

C.S. Lewis on Death and Immortality

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One of the great problems which every philosophy or religious view has to face is the significance of death. Do we just go around once, with death being the end of it all? Are we reborn in an almost endless series of reincarnations, or is there a personal continuation of ourselves after death? Are we mere mortals or immortals?

Part of evaluating a worldview is considering the adequacy of its answer on death. Consider the contrast between atheism and the biblical view of life and death as shown in this chart:

	ORIGIN	MANKIND	DESTINY
ATHEIST	Death	Life	Death
BELIEVER	Life	Life	Life

According to the atheist, life comes spontaneously out of the cosmic slime. All life springs from inert or non-living matter. Life comes from non-life through evolution. Our origin, in other words, is out of death. Since there is no life after death, our destiny is death. What then is the point or value of life? *Life is merely an unnecessary chance interruption in the midst of cosmic death.* For the believer, on the other hand, God is our creator. We are given the gift of life. Our destiny in Christ is eternal life. *Death is merely a very temporary interruption in the midst of cosmic life.* Notice the radical contrasts between these views of life. No wonder that atheist Bertrand Russell said that his view led to “unyielding despair.” No wonder atheist Albert Camus maintained that, in light of the meaninglessness of this picture of life, the only really serious philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide.

When we contrast major religious options, we also see radically different and contradictory views about our destiny:

RELIGION	PICTURE	DESTINY
Hindu	Drop in ocean	Absorption
Buddhist	Candle and flame	Extinction
Believers in Christ	Prodigal son	Restored relationship

The destiny for Hinduism (Shankara) is transcending this world of distinction and merging yourself with the One, as a drop of water would be absorbed into the ocean. The destiny of Buddhism (Theravada) is to extinguish desire as you might blow out the flame of a candle. In Sanskrit, the word Nirvana comes from a root word meaning to be extinguished – to be blown out. Since in this view there is no self, then there is no self to exist after death. By contrast, believers in Christ have maintained that the human predicament is a broken relationship with God, and its solution is reconciliation with God through Christ. This broken and yet later-restored relationship is then enjoyed for all eternity. The story of the prodigal son illustrates this alienation-then-restoration.

There is not a great difference between Hindu and Buddhist views of our destiny. Absorption and extinction are not very different from each other. Both mean that our destiny leads to a loss of personality or individuality. Whereas note the contrast with the third view – eternal extension of individual, personal relationship of love with God and others forever.

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Since this issue is so central to our view of life, it is not surprising that C.S. Lewis meditated often on death and immortality. In fact, Lewis scholar Walter Hooper argues that C.S. Lewis’s central theme was that all men and women are immortals. In one of his most famous quotes, Lewis maintains, “There are no ordinary people” because “You have never talked to a mere mortal.” He says:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you may talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct

all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. *There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.* Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.

It is because of the remnants of this view that our society places such emphasis on the value and rights of the individual. The nation, cultural pursuits, the arts, and civilization have their value, but their existence is finite, whereas the life of each individual continues on into eternity. As a nation, the United States has existed for more than two hundred years, but compared to an immortal soul, its time in history is as the “life of a gnat.”

C.S. Lewis manifested this belief by responding personally to everyone who wrote to him. At a C.S. Lewis Institute conference some time ago, a woman who attended brought a copy of a letter she received from Lewis when she was six years old. She had written to him after reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, because the story’s portrayal of Aslan the lion had pointed her to Christ. Lewis’s reply was a beautifully handwritten letter that kindly addressed her comments. Lewis kept up a constant stream of letters, and some collections have been published—*The Letters of C.S. Lewis, Letters to an American Lady, Letters to Children, Letters to Calabria*, and so on. Even though, at the height of his popularity, this correspondence consumed an hour or two of every day and was a task which he did not relish, he answered every letter. Why did he feel a need to individually answer each letter? I believe that it was due to his view that there are no ordinary people.

Lewis also gave away—often anonymously—most, if not all, of the proceeds of his books. He did not raise his style of life. He stayed in the same modest house; he kept his same rather shabby professional garb. He never bought a car and he never learned to drive. He did not travel—never coming to the United States and seldom crossing the English Channel. He put his money in an “Agape Fund” and gave it away, so much so, in fact, that a friend had to advise him to keep a third for taxes. Why would he give away so much of his income, except that he believed he had never met a mere mortal.

Sometimes a person’s deepest belief comes out in casual conversation in the midst of ordinary life. Walter Hooper recalled a discussion he had with Lewis about...

...a bore whom we both knew, a man who was generally recognized as being almost unbelievably dull. I told

Lewis that man succeeded in interesting me by the very intensity of his boredom. “Yes,” he said, “but let us not forget that our Lord might well have said, ‘As ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my bores, you have done it unto me.’”

He sometimes felt that it was his duty to visit such people, because as he did, he was doing it as to Christ. This view of life invests tremendous significance not only to the individual person but also to individual choices. Lewis says that in every choice we pick the beatific or the miserific vision. In *Mere Christianity* he writes:

Every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you, the part that chooses, into something a little different from what was before...you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature...to be one kind of creature is heaven; that is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to one state or the other.

Again, the kind of choices we make moves us down the road to a certain kind of destiny.

Destiny and immortality were not always prominent in Lewis’s thinking. When Lewis first came to faith, he did not think a great deal about eternal life but simply focused on enjoying God in this life. He parallels his experience to those who in the Old Testament did not have a clear understanding of eternal life and came to understand deeply that...

...He [God] and nothing else is their goal and the satisfaction of their needs, and that He has a claim on them simply by being what He is, quite apart from anything He can bestow or deny.”

Lewis says that the years he spent before coming to focus more on immortality “always seem to me to have been of great value” because they taught him to delight in God, not just in any thought of reward.

Paradox of Reward

Lewis did come to appreciate the place of reward. In fact he later delighted in it. But, he saw that the paradox of reward might be a stumbling block for some. On the one hand, it seems that true faith in God believes in Him for nothing. It is truly disinterested in what benefits might follow. On the other hand, reward is received for what is done. This might seem to pander to self-interest and a mercenary spirit. Lewis addresses this paradox in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*:

Tyndale, as regards the natural condition of humanity, holds that by nature we can do no good works without respect of some profit either in this world or in the world to come....That the profit should be located in another world means, as Tyndale clearly sees, no difference. Theological hedonism is still hedonism. Whether the man is seeking heaven or a hundred pounds, he can still but seek himself, of freedom in the true sense — of spontaneity or disinterestedness — nature knows nothing. And yet by a terrible paradox, such disinterestedness is precisely what the moral law demands.

One way to resolve this tension is to realize that *self-interest is not the same thing as selfishness*. In fact, Jesus appeals to self-interest as a motive for self-denial. In Mark 8:35-36 Jesus formulates his own paradox. This verse, I have been told, is Lewis's most quoted section of Scripture. Jesus says:

For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel shall save it. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

Jesus said that if anyone wanted to be his follower, he or she needed to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow Him. What would ever induce someone to pay that kind of cost? I've heard it said that unless there is a sufficient reason why we ought to sacrifice something we like, the cost will always be too great. Jesus gives a sufficient reason why we ought to pay that cost. First, if we try to save our lives by seeking our own pleasure, in our own way, we will lose not only eternal life but also the fullness of life right now. Second, if we "lose" our lives — give them away to Christ and others — we will not only gain eternal life but also the fullness of life in the present. Who wouldn't, seeing the end result, choose accordingly? Jim Elliot, the missionary martyr, once wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Especially when the things we cannot lose are of immeasurably more value than the things we cannot keep.

Jesus' argument here is in effect that self-denial is in your self-interest. If you say no to yourself and follow Him, you will gain everything worth having. But this sense of reward or self-interest does not necessarily make our motive impure. Lewis says in *The Problem of Pain*:

We are afraid that heaven is a bribe and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be interested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. There are rewards that do not sully motives. A man's love for a woman is not

mercenary because he wants to marry her, nor his love for poetry mercenary because he wants to read it, nor his love for exercise less disinterested because he wants to run and leap and walk. Love by its very nature seeks to enjoy its object.

Loving God is not only right but also in the interest of our own joy. To glorify God and enjoy Him forever are not two different purposes or ends but unite together as the greatest purpose of life. We get our greatest delight when we are lost in wonder awe and praise of God.

In that very praising of God we can see why the pursuit of self-interest is not necessarily selfish. When we are lost in wonder awe and praise, we are the happiest we can become, but also the least self-conscious because when we are focused on God, we are not focused on self. This is the same dynamic that we experience in a good friendship. With people we don't know we might feel self-conscious and wonder how they are responding to what we say and do. But with a really good friend we can lose ourselves in conversation, each conveying their deepest feelings without self-centeredness. Our joy is great, but we are focused on the other and the delight in the discussion we are having. Lewis summarizes this experience:

...the happiest moments are when we forget our precious selves...but have everything else (God, our fellow humans, the animals, the garden, and the sky) instead....

In this experience, we are not self-oriented but extremely happy. We are doing that which is in the interest of our own joy but not selfishly. We are joyous but "disinterested."

Images of Heaven

The movie *Shadowlands* indicates that Joy fell in love with C.S. Lewis due to his images of heaven. There is probably more to it than that, but his images are glorious. I remember my professor, Dr. Gerstner, who always conducted his classes by dialecture (dialogue), asking us, "Who has ever been perfect?" We responded, "Jesus" and "Adam and Eve before the fall," but then we ran out of concrete examples that could survive his scrutiny. When we gave up, Dr. Gerstner said, "You've just missed countless millions of people." We asked, "Whom do you mean?" He responded, "All those who have died and are now in heaven with Christ." C.S. Lewis shares something of the same insight towards the end of *The Silver Chair*. The children were at this point in Aslan's country beyond Narnia. King Caspian lay under a clear stream. They all wept — even Aslan. Aslan told Eustace to get a thorn and push it into his lion paw. As a result, a drop of

blood falls into the stream and King Caspian leaps up no longer old, but a young man. He rushed to Aslan "...and flung his arms as far as they would go round the huge neck; and he gave Aslan the strong kisses of a King, and Aslan gave him the wild kisses of a Lion." Eustace, afraid to touch the dead, said:

"Look here! I say," he stammered. "It's all very well. But aren't you — ? I mean didn't you —"

"Oh, don't be such an ass," said Caspian.

"But," said Eustace, looking at Aslan. "Hasn't he — er — died?"

"Yes," said the Lion..." He has died. Most people have, you know. Even I have. There are very few who haven't."

In other words, if our eyes could be opened for just a minute to the eternal dimension in the present, it would change our view of death and of our life. Many more people have died and now live than those who are presently on earth.

My favorite passage in what has become my favorite Narnia Chronicle is at the end of *The Last Battle*. In the chapter "Farewell to Shadowlands," the children are afraid of again being sent back from Narnia to England. Aslan assures them that this time they will not have to go. A "wild hope" arises in them. Aslan tells them that their transition from a train to Narnia in the beginning of the book was because there was a real railway accident. Aslan tells them in the final paragraphs:

"Your father and mother and all of you are — as you used to call it in the Shadowlands — dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: This is the morning...." The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And as for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

What a glorious vision. An infinitely creative God creating infinite, wonderful adventures for all eternity.

Encounters with Death

C.S. Lewis had a number of painful encounters with death. His mother died while he was a young boy. He lost friends in the war, particularly his best friend Paddy Moore. He lost his father and finally, most painfully, his beloved wife Joy. Her death caused him to ask

deep questions as can be read in *A Grief Observed*. We will probably get no clear answer as to why people die when they do. But perhaps if we saw it all from their point of view or from an eternal perspective, everything would look different. Lewis writes:

Heaven will solve our problems, but by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. These notions will be knocked from under our feet. We will see that there was no problem.

However, all kinds of problems emerge this side of eternity. It might be interesting to note that when Lewis had to face his own death he faced it bravely and calmly. For instance, when he had to decline a certain lecture invitation that he would have enjoyed, his face grew sad; he paused and said simply, "Send them a polite refusal." Once close to the end, he passed into a coma from which he was not expected to emerge. When he awoke, Lewis was rather disappointed because he, like Lazarus (raised by Jesus after four days dead), had his dying to do all over again.

How Can We Know?

How can we know that these things are true? It all comes down to the credibility of Christ and to the reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead. If Christ was raised from the dead, then He provides the guarantee that we will be raised. If Christ is not raised, then as the Apostle Paul said, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins, and we might as well eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. (See I Corinthians 15.) Either Christ was lying when He told us about eternal life, in which case, He ought to be utterly rejected for telling us such an untruth. Or, maybe He was a lunatic who truly believed what He said, but was deluded about his own deity and about eternal life. In this case, He ought to have been confined to an asylum next to a person who believed themselves to be a poached egg. The remaining option is that He is telling us the truth and that He is our risen Lord. His claims were either true or false. If false, He either knew that they were false, or He didn't. If He knew they were false, He was a liar. If He didn't know they were false, He was a lunatic. If his claims were true, He is Lord.

Not only is there a strong historical case for the resurrection of Christ (which you can find elsewhere), but there are also plenty of empirical results to back up his claims. Could whopping lies or raving lunacy change people's lives from insanity to sanity, from slavery to freedom, from hostility to love, from instability to stability, from brokenness to wholeness? Many testimonies bear out the effect of this "lunacy" on real lives throughout history.

However, Lewis's argument for these things was not experiential. As we will see in future articles, he came to believe that the account of Christ's life in the New Testament was not mythical but grounded in solid history. Although there are myths that seemed similar to the story of Christ, Lewis came to believe by historical standards that Jesus was the "myth become fact." He argued against those theologians who believed these stories were mythical.

If Christ died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us, and prays for us, then our lives are decisively different. It is impossible to truly believe these things without them having a revolutionary effect. Sometimes people have critiqued those whom they felt were so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. Lewis argues that it is the other way around. Those who are the most heavenly minded are the most earthly good.



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