

Reflections

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The Four Ages



In 1946, C.S. Lewis published an essay titled “Talking About Bicycles” in the form of a conversation with a friend. In the essay, he uses the experience of riding a bicycle to illustrate the four ages of many of the experiences we have in life. Lewis begins the essay:

“Talking about bicycles,” said my friend, “I have been through the four ages. I can remember a time in early childhood when a bicycle meant nothing to me: it was just part of the huge meaningless background of grown-up gadgets against which life went on. Then came a time when to have a bicycle, and to have learned to ride it, and to be at last spinning along on one’s own, early in the morning, under trees, in and out of the shadows, was like entering Paradise... Now one would begin to be happy. But, of course, I soon reached the third period. Pedalling to and fro from school (it was one of those journeys that feel up-hill both ways) in all weathers, soon revealed the prose of cycling. The bicycle, itself, became to me what his oar

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is to a galley slave.”

“But what was the fourth age?” I asked.

“I am in it now, or rather I am frequently in it. I have had to go back to cycling lately now that there’s no car. And the jobs I use it for are often dull enough. But again and again the mere fact of riding brings back a delicious whiff of memory. I recover the feelings of the second age... To be sure, it is not a recipe for happiness as I then thought. In that sense the second age was a mirage. But a mirage of something.”

“How do you mean?”, said I.

“I mean this. Whether there is, or whether there is not, in this world or in any other, the kind of happiness which one’s first experiences of cycling seemed to promise, still, on any view, it is something to have had the idea of it. The value of the thing promised remains even if that particular promise was false — even if all possible promises of it are false.”

“... I think there are these four ages about nearly everything. Let’s give them names. They are the Unenchanted Age, the Enchanted Age, the Disenchanted Age, and the Re-enchanted Age. As a little child I was Unenchanted about bicycles. Then, when I first learned to ride, I was Enchanted. By sixteen I was Disenchanted and now I am Re-enchanted.”¹



As the essay continues, Lewis’s friend illustrates how the “four ages” apply in the contexts of love and of war. He also argues that it is “immensely important to distinguish Unenchantment from Disenchantment — and Enchantment from Re-enchancement”. He observes:

“... You read an author in whom love is treated as lust and all war as murder—and so forth. But are you reading a Disenchanted man or only an Unenchanted man? Has the writer been through the Enchantment and come out on to the bleak highlands, or is he simply a subman who is free from the love mirage as a dog is free, and free from the heroic mirage as a coward is free? If Disenchanted, he may have something worth hearing to say, though less than a Re-enchanted man. If Unenchanted, into the fire with his book. He is talking of what he doesn’t understand...”²

What do you think of the idea that “there are these four ages about nearly everything”? When you talk with other people (or read the books they have written), do you consider how their life experiences (or lack of experience) may affect their views?



“Without counsel plans fail,
but with many advisers they succeed.”

PROVERBS 15:22 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Talking About Bicycles” in *Present Concerns*, edited by Walter Hooper (Harcourt, 1986), pp. 67-68.

² *Ibid*, pp. 70-71.

