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Biological Evolution vs. Mythical Thinking in the Writings of C. S. Lewis

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When the Scopes Monkey Trial was polarizing American attitudes on religion and science in 1925, C. S. Lewis was yet a young atheist whose support would surely have fallen to Clarence Darrow, the ACLU appointed defender of naturalistic evolution. However, only four years later, Lewis's conversion to Christianity initiated a literary career that would eventually see him lauded as a champion of conservative Evangelicalism, both in America and abroad. Yet in spite of his conversion and his status as Evangelical hero, a standing that continues into the 21st century, a careful look at Lewis's thinking on the matter of science and evolution shows that he was rarely in the camp of orthodox conservative Christianity.

Lewis was Oxford educated and was considered by some to be one the best-read scholars in Europe. This breadth and depth of education minimized the possibility of Lewis seeing in black and white when it came to issues theological or scientific. While American fundamentalists were growing ever more suspicious of higher education, and retreating into their own socially and educationally isolated communities, Lewis remained engaged with the best that the intellectual world had to offer. The perspective that emerged from this depth of refinement was deeply nuanced

and not easily categorized. As a result, groups claiming Lewis as their advocate have often done so without reading broadly enough to find that he actually stands in opposition to them.

In this paper I will explore Lewis's views on evolution as revealed in some of his major works. From there I will discuss the underpinning of Lewis's unique viewpoint — one that allowed him to hold in comfortable tension the teachings of Judeo-Christian scriptures and modern scientific theories. In doing so I will show that it is Lewis's high regard for both mythology *and* science that provided him with this ability. Perhaps one of the defining tendencies of the more absolutist streams within both science and theology is that mythology is seen as little better than lies. Lewis did not suffer from this handicap of the imagination. Where Evangelical conservatives, heavily influenced by the scientific revolution in their theological thinking, saw the embracing of mythological thinking as a watering-down of "truth", Lewis was confident in the ability of fiction to be the vehicle for understanding deeper realities, and indeed saw this function of myth as divinely intended.

Lewis became famous worldwide as an apologist for the Christian faith. However, despite his reputation as an advocate for the

more conservative segment of Christianity, he didn't seem to feel a need to hide his support for the biological theory of evolution. In fact, this endorsement appears in some of his most well-known works —*Perelandra*, *Mere Christianity*, and most prominently *The Problem of Pain* all display positive regard for evolution. It should be noted, however, that in later essays such as *The Funeral of a Great Myth* Lewis is careful to make a distinction between the biological theorem of evolution, and popular evolutionism. The biological theorem, he points out, “takes over organic life on this planet as a going concern and tries to explain certain changes within that field. It makes no cosmic statements, no metaphysical statements, no eschatological statements”.¹ Popular evolutionism, on the other hand, goes beyond the raw evidence of biology to propose an all-encompassing myth of its own, a new “cosmic law” as Lewis puts it.²

That said, it is undeniable that with regard to the biological theorem, Lewis is unequivocal in his support. It has been suggested by some that perhaps his untroubled support of evolution indicates that the fierce creation-evolution debate that characterizes American education now had not yet begun in the early part of Lewis's career. In fact, some scholars suggest that previous to the start of the Creationist movement, which made its appearance in the 1960's with the publication of Henry Morris's *The Genesis Flood*, belief in a literal biblical creation story was not as much a defining feature of conservative belief as it was later to become. George Marsden notes

that in the 19th century, Evangelicalism was close kin with science in general, and often neutral regarding Darwinism in particular, as Evangelicalism shared much in character with the mode of scientific thinking.

The reception of Darwinism, which eventually became pivotal in shaping and symbolizing evangelical attitudes toward scientific culture, has to be understood in this context. By 1859, evangelicals, both scientists and theologians, thought they had discovered an impregnable synthesis between faith and reason. Scientific reasoning, the kind they most respected, firmly supported Christian faith. In principle they were deeply wedded to a scientific culture, so long as it left room (indeed, a privileged place of honor) to add on their version of Christianity. Given this commitment, it is not surprising that the evangelical reaction to Darwinism was, as numerous recent studies have shown, far more ambivalent than the stereotyped story would suggest.³

This being the case, in the time when Lewis was publishing it may not have been as incongruous as it is now for a theological conservative to express support for and belief in the science of evolution.

Evidence of Lewis's support of evolution shows up in some of his earliest fiction writings. The first two novels of *The Space Trilogy*, which were based in the science fiction genre and were Lewis's first foray into fiction

writing, dealt extensively with the biology of rational life forms on other planets, first on Mars, then Venus. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis encounters a planet where evolutionary origins are not explicitly stated, but rational creatures of three types have emerged from the animal life of the planet, in contrast to earth's solitary race of humans. The first race of beings he encounters, the hrossa, though rational and possessing language, have a fur pelt and webbed feet, resembling an otter. Later in the novel the protagonist encounters the pfffltriggi, a rational race whose appearance suggests an amphibian ancestry.

In the second novel, *Perelandra*, the protagonist travels to Venus where he encounters a rational female being who is rather more human-looking. Here, Lewis makes the reference to evolutionary development explicit.

He wondered also whether the King and Queen of Perelandra, though doubtless the first human pair of this planet, might on the physical side have a marine ancestry. And if so, what then of the man-like things before men in our own world? Must they in truth have been the wistful brutalities whose pictures we see in popular books on evolution? Or were the old myths truer than the modern myths? Had there in truth been a time when satyrs danced in the Italian woods?⁴

This quote foreshadows an argument made more explicit in *The Problem of Pain*, which sees Lewis hinting at the possibility of there

being an evolutionary history prior to the first biological expressions of humanity. Lewis also questions the accepted linking of "primitive" with "inferior" or "deficient", and in doing so reveals his deep respect for myth, and his suspicion of a ambiguous boundary between myth and truth, which will be discussed in detail later. Finally, the quote reflects Lewis's ability to defy categorization, as in one quote he outs himself as a heretic to both the Darwinians *and* the Evangelicals.

In light of Lewis's star power among Evangelicals, the most surprising references to evolution come in *Mere Christianity*—surprising because out of all Lewis's books, this one in particular is renowned as an Evangelical classic. Lewis has reached the heights of Evangelical popularity in spite of the inclusion of the following lines of thought. This must stand as evidence either to the fact that Lewis's remaining ideas are pleasing enough to Evangelical sensibilities to trump his apparent heresies, or that Evangelicals don't thoroughly read their own classic literature.

In one section, Lewis displays no unease at bringing evolution into a discussion of spiritual development. He allows room for doubt of the theory, but proceeds to make it central to his explanation.

"In the last chapter I compared Christ's work of making New Men to the process of turning a horse into a winged creature. I used that extreme example in order to emphasise the point that it is not mere improvement but Transformation. The

nearest parallel to it in the world of nature is to be found in the remarkable transformations we can make in insects by applying certain rays to them.

“Some people think this is how Evolution worked. The alterations in creatures on which it all depends may have been produced by rays coming from outer space.... Perhaps a modern man can understand the Christian idea best if he takes it in connection with Evolution. Everyone now knows about Evolution (though, of course, some educated people disbelieve it); everyone has been told that man has evolved from lower types of life. Consequently, people often wonder ‘What is the next step? When is the thing beyond man going to appear?’ him....”⁵

Lewis here reveals himself as firmly in the camp of theistic evolution. He believes that creatures have been formed by the influence of natural selection, but that ultimately, God has played a part in the origins. Moreover, here and in a number of other places, Lewis makes it clear that he believes that there is a point where God bestows humanity upon an evolved animal (he deals with the “how” of this process more fully in *The Problem of Pain*, to be discussed later). Lewis makes this facet of his thought about evolution even clearer just a little farther on in *Mere Christianity*. He sees God’s hand guiding evolution to the decisive point of the creation of humanity, but perceives yet another critical moment when humanity faces its choice of turning to or away from the

Creator who bestowed humanity upon it.

Century by century God has guided nature up to the point of producing creatures which can (if they will) be taken right out of nature, turned into ‘gods’. Will they allow themselves to be taken? In a way, it is like the crisis of birth. Until we rise and follow Christ we are still parts of Nature, still in the womb of our great mother. Her pregnancy has been long and painful and anxious, but it has reached its climax. The great moment has come. Everything is ready. The Doctor has arrived. Will the birth ‘go off all right’?⁶

Lewis develops the idea of “New Men”, a spiritual ideal that comes in allegiance to Christ, as the next development of evolutionary progress. Again, this is a stance that would find few supporters among naturalists, but Lewis’s acceptance of evolution without argument would be repulsive to the creationists as well. Lewis, however, shows uncompromising comfort with the basics of evolution as evidenced by offhand references to it as “a biological or super-biological fact”.⁷ He groups evolution with a list of other indisputables. “The ordinary man believes in the Solar System, atoms, evolution, and the circulation of the blood on authority—because the scientists say so...”,⁸ and notes that “Thousands of centuries ago huge, very heavily armoured creatures were evolved.”⁹

The overlap of Lewis’s scientific and theological thought receives its plainest

explanation in *The Problem of Pain*. A myth is offered as an account of the fall of man, but it is not intended as a myth in the sense of “non-historical truth”, but rather as a “not unlikely tale”.

For long centuries God perfected the animal form which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself. He gave it hands whose thumb could be applied to each of the fingers, and jaws and teeth and throat capable of articulation, and a brain sufficiently complex to execute all the material motions whereby rational thought is incarnated. The creature may have existed for ages in this state before it became man: it may even have been clever enough to make things which a modern archaeologist would accept as proof of its humanity. But it was only an animal because all its physical and psychical processes were directed to purely material and natural ends. Then, in the fullness of time, God caused to descend upon this organism, both on its psychology and physiology, a new kind of consciousness which could say “I” and “me”, which could look upon itself as an object, which knew God, which could make judgements of truth, beauty, and goodness, and which was so far above time that it could perceive time flowing past.¹⁰

Just as Lewis does in other disputable areas, the case is made in a way that allows

some wiggle room — Lewis does not inflexibly demand acceptance of his interpretation. Rather, it is offered it as a possibility, in the form of a myth that can challenge the reader with a new thought, without forcing a final conclusion. This is largely what is unacceptable within the more rigid worldview of many Evangelicals, who, heavily influenced by the verifiable results of science, resist thinking in shades of grey.

This passage does, however, reveal that Lewis can in no way be considered a completely orthodox theological conservative. It is clear that Lewis does not consider it necessary to take the biblical creation story found in Genesis as a literal, factual account of the origins of man. Indeed, Lewis states this frankly, again in *The Problem of Pain*.

We do not know how many of these creatures God made nor how long they continued in the Paradisal state. But sooner or later they fell. Someone or something whispered that they could become gods ... For all I can see, it might have concerned the literal eating of a fruit, but the question is of no consequence.¹¹

Many Evangelicals and their creation science counterparts maintain with an unyielding vehemence that if the story of biblical origins cannot be trusted as literal, then neither can any of the rest of the Bible be trusted to communicate truth. Lewis clearly does not consider this to be a necessary conclusion.

How was Lewis able to so comfortably bring

together the apparently opposing spheres of faith and science? Answers to this question can be found in the Lewis's unique conception of mythical thinking, and its relationship to reality. Evangelical fundamentalists and ardent naturalists tend to hold in common a disdain for mythical thinking as a medium of truth. Here can be found the essential difference that kept Lewis at odds with both camps. Lewis came to see myth as God's primary means of communicating that which cannot be easily grasped, tested, and mastered by finite human intellect. To him, myth was how an infinite God provided his creation with the first few rungs on a ladder to understanding.

This had not always been the case. Alan Jacobs points out that the young, pre-conversion Lewis, in arguments with J. R. R. Tolkien had declared myth to be no more than lies, even if they were rather moving lies. Tolkien however, maintained that “.. to perceive the creation truly, we must move beyond seeing what stars are made of, and because we are fallen and finite creatures, this we can do only by image, metaphor, and myth.”¹³ This is a view the Lewis came to accept fully, and from conversion onward the idea that human yearning and desire is evidence of the divine can be found in most of his works. Jacobs notes, “That we dream and wish at all is a powerful element of the case for belief that myths communicate some truth that cannot be communicated in any other way. Lewis would use this argument repeatedly for the rest of his life.”¹⁴

Theologian Karen Armstrong speaks of

imagination as being the faculty that gives rise to myth and religion, but observes that it has always played a vital role in science as well. Both science and religion allow us, though in different aspects of life, to move forward into the not-yet-known, and in doing so, can be complementary. She states, “Like science and technology, mythology, as we shall see, is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it.”¹⁵ Lewis would have agreed with this assessment. At a bedrock level, he was interested in what is true, and he could see that scientific truth in the end only provides a partial account of the truth that is there to be accessed. Understanding of the complete story requires a seeker to go beyond the realm of facts describing the physical world, provided by science. And to do this, mythical thinking is required. Lewis felt that the scientists themselves proved this when they allowed themselves to speculate beyond the facts provided by the data, forming what Lewis called the myth of popular Evolutionism.

Lewis seemed to regard the biological truths of evolution as indisputable, but he could see that on top of those facts there rested an evolutionary myth all its own, which, while parading as fact, was based on faith in a great many unverifiable assumptions. First among these was the notion that evolution meant things were always getting better, the idea that change equals improvement. Random natural selection makes no such promise, and therefore Lewis could see that the popular Evolutionist notion of emerging Supermen in an endless

upward progression was as much a myth — not necessarily a false story, but a story reliant on faith and hope rather than indisputable facts — as is the Christian account of the meaning of life.

As mentioned earlier, in an essay called “The Funeral of a Great Myth”, Lewis deals with the myth of popular evolutionism at length. He points out that the conception of the myth pre-dated its science, with the Romantics articulating it before Darwin had published his theory. The essay demonstrates how the myth is a perfect fit for the economics and the politics of Lewis’s day. He concludes by praising the effectiveness of the myth, and points out that, even from a Christian perspective, the myth contains a great deal of positive value.

As I have tried to show it has better allies too. It appeals to the same innocent and permanent needs in us which welcome Jack the Giant Killer. It gives us almost everything the imagination craves—irony, heroism, vastness, unity in multiplicity, and a tragic close. It appeals to every part of me except my reason.¹⁶

The interesting thing is that he admires the myth, and sees a great deal of literary value in it. But that doesn’t mean he thinks it is true. He doesn’t begrudge the atheist an opportunity to extrapolate a larger story, beyond the indisputable foundation of data, in order to make fuller sense of the basic facts of science. It’s just that ultimately, though he finds it moving, he doesn’t think the evolutionary myth is true.

He finds the Christian narrative of a fallen humanity, followed by redemption through the sacrifice of a dying God to be a truer fit with his experience of the human condition.

It would be hard to deny that through the influence of Darwin and the apparent triumph of mechanistic explanations of nature in the 19th century, materialism won the battle for the public mind in the 20th century. Lord Kelvin’s declaration in 1900 that “there is nothing new to be discovered in physics now” reflected a confidence that was widespread. In fact it became such a ubiquitous and overwhelming foundation for popular thought that Christianity found itself working hard to accommodate it. Materialism saw truth as that which can be touched, tested and seen, and looked with suspicion on philosophies that spoke of reality being ideal or non-physical. Within this milieu, in an almost subconscious act of accommodation, conservative Christianity was forming awkward theologies in popular science’s image. The definition of “real” came to mean “physical”, with the most conservative of Evangelicals arguing for heaven and hell as actual geographical locations. Theologians who dared to suggest that finding truth in the Old Testament stories did not require a literal interpretation were branded as outsiders. “True” for them focused on the occurrence of historical events rather than God speaking truth through the vehicle of mythic fiction.

However by 1905 Einstein and quantum physics had arrived to rain on Lord Kelvin’s victory celebration. The Irish philosopher

Berkeley, founder of subjective idealism, had suggested in the 18th century that rather than matter giving birth to consciousness, as the materialists maintained, that it was the other way around. Consciousness to Berkeley was the basic building block of the universe, with perception giving birth to all we see. Of course throughout most of the 19th century such thinking was dismissed as almost comical. It was thus a profound shock for the science community in general when, in the early 20th century, advancements in science began to point in exactly this direction. Einstein himself went to his grave refusing to believe it could be true that, as he put it, “the moon exists because a mouse looks at it”.

Quantum physics ended the materialists’ monopoly on the definition of what is “real” and re-opened the way for alternative conceptions. Lewis was a perfect fit in this new age. At one point Lewis, when asked to name God’s philosophical position, responded without hesitation, “God is a Berkeleyan Idealist”.¹⁷ While it is true that before long Lewis moved on from subjective idealism to Christianity, perhaps it was this philosophical influence that brought about an understanding in Lewis that the highest levels of thought, the world of ideas, is as “real” - indeed even more real - than physical reality. This difference of emphasis freed Lewis from the bonds of rigid literalism. While the conservatives were fighting battles for literal interpretations of scripture, Lewis was convinced that the primary truths that

God was trying to communicate through scripture most often had little to do with literal meanings. At the same time, this same influence of idealism, along with Lewis’s belief in the inadequacy of materialism for providing a foundation for values of beauty and morality caused him to look beyond the simple facts of biological evolution toward a deeper meaning.

Endnotes

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- 2) Ibid.
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- 8) Ibid. p. 62
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