In the Teeth of the Evidence: C.S. Lewis’s Religious Epistemology

PEW Research Grant Proposal – Fall 2011

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I. Brief Project Description and Major Goals

I propose to write an article for a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., Christian Scholar’s Review) that examines the post-conversion (i.e., Christian) work of C.S. Lewis, both fiction and non-fiction, with a view toward three major aims: (a) to identify Lewis’s central epistemological assumptions as they occur in his work, (b) to determine whether these epistemological assumptions constitute a coherent system, and (c) to compare Lewis’s epistemological view(s) with paradigmatic theories in contemporary epistemology.\(^1\)

II. Expanded Project Description with Discussion of Scholarly Literature

Despite numerous treatments of Lewis’s work as a Christian apologist, very few take up the epistemological issues on which Lewis’s apologetics are based. In other words, although there are passing references to Lewis’s views about the role of reason, evidence, and argument, virtually no one has systematically investigated Lewis’s epistemology as such. For example,

\(^1\) Depending upon article length, it may turn out that the article prepared for publication to satisfy the requirements of this grant proposal will not cover all of these aims. For example, I may not be able to treat both fiction and non-fiction in a single essay. However, all of these aims will be in view throughout the research on this project. Moreover, the essay prepared for this grant proposal will eventually become part of a book-length project on Lewis’s epistemology, and the objectives outlined here are meant to provide a sense of the scope of that eventual project.
despite its claim to comprehensiveness, Bruce Edwards’s recent, massive four volume series, 
*C.S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy* does not contain a single essay devoted to Lewis’s 
epistemology – this despite a single volume (vol. 3) devoted to Lewis’s legacy as an “apologist, 
philosopher & theologian.” A similar gap characterizes the recent edited volume *Cambridge 
Companion to C.S. Lewis.* Aside from Gilbert Meilaender’s essay, “On Moral Knowledge,” 
which focuses narrowly on Lewis’s views about how we come to know *moral* truths, this 
collection does not contain any treatments of Lewis’s epistemology *as such.* Ironically, this is 
also true of a recent anthology, *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.* 
Despite the inclusion of two essays dealing with broadly epistemological issues (the psychology 
of doubt, and the nature of belief), no essay in this collection grapples with Lewis’s 
epistemology from a comprehensive, systematic perspective.

On the one hand, the lack of such a treatment in the secondary literature amidst an ocean 
of work on Lewis as *apologist* is understandable. Lewis almost never addressed the topic of 
epistemology *as such* in isolation from his broader apologetic concerns. Thus, one should 
expect Lewis scholars to deal with Lewis’s epistemology only insofar as it impinges upon other 
aspects of Lewis’s Christian apologetic. Paradigmatic examples are the essays by Habermas and 
Rozema in *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher* (see footnote 2). On the other hand, Lewis taught 
philosophy at Oxford at the beginning of his career. Consequently, one should expect Lewis to 
demonstrate a significant sensitivity to epistemological issues, even where he is not writing about

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2 The two essays in question are Gary R. Habermas’s “C.S. Lewis and Emotional Doubt: Insights from the 
Philosophy of Psychology,” and David Rozema’s “Belief” in the *Writings of C.S. Lewis,” in *C.S. Lewis as 
Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty,* edited by David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas and Jerry L. Walls, 
Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008. Both essays deal, in part, with Lewis’s famous “On Obstnacy in 
Belief.” The latter is one of Lewis’s most explicit works in religious epistemology. However, neither Habermas nor 
Rozema treat Lewis’s essay as a lens through which to understand Lewis’s larger epistemological insights. 
3 Perhaps the one exception to this is Lewis’s essay, “On Obstnacy in Belief,” in *God in the Dock,* edited by Walter 
4 It is worth noting that Lewis considered himself a “very minor philosopher.” See Lewis, *The Collected Letters of 
C.S. Lewis: Volume III,* 99 [March 25, 1951].
epistemology as such. At least, one should expect that Lewis embraced key epistemological assumptions, assumptions which, with careful analysis, should manifest themselves throughout his written work. Moreover, given the high degree of consistency in Lewis’s thought as a whole, one should expect to discover a set of epistemological assumptions in Lewis’s work constituting a coherent, defensible, system.

The purpose of this project is to investigate the warrant for the foregoing expectations. I propose to undertake a rigorous analysis of select, key writings of C.S. Lewis (both fiction and non-fiction) with a view toward identifying Lewis’s major epistemological positions. As a result of this investigation, I intend to produce a significant scholarly article, intended for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, in which I discuss the degree to which Lewis’s major epistemological outlook hangs together as a coherent system. Given my initial conviction about the overall coherence of Lewis’s thought, my operating interpretive assumption will be that Lewis’s epistemological position does, in fact, constitute a single, coherent, defensible perspective. Consequently, unless the results of my investigation demand a different reading, I intend to argue for the coherence of Lewis’s epistemology in the article produced for publication. Beyond this, as space permits, I aim to situate Lewis’s epistemology against contemporary theories of knowledge, comparing select strengths and weaknesses in order to determine what insights Lewis’s view might shed on contemporary debates.

Despite the absence of such a comprehensive project in the secondary literature on Lewis, my proposal is not without foundation in the scholarly literature. Thus, it is important to note what work has been done and how what I am proposing to do will distinguish itself from previously-covered terrain. Perhaps the most extensive treatment of Lewis’s epistemology occurs in Adam Barkman’s recent book, *C.S. Lewis & Philosophy as a Way of Life: A*
Comprehensive Historical Examination of his Philosophical Thoughts. In a chapter section devoted to epistemology, Barkman claims that “while there has been plenty of material published on Lewis’s epistemology over the years, most of what has been published has . . . been fairly superficial . . .”5 Barkman’s effort to remedy this superficiality with his own concise treatment of Lewis’s epistemology – a mere 11 pages in his 600 page tome – is a helpful launching point for my own project. At the same time, Barkman’s project is primarily historical-biographical. Thus, Barkman offers a synopsis of Lewis’s epistemological views as they develop in keeping with the overall development of Lewis’s thought throughout his life.6 The net result of such a summary is a sweeping assemblage of Lewis’s epistemological views at various stages of his career that lacks a rigorous argument in support of the coherence of Lewis’s mature, considered perspective. As a descriptive catalog of the development of Lewis’s thoughts about epistemology, Barkman’s work is an essential reference. However, as a normative source, one offering a defense of Lewis as a coherent, systematic epistemologist, Barkman is understandably inadequate. The evidence for this is the simple fact that in the space of 10 pages, Barkman records Lewis as having been categorized as a “rationalist,” a “critical rationalist,” a “foundationalist,” and a “virtue epistemologist.” Little attention is given to what distinguishes the conceptual space between these various labels. Moreover, because Barkman’s project is primarily historical-biographical, the descriptive tension created by this litany of labels is unresolved. What is needed is precisely what my project aims to provide, namely, an apologia for Lewis’s post-conversion (i.e., his mature, considered) epistemological outlook. To be sure,

5 Adam Barkman, C.S. Lewis & Philosophy as a Way of Life: A Comprehensive Examination of his Philosophical Thoughts (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), 299-300. Barkman’s claim that “plenty” has been published on Lewis’s epistemology is debatable. As evidence for this claim, he cites half a dozen articles in a footnote most of which are idiosyncratic.

6 Barkman does this because it conforms to his overall project in the book.
such a project will be informed by Barkman’s insightful historical narrative. However, my project aims to go beyond the foundation that Barkman has laid.

Because my project will focus primarily on the post-conversion phase of Lewis’s thought, I will not attend to the metaphysical and epistemological debate between C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield known as the “Great War.” This debate, which occurred intermittently between 1925-27 and focused on Barfield’s metaphysical position known as anthroposophy, has had extensive coverage in the secondary literature. While this literature and the debate itself may inform some aspects of my project by providing contextual clues in the development of Lewis’s thought, I intend to limit the scope of my project by dealing with his post-conversion work. For this reason, my project represents a legitimate contribution to the perpetually expanding Lewis scholarship, as opposed to mere rehearsal of old debates.

Finally, as previously noted (see footnote 3), my project will be significantly informed by one of Lewis’s most overtly epistemological works, “On Obstinacy in Belief.” This essay constitutes one of Lewis most obvious epistemological works as evident from the fact that in those few instances in which Lewis scholars directly consider aspects of Lewis’s mature epistemology, “On Obstinacy in Belief” is generally the work in view. As noted above (see footnote 2), both Gary Habermas and David Rozema offer analyses of this particular work. Habermas deals with the psychology of doubt, while Rozema deals with the nature of Lewis’s concept of belief, making comparisons to the work of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. Both essays illuminate various aspects of “On Obstinacy in Belief.” However, I hope to show in my

8 In The World’s Last Night and Other Essays, San Diego: Harcourt, 1987, 13-30. The emphasis here on this particular essay is not meant to ignore other places in the Lewis corpus from which one might glean significant insights into his overall epistemology (e.g., “Meditation in a Toolshed”). Rather, the point here is to note this essay’s significance in the secondary literature and to explain how my treatment of its content will be distinct from others already in print.
own essay that the insights from both are best situated (and hence, understood) in the larger context of Lewis’s overall, post-conversion epistemology. The same is true for Kelly Clark’s discussion of this essay in Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God. Here, Clark offers a substantial treatment of “On Obstinacy in Belief” – perhaps the finest exegesis of this particular essay in the secondary literature. Clark examines Lewis’s essay as a critique of evidentialism, noting Lewis’s awareness of W.K. Clifford’s essay, “The Ethics of Belief.” Clark does not offer a defense of Lewis’s position in light of a comprehensive analysis of Lewis’s epistemology, since it is not germane to the overall project of his book. Thus, while Clark’s work constitutes a worthy starting point for my own project, it clearly leaves space for further development.

IIa. Working Bibliography

Introductory Note

For purposes of this grant proposal, I have limited this growing, working bibliography to secondary source material examined thus far. Thus, with the exception of two key articles, this bibliography does not contain a list of works by C.S. Lewis relevant to my project. This gap should neither be taken as an indication of my lack of proficiency with Lewis’s work nor signal that I have given no thought to my reading strategy in the primary source material. I have withheld this list for two related reasons. As is well-known, the Lewis corpus is vast (and the scope of the secondary literature is almost incomprehensible). Consequently, in order to save space in this proposal, I have refrained from attempting to list most of what Lewis has written. As importantly, not all of what Lewis has written bears directly on the exact nature of my project. Thus, rather than list works which may turn out to have little or no value in my specific project, I thought it better to postpone the development of a bibliography of Lewis’s work, therefore I include only those sources that bear directly on my project. Moreover, I suspect that
in the course of my reading, I may uncover work by Lewis relevant to my project that I could not have anticipated at this stage.

Since the focus of my project is Lewis’s post-conversion epistemology, my plan is to read broadly and deeply in Lewis’s major Christian writings. At a minimum, this would include such works as, *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *Miracles*, *Screwtape Letters*, *The Weight of Glory*, *God in the Dock*, *Christian Reflections*, *Reflections on the Psalms*, *Letters to Malcolm*, *The Four Loves*, and *Pilgrim’s Regress*. In Lewis’s fiction, I will re-read *Till We Have Faces* and *The Great Divorce*; however, I do not plan to re-read *The Chronicles of Narnia* or Lewis’s “space trilogy” since I recently re-read both. I may examine *The Dark Tower and Other Stories*. However, because of the idiosyncratic (and in one case contested) nature of this work, it will not figure as prominently in my overall project. In addition to all of this, I plan to read key essays from many of Lewis’s major collections: *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, *Present Concerns*, *Of Other Worlds*, and *Selected Literary Essays*. Beyond this, I will likely limit my reading in Lewis’s literary work to *Experiment in Criticism* and *Preface to Paradise Lost*. Finally, as the process of discovery unfolds, I suspect that Lewis’s complete letters will be an important resource.

The essay prepared for this grant proposal will likely not address the third major objective that informs the overall project (i.e., compare Lewis’s epistemological view(s) with paradigmatic theories in contemporary epistemology). This third objective will be addressed (in print) as part of the larger project surrounding this proposal (see footnote 1). Consequently, I do not anticipate significant reading in contemporary epistemology. I do, however, plan to consult relevant sources, most of which are now helpfully cataloged in the philosophy section of the Oxford Bibliographies Online.

**Secondary Sources**


Reichenbach, Bruce R. “At Any Rate There’s No Humbug Here: Truth and Perspective.” In The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy: The Lion, the Witch, and the Worldview, edited by Gregory Bassham and Jerry Walls, 53-64. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.


III. Brief Essay on the Integration of Faith and Philosophy

Contrary to those who naively cite Colossians 2:8 as justification for a permanent separation of Jerusalem from Athens, one of the greatest rewards of being a professor of philosophy in Christian higher education is the deep, existential unity of one’s academic vocation with one’s growth in Christian discipleship. For me, teaching and scholarship both inform and are informed by my on-going efforts to follow Christ. This particular project is no exception.

For the past several years, I have been humbled by the process of mentoring students who wrestle with the epistemological wreckage of our postmodern culture. As inheritors of Descartes’s epistemological legacy, such students crave certainty as a necessary condition for knowledge. Yet, although they are unable to articulate it in such terms, these same students tacitly (perhaps experientially) recognize that they live in a culture and era in which epistemic authority has been displaced. There is no epistemological magisterium. Hence, in coming of age, such students are compelled to embrace the Cartesian legacy: the locus of epistemological authority is in the self.9 The humbler students, rightly recognizing that they are not up to the task understandably seek wisdom: How should I navigate?

Several years ago, I was confronted by this problem rather starkly when a student, for whom I later became a mentor, posed a provocative question. His question was set against the backdrop of a sincere desire to pursue truth. He acknowledged the oft-repeated axiom that “all truth is God’s truth.” But he went on to point out that the relative importance of all truths cannot be a matter of complete indifference. After all, he observed, “there is a truth of the matter about how many books are in the library, but presumably that particular truth is not as important to

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9 Ironically, this compulsion often takes place under the auspices of receiving a liberal arts degree in which students are taught to “think for themselves.”
know as others.” Then the hammer fell. *How then are we supposed to know what we ought to know?*

Understand that this question was posed by someone who is not a skeptic. Moreover, it is not the sort of question to which a quintessential Sunday school answer (e.g., “just read the Bible”) would suffice. For the question itself expresses its own predicament. If, as the Cartesian legacy would have it, we are our own respective centers of epistemological authority, then ultimately what we ought to know is merely a function of whatever we happen to know (or whatever happens to suit our fancy at a given time). But this is not an option for someone, like this particular student, who happens to think that some things are more important to know than others. For the idea that we are our own respective centers of epistemological authority ultimately entails that knowing how many books are in the library is no more or less important than the knowledge of God. At the same time, we are, in fact, living in a culture and era in which there is no shared epistemological center outside of one’s self. Thus, it seems (and it seemed to this student) that the only escape from the Cartesian predicament is *self*-will, which, even if it “succeeded” in rectifying the problem would inevitably be a Pyrrhic victory. So how does one navigate in the midst of such an epistemological quandary? How does what determine what one ought to know?

The question has haunted me in the years following this exchange. And my reflection on it has helped me to see that my own journey from an undergraduate student in philosophy to a member of the profession has, in many respects, been driven by a similar question. What drives my philosophical pursuit can be expressed simply: *What matters?* Because I’m finite, I find it

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10 Of course, the entailment assumes that ontologically no one person (and hence no one person’s interests) is more important than any other. Incidentally, I believe that this problem is at the heart of the fragmentation of the contemporary university. However, explicating this claim would require an independent essay.
difficult to believe that the answer is “everything” (or at least that everything matters equally).\textsuperscript{11}

At the same time, because I’m a Christian, I can’t embrace nihilism: nothing matters at all. So, the challenge of the philosophical life – a life devoted to the pursuit of wisdom – is to come to know what matters and to live in keeping with that knowledge.

Even though this project is greatly assisted by my adherence to the Christian faith and by my on-going discovery of the riches of the Christian tradition, it is not one to which Bible verses, creeds, confessions, or catechisms provide exhaustive guidance. For if we do, in fact, live in the kind of epistemological wreckage that my students sense, the challenge of pursuing what matters, of knowing how to know what I ought to know, must be informed by epistemological reflection which, while not contrary to Christian faith, most certainly transcends the ordinary teaching, life, and practice of Christianity. Such reflection is the task of a Christian \textit{philosopher}.

Since the day that my student awakened me from my dogmatic slumber, I have chewed on a hunch that C.S. Lewis may have wisdom to offer those who, like me and my student, find the epistemological vacuum in which we live existentially unbearable. This is partly because Lewis wrote and lived with what seems to be such a clear sense of what matters. Such luminous lives are attractive not merely for their beauty, but also for the light they shed on questions that impinge upon our experience. The present project is motivated by the assumption that the navigational confidence Lewis displayed is, at least in part, driven by a sound (even if tacit) epistemology. Thus, an investigation that disclosed Lewis’s epistemological perspective would be one that made a contribution to the larger project of knowing how to know what we ought to

\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps this is because I’m also committed to the tacit assumption that God wouldn’t make a world in which everything matters equally and populate it with beings (i.e., humans) whose finitude removes the possibility of everything mattering equally as a live option. Such a world would, literally, be maddening. And my trust in the goodness of Providence prevents me from believing that God’s just toying with us like that.
know. And to the extent that it did, a faithful follower of Christ would find a salve for the epistemological wounds inflicted by our fragmented intellectual landscape.

As I explained at the outset, my work as a Christian philosopher emerges out of a deep, existential unity between academic discipline and my growth in Christian discipleship. This essay is a small gesture toward making evident what is meant by that claim.
IV. **Timeline for Completion and Dissemination of Project**

November 2011 – May 2012: On-going collection and review of secondary source material; strategic re-reading in the Lewis corpus (e.g., *Till We Faces, Preface to Paradise Lost*)

May 2012 – August 2012: Intensive review of primary and secondary material, designated period for writing initial draft of article – 1st draft completed by end of August 2012

September 2012 – December 2012: Possible presentation of work at appropriate conference; revisions based on conference feedback; seek appropriate journal for publication

January 2013: Make final revisions; submit to journal for publication

April 2013: Submit report to PEW committee/luncheon

V. **Budget**

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VI. **Current Curriculum Vitae** (see attachment)

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12 If funds allow, I hope to visit the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College in Chicago for research and writing during this period.