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THE GOOD SERVES THE BETTER AND BOTH THE BEST

C.S. LEWIS ON IMAGINATION AND REASON IN CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS PART 3 OF 3

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Imagination Is Insufficient without Reason



Lewis distinguishes between ‘imaginary’ (bad) and ‘imaginative’ (good).¹ Pagan myths, howsoever meaningful, were ultimately untrustworthy as a final guide to life because their meanings were imaginary rather than imaginative. Without the controlling and clarifying effects of reason, imaginative efforts at apprehending God are always apt to lose themselves and turn unreliable or even rotten.² In *The Pilgrim’s Regress* it is because their imaginative ‘pictures’ are not supplemented by the truthful ‘Rules’ of the Shepherds that the Pagans ‘become corrupt in their imaginations’.³ Likewise, it is because its resulting play of imagination is undisciplined that awe at the universe’s size can be taken as an argument against God; this is ‘matter spiritualized’ in the wrong sense, the psycho-physical parallelism (wherein meaning resides) mishandled.⁴ Lewis is almost Feuerbachian here. As Feuerbach considered imagination to be the engine of religion and ground of its falsity, so Lewis would have said that it stoked the engine of religion and was a potential ground of its falsity.

To prevent imagination running amok it must be properly related to reason and both to the will. Lewis sometimes pictures the





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human person as three concentric circles, the outermost being the imagination, the middle ring being the reason, and the core being the will.⁵ Although imagination is the most exposed of these three rings and the one most naturally inclined to deceive, it is nevertheless indispensable to the two higher or more central levels. Images provide reason and the will with the very stuff of conscious life: 'I doubt if any act of will or thought or emotion occurs in me without them.'⁶ Thus, imagination, which is good, serves reason, which is better, and both serve the will, which is best of all. We will look briefly at the will in the final section of this essay, but before we come onto that subject, let us say a little more about how reason works on the meanings supplied to it by imagination.⁷

Reason, in Lewis's scheme, is much more than the faculty of bald ratiocination. The sort of understanding of Reason that Lewis appears to be working with is that 'Practical Reason'⁸ which was accepted by 'nearly all moralists before the eighteenth century'.⁹ It is difficult to say exactly how much of the detail of that pre-Eighteenth century understanding of Reason Lewis adopted in his own thinking, but there is a general harmony between the idea of the tripartite 'Rational Soul' that he outlines descriptively, from the literary historian's point of view, in *The Discarded Image*, and the model of man which he presents argumentatively in *The Abolition of Man, Mere Christianity*, 'Bluspels and Flansferes', 'On Ethics', and elsewhere.¹⁰ Reason, the defining part of the Rational Soul, consists of *intellectus* (the ability to see self-evident truth) and *ratio* (the ability to arrive at truth which is not self-evident). In this two-fold capacity, Reason obviously has a moral element (it is 'the organ of morality'¹¹) because certain self-evident truths are moral axioms.¹² That these understandings of Reason still linger in our concept of morality is shown, Lewis believes, by the fact that, when we would recall a person to right conduct, we sometimes say, 'Be reasonable'.¹³ The Rational faculty guides and governs the



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Sensitive Soul and its five inward ‘wits’ (including the imagination). In doing so, Reason chooses between the meanings presented to it by the imagination, distinguishing true meanings from false and, where a choice of expressions is available, choosing the one most suitable for the desired meanings to be communicated.

One of the reasons, I think, why Lewis has become so long-lived as an apologist, and why some passages from his apologetics have become veritable anthology pieces, is this very point: that his logical, reasoned argumentation is informed by a sensitive poetic intelligence. His choice of image, metaphor, and analogy is controlled by an alert imagination and, as a result, charges what he says with a pleasing appropriateness, even sometimes a superfluity, of meaning. His apologetic writing, at its best, becomes rich and enjoyable for its own sake, almost regardless of whether one actually agrees with the conclusions he arrives at. This carries its own dangers, of course. As Austin Farrer remarked, with respect to *The Problem of Pain*, ‘We think we are listening to an argument, in fact we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction.’¹⁴ But the dangerousness is an indication of the method’s power and, when used aright (for instance, the image of the great ‘dive’ in *Miracles* as a picture of the Incarnation;¹⁵ or the ‘myth’ of Lewis’s own devising in the chapter on agape in *The Four Loves*),¹⁶ the vision does not overpower the argument but supports and indeed enables it.

Imaginative Reason Is Also Insufficient

Thus the good imagination serves the better reason which allows readers to understand a good deal about their human situation and even a certain amount about God. But only a certain amount. We have already pointed out imagination’s deficiencies; reason also is insufficient for the full knowledge of God. Reason, for Lewis, we must remember, was not the organ of truth but ‘the

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natural organ of truth’;¹⁷ it could not rise to the supernatural in its own strength.¹⁸ Though a self-confessed ‘rationalist’,¹⁹ Lewis was a great deal more than merely a believer in the power of ‘Enlightenment’ ratiocination. Reason depends not only on what we might call the ground floor (imagination) and but also on the basement (physical sensation²⁰) in order to be supplied with its raw materials. Considered alone, then, reason is nothing special: ‘gnawing, peasant reason’, as the young Lewis calls it.²¹ It is helpless unless equipped by imagination (and sensation); and even thus equipped it cannot reach into the heavens. To his friend Harwood, Lewis wrote in 1926: ‘No one is more convinced than I that reason is utterly inadequate to the richness and spirituality of real things: indeed this is itself a deliverance of reason.’²² And he never resiled from this position, as many of his later writings, most notably *Till We Have Faces*, demonstrate.²³

So, his religion is not merely rational, any more than it is merely imaginative. But it would be a mistake to conclude that his religion was composed merely of an imaginatively informed rationality: imagination and reason together work not to serve themselves but to serve the will. The good serves the better and both serve the best. The best is the will, the heart of a person, and this requires to be reorientated by a meeting with the divine. However much an apologist may labour with imaginative and rational tools to defend the faith and persuade skeptics to accept its claims, nothing can be achieved “without the intervention of the supernatural”, because only the supernatural can bring about “an alteration of the will”.²⁴ How then, can the apologist hope for supernatural intervention in the imaginatively rational process of Christian apologetics?

Imaginative Reason Serves a Purpose

There are two ways by which the supernatural may intervene.



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One method of supernatural revelation is *by means of* natural revelation. The creative Word of God sustains the ‘natural virtues’²⁵ among which we may include the good use of fallen imagination, no less than the good use of fallen reason, for God is the Father of lights. The divine light enlightens all human minds, not just those which are already Christian, so that certain examples of ‘imaginative perception’ can be argued to be real approaches, however rudimentary, to the ‘idea of God’, approaches that operate ‘beyond our own resources’.²⁶ Imagination, like all created things, including reason,²⁷ properly understood, reflects something of its Creator.²⁸ It is this sort of imagination which Lewis told T.S. Eliot he believed in as ‘a truth-bearing faculty’.²⁹ To think otherwise would be to embrace the ‘negative theology’ of the modern ‘German Protestant’ kind, of which Lewis, with his deep-rooted belief in Natural Law, disapproved.³⁰ ‘I am inclined,’ he wrote, ‘to distrust that species of respect for the spiritual order which bases itself on contempt for the natural’.³¹ The natural exercise of imaginative reason may, up to a point, be a revelation of (and therefore an intervention by) the supernatural.

However, even this is insufficient. The rationally imaginative explanations and defences of Christianity provided by the apologist (and supported by the divine) can only take one so far, and it is at the point where they fall short that the divine intervention already seen in the exercise of natural faculties may be supplemented, God willing, by divine *supervention*. The internal presence of God in the human subject may meet the external presence of Holy Spirit in direct illumination, or, as may be, mediated through the more normal channels of preaching, sacrament, scripture, prayer, absolution, fasting or other forms of askesis.³²

The apologist is thus a John the Baptist figure, preparing the way for the One who comes after. Apologetics serves a vital ancillary function and this is its main justification, for although reasoned

A dramatic, low-key photograph of a man in a dark suit and tie, seen from the side. He has his hands clasped in prayer over an open book, which is resting on a wooden surface. The lighting is very dark, highlighting the texture of his hair, the fabric of his suit, and the pages of the book. The overall mood is solemn and contemplative.

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defences do not of themselves create conviction, the absence of them makes belief much harder to engender or sustain. As Farrer wrote, 'What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief [not even rational argument most richly and sensitively supplied by imagination], but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish. So the apologist who does nothing but defend may play a useful, though preparatory, part.'³³

Divine supervention takes us away from the field of pure apologetics into evangelism and soteriology. The indispensable role Lewis found for divinely-imparted faith both in the acquisition and retention of Christian belief³⁴ is not something we can here address, though it is a subject worth exploring.³⁵ Let us therefore conclude with what Lewis wrote in 'The Decline of Religion':

Conversion requires an alteration of the will, and an alteration which, in the last resort, does not occur without the intervention of the supernatural. I do not in the least agree with those who therefore conclude that the spread of an intellectual (and imaginative) climate favourable to Christianity is useless. You do not prove munition workers useless by showing that they cannot themselves win battles, however proper this reminder would be if they attempted to claim the honour due to fighting men. If the intellectual climate is such that, when a man comes to the crisis at which he must either accept or reject Christ, his reason and imagination are not on the wrong side, then his conflict will be fought out under favourable conditions.³⁶ ■



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NOTES

¹ See, for example, letter to Eliza Butler, 25 September 1940, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume II*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 445.

² Hence the phrase 'only imagination' is always meant pejoratively in Lewis's works. This independent imagination is his target when, for example, he opposes 'faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other' (*Mere Christianity*, 120).

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 195.

⁴ 'If ever the vastness of matter threatens to overcross our spirits, one must remember that it is matter spiritualized which does so. To puny man, the great nebula in Andromeda owes in a sense its greatness'. 'Dogma and the Universe', C.S. Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 121.

⁵ E.g., *The Screwtape Letters* (Glasgow: Collins, 1982), 37. Screwtape, the senior devil, advises Wormwood to evacuate his patient's will and intellect of virtues, locating them entirely in his fantasy or imagination: 'No amount of piety in

his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will' (70).

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (Glasgow: Collins, 1983), 87.

⁷ Lewis practised his theory of disciplining his imagination from young adulthood onwards. E.g., see his resolution not to let "things I really don't believe in and vague possibilities haunt my imagination". Diary entry for 26 January 1927, *All My Road Before Me: The Diaries of C.S. Lewis, 1922–1927* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 439.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Glasgow: Collins, 1984), 29.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 158.

¹⁰ E.g., the epistemology which structures his approach in *Mere Christianity* (16), for instance, broadly reflects the categories of Rational, Sensitive and Vegetable Soul described in *The Discarded Image*, 152–65.

¹¹ *The Discarded Image*, 158.

¹² See, e.g., *The Abolition of Man*, 23, 28.



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- ¹³ *Miracles*, 39; cf. *The Discarded Image*, 161.
- ¹⁴ Austin Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965), 37.
- ¹⁵ *Miracles* 115–16.
- ¹⁶ *The Four Loves*, 116–28.
- ¹⁷ 'Bluspels and Flalansferes', SLE, 265.
- ¹⁸ 'Human thought is not God's, but God-kindled', *Miracles*, 33.
- ¹⁹ 'Bluspels and Flalansferes', SLE, 265.
- ²⁰ 'Man's reason is in such deep insolvency to sense'. 'Horrid Red Things', C.S. Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 129. Lewis is quoting Robert Bridges's *The Testament of Beauty*, I, 57.
- ²¹ 'The Philosopher', *Collected Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 186–87.
- ²² Letter to Cecil Harwood, 28 October 1926, *Collected Letters*, Volume I, 670.
- ²³ In this, Lewis's last novel, there is a character called the Fox, a rational teacher, who comes to learn at the end of the story that mere reason is 'glibness . . . a prattle of maxims . . . all thin and clear as water'. *Till We Have Faces* (Glasgow: Collins, 1985), 306.
- ²⁴ 'The Decline of Religion', C.S. Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 182.
- ²⁵ Letter to Brother George Every, 12 October 1940, *Collected Letters*, Volume II, 448.
- ²⁶ 'Letter to his brother, 24 October 1931, *Collected Letters*, Volume II, 7.
- ²⁷ 'Where thought is strictly rational it must be, in some odd sense, not ours, but cosmic or super-cosmic. It must be something not shut up inside our heads but already 'out there'—in the universe or behind the universe . . . a rationality with which the universe has always been saturated'. 'De Futilitate', C.S. Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 676.
- ²⁸ 'I do not think the resemblance between the Christian and the merely imaginative experience is accidental. I think that all things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, the imagination not least. "Reflect" is the important word. This lower life of the imagination is not [i.e. not



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necessarily and by its own nature: God can cause it to be] a beginning of nor a step towards, the higher life of the spirit, merely an image'. *Surprised by Joy*, 135–36.

²⁹ Letter to T.S. Eliot, 2 June 1931, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 1523.

³⁰ See *The Discarded Image*, 70. It is not known how much of Karl Barth's work Lewis read (he was not sure himself, see letter to Corbin Scott Carnell, 13 October 1958, *Collected Letters, Volume III*, 980), but his references to it are invariably unfriendly. He coined 'Barthianism' as a loose term to cover 'a flattening out of all things into common insignificance before the inscrutable Creator'. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 449, 453. Cf. *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 18; 'Why I Am Not a Pacifist', *C.S. Lewis, Essay Collection*, 292; letter to his brother, 18 February 1940, *Collected Letters, Volume II*, 350–52.

³¹ *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 267.

³² I take it that those who read apolo-

getic works and who are in need of their help may include many whose religious practice is already significantly developed.

³³ Austin Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, 26.

³⁴ See, e.g., *Mere Christianity*, 119–29; 'Religion: Reality or Substitute?', *C.S. Lewis, Essay Collection*, 131–37.

³⁵ See, e.g., my 'Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion', in *C.S. Lewis, Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Angus J.L. Menuge (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 143–67.

³⁶ 'The Decline of Religion', *C.S. Lewis, Essay Collection*, 182.



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Human will becomes truly creative and truly our own when it is wholly God's, and this is one of the many senses in which he that loses his soul shall find it.

—*C.S. Lewis*



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1

According to Ward, how did C.S. Lewis view the relationship between imagination, reason, and will? What is meant by the statement “The good serves the better and both serve the best”? (See the last paragraph of the section titled “Imaginative reason is also insufficient”.)

2

Near the end of the article, Ward states: “The apologist is thus a John the Baptist figure, preparing the way for the One who comes after.” What is the reasoning behind this analogy? As you think about sharing Christ with others, what are the implications of this analogy for you?



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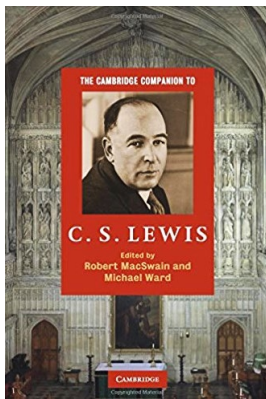


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RECOMMENDED READING



The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis (Cambridge Companions to Religion), edited by Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

A distinguished academic, influential Christian apologist, and best-selling author of children's literature, C. S. Lewis is a controversial and enigmatic figure who continues to fascinate, fifty years after his death. This Companion is the first comprehensive single-volume study written by an international team of scholars to survey Lewis's career as a literary historian, popular theologian, and creative writer. Twenty-one expert voices from Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton, and Wheaton, among many other places of learning, analyze Lewis's work from theological, philosophical, and literary perspectives. Some chapters consider his professional contribution to fields such as critical theory and intellectual history, while others assess his views on issues including moral knowledge, gender, prayer, war, love, suffering, and Scripture. The final chapters investigate his work as a writer of fiction and poetry. Original in its approach and unique in its scope, this Companion shows that C. S. Lewis was much more than merely the man behind Narnia.