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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

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## **C.S. Lewis: True Progressive**

Doug Jackson

## C.S. Lewis: True Progressive

by Doug Jackson

"While feeling that I was *born* a member of your Society," wrote C.S. Lewis to the Society for the Prevention of Progress in May of 1944, "I am nevertheless honored to receive the outward seal of membership." Lewis, replying to the (possibly facetious) organization's offer, goes on to pledge himself to "continued orthodoxy and the unremitting practice of Reaction, Obstruction, and Stagnation." Lewis could, of course, take, and make, a joke with the best of them, but never was it more accurately said of anyone that "many a truth is told in jest." If, as Owen Barfield has famously postulated, "what Lewis thought about everything was always secretly present in what he said about anything," this jocose letter of acceptance points to a key element in Jack's world-view, an element expounded at greater length in longer and more serious works. While it is true that C.S. Lewis was old-fashioned to the point of ludditism (he never learned to drive a car, hated the radio, and wrote with a dip-pen), a combined study of Lewis's views on progress in his essay entitled "Is Progress Possible?" his factual exposition of the medieval world-view in *The Discarded Image*, and his fictional depiction of that world view in *Out of the Silent Planet*, reveals that Lewis was a true progressive in his own unique sense of the term.

In "Is Progress Possible?" (*God in the Dock*, p.311), Lewis takes up the whole issue of progress. Of course, being Lewis, he insists

on defining the term clearly, and then insists on its being used according to that definition. "Progress," he argues, "means movement in a desired direction," adding that, "we do not all desire the same things for our species." Refining the definition still farther, Lewis states, "Now I care far more for how humanity lives than how long. *Progress, for me, means increasing goodness and happiness in individual lives.*" (Emphasis added) He goes on to dismiss scientific and technological forms of "progress" as irrelevant: the H-Bomb can kill, but death has very little effect on the kind of person one is at the moment he dies; chemicals can cure but can also murder. He even states, with shocking prescience, that "bacterial war, not bombs, may ring down the curtain."

I suspect that it was to battle against the latter sort of progress that Sir Jack pledged his sword to the California group. To the other kind of progress, the "increasing goodness and happiness of individual lives," Lewis swore his undying support. One of the great standards by which he judged the success of this campaign was his beloved medieval world view, with its geocentric cosmology and the psychological and spiritual outlook which it created. The details of this view, Lewis argued, "become valuable only in so far as they enable us to enter more fully into the consciousness of our ancestors by realizing how such a universe must have affected those who believe in it." (*Image*, p.98) Lewis's view of progress,

expressed by medieval cosmology, consisted of a movement toward humility, order, and relationship, in contrast to the egotistical, competitive, and automated definition given to the word by evolutionary scientism. Progress was, in short, a movement *inward*, rather than *outward*.

Lewis used the Ptolemaic universe to illustrate humility as a vital standard of true human progress. Popular prejudice has long held that the medieval universe was "egocentric," placing Earth, and man himself, at the center. This bogey, having been uncritically asserted, is then unfavorably contrasted to Darwinism, which humbles man by making him merely a chance formation of molecules, a true "quintessence of dust," living in exile on a small planet in the galactic suburbs of a cosmic metropolis. By contrast, Lewis argues that the medievals saw man, not so much at the center of the universe as at the bottom. "The Earth," he explains, "is really the centre, really the lowest place; *movement to it from whatever direction is downward movement.*" (*Image*, p.98 emphasis added) True, our planet is stationary and all else revolves around it, but this is a cause for embarrassment rather than pride. "The nearest approach to the divine and perfect ubiquity that the spheres can attain is the swiftest and most regular possible movement, in the most perfect form, which is circular. *Each sphere attains it in a less degree than the sphere above it, and therefore has a slower pace.*" (*Image*, pp. 115-116 emphasis added) Earth is the center, or actually the bottom, because, of the five "essences," it is composed of the thickest and least spiritual. (*Image*, p.95-96) We are a sort of a clot which has sunk to the basement of creation.

This physical fact has personal implications. "The nearest we get to a

widespread 'philosophy of history' in the Middle Ages," Lewis opines, "is, as I have said, the frequent assertion that things were once better than they are now." The men of earlier ages were superior to those of the present. This, instead of despair, produces the peace of humility. "Historically as well a cosmically, medieval man stood at the foot of a stairway; looking up, he felt delight. The backward, like the upward, glance exhilarated him with a majestic spectacle, and humility was rewarded with the pleasures of admiration." (*Image*, p.185) Progress, then, consisted, not in superseding the past, but in recognizing and accepting, even admiring, its superiority, which one could then seek to imitate. "One had one's place, however modest, in a great succession; one need be neither proud nor lonely." (*Image*, p.185)

Lewis clothes this factual skeleton with fictional flesh in Chapter 5 of *Out of the Silent Planet*. Freed from the crushing restraint of Earth's gravity and atmosphere, Ransom (no scientist, true, but a thorough-going modern) feels "his body and mind daily rubbed and scoured and filled with new vitality." (*Planet*, pp.31-32) It is significant that Weston (both a thorough-going modern *and* a scientist) admits a scientific explanation for his captive's sensations, based on the reception of rays normally clogged by our planet's atmosphere. He is not in "space," Ransom concludes. "Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens." (*Planet*, p.32) By contrast, when the ship approaches Mars, sensations of weight and bodily sluggishness return. Their "descent," in both the physical and spiritual senses of the word, is finalized by Devine's profane shout to Weston, "Slower, you damned fool. You'll be in air in a minute or two." (*Planet*, p.39)

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Having debunked the slander of egotism against the medieval model, Lewis lodges the charge against the true culprit: the world view which springs from Evolutionism. Lewis accomplishes this feat, first by demonstrating that Darwinism is just as metaphorical, and no more factual, than Ptolemaism, then by teasing out the implications of its metaphors. Darwinism puts humanity, not at the bottom of a circular reality, but at the front of a linear one. We have struggled farther from the primordial swamp than any other creature, and are therefore superior to them. The medievals put man in his place; the moderns put him in first place. To the medieval, we are fallen and must arrest our pace; to the modern, we are ascending, and must at all costs accelerate.

Lewis's fictional world allows him to demonstrate the two different courses of action which these divergent views imply. In a brilliant literary ploy in Chapter 20 of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis reduces Weston's yeasty scientific and philosophical rhetoric to Ransom's childish (in the best sense) and therefore unadorned Malacandrian translation. This distills Weston's justification for Malacandrian genocide to superior boats, huts, laws, and engines of death. "Life," Weston roars, "is greater than any system of morality . . . . She has ruthlessly broken down all obstacles and liquidated all failures and today in her highest form—civilized man—and in me as his representative, she presses forward to that interplanetary leap which will, perhaps, place her beyond the reach of death." (*Planet*, p.136) "He says," Ransom sums all this up, "that because of this it would not be a bent action . . . for him to kill you all and bring us here."

Lewis has wisely made Malacandrian technology vastly inferior to that of Earth, has

given his fictional planet virtually no literature and only rudimentary architecture. He has also made its inhabitants the moral superiors of man in every way. By this technique, he illustrates his argument that true progress has nothing to do with what kind of things people produce, and everything to do with what kind of people are produced.

Lewis also holds up the medieval cosmos as a standard for true progress because it is orderly rather than competitive. Earth, the world below the Moon, was changeable, but this change was seen as making it inferior to the perceived perfection of the spheres. "The characteristic of the world we men inhabit is incessant change by birth, growth, procreation, death, and decay." By contrast, "So far as (Aristotle) could find out, the celestial bodies were permanent; they neither came into existence nor passed away. And the more you studied them, the more perfectly regular their movements seemed to be." (*Image*, p.3-4)

This introduces one of the jewels in Lewis's medieval clockwork. The world is a series of ordered spheres, with Earth being, as has been seen, the lowest and, thus, the most disorderly. Order, however, existed—real, objective structure was "out there," and true progress (in the Lewisian sense) consisted of discovering what it was and coming into conformity with it. "Everything has its right place, its home, the region that suits it, and, if not forcibly restrained, moves thither by a sort of homing instinct." (*Image*, p.92) Again, the universe was organized in a series of spheres, which provided perfect motion in harmony with perfect stasis. "The nearest approach to divine and perfect ubiquity that the spheres can attain is the swiftest and most regular possible movement, in the most perfect form, which is circular."

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In another fictional expression of this factual concept, Augray the *Sorn*, a sort of Malacandrian Aristotle, explains this perfection to Ransom. "If movement is faster, then that which moves is more nearly in two places at once . . . . But if movement were faster still . . . you see that if you made it faster and faster, in the end the moving thing would be in all places at once." This view seems to echo that of Lewis's literary mentor, G. K. Chesterton, who writes in *Orthodoxy*, a book much read and admired by Lewis, "A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them." (*Orthodoxy*, p.65-66) This concept appears in Lewis's own life. Speaking of Lewis and his older brother, Warren, Perry C. Bramlett states, "Both brothers pursued the preservation of order in their everyday lives—'a sincere love of monotony,' as Lewis described it." (Bramlett, p.47)

For Lewis, then, progress consists, not of moving to new places and abandoning old ones, but in moving to one's true place and staying there. By contrast, modern progress, again voiced by Weston, seeks only movement for its own sake. "It is enough for me," he declares, "that there is a beyond." This high-flown rhetoric Ransom reduces to ". . . he says

that though he doesn't know what will happen to the creatures sprung from us, he wants it to happen very much." This restlessness puzzles the ruling being of Malacandra. "'Strange!' said Oyarsa. 'You do not love any one of your race—you would have let me kill Ransom. You do not love the mind of your race, nor the body. Any kind of creature will please you if only it is begotten by your kind as they now are. It seems to me, Thick One, that what you really love is no completed creature but the very seed itself: for that is all that is left.'" (*Planet*, p.137-138)

Finally, Lewis sees the medieval model as a true standard of progress because it provides an increased sense of relationship between the individual and the world around him. In a Chestertonian turn of the tables, Lewis, having admitted the anthropomorphism present in Medieval language about "kindly enclyning," posits the geocentric scientist's question to the modern, "But do you intend your language about *laws* and *obedience* any more literally than I intend mine about *kindly enclyning*?" (*Image*, p.93) Having shown both models to be metaphorical, Lewis then concludes, "On the imaginative and emotional level, it makes a great difference whether, with the medievals, we project upon the universe our strivings and desires, or with the moderns, our police-system and our traffic regulations."

The medieval sees all of creation as animated by a spiritual response to the Creator. "He moves as beloved," Lewis quotes Aristotle. (*Image*, p.113) This movement, begun by God who yet remains Himself unmoved, communicates to each lower sphere by *influence*. Thus even inanimate objects sought their rightful place in an orderly creation, and all in response to the greatness of God. While Lewis stresses that no educated medieval believed that rocks, for instance,

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possessed volition, he demonstrates that this particular metaphor increased humanity's sense of kinship with the world around him. Man's "progress" can be conceived as the kind of "progress" that a man and woman might make in a marriage: not finding new and more exciting partners, but becoming more fully in harmony with the partner they have chosen. By contrast, the universe is, to modern thinking, a "thing"—raw material behaving according to impersonal chain-reactions. If man, or one given man or small group of men—can exploit these objects and processes to his perceived advantage, then he "progresses."

Once more, Lewis illustrates his point on the pages of *Out of the Silent Planet*. While Weston and Devine's only visible interaction with the creatures on Malacandra is either to kill them or defy them, Ransom lives among them, learns their language, and will later miss them as personal friends. He has "progressed" on Malacandra in the true sense. For Weston and Devine, true progress was never possible. They could "succeed" or "fail," but not "progress," because their world-view defined this new planet and its occupants as things rather than persons.

Was C.S. Lewis a progressive? Understood in his own sense, the word may have applied to Lewis more aptly than to nearly anyone else in this century. His life and work have helped, and continue to help, thousands to become more humble, more reconciled, and better attuned to God and others. As for the modern sense of the word, perhaps Lewis summed it up best, as he so often did, in his children's fiction. At the harrowing of the Lone Islands in Chapter 4 of *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Governor Gumphus protests that King Caspian's proposed reforms amount to "putting the

clock back." "Have you no idea of progress, of development?" he splutters. "I have seen them both in an egg," the King replies. "We call it 'Going Bad' in Narnia." (*Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p.59)

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