

## An Epistemically-Focused Interpretation of C. S. Lewis's Moral Argument in *Mere Christianity* and an Assessment of Its Apologetic Force

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*C. S. Lewis's moral argument in Mere Christianity is rightly lauded as an influential contribution to moral apologetics. Yet its structure, which Lewis never formalizes, is often misunderstood. I will first defend an interpretation of Lewis's argument that views it as centering on moral epistemology. Although moral ontology plays a key role in his argument insofar as it affirms the reality of objective morality and a transcendent communicator of the moral law, many wrongly view it as making the further ontological claim that God must ground objective morality. I emphasize how Lewis's primary aim is to show that a mind-like Guide is needed for humans to know the moral law. My other key objective is to evaluate the apologetic effectiveness of this understanding of the argument. Although I will show how he could have strengthened his argument—and his conclusion, which stops short of arguing for classical theism—in significant ways, I will contend that Lewis does offer a sound argument that carries much apologetic force.*

*Key Words:* C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, moral apologetics, moral argument, moral epistemology, moral ontology

C. S. Lewis begins *Mere Christianity* with a five-chapter moral argument. Of all the moral arguments for God's existence that have been put forward in the history of philosophy, Gregory Bassham asserts that Lewis's is "probably the most famous and influential ever offered."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, C. Stephen Evans describes it as the "most widely-convincing apologetic argument of the twentieth century."<sup>2</sup> Despite Lewis's argument rightly being held in such high regard, it is often misinterpreted; moreover, it stops short of arguing that classical theism is true. While it is clear that Lewis

aims for his moral argument to undermine a materialistic view of the universe and to point the reader in the direction of theism, the argument's conclusion is an intentionally modest—but still valuable—one: that a mind-like Guide exists and has communicated an objective moral law to humanity.

This essay aims to achieve two primary objectives. First, I offer an interpretation of Lewis's moral argument. I contend that his goal is chiefly to show that a mind-like Guide that transcends humanity exists, and I make the case that both epistemological and ontological moral evidences are key to Lewis reaching this conclusion. To achieve this objective, I will first note a common way of understanding Lewis's argument: the view that it claims that God is necessary for—or, at least, is the best explanation for—grounding objective morality. A different construction of Lewis's argument will then be laid out and defended—one that centers largely on moral epistemology and draws upon Christopher Shrock's recent work, though it departs from his interpretation at certain points. My other key objective for the paper is to evaluate the apologetic effectiveness of this understanding of Lewis's argument. I will conclude that Lewis offers a sound argument that makes some contribution toward increasing the plausibility of theistic belief, though he could have strengthened the conclusion of his argument in various ways. I will contend that he should have concluded that the Guide who communicates the moral law is personal. Moreover, he sets the stage in the first three chapters of *Mere Christianity* for making the case that God is necessary (or, at least, is the best explanation) for grounding objective moral values and duties and for making sense of moral accountability and guilt; however, he does not complete these arguments to make a theistic case that fully leverages these moral phenomena.

### Interpreting Lewis's Argument

Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* to be understood by a popular audience; indeed, it was initially read as a series of BBC radio talks. While there is significant depth and insight to the moral argument that he presents in Book One of *Mere Christianity*, the book lacks the precision and rigor that it no doubt would have had if Lewis were writing specifically for a scholarly audience. Moreover, the precise construction of the argument must be teased out from what Lewis writes, as he never provides a formalized statement of the argument that specifically identifies his premises and how they support his conclusion. In seeking to provide such a construction, I will first consider briefly one common way of interpreting Lewis that understands him to be focusing on what best explains the foundation

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Bassham, "Introduction: Oxford's Bonny Apologist," in *C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 19.

<sup>2</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 347.

for the existence of the moral law. I will then offer an alternative interpretation of Lewis's argument.

Erik Wielenberg, a prominent critic of Lewis's moral argument, is an instructive example of a philosopher who interprets the argument as aiming primarily at showing that God is needed to ground moral ontology (i.e., God is needed to justify the existence of objective moral values and duties). Though Wielenberg is a critic, this interpretation of Lewis is common among both proponents and critics of the argument.<sup>3</sup> Wielenberg holds that "Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, maintains that God is good *and* is the ultimate source of objective rightness and wrongness," and he considers this claim to be "at the heart of Lewis's analysis" in this particular argument.<sup>4</sup> So Wielenberg thinks the core of the argument is to show that God is needed to serve as an adequate foundation for the existence of objective morality. Indeed, Wielenberg understands Lewis's argument to conceive of God himself as "the Good" and to equate God with the moral law. Given this interpretation of Lewis, the entire direction of Wielenberg's evaluation of the success of Lewis's argument centers upon whether God is plausibly necessary to ground objective moral ontology. He thus proceeds to attack Robert Adams's well-known position that God is the Good since he perceives Lewis's argument to be making the same sort of claim as Adams. He also tries to show that, even if atheism is true, there can still be necessary moral truths that stand alone as brute facts so that, contrary to what he believes Lewis is arguing, God is not needed for objective moral ontology.<sup>5</sup> In order for Lewis's argument to succeed, Wielenberg claims that it "must" show that the best explanation of both human moral knowledge (moral epistemology) and also "the reality of objective, universal ethical truths" (moral ontology) is the "existence of the God of classical theism."<sup>6</sup> I believe that Wielenberg's interpretation of Lewis is flawed, and thus his critique of the effectiveness of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the following debate concerning the merits of Lewis's argument, all parties agree that the focus of the argument is on showing that God is needed to provide an adequate foundation for moral ontology. See "Part Three: The Moral Argument" (chapters 9–12) of Gregory Bassham, ed., *C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics*.

<sup>4</sup> Erik J. Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Erik J. Wielenberg, "Con: A Critique of the Moral Argument," in *C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics*, 141–51.

<sup>6</sup> Erik J. Wielenberg, "Reply to David Baggett," in *C. S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics*, 168–69.

the argument is wrongheaded. While moral ontology plays a role in Lewis's argument, consideration of what might ground moral ontology is absent from the argument.

In contrast to the above interpretation, Christopher Shrock is closer to understanding Lewis correctly when he contends that the focus of Lewis's argument is on "human knowledge of and belief in the moral law" and that justifying God as the best explanation for morality's existence is not the goal of Lewis's argument.<sup>7</sup> In this particular argument Lewis does not directly address what might serve as the *source or ground* of objective morality; rather, his focus is on the source of *its communication* to humans. That is, Lewis is largely making a point about moral epistemology (how we come to know moral truths), and he is not trying to claim that God is needed to ground moral ontology. Moreover, contra Wielenberg, Shrock recognizes that Lewis's argument does not aim to conclude that "the God of classical theism" exists. Lewis's more modest aim is merely to show that a mind-like Being, which may not even be personal, exists. Let us now formalize an interpretation of Lewis's argument that will be defended in this essay:

- (1) Either there is a mind-like Guide beyond humanity or there is no mind-like Guide beyond humanity.
- (2) If there is no mind-like Guide beyond humanity, then it could not be the case that humans widely possess knowledge of an objective moral law that ought to be followed but is often not followed.
- (3) It is the case that humans widely possess knowledge of an objective moral law that ought to be followed but is often not followed.
- (4) Therefore, it is not the case that there is no mind-like Guide beyond humanity.
- (5) Therefore, there is a mind-like Guide beyond humanity.

Note first of all that this construal of Lewis's argument understands it as a deductive rather than an abductive argument. That is because, for reasons that we shall see, Lewis seems to argue that human knowledge of the moral law would not be possible in a naturalistic universe in which there is no mind-like Guide beyond humanity. Note also that—contra Wielenberg—this interpretation of Lewis's argument does not view it as

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher A. Shrock, "Mere Christianity and the Moral Argument for the Existence of God," in *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal: Volume 11, 2017*, ed. Bruce R. Johnson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 109.

making any claim about what—if anything—needs to serve as the foundation of moral ontology. Although Lewis does contend that in our moral experience we come to know what seems to be an objective moral law that actually exists (a claim about moral ontology), he never explicitly addresses in this argument the further ontological question of where this objective moral law comes from or what sort of reality must be in place in order for objective moral truth to have a foundation in reality. Let us now consider briefly what Lewis attempts to do in each of the five chapters that comprise Book One of *Mere Christianity* in which he expounds his argument, showing that the above interpretation of Lewis is accurate.

The first three chapters all support premise (3). The first chapter argues that humans widely believe that there is an indelible moral law that we ought to follow and that we all recognize that we are guilty of breaking this law.<sup>8</sup> To support this claim, Lewis points out that people of all backgrounds quarrel with others about moral issues. We accuse others of doing something that fails to meet a standard of morality that we expect the other person to know; moreover, the accused usually does not deny knowing that there is a moral standard but simply tries to argue that he has not violated it.<sup>9</sup> Lewis's point is that it would not make sense to quarrel about the moral law if we did not believe in its existence. He also notes that people of all times, places, and cultures have recognized very similar moral truths, and what is different is merely the way in which morality is applied. It appears to be unlivable for humans of all cultures to behave as though they do not recognize or believe in a moral law that appears to be objective. Although "people may sometimes be mistaken" about the moral law, the law we all believe in is "not a matter of mere taste and opinion," and ultimately "we are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong."<sup>10</sup> The fact that we constantly fail to "practice ourselves the kind of behavior we expect from other people" and that we often make excuses for our moral failure provides further evidence of "how deeply, whether we like it or not, we believe" in this law.<sup>11</sup> Note that in this first chapter Lewis is arguing entirely about our belief in an objective moral law that exists and makes no claims about what is necessary in order to ground such a law in reality.

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<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 7–8.

The second chapter deals with two main objections to the claim that we have come to know an objective moral law. First, the objection that our sense of the moral law is merely an instinct fails because our moral experience often leads us to sense that there is a conflict between our instincts and that our moral duty is sometimes to go against our strongest natural instinct. Moreover, we do not have one purely good instinct that we should always follow, but we sense that the moral law ought always to be followed.<sup>12</sup> Lewis then dismisses a second objection—that the moral law is merely what is ingrained in us via social conventions and education—by arguing that cultures differ widely in their conventions but not so much in their morals. In addition, we commonly make moral comparisons and criticisms—even of the moral practices of other cultures, such as the Nazis—and it seems legitimate to do so.<sup>13</sup> Again, notice that there is no mention in this chapter of what if anything is needed to ground this moral law.

The third chapter argues that the moral law is not like physical laws, as it can be broken by humans if they choose to do so. It is a law that governs how things ought to be and not how things are. The moral law is also more than just what is useful or convenient for oneself or for others, as morality often requires us to do things that are inconvenient.<sup>14</sup> It seems that there is a reality "above and beyond the ordinary facts of men's behavior, and yet quite definitely real—a real law which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us."<sup>15</sup> So this law appears to exist apart from human invention. It prescribes rather than merely describes and seems to be "pressing on us" to follow it. Lewis thus addresses moral ontology only in the sense that our moral experience leads us to believe that the moral law is real and is objective, and he raises the issue that we sense that we are accountable for following the law. However, he again says nothing about what if anything would be needed in order to serve as an adequate foundation for the existence of this moral law. Contra Wielenberg's interpretation of the argument, Lewis has so far made no claim that God is needed to provide a foundation for the existence of objective morality. Indeed, Lewis has not even addressed in this argument whether moral ontology requires a foundation in order to exist. Lewis insists that humans have a knowledge of this moral law, and we will see that this fact becomes the central aspect of his argument. These first three chapters complete Lewis's case for premise (3) that humans seem to have

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 9–11.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 12–13.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 17–20.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 20.

knowledge of an objective moral law that carries authority and is not fulfilled perfectly.

Premises (1) and (2) are addressed in the fourth chapter. Premise (1) recognizes—and, by the law of excluded middle, rightly so—that it must be true that either there is a mind-like Guide beyond humanity or there is no mind-like Guide beyond humanity. Christopher Shrock, however, describes what Lewis is doing a bit differently at this point. Shrock thinks Lewis's argument pits materialism against theism in his initial premise and that Lewis's argument ultimately concludes that theism is true. By contrast, this essay contends that Lewis argues only for a mind-like Guide whose existence undermines materialism but does not entail the truth of anything that could rightly be called theism.<sup>16</sup> Lewis does indicate that we can lump all worldviews into two broad conceptions of reality—those that reject any kind of transcendent mind and fit into the “materialist” camp (in which space, matter, and energy exist for no reason and humanity has come to exist via mindless and purposeless processes) and those within the “religious” camp (in which there is something “like a mind” that purposively created humanity and the entire universe).<sup>17</sup> Shrock fails to distinguish between theism and Lewis's “religious” view, and this adds confusion to his otherwise insightful interpretation of Lewis. While theism would fit under this broad umbrella of the religious view, it is not equivalent to it. For example, one could hold the religious view and accept that there is a powerful but limited Mind behind the universe that lacks the classic “omni” attributes of God necessary for theism—or at least anything that approaches classical theism. Lewis's core argument only makes the case for a transcendent mind-like Being that may be personal and that communicates the moral law to us. His argument does, however, aim to count in favor of the broadly understood religious view and to show that materialism is false. While his argument itself does not account for the entirety of the religious view (e.g., the creative role of this Mind is not entailed by communicating the moral law), it does argue for the Mind's guiding role and against materialism's denial of such a Mind. All worldviews either affirm or deny a mind-like Reality behind the universe. The fact that a mind-like Guide must either exist or not exist is the key to premise (1).

<sup>16</sup> Shrock recognizes that Lewis has only argued for a mind-like Guide that need not have certain “omni” qualities (p. 120), so it is odd that he frames Lewis's argument as concluding that theism is true (p. 103) and assumes that this Guide may rightly be understood as God (pp. 105–6). Shrock is unclear on his definition of theism and unclear on why he uses this term synonymously with Lewis's “religious” view (“Mere Christianity and the Moral Argument,” 103–6, 120).

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 21–22.

Premise (2) is also defended in the fourth chapter. Rather than appealing to a mind-like Guide beyond humanity as the best explanation among multiple viable explanations for how humans possess moral knowledge (i.e., an abductive approach that makes an inference to the best explanation), Lewis seems to hold that postulating such a Guide is the only explanation that adequately accounts for human knowledge of an objective moral law. Lewis thinks that a power beyond the universe could only reveal itself “inside” humanity via “an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way.”<sup>18</sup> So the moral law—or at least our reception of the moral law—is like an “influence” or a “command” that we discover within us. The moral law is like a “letter” that a powerful Guide sends to each of us to tell us how to behave. Although our apprehension of the moral law does not “put us within a hundred miles” of demonstrating that the Christian God exists, it does indicate the reality of a Guide who is “urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong.” Lewis thinks we “have to assume” that this Guide is “more like a mind” than like mere matter for the key reason that mere matter cannot give instructions.<sup>19</sup> The Guide need not be personal, Lewis says, but it must at least be enough like a mind to issue commands. The alternative to mind is mere matter, and matter cannot instruct us.<sup>20</sup> Notice again that no argument is given that anything like a mind is needed to provide a foundation for objective morality. Rather, Lewis claims that appealing to something like a mind is needed in order to explain the *communication* of the law to humanity. In addition, we have noted that Lewis's approach to defending premise (2) indicates that he is making a deductive rather than abductive case. He seems to think a mind-like Guide who passes on moral instructions to us is the only viable way (and not merely the best way among multiple viable possibilities) to explain our moral knowledge.

The fifth chapter of *Mere Christianity* does not seem to be intended by Lewis to advance his moral argument, as the argument appears to conclude in the fourth chapter. Instead, it offers some reflections on what is plausibly true about God in light of the moral argument *if* it is the case that a personal God exists—a possibility that Lewis considers to be beyond the scope of his argument. If the Guide who communicates the moral law is a personal God who created the universe, then He is plausibly

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25–26.

“like” the moral law and is thus not “indulgent” or “soft” concerning wrongdoing.<sup>21</sup> We should hope that such a God is forgiving since he must hold us to a standard of morality that we do not keep. He points out that Christians believe in such a God.<sup>22</sup>

### Assessing Lewis's Argument

Lewis's argument, as constructed above, is clearly valid. Premise (1) is simply a statement that, by the law of excluded middle, a mind-like Guide beyond humanity must either exist or not exist. Premise (4) follows from premises (2) and (3) by *modus tollens*. Premise (5) follows from premises (1) and (4) by disjunctive syllogism. If sound, this argument would count against naturalism by providing evidence for the existence of a mind-like Guide who transcends humanity. It makes no claim that a personal God exists. However, by arguing for a transcendent mind-like Guide, it increases the plausibility of theism. Let us consider the strength of each premise and assess the argument.

Premise(1) should not be controversial, as there is no third alternative besides the existence or nonexistence of a transcendent mind-like Guide. Lewis holds minimally that this Guide is beyond humanity, is like a mind (at least more like a mind than like mere matter), and communicates the moral law to us. Either such a Being exists or does not exist.

Let us skip over premise (2) for the moment and first consider premise (3), which contends that humans have knowledge of an objective moral law that ought to be followed. Lewis makes a great deal of headway toward defending premise (3) by pointing out reasons why human moral experience seems to involve genuine knowledge of an objective moral law. He shows convincingly that there is a widespread human sense that a set of fairly consistent moral laws is binding upon humanity, and he makes a strong case that our belief in this law cannot plausibly be explained away as mere instinct or social custom or convenience. The law is not a fact about human behavior but is experienced by humanity as an indelible standard for right behavior that we feel pressing on us. Contrary to a moral antirealist like Michael Ruse, who argues that our sense that there is an objective moral law is “illusory” and is a mere adaptation that benefits survival,<sup>23</sup> Lewis shows that what we sense to be our moral duty

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 29–30.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 30–32.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm: Essays on Its History, Philosophy and Religious Implications* (London: Routledge, 1989), 268.

is sometimes contrary to our strongest natural instinct and that our moral sense judges between instincts and is thus not itself an instinct.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Lewis could point out to Ruse that our moral sense is not always in agreement with what seems to have the most survival value. So, Lewis makes a variety of fine arguments in support of premise (3) by appealing to the nature of what seems to be an objective moral law that we apprehend in our moral experience and by showing that we commonly treat it as a real law in our everyday living even though we do not perfectly keep it. This is much like the defense William Lane Craig has adopted for the second premise of his famous moral argument, as Craig also appeals to our moral sense to make the case that we seem to be in touch with objective moral values and duties that rise above subjective opinion or the instinct of a herd morality.<sup>25</sup>

Although Lewis gives strong reasons to think that our moral sense is not an illusion and is actual knowledge of objective moral facts, he could strengthen his case by addressing whether there is plausibly a basis for grounding such facts. The reason that Ruse, despite admitting that morality seems to be objective in our moral experience, rejects objective morality is that he does not believe there is a “foundation” for it.<sup>26</sup> Knowledge, as commonly understood, must at least involve justified, true belief. In order to show more forcefully that the widespread belief in an objective moral law amounts to genuine knowledge, it would be valuable to argue that there is a plausible foundation in reality for the existence of such a law. If humans are to come to know objective moral facts, then there must first be such facts to be known and thus some foundation or basis for their existence. So while it is certainly legitimate that the features of our experience of what seems to us to be knowledge of objective morality can provide a great deal of evidence for thinking that there is a realist moral ontology that we truly know, Lewis's case could be strengthened if he were to include here in Book One of *Mere Christianity* a clear and explicit case that reality includes an adequate ontological foundation for grounding objective morality.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 9–11.

<sup>25</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 172.

<sup>26</sup> Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm*, 268.

<sup>27</sup> Shrock thinks that Lewis's avoidance of the question of what grounds objective morality is an advantage to his argument because it avoids that controversial ontological issue. But this is wrongheaded, as it remains the case that if there is no plausible ontological ground for objective morality then the plausibility of

Consider now Lewis's defense of premise (2), which contends that if there were no transcendent mind-like Guide (that may or may not be personal), then humans would not have knowledge of an objective moral law. Lewis makes one solid point in defense of premise (2), but his case for it could be strengthened by offering further support for it and by providing a critique of theories of moral knowledge that do not appeal to a mind-like Guide. We have seen that his one key defense for premise (2) is that only something like a mind is able to issue commands because the alternative to mind is mere matter and one "can hardly imagine a bit of matter giving instructions."<sup>28</sup> Since he argues in premise (3) that humans did not invent the moral law but yet know it, the law must have somehow been communicated to us. A Being that is something like a mind is plausibly necessary in order to communicate to us objective moral truths that are beyond human invention. This point, while not developed at any great length, has force to the extent that we seem to be in touch with an objective law concerning how we ought to behave that is not invented by humanity and would not plausibly be instilled in us as an instinct that may arise in naturalistic evolution. Insofar as this is plausible, premise (2) becomes plausible because, as Lewis rightly points out, such communication seemingly must come from something like a mind since mindless things do not communicate.

Lewis should have gone further on this point, though, by contending that the Guide must be personal. Lewis says the Guide need not be "very like a mind, still less like a person."<sup>29</sup> He underplays his hand here, for how could an impersonal reality have desires for us to behave in a certain way, communicate an objective moral law to us, and instill in us the sense that it ought to be followed? Why conclude that such a Being must at least be somewhat mind-like and yet allow that the Being need not be "very like a mind"? Lewis ought to clarify how a Being can be mind-like and yet not be "very like a mind" or how a Being can be mind-like and yet impersonal. Not only does his argument warrant making the stronger claim that there is plausibly a personal mind who is responsible for communicating the moral law, but the entire concept of an impersonal mind-like Being or a mind-like Being that may not be "very like a mind" and yet is able to issue moral communications to us is difficult to imagine. It is hard to see why Lewis hesitates to go so far as to argue that the Being who guides us is plausibly both personal and a mind in the fullest sense of the word.

Beyond failing to argue that the Guide is plausibly personal, Lewis

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genuine moral knowledge—which is at the heart of Lewis's argument—is reduced ("Mere Christianity and the Moral Argument," 100, 108–9).

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25–26.

passes over other opportunities to make a more forceful case in his defense of premise (2). Perhaps most significantly, he never emphasizes explicitly that a personal, purposive Guide is needed in order to explain our sense that the law ought to be followed. Instead, he focuses only on the need for something like a mind to explain our knowledge of the moral instructions. He thus fails to emphasize strongly moral authority and guilt in his argument after laying the foundation for doing so. He misses the opportunity to stress that only a personal Being beyond humanity can make it possible that there is any ultimate enforcement of the moral law such that our sense that the moral law must be followed is veridical. Lewis lays the groundwork for an argument concerning guilt and moral authority by pointing out that the moral law presses on us and that we fail to live up to it, but he then never completes such an argument. Just as mere matter cannot issue instructions, it also cannot lay objective duties upon us or hold us accountable for not fulfilling those duties.

Lewis notes that we feel that we ought to follow the moral law and experience a sense of guilt when we do not, but are these mere feelings? If one has an objective duty to follow this law and not merely the feeling that one ought to follow it, then this points to a personal and authoritative Judge who holds us accountable to the law. As Richard Joyce recognizes, true moral obligations would have to carry "practical clout" or "oomph." We "typically imbue our moral claims" with both inescapability and authority.<sup>30</sup> Lewis ought to argue that such authority is missing apart from a personal Judge behind the law. As Clement Dore argues, genuine moral obligations must be of "overriding importance" to each of us—even to those who ignore them. One's well-being must be tied to fulfilling these obligations if they are to carry weight. So apart from an afterlife and a powerful and wise Judge who punishes those who got away with spurning their moral obligations in this life and rewards those who fulfil those obligations, moral obligations could not be truly overriding as we sense that they are.<sup>31</sup>

Along with moral authority, the indelible sense of guilt that Lewis insightfully notes accompanies our breaking of the moral law points us to a personal and transcendent Being before whom we are guilty.<sup>32</sup> As John Henry Newman argued, our consciences lead us to feel moral guilt even when no other human is affected by our wrong action; it even leads us to feel regret when the wrong act brought us pleasure. One's conscience

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>31</sup> Clement Dore, *Theism* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1984), 36–47.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 7–8, 23.

connects one's moral sense with emotions and "always involves the recognition of a living object, towards which it is directed. Inanimate things cannot stir our affections; these are correlative with persons." This therefore "implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear." Since there are clearly times when we break the moral law and feel guilt even though we have wronged no human person, we are reasonable in concluding that—unless our guilt is illusory—we are guilty before "a Supreme Governor" who is personal and good.<sup>33</sup> Had Lewis pressed these points about the implications of moral accountability and guilt (if they are objective as they seem to be), he would have strengthened his case for premise (2). Our apparent knowledge that we have moral duties pressing on us and that we are guilty of violating them points to a transcendent person to whom we are responsible. Such arguments would fortify his case and would also give him further reason to regard the mind-like Guide as personal—a position he should have taken anyway based on the strength of his argument alone.

Lewis also could have bolstered his case for premise (2) by supporting it with the sort of argument that he made in *Miracles*. Similar to what Alvin Plantinga would later argue, Lewis makes the case that the truth of naturalism would undermine our basis for trusting our reason. Knowledge depends upon valid reason, but in *Miracles* Lewis points out that naturalism undercuts our confidence in the validity of our reason because our cognitive faculties, on naturalism, are merely the result of the blind forces of natural selection. An intelligent designer of our cognitive faculties provides a basis for them to be aimed at detecting truth (and not merely aimed at survival) so that knowledge is possible. For human knowledge to be possible, our reason must be derived from a source of reason that precedes and transcends nature.<sup>34</sup> If this sort of argument is plausible, then there is greater evidence that moral knowledge—along with all knowledge—fits better within a universe with a mind behind it than in a

<sup>33</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1870), 109–10.

<sup>34</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 311–21, 330–34. See also Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 309–46. Plantinga argues that the combination of evolution and naturalism provides a defeater for all knowledge. Mark Linville offers a similar argument but concludes that evolutionary naturalism undermines only moral knowledge rather than all knowledge. See Mark Linville, "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 391–414.

naturalistic universe.

It was noted earlier that Lewis would have strengthened his case for premise (3)—that human knowledge of objective morality is genuine and not illusory—if he had contended that there is a plausible ontological foundation for objective morality. In addition, he could bolster his case for premise (2) if he were to show that the most plausible candidate for this foundation of objective morality is a Being with a number of God's classical attributes (e.g., personal, transcendent, unchanging, and essentially good). He could attempt to show that any adequate ground of objective morality must transcend human opinion (as that is essential to objectivity); must be necessarily good (since the standard of objective morality must not merely be contingently good or good in virtue of something else); must be unchanging (since the standard of objective morality must not be in flux); and must be personal (since it seems that only personal beings are moral agents, it is plausible that any adequate ontological foundation for objective morality should be personal). Making such a case would strengthen his argument that humans would not have knowledge of an objective moral law apart from a transcendent Mind. Besides buttressing the epistemological argument that Lewis makes, this would give him an added layer to his argument that makes a stronger claim about the nature of the transcendent Mind—that this Mind is closer to the God of classical theism than Lewis's argument can justify as it presently stands.

Finally, Lewis's defense of premise (2) would also benefit from including critiques of theories of moral knowledge that do not appeal to a mind-like Guide. For example, Immanuel Kant famously roots objective moral truth in the rational faculty of the good will and thinks knowledge of these truths is attainable by humans purely via autonomous reason.<sup>35</sup> Lewis does not interact directly with Kant or with any other view that envisions humans as autonomously coming to know objective moral truth apart from the instruction of a mind-like Guide.

## Conclusion

Lewis's argument is a valuable contribution to Christian apologetics that has spurred many—both scholars and laypersons—to reflect upon the nature of morality—especially the sense most of us have that the moral law is objective and binding—and the implications that our moral knowledge seems to have for the plausibility of there being a transcendent Guide who has revealed this law to us. Since his argument was written for

<sup>35</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What Is Enlightenment?*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 8–59.

a popular audience and appears in the widely-read *Mere Christianity*, it has had an enormous impact on many who otherwise would not read or think about moral apologetics or philosophy. Yet, the popular format in which the argument appears also necessitated that Lewis not make the argument as philosophically precise as it could have been. His argument, which we have seen is more epistemologically focused than is often thought, is valid and does offer effective support for each premise; however, he should have contended that the mind-like Guide that he postulates is personal based on his argument as it stands. His conclusion is more modest than it needs to be. Moreover, he should have defended premises (2) and (3) more thoroughly by addressing the ontological foundation of objective morality and by building upon the groundwork he laid concerning our sense that we have binding moral duties and are guilty when we do not uphold the moral law. He set the stage for making these points but did not pursue them. While Lewis's argument offers some support for thinking that a mind is behind the universe and that naturalism is false, he misses opportunities to strengthen his case and offer more powerful evidence that leads to a theistic conclusion.