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# A Tryst with the Transcendentals: C.S. Lewis on Beauty, Truth, and Goodness Part II: Truth

Donald T. Williams  
*Toccoa Falls College*

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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

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Upland, Indiana

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**A Tryst with the Transcendentals:  
C.S. Lewis on Beauty, Truth, and Goodness  
Part II: Truth**

Donald T. Williams  
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# A Tryst with the Transcendentals: C.S. Lewis on Beauty, Truth, and Goodness Part II: Truth

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## INTRODUCTION

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know,” says Keats’ Grecian Urn. If the Romantics tended to conflate Truth and Beauty, the Moderns tended to explain Beauty away as a mere subjective emotional response; and now some Post-Moderns seem to do the same with Truth itself. C. S. Lewis, rooted in the classical Christian world view, sought a more whole vision of the relations among the Transcendentals than any of these other approaches can provide. As we summarized that Christian view in part one of this study, truth when we find it in the world is a reflection of God’s mind, goodness of His character, and beauty of His glory, impressed into the very fabric of what He has made (see Kreeft 23-5). We started with Beauty in part one because it was Beauty, coming through Joy, or *sehnsucht*, that led Lewis to Truth. But to Truth he believed he had arrived. What was Lewis’s view of Truth? How did he defend it against the Reductionisms prevalent in the middle of the Twentieth Century? Can that defense still help us to withstand the assaults typical of our own times? These are the questions on which we shall attempt to shed some light. In our age of Post-Modernism and Post-Foundationalism when the very concept of truth is subject to deconstruction, there are hardly any more important questions we could address.

## THE NATURE OF TRUTH

Simply put, C. S. Lewis held to the classical “correspondence theory” of truth: Truth is a property of propositions such that their content corresponds to the state of affairs in the real and objective external world which they assert to be so. So far Lewis is not original in his concept of truth. His contribution at this point is helping us to a fuller and richer understanding of what it means to hold such a concept.

For example, he complains,

If naturalists do not claim to know any truths, ought they not to have warned us rather earlier of the fact? For really from all the books they have written, in which the behaviour of the remotest nebula, the shyest proton, and the most prehistoric man are described, one would have got the idea that they were claiming to give us a true account of real things. (*Miracles* 24).

The key words here are “account” and “real things.” Truth is propositional; it is an *account*. The person holding to these propositions, i.e., making this account, may not be capable of perfect objectivity. Indeed, if he is a finite human being, he cannot be; but his account is an account of objective reality nonetheless, of *real things*. And he can in theory overcome his subjectivity sufficiently to verify the truth of his account, if indeed the nebulae, protons, and cavemen behave as his propositions claim they do; if the state of affairs they assert “obtains” in the real world.

The theoretical possibility of thus sufficiently overcoming our subjectivity—and knowing when we have done so—is then essential to our ability to perceive, know, and state truth as correspondence. Traditional philosophy and nihilistic Post-Modernism actually agree on this point; they part company on the question of whether that possibility exists. Lewis argues that it has to:

The reason why your idea of New York can be truer or less true than mine is that New York is a real place, existing quite apart from what either of us thinks. If, when each of us said “New York” each meant merely “The town I am imagining in my own head,” how could one of us have truer ideas than the other? There would be no question of truth or falsehood at all. (*Mere Christianity* 25)

Post-Kantian relativism, before we even arrive at Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, holds that the real objective New York, the New York *an sich*, is unreachable, and that therefore only the phenomenal New York, the one that exists as an image constructed in our heads, can be directly known. Common sense would seem to be on the side of Lewis and the older Tradition, though; for there actually is a real New York, and the simple expedient of visiting it can determine which of two accounts of it is closer to the reality, so that the town being imagined in one head can be rejected in favor of that being imagined in the other for good and sufficient reason—to wit, the town existing outside of either head. Is Times Square in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, or the Bronx? Unless the real New York outside our heads both exists and is accessible *to* our heads, the question is unanswerable. But the question is in fact answerable; therefore, truth must be what Lewis conceived it to be, an account of New York that is theoretically capable of getting what we think closer to the real place that exists quite apart from what any of us thinks.

The existence of truth in this sense entails the existence of falsehood. Of contradictory propositions, only one of them can be true, and if that one is true, the other must perforce be false. “Your Hindus certainly sound delightful,” Lewis wrote to Dom Bede Griffiths, “But what do they deny? That’s always been my trouble with Indians—to find any proposition they would pronounce false. But truth surely must involve exclusions?” (*Letters* 3:704). A precondition of truth then is the universal validity of the law of non-contradiction. Two contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same way, in the same place, at the same time. If they could, the claim that either was true would be empty.

In other words, a true thought “reflects,” not just the mind of the thinker, but “universal reality” (*De Futilitate* 60). “Christianity claims to give you an account of *facts*—to tell you what the real universe is like” (“Man or Rabbit?” 108). One who claims anything less is simply not claiming that Christianity (or any other account of the state of things) is *true*.

The radical nature of this concern for truth was apparent already by the middle of the Twentieth Century, as can be seen by looking at some of the typical academic concerns of late Modernism with which Lewis contrasts it.

What makes some theological works like sawdust to me is the way the authors can go on discussing how far certain positions are adjustable to contemporary thought, or beneficial in relation to social problems, or “have a future” before them, but never squarely ask what grounds we have for supposing them to be true accounts of any objective reality. (*Malcolm* 104)

Screwtape encourages Wormwood to make good use of such an intellectual climate:

Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He

doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false," but as "academic" or "practical," "outworn" or "contemporary," "conventional" or "ruthless." Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don't waste time trying to make him think materialism is *true*! Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. (*Screwtape* 8)

In the intellectual climate which we have at last succeeded in producing throughout western Europe, you needn't bother about that [the fact that earlier writers like Boethius had told the truth]. Only the learned read old books, and we have now so dealt with the learned that they are of all men the least likely to acquire wisdom by doing so. . . . When a learned man is presented with any statement in an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true. He asks who influenced the ancient writer, and how far the statement is consistent with what he said in other books, and what phase in the writer's development, or in the general history of thought it illustrates, and how it affected later writers, and how often it has been misunderstood . . . and what the course of criticism has been on it for the last ten years, and what is the "present state of the question." (*Screwtape* 128-9)

Now in the Post-Modern world we have added concerns for what racial, class, or gendered interests the ideas in question advance, how they fit into or illustrate the power-broking structures of society, etc. It is not that these questions, or the ones Lewis noticed (which are still with us), are always devoid of interest, legitimacy, or relevance. They become problematic when they are used as a substitute for the search for *truth*, a way of endlessly deferring the question of truth, which is thought to be unattainable anyway. And that is precisely how they often

do function, not surprisingly given that Derrida correctly realized that once the very possibility of truth has been banished, the "play of signification" is extended precisely to infinity (1207).

Here is the point: Lewis would want to ask of the claim that, by the very nature of discourse, questions of truth are endlessly deferred, "Is it true? Does it correspond to the way things actually are in the real world?" And this is a question that Derrida, for example, would have had to refuse to answer; it is a question that simply has no meaning in his system. If we accepted the Deconstructive analysis, we would have to limit ourselves to questions of race, gender, class, and power too, for the truth question would be unaskable. So the question whether a view of truth can itself be true (or false) turns out to be pretty basic. Can we correct the New York in our heads by the one in the American Northeast, or are we rendered unable to do so, trapped inside our heads, whether by Kantian categories or by the specious language games preferred by Post-Modern intellectuals? Putting off for the moment a field trip to the Big Apple, we can realize that there is no question as to which side of that divide Lewis occupied.

Not all people who have held the correspondence theory of truth have been theists. But Christian theism if accepted does provide a solid grounding for such a view of truth. If we believe in a personal and rational God who not only acts but speaks, and who has created our finite minds in His image, then it is easier to conceive of truth as both existing and knowable. There is a stable reality to which our propositions can correspond, and our minds were designed to deal with that reality by the same Mind that designed it. If God exists and has spoken, then He is Himself the ultimate source of truth, and His Word the ultimate criterion of truth. The complaint that there is no "God's eye view of the world" is then simply based on a false premise. There is one; God has it; and He has communicated at least some parts of it to us. All truth then comes from Him, either directly or indirectly. Lewis of course

lived comfortably in this world: “Whatever was true in Akhenaton’s creed came to him, in some mode or other, as all truth comes to all men, from God” (*Reflections* 86).

So far Lewis is solidly in the mainstream of Christian thinking about truth. Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin and Wesley, Cardinal Newman and Carl F. H. Henry would all have affirmed these basic points, though not perhaps with Lewis’s characteristically deft use of apt analogy. What Lewis adds to the discussion is some careful thinking about the relations of truth not only to reason but also to imagination. It was his experience and his conviction that “All things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, imagination not least” (*Surprised* 167). How exactly does imagination do so?

Some of Lewis’s interpreters, influenced perhaps by the surface resemblance in language between Lewis and the English Romantics, have not paid sufficiently careful attention to how Lewis answers that question. One reads vague statements like “Truth flows into a person through the imagination” (Uszynski 247) and even more inexact summaries like the following: “Lewis, like many Romantics, intuitively trusted the capacity of imagination to be a ‘faculty of truth’” (Tixier 141). What Lewis actually said was much more carefully and rigorously thought out:

We are not talking about truth but meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition of both truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. (“Bluspels” 265).

Imagination is the faculty or organ not of truth (directly) but of *meaning*, which is the “antecedent condition” of truth. What does this mean? Suppose I utter the proposition, “Blepple hloisats kleply flarg krunk bluzzles,” and then ask you for a

verdict on its truth or falsehood. I suspect you would be somewhat handicapped in trying to render that verdict by the fact that you would have no idea what I had said. Before you could even begin to form a judgment on the truth question, you would need to know what a hloisat is, how a blepple one differs from a regular one, what it is to flarg, what a bluzzle is, what is the quality of krunkness, and how flarging kleply differs from regular flarging. In order to give you that information I would have to render these objects, qualities, and actions in concrete terms that you could visualize. Your Imagination would be the faculty that enabled you to form a picture—an image—of what the proposition is asserting (or whether it is asserting anything). Then your Reason would compare that mental picture to the picture of reality it has already tested and come to trust, in order to see if correspondence or contradiction resulted.

Imagination, in other words, doesn’t give us truth, contrary to what Tixier implies. Just because we can imagine something does not make it real. But Imagination combined with Reason can give us *meaningful* truth, truth that impacts us on other levels than mere academic intellectual assent. This is truth that can appeal to head and heart together. Lewis was the master of giving it to us, whether in his expository prose or his fiction. The hall and rooms of a house for the church and its denominations; two books which have always been resting one on the other for the eternal generation of the Son; the keys of a piano and a tune for the relationship between our instincts and the moral law; entrusting oneself to the waves and floating islands of Perelandra rather than sleeping on the fixed land for faith; the Stone Table for the Law and Aslan’s death cracking it for the Gospel; Reepicheep the Mouse for valor, chivalry, and honor: The brilliant artistic construction of these images does not prove that they are images of truth. But their presence in the context of the linear arguments and narrative trajectories of which they are a part makes the truths established by those lines of development mean

something; it makes their impact, their beauty, and their relevance easier to see *and to feel*.

Mythology for Lewis was one of the most important places where this contribution of imagination to our ability to grasp the meaning of true (or false) propositions is seen. It is well known that for Lewis myth was not the opposite of truth, as it is in popular usage, but rather one way in which truth can be conveyed or embodied. Myth is not necessarily “lies breathed through silver” (as the pre-conversion Lewis once foolishly said to Tolkien), but can be “a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination” (Tolkien 54; Lewis, *Miracles* 139n.). Myth may then convey these truths to the imaginations of readers, who might then independently verify them through reason and hence validly accept them as true. Thus George MacDonald’s modern mythic stories helped move Lewis in the direction of Christian faith by giving a meaning to the concept of holiness, even as Lewis’s own stories have done for countless readers since. The mythical quality of the story refers in Lewis’s usage to its meaningfulness rather than its truth or falsehood as such, which must be established on other grounds. Hence Lewis could without contradiction refer to the New Testament story of Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection as “myth become fact” (67).

Lewis is careful to use this language correctly even in his fiction. “Long since on Mars, and more strongly since he came to Perelandra, Ransom had been perceiving that the triple distinction of truth from myth and both from fact was purely terrestrial—was part and parcel of that unhappy division between soul and body that resulted from the Fall” (*Perelandra* 143-4, cf. “Myth Became Fact” 66). Fact in this passage is the bit of reality that truth is about; truth the account that corresponds to that reality; myth the story that allows us to taste the particular tang of that fact (“Myth Became Fact” 66). Ransom experiences in Perelandra the pre-analytical unity that lies behind the distinguished categories.

When one is inside a myth, in other words—say, on Perelandra with Ransom—one experiences the unified reality from which all three flow. When talking about that experience later, one has perforce to use the distinguished language, and Lewis does so consistently. He was doing so even in his earliest Christian fiction: “Child, if you will, it is mythology. It is but truth, not fact; an image, not the very real” (*Regress* 171). A true statement about reality is not reality; not even a mythical statement is reality; but it may be true nonetheless, i.e., it may correspond to that reality in a faithful manner. Because the meaningful creating and sustaining acts of a personal, purposeful, and rational God are the ultimate source of all reality, there is indeed a real unity between fact and truth, and between both and myth, the most meaningful statement of truth. Wolfe captures it well: “Ransom’s education has led him to see that it is not merely the idyllic worlds of Malacandra and Perelandra which are ‘mythological,’ but that reality itself, when perceived truly, is as dense with meaning as myth” (Wolfe 68). And some of this meaning may be stated propositionally, and some of those propositions may be confirmed by Reason as true.

Lewis then embraces the traditional and standard correspondence theory of truth and enriches it by relating truth to imagination and myth. Truth is a property of accounts or propositions such that their assertions correspond with reality. Imagination is the organ of meaning, the antecedent condition of truth or falsehood, i.e., of the meaningfulness of those accounts claiming to be true or false. Reason, which distinguishes and discerns correspondence or non-correspondence (between those propositions and each other, between them and reality) and pursues their implications, is the organ of truth. Myth is a story that enables the imagination to receive and taste ways of seeing the world that reason can then confirm as true or false.

This view of truth, traditional and standard, was already under attack in Lewis’s

own day, and that attack has only intensified since. How did he defend it?

### THE DEFENSE OF TRUTH

Above we raised the question whether a view of truth can itself be true. It is time to see how Lewis answered that question in the case of the correspondence theory of truth. He gives two basic reasons why we should accept the correspondence theory of truth as true. First, it cannot be denied without self contradiction. Second, it corresponds to the way in which people do in fact come to true knowledge about the world.

Lewis advanced the argument from self contradiction in many ways and in many contexts. The most well known and fully developed place is the chapter of *Miracles* originally titled “The Self Contradiction of the Naturalist.” Attempts to answer technical objections raised by Elizabeth Anscombe when the argument was presented at the Oxford Socratic Club caused the water in that chapter to be muddied a bit in later editions, with the title changing to the “Cardinal Difficulty” of Naturalism. Either way, the argument is that Naturalism must itself be false because it participates in the inevitable self-refutation of all views that entail radical skepticism. (See Reppert for a fine history and evaluation of the Anscombe debate.)

A good summation of the argument appears in the essay “*De Futilitate*”:

Can we carry through to the end the view that human thought is *merely* human: that it is simply a zoological fact about *homo sapiens* that he thinks in a certain way; that it in no way reflects . . . universal reality? The moment we ask this question we receive a check. We are at this very point asking whether a certain view of human thought is true. And the view in question is just the view that human thought is not true, not a reflection of reality. . . . In other words, we are asking, “Is the thought that no thoughts are true, itself true?” If we answer Yes, we contradict ourselves. . . . There is

therefore no question of a total skepticism about human thought. (“*De Futilitate*” 60-61)

If true statements do not correspond to real states of affairs in the external world, if they are not “reflections of reality,” then the very claim that truth is not a reflection of reality does not correspond to the way things actually are either, and thus it self-destructs. This is so whether the reason why we allegedly cannot know that some statements accurately reflect reality is the physical determinism entailed by naturalism (Lewis’s opponent in *Miracles*), the cynicism of the Greek sophists, or the linguistic solipsism of Post-Modern Deconstructionists.

Lewis’s usual foil was naturalism. If Nature is all that there is, then the laws of physics—not the laws of logic—determine everything. The thoughts I am having are mere chemical reactions taking place in my head, determined solely by the movements of atoms set in random motion by purposeless and unintelligent processes ages ago. But, then, so are the thoughts of the person who disagrees with me. “What we called his thought was essentially a phenomenon of the same sort as his other secretions—the form which the vast irrational process of nature was bound to take at a particular point of space and time” (“Religion without Dogma” 136). Who is to decide between these two chemical reactions? A third chemical reaction produced by the same random, purposeless processes? This takes us nowhere. So Lewis quotes J. B. S. Haldane: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms” (*Miracles* 22). Lewis agreed. If naturalism were true, it would be have to be false. For if it is true, then

All our present thoughts are mere accidents—the accidental by-product of the movement of atoms. And this holds for the thoughts of the materialists and astronomers as well as for anyone

else's. But if their thoughts—i.e., of Materialism and Astronomy—are merely accidental by-products, why should we believe them to be true? I see no reason for believing that one accident should be able to give me a correct account of all the other accidents. ("Answers" 52-3)

It follows then that

At least one kind of thought—logical thought—cannot be subjective and irrelevant to the real universe: for unless thought is valid we have no reason to believe in the real universe. . . . I conclude then that logic is a real insight into the way in which real things have to exist. In other words, the laws of thought are the laws of things. (*De Futilitate* 63)

That thought be logical is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of truth that is *known* to be truth. A proposition that someone holds may just happen to be true; it may be true by luck. But unless it has a logical basis, we cannot *know* it to be true. And a proposition may be logically consistent or coherent without corresponding to external reality. To maintain a belief in knowable truth, in other words, we must have more than logic but cannot have less. Thus we can be certain that "No account of the universe can be true unless that account leaves it possible for our thinking to be a real insight" (*Miracles* 20).

The correspondence theory of truth itself then is not only logically consistent; it is logically necessary if there is to be any knowable truth at all. Furthermore, it matches the way people actually come to discover and hold truth. How do we actually come to know truth? The additional element that we have to add to logic is *experience*. There is a real New York that transcends any of our perceptions of New York (the New York "in my own head" that we saw above) and is capable of correcting those perceptions and adjudicating between them. If we do not

know which picture of the city is more accurate, we can go and look.

But can we really? Post-Modern theory argues that we cannot step outside of our perceptions to experience the New York *an sich* because the perception we receive through experience is itself mediated through our background, our beliefs, our language, and our situatedness. There is no such thing as uninterpreted experience; any experience to which we might appeal has already been interpreted, so that there is no "God's eye view" from which our perceptions can be evaluated and no final conclusion that can be reached about what reality is in itself outside our perceptions. As Derrida famously put it, "There is nothing outside the text."

Was Lewis then caught in a naïve Modernism so that his appeals to reason and experience are simply *passé*? He never had the opportunity to respond to thinkers like Derrida, of course. But he was confronted by earlier forms of cultural and epistemological relativism, and so we can easily imagine what his response might have been. Radical skepticism is no less self refuting when it is based on clever theories about language than when it is based on philosophical or scientific naturalism. It cannot be true without untruthing itself; therefore, it cannot be true. In the case of Post-Modern forms of this sophistry, Lewis might have noted the prevalence of reductionistic thinking. The demonstration that we cannot avoid having our thinking *influenced* by our language, race, gender, class, etc., is mysteriously elevated (while no one is looking) into the conclusion that our thinking must perforce be *determined* by those influences. The fact that we normally define language by using other language is extrapolated into the theory that language only refers to other language and has no ability to refer to anything outside of language. But as Smith points out,

Language . . . is the only means we have of making truth claims. Likewise, it is the only means we have of debating the veracity of such claims. Unless we wish to give over the entire business of

making and challenging claims to truth, we must accept the referentiality of language, metaphoricity and all. Otherwise, we must be ready to admit that statements such as “Metaphor is nonreferential” do not refer to anything except themselves. Such would probably be the starting point of any defense Lewis might make of the referentiality of metaphor. (22).

Can the real New York ever, even potentially, break through all these influences to smack us in the face with reality? Our experience tells us that, whatever the dictates of Theory to the contrary may be, in fact it can, if we just step out of the ivory tower into the street. Lewis’s attitude toward experience, and toward the external world which provides us with those experiences, is therefore quite refreshing compared to the suffocating claustrophobia of much current thinking:

What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it. (*Surprised* 177)

Truth then is a property of propositions such that they correspond to real states of affairs in a real world. We hold to this view because to deny it is self refuting and because reality rewards us in the search for truth in such terms when we approach it fairly. One must assume these truths even to argue against them. And the best response to those theories that seem to compromise or deny them is not just counter-theorizing, but stepping outside of the ivory tower into the street to allow the real New York to do its work.

## THE RELEVANCE OF TRUTH

Lewis not only expounds the correspondence theory of truth, enriches it by relating it to imagination as well as reason, and defends it successfully; he also has a lot to say about its implications for life and thought.

First, if we are confident in the existence of truth and the ability of human minds to know it, we are liberated from chronological snobbery. We are freed from the provincialism of the biases of our own age to become citizens of history and receive truth from any mind in any time, not just those who share the perspectives of our own limited “situatedness.” “Space does not stink because it has preserved its three dimensions from the beginning. The square of the hypotenuse has not gone mouldy by continuing to equal the square of the other two sides” (“Poison” 76). Truth becomes something we can find *and hold on to*. Only if it is reduced to perspective does it change into something else by the mere passage of time.

Second, it is impossible fully to understand human nature or to seek its fulfillment without a robust understanding of the nature of truth and confidence in its reality. In *The Abolition of Man*, human beings are those creatures who live not by instinct but by *understanding* of the *Tao*. Lewis agreed with Aristotle that all men naturally desire to know: “One of the things that distinguishes man from the other animals is that he wants to know things, wants to find out what reality is like, simply for the sake of knowing. When that desire is completely quenched in anyone, I think he has become something less than human” (“Man or Rabbit?” 108).

A human being divorced from the quest for truth is less than human because human beings were created in the image of the God of truth, for fellowship with the God of truth, which entails not just the knowledge but also the embracing of truth and the rejection of the lie. This fact makes our

orientation toward truth a matter not just of fulfillment but of moral obligation.

When Professor Price defended scientists, speaking of their devotion to truth and their constant following of the best light they knew, it seemed to him that he was choosing an attitude in obedience to an ideal. He did not feel that he was merely suffering a reaction determined by ultimately amoral and irrational sources, and no more capable of rightness or wrongness than a hiccup or a sneeze. (“Religion without Dogma” 137)

Lewis approves of this stance, even though Price may not have realized that his attitude ultimately flows from the relation of the creature to the Creator who is the God of truth. It is the duty of true humanity to feel this way: “Every free man wants truth as well as life: . . . a mere life-addict is no more respectable than a cocaine addict” (*Miracles* 24).

Therefore, to acquiesce in the mere freeplay of perspectives rather than pursuing the search for truth is to betray the purpose for which our minds were created. In a passage that prophetically anticipates a Post-Modern buzz word, the liberal bishop in *The Great Divorce* is warned, “Thirst was made for water; inquiry for truth. What you now call the free play of inquiry has neither more nor less to do with the ends for which intelligence was given you than masturbation has to do with marriage” (44). The choice of metaphor is not only daring but telling. Truth was intended to be experienced not just as an intellectual abstraction but as a participation in reality that has union with the ultimate Reality, the Source of all reality, as its end. The rejection of truth is finally a rejection of that union, a form of spiritual adultery. Every philosophy that reduces truth to merely a subjective mind state dehumanizes us and cuts us off not only from God, but from all that is good and real. As the George MacDonald character in *The Great Divorce* explains, “Every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the

dungeon of his own mind—is, in the end, Hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself” (*Great Divorce* 69). The Dwarfs in *The Last Battle*, clinging to the stable-litter of their minds, are a graphic picture of this epistemological captivity.

Flowing from all this is a third point: Seeking and finding and embracing the truth is not a matter just of intellectual curiosity but of moral and spiritual life and death. The importance of truth cannot be overstated in this view. And because truth flows from the creative decrees of the spiritual God who created the material world, the true propositions whose embrace is so crucial to us correspond not just to physical reality but to the unseen realities, to morals and values, as well. This means that, as in the argument of *The Abolition of Man*, morals and values are objective realities, not just subjective feelings or perspectives. Therefore, “Unless we return to the crude and nursery-like belief in objective values, we perish” (“Poison” 81).

The most critical truth to be embraced or refused is of course the truth about the God from whom the world of reality flows. Every person therefore has a moral obligation to consider the claims of the Christian faith very seriously—whether or not he or she sees any immediate pragmatic benefit in holding those beliefs. This above all is not a merely academic discussion.

Christianity claims to give you an account of *facts*—to tell you what the real universe is like. Its account of the universe may be true, or it may not, and once the question is really before you, then your natural inquisitiveness must make you want to know the answer. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be; if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all. (“Man or Rabbit?” 108-9)

Truth comes before any use we might make of it, and we find it only when we recognize that fact. “If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for

comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with, and in the end, despair” (*Mere Christianity* 39). Though the search for truth is a value in itself that supersedes any pragmatic benefit that might come from finding it, there is of course pragmatic benefit to knowing and embracing the truth: comfort, perhaps, and more important things besides. “If Christianity should happen to be true, then it is quite impossible that those who know this truth and those who don’t should be equally well equipped for leading a good life” (“Man or Rabbit?” 109). But there is something even greater at stake than how good a life we might lead:

Here is a door, behind which, according to some people, the secret of the universe is waiting for you. Either that’s true, or it isn’t. And if it isn’t, then what the door really conceals is simply the greatest fraud, the most colossal “sell,” on record. Isn’t it obviously the job of every man (that is a man and not a rabbit) to try to find out which, and then to devote his full energies either to serving this tremendous secret or to exposing and destroying this gigantic humbug? (“Man or Rabbit?” 112)

Lewis devoted his life to “serving this tremendous secret,” to living, explaining, and defending the Christian faith. The fourth implication of Lewis’s view of truth as he develops it is what it means for living the Christian life. To believe in truth and take it seriously is to make the quest for truth paramount not only in deciding to become a Christian, but also in those decisions one makes because one is a Christian—for example, the choice of a church or a denomination. Applying his analogy of the church as a house with its hall and rooms, Lewis advises, “Above all you should be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and paneling. In plain language, the question should never be: ‘Do I like that kind of service?’ but ‘Are these doctrines true?’” (*Mere Christianity* 12).

If truth is central to what Christianity is, then we have to understand the central Christian act—belief—in terms of our concept of truth. Faith becomes something oriented to truth, a stance one takes toward the truth. If this is so, it becomes harder to think of faith as a primarily emotional response, or as unrelated to specific propositions about God and the world, or as the inclination to affirm as true propositions that would otherwise not commend themselves as such. Faith is trust in a Person which causes us, not merely to acknowledge, but to embrace as true, those ideas and facts about that Person which we have come to believe (in Lewis’s case, on what he thought were good grounds) that He has revealed to us. Faith adds the emotional and personal element of trust and commitment to what would otherwise be a merely notional relationship to those propositions. That is why Lewis can say, “I define Faith as the power of continuing to believe what we once honestly thought to be true until cogent reasons for honestly changing our minds are brought before us” (“Religion: Reality or Substitute?” 42). He devotes an entire essay, “On Obstinacy in Belief,” to explaining this relational element as the reason why the Christian’s belief, once established, does not waver with “every fluctuation of the apparent evidence” (29). For one who holds Lewis’s classical view of truth, then, faith is something that is more than propositional and evidential, but it can never be less.

Faith then is a stance toward certain propositions seen in relation to the Person who is believed to have revealed them, which embraces them as true not as a matter of opinion but of trust and commitment. The lack of evidence is not what constitutes this stance as belief or faith rather than knowledge. Lewis (and many others) have thought the evidence quite good. But the fact that the particular relationship to which these beliefs lead and which they nurture is the rather overwhelming and life-changing one of creature to Creator, sinner to Savior, and servant to absolute Sovereign—a relationship infinitely satisfying to many who embrace it

but daunting enough in prospect to have caused Lewis to describe his conversion as being dragged kicking and screaming into the Kingdom—means that there is a lot more going on than the mere disinterested perusal of evidence. There are many more sources for doubt than lack of irrefutable evidence. So Lewis can see faith as the support of reason as much as the other way around:

Religion may win truths; without Faith she will retain them just so long as Satan pleases. . . . If we wish to be rational, not now and then, but constantly, we must pray for the gift of Faith, for the power to go on believing not in the teeth of reason but in the teeth of lust and terror and jealousy and boredom and indifference that which reason, authority, or experience, or all three, have once delivered to us for truth. (“Religion: Reality or Substitute” 43)

Truth then for the Christian is a serious intellectual matter that can never be only intellectual. It is at the heart of our created humanity and of its fulfillment in relationship to its Creator. In a healthy and whole human being, truth simultaneously informs the intellect, inspires the emotions, and energizes the will. Lewis would have understood Bacon:

The inquiry of truth, which is the lovemaking or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature. . . . Certainly it is heaven upon earth to have a man’s mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth. (Bacon 40)

It is not just reason and imagination that are unified by Lewis’s holistic view of truth; it is head and heart, being and doing, and every other aspect of our humanity as well. That unity is well expressed by Lewis’s final bit of advice: “A man can’t always be defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it”

(*Reflections* 7). In his fiction, his poetry, and his expository writing, Lewis helps us to do just that.

## CONCLUSION

C. S. Lewis’s exposition of truth, its nature, its grounds, and its implications, is increasingly a voice crying in a wilderness of radical perspectivalism. Various forms of reductionism today conspire to render truth claims nothing more than subjective responses and cynical power plays. Sadly, so pervasive is this way of thinking, so cloaked in the robes of academic sophistication and respectability, that even some Christians have inconsistently acquiesced in such views and helped to perpetuate them. Lewis can help us see what is at stake as well as provide a roadmap back to sanity.

The materialist reductionism Lewis battled is still with us. Reppert, for example, critiques thinkers like Patricia Churchland who think that evolutionary explanations of the nervous system render the concept of truth otiose: “Either truth is our highest epistemic goal and there is a state of the person called ‘believing truly,’ or else we have no epistemic goal and we can engage in various cognitive projects without being held to an absolute standard by which those projects can be judged” (77). To that materialist reductionism have now been added other forms of cultural and linguistic reductionism with similar or even more deadly effects. Edwards notes,

Some recent composition theorists have come to view their task as stripping away the illusions that language can capture and bear witness to “truth” or “reality.” . . . The purpose of writing instruction under the new literacy regimes is to prepare the writer to recognize and inhabit the world of “truths” that he himself creates, as opposed to the world of truths he might discover outside himself. . . . Lewis would regard these views as a retreat to a Gnosticism that not only does not shield humankind

from manipulation or error, but instead guarantees error by undermining the ontological status of knowledge and belief. (103)

Those who still aspire to the wholeness of an examined life and connection to a reality greater than themselves will find in Lewis a stout defender of the legitimacy and necessity of that quest, and an experienced guide to lead us in it. Is truth when we find it in the world a reflection of God's mind, goodness of His character, and beauty of His glory, impressed into the very fabric of what He has made? C. S. Lewis not only explains why we should think so; he lets us taste and see.

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**A Tryst with the Transcendentals · Donald T. Williams**

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