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# A Meaningful Hierarchy: How C.S. Lewis Perceives Humanity's Significance

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

Taylor University 2012

Upland, Indiana

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## **A Meaningful Hierarchy: How C.S. Lewis Perceives Humanity's Significance**

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# A Meaningful Hierarchy: How C.S. Lewis Perceives Humanity's Significance

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On Saturday 19 September 1931, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien bonded over the term *mythopoeia* (“myth-making”) during their famous stroll down Addison’s Walk (Carpenter 42). While on this walk, Lewis and Tolkien discussed how a storyteller “‘or sub-creator’ as Tolkien liked to call such a person, is actually fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light” (43). Lewis wrote to one of his dearest friends, Arthur Greeves, twelve days later, claiming that he went from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ (45). While this event certainly reveals a theological standpoint of Tolkien and Lewis, the claim that humans fulfill God’s purpose by sub-creating implies another important aspect of their worldview: that humanity is somehow different from other creatures.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, as G. K. Chesterton remarks in *The Everlasting Man*, a text we know contributed to Lewis’ conversion, humanity is “the measure of all things” (35). Measurement, of course, demands a scale from great to small—in this case, a hierarchy from the greatest of beings to the lowest. Lewis, through his literature, reveals the significance of humanity in the hierarchy of the universe. Within his core works, humanity’s significance may be observed in three contexts: humanity as a hybrid of bestial and divine; humanity as the protagonist of the Christian divine metanarrative; and humanity as a transformative creature.

In a paradoxical statement—a style for which he is often recognized—Chesterton sets the stage for Lewis when he notes the irony of the human animal: “the more we really look at man as an animal, the less he will look like one” (*The Everlasting Man* 27), for, as Chesterton further remarks in *Orthodoxy*, “we do *not* fit in to the world. I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God. But now I really was happy, for I had learnt that man is a monstrosity. I had been right in feeling all things as odd, for I myself was at once worse and better than all things” (72-73). Chesterton argues that humans are set apart from other creatures: “In so far as I am Man I am the chief of creatures....Man was a state of God walking about the garden. Man had pre-eminence over all the brutes; man was only sad because he was not a beast, but a broken god” (*Orthodoxy* 87).<sup>2</sup> Humanity, thus, finds itself in a conflicted, paradoxical state of existence—between the earthly and the divine, the physical and the metaphysical.

Lewis, likewise, recognizes the uniqueness of humans among all other creatures. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis states that a human “is subjected to various biological laws which he cannot disobey any more than an animal can...but the law which is peculiar to his human nature, the law he does not share with animals or vegetables or inorganic things, is the one he can disobey if he

chooses" (16)—what Lewis calls the Law of Nature, the Law of Descent Behaviour, or the Moral Law. The Moral Law "is not any one instinct or set of instincts: it is something which makes a kind of tune (the tune we call goodness or right conduct) by directing the instincts)" (21). In regard to animals, humans are, as Ransom of *That Hideous Strength* states, "More. But not less" (379). The demon Screwtape describes humans quite well as amphibians, "half spirit and half animal...As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time" (206). Through Screwtape, Lewis further asserts that the hybrid quality of humans is the cause of Lucifer's revolt. Humans, therefore, are hybrids of animal and spirit, time and eternity. *Bios* is the term Lewis gives to the natural, animal side of humans which "is always tending to run down and decay so that it can only be kept up by incessant subsidies from Nature in the form of air, water, food, etc." (*Mere Christianity* 131) In regard to the spiritual side, however, Lewis uses the term *Zoe* to refer to the spiritual energy and knowledge which is of God (131). According to Lewis, because of the paradoxical presence of both *Bios* and *Zoe* in humans, humans are "the highest of the animals," and "we get the completest resemblance to God which we know of" (131).

The power of reason is often recognized as one of the characteristics that divides humanity from the rest of the animal Kingdom. Agreeably, Lewis posits for two lobes of the human mind: while faith is built upon what is accepted in reason, "the battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other" (*Mere Christianity* 116). The narrator of *Perelandra*, for example, calls the reasoning quadrant "a chattering part of the mind which continues, until it is corrected, to chatter on even in the holiest of places" (140). Thus, while Ransom stands in the presence of

Maleldil—or, God, in Lewis' *Space Trilogy*—in a prayer, his calculating side continued to "pour queries and objections into his brain" in order to combat his faith (141). His reason, at this moment, is wrestling with his faith.

Lewis further portrays the divisions of the human mind in *That Hideous Strength* when Jane is given direction from Ransom; while one part of herself is completely receptive to Ransom, another seeks to control the situation, another produced moral confusion, and still a final portion felt joy (150-51). Characters like Jane and, later in the story, Mark experience a division of mind; one part reasons the event and contexts while the other expresses feelings about the event. One must, eventually, choose a side. When Mark is overcome by reason and its parallel with emotion, he had "his first deeply moral experience. He was choosing a side: the Normal. 'All that,' as he called it, was what he chose. If the scientific point of view led away from 'all that,' then be damned to the scientific point of view" (294). Mark, thus, chooses the irrational, yet reasonable side: the "normal." He decides against what science, stimulus, and evidence might suggest in the rational point of view; Mark, instead, exercises reason, faith, emotion, and imagination together to accept divine truth.

Mark's reasoning may be sharply contrasted to the actions of dear Mr. Bultitude, the "great snuffly, wheezly, beady-eyed, loose-skinned, gor-bellied brown bear," who is treated kindly and pronounced a safe animal (164). The wizard Merlin prophesizes the significance of the bear's role in the story of the world: "He said that before Christmas this bear would do the best deed that any bear had done in Britain except some other bear that none of us had ever heard of" (282). His "mind was as furry and as unhuman in shape as his body," having no ability to remember

much of his history, to recognize himself as a bear and his caretakers as humans, or to know that he did love and trust his caretakers: “The words *I* and *Me* and *Thou* was absent from his mind” (306). He is incapable of asking the question “why?” (307) Mr. Bultitude is, in fact, only a bear, able to feel Ivy’s love and care but unable to comprehend it (308), for he possessed “an inarticulate want for human companionship to which he was accustomed...[and] sorrow such as only animals know—huge seas of disconsolate emotion with not one little raft of reason to float on” (350). The bear’s inability to reason, however, is what most separates him from humans; thus, his part in the story consists of ruthless killings of the Belbury group members. In the midst of his slaughtering of humans, “The pride and insolent glory of the beast, the carelessness of its killings, seemed to crush his spirit even as its flat feet were crushing women and men. Here surely came the King of the world...then everything went black and he knew no more” (350). Mr. Bultitude cannot comprehend his emotion; he can only act. He lacks the reason, faith, imagination, and emotional awareness that Lewis believes to be part of humanity.

The animal’s inability to reason is not the only characteristic which separates humans from beasts; Lewis also notes the ability to create art as a point of separation from beasts. To aid his position, Lewis defines the words *creating* and *begetting*: “To beget is to become the father of: to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies....But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself” (*Mere Christianity* 130). Any animal can reproduce, but humans are the only animals who can really create.<sup>3</sup>

Humanity is certainly the highest of animals; in regard to the divine, however, humanity is at the base of the

hierarchy. When explaining the relationship between God and humans, Lewis personifies God: “Let us pretend that this is not a mere creature, but our Son. It is like Christ in so far as it is a Man, for He became Man. Let us pretend that it is also like Him in Spirit. Let us treat it as if it were what in fact it is not. Let us pretend in order to make the pretence into a reality” (155). Sandwiched between the animals and the divine, humanity dresses up to be like Sons of God when, in fact, they are incomplete Sons of God. Humanity, as you recall, relies on Bios and must be fed Zoe through God. Humanity may rise or fall in that hierarchy: traveling beastward or into the holy. As Donald T. Williams writes in *Mere Humanity*, “In summary, to be human is to be an animal who is more, who has also a spiritual nature and is therefore aware of and accountable to follow spiritual values” (33).

Humans, thus, have a choice whether to accept the role of a Son or Daughter of God. Again, addressing the reader through a persona of God, “Make no mistake...if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in my hands, that is what you are in for. Nothing less, or other, than that. You have free will, and if you choose you can push Me away. But if you do not push Me away, understand that I am going to see this job through” (161). Accordingly, one has a choice either to follow God’s purpose to perfection or not to do so; there is no neutral ground. As Camilla remarks to Jane in *That Hideous Strength*, “Don’t you see...that you can’t be neutral? If you don’t give yourself to us, the enemy will use you” (115). Alan Jacobs placed Lewis’ worldview in terms of “forks” yesterday, not unlike the direction we are going here.

In agreement with Process Theology, Lewis posits that everyone is moving in one direction or the other, either toward or away from God, participating in a divine metanarrative.

Some are Christians but losing their Christianity; others may not dare call themselves Christians but are on their way there (*Mere Christianity* 165). The middle is a dangerous place to be, however, whether one is moving toward or away from God. Screwtape remarks, “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts” (*Screwtape* 220). In Lewis’ view, while one is constantly traveling in either direction, she must choose a side both definitively and purposefully.

Although Process Theology seems tangential to our discussion of the significance of humanity, Lewis argues that one’s journey toward or away from God is what makes humanity especially significant. Individually, humans have the unique opportunity, unlike any other animal, to become more and more spiritual until, ultimately, becoming supernatural: “He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself. He is beginning, so to speak, to ‘inject’ His kind of life and thought, His *Zoe*, into you; beginning to turn the tin soldier into a live man” (*Mere Christianity* 153). The Christian becomes more spiritual, more alive, and more knowledgeable in the way that God is the way, the life, and the truth—but on a smaller scale, for “Christianity thinks of human individuals not as mere members of a group or items in a list, but as organs in a body—different from one another and each contributing what no other could” (149). The part of humanity who journeys toward God must unite with one another, existing as a part of the body of Christ in the world. The individual journey becomes a journey together. As Lewis writes, “If you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it would not look like a lot of separate things dotted about. It would look like on single growing thing—rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would

appear connected with every other” (146-47), or as Screwtape claims, humans “are to be one with Him, but yet themselves” (207). Humans, while individual and separate from one another, are a part of the whole of humanity; God, accordingly, seeks to make humans more like Himself: one who is more than one. Essentially, each person must contribute his or her part of the body to fulfill the task of that organ, as Paul writes of the church in 1 Corinthians 12.12-27. Lewis admits, “Christians are Christ’s body, the organism through which He works. Every addition to that body enables Him to do more” (*Mere Christianity* 60). Humanity is, essentially, the protagonist of a divine metanarrative—moving either away from God and toward isolation or away from isolation and toward God with His presence on earth through the Church.

While each person may have a place in the body of Christ and in the divine metanarrative, Lewis asserts that finding and accepting one’s place in the narrative is sometimes difficult. In *Perelandra*, for example, Ransom struggles with his position in the body of the church. Amidst discursive arguments between himself and the Un-man, Ransom questions God:

Why did no miracle come? Or rather, why no miracle on the right side? For the presence of the Enemy was in itself a kind of Miracle. Had Hell a prerogative to work wonders? Why did Heaven work none? Not for the first time he found himself questioning Divine Justice. He could not understand why Maleldil should remain absent when the Enemy was there in person. (140)

As he is mentally grumbling about God’s inactivity in the events around him, Ransom suddenly “knew that Maleldil was not absent” (140). Within moments, Ransom realizes that, while the Un-man was the ambassador of Hell, “That miracle

on the right side, which he had demanded, had in fact occurred. He himself was the miracle" (141). Following his epiphany, Ransom accepts his role in the Christian body—to be God's representative in the fight over the Lady of Perelandra; ultimately, if Perelandra's fate "lay in Maleldil's hands, Ransom and the Lady were those hands" (142).

Ransom discovers his role as what Lewis terms the "New Man"—that is, Ransom acts as one of God's children: "God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature....It is not mere improvement but Transformation" (*Mere Christianity* 170-71).<sup>4</sup> When God has been given the submission and willingness of humans to become the New Human, he infects us with his energy, joy, wisdom, and love to make us into gods and goddesses reflective of *the* God. As Lewis notes, "The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for" (163). But, as the New Humans admit in *Perelandra*, "it is He who is strong and makes me strong" (66).

Empowered by and reflecting God, each New Human has a special plan and purpose in the divine metanarrative as a part of the church. Lewis argues that as each person has a different command, each person has a different set of rules and responsibilities. On Perelandra, for example, "Maleldil has forbidden in one what He allows in another" (*Perelandra* 75). This is not to be confused with relativist morality but understood that Lewis is describing the different purposes for the various parts of the body of the Church. On Perelandra (Mars), the Lady is forbidden to be on fixed land and must remain on floating lands until she is rejoined with her King; on Thulcandra (Earth), humans are permitted to reside on fixed lands: nothing else exists! Lewis, thus, is not arguing for relativist morality;

instead, he posits that each person has a unique command, forbidding, and overall purpose as individual parts of the body of the church. Accordingly, the Lady comments, "I am His beast, and all His biddings are joys" (76). The joy of obeying Christ's biddings—that is the joy which Lewis believes we all should have.

The joy the Lady finds in obedience to God is like the New Human's joy; in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes, "To become new men means losing what we now call 'ourselves'....The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become" (175). In a sense, humanity has embraced the half-animal side rather than the half-spiritual side; by giving it all over, Lewis believes that one can discover her true self: "Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self" (176).

But where does this loss of self leave the animal side of the human? What about the human's responsibility as a creature of God as well as a Son of God? The third element of humanity's significance in the hierarchy of the divine metanarrative, according to Lewis, is the mastering of animals. Donald T. Williams asserts that Lewis means *leadership* rather than mastering in terms of *slavery*, the word which Lewis repeatedly uses (97-98); however, I do not believe that the term *leadership* reaches as far as Lewis intends. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis uses the metaphor of a human's relationship with a dog: "We treat our dogs as if they were 'almost human': that is why they really become 'almost human' in the end" (155). A dog's knowledge does not result from setting an example, as leadership might imply; rather, the knowledge to be more human-like is a result of being treated humanly: "I think I can see how the higher animals are in a sense drawn into Man when he loves them and makes them (as he does) much more nearly human than they would otherwise be" (159).

In the same way that God treats humans with the potential of rising in the hierarchy, humans are supposed to act as beastmasters by training the beasts to be more human-like. Ransom, likewise, states to the Lady of Perelandra, “The beasts in your world seem almost rational” to which the Lady responds, “We make them older every day....Is not that what it means to be a beast?” (*Perelandra* 65) Accordingly, the King of Perelandra states, “We will make the nobler of the beasts so wise that they will become *hnau* and speak: their lives shall awake to a new life in us as we awake in Maleldil” (211). Lewis, therefore, posits that *hnau*, including humans, must take care of the world around them, for “beasts must be ruled by *hnau* and *hnau* by *eldila* and *eldila* by Maleldil” (*Out of the Silent Planet* 102). One does not have to search far in Lewis’ canon to find examples of the beast-mastering principle: from Shasta and Bree in *The Horse and His Boy* to the cabby’s horse-turned-unicorn in *The Magician’s Nephew* to Ransom and Mr. Bultitude in *That Hideous Strength*.

Perhaps Ransom articulates humanity’s place in the hierarchy best as the *eldila*—the angels of the *Space Trilogy*—and the animals gather around the humans in Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength*: “We are now as we ought to be—between the angels who are our elder brothers and the beasts who are our jesters, servants and playfellows” (378). The true New Human, who, like Ransom, follows the Law of Human Nature, submits himself to God, and shepherds the lesser animals, will eventually pass into heaven, becoming full of *Zoe*. As the *hrossa* sing during the funeral service in *Out of the Silent Planet*, “Let it go down; the *hnau* rises from it” (131). Lewis posits, through the words of Ransom, that heaven removes the “present functions and appetites of the human body” and takes us into heaven as one of heaven’s own (32). Accordingly, the last of Ransom is a kind farewell to all of his house before

the descent of the vessel which is to take him into the Deep Heaven, entering into the fullness of *Zoe* and the Numinous (381).

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis and Tolkien were not validating a humanistic philosophy like that which affirms humans as perfect; rather, as will be further discussed, the authors posited humanity's significance and purpose in the story of the universe.

<sup>2</sup> In discussing the development of humanity, Chesterton, unavoidably, deals with evolutionary theory; accordingly, he wrote *The Everlasting Man* to combat the “vague notion” of evolution (71). Evolutionary theory, for Chesterton, is vague for its lack of evidence. Because science devalues the Creation story for the absence of empirical evidence, Chesterton argues, “There is not a shadow of evidence that *this* thing [human] was evolved at all. There is not a particle of proof that *this* transition came slowly, or even that it came naturally. In a strictly scientific sense, we simply know nothing whatever about how it grew, or whether it grew, or what it is” (38). In regard to the evolutionary assumption that humans are the same as any other animal, he writes about the superiority of humans over animals:

We can accept man as a fact, if we are content with an unexplained fact. We can accept him as an animal, if we can live with a fabulous animal. But if we must needs have sequence and necessity, then indeed, we must provide a prelude and crescendo of mounting miracles, that ushered in with unthinkable thunders in all the seven heavens of another order, a man may be an ordinary thing. (39)

Although confusing, the statement essentially claims that humans are superior from whatever perspective the race is viewed—as fact or animal; however, if one establishes a process of evolution from animals to humans, then the uniqueness of humans is entirely lost, for humans are only another link in the chain of evolution—and, therefore, nothing special.

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly, other animals can create, but they do so with a very limited capacity. Chesterton notes in *The Everlasting Man* that “the very fact that birds do build nests is one of those similarities that sharpen the startling difference. The very fact that the bird can get as far as building a nest, and cannot get any farther, proves that he has not a mind as man has a mind; it proves it more completely than if he built nothing at all” (37).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Glaspey in *Not a Tame Lion*, cites Eustace's transformation into a dragon in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* as an example of how transformation can, similarly, happen in reverse. Lewis may have adapted this concept from MacDonald. Lina, for example, has the appearance of a dog but the soul of a child who “was naughty, but is now growing good” (137).