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# a philosophical mind

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Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. We realise it best when we talk with an unliterary friend. He may be full of goodness and good sense but he inhabits a tiny world. In it, we should be suffocated ... My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others ... [I]n reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

(Lewis 1961a, 140–1)

As soon as the mind of the maker has been made manifest in a work, a way of communication is established between other minds and his. That is to say, it is possible for a reader, by reading a book, to discover something about the mind of the writer.

(Sayers 1987, 49)

## 1.1 A Brief Biography

Clive Staples Lewis was born on November 29, 1898, in Belfast, Ireland. He was the second of two children, his brother Warnie being three years his elder. According to Warnie, one morning during a holiday at the sea, his younger brother, while still a child with the habit of referring to himself in the third person,

marched up to my mother, put a forefinger on his chest, and announced, “He is Jacksie”; an announcement no doubt received by our mother with an absentminded, “Yes dear”. But on the following day he was still Jacksie, and as he refused absolutely to answer to any other name, Jacksie it had to be; a name afterwards contracted to Jacks, and finally

to Jack. So to the family and his intimate friends he remained Jack for the rest of his life. (W. H. Lewis n.d., 8; "Jacksie" was apparently borrowed from the name of a recently-deceased dog of which the young Lewis had been fond. (Gresham 2005, 2))

Jack's parents were Albert and Florence Lewis. Albert was a career solicitor, who by all accounts had a strained relationship with his sons. Florence, an educated woman gifted in logic and mathematics, earned first- and second-class honors respectively in those subjects at the Royal University (now Queen's University) in Belfast. She tutored the young Jack in French and Latin, and he loved her dearly. Tragically, her life was cut short by abdominal cancer in August of 1908, when Jack was nine years of age. He recounted his thoughts about the effects of her demise in the following memorable words:

With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures ... ; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis. (Lewis 1955, 21)

Though there were certainly pleasures, Lewis tersely wrote in his forties that "I had a not very happy boyhood ... " (Lewis 1967, 57).

With his mother dead not even a month, Jack's unhappiness from her passing was compounded by his being sent off to Wynyard School in England, a boarding school which his parents chose without ever having set eyes on it (Sayer 1994, 57). His life there was nightmarish (Lewis in his later years referred to the school as Belsen, after the World War II German concentration camp). The headmaster of the school was tyrannical and cruel (he regularly flogged his few and decreasing number of students). The school permanently closed in June of 1910, with the headmaster soon thereafter committed to an asylum. In the fall of 1910, Jack was enrolled at Campbell College, a boarding school not far from his home in Belfast. Because of an illness in November of that year and an ensuing convalescence at home, his time at the school was brief. In January of 1911, Jack was sent off again to England and another boarding school, Cherbourg, a preparatory school for entrance into Malvern College, a public school which Albert believed would prepare his son for possible admission to a university like Oxford. Jack's experience in school this time was not as bad as that which he had on the first go-around, and a reader of an examination taken by Jack at Cherbourg for a scholarship at Malvern saw academic promise: "Came into his own in the verse. Some of his rendering truly alpha, with a poetic feeling rare in any boy. I believe he is just the sort to develop to gain a Classics award at Oxford" (Sayer 1994, 75).

Jack entered Malvern College in the fall of 1913. In his first term there, he wrote a poem *CARPE DIEM!* After Horace, which Albert sent to William Kirkpatrick, the former headmaster of a school Albert had attended in his youth. Kirkpatrick was impressed by Jack's work: "It is an amazing performance for a boy of his age—indeed for a boy of any age" (Sayer 1994, 89). Despite his academic development, Lewis was not happy at Malvern, and he more than once petitioned his father to remove him. Much later in his life, Lewis wrote generally about his life at school that "I never hated anything as much, not even the front line trenches in World War I" (2007, 1325). Warnie believed the idea of placing his brother in boarding school was a mistake from the beginning:

The fact is that Jack should never have been sent to a Public School at all. It would have been a miracle if the boy who in his first term wrote *Carpe Diem* could have found a congenial companion amongst those of his own age, or for that matter at any age level ... [H]e would have found himself much more at home amongst first year undergraduates ... For the main function of the Public School in those days was to produce a standardized article. With two or three notable exceptions they were factories turning out the spare parts and replacements needed to keep Imperial and commercial machinery functioning efficiently, and obviously it was essential that the new part should be identical with the worn-out one. But no polishing, filing, or grinding could have made Jack a cog in any machine ... (W. H. Lewis, n.d., 35–6)

In September, 1914, after only one year at Malvern, Lewis's life in public school was over. Albert sent Jack to live and study with Kirkpatrick, whom Lewis came to refer to as "Kirk" or "The Great Knock." Kirkpatrick was a rationalist and atheist, and Lewis, who also did not believe in God, thrived intellectually under Kirkpatrick's instruction. The Great Knock worked one-on-one with Lewis, schooling him to articulate and defend his views with cold, analytic rigor. By this time, Lewis was proficient in Greek, Latin, and French, with more than a little knowledge of Italian. Kirkpatrick was so impressed with his student that he wrote the following to Albert on January 7, 1915:

I do not think there can be much doubt as to the genuine and lasting quality of Clive's intellectual abilities. He was born with the literary temperament, and we have to face that fact with all that it implies. This is not a case of early precocity showing itself in rapid assimilation of knowledge ... As I said before, it is the maturity and originality of his literary judgements which is so unusual and surprising. By an unerring instinct he detects first rate quality in literary workmanship, and the second rate does not interest him in any way. Now you will observe that these endowments, in themselves remarkable, do not

in some ways facilitate the work of the teacher, whose business, let us say, is to prepare the pupil for a Classical Scholarship in entering Oxford University. The ideal pupil for that purpose is a boy gifted with memory, receptiveness, patience, and strict attention to grammatical accuracy, and so on ... The fact is that a critical and original faculty, whatever may be its promise for the future, is as much of a hindrance as a help in the drudgery of early classical training—Clive has ideas of his own and is not at all the sort of boy to be made a mere receptive machine. (W. H. Lewis 1933, 279)

In December of the same year, Kirkpatrick once again wrote to Albert:

Of Clive himself we may say that it is difficult to conceive of him doing anything else than what he is doing now. Anything else is so repugnant to him that he simply excludes it from his thoughts ... In dealing with a natural bias of temperament so strongly accentuated, we must make great allowances, but what is perfectly clear in the case is this: that outside a life of literary study, a career of literary interests, life has neither meaning nor attraction for him ... [H]e is adapted for nothing else. You may make up your mind on that. (W. H. Lewis 1934, 39)

About four months later in April, 1916, Kirkpatrick could not refrain from expressing further praise of Lewis in a letter to Albert:

I do not look on Clive as a school boy in any sense of the term. He is a student who has no interest except in reading and study ... He hardly realizes – how could he at his age – with what a liberal hand nature has bestowed her bounties upon him ... [A]s far as preparation [for university] is concerned, it is difficult to conceive of any candidate who ought to be in better position to face the ordeal. He has read more classics than any boy I ever had – or indeed I might add than any I ever heard of, unless it be an Addison or Landor or Macaulay. These are people we read of, but I have never met any. (W. H. Lewis 1934, 74)

Finally, in December, 1916, toward the end of his time tutoring Lewis, Kirkpatrick penned the following words to Albert: “As a dialectician, an intellectual disputant, I shall miss him, and he will have no successor. Clive can hold his own in any discussion, and the higher the range of the conversation, the more he feels himself at home” (W. H. Lewis 1934, 165). Even though Lewis would write in later years that “we of the teaching professions often exaggerate the influence of teachers” (1954, 350), when he learned of Kirk’s death in March, 1921, he spared no praise for his former mentor:

I at least owe to him in the intellectual sphere as much as one human being can owe another. That he enabled me to win a scholarship is the least that he did for me. It was an atmosphere of unrelenting

clearness and rigid honesty of thought that one breathed from living with him – and this I shall be the better for as long as I live. (Lewis 2004a, 535)

Summing up his life in school, Lewis wrote: “I was at four schools, and learnt nothing at three of them; but on the other hand I was lucky in having a first class tutor” (2007, 1047).

The scholarship to which Lewis referred in the penultimate quote was in classics at University College, Oxford,<sup>1</sup> where he went to reside as a student in April of 1917. He headed to University College, even though in late March he had failed an Oxford university entrance exam called “Responsions,” which included mathematics, a subject at which Lewis was extremely weak. Lewis again failed Responsions in June of that year, and never passed the exam, but was allowed to continue at Oxford nevertheless because of his service in World War I. He entered the war in November, 1917, in the trenches in France, and in the spring of 1918 was wounded there. As to the nature of his war experience, it is best to let Lewis speak for himself:

I have gone to sleep marching and woken again and found myself marching still. One walked in the trenches in thigh gum boots with water above the knee; one remembers the icy stream welling up inside the boot when you punctured it on concealed barbed wire. Familiarity both with the very old and the very recent dead confirmed that view of corpses which had been formed the moment I saw my dead mother. I came to know and pity and reverence the ordinary man: particularly dear Sergeant Ayres, who was (I suppose) killed by the same shell that wounded me ... But for the rest, the war—the frights, the cold, ... the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass, the boots worn day and night till they seemed to grow to your feet ... “This is War. This is what Homer wrote about.” (Lewis 1955, 195–6)

Upon returning to Oxford after the war, Lewis earned three firsts, one in Honours Moderations (mainly a course of study in Greek and Latin texts) in 1920, one in Greats (essentially the study of classics, philosophy, and ancient history) in 1922 (Honours Moderations and Greats were two parts of the single degree *Literae Humaniores*), and one in English language and literature in 1923 (a second degree). It was in part because permanent academic posts in philosophy and classics were hard to come by in Oxford in the early 1920s that Lewis concluded he would do the additional degree in English language and literature. He wrote to Albert in 1922 that

[t]he actual subjects of my own Greats school are a doubtful quality at the moment; for no one quite knows what place Classics and

Philosophy will hold in the educational world in a year's time. On the other hand the prestige of the Greats School is still enormous; so what is wanted everywhere is a man who combines the general qualifications which Greats is supposed to give, with the special qualifications of any other subjects. And English Literature is a "rising" subject. (W. H. Lewis n.d., 114)

John Wain, a former student of Lewis's, succinctly explained Lewis's decision to enter the English school in the following way: "[A]lthough [Lewis] didn't particularly want to teach in the English School, he thought it might be a job" (2015, 244–5).

During this time of uncertainty about his prospects for future academic employment in Oxford, Lewis was in need of money. Albert wrote in his diary on October 11, 1923, that

[w]hile Jacks was at home I repeated my promise to provide for him at Oxford if I possibly could, for a maximum of three years this summer. I again pointed out to him the difficulty of getting anything to do at 28 if he had ultimately to leave Oxford. (W. H. Lewis n.d., 148)

But Lewis did not have to leave. After taking a one-year replacement position in philosophy at University College, Oxford, in 1924–25, about which Lewis wrote to Albert, "Well, it is poorly paid and temporary ... but it is better to be inside than out, and is always a beginning" (2004a, 628), Lewis was hired by Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1925 to teach English. He wired his father "Elected fellow of Magdalen. Jack," and Albert wrote in his diary "I went up to his room and burst into tears of joy. I knelt down and thanked God with a full heart" (Lewis 2004a, 642). Lewis wrote to his father the following: "[L]et me thank you from the bottom of my heart for the generous support, extended over six years, which alone has enabled me to hang on till this" (2004a, 642). Though Albert had made it financially possible for Jack to hang on for so long, his son's letters during these years reveal a serious lack of respect for his father. Jack repented of his "many sins" against Albert years after the latter's death and acknowledged more than once in personal correspondence that the relationship with his father was "the blackest chapter in my life" (Lewis 2004b, 340), because he had "treated [his] own father abominably and no sin in [his] whole life now seem[ed] to be so serious" (Lewis 2007, 445).

But Lewis was now a Fellow of Magdalen. According to Warnie, his brother was relieved and "the relief was enormous. It had been a long, wearisome, often heartbreaking struggle to fight his way into that seemingly impregnable fortress which he used to describe as 'the real Oxford'; and now at last the battle was won" (W. H. Lewis, n.d., 161).

But the job was officially in English, not philosophy. Perhaps at least in part as an after-the-fact attempt to convince himself that he would find life in the English faculty more hospitable than a life in philosophy, Lewis wrote to Albert the following in August, 1925:

As to the other change – from Philosophy to English – I ... think you are mistaken in supposing that the field is less crowded in Philosophy: it seems so to you only because you have more chance of seeing the literary crowd ... On other grounds I am rather glad of the change. I have come to think that if I had the mind, I have not the brain and nerves for a life of pure philosophy. A continued search among the abstract roots of things, a perpetual questioning of all that plain men take for granted ... – is this the best life for temperaments such as ours? ...

I am not condemning philosophy. Indeed in turning from it to literary history and criticism, I am conscious of a descent: and if the air on the heights did not suit me, still I have brought back something of value. (2004a, 648–9)

Although hired *de jure* to teach English language and literature, *de facto* Magdalen College hired Lewis because he could also teach philosophy. According to Lewis biographers, Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, “Lewis had to be always ready to ‘fill in’ with a philosophy tutorial or lecture if required. Of the sixteen pupils Lewis had in 1926 only five were reading English” (2003, 76).

During the years Lewis was struggling to move from the life of an Oxford student to that of an Oxford don, he was also slowly but surely moving intellectually from atheism to theism.<sup>2</sup> He recounted that the “long-evaded encounter [with God] happened at a time when I was making a serious effort to obey my conscience” (Lewis 1967, 169). The date of the momentous “meeting” (it is contested) was in the spring of either 1929 or 1930. The following is Lewis’s oft-quoted summary of it:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term ... I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. (Lewis 1955, 228–9)

Though a dejected and reluctant convert to theism, Lewis wrote not too long afterward to his life-long friend Arthur Greeves that “[i]t is emphatically coming home” (Lewis 2004a, 873). Years later, Lewis recounted that “[i]t must be understood that the conversion ... was only to Theism, pure

and simple, not to Christianity” (Lewis 1955, 230). For some time, he had had longstanding reservations about the Christian religion. For example, in October, 1916, Lewis had written to Greeves that

there was once a Hebrew called Yeshua ... : when I say “Christ” of course I mean the mythological being into whom he was afterwards converted by popular imagination, and I am thinking of the legends about his magic performances and resurrection etc. That the man Yeshua or Jesus did actually exist, is as certain as that the Buddha did actually exist ... But all the other tomfoolery about virgin birth, magic healings, apparitions and so forth is on exactly the same footing as any other mythology. (Lewis 2004a, 234)

But by the time of his conversion to theism, Lewis’s views of Christianity were changing. Though not yet a Christian, he acknowledged in writing to his friend Hamilton Jenkin that “it may turn out that way in the end” (Lewis 2004a, 887). And when it finally did turn out that way, Lewis wrote to Greeves that “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity. I will try to explain this another time. My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a good deal to do with it” (2004a, 974).

The long talk to which Lewis referred was with English colleagues Hugo Dyson and J. R. R. Tolkien and stretched into the wee hours of a morning in September, 1931. The topic of conversation was about the nature of myth and its relationship to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lewis was familiar with and a lover of pagan stories about dying and rising gods, and up to the time of his discussion with Dyson and Tolkien, he had believed Christianity to be just one more such imaginative myth. As a result of the eventful talk, he became convinced that Christianity was not just another myth like the others, as he had asserted to Greeves in 1916. He was now convinced and wrote to Greeves in October, 1931 that “[t]he story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it *really happened*” (Lewis 2004a, 977). The true myth was that to which all others were pointers. Lewis’s belief in the significance of the mythology of dying and rising gods was in part a result of his already having become convinced of the importance of dying to self (obeying one’s conscience) in living one’s life. Many years after his conversion to Christianity, he explained that “[t]he value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity’” (Lewis 2013b, 108). The veil of familiarity included the truth that the seed must be buried in order to come to life, and that before there can be spring and summer there must be fall and winter. Thus, the story of



Christ dying and rising was not only the fulfillment of stories about dying and rising gods, but also reflected the philosophical truth about how one ought to approach life. In response to Greeves's frustration with rejection as a writer in 1930, Lewis penned the practical advice that "[a]s you know so well, we have got to *die* ... I am writing as I do simply [and] solely because I think the only thing for you to do is absolutely to *kill* the part of you that wants success" (2004a, 926, 927).

Firmly settled in both Oxford and the Christian religion, Lewis began to make a name for himself in academic circles. *The Allegory of Love* was published in 1936. Other academic books of note followed, including *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), the massive *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century: Excluding Drama* in 1954, and *An Experiment in Criticism* in 1961. Prior to any of these academic monographs, Lewis had published in 1933 a semi-autobiographical account of his conversion to Christianity entitled *The Pilgrim's Regress*. The book contained in his own words "needless obscurity" (Lewis 1992b, 200), and it was not until the appearance of *The Problem of Pain* in 1940 that Lewis began to acquire a reputation as a Christian apologist and public intellectual. In light of the book's success, the British Broadcasting Corporation chose Lewis to speak on the radio to the British people during World War II about Christianity. The popular talks were eventually included in the book *Mere Christianity* (1952). In the meantime, publication of *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), *The Great Divorce* (1946), and *Miracles* (1947) solidified Lewis's reputation as a spokesperson for Christianity. Lewis read aloud drafts of many of his works to members of the literary group known as the Inklings, which usually met in Lewis's rooms in Magdalen College on Thursday nights during the academic year, from roughly 1933 through 1949. Members of the group included such notable authors as J. R. R. Tolkien, who read aloud parts of what would become his Ring Trilogy, and Charles Williams.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1950s, Lewis turned to writing children's literature in the form of the Narnia stories. There would be seven books in all, the best-known of which was *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In 1954, after thirty years as a tutor at Oxford, Lewis accepted the professorship of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University. In the mid-1950s, he also met an American woman named Joy Davidman, and through a singular series of events ended up marrying her. Lewis told his friend Nevill Coghill that "I never expected to have, in my sixties, the happiness that passed me by in my twenties" (Green and Hooper 1974, 270). But the happiness was short-lived, as Davidman died from cancer in July, 1960. Lewis recounted his sorrow in *A Grief Observed*. He lived for three-and-a-quarter more years after the death of Davidman and passed away on November 22, 1963, the day the American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

## 1.2 Lewis as a Philosopher

Lewis was a most distinguished academic with what in his day was a philosophical pedigree second to none. Yet he was not a member of the professional philosophical guild, and never wrote philosophical books and papers for a strictly professional philosophical audience. In what way, then, was he preeminently a philosopher?

One might think a good way to answer this question would be to query the question itself, which assumes that Lewis was a philosopher. Perhaps despite what he and those who knew him claimed, he was not. But this argumentative move must be dismissed. While Lewis did not write academic philosophical books for professional philosophers, anyone who reads his works knows that many of them are deeply philosophical in nature. Here, *Miracles* immediately comes to mind, along with *The Problem of Pain*, *The Abolition of Man*, and the first part of *Mere Christianity*. Some Lewis scholars have intimated that Lewis likely would have continued producing such philosophical works had it not been for a public debate with the young professional philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe in 1948, at which she criticized his argument against the philosophical view known as “naturalism” (Anscombe 1981, 227). For example, the Lewis scholar Colin Duriez has recently written that in light of Anscombe’s critique, Lewis eventually “acknowledge[d] ... that philosophy had become increasingly specialized and analytical” (2015, 190) and it had left him behind. Duriez adds that Lewis “felt that if he tried to continue in that more and more rarified world, he would only be communicating with a smaller and smaller audience” (2015, 190).

I will have something to say about the exchange between Anscombe and Lewis in Chapter 2. Here I want to make clear that Duriez is mistaken when he writes that Anscombe’s criticism made Lewis realize that philosophy had become increasingly specialized and led him to conclude that he would no longer try to move in that rarified world. Lewis had already come to this realization more than two decades earlier in 1925 when he acknowledged in writing to his father (see the quote in the previous section) that while he had the mind for professional philosophy, he had neither the brain nor temperament for it. Whatever Lewis took away from Anscombe’s criticism, it could not have been that it would be wise for him not to continue in the rarified world of philosophy. Lewis could not have ceased at that time to continue in that world because he had walked away from it years earlier.

But Duriez is mistaken only in part. He is also in part correct. As he says, philosophy had become more and more specialized. Since Lewis’s days as an undergraduate, the academic discipline had taken a linguistic turn and, among other things, was focused on whether religious, moral, and aesthetic statements are meaningful declarative statements that can

be true or false. The accepted view became that assertions like “God exists,” “the purpose of life is that we be happy,” and “murder is wrong” are strictly speaking neither true nor false, but disguised emotive claims like “Hopefully there is a God!” and “I disapprove of murder and you should too!” Lewis believed this accepted view was seriously mistaken. When he wrote that he had had “a philosophical ... education” (Lewis 2001c, 20), he was referring to a course of study of historical works in which these and similar declarative statements were understood to be genuinely declarative and either true or false. Philosophy, as he learned it, was a discipline concerned with questions about what makes life worth living, what constitutes a good life, what is the nature of the self, and arguments for and against God’s existence. Lewis never wavered in his conviction that these “Big Questions” were the real subject matter of philosophy, and the breadth and depth of his education concerning historical thought about them are evidenced by references in his own published works to philosophical luminaries like Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Confucius, Augustine, Aquinas, Berkeley, Spinoza, Rousseau, Locke, Hegel, Bradley, Bergson, and a veritable host of others. His interactions with the ideas of some of these philosophers are found early on in the unpublished notes for his philosophy lectures (Lewis 1924).

So Lewis’s abiding interest in and written work about the Big Questions highlights one important way in which he was first and foremost a philosopher. But there was another way, one which complemented his interest in the Big Questions. This additional way is perhaps best characterized as an issue of personal ownership or livability (cf. Barkman 2009, 1–20). As Robin Lane Fox has recently written, for pagan Greeks and Romans, a conversion to philosophy was a conversion to “its accompanying way of life” (Fox 2015, 6). And Lewis knew as well as anyone else the thought of the pagan Greeks and Romans. An important event in terms of the issue of livability was a lunch conversation Lewis had as a young don at Oxford with his friend Owen Barfield and a pupil Alan Griffiths. Lewis referred to philosophy as a subject, to which Barfield responded:

“It wasn’t a *subject* to Plato ... it was a way.” The quiet but fervent agreement of Griffiths, and the quick glance of understanding between these two, revealed to me my own frivolity. Enough had been thought, and said, and felt, and imagined. It was about time that something should be done. (Lewis 1955, 225)

Lewis took Barfield’s point to heart. As George Sayer wrote, “[m]any men who read ‘Greats’ (classical philosophy) at Oxford read it as a subject of academic study, not as something that might affect their conduct. Jack, on the other hand, wanted the study of philosophy to

be a road to belief" (1994, 219). At the time of the conversation with Barfield and Griffiths, Lewis espoused philosophical Idealism, which is roughly the view that reality is ultimately spiritual in nature and everything, including seemingly distinct human persons, is a manifestation of Spirit and ultimately identical with it in being. Lewis concluded that one of the major problems with Idealism was that it could not be lived. He acknowledged that "there had long been an ethic (theoretically) attached to my Idealism," but, he continued,

I thought the business of us finite and half-unreal souls was to multiply the consciousness of Spirit by seeing the world from different positions while yet remaining qualitatively the same as Spirit; to be tied to a particular time and place and set of circumstances, yet there to will and think as Spirit itself does. (Lewis 1955, 225)

Lewis went on to point out that to will and think as Spirit itself does is hard to do. Though he did not straightforwardly explain the difficulty, it is plausible to think he reasoned that if Idealism is true, one is identical with one's neighbor. Thus, in pursuing or not pursuing one's own happiness one is pursuing or not pursuing one's neighbor's happiness, because they are really the same thing. But morality is about how to act when one's interests conflict with those of one's neighbor. How could one choose to live morally when morality presupposed distinctions which were not ultimately real? Lewis concluded that a practical choice had to be made and he started consciously appealing to Spirit for help: "But the fine, philosophical distinction between this and what ordinary people call 'prayer to God' breaks down as soon as you start doing it in earnest. Idealism can be talked, and even felt; it cannot be lived" (Lewis 1955, 226). In Lewis's mind, it could not be lived because to live it he had to avoid praying to God as a Spirit distinct from himself who knew and cared about the petition. Lewis reached the point where he concluded, "I was to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer" (1955, 227). More than two decades later, Lewis would approvingly make reference in personal correspondence to the poet John Keats's point that "axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses" (2007, 425n. 89).

In the end, Lewis rejected Idealism for Christianity and came to believe that not only was professional philosophy's linguistic turn a mistake, but so also was its failure to appreciate that "a philosophy" is something that impacts daily life and not something to be just mentally entertained. In contrast with philosophical academicians of his day (and today, as the philosopher Tim Crane has recently written "[i]t is normal in academic philosophy to separate a philosopher's life sharply from his or her work" (2016, 4)), Lewis joined with those who in much earlier times "still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of

life as the result of a chain of reasoning” (Lewis 1961b, 7–8). The “doing” extended to one’s daily routine, so that Lewis could write about how “[i]t is terrible to find how little progress ones [*sic*] philosophy and charity have made when they are brought to the test of domestic life” (Lewis 2004a, 907–8). In the light of his belief in the importance of the livability of a philosophy, Lewis’s insistence in a letter to J. S. A. Ensor in 1944 that “I came to believe in God on purely philosophical grounds” (Lewis 2004b, 605) and in written correspondence with N. Fridama two years later that “I was brought back [to Christianity] ... [b]y Philosophy” (Lewis 2004b, 702) makes perfect sense.

### 1.3 Lewis and Common Sense

When Lewis abandoned Idealism because it could not be lived, he was implicitly acknowledging his respect for and acceptance of common sense. J. A. W. Bennett, who was the successor to Lewis in the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge, wrote about Lewis that “[t]he whole man was in all his judgments and activities ... for [in support of] <common life>” (1992, 74). And Wesley Kort has written recently that “Lewis ha[d] a high regard for what he took to be ordinary experience. He prize[d] attention to ... the everyday” (2016, 14). Here are two representative comments from Lewis about living life: “All we can do is to try to follow the plain rules of charity, justice and commonsense and leave the issue [result] to God” (Lewis 2007, 940–1); and “[H]ow right our Lord is about ‘sufficient to the day’. Do even pious people in their reverence for the more radiantly divine element in His sayings, sometimes attend too little to their sheer practical common-sense?” (Lewis 2007, 1335).

Lewis clearly thought of common-sense philosophy as that which must be livable. But what about a slightly more expansive conception of common sense? Can something be said about it? According to Arthur J. Balfour in *Theism and Humanism*, one of the books that Lewis claimed most shaped his philosophy of life (Lewis 1962), the following is the creed of common sense:

What *is* the creed of common sense?

It has never been summed up in articles, nor fenced round with definitions. But in our ordinary moments we all hold it; and there should be no insuperable difficulty in coming to an agreement about certain of its characteristics ... One such characteristic is that its most important formulas represent beliefs which, whether true or false, whether proved or unproved, are at least inevitable. All men accept them in fact. Even those who criticise them in theory live by them in practice ...

But, are there such inevitable beliefs? There certainly are. We cannot ... suppose the world to be emptied of persons who think, who feel, who will; or of things which are material, independent, extended, and enduring. We cannot doubt that such entities exist, nor that they act on one another, nor that they are in space or time ... (Balfour 2000, 18)

Balfour added that common sense also affirms that

[t]hings are not changed by a mere change of place, but a change of place relative to an observer always changes their appearance for him. Common sense is, therefore, compelled in this, as in countless other cases, to distinguish the appearance of a thing from its reality; and to hold, as an essential article of its working creed, that appearances may alter, leaving realities unchanged.

Common sense ... has never held the opinion ... that the character or duration of external things in any way depends upon our observations of them ... Things in their true reality are not affected by mere observation, still less are they constituted by it. When material objects are in question, common sense never supposes that *esse* [the *being* of material objects] and *percipi* [their being *perceived*] are identical ... It is content to say that, though a thing is doubtless always more than the sum of those aspects of it to which we happen to be attending, yet our knowledge that it is and what it is, however imperfect, is, for practical purposes, sufficiently clear and trustworthy, requiring the support neither of metaphysics nor psychology. (Balfour 2000, 91–2)

In Balfour's estimation, then, the world of common sense is a world that contains enduring material entities that exist in space and time independently of the perceivers of them, where, as he intimates, those perceivers are rational souls (beings that think, have experiences, and will (choose)). If, like Lewis, we take our lead from Balfour, a respect for common sense would seem to include a healthy respect for beliefs/knowledge that are directly grounded and/or originate in (1) self-awareness (e.g., I believe I am a soul that is distinct from other entities and endures through time; I know I am now experiencing pain; I remember having lunch this noon; I know I want to be happy; I know pleasure is good and pain is bad; I believe I ought to treat others as I would want to be treated); (2) sense perception (e.g., I believe I have a body; I believe there is a car in my driveway that was there yesterday); and (3) reason (e.g., I know that if P then Q, and P, then Q; I know that if A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C).

In a letter to his friend Leo Baker in July, 1921, Lewis laid out what was coming to be his settled belief in the importance of common sense for assessing the truth of a philosophy of life. The subject matter that

elicited his thoughts was a book about Buddhism entitled *The Gospel of Buddha According to Old Records*, provided to him by Baker:

[T]hanks for the Gospel of Buddha: in so far as it is a gospel, an exposition of ethics etc, it has not perhaps added much to what I know of the subject, tho' it has been very pleasant reading. On the metaphysical presuppositions of Buddhism, it has given me new light: I did not realize, before, his denial of the Atman: that is very interesting. I cannot at present believe it—to me the Self, as really existing, seems involved in everything we think. No use to talk of “a bundle of thoughts” etc for, as you know, I always have to ask “who thinks?” Indeed Buddhism itself does not seem to make much use of the non-Atman doctrine, once it has been stated: and it is only by torture that the theory of re-birth is made compatible with it. Perhaps he has confused a moral truth with a metaphysical fallacy? One sees, of course, its inferiority to Christianity—at any rate as a creed for ordinary men: and though I sometimes feel that complete abnegation is the only real refuge, in my healthier moments I hope that there is something better. This minute I can pine for Nirvana, but when the sky clears I shall prefer something with more positive joy. (Lewis 2004a, 567)

Such was to be the primacy of common sense in Lewis's mind. What, if anything, did he think competes with common sense? Lewis came to believe the major contemporary competitor is a doctrine called “naturalism.” As we will see in subsequent chapters, Lewis was well aware of an ongoing effort among a growing number of “naturalistic” philosophers and scientists to reduce or explain away (eliminate) the objects of the world of common sense in terms of the “entities” of the world of science. However, Lewis repeatedly harkened back to the point that our belief in the world presented to us by science ultimately depends upon our belief in and acceptance of the framework of common sense, hence it is impossible to use the former to undermine the integrity of the latter. Because I will be discussing Lewis's convictions about this and related points in subsequent chapters, it will suffice to close this section with Balfour's summation of this point:

In its most general form the difficulty is this. It is claimed by science that its conclusions are based upon experience. The experience spoken of is unquestionably the familiar perception of external things and their movements as understood by common sense; and, however much our powers of experience be increased by telescopes, microscopes, balances, thermometers, electrosopes, and so forth, this common-sense view suffers no alteration. The perceptions of a man of science are, in essence, the perceptions of ordinary men in their ordinary moments, beset with the same difficulties, accepted with the same assurance. Whatever be the proper way of describing scientific results, the experimental data on which they rest are sought and obtained in the spirit of “naïf realism.” (Balfour 2000, 98)

## 1.4 Reading Lewis

In an essay that he wrote as an Introduction for a translation of a work by the theologian St. Athanasius, who lived in the late third and early fourth centuries, Lewis claimed in his capacity as a tutor in English Literature

that if the average student wants to find out something about Platonism, the very last thing he thinks of doing is to take a translation of Plato off the library shelf and read the *Symposium*. He would rather read some dreary modern book ten times as long, all about 'isms' and influences and only once in twelve pages telling him what Plato actually said ... The student is half afraid to meet one of the great philosophers face to face. He feels himself inadequate and thinks he will not understand him. But if he only knew, the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator ... It has always therefore been one of my main endeavours as a teacher to persuade the young that first-hand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than second-hand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire. (1970, 200)

While I have aimed to include what Lewis actually said on just about every page of this book and believe the best thing readers of it can do is read Lewis for themselves, there is nevertheless justification for a book about Lewis's philosophical views. This justification is that Lewis for the most part did not systematically express his philosophical ideas in his written work, which leaves any reader of that work with the task of having to piece together Lewis's philosophy. What makes this project especially difficult to carry out is the fact that Lewis expressed his philosophical views in different literary genres and non-professional venues and, therefore, often did not write with a degree of exactitude most suitable for a clear and precise expression of them.<sup>4</sup> Over two millennia ago, Aristotle wrote that "precision cannot be expected in the treatment of all subjects alike" (1962, 5 [1094b13]) and therefore "one can demand of a discussion only what the subject matter permits" (1962, 35 [1104a2]). In accordance with Aristotle's point, I can only provide the degree of precision in my exposition of Lewis's ideas that his written work allows. For some claims that I make about what Lewis thought, one can find a statement here or an assertion there that seems to contradict it. This is especially the case with his thought about what most would regard as more theological topics. But one need not conclude that Lewis was a careless thinker. More charitably, one might reasonably hold that because he wrote so many different kinds of works for a broadly educated public, he was willing to sacrifice strict accuracy for readability. Therefore, when reading the vast corpus of Lewis's work with the goal of getting to know his mind, one must avoid fixating on isolated sentences or paragraphs.



Lewis himself once protested that one of his academic critics “judges my books *in vacuo*, with no consideration of the audience to whom they were addressed ... ” (1970, 182). I am convinced that when one reads Lewis with a charitable spirit, one can for the most part piece together the contents of a well-developed philosophy of life.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.5 What Is to Come

So where does one begin explaining the philosophical mind of C. S. Lewis? Lewis would have told us to begin with thought and reason. We have already seen that he insisted his conversion to Christianity was philosophical in nature. “I came to it chiefly by Reason ... ” (Lewis 2004b, 189). While he was well aware that Christianity undoubtedly included those who “had danced and sung and sacrificed and trembled and adored,” it ultimately was acceptable because “the intellect ... ” serves as “our guide” (Lewis 1955, 235). The importance for Lewis of the fact that *we*, as *distinct individuals*, are intellects who think, know, and reason cannot be overemphasized. This fact will shed light on so many of the other issues discussed in this book. As Lewis wrote to Leo Baker in the letter quoted above, “to me the Self, as really existing, seems involved in everything we think ... [A]s you know, I always have to ask ‘who thinks?’” (2004a, 567). I turn to Chapter 2 to Lewis’s treatment of the self which thinks, knows, and reasons.

### notes

- 1 Though Lewis won a scholarship to University College, he had known before taking the scholarship exam that much was at stake in terms of his future livelihood: “I knew very well by now that there was hardly any position in the world save that of a don in which I was fitted to earn a living, and that I was staking everything on a game in which few won and hundreds lost” (Lewis 1955, 183).
- 2 Though, strictly speaking, “theism” is a genus of which “monotheism” and “polytheism” are species, I will use “theism” to mean “monotheism.”
- 3 Excellent books on the Inklings include Carpenter (1997); Duriez (2015); and Zaleski and Zaleski (2015).
- 4 Other writers on Lewis are well aware of the problem. Gilbert Meilaender says that

anyone attempting to write systematically about Lewis’ thought faces the great difficulty of coping with the many genres in which Lewis expresses his ideas. He writes theological treatises, short essays on a variety of topics, science fiction and fantasy, children’s stories, myth, and literary criticism. (1998, 3)

Interestingly, Meilaender does not list philosophy as one of the genres in which Lewis wrote. I believe this is evidence of the fact that too few have appreciated Lewis as a philosopher.

- 5 One who does appreciate Lewis as a philosopher is Adam Barkman, and he knows all too well how it is sometimes difficult to piece together Lewis's philosophical thought. For example, Barkman notes how Lewis both seems to embrace and reject the metaphysical categories of substance and accidents, things and qualities. He comments that

I believe that the answer to these apparent inconsistencies is to be found in *how* Lewis is read ... Thus, in all likelihood, Lewis the philosopher accepted something like the distinction between substance and accident, but Lewis the poet or Lewis the lay pastor rejected it ... (Barkman 2009, 252)

In other words, when reading Lewis, one must pay particular attention to the genre and not be overly concerned with apparent inconsistencies. When one does this, it is possible to get a reasonable sense of what he thought.