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Zachary A. Rhone

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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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C.S. Lewis' Warnings on Education

Zachary A. Rhone
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Upon hearing a boy say he might enjoy going back to school, C. S. Lewis remarked, "I was feeling, in a confused way, how much good the happy schoolboys of our own day miss in escaping the miseries their elders underwent," but Lewis also was not entirely disenchanted with the education he received, claiming the good results of his education were the unintended ones ("My First School" 23, 26). In the mid-1940s, Lewis admitted discontent with some of the shifts in British education. On the American side, the Great Depression caused rapid economic changes to educational budgets. Books and supply expenditures were reduced or eliminated; 10-25% of administrative and faculty salaries were cut; and the length of the school year was even reduced by a month (Judd 876). Youth who left school to find a job were unable to obtain employment and, furthermore, turned away from further education (877). The world entered a state of turmoil from political to personal levels, education included. As Charles H. Judd notes, "With the change in conditions . . . it is no longer possible for most young people to complete their preparation for mature life by securing at an early age profitable employment" (881-82); it may be difficult to believe that Judd was writing in 1942 when higher education has risen to such high demand since the 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1940s, Lewis recognizes rising problems in the British educational system, warning

society of immanent ramifications in educational focus, socio-political demands, and social equality that, even today, apply to British and American educational systems.

Between the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, educational goals changed dramatically from student-learning to student-centered models: what the student should learn versus what the student likes to learn. Education, like politics and the family, observed tremendous shifts in the mid-twentieth century: from tradition to evolution, from local nuclearity to political universality. In 1942 America, Judd notes the "extremists" who sought for "complete abandonment of the conventional divisions of the curriculum" (882). New educational structures would remove courses in math, spelling, geography, and history and replace them with "such topics as arouse the interest of pupils," conclusively fusing disciplines normally diversified in separate subjects (882). Across the pond, Lewis decried the Norwood Report in both "The Parthenon and the Optative" and "Is English Doomed?" The 1941 Norwood Report resulted in the 1944 Education Act, essentially creating a division among children: academically-inclined students went to grammar schools; scientifically-inclined went to technical schools; and remaining students attended secondary schools. The division caused public concern, yielding a review of education in the 1963 Newsom Report (Gillard).

Norwood, et al. argued for a break away from traditional education to a student-centered approach: "The curriculum then must do justice to the needs of the pupil, physical, spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, practical, social. This is the problem which those who construct curricula have to face" (Norwood, et al. 60). They further called for a curriculum which integrates "the personality of the child . . . by the realisation of his purpose as a human being" (61); in terms of English courses, all examinations should be abolished because they could produce "much harm in its influence" (95). Lewis responds to the overall mentality in "The Parthenon and the Optative." The Parthenon is a kind of education which deals with the "hard, dry things like grammar, and dates, and prosody" while the Optative "begins in 'Appreciation' and ends in gush" (109). Lewis is challenging Norwood et. al's resistance to English examinations because they believe those examinations either test information outside of English or attempt to "test a pupil's appreciation of them by means of an external examination" (93). Lewis rebuts that, while "appreciation is a delicate thing . . . the questions were never supposed to test appreciation; the idea was to find out whether the boy had read his books. It was the reading, not the being examined, which was expected to do him good" ("The Parthenon" 110). Furthermore, removing examinations from the English curriculum—and humanities like it—would cause a chain reaction over time because, believes Lewis, "A subject in which there are no external examinations will lead to no State scholarships; one in which no school teachers are required will lead to no livelihoods" ("Is English Doomed?" 28), a trend that is quite evident in higher education today with little funding for the humanities, increasing job loss in literary studies, and decreasing English departments in America, nationwide.

Then, and today, a clear privileging takes place at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The subjects that currently few aspire to and many have difficulty with are discarded for reasons of impracticality,

economic profit, and, according to these mid-twentieth-century reports, the harmful emotions that examinations place on students. In the words of Screwtape, the basic principles of education are that "dunces and idlers must not be made to feel inferior to intelligent and industrious pupils" because these individuals simply have different interests, or, in Norwood terminology, the curriculum has failed to integrate them ("Screwtape Proposes a Toast" 293). It is not that Lewis disapproves of certain student types; rather, he recognizes a survival of the fittest in education. He simply observes that some students "will sit at the back of the room chewing caramels and . . . occasionally ragging and occasionally getting punished" because that is the education for which they work. To his benefit, he will learn that his place is not in academia: "The distinction between him and the great brains will have been clear to him ever since, in the playground, he punched the heads containing those great brains. . . . But what you want to do is to take away from Tommy that whole free, private life as part of the everlasting opposition which is his whole desire" ("Democratic Education" 35). Lewis believes that, if generic Tommy experiences an education which encourages him rather than educates him, then he will resent the inferiorities he may not have known he even had. "Democracy demands that little men should not take big ones too seriously," says Lewis, "it dies when it is full of little men who think they are big themselves" ("Democratic Education" 36).

That democracy alludes to a second warning Lewis offers against the changes in school: those which would inevitably establish problematic relationships among education, politics, and socio-cultural demands. He foresaw the rising entanglement of education with social and political demands. In "The Death of Words," he notes the current synonymy of *moral standards, civilized, modern, democratic, and enlightened* (107). Accordingly, all five terms might be applied to the developing educational reforms of the 1940s and beyond

(many, if not all, are, in fact, used). Lewis admitted to being a democrat not because of equal representation but because of checked power: "Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows" ("Equality" 17). Aristotelian democratic education does not mean "the education which democrats like, but the education which will preserve democracy" ("Democratic Education" 32). A democratic education, then, should check and balance the power and attention given to certain interests and people: "On the one hand the interests of those boys who will never reach a University must not be sacrificed by a curriculum based on academic requirements. On the other, the liberty of the University must not be destroyed by allowing the requirements of schoolboys to dictate its forms of study" ("Is English Doomed?" 27).

European education, notes Lewis, was based on the ancient Greeks, who greatly revered tradition unlike the "modern industrial civilization" ("Modern Man and his Categories of Thought" 62). *Provincialism*, or narrow-mindedness, is the term Lewis applies to the mentality which disregards tradition because it is out of date. Old texts, particularly the Bible, are discarded simply because they are old: "The tactics of the enemy in this matter are simple and can be found in any military text book. Before attacking a regiment you try, if you can, to cut it off from the regiments on each side" ("Modern Man" 62). Lewis finds recommending Christianity, for example, increasingly difficult because audiences always ask "if it will be comforting, or 'inspiring', or socially useful" ("Modern Man" 65). Modern individuals cannot seem to view something objectively; it must be practical—an historic sign of the peasant rather than the philosopher.¹ Such are the changes given to education in the mid-twentieth century and beyond—socio-cultural demands which see education for its practicality rather than personal betterment—for *moral standards*, *enlightenment*, and like words are no longer important in the academic realm.

Instead, practical education begins to

see pupils for their utility. As Screwtape says, "the differences between pupils—for they are obviously and nakedly individual differences—must be disguised" ("Screwtape Proposes" 293). Education shifts away from what may be too challenging for one student and, perhaps, even away from what may be too easy, disregarding the significance of knowledge in itself. As a result, asserts the excited demon Screwtape, "At schools, the children who are too stupid or lazy to learn languages and mathematics and elementary science can be set to doing the things that children used to do in their spare time" ("Screwtape Proposes" 293). Little did Lewis know that the 1963 Newsom report would encourage studies beyond the traditional forms: e.g., handicraft, rural studies, and needlework (Newsom, et al. 132-35). This democratic education attempts to appease desires, "evil passions," and envies, according to Lewis ("Democratic Education" 34). Yet, "Envy is insatiable," and equality is being applied where "equality is fatal"; it "is purely a social conception" (34). Lewis reminds his readers of the latent content unachievable in this utility-oriented, socially- and politically-constructed education; virtue, truth, nor aesthetics are democratic. A truly democratic education, on the other hand, is one which preserves democracy—which is "ruthlessly aristocratic, shamelessly 'high-brow'". In drawing up its curriculum it should always have chiefly in view the interests of the boy who wants to know and who can know" (34).

The problem of a democratic education which seeks to represent all people rather than educate people took little time from the 1941 Norwood Report to touch higher education in the 1963 Robbins Report, which called for not only co-ordination between schools and higher education institutions (269) but also a near-doubled enrollment at the higher education level from 1962 to 1974 from 216,000 to 390,000 students; and an additional increase to 560,000 students by 1981 (67-69). They asked that money be set aside to establish new institutions to defer attraction to Oxford and Cambridge (79-80). In the US, the Higher

Education Act of 1965 attempted to increase access to higher education for all people. It saw the birth of the Pell Grant, Educational Opportunity Funding, grants for teacher education, and the beloved federal and private student loans. Screwtape, timely enough in 1959, prophesies, "At universities, examinations must be framed so that nearly all the students get good marks. Entrance examinations must be framed so that all, or nearly all, citizens can go to universities, whether they have any power (or wish) to profit by higher education or not" (293). Political and socio-cultural demands drive the educational system to forfeit the elite element of higher education; students whose performance is sub-par may reach the university simply because the demand is to increase numbers. Lewis' cry for a "ruthlessly aristocratic, shamelessly 'high-brow'" education which preserves democracy is entirely ignored at both child and young adult academic levels. It may be worth mentioning that federal grant programs such as the GEAR UP program, enacted in the 1998 revision of the Higher Education Act of 1965, can be found simply by going to the homepage of the NCLB program. GEAR UP, an acronym for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, "is a federal program aimed at equalizing access to higher education for low-income students" which promotes information to students and parents about higher-ed institutions, individualized academic and social support for students, parental involvement in education, (that oh-so-specific!) educational excellence, school reform, and student participation in rigorous courses (Don't worry, *rigorous* is defined ten years later in another grant program; we'll get there!) ("National Evaluation of GEAR UP" 1). Ironically, though the executive summary of the first two years of GEAR UP provides explanations for use of funding, student environmental statistics, and educational reform objectives, it surprisingly contains no statistical data about how many GEAR UP children attended or even completed a higher education program.

Nonetheless, one of the driving forces for these demands is equality which, as Lewis observes, is a significant remedy for a broken machine; the final warning, however, is that when equality is valued not as a means but as an end, the medicine becomes a dangerously poisonous drug for the student and culture, alike. Lewis believed that equality, unlike wisdom and happiness, is not something innately good ("Equality" 17). Certain kinds of equality are, in Lewis' words, "necessary remedies for the Fall," but when equality is treated as an ideal rather than a medicine, "we begin to breed that stunted and envious sort of mind which hates all superiority. . . . It will kill us all if it grows unchecked" (18). Politically, for example, Lewis praises his nation for having a ceremonial monarchy while maintaining a democratic government, for "there, right in the midst of our lives, is that which satisfies the craving for inequality, and acts as a permanent reminder that medicine is not food" (20). Not admitting the obviousness of natural inequalities will inevitably either remove all required subjects or broaden the curriculum so much so that every child can pass without a problem; she can be "praised and petted for something – handicrafts or gymnastics, moral leadership or deportment, citizenship or the care of guinea-pigs, 'hobbies' or musical appreciation. . . . Then no boy, and no boy's parents need feel inferior" (33). Of course, the natural consequences of an education which facilitates "dunces" will be not only the "hatred of superiority" but also a "nation of dunces" (33).

This warning against equality-based education permeates Lewis' literature. When Lewis published *The Screwtape Letters* in 1941, the Norwood Report was only being released, as well. Lewis' short essays on education to follow over the next few years wrestled with the concept, but he did not make a large publication of his view until the follow-up to *The Screwtape Letters* in 1959: "Screwtape Proposes a Toast." Screwtape begins his discussion of the word *democracy*, particularly interested in encouraging his fellow demons to confuse human minds as to

the meaning of the word: “they should never be allowed to give this word a clear and definable meaning” (290). In two short paragraphs, he essentializes the first two warnings, followed by the core of the argument: “you can use the word *Democracy* to sanction in his thought the most degrading (and also the least enjoyable) of all human feelings. . . . The feeling I mean is of course that which prompts a man to say *I’m as good as you*” (290). The phrase is Screwtape’s way of masking the word *equality*, and the feeling is clearly a feeling of envy which “has been known to the humans for thousands of years.... The delightful novelty of the present situation is that you can sanction it—make it respectable and even laudable—by the incantatory use of the word *democratic*” (291). The clause, *I’m as good as you*, becomes the theme of the toast—as the key to the syntactic games and educational advice to come. Screwtape envisions the best way to ruin humanity. Intelligent, gifted children “who are fit to proceed to a higher class may be artificially kept back, because the others would get a *trauma*—Beelzebub, what a useful word!—by being *left behind*” (294, italics mine). One may recall the American No Child *Left Behind* Act which restrained the progress of some students to maintain an arbitrary national average. The NCLB has roots in 1965, alongside Higher Education reform, with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. I need not expound on the goal of the NCLB, “to ensure that all children have a fair, *equal*, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (italics mine) which includes “closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (*No Child Left Behind* 1.1001). Lewis, I believe, expresses the aim most effectively: “The bright pupil thus remains democratically fettered to his own

age-group throughout his school career, and a boy who would be capable of tackling Aeschylus or Dante sits listening to his coeval’s attempts to spell out A CAT SAT ON THE MAT” (“Screwtape Proposes” 294). As a result, says Screwtape, demons will no longer need to ruin humanity because humanity will pave their own roads to Hell.

Through the guise of Screwtape, Lewis perceives a necessary step in order to implement *I’m as good as you* into education, beginning with the economic liquidation of the Middle Class via taxation and rising costs of private education (294). As a part of Obama’s 2009 revisions to NCLB—yes, Obama has used the Act he slanders to his benefit—the Academic Competitiveness Grant and the National SMART (Science and Math Access to Retain Talent) Program demand a student have participated in “rigorous” courses—a term you may recall from the 1998 GEAR UP program. Even ten years later, respondents at higher-ed institutions had difficulty understanding what was meant by the term *rigorous* in order to award funds to students (*Academic Competitiveness and SMART Grand Programs* 41). To top it off, these grants that supposedly function on competitiveness boasted 282,300 first-time, first-year students would have been eligible for funding had the program existed in 2003, double of those who would have qualified in the 1995-96 academic year. That, apparently, is the spirit of competition: double the recipients. Additionally, this calculation relies solely on college preparation-based curriculums, meaning the program does not rely on student performance so much as school participation in the program. In fact, they exclude from calculations student populations who did not attend a participating school. I might add, according to these grants, competition and intelligence only occur in the maths and sciences, for these grant programs do not exist outside of them.

Government, as we can see, effectively steers education to its aims. Consequently, all education becomes state education,

controlled by the democratic ideal of equality. This new democracy, what Screwtape contextualizes as the *diabolic sense*, will sustain a “morally flaccid” nation with undisciplined youth, arrogance built upon ignorance, and emotional weakness due to “lifelong pampering. And that is what Hell wishes every democratic people to be” (“Screwtape Proposes” 295). Through such measures, true democracy will be crushed in the face of diabolic democracy and its *I’m as good as you* equality. Such education cannot teach traditional virtues, values, or ethics—none of these are part of an equality-based system. Lewis is clear in positing that where absolute equality could exist, obedience does not—which begs the question if such equality may be achieved if it resists the obedience necessary to create it: “The man who cannot conceive a joyful and loyal obedience on the one hand, nor an unembarrassed and noble acceptance of that obedience on the other, the man who has never even wanted to kneel or to bow, is a prosaic barbarian” (“Equality” 18). So much for being civilized—or, if one prefers different verbiage, *moral, modern, democratic, or enlightened*.

“Where men are forbidden to honour a king,” writes Lewis, “they honour millionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead: even famous prostitutes or gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison” (20). *I’m as good as you* ignores the virtues of a good leader for conspicuous entertainment: *The Apprentice, The Voice, Scarface, Lady Gaga, Charlie Sheen*, as a few examples. The relationship of this worship to education may seem unclear, but the praise of these shows, characters, and appearances resist the uplifting of those similar shows, characters, and appearances which display human maturity—the heroes of an age. Clearly, popular examples of astute minds and virtuous characters are difficult to find in order to compare to the previous examples. In 1963, Newsom, et al. argued that English and humanities are not taught appropriately because they are taught as ends in themselves rather than as integrative into other

disciplines (152). The problem now, however, is that disciplines such as these, after suffering integration into other disciplines, have nearly disappeared and been declared unconventional. In an age of utility, barbarians do not need literacy; in an age of literacy, barbarians are still needed for their utility. Perhaps, had Lewis’ voice been heard and understood, some of the catastrophes in teaching, testing, and cultivation may have prevented the current state of education, both in England and the US.

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¹ In 1818, Mary Shelley's narrator in *Frankenstein*, for instance, remarks, "The untaught peasant beheld the elements around him, and was acquainted with their practical uses. The most learned philosopher knew little more. He had partially unveiled the face of Nature, but her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery. He might dissect, anatomise, and give names; but, not to speak of a final cause, causes in their secondary and tertiary grades were utterly unknown to him" (41).