C. S. Lewis as Apologist and Mystic

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It has been my good fortune to know two of C. S. Lewis's closest friends, Owen Barfield and Martin Lings. My acquaintance with Barfield, who died in December of 1997 at the age of ninety-nine, stretches back about twenty years to my days as a graduate student. I had decided to write a dissertation on Coleridge and quickly discovered Barfield's superb book on that subject. We struck up a correspondence, and this in turn led to several meetings, both in this country and at his home in England. Like Lewis, who first met the man he later called "the best and wisest of my unofficial teachers"[1] when they were undergraduates at Oxford, I soon found myself deeply indebted to Barfield—though I hasten to add that like Lewis again I soon grew suspicious of Barfield's interest in anthroposophy and did my best to take up where the discoverer of Narnia had left off in their Great War on this subject! For the moment, however, it is not the suspicions but the debt I would stress, for it is an important key, I believe, to C. S. Lewis's work as apologist.

Barfield once told me, "Lewis taught me *how* to think, and I taught him *what* to think." The wry smile which he had on his face at the time made it clear that this maxim was by no means his last word on the subject, and yet, as you may remember from *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis was the first to admit to how great an extent the content of his mature philosophy had been shaped by his friend. "Barfield never made me an Anthroposophist," writes Lewis, "but his counterattacks destroyed forever two elements in my own thought."[2] The first was "chronological snobbery", that is, "the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."[3] We readers of Lewis can easily see the lasting importance of this lesson throughout his many books. Indeed in my experience, no author has been more successful in driving home the fact that "our own age is also 'a period'".[4] But it is Barfield's other contribution that I would have us focus on here. "In the second place," Lewis continues, Barfield

> convinced me that the positions we had hitherto held left no room for any satisfactory theory of knowledge. We had been, in the technical sense of the term, "realists"; that is, we accepted as rock-bottom reality the universe revealed by the senses. But at the same time we continued to make, for certain phenomena of consciousness, all the claims that really went with a theistic or idealistic view. We maintained that abstract thought (if obedient to logical rules) gave indisputable truth, that our moral judgment was "valid", and our aesthetic experience not merely pleasing but "valuable". . . . Barfield convinced me that it was inconsistent. If thought were a purely subjective event, these claims for it would have to be abandoned. . . . I was therefore compelled to give up realism. . . . I must admit that mind was no late-come epiphenomenon; that the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental; that our logic was participation in a cosmic *Logos*.[5]

Take particular note of the fact in this passage that man's aesthetic experience, and not only his thinking and moral willing, had become for Lewis a proof of our participation in the *Logos* or Word. I shall wish to return to this point toward the end of my talk.

Lewis's other friend whom I mentioned, Martin Lings, is not as well known in Lewis circles as Barfield, though he too is a gifted and influential writer, and at the age of ninety-two continues an active publishing life. The author of books on many subjects, including two collections of poetry, an interpretation of the major plays of Shakespeare, a study of Koranic calligraphy, and a biography of the Prophet Muhammad, Lings is especially prominent among scholars of Sufism, and he is widely recognized as a leading figure in the perennialist or traditionalist school of comparative religion. He was a student at Oxford in the 1930s, reading classics and English, and in a letter to Arthur Greeves, Lewis singled him and a fellow student out for special mention. "I wish you knew my pupils Lings and Patterson," he writes. "Indeed this is the best part of my job. In every given year the pupils I really like are in a minority, but there is hardly a year in which I do not make some real friend." My own friendship with Dr Lings has been based in large part on our common interest in the perennial philosophy and in the works of such traditionalist authorities as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, but I once asked him for his impressions of Lewis. "One thing is certain," he wrote back in response. Lewis's death "left a yawning gap that has not been filled. He had become something of a power in the land—a power for good. . . . He could set things moving in the right direction by giving exactly

the right arguments. Most people who are on the right side will give the wrong arguments. Lewis was anything but muddle-headed." This last observation did not surprise me, of course, nor will it be any news to most of you. The clarity and rigor of Lewis's mind is evident to all of his readers. But Lings then proceeds to some additional points which might otherwise not be obvious, and which seem of decisive importance for understanding precisely how that mind worked.

He recalled for me one of Lewis's very popular lectures that he attended—"I can see him now, and hear him now"—in which Lewis had explained to his audience that the Middle Ages were dominated, in their conception of the human soul and its faculties, by what Boethius laid down in Book V of his *Consolation of Philosophy*. The faculties, Boethius had said, are arranged in hierarchy: first of all, beginning with the highest, there is *intellectus*, then *ratio*, then *imaginatio*, and then *sensus*. Lewis had stressed in that lecture, says Lings, that "the intellect is not for things of this world". Indeed for Boethius, as you may remember, the trans-temporal vision of *intellectus* is strictly a Divine prerogative, although a man might come to share in that vision through a growing likeness to God, who is (says Boethius) "one by nature but many by participation".[6] In any case, "this was for me like a flash of lightning," says Lings, "for I had never before heard of the intellect in its true meaning. It was something wonderful, and in a sense I never recovered." And yet it was also something which soon came between him and Lewis. For Lings, the prospect of intellection served as an invitation and catalyst to a lifelong interest in mysticism, but this (he said) was a path which his teacher and friend refused to follow. According to Lings, Lewis "cut short one of our final arguments by saying: 'You should realize that there is often a great difference between one soul and another. Some men are above all intellectual, others are rational, others imaginative. *You*,'" he told Lings, "'are an intellectual. *I* am an imaginative man.'"

Now as Dr Lings remembers it, this exchange was a testimony in large part to Lewis's profound humility, and he made a point in the same letter of underscoring this fact by describing for me another, later conversation in which he had praised *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis's reply was simply to say, "But if only I were capable of writing its angelic counterpart!" Precisely the same self-effacement, Lings goes on to note, can be found at the conclusion of *The Four Loves*, where in speaking of *agapê* or charity Lewis touched very lightly on the supernatural love of the great mystics for God, only then to add that "with this, where a better book would begin, mine

must end. I dare not proceed. God knows, not I, whether I have ever tasted this love. Perhaps I have only imagined the tasting."[7]

But I wonder. That C. S. Lewis was an extraordinarily humble man I have no wish to contest. In fact, as an antidote to one's own moments of inflation, it can be instructive to ponder the retort he once offered to a friend of Barfield's, also an anthroposophist, who had been insisting on the importance of spiritual freedom as the aim of human life. "I was not born to be free," parried Lewis. "I was born to adore and obey."[8] When a giant of Lewis's stature says such a thing, it is inescapably evident that any would-be mystics in his audience had better sit up and take notice! And yet, however much we might emphasize the subordination of *imaginatio* among our cognitive powers, and however much we must stress Lewis's remarkable self-abnegation, I cannot but think that in calling himself "an imaginative man" he was nonetheless describing a genuine mode of knowing God, no less profound in its way than its intellectual counterpart, and that in this doubtless casual remark to my friend Dr Lings, he was providing us with a critical insight into the quality of his own religious experience and into the nature of his work as a Christian apologist.

Apologetics, as the term is used by theologians and Christian philosophers, traces its history to a passage in the First Epistle of Peter where the apostle exhorts his readers, "Be always prepared to give a defense . . . of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). The English word "defense" in this text is a translation of the term *apologia* in Greek, and it is from this that our word "apologetics" is derived. Now to defend something, of course, is to explain it, to account for it, to give reasons for it, to discern the order behind it. And this makes perfect sense, etymologically speaking, for *apologia* is rooted in turn in the Greek word *logos*, which (like its derivative "logic") refers among other things to rational order and just exposition. Adding the prefix *apo*, which signifies in this case a giving back or return, we may therefore say that an *apologia* is the act of responding to a request for one's reasons. It has to do with supplying the explanation or rationale demanded by some particular dialectical challenge or inquiry. And yet this is not all. As you doubtless know, the term *logos* has a special meaning for Christians, already alluded to by Lewis in acknowledging his debt to Barfield. "In the beginning was the *Logos*," says St John in his Gospel, "and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God" (John 1:1). More profoundly, therefore, an *apologia* must mean the return, often occasioned by requests for our reasons, to the Source of reason itself. For in the Christian perspective, every defense of

the faith presupposes that God is Himself the principle of all order and the very power of reason, and it is meant to lead eventually to a personal verification of that fact in direct experience, whether in this world or the next. The apologist begins by *assuming* a mental or cognitive participation in the divine *Logos*, but the whole point is to end by *living* that participation with the whole of oneself. And this, I believe, was the great achievement of Lewis, that he not only shows us good reasons for believing in God at the beginning of our journey, but assists us in sensing, if only for a few precious moments, what it is going to be like when we reach that journey's end and believing is changed into seeing. But I am going too fast and getting ahead of my story. Before suggesting (as I shall) that Lewis, contrary to his own estimate, was himself a certain kind of mystic, who had at least glimpsed God, I want to spend some time first with apologetics in its first and more familiar sense.

The task of the Christian apologist has varied somewhat from age to age. In the second century, when it was a question of the sheer survival of the faith, writers like St Justin the Martyr and Athenagoras the Philosopher could take for granted a common theism between themselves and their pagan audience while focusing their dialectical energies on certain finer points of doctrine and practice that set Christianity apart from other religions. In the modern world, however, the situation is radically different, and the apologist can assume no such common ground. As Lewis writes, "The gap between those who worship different gods is not so wide as that between those who worship and those who do not."[9] He goes on in what is for me one of his most characteristic and memorable lines:

> It is hard to have patience with those Jeremiahs, in press or pulpit, who warn us that we are "relapsing into Paganism". It might be rather fun if we were. It would be pleasant to see some future Prime Minister trying to kill a large and lively milk-white bull in Westminster Hall. But we shan't. . . . A post-Christian man is not a Pagan; you might as well think that a married woman recovers her virginity by divorce.[10]

In any case, no: the critics of Christianity are no longer all pagans, and in defending his faith in a post-Christian context, the Christian apologist is now obliged to begin from scratch. He must begin by justifying his belief in the very existence of God.

Classically, the reasons put forward for this belief have fallen into two broad categories, corresponding to the two principal objections that may be brought against it by the atheist. Just before presenting his famous Five Ways of proving God's existence in his *Summa Theologica*,

St Thomas states both objections succinctly. The first is based upon the problem of evil. St Thomas puts it this way: "God is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil; but there is evil. Therefore God does not exist." The second objection to the theist's faith concerns the question of whether materialism or naturalism can provide an adequate explanation of the world. Here again is St Thomas's summary: "Everything in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence."[11]

Now as many of you probably know, Lewis undertook responses to both these objections. The problem of evil is addressed above all in his *Problem of Pain*, while his arguments against atheistic naturalism, though scattered widely throughout his work, are especially prominent in the first part of *Mere Christianity* and in his book *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Let me try to summarize briefly his essential arguments in each case, beginning with the problem of evil.

Evil is a problem for the Christian because it seems to call into question either the power or the goodness of God. Take away God's power, leaving Him less than omnipotent, and our sufferings become at once intelligible; they are simply the effects of a blind cosmic force too intense or extensive for God to manage. As you may remember, this was the basic theme of a seductively popular book some years ago called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Alternatively, if you strip away the goodness of God—as it seems Lewis was himself at first tempted to do after the death of his wife—then again our miseries make perfect sense; they are merely the delights of a cosmic vivisectionist. The difficulty in all this is that Christianity refuses to sacrifice either of these Divine attributes. Its God is neither a wimp nor a sadist. Not only is He supremely powerful; He is Power itself. And not only is He supremely good; He is Goodness itself. Therefore the question remains: why is there evil? Why cruelty, why pain, and why death? If God is *able* to get rid of evil, as He surely is if He is powerful, and if He is *willing* to do so, as He surely is if He is good, then why for Heaven's sake does He not?

In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis suggests a way out of this dilemma which combines two important insights going back to the early Church fathers. First of all, he makes use of an argument, usually associated with the name of St Augustine, in which evil is explained as the result of free will. Because of the great weight of St Augustine's authority, this has been the most common of all Christian theodicies. Here is Lewis's summary:

> Christianity asserts that God is good; that He made all things good and for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil.[12]

Evil, in short, is the result of the Fall. All the suffering and horror of man's present life in this world are to be traced to a misuse of his freedom. Theologians have sometimes described this freedom as a gift, but Lewis's analysis is a bit more subtle. The notion of gift can easily mislead one into thinking that man already existed as a potential recipient or beneficiary of free will before it was actually bestowed—that God had first made him unfree or only partly free, and that the full power of choice was then added on. But this is to mistake what it means to be a self, says Lewis. "From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as a self," he writes, "the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it."[13] Hence the very existence of human consciousness is bound up with the possibility of an idolatrous self-centeredness. In Lewis's words, man is "the 'weak spot' in the very nature of creation, the risk which God apparently thinks worth taking".[14]

Free will is not the whole solution, however. Lewis's theodicy also makes use of a second ancient strategy found in the works of such theologians as St Irenaeus and Origen, who traced the cause of suffering to a point even earlier than the Fall. In the view of these fathers, suffering is an inevitable by-product of creation itself, and it was the aim of the Creator from the very start to use this suffering as a way of provoking and promoting man's spiritual growth. Although Lewis never goes so far as to say that the origin of evil is independent of the Fall, he does agree that, given man's disobedience, the constitution of the world is what makes suffering possible, and his defense of this claim comes in three steps. We must realize first that not even God can do something which is self-contradictory and therefore intrinsically impossible. It is certainly true that because He is omnipotent, "all things are possible with God" (Matthew 19:26). But in citing this scripture, we too often fail to see that

> intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.[15]

Lewis's second step is to insist that an immaterial creation is a contradiction in terms. God cannot make a world which is not an environment for the creatures he places into it, and yet an environment by its very nature must be distinct from its contents, and these in turn must be different and discrete from each other. Communication and commerce between fellow-creatures demand a medium which can bring them together while at the same time underscoring their individuality. This medium is what we call matter.

> Matter, which keeps souls apart, also brings them together. It enables each of us to have an "outside" as well as an "inside", so that what are acts of will and thought for you are noises and glances for me; you are enabled not only to *be*, but to *appear*; and hence I have the pleasure of making your acquaintance.[16]

Wherever there is the possibility for such a pleasure, however, there is also the possibility of a corresponding pain. There cannot be a world without matter, and there cannot be matter, says Lewis, without a potential for suffering. This is step three of his argument. "If matter has a fixed nature and obeys constant laws," he observes, then "not all states of matter will be equally agreeable to the wishes of a given soul, nor all equally beneficial for that particular aggregate of matter which he calls his body".[17] The world is inevitably constructed in such a way that a downhill stroll for a man going East cannot but be an uphill climb for a man going West. Similarly the same solidity which allows you to use a beam in constructing your house also allows me to use it in hitting you on the head. "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering," Lewis reasons, "and you find that you have excluded life itself."[18]

There is of course one final piece to the puzzle. To be told that we and the world have been so made that we cannot help but suffer may make our pains more intelligible but hardly more palatable, and we might well be excused for being less than satisfied with Lewis's theodicy. It is therefore essential that he connect this all up with God's providential design for our lives, and this he does by insisting that God in His wisdom has contrived things in such a way as to make use of our suffering for our ultimate benefit. In order to see this, however, we must be willing to revise our conceptions of goodness and love. Lewis certainly does not mean to suggest that God's goodness and ours are entirely different, or that what is love for Him is hatred for us. He was always careful to distance his perspective from a certain type of Christian fideism, which supposes that our morality is determined solely by divine command, and that apart from special revelation we would remain in utter darkness. "A theology which goes about to represent

our practical reason as radically unsound is heading for disaster," Lewis objects. "If we once admit that what God means by 'goodness' is sheerly different from what we judge to be good, there is no difference left between pure religion and devil worship."[19]

So no, the point is not that our circle is actually God's square. On the other hand, our circle may well be God's sphere. It is very tempting for us to think that we are seeing the whole when in fact we have only a part, and in the present case what this means is that it is very easy to confuse true love with mere indulgence. Such a confusion, says Lewis, is precisely what leads us to call into question the motives of a God who permits us to experience pain. What we naturally want is a celestial grandfather who will grant us a state of perpetual pleasure, whereas what God wants for us is resilience and moral courage, and He does not hesitate to provide us the challenges which the development of such virtues requires. "The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves," writes Lewis, "is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word 'love', and look on things as if man were the centre of them".[20] Man wishes that the world were an amusement park, but it is instead a divinely ordained school of hard knocks. One thinks of Mrs Beaver's description of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. "Who said anything about safe," she corrects Lucy. "'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."[21]

I said earlier that the Christian defense of God has usually come in response to two main objections, the first of which is based on the problem of evil. A second objection has to do with the claim that the world can be explained without reference to God—that the theistic hypothesis, while not necessarily false, is a speculative luxury unwarranted by the facts. Whether we call it materialism, or naturalism, or rationalism, or historicism, or humanism, or psychologism—all these terms have been used—there can be no doubt that this claim is at the heart of the modern and post-modern worldview. Lewis was well aware of this fact, of course, and the largest part of his apologetic efforts was devoted to demonstrating the weaknesses of this reductionist mindset and to exposing its consequences. Many of his essays had this as their aim. One of my favorites is a little piece entitled "Bulverism", published in the collection called *God in the Dock*, in which he considers writing the biography of the imaginary inventor of twentieth century thought, a fellow named Ezekiel Bulver,

> whose destiny was determined at the age of five when he heard his mother say to his father—who had been maintaining that two sides of a triangle were together

> greater than the third—"Oh you say that *because you are a man*." "At that moment", E. Bulver assures us, "there flashed across my opening mind the great truth that refutation is no necessary part of argument. Assume that your opponent is wrong, and then explain his error, and the world will be at your feet. Attempt to prove that he is wrong or (worse still) try to find out whether he is wrong or right, and the national dynamism of our age will thrust you to the wall." That is how Bulver became one of the makers of the Twentieth Century.[22]

Lewis, of course, did not simply imagine such people. He confronted their counterparts in what we are pleased to call the real world, people like the authors of an elementary English text-book for children, whose reductionistic assertion that aesthetic feeling is a purely subjective state prompted Lewis to write his prophetic masterpiece *The Abolition of Man*.

I mentioned a few minutes ago that some of Lewis's most important arguments against the naturalistic objection can be found in *Mere Christianity* and his study of *Miracles*. In the first book of *Mere Christianity*, which he calls "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe", he undertakes to refute the idea that morality can be accounted for naturally as a mere social convention. On the contrary, says Lewis, the existence of a conscience which we nonetheless disobey is proof that reality is much larger than the materialists suppose. The absoluteness of the moral imperative, an effect which we cannot help seeing if we look carefully and sincerely into our own deepest selves, requires an absolute and transcendent Cause—"a Something," writes Lewis, "which is directing the universe, and which appears in me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong".[23] A similar argument is worked out in the book *Miracles*, above all in an extremely helpful little chapter called "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism". In this case, however, it is not man's sense of moral duty but his powers of rational thought which are shown to be unexplainable exceptions to the reductionistic assumption. More than twenty years of teaching in the university classroom have convinced me that this second argument is the more effective of the two, and for this simple reason. An atheist or agnostic can deny he has a conscience while he is disputing with you, but he cannot deny, without visibly contradicting himself, that he has a mind, a mind which at that moment claims to be espousing the truth. And once he admits this is so, it is a remarkably short distance to God. It was Lewis as much as anyone who taught me this, and it is worth taking a closer look at what he says.

His argument takes the form of a syllogism. The major premise is this. "If Naturalism is true, every finite thing or event must be (in principle) explicable in terms of the Total System [of nature]."[24] In other words, if the naturalists or materialists are right, then everything can be accounted for by physical causes alone. The minor premise claims, however, that at least one thing exists, namely reason, which cannot be so accounted for. Our capacity to draw valid conclusions from true premises, as we do when we think syllogistically, is something which no physical cause can explain. Hence the conclusion to this particular syllogism: naturalism must be false. And of course if *naturalism* is false, then *supernaturalism* must be true, and the door is at least opened to the existence of God.

Now obviously the key to this argument lies in the minor premise, in the claim that reasoning cannot be explained by natural forces. Lewis therefore concentrates his energies on a defense of this assertion. Consider, as one example of how reason works, the mathematical fact that if A = B, and if B = C, then A = C. We know that given the first two equalities, the third is inescapably necessary. The conclusion simply *must* follow from the two conditions. This necessity, however, is different in kind, says Lewis, from the necessity or inevitability of the causal relationships that we notice in nature. In nature, if an object moving at such and such a velocity and having some particular mass strikes a second object of a smaller mass (let us say) which happens to be at rest, then the second will be set into motion according to certain definite laws. Its movement, over a particular distance and at such and such a speed, must necessarily follow from the impact. We have here, Lewis points out, two quite different sorts of relationships. The first is "a logical relation between beliefs or assertions", and the other "indicates a dynamic connection between events or 'states of affairs'".[25] Moreover, and this is the crucial point, "the two systems are wholly distinct. To be caused is not to be proved. Wishful thinkings, prejudices, and the delusions of madness," he continues,

> are all caused, but they are ungrounded. Indeed to be caused is so different from being proved that we behave in disputation as if they were mutually exclusive. The mere existence of causes for a belief is popularly treated as raising a presumption that it is groundless, and the most popular way of discrediting a person's opinions is to explain them causally—"You say that because . . . you are a capitalist, or a hypochrondiac, or a mere man, or only a woman."[26]

Ezekiel Bulver, we see, was a good deal more than a creature of Lewis's fancy.

The cardinal difficulty with naturalism is that it forgets to make this distinction and attempts to reduce all thinking, and therefore all possible objects of thought, to the level of pure causality. If the naturalist (using that term quite broadly now) is a certain kind of psychologist, he limits himself to causes called behavioral stimuli; if he is a Marxist, the causes are economic and social forces; and if he is a materialist or physicalist, the causes of thought will be assigned to what Lewis calls elsewhere "tiny movements in the grey matter".[27] Whatever the details, though, the same basic assumption is at work in each case, that the process by which we reach a conclusion in a syllogism is the same as the process by which a billiard ball drops into a pocket. Each has been determined by a sequence of material events. It follows from this naturalist standpoint that we are what we are and we think what we think and we reach the conclusions we do because we have been determined or programmed so to be and to act by causes that are outside our control, causes of a purely physical order.

Here is the problem, however. If naturalism were really true, then there would be no way to explain how the human mind is able to reach valid conclusions or to discern the truth. Go back to the sequence of mathematical equations. I am sure that no one in this room is in any doubt that if A = B, and if B = C, then A = C. But what if in a fit of perversity I began to argue with you that A in fact does *not* equal C in this sequence? You would in your patience and charity try to help me see my error, of course. But if you were a naturalist, you would actually have no grounds for calling it an error. For on a strictly materialistic or physiological basis, the thought which says A = C and the thought which says that A does *not* equal C are indistinguishable as bio-chemical and cerebral events. More importantly—and here is the suicidal self-contradiction that I alluded to earlier—you would have no grounds for supposing that your naturalism was itself a true account of reality. In claiming to speak the truth about the way things really are, the naturalist inadvertently slips into thinking that at least at that moment his own mind has miraculously escaped from the limits of his philosophy. And this indeed is the point. As Lewis sees it, every act of thinking which leads us to a genuine knowledge about reality involves a miraculous escape from the merely material. For in every act of knowing the truth, the human mind comes into contact with something which cannot be explained in terms of any contingency, any particularity, any history or biography. "In this sense," says Lewis, "something beyond Nature operates whenever we reason."[28]

Well, there is obviously much more one could say in pursuing this line of argument, but my point so far has been simply to give you a taste of how Lewis the apologist reasoned, not to examine his reasonings in any great detail. And of course even this tasting is highly selective. We have glanced at a few of his main arguments for theism, but his apologetics consisted in much more than defenses of God. Lewis realized (as I mentioned before) that responding to atheists and agnostics is the apologist's first and most important task in modern times, but at the same time he knew that Christianity is more than any one of its dogmas, and his explication of the faith extended to numerous other points of doctrine and practice. Had we more time, we might look at his discussions of the Trinity, for example, in which he compares the arrangement of the three Persons in one God to the combination of six squares in a cube.[29] In teaching college students I have found that this single insight often goes further than whole treatises by the professional theologians. Or again we might take note of the way Lewis handles the issue of faith and works. "I have no right really to speak on such a difficult question," he once wrote, "but it does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary."[30] And then he proceeds (as you may recall) with characteristic wit and simplicity to cut through half a millenium and more of debate on this subject.

Admitting, then, that there is much more that could be said about Lewis's treatment of specific points of the faith, I want to change direction now and turn in this second half of my talk to another, and I believe more important, dimension of his work as apologist. You will remember that I have distinguished between two kinds of apologetics, each reflecting the word's Greek etymology. On the one hand, an *apologia* has to do with giving explanations or reasons. Questions are posed, questions arising from doubts (among others) as to the possibility or necessity of the Christian God, and the apologist then endeavors to answer them, providing reasons in return for criticisms. On the other hand, an *apologia* may refer instead to a different and more profound sort of return. In this case, the direction of movement is not so much from the apologist toward his critic or challenger, with particular justifications serving as the medium of exchange. The return is rather toward the divine *Logos* itself, and the aim is not the allaying of doubts by means of assumptions and syllogisms, but the provoking or inciting of an immediate vision. We may conclude (to use the familiar example) that where there is smoke there is fire. But the discursive process by which we arrive at this deduction is something very different from actually seeing and being warmed by the flames. My belief is that Lewis had more than *reasoned*

his way into thinking that there had to be fire. He had *seen* it, if only "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor 13:12), and he was at his very best as a writer in helping others enter into the same experience. Valuable as his discursive arguments are, it is the power of his imagination to awaken a like seeing in us that makes him, finally, so great an apologist.

To understand what I have in mind, we would do well to go back to some points which I highlighted earlier. First there was the self-assessment Lewis offered in speaking to his former student and friend Martin Lings. "Some men are above all intellectual, others are rational, others imaginative," Lewis had said, and he went on as you will remember to include himself in the third group. "*I*"—he explained, "am an imaginative man." Now as I told you before, this seems to me a most significant confession, though not primarily for the reasons which his interlocutor later chose to emphasize. Dr Lings concluded that the remark was a testament to Lewis's humility, for Boethius had said that in the hierarchy of man's faculties the intellect is above the reason, and the reason above the imagination. And yet it seems to me that it would be a great mistake to suppose that Lewis, in speaking about his own imaginative powers, meant quite the same thing as the author of the *Consolation*. In Boethius's usage *imaginatio* is our familiar capacity to call up memories based upon sense impressions, as when we picture a round shape in the mind's eye when a penny or some other round object is not actually present. But for Lewis, the imagination meant considerably more. More than a means for retrieving and combining past experiences, it was a genuine mode of fresh perception, a real organ of knowledge, and this was something which he had learned from his other friend, Owen Barfield. Barfield had taught him (I quote again the line from *Surprised by Joy* which I emphasized earlier) that "our aesthetic experience [is] not merely pleasing but 'valuable'"—that like our thinking and willing, it too is a sign of our "participation in a cosmic *Logos*".[31] Thus for Lewis to say that his own greatest strengths were of an imaginative order was not a matter, or not at least only a matter, of self-deprecation. He was instead telling us something very important about the mode or quality of his relation to God, and understood in this light, the comment helps to explain the effectiveness of so much of his writing in promoting that return to the *Logos* which is the aim of apologetics in its second sense. I realize that this is a difficult point. A few further comments on the Barfieldianism in Lewis's thinking would be helpful.

As we know from his book on the subject, Barfield agreed with Coleridge that the imagination is not only "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception"; it is also,

more profoundly, the "repetition" in man of "the eternal act of creation" in God.[32] Quite apart from his later studies of the Coleridgean philosophy, this was a discovery which Barfield claims to have made in his youth through reading lyric poetry. "What particularly impressed me," he writes,

> was the way in which almost any intense experience of poetry reacted on my experience of the outer world. The face of nature, the objects of art, the events of history and human intercourse betrayed significances hitherto unknown as the result of [the] . . . poetic or imaginative combinations of words. . . . I found I knew (there was no other word for it) things about them which I had not known before.[33]

Barfield concluded from such experiences that the colors and sounds and smells, and even the solidity, of things as perceived by our senses are not simply the data of an external and independent environment, but the constructions or expressions of consciousness—the consciousness of God, on the one hand, whose ideas are the indispensable principles, but also the consciousness of man, without whose participation those principles could not have been embodied in matter. Hence the conviction (quoting Lewis again) that the "mind was no late-come epiphenomenon"—that "the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental".[34]

There is yet another point in Barfield's doctrine, however, which was perhaps even more important to his impact on Lewis, and that was his analysis of modern consciousness. According to Barfield, modern man is distinguished by the fact that he is no longer aware of the constructive role of his mind, and he has therefore ended up freezing and fixing the objects of his consciousness as if they were givens, casting himself in the role of their passive observer. The realities which enter into us from God undivided, we first cut into parts, called percepts and concepts, or facts and thoughts, or matter and spirit. And then, rather than giving way to God's gift in its wholeness so that the principles of things might enter the world still imbued with their glory, we permit only their bodies to pass, which are as it were the sensible or physical halves of God's intentions, while at the same time we hoard their meanings inside us, clinging to the abstracted qualities of things and refusing to let them pass fully into the corresponding substances of living forms. Here, for Barfield, is where the imagination is meant to come in, as the necessary means of liberating man from this state of division and self-forgetfulness. By helping us once again to experience the creative forces of consciousness which are inwardly and

invisibly at work in the objects around us, the imagination can assist us in moving back upstream in the river of our knowing toward that knowing's Source.

I do not mean to be giving you a full exposition of Barfield, or to be answering all the questions which these claims will have provoked in your minds. My point has been simply to show that when Barfield's friend C. S. Lewis referred to himself as an imaginative man, there was considerably more at stake in the comment than one might at first have suspected. He is not just telling us that he is a visual, or "right brain", sort of person, to use the current jargon. It is true, of course, that practically every page he wrote bears witness to his extraordinary powers of perception and description. But in his conversation with Lings, he was talking (I believe) about something much more subtle and important than a flare for colorful writing or a highly developed sensibility. He was referring to the fact that at least in some measure he himself had seen through the seeming division between facts and their meanings and had come to participate, in however tentative and modest a way, in their common source in the *Logos*.

I do not have time to go into a detailed argument at this point, but shall have to content myself with giving you a few directions to look in. We might turn, for example, to Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm*, where he explains to his correspondent that "images play an important part in my prayers". Indeed, he continues, "I doubt if any act of will or thought or emotion occurs in me without them. But they seem to help me most when they are most fugitive and fragmentary—rising and bursting like bubbles in champagne or wheeling like rooks in a windy sky." This line is vintage Lewis, of course, as many of you know. Even in describing the value of the imagination he cannot help making good use of it—though one must admit, of course, that up to this point the author of these lines could have been any especially visual person with a knack for words. But now comes the key to the passage. Lewis goes on to explain precisely what it is that images give him:

> In their total effect, [images] mediate to me something very important. It is always something qualitative—more like an adjective than a noun. That, for me, gives it the impact of reality. For I think we respect nouns (and what they stand for) too much. All my deepest, and certainly all my earliest, experiences seem to be of sheer quality. The terrible and the lovely are older and solider than terrible and lovely things. . . . I know very well that in logic God is a "substance". Yet my

> thirst for quality is authorized even here: "We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory." He *is* this glory. What He is (the quality) is no abstraction from Him.[35]

Those of you familiar with Lewis's life will realize that he is referring in part in this passage to certain childhood experiences in which he had come to intuit "the Idea of Autumn" and the quality of "pure Northernness",[36] and you may remember that these and similar experiences were at the root of that nostalgia for the Infinite which he would later refer to as Joy.

But more important than any given perception or any particular quality is the fact that for Lewis every aesthetic experience, whether occasioned by a great myth or by a walk through the country, seems to have served as the medium for a contact with God, a contact which, though perhaps falling short of direct intellection, could lead nonetheless to a genuine knowledge, deeper and more potent than the conclusions of reason. I had learned, says this imaginative man, "the far more secret doctrine that *pleasures* are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility,"[37] and it is of course by reawakening a delight in those pleasures that he has proven so skillful a guide for his readers, bringing them through the colors and tones and tastes of his prose, especially his fiction, to a point where the brightness of that glory might fall on them, too—to the point (in his own words) where "one's mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun".[38] For "any patch of sunlight in a wood will show you something," says Lewis, something "which you could never get from reading books on astronomy. These pure and spontaneous pleasures are 'patches of Godlight' in the woods of our experience."[39] Here, as I hope you can see, is the experiential foundation in Lewis for what I have been calling a second sort of apologetics, one which returns along the path of the Divine radiance to the *Logos* itself.

Each of us will have his own favorite passages, certain key moments in Lewis's writing, when the magic of this movement has been felt most profoundly—moments when, for an instant, we are put off our guard and suddenly see that whole tracts of our experience open onto dimensions we had never dreamed of. It is a thing impossible to illustrate by short quotations, but perhaps I can point you to just a few texts where I have myself sensed this transformation with an especial force. For some reason, I have always been deeply affected, for instance, by Lewis's description in *Perelandra* of the voice of an eldil or angel. It was "as if rock or crystal or light had spoken of itself. And it went through me from chest to groin," says Ransom, "like the thrill that goes through you when you think you have lost your hold while climbing a cliff."[40] Or again I like to come back to the scene in *That Hideous Strength* when Merlin has just arrived at the

door of St Anne's, and he is standing so still, his body "as relaxed as if it were asleep", that every drop of rain from his coat splashes on the floor exactly where the drop before it had fallen. "Tell the Lord of this House," says Merlin, "that I am come."[41] And lest you think that such moments are to be found only in Lewis's fiction, I would offer as a final example a line from his sermon "The Weight of Glory" which, though very different in many ways, has for some reason always had much the same effect on the quality of my perception:

> It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.[42]

Now of course I fully realize that my claims here are very far from conclusive. It is much easier to point to such passages than to say precisely how they might be contributing to Lewis's work as apologist. As I look back on these particular lines, I see there is nothing very special about their diction, and as for the images he uses, they are characteristically understated and straightforward. Lewis never exaggerated for the sake of effect. If I had to explain it, about all I could say is that what I have sensed in such passages is a "violation of frontier", to use a phrase which Lewis himself applied to the novels of his friend Charles Williams.[43] It seems to me, in other words, that the boundary between worlds of experience which we normally divide from each other has in some way been crossed, and as a result one is compelled to look anew at things long familiar—at things like the sensation of falling, or drops of water on a threshold, or the faces of ordinary people. We are told in *Perelandra* about Ransom's first encounter with an eldil, but the words could serve just as well as a description of our own encounters with Lewis:

> The distinction between natural and supernatural in fact broke down. And when it had done so, one realized how great a comfort it had been—how it eased the burden of intolerable strangeness which this universe imposes on us by dividing it into two halves and encouraging the mind never to think of both in the same context.[44]

You will perhaps not have felt quite the same thing in your own engagements with Lewis. But it is simply impossible for me to read his work without concluding that he himself had enjoyed at least glimpses of the universe in its wholeness, in its intolerable and yet magnificent strangeness.

This is what I mean, of course, in saying that Lewis was a kind of mystic, and this is why I have felt obliged to distinguish two dimensions in his work as apologist. As I conclude my remarks, however, I should perhaps anticipate the likely objection. If it is true, you might ask, that Lewis was a mystic, why did he go out of his way to insist he was not? Why, as I admitted at the outset, did he deliberately refuse to join Lings in following a spiritual or contemplative path? Why the conclusion to his book *The Four Loves*, where he cautions the reader that "for news of the fully waking world you must go to my betters".[45] And what about the diffidence and disavowal in the *Letters to Malcolm*? "You and I are people of the foothills," he tells his correspondent. "In the happy days when I was still a walker, I loved the hills, and even mountain walks, but I was no climber. I hadn't the head. So now, I do not attempt the precipices of mysticism."[46] Why this reticence?

It seems to me there are three ways of explaining it. The first is simply to acknowledge that Martin Lings is right—that for all his genius and undoubted insight, Lewis remained a very humble man. "I haven't any language weak enough," he felt, "to depict the weakness of my spiritual life",[47] a life he once compared to the flame of a gas stove turned so low that it is only just not out. Calling him a mystic would for this reason have seemed to Lewis less a temptation than a bad joke. A second explanation is the fact that mysticism was a word in his vocabulary which usually referred to a spirituality of abstraction or remotion, the path which theologians call the *via negativa*. "One thing common to all mysticisms," Lewis wrote, is a "negative experience", which involves "the temporary shattering of our ordinary spatial and temporal consciousness".[48] I do not myself think he was right to limit the term in this way, but given his definition, it is easy to see why a man whose own experiences (as my few examples suggest) were decidedly positive, and whose intuitions tended not to destroy but to deepen the ordinary, would have shied away from the idea that he himself might be classed as a mystic. Speaking about the work of Charles Williams, he drives the point home: "I would hesitate to claim that Williams was a mystic. If a mystic means one who follows the negative way by rejecting images, then he was, consciously and deliberately, the very reverse."[49] And so also was Lewis.

There is, however, yet a third explanation, and it is the one I prefer. I base it on an aphorism which Barfield once shared with me. You may have heard it, or a variation, elsewhere. Barfield told me he had learned it at school, but I have never tried to track down the source:

> He who knows not and knows not that he knows not is a fool. Leave him. He who knows not and knows that he knows not is a student. Teach him. He who knows and knows not that he knows is an artist. Watch him. He who knows and knows that he knows is a teacher. Follow him.

Leaving the fool aside, it occurs to me that what we have in this apothegm is precisely the same set of distinctions Lewis had in mind in his conversation with Lings. "Some men," he had said, "are above all intellectuals." These we may take to correspond with the teacher, the one who knows that he knows. "Others," Lewis continued, "are rational." Since it is in the nature of reason, as distinct from the intellect, to approach its objects indirectly by way of assumptions and argument, we may identify this second type with the student, who knows that he knows not and is seeking to remedy that deficiency. Finally, said Lewis, there is the "imaginative man", and this is evidently much the same as the artist, the one (we are told) who knows but knows not that he knows.

Why, then, did Lewis not think he was a mystic? Because a mystic is someone who is aware of his knowledge, and though I am rather sure that he *did* know, Lewis the imaginative man seems not to have known it—or else perhaps, having sensed it briefly, he had managed to forget. After all, "the real work" of the spiritual life, he once wrote, "must be, of all our works, the most secret. Even as far as possible secret from ourselves. Our right hand must not know what our left is doing."[50] Is it too much to suppose that Lewis had somehow nearly perfected this work? Like his friend Williams, he was certainly no mystic of the negative kind. And yet I cannot help thinking that what he once said about Williams—who brought me, he wrote, "where I have never gone on my own sail or steam"—applies just as much to his own value for us who are able to *watch* him. "You may of course ask me how Williams *should* know," Lewis continues—how he came (in this case) to understand other worlds or the life after death. "I am not suggesting that he knows in one sense," Lewis replies to his own question, "that he is giving me factual details. . . . What I am *quite* sure of is that he is describing something he knows which I should not have known unless he had described it; and something that matters."[51]

Perhaps you will think that I have gone too far in this last part of my talk. But I remain likewise convinced that C. S. Lewis, the imaginative man, also *knew*, and it is for this that I value him most as a Christian apologist.

[1] This was Lewis's dedication to Barfield of his book *The Allegory of Love*.

[2] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955), 207.

[3] *Surprised by Joy*, 207.

[4] *Surprised by Joy*, 208.

[5] *Surprised by Joy*, 208-209.

[6] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book III, Prose 10.

[7] Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960), 192.

[8] James T. Como, ed., *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 29.

[9] *Selected Literary Essays*, 5.

[10] *Selected Literary Essays*, 10.

[11] *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q. 2, Art. 3.

[12] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 69.

[13] *Problem of Pain*, 75.

[14] *Problem of Pain*, 81.

[15] *Problem of Pain*, 28.

[16] *Problem of Pain*, 31.

[17] *Problem of Pain*, 32.

[18] *Problem of Pain*, 34.

[19] Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism", *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), 79.

[20] *Problem of Pain*, 47-48.

[21] Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 80.

[22] Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 273.

[23] Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 20.

[24] Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 12.

[25] *Miracles*, 15.

[26] *Miracles*, 16.

[27] Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed", *God in the Dock*, 213.

[28] *Miracles*, 25.

[29] *Mere Christianity*, 126.

[30] *Mere Christianity*, 115.

[31] *Surprised by Joy*, 208, 209.

[32] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Vol. I, 304. See Barfield's *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971).

[33] Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 9, 10.

[34] *Surprised by Joy*, 209.

[35] C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1964), 86.

[36] *Surprised by Joy*, 16, 73.

[37] *Letters to Malcolm*, 89.

[38] *Letters to Malcolm*, 90.

[39] *Letters to Malcolm*, 91.

[40] C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 17-18.

[41] C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown Ups* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 271.

[42] C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory", *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1949), 14-15.

[43] C. S. Lewis, "The Novels of Charles Williams", On Stories and Other Essays on Literature, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 22.

[44] *Perelandra*, 11.

[45] *The Four Loves*, 192.

[46] *Letters to Malcolm*, 63.

[47] *Letters to Malcolm*, 113.

[48] *Letters to Malcolm*, 64.

[49] "The Novels of Charles Williams", 26.

[50] *The Four Loves*, 185.

[51] "The Novels of Charles Williams", 26.