

Dear fellow pilgrims,

Well, we finally made it to Chapter 1 of *Mere Christianity* last week! I trust that our deep dive into the context for this remarkable work and into the prefaces served to whet your appetite for Lewis's launch into this search for "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." At the end of this email are links to the last class as well as some of the materials I mentioned during class. I am looking forward to exploring Chapter 2, "Some Objections," with you tomorrow evening on Zoom. Please feel free to share the class link with any friends who may be interested.

Here are some of the key points from our discussion of Chapter 1 last week:

Book I. Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him? --Psalm 8:3*

Lewis taps into the universal and ancient question: who are we and how did we and the cosmos come to be?

Some definitions:

Cosmology: the study of origins

Metaphysical cosmology: the place of humans in the universe in relationship to all other entities.

"He who does not know what the world is does not know where he is, and he who does not know for what purpose the world exists, does not know who he is, nor what the world is."

—Marcus Aurelius (ca. 170)

Note where Lewis chooses to begin his apologetic:

—not with evidence for Jesus or a discussion of other faiths, but with the universal quest and hunger for meaning and purpose

--this deliberate choice of starting point is a stroke of genius and helps account for this book's enduring popularity and relevance, exacerbated by education's shifting focus

1. The Law of Human Nature

A. Quarreling and what people say

A universal and relatable issue! "I was here first" "Come on, you promised"

Not merely that the behavior doesn't please you, nor response of "to hell with your standard"

B. Appeal to a standard of behavior which is generally agreed upon

The standard is NOT dismissed—rather, the behavior is said not to go against it or an excuse is made.

"... Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football."

C. The Law of Nature and the Law of Human Nature:

humans are subject to multiple natural laws but are only free to disobey one

Gravity, chemistry, heredity—we (and animals) are inexorably subject to all of these natural laws, but only we can choose whether to obey the Law of Human Nature

D. Idea of decent behavior is obvious to all because Right is a real thing

“What was the sense in saying the enemy were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practised? If they had had no notion of what we mean by right, then, though we might still have had to fight them, we could no more have blamed them for that than for the colour of their hair.”

E. Morality and moral teaching are remarkably consistent across ages and civilizations

“I know that some people say the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behaviour known to all men is unsound, because different civilisations and different ages have had quite different moralities. But this is not true. There have been differences between their moralities, but these have never amounted to anything like a total difference. If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. Some of the evidence for this I have put together in the appendix of another book called *The Abolition of Man*.”

Examples: cowardice, selfishness, promiscuity

F. Those who say they do not believe in a real Right or Wrong will nevertheless appeal to a standard of fairness if things do not go their way

“But the most remarkable thing is this. Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining “It’s not fair” before you can say Jack Robinson.”

G. Right and Wrong are no more matters of taste or opinion than the multiplication tables, yet no one is successfully and consistently keeping the Law of Nature

“I am not preaching, and Heaven knows I do not pretend to be better than anyone else. I am only trying to call attention to a fact; the fact that this year, or this month, or, more likely, this very day, we have failed to practise ourselves the kind of behaviour we expect from other people. There may be all sorts of excuses for us. That time you were so unfair to the children was when you were very tired. That slightly shady business about the money—the one you have almost forgotten—came when you were very hard up. And what you promised to do for old So-and-so and have never done—well, you never would have promised if you had known how frightfully busy you were going to be. And as for your behaviour to your wife (or husband) or sister (or brother) if I knew how irritating they could be, I would not wonder at it—and who the dickens am I, anyway? I am just the same.”

(Note Lewis’s disarming honesty and humility here, as well as his deep understanding of human nature and conscience—he has put himself in the same boat with all his readers.)

H. We have failed to practice ourselves the kind of behavior we expect from other people

When we do not keep the Law of Nature, we immediately begin to come up with self-justificatory excuses.

“The question at the moment is not whether they are good excuses. The point is that they are one more proof of how deeply, whether we like it or not, we believe in the Law of Nature. If we do not believe in decent behaviour, why should we be so anxious to make excuses for not having behaved decently? The truth is, we believe in decency so much—we feel the Rule or Law pressing on us so— that we cannot bear to face the fact that we are breaking it, and consequently we try to shift the responsibility. For you notice that it is only for our bad behaviour that we find all these explanations.”

I. Two key points: humans know the Law of Nature; they break it

“It is only our bad temper that we put down to being tired or worried or hungry; we put our good temper down to ourselves. These, then, are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.”

Lewis begins this book in the most unlikely place--the phenomenon of quarreling. Rather than launching into a long and abstract discussion of ontology and epistemology, he starts with something universally relatable for people across ages and cultures and class and income levels. Most remarkably, he makes us look at quarreling through a new lens that enables us to understand something profound about what it means to be human.

In Chapter 2, Lewis will deal with some objections that were raised by listeners to his original broadcast. In the broadcast talks, this actually occurred several weeks later (after he had gotten the letters and had time to respond to them and realized their points bore devoting some time on the air), but in the book he moves the response right up just after the points he has made.

For those who are scuba diving, I highly recommend Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* as concurrent reading. The Appendix, which focuses on universally held moral principles, is fascinating and compelling. You can order it from Amazon here <https://www.amazon.com/Abolition-Man-C-S-Lewis/dp/0060652942> For those who are snorkeling but would like to know more, I have attached a good summary of the book by the philosophy professor Dr. David Naugle below.

Meanwhile, as we progress through the book, do keep in mind the context of London during the Blitz and the apocalyptic feel of Britain in 1941. It makes the questions about Nazi morality and war and the purpose of life that much more pressing and poignant.

Finally, since we are in the season of Advent, I have included the music link from last week for the Matins Responsory for the First Sunday of Advent from Salisbury Cathedral, as well as a text document with the words and a little background.

I look forward to "seeing" you tomorrow evening in class!

Further up and further in,
Brian+

Video recording of class and PowerPoint:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbVYzGrxkls>

Audio recording of class:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/mere-christianity-timely-truth-for-a-hurting-world/id1537579476>

or
<https://www.stphilipchurchsc.org/mere-christianity-/episode/2020-12-02/episode-5-the-law-of-human-nature>

C.S. Lewis Doodle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmHXYhpEDfM>

Class materials:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R8EnwW4nVg&list=OLAK5uy_lqiMNB74C7UVGL5VnmcRVmt8vPQL4Vy0

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/contemporary-perspectives-on-c-s-lewis-the-abolition-of-man/>