

REASON AND RELIGION

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Erik J. Wielenberg. *God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge U. P., 2008. Pp. x, 243. £50.13 (hb); US\$30.99 (pb).

Erik J. Wielenberg is Johnson Family University Professor, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department at DePauw University. His interest in and affinity for Bertrand Russell's views on religion came through in his first book *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, where he used a quotation from *What I Believe* as the epigraph: "Many a man has borne himself proudly on the scaffold; surely the same pride should teach us to think truly about man's place in the world", and he referred to Russell in several places in discussing religion, naturalism, happiness and courage.

The central project of that book is an examination of the ethical implications of “naturalism”, which he uses as a synonym for “atheism”. In the introduction he writes: “In a naturalistic universe, there is no God, no afterlife, and no immortal soul.” He combines these familiar Russellian beliefs with metaethical views that Russell supposedly held until he abandoned Moore’s ethical objectivism and converted to some form of emotivism.¹

Wielenberg leaves open the possibility that there are ethical *facts* that are not reducible to physical or scientific facts. He argues that we have good reasons to be moral and that life can be good and meaningful without believing in God, a soul or immortality (whether in heaven or hell). In the introduction he also outlines a two-part account of “why I am not Christian”, which is along the lines of Russell’s arguments for not having been one also.

His latest book starts with a passage from the *Phaedo* where Socrates, facing execution, said: “... the one aim of those who practise philosophy in the proper manner is to practise for dying and death.” Wielenberg comments: “If the measure of a philosopher is the ability to face death without fear, then Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963), David Hume (1711–1776), and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) were great philosophers indeed” (p. 1). He uses a passage from “How to Grow Old” to illustrate Russell’s philosophy of life, ethic and attitude towards our mortality:

An individual human existence should be like a river—small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man who, in old age, can see his

¹ Towards the end of his life Russell showed signs of returning to Moorean objectivism and a belief in “absolute values”. In a letter to the editor of *The Observer*, 20 Oct. 1957, Russell wrote: “I cannot meet the arguments against absolute ethical values, and yet I cannot believe that a dislike of wanton cruelty is merely a matter of taste, like a dislike of oysters. But I am in complete agreement with Professor Ayer in thinking that the question whether ethical values are absolute has no bearing whatever on the question of the existence of God.” A week earlier he had written: “What Mr. Toynbee says in his criticism of my views on ethics has my entire sympathy. I find my own views argumentatively irrefutable, but nevertheless incredible. I do not know the solution.” See *Papers* 29: 21b and 21a, and RAMSAY, *Freedom and Immortality*, pp. 43–7. Both PIGDEN in *Russell on Ethics* and POTTER in *Bertrand Russell’s Ethics* seem to have overlooked the possibility that Russell in old age returned to metaethical cognitivism and objectivism. Although he had difficulties in defending these positions theoretically, his practical involvement in CND and protests against the Vietnam War show that he was at heart and in practice a believer in absolute values. See also n. 3.

life in this way, will not suffer from fear of death, since the things he cares for will continue.² (PJM, p. 52)

One aim of Wielenberg's book is to show that C. S. Lewis's philosophical work is worthy of serious attention, and he puts his apologetic views against those of Hume and Russell. Lewis's views receive the most attention with Hume a close second and Russell a distant third. This is not because he thinks that Lewis's apologies are convincing; as a matter of fact he thinks that Lewis's overall case for Christianity fails.

His main goal is to put these three great thinkers into conversation with one other, shedding light not only on the views of each but also on the quality of their various arguments. "But this book is not just for those interested in Lewis, Hume, or Russell; it is for anyone interested in thinking seriously and thinking hard about God" (p. 6).

The first chapter, "The Love of God and the Suffering of Humanity", focuses on the challenge that suffering poses to belief in God as that challenge is formulated by Hume in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and addressed by Lewis in *The Problem of Evil*. He argues that while Lewis's response to the challenge is incomplete in a certain way, that response is novel and has a richness and subtlety that have not been widely appreciated. He seeks to bring out this richness by defending Lewis's solution to the problem of pain against a variety of objections.

The second chapter, "Beyond Nature", focuses on Lewis's three arguments for the existence of a higher power. These arguments are grounded in human nature. Like Descartes, Lewis thinks that we can understand God by first understanding ourselves. He maintains that human beings have knowledge of objective moral truths, can reason, and have a desire that nothing on earth can satisfy. Each of these aspects of human nature constitutes the starting-point of an argument for the existence of a higher power.

Hume and Russell appear in this chapter primarily as critics of Lewis's theistic arguments. However, the author suggests that some of the most serious challenges to Lewis's arguments come from the relatively new field of evolu-

² This passage is a good illustration of what BLACKWELL calls Russell's ethic of "im-personal self-enlargement", which he to a large extent based on Spinoza's central ethical concept, the "intellectual love of God" (*Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell*, pp. vii-ix). Although Blackwell explicitly says that he is not interested in Russell's different metaethical views (p. 3), he nevertheless gives an interesting description of its different stages "which (as published) proceeds from intuitionism through emotivism to a *tentative naturalism*" (p. 5, my italics). In a more developed essay I intend to explore this development and particularly its final stage.

tionary psychology, and he explains how evolutionary psychology may be drawn upon to resist Lewis's case for a higher power.

"Miracles", the third chapter, focuses on a challenge posed by Hume together with a direct response to that challenge from Lewis. In this case the focus is on miracles and testimony. Hume argues, roughly, that testimony (of a certain kind) never provides us with a good reason to believe that a miracle has taken place. An obvious implication of this result is that it would not be reasonable for us to believe that the resurrection of Jesus really happened on the basis of some texts in the New Testament; thus, Hume's argument strikes directly at the heart of Christianity.

Lewis criticizes Hume's argument and tries to show that the resurrection has enough initial plausibility that testimony could provide sufficient evidence for its occurrence. After carefully explaining the reasoning of Hume and Lewis on these issues, the author makes the case that while Lewis exposes a significant weakness in Hume's argument, Lewis's own argument fails because it depends upon his case for the existence of a higher power, and this case is not particularly strong. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of all this for Lewis's famous "trilemma".

Chapter 4, "Faith, Design, and True Religion", involves more exposition than the preceding three chapters and focuses on some perhaps surprising areas of agreement among the three thinkers. Substantial attention is devoted to determining Hume's overall views on religion, particularly in the *Dialogues*. He argues that despite their very different positions on the status of Christianity, the three thinkers hold similar views on the importance of following the evidence and on the difficulties humans face in doing this. He further argues that all three reject the argument from design and recognize the potential for violence of organized religion. Hume and Russell favour the abandonment of traditional dogma (including Christian dogma) as the way to avoid religious violence, whereas Lewis maintains that the solution to the problem lies in a proper understanding of Christianity itself.

Although Russell's views are not the most frequently cited in the book, there is no doubt that Wielenberg is a disciple of Russell in many ways and that his criticism is along the lines of the new atheists. He does not fall victim to the moral and rhetorical weakness of ridiculing his major opponent. Even as an atheist he is prepared to follow Lewis's arguments where they lead and to give him credit when such is deserved.

Although Russell has offered different solutions to "the problem of evil" and criticized many "theodicies"—i.e. attempts to reconcile God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence with the fact that many humans experience a lot of unjust suffering during their short lives (not to speak of the

eternal suffering waiting for the unsaved)³—we have to wait until the second chapter to find Russell’s arguments against Lewis’s “moral argument” for the existence of God, which is one of three arguments that point in the direction of the existence of a higher power.⁴

According to Wielenberg, Lewis’s argument can be formulated in the following way:

- (1) Lewisian moral phenomena exist.
- (2) The best explanation of the existence of Lewisian moral phenomena is the existence of a higher power that created the universe.
- (3) So: there is a higher power that created the universe. [(1), (2)]
- (4) The higher power issues instructions and wants us to engage in morally right conduct.
- (5) If (4), then there is a good, mind-like higher power that created the universe.
- (6) Therefore there is a good, mind-like higher power that created the universe. [(4), (5)]

Russell’s counter-argument can be seen as an exegesis of Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*, where Socrates raises a very clever question: “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” “Pious” can here be replaced with “good” while the potency of the question remains the same.

In *Why I Am Not a Christian* Russell gives a very convincing argument that Wielenberg summarizes as (RC): “The only way a being (even God) can be good is by conforming its actions to a moral law of which it is not the author” (p. 65). Take the example of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac without giving any *reasons*. Abraham’s blind obedience is used by Jews and Christians (Rom. 4) as well as Muslims as the apotheosis of *faith*. The only way for a religious person to defend God morally is to say that whatever the Bible says about God should be believed and morally endorsed, even if it

³ Russell’s posing of the problem echoes Hume’s famous words from the *Dialogues* in the mouth of Philo: “Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” This does not necessarily prove that God does not exist, but it proves that in light of human suffering, God cannot be all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving.

⁴ Lewis’s two other arguments are called “the argument from reason” and “the argument from desire”. Lewis dismisses the argument from design, which is the only argument about which Russell finds anything good to say. See the chapter on Leibniz in *HWP* and below, p. 81.

makes God's actions inconsistent, incomprehensible and morally repulsive. This is pure unreasonable *fundamentalism*.

According to Wielenberg Lewis's writings suggest three alternatives to Russell's argument: (1) Being *identical* to the moral law is a way of being good. (2) Preferring love, fair play, unselfishness, courage, good faith, honesty, and truthfulness is a way of being good. (3) Desiring that human beings attain genuine happiness (that they freely love God and strive to become Christlike) is a way of being good (p. 92).

Wielenberg's conclusion is that the contribution of Lewisian moral phenomena to his cumulative case for a higher power is weak: "I believe that objective morality is not the thorn in the side of atheism that it is often thought to be" (p. 93). The examples of Russell and many Victorian agnostics and "honest doubters" show that you may very well disbelieve in God and still believe in objective morality ("absolute values") and be far more moral than most believers, both laypeople and clergy.

Wielenberg also brings in Russell to undermine the second premiss of Lewis's argument from desire: "Every desire that is innate and natural to all normal human beings can be satisfied." Russell's response to this argument is: "The fact that I feel a *need* for something more than human is no evidence that the need can be satisfied, any more than hunger is evidence that I shall get food" (p. 110).⁵

The last chapter, "Faith, Design, and True Religion", starts with a section "Lewis and Russell on Faith", which brings out a fundamental difference between them in their understanding of this concept. To Russell faith was anathema, because he interpreted it as "... believing a proposition when there is no good reason for believing it. That may be taken as a definition of faith."⁶

⁵ The quotation is from "Reply to Criticisms", *RoR*, p. 29; *Papers* 11: 52.

⁶ For a different understanding of "faith" and its relationship to "belief", see WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH, *The Meaning and End of Religion, Belief and History*, and *Faith and Belief*; and JAMES W. FOWLER, *Stages of Faith*, in which he has a chapter "Faith, Religion and Belief" where he gives a short presentation of Smith's theories regarding the difference between "faith" and "belief". To quote Smith: "Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by a religious tradition, in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines; but it is a quality of the person not of the system. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbor, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension" (*Faith and Belief*, p. 11). Russell had a lot of "faith", according to Smith's terminology. Russell's father applied the same distinction in his book, *An Analysis of Religious Belief*, which he got from Cardinal Newman's brother. See my "Religion in the Russell Family". For Smith's course "Faith and Belief" at Harvard Divinity School in 1977, I wrote an essay, "The Generic Distinction between Faith

Wielenberg says that Russell sought the opposed virtue, which he referred to by a variety of names, including “veracity”, “truthfulness”, “intellectual integrity” and “intellectual honesty”. He characterized this virtue as “the habit of deciding vexed questions in accordance with the evidence, or of leaving them undecided where the evidence is inconclusive” (p. 154).

What Lewis and Russell have in common, according to Wielenberg, is that they both thought human emotion to be among the primary obstacles in forming one’s beliefs properly and that one ought to follow the evidence, when it comes to forming one’s beliefs, although they disagreed about where the evidence leads when it comes to Christianity (p. 157).

Having spent more than 40 years among mostly highly intelligent theologians, who insist that their beliefs are sincere and based on evidence, I am amazed how differently one can interpret concepts like “evidence” and “fact”, particularly when it includes believing that the New Testament just reports historical facts about miracles including the resurrection and the ascension. I do not consider these theologians to be either stupid or insincere (most of the time)—they just do not mean the same by “reliable evidence” as Russell did and many of his admirers do today.

In the section “Russell on Design” Wielenberg gives a short review of some of the arguments that Russell gave to support his belief that arguments from design cannot by themselves establish the existence of the traditional God of Christianity. Like Hume and Lewis, Russell saw evil in the universe as one of the major stumbling blocks for such arguments.

However, in the chapter on Leibniz in *History of Western Philosophy* Russell says that the argument has no formal logical defect. One way of getting out of trouble is to compromise on the metaphysical attributes usually attributed to God. Russell writes:

He need not be omnipotent or omniscient; He may only be vastly wiser and more powerful than we are. The evils in the world may be due to His limited power. Some modern theologians have made use of these possibilities in forming their conception of God. (HWP₂, p. 612)

The modern theologians Russell is referring to may have been his former teacher and collaborator A. N. Whitehead and his disciples in “process theology”, which is, at least, not blatantly incompatible with the existence of some evil in the universe. As far as I know, Russell never revealed more than this

and Belief in the Particular Case of Bertrand Russell”. I argued that an agnostic or atheist like Russell had a lot of faith although no religious beliefs.

about his thoughts about a not totally perfect God, and Wielenberg seems to have overlooked this passage.

In the section “Lewis and Russell: True Religion as the Conquest of Selfishness”, Wielenberg gives a brief review of Russell’s 1912 essay “The Essence of Religion”, in which he presents the good aspects of a religion without dogma that can survive “the decay of religious beliefs”. This religion is grounded in the conquest of the “finite self” by the “infinite self”. Such conquest yields a desire to make the world as good as possible, a calm acceptance of the evils that one cannot eliminate, and universal love for one’s fellow human beings. Wielenberg finds this account strikingly similar to what Lewis said in a talk called “Religion without Dogma” given to the Oxford Socratic Club in 1946 (p. 196). As a matter of fact the similarities are so great that one wonders if Lewis was not paraphrasing Russell without acknowledging the source. However, Wielenberg does not consider this possibility.

In the final section Wielenberg summarizes his findings and says that despite their many disagreements, there are significant and sometimes surprising areas of agreement among the three thinkers. All three reject the view that we can reason from the nature of the observable physical universe to the existence of a perfect God. All three recognize organized religion’s potential for explosive violence and are aware of Christianity’s sins in this regard. Hume and Russell see Christianity as rooted in irrational emotions rather than reason. Lewis sees Christianity as rooted in reason; he thinks that we can come to know God by first knowing ourselves. He sees the key to avoiding Christian violence as understanding Christianity correctly and preventing its misuse politically. All three thinkers share a common prescription: *Follow the evidence!* However, this means one thing to Lewis and another to the more sceptical and critical Hume and Russell.

This is a well written book that can catch the attention of a wide readership interested in theology, ethics and the philosophy of religion. My only criticism is that the author could have applied a more developmental approach to what Russell had to say about religion—his own and others—at different stages of his life and to different audiences. That could have explained how Russell’s different rhetorical tropes at different times and situations were not as inconsistent as they might seem. It also could have shown that Russell, towards the end of his life, returned to a view of religion close to that expressed in “The Essence of Religion”, traced its connection with his ethic of “impersonal self-enlargement”, and also shed light on the often misunderstood words:

The root of the matter is a very simple and old-fashioned thing, a thing so simple that I am almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which wise cynics will greet my words. The thing I mean—please forgive me for

mentioning it—is love, Christian love or compassion. If you feel this, you have a motive for existence, a guide in action, a reason for courage, an imperative necessity for intellectual honesty. If you feel this, you have all that anybody should need in the way of religion. Although you might not find happiness, you will never know the deep despair of those whose life is aimless and void of purpose; for there is always something that you can do to diminish the awful sum of human misery.

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