The man who despaired of political solutions had much to say about the foundations of a just political order

The Old Western Man: C. S. Lewis on Politics and Modernity

Justin Dyer and Micah Watson

"Speaking not only for myself but for all other Old Western men whom you may meet," C. S. Lewis concluded his inaugural address at Cambridge University, "I would say, use your specimens while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs." Cambridge had plucked Lewis away from Oxford by offering him a chair in medieval and renaissance literature, and Lewis's title for his first address was "De Descriptione Temporum," a description of the times. Lewis turned his observant eye to a watershed difference between a previous age, that of Austen, Milton, and Shakespeare, and the modern age of machines, Darwin, and progress. The default view of the previous era was that age and tradition were to be respected; the modern view is that the old and ancient must be surpassed and then discarded. As one steeped in the ancients but living among the moderns, Lewis offered himself as a specimen of the Old Western Man, someone who could speak to both sides of the divide between modernity and the ancients.

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Although he gave this address in 1955, and died on November 22, 1963, Lewis still speaks, retaining a devoted following that shows no sign of diminishing. Described by *Time* in 1947 as "one of the most influential spokesmen for Christianity in the English-speaking world," Lewis was first thrust into the public eye by the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* in 1943. Four years later, Lewis had sold more than one million copies of his books and spoken on twenty-nine radio broadcasts to audiences averaging 600,000 listeners. The interest in Lewis has never abated. *Mere Christianity* ranks among the top ten religious books sold each year.

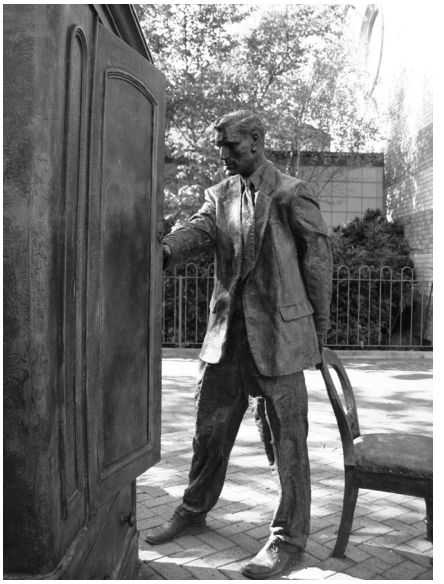
Lewis's Narnia chronicles and his Christian apologetics are well known. Less well known is his approach to culture and politics. Despite an occasional mention from conservative outlets—*National Review* ranked Lewis's *Abolition of Man* number seven of the top hundred books of the twentieth century—Lewis's political thought has been relatively unexplored in the fifty-four years since his death. The conventional wisdom suggests that Lewis was at best apathetic about politics and at worst actively hostile to it. His earliest biographers, his brother, and even Lewis himself testified to his indifference to political matters. In the early 1950s Lewis declined an invitation from Winston Churchill to become a Commander of the British Empire. He once wrote to his brother, Warnie, than he "loathed great issues" and would prefer to see a "Stagnation party—which at General Elections would boast that during its term of office *no* event of the least importance had taken place." Lewis claimed to avoid newspapers, and to the end of his life he expressed skepticism, and even despair, about politics.

Lewis held many politicians in disdain and was indeed pessimistic about the potential for political solutions to live up to their advertising. Nevertheless, conventional claims about the apolitical Lewis are overstated. We know from Lewis's personal letters, his education and teaching, and his published works that he was both very interested in and knowledgeable about politics and political thought. Lewis had much to say about the foundations of a just political order.

As a student and a teacher, Lewis read, wrote, and taught about many of the great political philosophers in the Western canon. Lewis scholar Adam Barkman points out in a note about Lewis's early essay "On Bolshevism" that we know Lewis was teaching his political science students about Lenin as late as 1939, and even as a literary scholar Lewis continued to teach his students Western political thought beginning with Plato. "While teaching English literature at Magdalen," A. J. P. Taylor observed, "Lewis helped in the history school by teaching political theory. He took the history students. His lectures covered Rousseau and Aristotle, et al. He loved doing this."

Lewis was steeped in the classics of the Western tradition and could appreciate the intellectual and philosophical transitions that had taken place from Plato to Locke to the theorists of his own day. His interests in world mythologies also gave him a breadth of perspective that transcended a purely Western focus. With his background in the ancient Greeks as well as the Scholastics and early modern thinkers, Lewis was well versed in ethics and political thought, including natural law theory, virtue ethics, and consequentialism.

It is true that Lewis was not actively involved in partisan politics, and he was uninterested in most policy questions. But politics in the fullest sense means more than parliamentary intrigue and debates about taxes and tariffs. Politics is more than the merely instrumental hurly-burly of self-interest and cynicism we see on the news. In the Aristotelian sense, politics refers to the business of the *polis*, the almost untranslat-



A statue of C. S. Lewis peering into the closet that was the doorway to Narnia

able Greek word describing a comprehensive community, combining spheres and identities we moderns tend to separate: religion, government, family, school, and business. The *polis*, Aristotle tells us, is established and maintained with a view to some good. Thus political life raises perennial questions that pertain to human beings as human beings: What is the good life? How should we live together? What things are so good as to be required, by force if necessary, and what things are so evil as to be prohibited, by force if necessary? Do human beings have a deeper purpose than mere survival or pleasure? Conceived of in this way, politics is inextricably tied to the most fundamental questions about human nature.

Lewis spent his life wrestling with those questions and drew upon his considerable gifts and his Christian faith in attempting to provide answers to them. In this sense, Lewis's writings brim with political themes. Screwtape delivers an address on politics and democratic education. The *Chronicles of Narnia* describe an original state of nature and the founding of a new polity, not to mention the adventures and misadventures of several monarchs and tyrants, all of whom exercise power for good or ill. Lewis's favorite of his own books, *Till We Have Faces*, is told entirely from the first-person perspective of Orual, a queen responsible for the well-being of her people. *Mere Christianity*, first as a radio address over the BBC and then later as the bestselling book, includes a chapter on social morality. Lewis's *The Four Loves* opens with a discussion of patriotism, and his massive volume on English literature in the sixteenth century includes several passages offering sophisticated treatments of various political thinkers and themes. Lewis's *Abolition of Man* deals explicitly with education and natural law. *Abolition*'s themes are then presented in fictional form in the third book of Lewis's science-fiction space trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*. This short and incomplete listing does not include the scores of essays and newspaper articles that Lewis wrote addressing such topics as equality, criminal justice, capital punishment, pacifism, nuclear war, unalienable rights, social-contract theory, Christian political parties, and the welfare state. The conventional wisdom about Lewis's interest in and aptitude

for politics and political thinking is, in a broad sense, simply mistaken.

The student of politics and of society generally should be interested in Lewis if for no other reason than that he has had an enormous impact on the thinking of hundreds of thousands of people in several countries and across the several decades since his death. Moreover, Lewis is worth studying because he incisively identified and winsomely addressed enduring realities and lasting political concerns. While there are a great many aspects of Lewis's political thought that could be highlighted, two merit special focus here: his commitment to natural law and limited government, and his rather critical assessment of modernity.

Natural law and limited government

Lewis insisted that a belief in a moral law known through the exercise of reason is one of the pillars of "all clear thinking about the universe we live in." The other pillar was an awareness that we each fail to keep the known moral law. While Lewis believed that the natural law—he often referred to it as the Tao—was a necessary precursor for evangelism as well as an explanation for how human beings are to live, he also thought it was necessary for the relatively successful functioning of a pluralistic society.

Lewis asserted two things that put him squarely in the natural law camp: (1) the foundational principles of morality are obligatory rational principles, i.e., they are known through reason and morally obligatory for us to follow; and (2) the highest aspect of human nature, our reason, ought to rule our appetites and passions. To these broad Platonic claims, Lewis connected the core Christian doctrines of creation and fall and men and women being made in God's image. In addition to moral objectivity, Lewis's approach includes a strong teleology or built-in purpose to human nature and an epistemology that allows for objective knowledge of the moral law by human beings as such. This last feature of natural law provides a common foundation upon which to ground enforceable moral duties in a pluralistic and democratic society.

Because God made everyone in His image, and people retain some vestige of that image whether they recognize their Creator or not, natural law provides moral standards for the Christian and non-Christian alike. This makes possible for Lewis his commitment to classical-liberal political theory, which provides a common framework of politics and ethics for Christians and non-Christians who share the same political community. Unlike the more spiritual applications of the natural law, which are positive, much of Lewis's work regarding the political aspects of natural law is negative. That is, he often points to how bad things will be without a recognition of and commitment to the natural law rather than showing how natural law actively promotes and preserves positive aspects of society.

While Lewis was a determined advocate for a practical renaissance of natural law philosophy in contemporary culture and education, he did not see himself as an innovative, or even classical, natural law theorist. Indeed, Lewis adamantly insisted that he was not "trying to reintroduce in its full Stoical or medieval rigour the doctrine of Natural Law." Lewis did not advocate a return to an ancient or medieval doctrine of natural law; nor did he favor a return to monarchy or aristocracy or, even worse, any attempt to reintegrate church and state. What political doctrine, then, did Lewis subscribe to?

Although Lewis never systematically described his political philosophy, he did have a political system of choice, and it was heavily influenced by a strong belief in the fallen nature of humanity. Lewis was a partisan of classical liberal democracy not because it

allowed for maximum political participation for all of a nation's citizens but because it curtailed the likelihood of political tyranny. He was a democrat because he believed human nature had been corrupted, which contrasted sharply with the claims of other democrats such as Rousseau, who believed humanity to be "so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government." "The real reason for democracy is just the reverse," Lewis noted in an essay about equality, "Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows."

One of Lewis's political principles was government's duty to restrain wrongdoing as understood given the law of nature. And it is in describing this restraining and punitive duty that Lewis most closely identified with that early proponent of classical liberal thought and fellow Oxford scholar John Locke.

Contrary to the premodern tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, but in line with social contract theory, Lewis held that men enter into a social contract for the "mutual preservation" of their property. Because the law of nature remains in force whether people are in the state of nature or political society, citizens have the right to revolt and produce a new government if the existing one consistently violates their natural rights. Lewis worried about just this possibility in England. In his short essay "Delinquents in the Snow," Lewis complained about how the legal process failed to deal properly with hooligans who had been caught stealing and vandalizing his home. In his view, the presiding judge was far too lenient on the young criminals, and Lewis worried what such laxity might mean for England's political future. Describing how the social contract should work in theory, he warned of the consequences that would occur if the system broke down in practice. "According to the classical political theory of this country," Lewis summarized, "we surrendered our right of self-protection to the State on the condition that the State would protect us."

But a dilemma arises when the state does not live up to its end of the contract. The state's promise of protection is what morally grounds our obligation to civil obedience, according to Lewis. On the classical Lockean theory, the government's protection of natural rights, including the right to property, is what explains why it is right to pay taxes and wrong to exercise vigilante justice. Lewis's assessment of the England of his day might strike some as still applicable there and elsewhere:

> The State protects us less because it is unwilling to protect us against criminals at home and manifestly grows less and less able to protect us against foreign enemies. At the same time it demands from us more and more. We seldom had fewer rights and liberties nor more burdens: and we get less security in return. While our obligations increase their moral ground is taken away.

Lewis drew the same conclusion from this state of affairs that Locke did. Those citizens who have entered into the social contract have the right to revolt and will revolt when the state breaches their trust and no longer carries out its function. "When the State cannot or will not protect," Lewis warned, " 'nature' is come again and the right of self-protection reverts to the individual."

Lewis was obviously concerned about the abuses of an overly ambitious government. But what positive role did he envision for government? After all, human depravity gives the rationale for government as well as reason to fear its excesses. As James Madison famously claimed in *Federalist* No. 51, no government would be necessary if men were angels and no limitations on government power would be necessary if angels governed men. The reality, however, is that

government is necessary; yet there are clear dangers with trusting it with untrammeled power. Although Lewis strongly preferred a very limited government, he wrestled with the tension between his desire for a limited government (which both protects and respects a robust private sphere) and his acknowledgment that we have massive social needs that it seems only government can address. This tension reveals a difference between Lewis's normative view of what politics should be and his realistic view of what politics is, given infinite need and finite resources. Government must exist, Lewis acknowledged, but he always insisted that government exists for the good of individuals, a modern and Lockean element in Lewis's political thought. Consider two quotes by Lewis about the ultimate purpose of government, the first from his essay "Membership" and the second from *Mere Christianity*:

> As long as we are thinking of natural values we must say that the sun looks down on nothing half so good as a household laughing together over a meal, or two friends talking over a pint of beer, or a man alone reading a book that interests him; and that all economies, politics, laws, armies, and institutions, save insofar as they prolong and multiply such scenes, are a mere ploughing the sand and sowing the ocean, a meaningless vanity and vexation of the spirit. Collective activities are, of course, necessary, but this is the end to which they are necessary. . . .
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> It is easy to think the State has a lot of different objects—military, political, economic, and what not. But in a way things are much simpler than that. The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life.

In each formulation, Lewis insists that the state exists for individuals. The way Lewis chooses to represent the relationship between the individual and the state in these passages represents a break from the classical Aristotelian and Thomistic natural law tradition. The latter sees political activity—voting, organizing, advocating—as an intrinsic part of what it means to flourish as a human being. Lewis, in contrast, sees governmental matters as an instrumental means to provide for the real goods that we enjoy far from the gaze of legislators and policy wonks.

Lewis does acknowledge that collective activities are necessary, and at times he recognizes the appeal of developing technocratic government solutions to address our collective social problems. The temptation to invest government with more power, he noted, always works on a real need that has been neglected. Lewis's constant fear was that legitimate human problems that require social coordination and collective activity will give rise to solutions that are far worse than the original crisis. "We have on the one hand a desperate need; hunger, sickness, and the dread of war," Lewis noted, and "we have, on the other, the conception of something that might meet it: omnicompetent global technocracy."

The temptation to use a real need as a pretext to accumulate and concentrate power is not new, but the difference in the mid-twentieth century, Lewis warned, was that "success" looked more and more like a realistic possibility. Lewis contrasted the dilemmas of past societies with the unprecedented opportunities offered by science and extensive government bureaucracy:

> In the ancient world individuals have sold themselves as slaves, in order to eat. So in society. Here is a witch-doctor who can save us from the sorcerers—a war-lord who can save us from the barbarians—a Church that can save us from Hell. Give

> them what they ask, give ourselves to them bound and blindfold, if only they will. Perhaps the terrible bargain will be made again. We cannot blame men for making it. We can hardly wish them not to. Yet we can hardly bear that they should.
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> The question about progress has become the question whether we can discover any way of submitting to the worldwide paternalism of a technocracy without losing all personal privacy and independence. *Is there any possibility of getting the super Welfare State's honey and avoiding the sting?*

Whether we can get the welfare state's honey without the sting was perhaps the most pressing practical political question for Lewis, and the stakes were (and are) enormous. While acknowledging the great needs for which technology and a powerful government promise answers, Lewis endorsed simple values that he feared were endangered by a know-it-all state: "To live one's life in his own way, to call his house his castle, to enjoy the fruits of his own labour, to educate his children as his conscience directs, to save for their prosperity after his death." He was skeptical that the modern state can deliver painless cures. Repeating his argument in *Abolition of Man*, Lewis predicted soberly that "some men will take charge of the destiny of others. They will be simply men; none perfect; some greedy, cruel and dishonest." He then asked rhetorically, and with an allusion to Lord Acton's famous aphorism that absolute power corrupts absolutely, whether "we discovered some new reason why, this time, power should not corrupt as it has done before?"

Lewis's political thought is so imbued with concerns about governmental overreach that even his account of government's legitimate purposes soon slips back to warnings about the dangers of abuse. His ideal government was meant to protect negative rather than positive freedoms. Given this, it is no surprise to find he was very concerned about the developments of the twentieth century: thinking about how to promote the virtues of limited government and a healthy civil society requires an incisive analysis of the modern mind.

The radical altering of the public mind

Lewis's most straightforward account of the modern mind is found in his essay "Modern Man and His Categories of Thought." Though primarily concerned with implications for Christian apologetics, Lewis's observations pertain to the culture broadly speaking, and thus to political thinking as well. We see in his description a conservative analysis of how Western society has changed, and not for the good. "In the last hundred years," Lewis wrote, "the public mind has been radically altered." Lewis proposed that six changes have contributed to this radical break: (1) an educational revolution; (2) the emancipation of women; (3) the advance of historical developmentalism or what he called "Evolutionism"; (4) the rise of Proletarianism or democratic egalitarianism; (5) an emphasis on practical knowledge over wisdom; (6) and an increasing skepticism toward reason. With the exception of Lewis's thoughts on the emancipation of women, which arguably changed by the end of his life, these descriptions provide a good synopsis of Lewis's views on modernity.

Lewis described the educational revolution for the upper classes as a shift away from the "ancients." No longer schooled in the thought of Plato or Aristotle, or even Virgil or Horace, the educated classes had a diminished set of values with which to compete with the values of "modern industrial civilization." This development results in an isolated "Provincialism," which cuts off each

succeeding generation from the wisdom and folly of its forebears, leading to a myopic intellectual vision and a dearth of standards by which to judge contemporary thought. What follows is what Lewis referred to as chronological snobbery. Such a development bodes ill for moral education, as it breeds contempt among the young for the wisdom of their elders, and thus undercuts their ability to distinguish genuine and time-tested wisdom from passing fads and trivialities.

The second and related change in how the modern man thinks is what Lewis called "Developmentalism" or "Historicism." This idea, related to Lewis's treatment of epochal change in his inaugural Cambridge address, pertains to the modern faith in progress. Modern men and women are influenced by their experience with ever-improving machines and an evolutionary account of ever-increasing human intelligence and accomplishment. The modern default expectation is that "almost nothing can be turned into almost anything": order from chaos, life from nonlife, reason from instinct, civilization out of savagery, and virtue from animalism. The problem with this way of looking at the world is not the judgment that some types of progress are good but rather that there is a natural and inevitable stream of progress that we must discern and join. History with a capital H is now the source of wisdom and value, and prophecy about its future direction reveals humanity's sacred duty. We see evidence of this mindset when people act surprised that this or that terrible act or attitude is "still with us" in 2017, as if chronological moral progress is a given.

Lewis sharply contrasted this modern faith in progress with traditional Christian teaching, for Developmentalism rejects both the goodness of God's original creation and the Fall, which has corrupted it. The differences between the two approaches as applied to politics are profound. For the Christian natural law theorist, the very standards of what counts as progress are inextricably bound up in the natural law, which itself is rooted in God's character, proclaimed by divine revelation, and discoverable by natural reason. Contrary to the progressive view, Lewis noted that Christianity holds that "the Best creates the good and the good is corrupted by sin, [but that] for Developmentalism the very standard of good is itself in a state of flux."

"Proletarianism" was Lewis's term for a particular form of democratic thinking that flatters the "people" without reservation. Having accepted the Lockean principle that government legitimacy requires the consent of the governed, democratic citizens have conflated their authority with political infallibility. As a result the Proletariat "are self-satisfied to a degree perhaps beyond the self-satisfaction of any recorded aristocracy. They are convinced that whatever may be wrong with the world it cannot be themselves." Lewis noted that this shift in class self-satisfaction puts God "in the dock," or under indictment. Whereas early Christians, Jews, and pagans alike took it for granted that there was something inherently wrong with people, modern men and women do not share a sense of sin and therefore do not recognize their need for salvation. How to proclaim the good news changes when the target audience does not believe in the bad news. Moreover, the test God now needs to pass—what gets Him out of the dock—is not whether Christian revelation about Him is true but whether belief in God is helpful or therapeutic for the individual.

The political implications of this shift follow the religious implications. Democratic societies unwilling to entertain the possibility that the people may be badly mistaken about particular policies or moral views will foster a politics of flattery and obfuscation, encouraging politicians to avoid unpopular but necessary stands in order to stay in office. In addition, like the modern view of religion,

politics becomes primarily about what the government can do for me or my particular interest group. Ascertaining the truth about whether a particular tax policy promotes the common good for the nation becomes wholly secondary to whether I personally benefit from the policy.

This shift in religious and political thinking from "Is it true and good in itself?" to "What's in it for me?" illustrates another change: an emphasis on practicality. Whereas a pragmatic approach to religion downplays the question of truth, a purely pragmatic approach to politics leads to a political conversation almost exclusively concerned with technocratic means rather than principled ends for human beings individually and in community. "Ends" are assumed to be common but in fact are expressed with elastic words or phrases that obscure rough edges: national interest, economic growth, or making America (or Britain) "great." The difficulty and controversy that accompany conflicting political ends are precisely what the American political theorist John Rawls famously tried to avoid by making his political theory "political" rather than "metaphysical." If Lewis is right about the reality of the natural law, however, burying our deep disagreements about the ends of politics is quixotic.

Finally, Lewis anticipated the advent of modern skepticism by observing that modern man has a general and unalarmed belief that reason cannot be trusted. Irrational causes, rooted in subconscious desires or economic interests (or, we would now add, race and gender), are the real origin of thoughts and grounding for personal identity. Lewis wrote of modern man, exaggerating only a bit, that "he accepts without dismay the conclusion that all our thoughts are invalid." In a talk to the Oxford Socratic Club, republished in a 1944 issue of the *Socratic Digest*, Lewis insisted that the ad hominem fallacy is the intellectual error of the twentieth century. He dubbed the fallacy "Bulverism," after a fictional character named Ezekiel Bulver who would only explain *why* people are wrong without bothering to demonstrate *that* they are wrong. The fallout of this development for political discourse is significant. If we believe the positions held by our fellow citizens are grounded entirely in subrational and often intractable characteristics, then attempting to persuade them with reason and evidence is hopeless. Lewis believed the particularities of modernity had significant ramifications for Christian apologetics, but it is clear that the changes he identified have had severe political and cultural consequences as well. The combination of these developments led Lewis almost to despair of any hope of a political or cultural renewal.

Yet ultimately Lewis's hope was not in a this-worldly politics. Politics has its place, but Lewis was first and foremost a Christian thinker, and it is only by "aiming at heaven" that one can get "earth thrown in." Not everyone will harken to that core aspect of Lewis's thinking, but if he was right about the importance of the natural law, there are truths about the goods of our enduring human nature we can all understand and pursue irrespective of whether we acknowledge the divine author of that same nature. ✝