that Christians should always be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3: 15). Christians are called to defend the faith, but what drives their defense, Peter says, is not what the apologist feels most comfortable in expounding, but the questions of others. The Socratic Club was faithful to this calling, by centering on the

[4]Audio interview with Stella Aldwinckle, quoted in Mitchell, "C. S. Lewis and the Oxford University Socratic Club," 331.
[5]Walter Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," in ed. James T. Como, *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscence*s (New York: Macmillan, 1979). 145.
[6] Ibid, 140.
[7]Ibid, 145.

actual problems and objections students and faculty encountered or harbored, rather than on what Christian leaders would prefer to say to them.

Second, the club was specifically *student* driven. In my experience, it is only campus clubs strongly supported by a cadre of loyal students that usually succeed. Over 10 years ago, when I first taught a class on the life and works of C. S. Lewis and said that the Socratic Club was an exemplary organization, it was a highly committed student who formed and ran a club of the same name. After he graduated, this student continued to engage atheists in debate via his internet ministry, and the club was reincarnated as "the Tea Society," and then "the TGB society," ("TGB" stands for the classic values of Truth, Goodness and Beauty). By contrast, clubs that are started by faculty with the goal of enlightening students with the faculty members' preferred political ideologies (e.g. "progressive" or "conservative" clubs) are not well-received. They come across as condescending and propagandistic, as a place for fortifying the already convinced and for dismissing the benighted, rather than an open forum where opposing ideas are given a fair hearing.

A third reason for the success of the Socratic club was that it courageously eschewed such a partisan agenda, thereby making both the critics and the defenders of Christianity feel welcome. Lewis claimed that, so far as he knew, there had never been a club quite like the Socratic.

> There had been plenty of organizations that were explicitly Christian...and there had been plenty of others, scientific or political, which were, if not explicitly, yet profoundly anti-Christian in outlook.... [B]ut an arena specially devoted to the conflict between Christian and unbeliever was a novelty.[8]

On reflection, Lewis saw that the lack of such a society had harmed both believers and unbelievers. Believers could not be faithful to Peter's call to defend the faith if they

[8]C. S. Lewis, "The Founding of the Socratic Club," 127.

never encountered the real problems of unbelievers first-hand, but only as described, at a safe distance, by fellow believers. Unbelievers were allowed to react to untutored caricatures of Christian doctrine, objecting to claims that thoughtful Christians need not make. Wrote Lewis, in a comment that brilliantly exposes the folly of today's electronic ghettoes,

> In any fairly large and talkative community such as a university there is always the danger that those who think alike should gravitate together into *coteries* where they will henceforth encounter opposition only in the emasculated form of rumour that the outsiders say thus and thus. The absent are easily refuted, complacent dogmatism thrives, and differences of opinion are embittered by group hostility. Each group hears not the best, but the worst, that the other group can say. In the Socratic all this was changed. Here a man could get the case for Christianity without all the paraphernalia of pietism and the case against it without the irrelevant *sansculottisme* of our common anti-God weeklies.[9]

The exclusion of pietism meant that appeals to inner religious experience and personal testimonies, however valuable when shared among believers, had no place in the Socratic. By its very nature, the Club had to offer a level-playing field to both believer and unbeliever. The framework had to be neutral regarding the validity of religious experience since that was one of the very questions at issue. Like a court of law, the Socratic confined itself to public evidence and rational argument which could be assessed by all interested parties. The exclusion of "sanscullotisme" means that the emotionally charged propaganda of popular atheism was also excluded. The term "sanscullotisme" literally means "without knee-breaches" and was coined by the aristocracy in the French revolution as a term for the lower class revolutionaries. In this context, it implies that the anti-God weeklies were extremist and populist in tone, and therefore that presentations at that level were not up to the scholarly standards expected at a major university.

A fourth reason for the Socratic Club's success was the caliber of its speakers. While the Socratic aimed to include all sides in its discussion of the Christian Religion, it

[9]Ibid.

was concerned to field the best representatives possible. A typical Socratic meeting had two well-matched speakers, one opposing, and one defending a core claim of Christianity, with Lewis himself expected to defend Christianity in the ensuing discussion. Hooper writes,

> Should the first speaker be a Christian, the reply would come from an atheist (if one could be found), and *vice versa* should the first speaker be an unbeliever. In fairness to both sides, the second speaker was usually allowed to see the other's paper in advance of the meeting in order that he might have a chance to frame his reply.[10]

Lewis tells us that the club's committee "scoured *Who's Who* to find intelligent atheists who had leisure or zeal to come and propagate their creed."[11] A complete listing of the papers and speakers at the Socratic Club from 1942 to 1954 is provided by Walter Hooper[12], and although many of the participants are no longer well-known, they included figures at the height of their profession. Amongst those whose names are still widely remembered are: the philosophers Elizabeth Anscombe, J. L. Austin, A. J. Ayer, Renford Bambrough, Brand Blanshard, Frederick Copleston, Michael Dummett, Antony Flew, Peter Geach, R. M. Hare, C. E. M. Joad, John Lucas, Basil Mitchell (who chaired the Socratic Club after Lewis until it ended in 1972), P. H. Nowell-Smith, H. H. Price, Gilbert Ryle, Stephen Toulmin, Bernard Williams and John Wisdom; the scientists Jacob Bronowski, Conrad Lorenz and Michael Polanyi; important literary figures such as Iris Murdoch and Dorothy Sayers, and theologians such as Christopher Dawson and Austin Farrer, who sometimes stood in for C. S. Lewis when he was sick or had another engagement.

A fifth reason for the club's success was the openly stated convictions of its founders and participants. Today, it is common to find a kind of nihilistic model of

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[10]Walter Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," 140.
[11]Ibid, 128.
[12]Walter Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," 174-185.

debate, where the important thing is that both sides are heard, but no-one is greatly concerned how the debate turns out, because no-one has a deep commitment to either side in the first place. The common refrain, "I can see both sides," which might mean only that one respects the position of one's opponent, is often used to convey a settled indifference to the whole matter. Hearing both sides is important to be "nice" to everyone, but the debate begins and ends with the mantra, "Whatever..." By contrast, the Socratic club was founded by open Christians (Lewis and Aldwinckle) who "never claimed to be impartial"[13] and recruited other professing Christians, atheists and agnostics as participants. The clear identification of sides with a strong, vested interest in presenting the best case they could is what made the Socratic so appealing. There was a sense of drama, because a lot was at stake. A bad argument or a weak reply would let down one's side. A point well made could show the weakness of an opponent's position for everyone to see. The Socratic was a kind of arena, and although no physical violence was permitted, participants ran the risk of receiving a mortal, intellectual blow.

Finally, vital to the Socratic club's success was its choice of President. Even so distinguished a Christian philosopher as Basil Mitchell, who took over as President in 1954, was not able to maintain the high level of popularity that the club enjoyed under Lewis. This is partly because Lewis was a noted public intellectual and a celebrity among thinking Christians, and even among their critics. But a more fundamental factor is the breadth and depth of Lewis's education. Lewis had simply read far more than most people, in English, Philosophy, the classics and theology. Many of the questions raised by the skeptics and atheists of Lewis's day had been raised before and addressed ably by

[13]C. S. Lewis, "The Founding of the Socratic Club," 128.

thinkers of the past. Lewis's catholic reading habits and prodigious memory meant that he was well-armed to enter the debate.

In addition, Lewis was a clear thinker, quick on his feet, with gifts of verbal repartee. His eloquence traced to numerous sources, including his father (a lawyer) and "Smugy," an English teacher at Malvern College, who taught Lewis to attend closely to the music of language:

> "Every verse he read turned into music on his lips: something midway between speech and song... He first taught me the right sensuality of poetry..."[14]

This sensitivity to language developed Lewis's rhetorical powers, so that he could select just the right turn of phrase to make a point clearly, effectively and memorably. A good example of how Lewis employed rhetoric at the Socratic Club is recounted by Walter Hooper:

> "Lewis was a master of the instant riposte.... Austin Farrer told me of a meeting at which the first speaker, who was a Relativist, ended his talk with the assertion: 'The world does not exist, Oxford does not exist, and I am confident that *I* do not exist!" Lewis, standing up to reply, said, 'How am I to talk to a man who's *not there*?"[15]

Lewis's rhetoric did not become mere sophistry because he also had a strong background in logic. As Christopher Mitchell has noted, Lewis was himself trained in the Socratic method by his tutor, William T. Kirkpatrick—also known as "Kirk" and "The Great Knock," before studying at Oxford University. A famous exchange between Lewis and Kirkpatrick was to set the tone for their whole time together. Lewis, born near Belfast with its hills, mountains and lochs had expected Surrey, a county near London, to be a dismal, non-descript area of suburbia. He was therefore surprised to discover "steep little hills, watered valleys, and wooded commons" with "bracken everywhere".[16] Then he

[14]C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 111.
[15]Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," 146.
[16]C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 132.

made the fatal mistake of "'making conversation'" with Kirkpatrick, saying that the scenery of Surrey was "much 'wilder' than [he] had expected."

> "Stop!" shouted Kirk with a suddenness that made me jump. "What do you mean by wildness and what grounds had you for not expecting it?"
> .... As answer after answer was torn to shreds it at last dawned upon me that he really wanted to know... A few passes sufficed to show that I had no clear and distinct idea corresponding to the word 'wildness,' and that, in so far as I had any idea at all, 'wildness' was a singularly inept word. "Do you not see, then," concluded the Great Knock, "that your remark was meaningless?"....Having analyzed my terms, Kirk was proceeding to deal with my proposition as a whole. On what had I based (he pronounced it *baized*) my expectations about the Flora and Geology of Surrey? Was it maps, or photographs, or books? I could produce none.....Kirk once more drew a conclusion... "Do you not see, then, that you had no right to have any opinion whatever on the subject?"[17]

From Kirkpatrick, Lewis learned the importance of two mental disciplines, both of which were emphasized by Socrates and which were vital for an effective debater and defender of the faith. First, Lewis learned the crucial importance of clear and precise definitions of the terms of the debate. Debates can go wrong because an ambiguous term is used equivocally so that parties speak past each other. Even such basic terms as "religion" and "Christianity" frequently have different meanings in the minds of believers and unbelievers. Unless some common ground is fixed by verbal precision, such a debate can degenerate into a straw-man side show. Second, Lewis was trained by Kirkpatrick to see that in a debate, very little can be taken for granted. For any claim one intends to make, one had better be able to provide a reasoned argument that supports the claim with publicly accessible evidence. Feelings count for nothing in the Socratic arena, only the quality of the case one can present for one's convictions. While Lewis's scholarship and the fact that one of his three degrees was in classical philosophy were good preparation, it was also important that Lewis learned to think well on his feet, for the Socratic arena was dynamic, fast-paced, unpredictable and complicated by the fact that any of its diverse

[17]C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 134-135.

participants could interject. This is quite unlike a scholar responding to the final and comfortably fixed version of an academic paper read slowly and in solitude.

4. Some Famous Debates

The Socratic was extraordinary not merely for its depth, bringing in opposing experts to frame each debate, but also for its breadth. Looking at the full listing of meetings re-printed by Walter Hooper, one sees that Christianity is understood as a comprehensive worldview, with something to say about everything. While skeptics certainly could and did present their doubts about specific Biblical claims, they were also permitted to question the social and cultural implications of the Christian faith. Topics for debate included:

1) Is Christianity an outdated belief system that that hinders progress, and which will be replaced by a purely secular, scientific view of the world (the continuing challenge of Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins)?

2) Is belief in God just wish fulfillment or something to be explained away by Freudian psychoanalysis (a question frequently addressed by Lewis)?

3) Is faith rational, and in what sense (a question that culminated in the famous symposium of Antony Flew, R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell, all participants in the Socratic Club)?

4) What is prayer and how can it work?

5) Mechanism vs. design in the universe.

6) The relation between Christianity and other faiths.

7) Christian ethics and sexual morality.

8) The existence of God.

9) The divinity of Christ.

10) Can Christian morality be separated from the rest of the faith?

11) The reliability of the New Testament as evidence.

12) The possibility of miracles.

13) The problems of evil, pain and suffering.

14) Does man have a soul?

15) Does man have free will?

16) Humanism as an alternative to Christianity.

17) The bearing of psychical research on faith.

18) The case for the incarnation and resurrection.

19) The nature of myth and the relation of myth to the Gospels.

20) How do we know God?

Several debates stand out as especially noteworthy. On 24th of January, 1944, a huge crowd gathered to hear C. E. M. Joad spar with C. S. Lewis. Joad was a distinguished professor of philosophy at Birkbeck College, London University, and also a national celebrity because of his presentations on the BBC radio (and later television) program, *The Brain's Trust*. Joad was as well known as Bertrand Russell, and had written several, powerful critiques of the Christian faith. Like many atheists, Joad had thought that "the problem of pain and evil" was an "insuperable objection to Christianity,"[18] but had been greatly helped by reading Lewis's first work of formal apologetics, *The Problem of Pain*. This book convinced Joad that if God wanted to create sons capable of love and obedience—rather than automata that blindly followed

[18]C. E. M. Joad, "The Pains of Animals a Problem in Theology," reprinted in ed. Walter Hooper, *God in the Dock*, 161-166.

his decrees like planets in their orbits—he would have to give them free will, and that since this gift can be abused, evil is possible, with pain being its byproduct. According to Christopher Mitchell, by the time Joad appeared at the Socratic in 1944,

> He was already moving in the direction of Christianity...and his paper, "On Being Reviewed by Christians," was only moderately critical of the Christian faith. Even so, the atmosphere was combative and the interchange electrifying.[19]

With two such well-matched opponents, the debate was clearly hard work. Stella Aldwinckle told Walter Hooper that, "despite the freezing temperatures outside, both Lewis and Joad were soon dripping with perspiration," and while Joad removed his coat, Lewis was unable to do so, owing to the embarrassing fact that "he had a large hole in his shirt."[20]

Joad, like Lewis, did not give in easily, however, and for several years after this encounter, continued to wrestle with the problem of animal pains. Human free will may explain moral evil and the pains it produces, but many animal pains have nothing obviously to do with human choice. Lewis himself, a great animal lover, was more concerned about this problem than most apologists and made some very speculative suggestions on this topic in the ninth chapter of *The Problem of Pain*. Joad found these suggestions inadequate, leading to an exchange of papers (one of which, together with Lewis's reply, is reprinted in *God in the Dock*[21]). What began in the Socratic and spilled over into a printed debate culminated in Joad not only accepting a resolution for the problem of pain, but also, at some point, in his becoming a Christian. In 1952, when Joad realized he was dying of cancer, and had to face the problem of pain in an intensely personal way, he published *The Recovery of Belief: A restatement of Christian*

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[19]Christopher Mitchell, "University Battles," 341.
[20]Walter Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," 145.
[21]See "The Pains of Animals," in ed. Walter Hooper, *God in the Dock*.

philosophy, taking back a life-time's contribution to defending atheist and humanist causes and affirming the coherence of his Christian faith.

We are fortunate to know even more about several other famous debates because associated papers were later published in widely accessible places. For example, professor H. H. Price delivered the paper, "The Grounds of Modern Agnosticism" to the Socratic Club on the 23rd October, 1944, and Lewis made his reply at another meeting on the 20th May, 1946. Both papers were subsequently published in the *Phoenix Quarterly*, and Lewis's is reprinted in *God in the Dock*. Price's position was summarized by Lewis in four basic propositions:

> (1) That the essence of religion is belief in God and immortality; (2) that in most actual religions the essence is found in connection with 'accretions of dogma and mythology' which have been rendered incredible by the progress of science; (3) that it would be very desirable, if it were possible, to retain the essence purged of the accretions; but (4) that science has rendered the essence almost as hard to believe as the accretions. For the doctrine of immortality involves the dualistic view that man is a composite creature. But in so far as science can successfully regard man monistically, as a single organism whose psychological properties all arise from his physical, the soul becomes an indefensible hypothesis. In conclusion, Professor Price found our only hope in certain empirical evidence for the soul which appears to him satisfactory; in fact in the findings of Psychical Research.[22]

Lewis's reply to Price is a superb example of his application of the Socratic method he learned from Kirkpatrick. Lewis successfully questions both Price's definitions and his supporting arguments. Lewis first pointed out that Price's definition of religion must be wrong, since some religions, such as early Judaism do not subscribe to immortality, and there are others, like Buddhism, which admit it, but give it no religious significance, since they teach "Salvation from immortality, deliverance from reincarnation"[23] regarding it "as a nightmare, not as a prize."[24] Lewis's own experience of becoming a theist before becoming a Christian had taught him to worship God for who

[22]C. S. Lewis, "Religion Without Dogma?" in *God in the Dock*, 129-130.
[23]C. S. Lewis, "Religion Without Dogma?" 130.
[24]C. S. Lewis, "Religion Without Dogma?" 131.

He is, before he had any idea that God offered the reward of eternal life. This had helped him avoid a corrupted motive to worship God. Perhaps Lewis shares this personal insight with Price because he sensed the desperation lying behind Price's clinging to Psychical research as grounds for believing in survival.

> For I cannot help thinking that any religion which begins with a thirst for immortality is damned, as a religion, from the outset. Until a certain spiritual level has been reached, the promise of immortality will always operate as a bribe which vitiates the whole religion and infinitely inflames those very self-regards which religion must cut down and uproot. For the essence of religion, in my view, is the thirst for an end higher than natural ends; the finite self's desire for, and acquiescence in, and self-rejection in favour of, an object wholly good and wholly good for it.[25]

In response to Price's second proposition, Lewis goes on to criticize Price's naive, monolithic definition of "myth," which simply assumes some naturalistic explanation can be given for all myths. However, if like Lewis, one allows the supernatural, other explanations are possible. Christianity itself can be understood as the special case in which myth became fact, where God told a story via real historical figures and events. But even pagan myths need not be dismissed as entirely false:

> I could not believe Christianity if I were forced to say that there were a thousand religions in the world of which 999 were pure nonsense and the thousandth (fortunately) true. My conversion, very largely, depended on recognizing Christianity as the completion...of something that had never been wholly absent from the mind of man.[26]

When Lewis had himself been an atheist, he had believed the anthropological argument against Christianity, that the resemblances of Christianity to other myths proved that it had borrowed from them and was only another myth. The problem with the anthropological argument, however, is that it assumes that we already know that myths can be explained naturalistically. If instead they result from dreams and visions sent by God, then they can be expected to contain some truth, and their resemblances to Christianity do not demonstrate borrowing but rather a common source. The naturalist

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[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid, 132.

has simply not thought through how the topic of myth may look if we assume as a hypothesis that God does exist and wishes to reveal himself to us in many and diverse ways.

Price had also maintained that Christian accounts of miracles were obvious mythological accretions rendered incredible by modern science. However, Price simply assumes that laws of nature are incompatible with miracles. Lewis pointed out that in those areas of science, such as Quantum physics, where only statistical laws are possible, individual events are not produced by the interlocking system of nature and if so, the naturalistic idea that nature is a completely non-porous, self-contained machine has been abandoned: "For if nature means the interlocking system, then the behaviour of the individual unit is outside nature. We have admitted what may be called the sub-natural. After that admission what confidence is left us that there may not be a supernatural as well?"[27] Furthermore, even if laws are "regularities," this does not show that miracles are impossible. For Lewis, laws are conduits or recipes or rules. Given a certain cause as input, they tell you what effect you will get as output, *other things being equal*. But the laws do not provide the causes themselves any more than a recipe provides ingredients or a train time-table provides trains, and they do not ensure that other things always will be equal: a correct recipe does not prevent a malfunctioning oven from burning cakes, and train time-tables do not prevent derailments, floods and signal failures. As Lewis notes, "You cannot discover extra half-holidays by studying a school timetable: you must wait till they are announced."[28]

[27]Ibid, 133.
[28]Ibid, 134.

The fact that the rules neither predict nor preclude exceptions, whether naturally or supernaturally caused, shows that law-based science cannot capture all of history. This is hardly surprising because history consists of singular events, events that in all their specificity, never recur: "You cannot find out what Napoleon did at the battle of Austerlitz by asking him to come and fight it again in a laboratory with the same combatants, the same *terrain*, the same weather, and in the same age."[29] While laws may reflect important regularities and similarities between events, every event in its entirety is unique and unrepeatable. Law-based science is therefore simply the wrong way to investigate particular events. In this area, all that matters is historical evidence, and there is no reason whatever why the best explanation of a historical event cannot be that a miracle occurred. Anticipating the objection that modern historians view accounts of the miraculous as unreliable, Lewis points out that this is because they have presumed a skeptical stance of higher criticism that was already being abandoned in English literature. He comments wryly that

> The period of arbitrary skepticism about the canon and text of Shakespeare is now over: and it is reasonable to expect that this method will soon be used only on Christian documents and survive only in the *Thinkers Library* and the theological colleges.[30]

Next, Lewis jumps to Price's fourth proposition, and counters the claim that materialistic science has undermined belief in the soul, by presenting an early version of his argument from reason against naturalism. This argument appeared in the following year in the first (1947) edition of his book *Miracles* as chapter 3, "The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist." Lewis starts by noting that if materialism is true, then blind, impersonal causes suffice to explain every event in the universe, including the writing of Professor Price's paper. But then, argues Lewis,

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[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid, 135.

> What we should think of as his 'thoughts' were merely the last link of a causal chain in which all the previous links were irrational. He spoke as he did because the matter in his brain was behaving a certain way: and the whole history of the universe up to that moment had forced it to behave in that way. What we called his thought was essentially a phenomena of the same sort as his other secretions—the form which the vast irrational process of nature was bound to take at a particular point of space and time.[31]

Lewis goes on to argue that if our thoughts can be completely explained by irrational and amoral causes, then we are not capable of rational thought or moral conduct. We then could not understand scientists' devotion to truth (a moral cause) or even admire their skill in employing reason to uncover nature's secrets. Most telling of all,

> It would be impossible to accept naturalism itself if we really and consistently believed naturalism. For naturalism is a system of thought. But for naturalism all thoughts are mere events with irrational causes. It is, to me at any rate, impossible to regard the thoughts which make up naturalism in that way and, at the same time, to regard them as a real insight into external reality....For meaning is a relation of a wholly new kind, as remote, as mysterious, as opaque to empirical study, as soul itself.... Therefore, naturalism is worthless. If it is true, then we can know no truths. It cuts its own throat.[32]

Having argued that science does not exclude miracles and that naturalism is self-refuting, Lewis has no reason to remove the supernatural "accretions" from religion to find a simpler, lowest common denominator. However, he does consider whether this minimal religion could (1) "give fresh heart to society, strengthening the moral will, and producing all those benefits which, it is claimed, the old religions have sometimes produced," and (2) "be the true one".[33] In response to (1) Lewis points out that vital religions that have transformed cultures have been rich, not minimal, and that dogma is unavoidable to protect any idea in its purity, even minimal religion. Lowest common denominator approaches to religion either become dogmatic, by explicitly excluding developed religions (e.g. by denying that we need Christ to be saved) or they maintain indifference to the developed religions, in which case they are not really an alternative for

[31]Ibid, 136.
[32]Ibid, 137.
[33]Ibid, 138.

anyone who is already a follower of one of them. Lewis clearly saw how the façade of unity could be achieved by using vague, ecumenical language:

> they will hold conference at which they all speak the same language and reach the most edifying agreement: but they will all mean totally different things. The minimal religion in fact cannot, while it remains minimal, be acted upon. As soon as you *do* anything you have assumed one of the dogmas. In practice it will not be a religion at all; it will be merely a new colouring given to all the different things people were doing already.[34]

In fact the idea of "mere Theism," is completely unappealing, because unless we make some assumptions about God's character and identity, He will not even support ideas of social salvation: "The minimal religion will, in my opinion, leave us all doing what we were doing before."[35] People will stay with the God they know and trust and not move to a vacuous abstraction.

> The god of whom no dogmas are believed is a mere shadow. He will not produce that fear of the Lord in which wisdom begins, and, therefore, will not produce that love in which it is consummated.... There is in this minimal religion nothing that can convince, convert or (in the higher sense) console; nothing, therefore, which can restore vitality to our civilization. It is not costly enough... A flag, a song, an old school tie, is stronger than it; much more, the pagan religions.[36]

If what Price really wants is a religion that best captures the vitality of all the others, then Lewis points him to Christianity, where we see most clearly the common themes

> of sacrifice, of mystical communion through the shed blood, of death and rebirth, of redemption.... We may still reasonably attach ourselves to the Church, to the only concrete organization which has preserved down to the present time the core of all the messages, pagan and perhaps pre-pagan, that have ever come from beyond the world, and begin to practice the only religion which rests not upon some selection of certain supposedly 'higher' elements in our nature, but on the shattering and rebuilding, the death and rebirth, of that nature in every part: neither Greek nor Jew nor barbarian, but a new creation.[37]

After such a thorough reply, Lewis might have been tempted to end his paper by saying, "Do you not seen then, Professor Price, that you had no right to have any opinion

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[34]Ibid, 140-141.
[35]Ibid, 141.
[36]Ibid, 142-143.
[37]Ibid, 144.

whatever on the subject?" But it was a good thing he didn't, because a key part of his reply, the argument from reason, provoked an important critique from the highly respected analytical philosopher and devout Roman Catholic, Elizabeth Anscombe. At a meeting of the Socratic Club, on February 2nd, 1948, Anscombe presented the paper, "'Miracles'—A Reply to Mr. C. S. Lewis." This paper was subsequently printed in *The Socratic Digest*, and is now widely available as chapter 21 of *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, the second volume of the collected philosophical papers of G. E. M. Anscombe. Anscombe's reply takes into consideration not only the short version of the argument from reason he presented in reply to H. H. Price, but also the longer version published as chapter 3 of the first edition of *Miracles* (hence Anscombe's title).

Since the longer version is more careful, it is helpful to see what the substance of that argument is. Lewis argues that:

(P1) "*[N]o thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes*."[38]

For example, if someone only believes something as a result of brain-damage, superstitious association of ideas, or a delusion, we have no confidence in his thinking because it did not result from reasoning.

(P2) If naturalism is true, then reality, the "Total System" is one of blind, undirected cause and effect: "the Total system is not supposed to be rational."[39]

Lewis explains that rationality requires that "the feeling of certainty which we express by words like *must be* and *therefore* and *since* is a real perception of how things outside our mind really 'must' be."[40] But the problem is that naturalism understands all phenomena

[38]C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 27.
[39]Ibid, 28.
[40]Ibid, 26.

as simply chains of events that cause each other regardless of whether they involve logical insight or not. So, he argues,

(P3) If naturalism is true, then "All thoughts whatever are the result of irrational causes and nothing more than that. The finest piece of scientific reasoning is caused in just the same irrational way as the thoughts a man has because a piece of bone is pressing on his brain."[41]

But then,

(P4) If naturalism is true, then naturalism is the result of irrational causes.

So, given (P1), that no thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes, we conclude:

(C) If naturalism were true, then it is invalid, or in other words, if naturalism were true, then no-one could be rationally justified in believing it. So naturalism is self-defeating in the sense that it undermines its own justification.

In Anscombe's reply to this argument, she makes several critical points. First, she points out that the opposite of "rational" is not "irrational," but "non-rational." The naturalist can claim that when he studies the events in someone's brain that lead to a belief, these events, physically considered, are neither rational nor irrational, but simply non-rational. That is, they are viewed simply as physical occurrences, and the question of whether these occurrences follow a rational or irrational path is set to the side. She then argues that a physical account of someone's thoughts is compatible with a complimentary evaluation of the rationality of that thinking. Thus, she writes:

> Whether his conclusions are rational or irrational is settled by considering the chain of reasoning that he gives and whether his conclusions follow from it. When we are giving a causal account of his thought, e.g. an account of the physiological processes which issue in the utterance of his reasoning, we are not considering his utterances from the point of view of evidence, reasoning, valid argument, truth at all; we are considering them merely as events.[42]

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[41]Ibid, 28.

[42]G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, vol. 2 of The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 227.

Anscombe thereby dichotomizes the order of causes and the order of reasons, and suggests that since they are complementary orders, the naturalist's causal account of thinking won't undermine the idea of rational thought. In a sense, this is true. No matter why someone thinks what they do, it is certainly possible that they think in accordance with reason. Suppose that a patient who is barely conscious believes that A = B and also that B = C, but is too lethargic to draw the obvious conclusion that A = C. Now suppose that a mad scientist stimulates part of the patient's brain in such a way that he involuntarily believes that A = C, but without his other beliefs playing a role. Then the patient's thinking will be in accordance with reason, since, objectively, the thought that A = C is the correct logical conclusion. However, the problem is that the patient did not reason to that conclusion. The content of his other beliefs played no role in leading him to conclude A = C. It was not as a result of the logical insight that *since* A = B and B = C, *therefore* A = C that the patient had the thought that he did. In other words, thinking *in accordance with reason* is not the same as thinking *from reason*.

So while Anscombe is correct that the naturalist's account of thought is compatible with someone thinking in accordance with reason, it does not address two deeper questions:

> (1) What is the *relationship* between the order of causes and the order of reason, and specifically, granted naturalism, is it possible for reason itself to play a causal role in why someone thinks as he/she does?
>
> (2) Can the naturalist give an *account* of reasoning itself without abandoning naturalism?

In Lewis's reply to Ancombe at the Socratic club, he conceded that he should have carefully distinguished "cause" and logical "ground," but "said that the recognition of a

ground could be the cause of an assent, and that assent was only rational when such was it cause."[43] So, for Lewis, the real problem with naturalism is that it cannot give an account of how logical insight plays a causal role in thinking.

Anscombe recognized this, but appears to argue that human rationality does not require that our reasons play a causal role in our thought. She says, starkly:
"It appears to me that if a man has reasons, and they are good reasons, and they are genuinely his reasons, for thinking something—then his thought is rational, whatever causal statements we make about him."[44] It seems to me, however, that this is simply false. The patient I described does possess excellent reasons for thinking that A = C, but they have nothing to do with why he in fact thinks so, and so he cannot claim to have reached that conclusion as the result of reasoning. In response to Anscombe's critique, Lewis clarified this idea in his second version of the argument from reason, which appeared as a new chapter 3, "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism," in the Second Edition of *Miracles*, published in 1960. This chapter replaces 5 pages of the original chapter with 10 new pages and is more carefully argued.

In the new version of the argument, Lewis begins by clearly distinguishing two senses of the word "because." There is the "Cause and Effect" sense (Lewis's e.g.: "He cried out because it hurt him") and there is the "Ground and Consequent" sense (Lewis's e.g.: "A = C because, as we already proved, they are both equal to B").[45] He then argues that our thinking can only be logical (in the sense of arguing from reason) if the Ground Consequent relation explains it. But, if naturalism is true, Cause and Effect completely accounts for our thinking. Lewis anticipates the objection: why can't the naturalist claim

[43]"Religion without Dogma?", *God in the Dock*, 145.
[44]G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, 229.
[45]C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, Revised Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 23.

that Cause and Effect somehow works through the Ground Consequent relation, so that reasons become causes. If naturalism is true, "It looks...as if...these two systems of connections must apply simultaneously to the same series of mental acts."[46] But the problem is that, given naturalism, causes work inevitably and in apparent indifference to logical connections:

> If it is an event it must be caused. It must in fact be simply one link in a causal chain which stretches back to the beginning and forward to the end of time. How could such a trifle as lack of logical grounds prevent the belief's occurrence or how could the existence of grounds promote it?[47]

Lewis goes on to argue that rational thought requires that logical insight plays a causal role in why someone thinks as they do. If rational thought is possible, "One thought can cause another not by *being*, but by being *seen to be*, a ground for it."[48] And here we get to the crux of Lewis's argument against naturalism, which is really an argument from intentionality. Thoughts are said to be intentional because they are about something other than themselves with which they need not stand in any current physical causal relation. Thus one can think right now about the Eiffel tower without its being the case that the Eiffel tower is currently causing one to think about it. Lewis argues that the aboutness or intentionality of thought is essential to understanding reasoning, but cannot be explained by the naturalist.

> Acts of thinking are no doubt events; but they are a very special sort of events. They are 'about' something other than themselves and can be true or false. Events in general are not 'about' anything and cannot be true or false.[49]

Lewis further points out that while the naturalist may explain why thought B follows thought A by way of association, this is not the same as explaining how someone grasps that B follows from A in the logical sense. Someone may be afraid as a result of

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[46]Ibid, 24.
[47]Ibid, 24-25.
[48]Ibid, 25.
[49]Ibid, 25-26.

seeing a black cat with no logical insight whatever, but they are only rationally justified in believing something if they see that it follows from evidence. This act of seeing or knowing must be determined by its object, not merely a cause in the brain, and so it "must break sufficiently free from the universal chain [of natural events] in order to be determined by what it knows."[50]

Lewis anticipates that the naturalist will attempt to show that logical insight can itself be reduced to natural causes. Perhaps, as Quine suggested, natural selection would favor logical thinking over illogical thinking. The problem with this idea is that selection improves responses to the environment, but it is perfectly conceivable that an automaton would have useful responses without rational thought. Even if selection favors beings whose behavioral responses are *in accordance* with reason, there seems no particular advantage in having beings who really think rationally. But perhaps logical thinking could arise from experience. The problem with this is that experience conditions associations (e.g. if I touch this red-hot stove, I expect to be burned), but these are not logical insights. Associations are based on what has contingently been the case in the past, and the expectation that the future will be similar is natural, but logically invalid. Logical insight allows us to grasp that something is necessarily the case: "If it ever 'follows from' in the logical sense, it does so always."[51] Logical insight is determined by objective, non-contingent rational connections; it does not arise from the contingencies of natural selection or psychological association:

> My belief that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another is not at all based on the fact that I have never caught them behaving otherwise. I see that it 'must' be so.

[50]Ibid, 35.
[51]Ibid, 26.

In its necessity and independence from contingent causal connections, reason therefore clearly transcends nature, which is nothing but a contingent collection of contingent events. But if reason transcends nature, and our thinking involves real insight into reason, then our thinking is connected to something that transcends nature, and if that is so, and our thought is determined by what we think about, then necessarily, rational thought breaks free from the causal nexus described by the naturalist.

If genuinely rational thought is incompatible with naturalism, then there can be no good reason to be a naturalist. We need a worldview which allows reason to be independent from nature. The view is of course Theism. The Theist

> is not committed to the view that reason is a comparatively recent development moulded by a process of selection... For him, reason—the reason of God—is older than Nature, and from it the orderliness of Nature, which alone enables us to know her, is derived. For him, the human mind in the act of knowing is illuminated by the divine reason.[52]

Much has been written about the Lewis-Anscombe exchange. Some of it is quite unhelpful, because it adopts a journalistic "he said, she said" approach that does not engage the substance of the argument. We have A. N. Wilson claiming that Lewis was utterly defeated by Anscombe[53], and gave up rational apologetics for the rest of his career. Yet this is clearly false, since Lewis took the trouble to revise his early version of the argument from reason, remained President of the Socratic Club for another 6 years (only abandoning the position when he moved to Cambridge), wrote a number of other apologetic papers, and presents important arguments even within his fictional works. Anscombe herself chided some Christians for exaggerating the emotional reaction Lewis had to the encounter:

> My own recollection is that it was an occasion of sober discussion of certain quite definite criticisms, which Lewis' rethinking and rewriting showed he thought were accurate. I am inclined to construe the odd accounts of the matter by some of his friends

[52]Ibid, 34.
[53]A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1990).

> —who seem not to have been interested in the actual arguments or the subject-matter—as an interesting example of the phenomenon called "projection".[54]

While Anscombe's tone is perhaps a little unkind, I think her remarks are just. Anscombe did not demolish Lewis's argument as we have seen. What she did, mainly, was show that he had not taken sufficient care to distinguish terms, and had left the naturalist some apparent escape routes which he would need to address, precisely what he did in the revised edition of *Miracles*. When looking back at her earlier critique of Lewis, Anscombe wrote,

> Rereading the argument of the first edition and my criticisms of it, it seems to me that they are just. At the same time, I find them lacking in any recognition of the depth of the problem... The argument of the second edition has much to criticize in it, but it certainly does correspond more to the actual depth and difficulty of the questions being discussed. I think we haven't yet an answer to the question... 'What is the connection between grounds and the actual occurrence of the belief?'[55]

Too many of those interested in Lewis, whether friends or critics, have focused on the historical and psychological characteristics of the Lewis-Anscombe debate, rather than on the real issue, whether there are some promising arguments which can be developed, something that Anscombe herself never denied. Who "won" an argument rhetorically is never as important as which argument is in itself promising and effective. Nor does it matter that Lewis was not a professional philosopher. Neither was Socrates. The important point is that, as Victor Reppert says, Lewis had "outstanding philosophical instincts,"[56] that make his ideas worth pursuing. The Socratic spirit is best shown by those like Reppert and Alvin Plantinga who have rigorously explored the potential of the argument from reason to defeat naturalism. When they have done so, developing arguments inspired by Lewis's basic proposal, but far more sophisticated and careful,

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[54]G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, x.
[55]Ibid.
[56]Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 12.

they have demonstrated that the nature of reasoning poses a formidable challenge to naturalism.

5. The legacy of the Socratic Club

After Lewis stood down as president, the Socratic Club continued under Basil Mitchell. Questions about faith and reason discussed at the Socratic were evident in the famous symposium on theology and falsification with Antony Flew defending atheism, R. M. Hare defending theism and Mitchell defending Christianity. Since that time, Flew frequently debated Christian apologist Gary Habermas, and has not only moved from atheism to deism, but also concedes that the case for the resurrection is the best case for any miracle in any religion.[57] As we just saw, Lewis has inspired other thinkers to further develop his argument from reason. In addition to his writing, Victor Reppert maintains a popular blog frequented by atheists and Christians, dangerousidea.blogspot.com.[58] On a broader level, there is renewed interest in having high-profile public debates between atheists and Christians. For example, we have seen Richard Dawkins v. David Quinn in an interview, and Dawkins v. Francis Collins in *Time* magazine[59], and in February 2007, the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary hosted the Greer-Heard Point-CounterPoint Forum in Faith and Culture, a two-day exchange between Daniel Dennett and Alister McGrath.[60] The previous year, the forum hosted William Dembski and Michael Ruse for a spirited debate about the merits of Intelligent Design. The field of apologetics in general is showing resurgence with major, national events such as the one at the McLean Bible church in Washington DC, which overlapped with the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2006. We have journals

[57]See the interview between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas at: http://www.biola.edu/antonyflew/
[58]See: http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/
[59]Both are available from: http://cis.org.uk/resources/dawkins.shtml
[60] See: http://www.greer-heard.com/

like *Philosophia Christi* that invite debates between the best atheist and Christian philosophers. Oregon State University has its own Socratic Club, and many universities have societies designed to debate secular ideologies at the highest level, including the Rivendell Society of Yale University and the MacLaurin Institute at the University of Minnesota, Chesterton House at Cornell University and many others.

On the other hand, there are major challenges. Many in the culture seem infected with a postmodern relativism which makes them indifferent or opposed to vigorous debates about ultimate truth. Civility has declined so that many would prefer to jeer and sneer at straw men from the cozy comfort of their electronic ghettoes—a ghastly kind of cyber-Gnosticism that insulates people from authentic engagement with real people—and so never hear the best case for the opposition. An emphasis on surface and sound bytes and a decline in logic have developed too many minds that are incapable of appreciating a good argument. It seems ironic that while Lewis's main argument from theism rested on human reason, many humans seem intent on abandoning that gift. And even where there is a receptive audience and good arguments are given, these arguments are often oversimplified or misrepresented by the media.

But all this shows is that the case for Christianity involves a war on all fronts, including the case for a solid classical education that emphasizes reason, truth, civility and public debate themselves. This reasoned public debate is essential if we are to recapture the Socratic idea that Christianity is not, as Lewis said, "'what a man does with his solitude.'... It is not even what God does with his solitude. It tells of God descending into the coarse publicity of history and there enacting what can—and must—be talked about."[61] As Austin Farrer, himself a participant in the Socratic Club, put it:

[61]C. S. Lewis, "The Founding of the Socratic Club," 128.

> It is commonly said that if rational argument is so seldom the cause of conviction, philosophical apologists must largely be wasting their shot. The premise is true, but the conclusion does not follow. For though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish. So the apologist who does nothing but defend may play a useful, though preparatory, part.[62]

The Socratic spirit is vital to supporting that "climate in which belief may flourish." As C. S. Lewis wrote in his famous essay, "On Learning in War-Time," Christian scholars are especially called to maintain this climate.

> To be ignorant and simple now--not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground--would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.[63]

[62]Austin Farrer, "The Christian Apologist," in Jocelyn Gibb, ed. *Light on C. S. Lewis* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1965), 26.
[63]C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 27-28.