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## What Lewis NEVER Wrote: Quotes Misattributed to the Oxford Professor Don

William O'Flaherty

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IX**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Ninth  
**FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM**  
on  
**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

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## **What Lewis NEVER Wrote: Quotes Misattributed to the Oxford Professor Don**

William O'Flaherty  
EssentialCSLewis.com

# What Lewis NEVER Wrote: Quotes Misattributed to the Oxford Professor Don

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"Nothing can deceive unless it bears a plausible resemblance to reality."

- C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As you may notice from this title, I intentionally made an error and corrected it. C.S. Lewis never held the title of "professor" when at Oxford. However, he did when he worked at Cambridge. When many of his books were published in the 1940's it stated that Lewis was "Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, if one were to rank erroneous information on a scale of 1-10 ("1" being minor and "10" being major), then this mistake would rank on the lower end of that gauge. Yet, when it comes to truth, in an absolute sense, something is either correct or incorrect. Therefore, stating Lewis was an Oxford Professor is false.

In the same vein, when considering whether or not a quotation is by Lewis; it either is, or is not. It doesn't matter if you like the statement or not, or how close it may be to something he actually said. He either wrote it or he did not.<sup>2</sup>

Before considering some quotations incorrectly credited to Lewis, I want to briefly ponder a questionable quote that is obviously not by him to draw a parallel. The following statement is generally accepted and some believe it is in the Bible:

Money is the root of all evil.

Of course, something very close to this is in the Bible. However, a few important words are missing from that statement. Examining the KJV of 1 Timothy 6:10 we see the following: "*The love of* money is the root of all evil" (emphasis added).

Unlike the quotations examined in a moment, this misquotation from the Bible merely lacks some key words. Quotations falsely credited to Lewis are typically not similar in that way, that is, we cannot simply add a few words to make it into a statement by him.

What does this have to do with Lewis? I'm setting the stage for an understanding of why quotes I'll be examining are likely misattributed to him. In some examples the statement is close to what Lewis actually wrote.

In other cases it may not be anything related to what Lewis wrote, but it is a

statement that the people reading it believe is true. Referring back to the quotation falsely attributed to the Bible; people either are not noticing some words are missing, or actually believe the statement and having the Bible as the source adds weight to their conviction of its truth.

Thus, when someone shares the above incorrect quotation and states the Bible says it is true, those less familiar with Scripture will easily accept it as truth because a recognize authority is cited as the source.

When considering whether or not Lewis actually wrote something it is important to realize that this author is not directly addressing whether or not the statement is true. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to debate the accuracy of the quotation. Rather, the focus is merely to provide proof that Lewis is not the source of the material.

In what follows I provide a quotation that is not found in any of C.S. Lewis's published works. The actual source or likely source is presented for the questionable statement. In some cases I explore why Lewis would not have made such a statement. Finally, what Lewis actually wrote (or the closest thing to it) is presented.

## II. YOU DON'T HAVE A SOUL

The first quotation to consider is "**You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body.**" In Imperfect Reflections, a blog by a person merely identifying as being by Mackenzie, the author points out that a character in Walter Miller's 1959 book *Canticle for Leibowitz* says "You don't have a soul, Doctor. You are a soul. You have a body, temporarily." Yet, there is actually an earlier source for this quote falsely attributed to

Lewis. Hannah Peckham, in a 2012 post on Mere Orthodoxy reveals her discovery that an 1892 monthly journal called *The British Friend* had a piece stating George MacDonald made a statement very close to the popular quotation we see today.<sup>3</sup>

"Never tell a child," said George Macdonald, "you *have* a soul. Teach him, you *are* a soul; you have a body."

While Lewis was a fan of MacDonald it is unclear if he was familiar with this article. However, we do know that in a book Lewis edited, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, this quote is not present.

There are those who wish Lewis had made the statement because it appears to confirm a belief that the material world is not all there is. However, some are concerned that this quotation is supportive of gnostic notions which Lewis would clearly reject. Either way, the purpose of this paper is not to debate the meaning of the quotation or the truth of it, but to merely show that Lewis never wrote it.

What has Lewis said on the topic? Below is a passage from the fifth chapter of *The Four Loves*. There is also a lengthier section (not provided here) in chapter eleven of *Perelandra* that also touches on some elements expressed in the quotation in question.

Man has held three views of his body. First there is that of those ascetic Pagans who called it the prison or the "tomb" of the soul, and of Christians like Fisher to whom it was a "sack of dung," food for worms, filthy, shameful, a source of nothing but temptation to bad men and humiliation to good ones. Then there are the Neo-Pagans (they seldom know Greek), the nudists

and the sufferers from Dark Gods, to whom the body is glorious. But thirdly we have the view which St. Francis expressed by calling his body "Brother Ass." All three may be—I am not sure—defensible; but give me St. Francis for my money.

Narnia series came out could think that proves he might have written something similar. However, prior to Narnia, Lewis was famous because of *The Screwtape Letters* that came out as a book in 1942 and it was chiefly this that led to him being on the cover of *Time* in 1947, well before Narnia was published!

So, what has Lewis said that might be related? As you will see it was not anything that would be considered all that motivational:

### III. NEVER TOO OLD

If you happen to be facing fewer years ahead of you than are behind you (like myself), than you likely wish the following statement is correct: **"You are never too old to set another goal or dream a new dream."** While many hope such a proclamation is true, falsely attributing it to Lewis doesn't make it any more accurate, but some find it more believable if a person as famous as Lewis stated it.

Growing up in the 1970's I recall hearing something similar to this quotation in relation to the fact that Kentucky Fried Chicken is a franchise that didn't start until Colonel Sanders was in his 60's. A notion like this can be great motivation to those wanting to find success later in life.

When exploring the actual source for this quotation I found it on a website by Les Brown, a motivational speaker that appears to credit him as the creator of the quote.<sup>4</sup> There is also a YouTube video that was posted 8/29/2012 by Les Brown where he shares the quote, but he doesn't claim he is the source.<sup>5</sup>

While Lewis believed in encouraging others his published writings do not contain any statement similar to this. His general style of writing is very different than this cliché-like expression. Also, there is very little reason Lewis would have said it. Although, those vaguely familiar with the fact that Lewis was in in 50's when his successful

Progress means getting nearer to a desired goal and therefore means not being there already.<sup>6</sup>

Once a dream has become a fact I suppose it loses something. This isn't affectation: we long & long for a thing and when it comes it turns out to be just a pleasant incident, very much like others.<sup>7</sup>

Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means, at the point of highest reality.<sup>8</sup>

### IV. BAD EGGS

A somewhat more recent quotation going around the Internet is actually vaguely related to what Lewis really wrote. This quote, **"No clever arrangement of bad eggs ever made a good omelet,"** is likely a witty paraphrase of a passage found in *The Great Divorce*.

After not locating the quotation in my electronic versions of Lewis's texts I sought out the help of the Lewis community in a secret Facebook group I started called Virtual C.S. Lewis Society.<sup>9</sup> About two hours after I posted my question Max McLean (founder and artistic director of Fellowship for Performing Arts) replied with a solution to my mystery.<sup>10</sup>

He pointed out that in chapter seven of *The Great Divorce* we have the following statement by one of the characters Lewis created:

What would you say if you went to a hotel where the eggs were all bad and when you complained to the Boss, instead of apologising and changing his dairyman, he just told you that if you tried you'd get to like bad eggs in time?

Lewis is known for his Irish dry sense of humor and you can find many funny statements by him in his writings. However, we know he did not write what appears to be a paraphrase of something similar. At this time it is unknown who created the version falsely attributed to him.

What follows are actual statements Lewis wrote that are quite humorous.

A good toe-nail is not an unsuccessful attempt at a brain: and if it were conscious it would delight in being simply a good toe-nail.<sup>11</sup>

Is an elephant more important than a man, or a man's leg than his brain?<sup>12</sup>

A man is still fairly sober as long as he knows he's drunk.<sup>13</sup>

Those who do not think about their own sins make up for it by thinking incessantly about the sins of others.<sup>14</sup>

You understand sleep when you are awake, not while you are sleeping.<sup>15</sup>

A cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither.<sup>16</sup>

## V. THINKING LESS OF YOURSELF

Another quotation that suffers from being a decent paraphrase of what Lewis actually wrote is this: "**Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.**" However, because he never wrote those words it is a disservice to falsely attribute it to him. Whenever I point this out to others I make it clear that I am not disagreeing with the rewording of what Lewis actually said. It is just that Lewis never wrote it that way.

As best as I can determine the earliest place this quotation came from is the 2002 edition of *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. On Day 19 in the chapter called "Cultivating Community" he makes this very statement without giving any credit to another source.

As already noted this statement is close to what Lewis wrote. Yet, despite his ability to create very quotable sayings, when he addressed that topic in *Mere Christianity* he didn't say anything this concise. In the eighth chapter of Book 3 ("Christian Behaviour"), entitled "The Great Sin," he deals with the subject of pride. There he says:

It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

And near the end of the chapter he states that a really humble person:

...will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud.

Elsewhere Lewis wrote the following that is related this topic:

A man is never so proud as when striking an attitude of humility!<sup>17</sup>

As long as one knows one is proud one is safe from the worst form of pride.<sup>18</sup>

No man who says I'm as good as you believes it. He would not say it if he did.<sup>19</sup>

## VI. MORE CLEVER DEVIL

The final quotation I'll explore suffers a similar shortcoming to the statement falsely attributed to the Bible that I mentioned at the beginning. It's **"Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil."**

This nearly sounds like Lewis, doesn't it? A valueless education might make you clever, but without morals you are closer to being like the devil. However, that is not really what this quotation says. The statement I just made Lewis would agree with.

The key concern is what's said after the first three words, "Education without values." When I was having difficulty noticing this quote as problematic I emailed Lewis scholar Dr. Bruce Edwards and this was his reply<sup>20</sup>:

But I don't even think it expresses truth. Neither Lewis nor I believe that there is such a thing as "education without values"

In other words, it's the opposite of his argument in *Abolition of Man*. Why would Lewis say an "education without values" is "useful"?

Once pointed out it seems very clear that Lewis would never make a mistake like this and advocate value-free education when stating it will only make you "a more clever devil." So, when you read something, whether it be attributed to Lewis or someone else, it is important to read it carefully. Unfortunately I don't yet know the source of this quotation.

What did Lewis actually say related to this? The following are two important samples of Lewis's thought on the subject. The first is from chapter three of *The Abolition of Man* and the second is from the first chapter.

A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.

The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes.

## VII. CONCLUSION

There are many other quotations falsely attributed to Lewis that I hope to address in the future. For now just be cautious about believing something is by him unless you see a reference to one of his books or articles.

As already noted there can be a variety of reasons why someone has incorrectly credited Lewis as the source of a quotation. A moment ago it was because they are not reading them carefully. Related to this is not being familiar enough with Lewis to know what he "sounds" like.

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Earlier I noted that people often take their already held beliefs and either look for support or think they have support for them because of a quote that is alleged to be from a trusted source. Having somebody famous confirming notions they already hold is “icing on the cake.”

Finally, I want to suggest that this phenomenon, while very sad, also shows hope; that is, it confirms in some ways that we live in a culture looking for answers. But we are also in a very distracted culture that frequently doesn't pay careful attention to sources. This makes our job more difficult at times, but, if you stop and think about it, it also keeps us “employed.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>At least each of his book that were published after his talks on the BBC in the 1940's listed Lewis this way. My 1946 copy of *Christian Behaviour* also states on the inside of the back dust jacket that “since 1925 (he) has been Fellow and Tutor of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he lectures on English literature.

<sup>2</sup>I either own or have access to electronic (searchable) copies of nearly all his books, including his essays and letters. This is how I am able to either determine, or confirm Lewis never wrote something.

Yet, there is actually an earlier source for this quote falsely attributed to Lewis. Hannah Peckham, in a 2012 post on Mere Orthodoxy reveals her discovery that an 1892 monthly journal called *The British Friend* had a piece stating George MacDonald made a statement very close to the popular quotation we see today.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Peckham found the quotation in an article entitled “BE NOT ENTANGLED AGAIN IN A YOKE OF BONDAGE.” (p. 157) by “W. H. F. A.”

<sup>4</sup>The page I first found ([http://www.lesbrown.com/english/motivational\\_quotes.html](http://www.lesbrown.com/english/motivational_quotes.html)) appears to be an older version of his website, as I also found another version of that page ([http://lesbrown.com/?page\\_id=34](http://lesbrown.com/?page_id=34)) that doesn't state the sources of any of the quotes.

<sup>5</sup>The YouTube video by Les Brown is found here: <http://youtu.be/eAGqBhQXWTE>

<sup>6</sup>Letter to Mr. Lyell from December 6, 1944. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 2.*

<sup>7</sup>Letter to Arthur Greeves from November 2, 1918. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 1.*

<sup>8</sup>From letter XXIX in *The Screwtape Letters.*

<sup>9</sup>Facebook allows you to create a “secret” group that only other members of the group can invite a person to join. I used this setting originally to limit the size of the group, but to also avoid having strangers ask to join the group. If you are reading this then you are likely one who seriously studies Lewis, so you can send me an email at [777email@gmail.com](mailto:777email@gmail.com) to ask to be added.

<sup>10</sup>This was done on May 10, 2014. His reply was “Probably a redaction from this bit in *The Great Divorce*. ‘What would you say if you went to a hotel where the eggs were all bad and when you complained to the Boss, instead of apologising and changing his dairyman, he just told you that if you tried you'd get to like bad eggs in time?’ Always gets a chuckle. See [www.CSLewisOnStage.com](http://www.CSLewisOnStage.com).”

<sup>11</sup>Letter to Hugh Kilmer from April 5, 1961 in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 3.*

<sup>12</sup>“Christian Apologetics” in *God in the Dock.*

<sup>13</sup>“Answers to Questions on Christianity” in *God in the Dock.*



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<sup>14</sup>"Miserable Offenders" in *God in the Dock*.

---. *The Great Divorce*. N.Y. MacMillan. 1946.

<sup>15</sup>In Book 3, Chapter 4 of *Mere Christianity* ("Morality and Psychoanalysis")

---. *Mere Christianity*. N.Y. MacMillan. 1960.

<sup>16</sup>In Book 3, Chapter 5 of *Mere Christianity* ("Sexual Morality")

---. *Perelandra*. N.Y. Scribner, 1996.

<sup>17</sup>"Christianity and Culture" in *Christian Reflections*.

---. *The Screwtape Letters*. N.Y.: MacMillan, 1961.

<sup>18</sup>Letter to Genia Goelz from May 15, 1952 in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 3*.

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<sup>19</sup>"Screwtape Proposes a Toast" (found in most editions of *The Screwtape Letters*).

<<http://imperfectfornow.blogspot.com/2011/10/c-s-lewis-was-not-gnostic-heretic.html>>

<sup>20</sup>Dr. Edwards's reply came in an email dated February 4, 2014.

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