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A Collection of Essays Presented at
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FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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**Personal Honesty as an Epistemological Key
in the Works of C.S. Lewis**

Mike Mitchell

Personal Honesty as an Epistemological Key in the Works of C.S. Lewis

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Once when asked what he thought of a book entitled *Honest to God*, Lewis replied, “I prefer being honest to being ‘honest to God.’”¹ It is an unmitigated honesty, with one’s self and with God, which Lewis establishes as the central epistemological issue. This is not a surface level honesty—not a general, *storge* honesty—but an honesty directly related to the purity and intensity of one’s will. According to Lewis, the condition of one’s will is *the* epistemological key. Through a scrutiny of internal motives and of emotional prejudices, Lewis’s epistemology seeks to expose all those factors in human nature that so constantly, yet subtly, evade and distort the truth. This is not to say that Lewis did not place a high value on a person’s ability to reason and the quality of his or her logic—especially the logic of theological inquiry—but he understood that this was not the primary issue in the process of discovering the truth.

This being the case, Lewis’s approach can best be described as an epistemology of the will. The quality of one’s will to believe is the most decisive factor in someone being in a state of belief or unbelief. In Lewis’s perspective, a person’s desire to know the truth must exceed the desire to secure self-interests.

It necessarily follows from the orthodox Christian concept of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God, and from the fact that his explicit intent is for people to know him, that if a person who claims to want to know him does not know him—does not see what God has attempted to explicitly show—that the person must be less than honest in his or her claim to seek God. As will be shown, the presence of such dishonesty often results in a shallow, yet comforting illusion, which ultimately results in an inability to know one’s own true identity, God’s identity, and the necessary implications therein.

It will be good to begin with a passage from Chapter nine in *The Great Divorce* which is very indicative of Lewis’s view of the importance of honesty and/or purity of will. In this passage the protagonist asks George Macdonald about the fate of “the poor Ghosts who never get into the omnibus at all,”

essentially raising the question of the fate of those who lie outside the truth and that of the accessibility of the truth to them. Macdonald replies:

Everyone who wishes it does. Never fear. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.

If it is the case that no one who “seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it,” why then are there so many (*The Great Divorce* is filled with descriptions of them) of those who do miss it and yet experience such a deep sense of injustice? For many people, the mere idea of Hell evokes such a sense of injustice that they paradoxically claim to reject orthodox Christian doctrine on moral grounds. This sense of injustice is often a result of a person’s failure to come to terms with his or her own sin. It is a willful blindness for the sake of defending one’s own righteousness.

No where in Lewis’s writing is this issue expounded on more thoroughly than in the work he personally considered to be his masterpiece, *Till We Have Faces*. This story, written as a novel, retells the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche as a means to allegorically answer the question raised by the disciple Judas (not Judas Iscariot) in John 14:22: “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?”—a question which brings to a sharp point the issue raised above: why are those who *see* God so seemingly few, when he is “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance?”²

Oruah, the protagonist and speaker throughout the story, explains her motivation for writing the story:

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I am old now and have not much to fear from the anger of gods. I have no husband nor child, nor hardly a friend, through whom they can hurt me . . . Being, for all these reasons, free from fear, I will write in this book what no one who has happiness would dare to write. I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning, as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge. But there is no judge between gods and men, and the god of the mountain will not answer me.³

She “accuses” the gods and explains the source of the freedom with which she writes to be the fact that there is no one through whom the gods can hurt her. Clearly, Orual’s case screams of injustice—an injustice grounded in the thought that she suffers at the hands of the gods, yet is given no clear access to them or to an understanding of their demands on her. As revealed in the last line of this passage, it is this concealing of the gods—their refusal to reveal themselves to her—that is Orual’s main contention against them: “there is no judge between gods and men, and the god of the mountain will not answer me.”

One of the ways in which Lewis conveys his point with such power is that, through much of the story, Orual’s case against the gods appears to be a fairly justified one. Orual’s earthly life is not at all an easy one. She is the unwanted daughter of a tyrant king, has a strikingly unattractive appearance, and a self-absorbed sister whose appearance is just the opposite. While Orual is still a child, her mother dies giving birth to her youngest sister, Psyche, with whom Orual eventually has a relationship that is sweeter than the rest of her life is bitter.

However, despite the blissful relationship between the two girls and the apparently redeeming value it has in Orual’s otherwise treacherous life, Psyche is eventually taken from her. She is offered in sacrifice to the god of the Grey Mountain mentioned in the opening passage, and thus the suspicion based on Orual’s plight up until the time of Psyche—that the gods had hated her—is seemingly confirmed, but not without some doubt. The offering of Psyche to the god of the Grey Mountain turns out to be a marriage rather than a sacrifice, which is Lewis’s allegorical expression of Psyche’s conversion. Soon after, Orual makes a dangerous trek to retrieve Psyche from the mountain and upon finding her is deeply troubled as Psyche speaks of a god and a palace of grandeur (all part of the conversion experience), none of which Orual can see. She is thrown into a crisis of faith, but quickly decides that the responsibility for her lack of sight of the object of faith lies with the gods and not with herself. Her

account of her fleeting vision is very telling:

And now, you who read, give judgment. That moment when I either saw or thought I saw the House—does it tell against the gods or against me? Would they (if they answered) make it a part of their defence? Say it was a sign, a hint, beckoning me to answer the riddle one way rather than the other? I’ll not grant them that. What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle? . . . They set the riddle and then allow a seeming that can’t be tested and can only quicken and thicken the tormenting whirlpool of your guess-work. If they had an honest intention to guide us, why is their guidance not plain? Psyche could speak plain when she was three; do you tell me the gods have not yet come so far?⁴

Throughout the story, and culminating with the exchange between the two sisters, Lewis allegorically poses the glaring question about Jesus’s seeming selectiveness in revealing himself to people. Why do the gods choose to reveal themselves with such lucidity to Psyche, and yet with vague, fleeting visions to Orual? Orual’s conclusion is that the reason for such apparent favoritism is the capriciousness and injustice of the gods.

Soon after Orual’s discovery of the differences in what she and Psyche can and cannot see, she attempts to turn to the gods in prayer in a passage of great strategic importance in conveying the thrust of Lewis’s message about the importance of honesty in epistemology. When Orual returns home after her encounter with Psyche, she is soon left alone and then does something she says she thinks, “few have done”:

I spoke to the gods myself, alone, in such words as came to me, not in a temple, and without a sacrifice. I stretched myself face downward on the floor and called upon them with my whole heart. I took back every word I had said against them. I promised anything they might ask of me, if only they would send me a sign. They gave me none. When I began there was red firelight in the room and rain on the roof; when I rose up again the fire had sunk a little lower, and the rain drummed on as before.⁵

Because her prayer is portrayed as a genuine one, it is this passage that gives Orual’s case against the gods the most credence. It is a prayer offered in seemingly authentic humility, but is still met with only silence.

The shape of Orual’s argument against the gods is very important in understanding the epistemological

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point Lewis is making. The sympathy for Orual evoked from the reader is key in his didactic strategy. Orual is not a fatuous, pampered character who takes the good things in life for granted. There are few good things in her life, and when she receives the rare gift of genuine love, the very person who gives it is taken away from her. She is then told of the immense grandeur on the mountain, which, if real, would remedy all her pain and bring utter fulfillment, but she is unable to see it. Then her seemingly authentic plea to the gods for answers is met with dead silence.

This dilemma is also raised with painful clarity in Lewis's much more personal work, *A Grief Observed*, in which he records his thoughts and feelings during a period of bereavement after the death of his wife. Notice the striking similarity of Orual's complaint against the gods and Lewis's own emotions as he seeks God's comfort in his time of tremendous pain:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?⁶

It is a sense of injustice that under girds both Orual's case against the gods and Lewis's own feelings in his bereavement. Judas's question is found woven throughout these and others of Lewis's works. Why does God show himself to some and not to others? Why does he remain silent when someone so desires to hear him to speak?

As in the case with Orual, many are tempted to think this reflects God's arbitrary nature and his indifference to human need. As has been said, many argue that the lack of success in God's plan to make himself known is his fault. Orual, however, is eventually faced with the sobering reality that the only obstacle which prevents her from seeing all that Psyche sees and from hearing the gods clearly lies completely

within herself. At the end of the story Orual stands in the presence of the gods on her judgment day and is forced to read her complaint against them from the book in which she has written this complaint over and over again through the course of her life. Amazingly, when this same complaint, which has always sounded so completely justified, is read in the immortal world—that is in the real world—it sounds completely different than when Orual is writing it. The book of complaint itself even appears differently when it is seen in immortality: "A little, shabby, crumpled thing, nothing like my great book that I had worked on all day, day after day . . ." ⁷ And when she is forced to read the complaint aloud what is heard is not the words that she has said, but those she has *meant*. Thus, the hollow, self-centered grounds on which she bases her case against the gods is revealed.

Then, in what is arguably the most riveting passage in the book, Orual realizes why the gods have not shown themselves to her, despite her incessant request:

The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered. Lightly men talk of saying what they mean . . . When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?⁸

It is only when we are honest enough to show God our true faces that he is able to show us his. Thus the question that plagues Orual throughout the story is answered in her realization that she has not been honest enough in asking to receive an answer.

Similarly, Lewis makes an observation toward the end of *A Grief Observed* that provides some remedy for the dissonance expressed in the passage cited earlier.

I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.

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On the other hand, “Knock and it shall be opened.” But does knocking mean hammering and kicking the door like a maniac? And there’s also “To him that hath shall be given.” After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can’t give. Perhaps your own passion temporarily destroys the capacity.⁹

Once it is understood that certain legitimate passions like grief can hinder our capacity to receive knowledge from God, it becomes all the more clear how those *sinful* passions, which are inherently contrary to God’s nature, can deafen our ears to his voice, just as they deafen Orual.

Each of the above cases emphatically makes the point that the responsibility for the failure of God’s endeavor to reveal himself lies completely with the people who do not receive the revelation. The important thing to see in the above examples is that if a person is honest enough to admit his or her sin, this, in itself, does not solve the problem of God’s inaccessibility (only repentance can do that), but it does show the problem to be a moral rather than epistemological one. In other words, if a person were to persist in sin, he or she would still be damned, but would raise no *epistemological* dilemma—no theatrical screams of injustice. The truly honest person would never ask the question, “If God is real, why doesn’t he reveal himself?”

This being said, it is clear that the basis for disbelief in Lewis’s characters is emotional or moral rather than rational. It is not an absence of evidence, or even the presence of contrary evidence that obstructs the revelation of God. It is the inability to come to terms with the obstruction of personal sinfulness or misplaced value; one does not have the heart to tell one’s self it is evil.

Lewis shows this same principle in *A Grief Observed* when he calls into question God’s goodness. Again, much like Orual, what Lewis has to say in the book takes the form of an argument, or rather a case against God. But the “argument” is eventually exposed as an emotional vent in disguise. After being motivated by his deep grief to question God’s goodness, Lewis asks, “Why do I make room in my mind for such filth and nonsense? Do I hope that if feeling disguises itself as thought I shall feel less? Aren’t all these notes the senseless writhings of a man who won’t accept the fact that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?”¹⁰ In the same way, the question “Why doesn’t God reveal himself” is often a feeling disguised as thought—the writhing of an unfulfilled person who cannot honestly face the fact of his own sin and so, like Orual, instead pleads a false (yet dramatic) case of injustice. When this happens—when the disguise is put

on—the scope of the problem is subtly shifted from one of personal honesty and repentance to one of epistemology.

This process of disguising the true nature of the issue can also be clearly seen in the exchange between the Spirit and the ghost of the Bishop in chapter five of *The Great Divorce*: “‘I’m not sure that I’ve got the exact point you are trying to make,’ said the Ghost. ‘I am not trying to make any point,’ said the Spirit. ‘I am telling you to repent and believe.’”¹¹ The ghostly Bishop is intent on keeping the scope of the conversation in the intellectual realm, but the Spirit sees through this and calls him to an act of the will—“repent and believe.” Ultimately it is the Bishop’s lack of will to repent that prevents him from becoming a solid person, and thus from seeing God.

Christian doctrine and the evidence that supports it remains the same, but people often don’t have the will to accept it or to abide by it because, as has been shown, a greater value is placed on gratification promised by sin, or on the prevention of the pain and humility brought about by honest acknowledgement of sin. In other words, finding the answer to the question of God is really not as complicated as often thought, it’s just that there is so much about us that is not willing to face what that answer implies. As a result, we try to evade our responsibility for disbelief by shifting the issue into the realm of epistemology where we can disguise our lack of will to believe with cries of injustice or ignorance or insufficient evidence or flawed epistemological method.

With this in mind, a particular relevance to the task of Christian apologetics becomes clear. There is much contemporary debate on proper epistemological method. This is certainly an important issue, but also one which tempts us to think that there is more at stake in it than there really is. For those who claim that God has not shown himself clearly, choosing the most rationally sound epistemological paradigm will not help; for them, that which hinders a successful epistemology is not rational. Indeed, the most effective epistemological method is most clearly articulated by Jesus in the answer he gives to the question asked of him by the disciple Judas noted earlier: “‘But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?’ Jesus replied, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.’”¹² The way to see Jesus is to obey Jesus, and obedience is an act of the will.

This being the case, we must, like the Spirit to the Bishop, know when to make a point or to simply say (and often to ourselves) “Repent and believe”; we must not let the core issue be shifted or disguised. According to Lewis, rather than a flawless philosophical paradigm, honesty with one’s self and with God is the kingpin,

epistemological factor. Replacing dishonesty and emotional prejudice with honest repentance will bring the truth flowing full and clear like the removal of a clog in a water line or the most structurally important brick in a dam. We must realize that the keenness of our epistemological method (as truly important as it is) will be of no effect to anyone who lacks the will to know the truth.

Notes

- ¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Grand Miracle and other selected essays on theology and ethics from God In The Dock*, p. 153.
- ² 2 Peter 3:9
- ³ Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*. Ch. 1, Book 1.
- ⁴ Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*. Ch. 12, Book 1, p. 134.
- ⁵ Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*. Ch. 13, Book 1, p. 150.
- ⁶ Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*, p. 4.
- ⁷ Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*. Ch.3, Book 2, p. 289.
- ⁸ Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*. Ch.4, Book 2, p. 294.
- ⁹ Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*. Ch. 3, p. 53-54.
- ¹⁰ Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*. Ch. 2, p. 38.
- ¹¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*. Ch. 5. p. 43.
- ¹² 1 John 14:22-23

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