

The Building Blocks of C.S. Lewis
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On Thursday Paul Lange asked me what were Lewis' Big Ideas that Owen Barfield describes as "the centrality of his thought" that is seen in all his writings. This essay is another crack at my response.

Block 1: There is Truth.

Lewis begins *Mere Christianity* with a discussion of the Moral Law. He argues that if there truly is a "Moral Law, or Law of Human Nature ... this Rule of Right and Wrong ... or whatever you call it, ... must somehow or other be a real thing — a thing which is really there, not made up by ourselves ... a real law which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us." Lewis believes the Moral Law is connected to Truth just as Natural Laws are. Without this connection, there is no right or wrong, only opinion.

Lewis' belief in truth puts him on firm biblical ground. "Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth and the life." John 14:6.

And we have Jesus before Pilate:

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

"What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him." (John 18:36-38)

Will Durant is in Pilate's camp. According to Durant, "Religion begins by offering magical aid to harassed and bewildered men: it culminates by giving to a people that unity of morals and belief which seems so favorable to statesmanship and art; it ends by fighting suicidally the lost cause of the past." (*Our Oriental Heritage*) In other words, Morality and Religion are social constructs that allow the powerful to control populations. They are not based on Truth, but are a social and political necessity, which is motivated by man's innate pursuit of power.

It's a topic that deserves a whole essay, but if you don't believe in Truth, what is left? Science allows people to describe parts of how things work, but it is incomplete and fails to answer the why or the who of the equation. Newtonian physics put a person on the moon but couldn't explain why magnetic force exceeded gravitational force. String Theory is science's effort to resolve this issue. Lewis believed in science, and in the *Abolition of Man* described it as a subset of religion. Both seek to find Truth.

Block 2: Truth is alive and is good.

Lewis believes that this Truth is embodied in a positive and good force he called God. "There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him."
(*The Great Divorce*)

A study of cultures shows that all peoples have some acknowledgement that this "Goodness" has a moral force similar to the force that laws such as gravity have on material objects. It can be resisted, but it cannot be ignored. This means that truth can be found in every civilization and faith tradition in various forms and degrees. In Lewis's view, "As in arithmetic there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some answers are much nearer being right than others." (*Mere Christianity*)

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs describes this pattern as follows in his book, *The Dignity of Difference*. "God is universal, religions are particular. Religion is the translation of God into a particular language and thus into the life of a group, a nation, a community of faith."

Block 3: Joy is the gravitational force that pulls us towards this good.

Lewis's personal journey towards faith began with a sense of longing or being pulled towards something. He spent the next thirty years trying to understand what was behind his own longing. Below are several quotations from his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.

"Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing."

“All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still “about to be.”

“It is a by-product. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer.”

“Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring. And that object, quite clearly, was no state of my own mind or body at all.”

“It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries, “Look!” The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare.”

If I were to presume to rewrite *Mere Christianity*, I would start with Joy. I think people can relate to a feeling, a sense of the other, an emotional response to beauty more than they can to a somewhat abstract argument about the basis of Morality. The latter is persuasive and important, but in my view, not the first step on the path.

On Lewis’s tortured journey to belief he struggled with this sense of Joy, which was part of his imaginative life, versus his rational intellect. He describes this struggle in *Surprised by Joy* as follows: “On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow “rationalism.” Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believe to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”

He resolved this conflict when he observed that the thinkers and writers that connected to deeper truths and the richness of life also believed in something outside of themselves, regardless of their faith tradition. “The most religious (Plato, Aeschylus, Virgil) were clearly those on whom I could really feed. On the other hand, those writers who did not suffer from religion and with whom in theory my sympathy ought to have been complete –Shaw, Wells and Mill and Gibbon – all seemed a little thin, and what as boys we called “tinny.” It wasn’t that I didn’t like them. They were all (especially Gibbon) entertaining; but hardly more. There seemed to be

no depth in them. They were too simple. The roughness and density of life did not appear in their books.”

Block 4: There is Evil.

The ring in *Lord of the Rings* is the best description of the power of evil I have ever read. Lewis, I believe shared this sentiment. It draws you in, it absorbs, it distorts, it twists and rationalizes, and it ultimately destroys. Lewis felt strongly that it was an external force, and that its existence increases our need to be in relationship with God. In *Mere Christianity* he describes our position as follows:

“Enemy-occupied territory---that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”

According to Lewis, the intent of evil is to separate us from the Good, and Evil exists in our everyday lives. As he says in *The Screwtape Letters*, “Why use murder when cards will do.” In the preface of the *Letters* Lewis outlines where evil is found. “The greatest evil is not done now in sordid dens of crime. It is not even done in concentration camps and labor camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried and minuted) in clear, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices.”

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis describes how good and evil work. “Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.”

In his essay, “Why I am not a Pacifist” he talks about how to confront evil. “I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can.” In short, it’s a process.

Block 5: Centrality of Christ.

All these blocks, or steps on the road, led to Lewis's acknowledgement of God, which he describes in his autobiography as follows:

"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 of 1929 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. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words "compelle intrare," compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation."

At this point, Lewis is not a Christian, he is a theist. It took two more years of long discussions with Tolkien, Dyson, and Barfield before he came to believe in Christ. He also began to attend his local parish church on Sundays, and college chapel on weekdays. He describes his conversion to belief in Christ in *Surprised by Joy*. He was riding in the sidecar of his brother's motorcycle on the way to the Whipsnade Park Zoo in Bedford.

"I know very well when, but not how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought."

Lewis describes his conversion like waking up. He didn't know exactly when he became awake, he just realized he was.

Nine days earlier Lewis had spent the night walking and talking with Tolkien and Dyson on Addison's walk at Oxford. The thing that finally clicked for

Lewis was Tolkien's description of Christianity as True Myth. Lewis believed that myth in all traditions connected with truth, but with Christianity the myth connected to history, reality, and living truth.

Lewis makes Christianity relatable by combining the logical with the mystical. His two great influences were George MacDonald, who baptized his imagination, and G.K. Chesterton, who baptized his reason. In his life and writing Lewis synthesizes both.

Building Block 6: New Man or Transformation.

In the *Screwtape Letters* Lewis describes humans as follows:

“Humans are amphibians...half spirit and half animal...as spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time, means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation--the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.”

Christians are in the process of transforming themselves into this New Man. They do it through practicing religious habits and mediating their lives through agape love (Block 7). This helps them survive and learn from the natural undulation of life.

The Narnia series beautifully describes Christian transformation according to Lewis. Edmund and his cousin Eustace are the two who transform the most. Peter and Susan are relatively undeveloped characters. Lucy is innately good but is humanized when she is tempted in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. However, Edmund and Eustace start off as real stinkers and become good, caring, and courageous people. Edmund, who betrays the other children in the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* repents and comes to be known as “Edmund the Just.” Eustace, the Pevensies' Cousin, starts off as a spoiled and bratty kid to whom Reepicheep in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* teaches a lesson with his sword after Eustace swung him around by his tail. Later in the book he was de-dragoned by Aslan, which is the best description of the process of transformation I've ever read. A transformed Eustace is described in a subsequent book entitled *The Silver Chair*. “Once being a friend of the bullies and also a former bully himself, Eustace has started a new chapter in his life. This

transition from tormentor to a gentler soul has also earned his old friends' attention."

Screwtape describes the mechanism of starting a new chapter in one's life succinctly in one of his letters to Wormwood. "When He talks about losing their selves, He means only abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever."

Block 7: Mechanism for Transformation, or Mediating your loves through Agape

The Four Loves is one of the last books Lewis wrote, and the first book he wrote after his Christian marriage to Joy Davidman. In this book he talks about the four loves: storge (affection), philia (friendship), Eros (romantic), and Agape (charity). The punch line is that we need to mediate each of the loves through Agape. If we don't subordinate these loves to Godly love, then they become false gods and control us. If you don't mediate through agape love, then you'll hedge your bets on the other loves.

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

St. Augustine who, after he lost his friend Nebridius, came to the same conclusion and decided that only agape love should be observed. "Then he (Augustine) draws a moral. This is what comes, he says, of giving one's heart to anything but God. All human beings pass away. Do not let your happiness depend on something you may lose. If love is to be a blessing, not a misery, it must be for the only Beloved who will never pass away." (*The Four Loves*)

Lewis' has a different take; Agape Love allows us to fully love in the other dimensions. It fulfills those loves. "The natural loves are summoned to

become modes of charity while also remaining the natural loves they were.”
(*The Four Loves*)

Lewis provides another take on this in *The Great Divorce* where he describes how the elevation of the three loves without Agape prevents people journeying from hell from leaving behind what was trapping them and preventing them from entering Heaven, or going further up and further in.

Conclusion

Lewis’ writing spans apologetics, essays, letters, satire, fantasy, myth, and science fiction. As Owen Barfield observed, what is remarkable about Lewis is not the diversity but the unity of his writing. They all map to the same pattern, much like the patterns the great writers Lewis mentioned in the earlier *Surprised by Joy* quotation. This unity is ultimately derived from the primary biblical source, which is anchored in eternal truths. Lewis’s writings endure because they provide accessible views of this truth. This essay is in large part a collection of Lewis’ greatest quotation hits, but each of his 40 books would yield similar content with their own unique view. I’ll conclude with a paragraph written by Owen Barfield in his essay, “The Five C.S. Lewises.”

“I am not sure that anyone has succeeded in locating it. Some have pointed to his “style,” but it goes deeper than that. “Consistency”? Noticeable enough in spite of an occasional inconsistency here or there. His unswerving “sincerity” then? That comes much nearer, but still does not satisfy me. Many other writers are sincere—but they are not Lewis. No. There was something in the whole quality and structure of his thinking, something for which the best label I can find is “presence of mind.” If I were asked to expand on that, I could say only that somehow what he thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything.”