

C.S. Lewis & G.K. Chesterton: A Comparative Appreciation

G.K. Chesterton held that ‘Talking about serious questions is a pleasure’¹, so let me to begin by thanking everyone who has made this pleasurable, serious discussion possible.

I love the writings of C.S. Lewis, and, like Lewis, I love the writings of G.K. Chesterton. With Lewis, I especially love *The Everlasting Man*. Neo-atheist Lawrence Krauss could have saved himself from writing *A Universe from Nothing* if only he’d paid attention to Chesterton’s observation that: ‘Nobody can imagine how nothing could turn into something. Nobody can get an inch nearer to it by explaining how something would turn into something else.’²

Researching my book *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013), it struck me that Lewis had been the kind of atheist who takes philosophy seriously. As an atheist, Lewis rejected the positivism and scientism that characterised ‘modernity’. One might even say that the atheism of Lucretius saved Lewis from the non-theism of A.J. Ayer!

Lewis believed language puts us in touch with reality, and he argued, against the positivists, that there’s more than one way of being in touch with reality. Lewis’ paper on ‘The Language of Religion’ is a significant rejoinder to positivism.

Lewis didn’t lurch from the strictures of modernism into the louchness of post-modernity. His love of philosophy produced neither a narrow rationalism nor a romantic anti-rationalism, but a pre-modern wisdom that recognised the value of empirical data without rejecting the transcendent facts of truth, goodness and beauty.

Lewis holes *scientism* below the waterline by observing that acts of reason, upon which science depends, don’t depend upon science but upon rational intuition: ‘You cannot produce rational intuition by argument, because argument depends upon rational intuition. Proof rests upon the unprovable which just has to be “seen”.’³

Likewise, in ‘A Plea for Popular Philosophy’ Chesterton points out that:

all argument begins with assumption; that is, with something that you do not doubt... let us clearly realize this fact, that we do believe in a number of things which are part of our existence, but which cannot be demonstrated... Every sane man believes that the world around him and the people in it are real, and not his own delusion or dream.⁴

One might almost say that by embracing medieval ideas about philosophy Chesterton and Lewis anticipated the ‘reformed epistemology’ of the 1960’s. This goes to show the great sense Chesterton showed in noting that ‘What a man can believe depends

¹ G.K. Chesterton, ‘No Such Thing’ in *Prophet of Orthodoxy: The Wisdom of G.K. Chesterton* (Fount, 1997), 127.

² G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), 25.

³ C.S. Lewis, ‘Why I am not a Pacifist’

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, ‘A Plea for Popular Philosophy’ in *Prophet of Orthodoxy: The Wisdom of G.K. Chesterton* (Fount, 1997), 127.

upon his philosophy, not upon the clock or the century.’⁵ In the same vein, Lewis warned against ‘the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.’⁶

There is no epistemological good news needed more by people today than the news that there’s more to knowledge than science. The failure of scientism means it makes sense to say that murder is objectively evil and that rainbows are objectively beautiful. Lewis’ influential lectures on *The Abolition of Man* remain a powerful statement of such axiological realism.

Lewis was as much a poet as a philosopher; not as a centaur is half man and half horse, but as Jesus is fully man yet fully divine. Lewis was a philosophical poet and a poetical philosopher. When Lewis was memorialised in Westminster Abbey last year, he was celebrated as much for being the Christian apologist who gave us *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles* as he was for being the Christian novelist who gave us *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

One can’t separate Lewis’ philosophy from his fiction. On the one hand, his philosophy uses story to elicit rational insight. Consider ‘Meditation in a Toolshed’, with its distinction between ‘looking at’ and ‘looking along’ a beam of light. On the other hand, Lewis’ fiction fleshes out a philosophical skeleton, allowing us to imbibe the *atmosphere* of a philosophy. I particularly enjoy imbibing *The Abolition of Man* through *That Hideous Strength*. I was thrilled by Michael Ward’s recent discovery of how the medieval cosmology Lewis describes in *The Discarded Image* shapes Narnia.

Chesterton said ‘it is only too easy to forget that there is a thrill in theism.’⁷ I find reading Lewis is thrilling, not because he has anything original to say, but because he puts his mastery of language wholly at the service of truth. As Lewis advised:

no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.⁸

Unlike the neo-atheists, Lewis attended carefully to arguments for the falsehood of naturalism and the truth of theism. The arguments Lewis gives us are popularisations or developments of arguments others had already made and which had convinced him. For example, in *Mere Christianity* he succinctly popularised the sort of meta-ethical moral argument for God developed in W.R. Sorley’s Gifford lectures on *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. Likewise, Lewis clearly owes Chesterton an apologetic debt.

In general terms, in addition to the use of multiple literary genres, we should note that Lewis’ desire to advocate *Mere Christianity* follows Chesterton’s emphasis in *Orthodoxy* upon ‘the central Christian theology (sufficiently summarised in the

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (House of Stratus, 2011), 53.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Fount).

⁷ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 103.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Fount).

Apostle's Creed)'⁹ at the expense of 'the fascinating but quite different question of what is the present seat of authority for the proclamation of that creed.'¹⁰

In specific terms, one sees ancestors to many of Lewis' arguments in Chesterton's work. In *The Everlasting Man* he pre-cedes Lewis in debunking the mythical Jesus myth¹¹, lays the foundation for Lewis' argument from desire¹² and gives Lewis the 'mad, bad or God' trilemma.¹³ In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton touches upon the argument from desire¹⁴ and spends several pages planting seeds that may have contributed to Lewis' anti-naturalism arguments. Chesterton writes:

Evolution is a good example of that modern intelligence which, if it destroys anything, destroys itself. Evolution is either an innocent scientific description of how certain things came about; or, if it is anything more than this, it is an attack upon thought itself.¹⁵

His arguments for this conclusion are best described as 'suggestive'. Indeed, Chesterton describes his own style as attempting 'in a vague and personal way, in a set of mental pictures rather than a series of deductions, to state the philosophy in which I have come to believe.'¹⁶

When Lewis takes over from Chesterton in the wrestling match with naturalism, he comes into the ring equipped with clear definitions, lean distinctions and a range of heavy-hitting deductions that continue to spark debate in the professional literature.

In fact, *all* of these arguments live on in contemporary debates. For example, the 'argument from desire' has been developed and defended by John Cottingham, John Haldane, Robert Hoyler, Peter Kreeft and Alister McGrath, among others. The 'trilemma' has been developed and defended by the likes of Stephen T. Davis, Douglas Groothuis and David A. Horner.

However, of all the arguments Lewis defended, it's the anti-naturalism arguments of *Miracles* and of essays such as 'De Futilitate' that resonate most insistently today. Alvin Plantinga acknowledges his debt to Lewis for his 'anti-naturalism argument from evolution'. Moreover, it's not only in reading contemporary Christian philosophers such as Plantinga, Victor Reppert, R. Scott Smith or Angus L. Menuge that one recalls Lewis' anti-naturalism arguments; it's also in reading contemporary non-Christian thinkers such as John Gray, Thomas Nagel, Alex Rosenberg, John Searle and Raymond Tallis.

Through the many friendships that constituted 'The Inklings', Lewis teaches us the importance of being nourished by a community of scholarship jointly dedicated to following the argument wherever it leads. Through reading what Lewis called 'old

⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (House of Stratus, 2011), 4.

¹⁰ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 4

¹¹ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 132 & 199.

¹² Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 106-107.

¹³ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 215 & 229.

¹⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 57.

¹⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 21.

¹⁶ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 1.

books', we have the privilege of transcending the chronological snobbery of our own age and communing in just such a fellowship with C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton.

Peter S. Williams – Southampton, March 2014.

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