

Reflections

NOVEMBER 2019

Looking Along and At Everything

In an essay titled “Meditation in a Toolshed,” C.S. Lewis critiqued what he called the “modern” type of thought that, on religion and other matters, the external account of a thing somehow refutes the account given from the inside. As an example, he noted that “[i]t has been assumed without discussion that if you want the true account of religion you must go, not to religious people, but to anthropologists...” An excerpt from the essay follows.

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

...we must start with no prejudice for or against either kind of looking.

But this is only a very simple example of the difference between looking at and looking along. A young man meets a girl. The whole world looks different when he sees her... He is, as they say, ‘in love’. Now comes a scientist and describes this young man’s experience from the outside. For him it is all an affair of the young man’s genes and a recognised biological stimulus. That is the difference between looking *along* the sexual impulse and looking *at* it.

...it is perfectly easy to go on all your life giving explanations of religion, love, morality, honour, and the like, without having been inside any of them. And if you do that, you are simply playing with counters. You go on explaining a thing without knowing what it is. That is why a great deal of contemporary thought is, strictly speaking, thought about nothing — all the apparatus of thought busily working in a vacuum.

... We must, on pain of idiocy, deny from the very outset the idea that looking *at* is, by its own nature, intrinsically truer or better than looking *along*. One must look both *along* and *at* everything...we must start with no prejudice for or against either kind of looking. We do not know in advance whether the lover or the psychologist is giving the more correct account of love, or whether both accounts are equally correct in different ways, or whether both are equally wrong. We just have to find out...¹

Any person can learn a good bit about Christianity from the outside, e.g., by reading the Bible, studying the history of the church and what Christians believe. These are good things. It is important to remember, however, that a Christian is someone who has been born again, and knows God personally as Savior and Lord. Let us seek to know Him more deeply.²

*“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*

JOHN 17:3 (ESV)



¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, in *The Beloved Works of C.S. Lewis*, Inspirational Press: New York, 1998, pp. 225-227.

² See Thomas A. Tarrants, III “Knowing God Personally,” *Knowing & Doing*, Summer, 2016, available at http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Knowing_God_Personally_FullArticle

