

OBSTINACY IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF

DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS

University of Oregon, Eugene, USA

In the essay "On Obstinacy in Belief," C.S. Lewis argues that the Christian's epistemic situation in believing in God justifiably differs from the epistemic situation of the scientist qua scientist in testing and rejecting hypotheses. The issue can be seen when the two situations are contrasted: epistemic integrity for the scientist is often thought to consist primarily in believing an hypothesis only to the degree that it is supportable by evidence. But epistemic integrity for the Christian may involve belief "in the teeth of evidence," belief without evidence, beyond evidence, or against evidence. Generally speaking, for the scientist, belief must be *proportional* to the evidence; but for the Christian, belief has a legitimate "obstinacy" *disproportional* to the evidence.¹

This essay will explore Lewis' attempt to differentiate the epistemic stance of the Christian from that of the scientist and examine his defense of the "obstinacy" of Christian belief in the face of apparent evidence to the contrary. Material by Basil Mitchell on the relation of faith and reason in non-religious situations will be used to illuminate the discussion of Lewis' claims.

Lewis defends obstinacy in Christian belief by referring to a "logic of personal relation" that differs significantly from the scientific "logic of speculative thought."² Different epistemic standards, he thinks, are appropriate in each case. He spends little time explaining what the epistemic enterprise of science is, although he thinks there is more involved than a simple proportioning of belief to evidence. Lewis devotes most of the essay to outlining the distinctive features of the "logic of personal relation"—trusting God in the face of counter-evidence—as opposed to the "logic of speculative thought." Before developing this, we will consider the epistemic situation of scientific and other non-religious investigations. If the "logic of speculative thought" may be seen to involve a healthy dose of appropriate

"faith," then a similar faith exercised by the religious believer could be viewed in a more positive light.

Basil Mitchell sees the traditional faith/reason dichotomy as mistaken. Non-religious pursuits often demonstrate elements of faith appropriate to their sphere. In the "hard sciences," for instance, strict proportionality is only operative in what Thomas Kuhn calls "normal science"—the process of "testing comparatively low-level hypotheses" in accord with an "accepted theoretical structure."³ A low-level hypothesis has a narrow reference range and is not a basic paradigm for the scientific project itself. For example, the low level hypothesis that a particular beetle is extinct would be easily refuted by one reliable sighting of the presumably postmortem insect.

What Mitchell calls "a principle of tenacity" legitimately operates outside of normal science whereby fundamental theories or high-level hypotheses are not immediately brought into question in the face of apparent counter-evidence. This is largely because these fundamental theories provide the epistemic context for the scientific pursuit in question, and without a viable alternative the scientific enterprise itself would stall. In these cases, apparent evidence against fundamental theories may initially be dismissed as flukes; if consistently obtrusive enough they may ignite some suspicion. Mitchell concludes that "the notion that scientific theories 'rise and fall with the evidence' is only partially correct."⁴ It is true of low-level hypotheses, but not strictly true of fundamental theories such as the big bang cosmology or (for previous centuries) geocentric cosmology.

Faith in and respect for scientific authority are indispensable elements of the scientific enterprise. The "principle of tenacity" corresponds roughly to Lewis' "obstinacy in belief." Of course, scientific faith may be shattered and authority discredited—but not according to a strict proportionality principle. Counter-evidence would need to be cumulative, recurrent, and persistent in order for fundamental hypotheses to become epistemically vulnerable.

Thus Mitchell thinks that the faith/reason dichotomy doesn't hold for much of scientific methodology, yet this is not strongly analogous to the religious believer's situation because "the 'faith' the scientist exhibits is so obvious a requirement of an effective scientific policy that no one would even be tempted to regard

faith and reason an antithetical"⁵ as is often done in relation to religious faith. Therefore, Mitchell attempts to draw a closer analogy between religious faith and academic pursuits relating to "schools of thought" in the humanities.

Mitchell observes that the normal and legitimate epistemic situation of the academic involves a reasonable kind of faith. The academic "adheres to and believes in certain schemes of thought"⁶ described as the following: (1) They are rationally structured and based on some evidence. (2) They are subject to criticism, and are criticized by contending positions. (3) Although one of them may be more warranted than its contenders, it is not incorrigibly so. (4) They often involve ideological presuppositions which may have practical implications. (5) They are derived from various historical traditions. (6) Because of their complexity, the individual cannot usually be an expert in every aspect of the school of thought, but must instead depend on others authority for part of his understanding. (7) "They are such that the individual cannot in practice avoid a decision as to whether he accepts them or not; and, in so far as he accept them, they help to determine the sort of man he is going to be." The 'faith' he exercises involves his allegiance to the scheme of thought and his allowing it to influence him even though: a) counter-evidence and counter-argument exists (which he knows to exist) which he cannot, at present, accommodate; b) He cannot on demand provide all the credentials of the system (see point (5)); c) he recognizes (or should recognize) that the system is not invulnerable to substantial error.⁷

Mitchell claims that the academic, even more than the scientist, needs "the capacity to persevere" in spite of his own doubts and the criticisms from others in order to develop fruitfully his thinking in a given area. If his theory is to be tested and modified over a period of time (as all credible theories should be), it cannot be jettisoned at the first sight of apparent counter-evidence. Without this "capacity to persevere," "no 'body of knowledge' would ever have time to be built up. The growing child would always be killed by premature antisepsis."⁸ For any academic theory to become epistemically "fertile" (have extensive and proven explanatory value) it must be given a fair chance. Mitchell adds that academic pursuits are not matters of

pure ratiocination; personal factors imbue the epistemic situation. Yet this may not be out of place. Mitchell suggests it may be appropriate for the academic to "internalize not only the ideal of impartiality and concern for truth" but also his or her "attitudes and assumptions characteristic of some particular approach to his [or her] subject."⁹

The upshot is that reasonable academic pursuits require a kind of faith which is sometimes disproportional to the evidence at hand. Faith, then, is not necessarily opposed to reason. This faith, of course, is neither incorrigible nor impregnable—sufficient counter-evidence could count against it. Therefore, if an appropriate faith disproportional to evidence is sometimes permitted (and even required) in science and academia, then, *prima facie* it should not be disallowed for religious beliefs. Mitchell says "there is a sense of 'faith' which is common to religious and secular contexts, and that faith in this sense need not be contrary to reason."¹⁰

There should be no epistemic double-standard that commends faith for the secular while condemning it for the religious. Of course, many relevant dissimilarities between religious belief and secular belief could be discussed in this regard, but Lewis wants to highlight what he takes to be the crucial dissimilarity. This dissimilarity is pivotal for Lewis to justify "obstinacy in belief." "Obstinacy" is similar to Mitchell's idea of theoretical "tenacity" in that belief is maintained in the face of counter-evidence. Yet the notions differ somewhat. For Mitchell, the tenacity gives a theory a chance to be developed and established. For Lewis, obstinacy is based on a personal commitment to and trust in God himself.

Lewis first draws a distinction between "the way in which a person first assents to certain propositions and the way in which he afterwards adheres to them."¹¹ Lewis believed that initial Christian faith should be based on adequate reasons and not be without evidence or "in the teeth of evidence." Lewis briefly discusses the dynamics of belief-assent which we need not now review. He then considers belief-maintenance, noting that Christians consider obstinate faith as meritorious even in the face of "apparent counter-evidence" which is construed as "trials" or "temptations to doubt."¹² This attitude, Lewis thinks, has integrity for the Christian but not for the scientist or historian. It

would only strengthen Lewis point if it be shown, as sketched above, that the scientist and academic does exercise a reasonable faith in the face of counter-evidence (and Lewis does move in this direction somewhat in his essay). But even if Lewis could be so convinced, he would still maintain that there is a crucial difference in epistemic approaches. He approaches this first by analogies.

He says there are "times in which we can do all that a fellow creature needs only if he will trust us."¹³ The dog caught in the trap must trust its master that applying more pain is required to extricate it from the trap and stop the pain. The child must trust the parent that the pain needed to get a thorn from its finger will eventually stop the pain. The drowning boy must believe the rescuer that "water which is obviously permeable will resist and support the body—that holding onto the only support within reach is not the way to avoid sinking."¹⁴ In all these cases personal *trust* goes beyond the immediate evidence and is required. It seems irrational to increase pain in order to stop it or to lay flat in the water in order not to sink. In each case the person in distress is asked to believe "apparent impossibilities."¹⁵ Yet so believing is epistemically justified; it is permissible to depart "from Clifford's rule of evidence by entertaining a belief with strength greater than the evidence logically obliged him to."¹⁶

Analogously—or, *a fortiori*—for the Christian, God "knows best" and wills the best by virtue of being omnibenevolent. The Christian may sometimes be in a position where it is epistemically appropriate to trust God despite counter-evidence. Lewis argues that because of our finitude we "must expect *a priori* that His operations will often appear to us far from beneficent and far from wise, and that it will be our highest prudence to give Him our confidence in spite of this."¹⁷ Lewis adds that when one accepts Christianity one is warned in advance that counter-evidence will threaten to destroy faith¹⁸, but that the situation is "rendered tolerable" in two ways: First, we do have some positive evidence to believe, both empirical and existential (personal communion with God). Second, if our "original belief is true such trust beyond the evidence, against much apparent evidence, has to be demanded of us"¹⁹ because God seeks to develop a personal relationship with us somewhat

akin to marriage where trust and "giving the benefit of the doubt" is essential. "To love involves trusting the beloved beyond the evidence."²⁰ (We should refine Lewis' statement to say: A loving relationship *may* involve, often does involve, and can legitimately involve, trusting beyond the evidence. Love may demand that we be ready to "give the benefit of the doubt"; but we may truly love without ever having to actually do so—as with long wedded couples who never doubt the other's fidelity.)

Lewis thinks there is "no real parallel between Christian obstinacy in faith and the obstinacy of a bad scientist trying to preserve a hypothesis although the evidence has turned against it."²¹ (We can amend Lewis' "bad scientist" by saying that what makes him "bad" is not Mitchell's "tenacity" but irresponsible intractability.) Once the question of the truth of Christianity has been decided through initial assent, it no longer is a speculative issue; instead of variations in speculative opinion we have personal attitudes toward another Person.

But Lewis anticipates criticism: "To be forewarned and therefore forearmed against apparently contrary appearance is eminently rational if our belief is true; but if our belief is a delusion, this same forewarning and forearming would obviously be the method whereby the delusion itself would be rendered incurable."²² In conclusion, Lewis states that the Christian cannot expect the non-Christian to really know the basis of the Christian's assurance. This "knowledge by acquaintance" cannot be communicated to those outside the faith, although God may for the Christian become "increasingly knowable."²³ By this Lewis seems to mean that the personal dimension of communion with God can't be reduced to a verbal description, any more than the taste of peach ice cream can be completely communicated to someone who has never eaten a peach or ice cream. There seems to be an incommensurability at a certain level of communication, but not at every level, otherwise nothing meaningful could be affirmed.

In response, the fact that a reasonable faith is appropriate outside of religious contexts might undercut Lewis' distinction between the "logic of speculative thought" and the "logic of personal relation." But this need not incapacitate a modified form of his argument, as we will see below.

Factors of personal relationship are involved in (non-theistic) "speculative beliefs." The neophyte sociobiologist may endure apparent counter-evidence because of the sagacious advice of his departmental adviser: "Be careful, things won't always fit. But don't worry, I've been there too. Take my word. Give it some time and you will be able to answer the counter-arguments." The neophyte not only trusts his adviser, but wants to please him by obeying him. His allegiance is not only to the system of sociobiology, but to his adviser as a person. Even the factor of personal troth may in some sense be present: those in "the movement" must draw together and drop their guard if the theory is to survive.

However, the personal element functions differently for the Christian than for the "speculative believer." Although a high degree of subjective certainty may attach to belief in God as a person, the very existence of God can be called into question, whereas the existence of mentors or fellow-believers in speculative cases will not be. We should reformulate Lewis' principle in terms of "presumptive personhood," which is all that could be claimed at the time of initial assent.²⁴ The Christian presumes she is trusting a person, acts on that presumption, hoping for corroboration.

This "presumptive personhood" and its entailed personal commitment seems to be a legitimate epistemic attitude. If Christianity claims that certainty in faith grows in accordance with its being exercised, a certain legitimate experimentalism is incorporated. This experiential certainty may indeed be impossible apart from the condition of experimental trust. C. Stephen Evans gives an example: Someone suffering from mental problems has to choose between a psychoanalyst or a behaviorist therapist. Since it can't be known beforehand with complete certainty which would be better, once the decision is made the person must commit themselves to the therapy if they are to know whether it works or not. A half-hearted commitment won't do, and isn't the rational thing to do.²⁵ Yet the commitment need not be mindless.

This claim could be called one of "conditioned epistemic access": S must do X in order to test or confirm P. The claim here is not that doing X makes P true, but that it puts S in the requisite epistemic posture to determine better whether P is true or false.

Since Christianity claims that those who seek God with humility will find peace and joy through God's grace, then seeking God in the recommended ways is a way to test these claims existentially.

One may hold a belief in a committed fashion and still admit the possibility of its falsehood. But we should revise Lewis' view of obstinacy, because it threatens to render theistic belief unfalsifiable (once original assent has been given) because *all* apparent counter-evidence could be interpreted as endurable "trials of faith." But even "total" commitment (stronger than the psychoanalyst example) is compatible with self-criticism. One may hold the logical possibility of falsification without existentially doubting that the belief is true.²⁶ Moreover, a justified confidence in faith should lead one to be willing when needed to scrutinize that faith in light of apparent counter-evidence. Lewis' "logic of personal relation" should give the believer confidence to face the apparent counter-evidence with the hope of *resolving* (or at least mitigating) the apparent problems, not just *enduring* them by faith: If (1) God knows all, (2) is rational, (3) Christians are in need of rational support for their faith, (4) if God is able and willing to give the needed rational support, then: we should assume some epistemic relief to be forthcoming. Instead of "obstinacy in belief" we might better say "patience in belief."

But when is self-criticism needed? A point related to Lewis' "logic of personal relation," is that world-views or synoptic perspectives cannot, pragmatically speaking, be subject to immediate or incessant questioning or revision. Just as a "school of thought" needs time to earn its epistemic integrity, so does a religious world-view need time for experiential confirmation. A believer would be paralyzed if she spent all her time reflecting on possible objections to faith instead of doing the kinds of things believers do in living out their faith.

Without stipulating the details, we can say generally that if apparent counter-evidence is cumulatively persuasive—that is, persistent, unavoidable, and substantial—critical reexamination would seem warranted. If the theistic world-view seems to fail the tests of any or all of the positive epistemic criteria of consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness or fertility it should be reexamined.²⁷ Without this proviso Lewis' position would seem to render "obstinacy" as "intractability." But such

reexamination need not necessarily be capitulation; it may lead to (1) a strengthening of the original assent or (2) a minor revision of the original assent (concerning subsidiary and not essential truth claims) or, more drastically, (3) a rejection of Christianity altogether (or one's present understanding of Christianity).

In cases of reevaluation, one is forced back to the original grounds for assent. Yet Lewis seems to want to freeze the grounds for initial assent in place such that apparent counter-evidence is to be endured without being seen as a reason (at least in some cases) of reevaluating initial assent. This seems to make Christianity unfalsifiable in principle (or maybe, just in practice) at least after initial assent. Yet if the particular apparent counter-evidence calls into question the very grounds initially given for assent, it would seem to demand investigation. The fact that Christianity countenances counter-evidence doesn't render it immune from counter-evidence; after all, if Christianity were false, there will also be plenty of bona fide counter-evidence, as Lewis himself admitted. Yet many people initially give assent to Christianity with little epistemic justification. Oftentimes, attempts at justification come subsequent to conversion whereby an initial experience is interpreted in more rational categories. Lewis' analysis of obstinacy in those cases would be somewhat skewed.²⁸

All in all, Lewis seems only partially successful in differentiating the "logic of speculation" from the "logic of personal relation" and showing that this distinction grants the Christian special epistemic privileges in regard to counter-evidence. The similarities between the exercise of faith in scientific or academic affairs and the exercise of faith in religious matters seems greater than Lewis noted. Nevertheless, this ends up strengthening his position by closing the gap between religious and non-religious epistemic enterprises (so long as the non-religious epistemologies are justified—which they seem to be). To close the gap, we needed to build into Lewis' view of obstinacy an experimental element, whereby religious faith can be open to criticism, without being A halfhearted; that is, faith can be legitimately "obstinate" without being blind. But the "logic of personal relation" still includes the distinctive claim that

God himself can be known experientially through certain practices. This adds a personal dimension of epistemic verification lacking in academic and scientific speculations.

NOTES

- 1 See Basil Mitchell, "Faith and Reason: A False Antithesis?" *Religious Studies* 16 (1980), p. 131.
- 2 C.S. Lewis, "On Obstinacy in Belief," *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, n.d.), p. 30.
- 3 Mitchell, p. 132.
- 4 Ibid., p. 133.
- 5 Ibid., p. 134.
- 6 Ibid., p. 137.
- 7 Ibid., p. 139.
- 8 Ibid., p. 135.
- 9 Ibid., p. 136.
- 10 Ibid., p. 139.
- 11 Lewis, p. 17.
- 12 Ibid., p. 21.
- 13 Ibid., p. 23.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., p. 24.
- 17 Lewis, p. 24, 25.
- 18 Some may think that trials are *moral* difficulties to be endured and conquered and not *epistemic* temptations. Although Lewis does not cite chapter and verse for his epistemic view of trials, we can infer it from biblical passages which encourage believers to persist in the faith and from those which warn of doubt.
- 19 Lewis, p. 25.
- 20 Ibid., p. 26.
- 21 Ibid., p. 26.
- 22 Ibid., p. 28.
- 23 Ibid., p. 30.

- 24 The idea of "presumptive personhood" would itself seems presumptuous for one who experienced a personal mystical conversion experience, such as the Apostle Paul.
- 25 C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 174.
- 26 Ibid., p. 176.
- 27 On rationally assessing conceptual systems, See Keith E. Yandell, *Christianity and Philosophy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 272-289.
- 28 Lewis might be reading his own experience into things, having himself critically examined the rational claims of Christianity before converting.