

Introduction

C. S. Lewis and Philosophy?

A. J. Ayer, one of the leaders of logical positivism in Britain, recounts an exchange he once had with C. S. Lewis:

While the analytic movement, in one form or another, took increasing control of the English philosophical scene, there were some pockets of resistance to it. One of those who fought a rearguard action against it in Oxford was the English scholar C. S. Lewis, who had once had the ambition to become a tutor in philosophy and still took a lively interest in the subject. He presided over the Socratic Club, which then drew a large audience to meetings at which the principal speakers usually struck a religious note. At one of these meetings, not long after my return to Oxford, I undertook a reply to a paper by Michael Foster, who had spent part of the war as an officer in Northern Ireland and had come back strengthened in his Puritanism. I dealt with his paper rather harshly, and when he made little effort to defend it, C. S. Lewis took over from him. Lewis and I then engaged in a flashy debate, which entertained the audience but did neither of us much credit, while Foster sat by, suffering in silence.¹

This passage is interesting because it shows C. S. Lewis, a man generally perceived as a literary critic, fantasy writer and / or lay theologian, engaged in a philosophical debate with one of the twentieth century's most influential philosophers. And this was not just a one-time occurrence: over the course of his life, Lewis crossed paths with many great philosophers such as Gilbert

¹ A. J. Ayer, *Part of My Life: Memoirs of a Philosopher* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 296-7.

Ryle,² Antony Flew,³ C. E. M. Joad,⁴ Fredrick Copleston,⁵ Basil Mitchell,⁶ and George Grant.⁷ If one thinks about it for a moment, these philosophical debates point to a dimension of Lewis – a philosophical dimension – which has been greatly overshadowed by his theological and literary accomplishments.

This brings me to the purpose of this book. By and large it seems as though friends and critics alike have been content with reducing any discussion of Lewis and philosophy, if they mention it at all, to his apologetics. I find this lack of attention given to all of Lewis’s philosophical interests both saddening because it robs “Lewis of the philosophic insights that constitute the very texture of his apologetic,”⁸ and surprising given the vast outpouring of publications about Lewis every year. It is lamentable that, for instance, during the Christmas 2005 holiday season alone, more than twenty books were written about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, none of which told us anything new about Lewis (“a shelf-full of mediocrity,”⁹ as one critic put it). Of course there have been a few attempts at drawing attention to Lewis and philosophy, notably: the recently released collection of essays on Lewis’s understanding of Truth, Beauty and Goodness (which is wonderfully

2 John Mabbott, *Oxford Memories* (Oxford: Thornton’s, 1986), 77-8.

3 “The Socratic Club was a lively forum for debates between atheists and Christians, and I was a regular participant at its meetings. Its redoubtable president from 1942 to 1954 was the famous Christian writer C. S. Lewis.” Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 22-3. Cf. Antony Flew and Gary Habermas, “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: A Discussion between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas,” *Philosophia Christi* 6, no. 2 (2004): 200. Cf. Antony Flew and Gary Habermas, “From Atheism to Deism: A Conversation between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary Habermas and Jerry Walls, 37-52 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

4 Christopher W. Mitchell, “University Battles: C. S. Lewis and the Oxford University Socratic Club,” in *C. S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands; The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge, 329-52 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 329.

5 Walter Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James Como, 137-85 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), 180.

6 Basil Mitchell and Andrew Walker, “Reflections on C. S. Lewis, Apologetics, and the Moral Tradition,” in *Rumours of Heaven: Essays in Celebration of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Andrew Walker and James Patrick, 7-26 (London: Eagle, 1998), 7. Basil Mitchell, “C. S. Lewis on *The Abolition of Man*,” in *C. S. Lewis Remembered*, ed. Harry Lee Poe and Rebecca Whitten Poe, 174-83 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 174. 0

7 Ron Dart, “C. S. Lewis and George Grant: A Tale of Two Anglican Tories,” *Pilgrimage: The Toronto C. S. Lewis Society Bulletin* 9, no. 2 (April 2002): 1.

8 James Patrick, *The Magdalen Metaphysicals: Idealism and Orthodoxy at Oxford 1901-1945* (N.p.: Mercer University Press, 1985), 164.

9 Laura Miller, “Return to Narnia,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2005.

titled *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*),¹⁰ another recently released collection of essays on *The Chronicles of Narnia* and philosophy,¹¹ Erik Wielenberg's book which discusses the views of Lewis, Russell and Hume largely on natural theology,¹² French philosopher Iréne Fernandez's book on Lewis's theory of reason and myth,¹³ the third volume of Bruce Edwards's *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*,¹⁴ Owen Barfield's and Lionel Adey's insights into Lewis's "Great War" with Owen Barfield,¹⁵ Peter Kreeft's selected essays on Lewis's argument from desire and Natural Law,¹⁶ Victor Reppert's books and essays on Lewis's argument from reason,¹⁷ Richard Purtill's philosophical insights into Lewis's theological project,¹⁸ Peter Schakel's discussion about reason

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- 10 David Baggett, Gary Habermas and Jerry Walls, eds., *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008). Let me extend my gratitude to David Baggett, who graciously provided me with all the chapters to this book before it was published.
 - 11 Gregory Bassham and Jerry L. Walls, eds., *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy: The Lion, the Witch, and the Worldview* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).
 - 12 Erik Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C.S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Also see Adam Barkman, review of *God and the Reach of Reason: C.S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell*, by Erik Wielenberg, *Christian Scholar's Review* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 160-3.
 - 13 Iréne Fernandez, *C. S. Lewis – Mythe, Raison Ardente: Imagination et Réalité Selon C. S. Lewis* (Geneva: Ad Solem, 2005).
 - 14 Bruce Edwards, ed., *Apologist, Philosopher, & Theologian*, vol. 3, *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy* (West Point, CT: Greenwood, 2007).
 - 15 Owen Barfield, *Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). Lionel Adey, *C. S. Lewis's 'Great War' with Owen Barfield* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Press, 1978).
 - 16 Peter Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis' Argument from Desire," appendix A in *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, 201-32 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989). Peter Kreeft, *C. S. Lewis for the Third Millennium: Six Essays on The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).
 - 17 Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defence of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). Victor Reppert, "The Green Witch and the Great Debate: Freeing Narnia from the Spell of the Lewis-Anscombe Legend," in *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, ed. Gregory Bassham and Jerry Walls, 260-72 (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). Victor Reppert, "Miracles: C. S. Lewis's Critique of Naturalism," in *Apologist, Philosopher, & Theologian*, vol. 3, *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, ed. Bruce Edwards, 153-82 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007). Victor Reppert, "Defending the Dangerous Idea: An Update on Lewis's Argument from Reason," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary Habermas and Jerry Walls, 53-67 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008). Also see Adam Barkman, review of *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: A Philosophical Defense of Lewis's Argument from Reason*, by Victor Reppert, *Pilgrimage* 12, no. 1 (January 2005): 8.
 - 18 Richard Purtill, *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985). Richard Purtill, *Lord of the Elves and Eldils: Fantasy and Philosophy in C. S.*

and the imagination,¹⁹ James Patrick's essays on Lewis and idealism,²⁰ Basil Mitchell's papers about Lewis and ethics,²¹ Christopher Mitchell's essay on Lewis and the Socratic Club,²² John Beversluis's attack on Lewis's rational religion,²³ and selected essays by prominent Catholic theologians like Avery Cardinal Dulles, who said Lewis was "competent in philosophy,"²⁴ and Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), who spoke of Lewis as "the English author and philosopher."²⁵ Nevertheless, while all of these books and essays touch on various aspects of Lewis's philosophical thought, none of them have done justice to Lewis's insistence that "a complete philosophy must get in *all* the facts,"²⁶ for none of them have provided (1) a clear and complete historical account of Lewis's understanding of the purpose of philosophy (hence the constant misunderstanding of the "Anscombe Legend"), (2) a complete historical and historiographical account of Lewis's philosophical

Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974).

- 19 Peter Schakel, *Reason and Imagination in C. S. Lewis: A Study of Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).
- 20 Patrick, *The Magdalen Metaphysicsals*, 109-34. James Patrick, "C. S. Lewis and Idealism," in *Rumours of Heaven: Essays in Celebration of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Andrew Walker and James Patrick, 156-73 (London: Eagle, 1998).
- 21 Mitchell, "Reflections on C. S. Lewis, Apologetics, and the Moral Tradition," 7-26. Mitchell, "C. S. Lewis on *The Abolition of Man*," 174-83.
- 22 Mitchell, "University Battles: C. S. Lewis and the Oxford University Socratic Club," 329-52.
- 23 John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985). It should be noted that while a second, revised edition of this book was released in 2007, I have not made use of it since all of the basic arguments – with their respective theses and conclusions – are basically unchanged.
- 24 Avery Cardinal Dulles, "C. S. Lewis: The Case for Apologetics," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 36, no. 1 (January-February 2005): 1-9.
- 25 Joseph Ratzinger, "Consumer Materialism and Christian Hope," <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/resource/totf/ratzinger.html> (accessed August 4, 2005). Cf. "I think one of the most illuminating comments I have ever heard about Lewis was from someone who hadn't met him but who could understand human motivation very well and who also was a writer, and that was the Pope. I met him in 1984, and as I understand it the meeting was at his suggestion because he was the one who wanted to talk about Lewis. John Paul had been reading the works of Lewis at least since the fifties. Anyway, it was a great moment for me when I had the talk with him and he began by asking me, 'Do you still love your old friend C. S. Lewis?' I said, 'Yes, Holy Father, both *storge* and *philia*,' and he said, 'Ah, you knew I liked *The Four Loves*!' But at the end of the interview he then made a comment about Lewis. He said, 'C. S. Lewis *knew* what his apostolate was.' There was a long pause, then he said, 'And he *did* it!'" Walter Hooper, "Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: An Interview with Walter Hooper," in *Tolkien: A Celebration*, ed. Joseph Pearce, 190-8 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 194.
- 26 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, in *C. S. Lewis: Selected Books* [Long Edition] (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 1131.

journey, (3) an examination of Lewis's unpublished philosophical material and marginalia in his editions of the philosophers, nor (4) a unified look (I do not say *systematic*, for such I believe to be impossible with Lewis) at how Lewis saw all the branches of philosophy. My purpose, consequently, is to rectify this situation by attempting a complete exploration of the history of Lewis's philosophical thought; however, I should add for those critics who expect to find in this book detailed discussions of Lewis's philosophical arguments that because many of Lewis's philosophical arguments, particularly those in natural theology, have been suitably dealt with elsewhere (e.g. in Reppert, Wielenberg, Baggett et al.), my book will mostly focus on explaining the *historical* aspect of Lewis and philosophy.

So what was the Oxford don's philosophy? In regard to philosophical labels, Lewis's mature thought reveals him to have been an eclectic thinker who, if one had to put him in a box, is best described as a proponent of Neoplatonic Christianity, a philosophy which attempts to synchronize, as well as it can, the best of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and pagan religion with Christianity. In regard to the purpose of philosophy, Lewis insisted that philosophy is the transformation of life and not merely an academic exercise. In this respect he is in agreement with the philosophers of antiquity, starting with Socrates, who understood philosophy to be "a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being."²⁷ Moreover, Lewis agreed with such philosophers that the truly philosophical life will utilize not only reason, but also the imagination and other faculties of the soul to probe physical, metaphysical and mythological reality for answers as to how one ought to live.

Hence, it is my view that if one understands philosophy in the classical sense, as a way of life or a process by which one seeks after knowledge and then attempts to live by its dictates, Lewis may be justly considered a philosopher. Vector Reppert, although he formulates it differently than I, agrees:

Lewis was a thinker with what I believe to be outstanding philosophical instincts. . . . It is sometimes presupposed by those who are familiar with the technical side of a discipline like philosophy that no one who is not similarly a 'professional' has anything serious to say. But of course 'professionalism' in philosophy is a rather recent development: the majority of those who have made significant contributions to philosophy over the past twenty-five centuries would not qualify as 'professional' philosophers in the contemporary sense.²⁸

²⁷ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265.

²⁸ Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea*, 12, 15. Cf. "Technically, [Lewis] was throughout

Nevertheless, while I will be arguing throughout this book that Lewis is a philosopher in the ancient sense of the word (and one who has much to say to contemporary philosophers²⁹), let me strongly emphasize that I have no intention of turning a blind eye (as so many Lewis scholars do) to Lewis's philosophical shortcomings, nor do I intend to prove in any way that Lewis is a "serious" or "professional" philosopher if by this we mean, as Pierre Hadot does when he speaks of the modern understanding of the philosopher, someone who strives "to invent . . . a new construction, systematic and abstract, intended somehow or other to explain the universe, or at the least . . . elaborate a new discourse about language."³⁰ It would be odd indeed if after lamenting the poor state of Lewis scholarship, I would then proceed to commit the most common of all mistakes in regard to Lewis scholarship – to oversimplify him and then hail him as infallible.

Methodologically, I will be using a combination of a problem-centered approach (how do we solve this apparent inconsistency?) and a genealogical approach (what came before this?) to reconstruct Lewis's philosophy. And while these two approaches can provide a fairly accurate picture of what is going on, historical-philosophic reconstruction is no straightforward matter as the meaning of terms and concepts change from philosopher to

most of his adult life a professor of literature. But really, he was a philosopher. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, along with an unending desire to find it, understand it, put it into action, and pass it on to others. Lewis brought a philosophical caste of mind to everything he did." Tom Morris, "Foreword," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary Habermas and Jerry Walls, 9-10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 10. Cf. Paul Vincent, "C. S. Lewis as Amateur Philosopher," *The New York C. S. Lewis Society Bulletin* no. 9 (July 1970): 1-3. Cf. "The popular literature on C. S. Lewis, from the first, has tended to run to excessive adulation; yet his Christian apologetics have usually been dismissed out of hand by serious philosophers and theologians. Neither attitude, as it seems to me, properly takes Lewis's measure." Hugo Meynell, "An Attack on C. S. Lewis," *Faith and Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (July 1991): 305.

29 Thus, I agree with Erik Wielenberg when he writes, "Whatever the reason for the relative neglect of Lewis in contemporary philosophy, I believe that it is a mistake, and one of my aims in this book is to show that Lewis's philosophical work is worthy of serious attention. . . . [Drawing attention to weaknesses in naturalism] is among Lewis's most important contributions to contemporary philosophy." Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume and Bertrand Russell*, 4, 104.

30 Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 2. Hence, I agree with Scott Burson and Jerry Walls when they write, "So the first thing we should realize is that when we come to Lewis . . . we should not come expecting the philosophical rigor of a Plantinga or Swinburne. Those who come with such expectations are sure to be disappointed." Scott Burson and Jerry Walls, *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 240.

philosopher. And even this would not be so difficult were Lewis not so well-read and eclectic, for the huge diversity of philosophical positions that he took over the years, culminating in Neoplatonic Christianity, make getting at the meaning of such apparently simple words as “idealism,” “reason” or “imagination” extremely difficult. Additionally, while it is philosophically and literarily tricky to look to works of fiction for insight into an author’s philosophy, I believe that in many cases we can do this with Lewis, for as James Como has pointed out, “From annotation to notebook, from notebook to essay or address, from address to one sort of book, from one sort of book to another – from one way of knowing to another – Lewis and his world of discourse form a coherent whole, a tapestry of meaning.”³¹ Nevertheless, the reader must keep in mind that all of this requires a lot of finesse and gap-filling, an activity which Lewis himself was somewhat skeptical of despite being an eminent student of history and the evolution of ideas; as he said, “I wonder how much *Quellenforschung* in our studies of older literature seems solid only because those who knew the facts are dead and cannot contradict it?”³²

As for the structure of this book, I have divided it into two main parts. In the first part, which I have divided into five chapters, I discuss Lewis’s *definition of philosophy* and his *philosophical journey*, which, I argue, culminates in the Oxford don’s *identity as a philosopher*. Thus, the first chapter focuses on the historical definition of philosophy as way of life. The second chapter begins to relate this understanding of philosophy to Lewis, particularly in regard to the roles that rational analysis and training had in his philosophical journey. The third chapter develops this further by shifting focus to the crucial affect in Lewis’s philosophical journey: heavenly desire. The fourth chapter further refines Lewis’s philosophical journey by discussing the centrality of one object of heavenly desire, Myth. And the fifth chapter completes the sketch of Lewis’s philosophical journey by examining the role of culture in the Oxford don’s philosophy. In the second part of this book, I narrow the discussion of Lewis and philosophy by investigating the *particulars* of the Oxford don’s philosophy. Subsequently, chapter six focuses on metaphysics and some aspects of natural theology. Chapter seven explores Lewis’s psychology, logic and epistemology. Chapter eight has to do with Lewis’s ethics. Chapter nine examines Lewis’s socio-political philosophy,

31 James Como, *Branches to Heaven: The Geniuses of C. S. Lewis* (Dallas: Spense Publishing, 1998), 141.

32 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Volume III; Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 992 [November 28, 1958].

including issues such as family, politics and education. And chapter ten deals with the Oxford don's aesthetics. Finally, I conclude with an assessment of Lewis's philosophical project as a whole.