

**Budziszewski, J. *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*. Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2003. 272 pp. \$27.95 hardcover.**

We all have a knowledge of common moral norms, and yet this knowledge is obscured enough to speak of a “lost world of common truths.” This is the topic of J. Budziszewski’s *What We Can’t Not Know*. Budziszewski argues against those who claim that there is no moral law or that they don’t know any moral law. The aim of his work is to restate the obvious, both to bolster the confidence of plain people in the rational foundations of their common moral sense, and to explain this in such a way that will bring about a firmer alliance between otherwise disparate groups holding these moral truths. Directed at the “persuaded, the half-persuaded, and the wish-I-were persuaded,” the work unfolds in this general sequence: The Lost World, Explaining the Lost World, How the World Was Lost, and Recovering the Lost World.

### *The Lost World*

Following an elaboration of how the precepts of natural law are contained in the Decalogue, Budziszewski persuasively argues that crucial to the natural knowledge of moral norms is knowledge of God, both via reason and divine revelation. Natural knowledge of God is essential for a sound moral theory, for a godless natural law could revere the laws of human nature only insofar as they are prudent, but this strips away the law’s obligatory properties. If there is no Designer, there is no purpose to things, and if no purpose, then we may alter things without care. A supernatural knowledge of God also is vital, for it is here that we derive the notions of forgiveness, the faith to do good and not to do evil even if good is the result, and the *Imago Dei* that grounds the very

dignity of humanity. Indeed, knowledge of God, natural and supernatural, makes a significant difference in the rational justification of our moral awareness.

### *Explaining the Lost World*

This section discusses some things we need to know about this misplaced moral knowledge. With keen insight, Budziszewski show that there are four sources of moral knowledge available to us; the witness of deep conscience, the witness of design as such, the witness of our own design, and the witness of natural consequences. Deep conscience is straightforwardly explained; it holds the knowledge of basic moral goods and everyday rules. The witness of design in the universe indicates a Designer that has instilled purpose into creation, and this becomes even more relevant when we look at the telos of our humanity. Budziszewski uses this witness of our own design to highlight important aspects of our humanity, for example, the complementarity of the sexes both in physical and psychological orientation, and how this plays into the establishment of the family and the nurturing of young. With eloquent language, Budziszewski shows how adults are made more virtuous with the blessing of children: “Offspring convert us; they force us to become different beings. There is no way to prepare for them completely. They crash into our lives, they soil their diapers, they upset all our comfortable arrangements, and nobody knows how they will turn out. Willy–nilly, they knock us out of our complacent habits and force us to live outside ourselves; they are the necessary and natural continuation of that shock to our egotism which is initiated by marriage itself. To receive this great blessing requires courage” (92). The witness of natural consequences shows that just as there are civil penalties for breaking civil laws, so too there are natural

penalties for breaking the natural law. Budziszewski is quick to point out that it is not the consequence that makes an act wrong, but a declaration of its wrongness and a discipline for those who commit it. Natural consequences thus act as a pointer to the natural purposes of things. With these four witnesses, Budziszewski argues, effectively, that everyone knows something of the natural law, in spite of not having heard any complex philosophical theories about it.

### *How the World Was Lost*

Here Budziszewski embarks on the most profitable portion of his book. Budziszewski's insight into how natural moral knowledge became eclipsed to the modern mind is an immensely satisfying account of the decline of sound morality in a post-modern world. Many factors are to blame. The absence of sound traditions (i.e. parents who decline to give their children any religious instruction and to let them "make up their own minds") leaves one improperly prepared to grapple with important issues and the habit of not taking important things seriously. The "Cult of the Expert" is the antithesis to the ancient idea of wisdom as explicating the deep presuppositions of common sense, and instead operates on the hubristic notion that the common person knows nothing and all fields of knowledge are better left to the man of expertise. Another factor is the "Return of the Sophist" in the modern Academy, where "sophistry" has taken a new name of *postmodernism* while still retaining its self-contradictory character. Yet another culprit is the "Prolongation of Adolescence." Instead of the past's cultural proclivity for one to pass from childhood to adulthood without an extended period of time in between, the practice of modern society produces prolonged periods of adolescence and

immaturity leaving the normal sexual urge stripped of being the “raw materials” on which marriage is built and instead stranded only as an incentive to promiscuity. Finally, the denigration of reason has created a “Cult of Feelings” according to which agreeable emotions are taken as the sole criteria of moral judgment.

*Recovering the Lost World*

Agreeing with C.S. Lewis that there cannot be a new morality but only perversions of the old one, Budziszewski recommends classical persuasion by changing people’s minds and latching on to the bits of truth they already hold as a means of renewing the culture. At least this should be effective at persuading the honestly confused person. As for the willfully confused, the key here is simply to call their bluff. If culture is not renewed with the old moral norms, Budziszewski provides many reasonable and undesirable predictions to the moral destination to which this culture is headed. Hope is essential here, and is bolstered by knowing “that the Designer Himself took the form of His designs, that He came into our night” and thus prepared the final victory of good over evil (216-17).

Budziszewski has given us some fine insights into natural law with this piece. For those experienced natural law thinkers, the value of this work will mostly come from Budziszewski’s analysis of the four sources of moral knowledge and of how “what we can’t not know” has become eclipsed in modern times. The other sections describing natural law are fundamental and seem to be directed towards the layman more than the philosopher. Budziszewski’s simple and direct approach makes this work an excellent

introduction for those who are not interested in the recondite theories of what natural law is, but instead just want the basics.

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