

**Erik J. Wielenber, *God and the Reach of Reason. C.S. Lewis, David Hume and Bertrand Russell,*
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Erik J. Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason. C.S. Lewis, David Hume and Bertrand Russell*

When observing the contemporary crusade of New Atheists against all things religious, one cannot help wondering whether tirade has taken the place of reasoned argument somewhere along the way. Several commentators have remarked that New Atheism lacks the eloquence of Hume, the scholarly robustness of Mackie, the existential severity of Nietzsche, making it a less sophisticated and less interesting remake of the original blockbuster. Wielenberg's book seems to answer this call. In his study, Wielenberg puts three prominent and influential philosophers—Lewis, Hume and Russell—in 'dialogue' with each other. This is not Wielenberg's first take on the philosophy of religion. His earlier book *Value and Virtue in Godless Universe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) argued for the possibility of morality and a meaningful life in a world without God. The bottom-line of this new study is that Lewis' arguments for Christianity ultimately fail or remain inconclusive, even if they are occasionally worth serious consideration. Wielenberg is not a ranting atheist, but seeks to address these questions in a scholarly manner and with trust in the power of sheer argument. This is a most welcome development in current debates. Few atheists regard their foes as 'exemplars we would all do well to emulate' (202).

Its dialogical style makes this book an engaging read. Unlike some books on the philosophy of religion in the analytical tradition, this piece is easily approachable, lucid, and intellectually nourishing. Its introduction of several voices into the discussion helps keep the text going; it (almost) reads like a novel. Yet there are latent problems in this kind of approach. The first is the danger of anachronism. How feasible it is to play out authors from different eras against each other? Wielenberg's use of different voices is focused on Lewis' general apologetical project. Thus this is a book mainly about Lewis, in which the atheist philosophers are summoned to the arena as needed. Nevertheless, Wielenberg does not restrict the arguments to these three authors. He elaborates some of Lewis' arguments incorporating external, more modern material, and interprets him charitably. At the same time, he summons contemporary discussions, for example in evolutionary psychology, in order to argue that Lewis' arguments cannot stand against these modern 'threats'. This raises the second question: how the arguments should be

delimited. On several occasions Wielenberg suggests that there is 'more' to these issues (93, 105). Sometimes Wielenberg's arguments are tentative, suggesting a conclusion without addressing the question at length (87). Wielenberg admits that in some cases giving an adequate answer would require a book of its own (210). The third problem concerns the aim of the book. This is neither purely analytic close-reading of Lewis' thought nor a general rebuttal of the arguments of Christian apologetics. It is something in between. This makes it easier to dodge the charges of not knowing 'lewisology' well enough, simultaneously allowing him not to follow all the arguments to their very end and examining them in full length. An ill-willed reader might interpret this as a case of bringing down the best of us: If Lewis, the most influential apologist of last generation, falls down, who then is able to stand? The fourth problem concerns Lewis' role as an apologist. Even though he is one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the last century, his works are surely not the most profound, detailed, and academically rigorous presentations of the subject. His influence arises from his popular style, a fact which Wielenberg acknowledges.

Wielenberg's book is divided to four main chapters, which deal severally with the problem of evil, arguments from morality, reason and desire, miracles, and some particular issues, such as the relation between faith and reason, design, and politics. Regarding the problem of evil, Wielenberg considers Lewis' argument ineffective on the grounds that it cannot give a satisfactory account of 'non-victim-improving child suffering', i.e. cases of horrible things happening to innocent children, in which it is impossible to imagine any reasonable good that may result. Wielenberg considers this a gap of considerable breadth, yet admits that it does not offer 'decisive evidence' against Christianity, while being clearly evidence against it (163). In dealing with the argument from reason, which Wielenberg seems to consider Lewis' strongest case, he interestingly sets atheist arguments against Christianity on a par with Christian theodicies: 'So, just as the presence of evil for which we can discern no justification should not lead us to infer that has no justification, the presence of mental phenomena for which we can discern no evolutionary explanation should not lead us to infer that such phenomena have no evolutionary explanation' (107). This standoff crystallizes the heart of Wielenberg's atheist defence: it remains to be seen whether evolutionary explanations will be able at some point to provide a good enough account of our moral phenomena and the nature of reason (108). Wielenberg gives Lewis credit for being ahead of his times in being able to put his finger on certain issues, such as the origins of morality, consciousness and intentionality, which remain matters of intricate debate 50 years after his death. Thus Wielenberg's book offers a good introduction to the origins of (admittedly age-old) debates which are now being advanced on many levels. An interesting contribution to these issues

is, for example, Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray, *The Believing Primate* (Oxford University Press, 2009), which offer some rather good rejoinders to Wielenberg's case. While the jury is still out (and it seems it is going to be out for some while), it seems that Lewis' statement, with which Wielenberg opens, holds true: 'There is evidence both for and against the Christian proposition which fully rational minds, working honestly, can assess differently' (vi). Nevertheless, even if these problems hold back some of the force of his arguments, Wielenberg's book remains worthy of detailed examination, being a fine contribution to the debate from atheist side.

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