God and Modern Thought
C.S. Lewis

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Michael Ward

Song of Solomon 5 *Extract from* Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life *(1955)*

'God and Modern Thought' in the life and work of C.S. Lewis. Lewis is best known, of course, for his seven Chronicles of Narnia, but he did a lot more than just write a series of popular children's books. He had a distinguished academic career which he concluded here at Cambridge as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English, having previously been employed for about thirty years at a university somewhere west of London and south of Birmingham.

Lewis's scholarly magnum opus was *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (a snappy title if ever there was one), his contribution to the multi-volume *Oxford History of English Literature*. 'O hell!' as he called it.

Lewis starts his book with a discussion of 'the new astronomy' that came in in the middle of the sixteenth century when Copernicus revolutionized the field with his theory of the heliocentric cosmos, a theory which Kepler and Galileo would soon come along and verify. Lewis suggests that what proved most important about the new astronomy was not the mere alteration in our map of space but the methodological revolution which verified it:

> By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements [the new astronomy] substituted a mechanical for a genial . . . conception of the universe . . . (Kepler at the beginning of his career explained the motion of the planets by their *anima motrices*; before he died, he explained it mechanically.)

This shift towards a mechanical way of speaking and a mathematical way of thinking was reinforced when Newton began talking about 'the law of gravity'. In a lecture Lewis gave here in Cambridge in the 1950s, he reminded his audience that medieval people never talked of *gravitation*.

> Their way of describing it is to say that every natural object has a native or 'proper' place and is always 'trying' or 'desiring' to get there. When unimpeded, flame moves upwards and solid bodies move downwards because they want to go you may call it, 'home'.

This wasn't animism, Lewis says. They didn't really think that all matter was sentient.

> They will distinguish animate and inanimate as clearly as we do; will say that stones, for example, have only being; vegetables being and life; animals, being, life and sense; man, being, life, sense and reason.

The truth is that the language of inanimate bodies 'seeking home' used in the Middle Ages was the same kind of language that the modern thinker uses when speaking about 'laws of nature'. As Lewis writes:

> When a modern [person] says that the stone fell 'in obedience to the law of gravitation', he does not really think there is literally a law or literal obedience; that the stone, on being released, whips out a little book of statutes, finds the chapter and paragraph relevant to its predicament, and decides it had better be a law-abiding stone and 'come quiet'. Nor did the medieval man believe that the stone really felt homesick, or felt at all. Both ways of putting it are analogical; neither speaker would usually know any way of expressing the facts except by an analogy.
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> But of course it makes a great difference to the tone of your mind which analogy you adopt – whether you fill your universe with phantom police-courts and traffic regulations, or with phantom longings and endeavours.

The *machine*, the *laws* of nature (it was Francis Bacon, Lewis says, who first started to talk of 'laws' of nature, by analogy with jurisprudence) – these were terms that began to affect the attitudes people had to the world, they began to make people suppose that things are regular, impersonal, functional but essentially lifeless.

And this tendency was soon fortified by another new term that arrived in the long wake of the Copernican revolution, namely 'space', a seventeenth-century word. To think of the canopy above our heads as 'space', rather than 'the heavens', as was commonly the term used before the time of Copernicus, is to introduce a whole new quality of emptiness or hollowness into the universe. Earth is now adrift in a void, rather than the focus of a network of influential planetary relationships; a sense of a trackless waste will have replaced the sense of a vast, lighted concavity, filled with purposes, homes, desires and signifiers.

The total result of these changes was not (or at least not immediately) materialism, but rather dualism. 'The human mind, on whose ideal constructions the whole method depended, stood over against its object in ever sharper dissimilarity.' Increasingly, modern thinkers learnt to 'look *at*' things analytically from the outside and gave up the habit of 'looking *along*' things integratedly from the inside. This detachment of the thinking subject from the thought-about object is, Lewis contends, 'the whole basis of the specifically "modern" type of thought. And is it not, you will ask, a very sensible basis? For, after all, we are often deceived by things from the inside.'

Well, . . . up to a point, Lord Copper! There is value to abstraction, to disinterested observation, to objectivizing, quantitative mensuration. But only up to a point. Carry that line of thought into *every* department of life, and you will find not only that you have disinfected the universe of superstition, you will also have diminished your own intercourse with reality, hollowed out your capacity for what makes life worth living. For what does *love* have to do with objectification?

Love does not objectify. Love rejoices in the sheer intrinsic beauty of the beloved. Objectification, quantification, calculation – though they are so important and so useful in the world of modern thought – are out of place in the world of moral behaviour. Love is not mechanical or abstract, but personal and concrete. Lovers are not just brains on stalks, but have bodies, with senses. Mere ratiocination, however useful it may be in certain departments of enquiry, can never adequately cover the whole of life with its

‘tasting touching hearing seeing breathing’. Our sensitive flesh, our warm blood enable us to know what ee cummings captures so well in the words we heard in tonight’s anthem: joy, gratitude, amazement. I’m put in mind of Oliver Edwards’s remark to Dr Johnson: ‘You are a philosopher, Dr Johnson. I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher, but, I don’t know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in.’

In his spiritual memoir *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis records how cheerfulness was always breaking into his experience, however much he tried to live on reason alone. We heard of his very first encounter with that cheerfulness, or ‘Joy’ as he calls it, in the passage that was read earlier.

Joy in Lewis’s sense is a longing for we know not what, though it is often communicated to us through things we know well, like music, the natural world, human love, memory. It can’t be put into words. It can’t be relied upon to happen, nor to recur once it has happened. And because Joy is so elusive, we tend to become impatient with it and instead begin to seek out mere pleasure, because we find experiences of pleasure more controllable, more easily repeatable. We might even end up saying that we *long* for these pleasures, but the longing for pleasure is qualitatively different from the longing that accompanies Joy, the longing that *is* Joy, in Lewis’s sense.

So we may say, aged eight, that we long for a new bicycle; aged thirteen, that we long for a clean complexion; aged seventeen, that we long to get into Cambridge; aged twenty, that we long for a First or a Blue; aged twenty-five, that we long to be married; aged thirty, that we long to be married to someone else; aged forty, that we long for our vanished youth; aged sixty, that we long for retirement; aged seventy, that we long for our grandchildren’s happiness. But once our three score years and ten have run their course, what will we long for then?

And so the further question is worth asking ourselves from time to time: What are we hoping for above all things? Is there anything behind these good but transitory pleasures that will finally satisfy us? We get glimpses of the transcendent in great music, in nuptial ecstasy, in a breath-taking mountain-top view. But is there anything really transcendent, anything beyond the walls of the world, beyond death?

St Augustine of Hippo, to whom Lewis’s *Surprised by Joy* is much indebted, reckoned that all human longings were versions of the longing for God, they were refractions of the true divine desiderium. ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord,’ wrote Augustine, ‘and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.’ We look for satisfaction in relationships, in work, in leisure, but however intense the friendship, however worthwhile the work, however enjoyable the leisure, we’re left wanting more, because what we really desire is the original and final Someone who is perfectly loving, infinitely worthwhile, endlessly enjoyable.

In his sermon, ‘On the Pure Love of God’, Augustine says: Imagine God appeared to you and said he would make a deal with you, that he would give you everything you wished, everything your heart desired, except one thing. You could have anything you wanted, nothing would be impossible for you, and nothing would be sinful or forbidden. But, God concluded, ‘you shall never see my face.’ Why, Augustine asks, did a terrible chill creep over your heart at those last words unless there is in your heart a love of God, the desire for God? In fact, if you wouldn’t accept that deal, you really love God above all things, for look what you just did! You gave up the whole world, and more, just to see the face of God.

Perhaps no such chill crept over your heart; perhaps you have no desire for God. Or perhaps you have the desire but don't believe it will be satisfied. Lewis readily admits that just because we have a desire for something doesn't necessarily prove that we'll get it. There are plenty of people in the world tonight who will go to bed hungry for food: just because they're hungry doesn't mean they will get bread to eat. 'But I think it may be urged that this misses the point,' Lewis says.

> A man's physical hunger does not prove that that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some [people] will [enjoy it]. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called 'falling in love' occurred in a sexless world.

In conclusion, what have I been trying to say about Lewis on 'God and Modern Thought'? Does he think the two are immiscible, irreconcilable? Is modern thought, as Lewis understands it, so radically detached, atomizing and analytical that it can never find a place in its workings for the Personal fountain of love whom Christians worship as the Holy Trinity? In his slim but searching philosophical volume, *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis virtually asks this question himself:

> Is it, then, possible to imagine a new Natural Philosophy, continually conscious that the 'natural object' produced by analysis and abstraction is not reality but only a view, and always correcting the abstraction? I hardly know what I am asking for. . . The regenerate science which I have in mind . . . [w]hen it explained . . . would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole. While studying the *It* it would not lose what Martin Buber calls the *Thou*-situation."

It is unusual to find Lewis asking questions rather than offering answers, and his hesitancy here indicates, I think, the seriousness of the issues with which he is trying to grapple. But they are key questions that we all have to grapple with in some form or other. Is ultimate reality an 'it', an object without personhood which we might as well use for as long as we have the chance? Or is ultimate reality a Thou, someone who surprises us, who calls out to the deepest parts of our being, who is, in the words of the Song of Songs, 'altogether lovely'?