

Persona and Paradox

Persona and Paradox:
Issues of Identity for C.S. Lewis,
his Friends and Associates

Edited by

Suzanne Bray and William Gray

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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In memory of

Stephen Medcalf (1936 – 2007)

and

Jacques Sys (1948 – 2007)

Teachers, scholars and an inspiration to many.

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PREFACE

WILLIAM GRAY

I felt honoured and delighted when I was invited to serve on the Academic Panel of the Lille Catholic University conference “Persona and Paradox: Issues of Identity for C.S. Lewis, his Friends and Associates.” This conference was, I am informed, the first of its kind to be held in France; it is also, to the best of my knowledge, the first conference to approach the question of Lewis’s identity in quite the way that it does, that is, by means of a wide-ranging exploration of the diverse contexts, contacts, conflicts, contretemps, conversations and convivialities that constituted Lewis as the distinct but nevertheless highly elusive individual that he was. It has been most interesting, as well as a privilege, to follow these essays in their development from mere proposals to the finished pieces included in the present volume.

Part A – “Defining C.S. Lewis’s Identity” – begins with Christopher Mitchell’s essay “C.S. Lewis as Lay Minister” which digs deeply into Lewis’s motivation for undertaking his very high-profile work as a popular apologist and lay theologian. This was not a role that Lewis would have naturally chosen – prior to his conversion his wish was to be left alone to get on with his own academic work. Lewis’s conversion was above all about the surrender of his *will* in *obedience* to a divine Person. However, this was not just the traditional Biblical stress on faith and obedience rather than philosophical understanding: Mitchell emphasizes the influence on Lewis of Plato’s “Cave Allegory,” with the culmination of the prisoner’s spiritual/intellectual ascent being his realization of the necessity of *returning* to the cave for the instruction of the benighted cave-dwellers.

If such a balance of faith *and* philosophical reason has a distinctively Anglican feel to it, Suzanne Bray’s “C.S. Lewis as an Anglican” offers a carefully nuanced account of Lewis’s Christian identity, which begins by scotching the persistent rumour that C.S. Lewis became a Roman Catholic. However, Bray overcomes any simplistic denominational pigeonholing of Lewis by sketching the historical context of his religious life. By careful

attention to his own words in published works and in correspondence, she manages to communicate with considerable precision the distinctive flavour of Lewis's churchmanship.

David C. Downing in his "A Grief Obscured: C.S. Lewis on Sorrow And Hope" shows how not only the various versions of *Shadowlands*, but also readers and critics more generally, have misinterpreted Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, taking it to be straightforwardly autobiographical when Lewis sought deliberately to introduce a critical distance between this narrative of the grief process and his own experience of the loss of Joy Davidman. Worse still is the misreading according to which *A Grief Observed* is evidence of some final loss of faith on Lewis's part, rather than a careful and subtly intertextual analysis precisely of the *process* of grief.

Robert Banks's "Was C.S. Lewis 'Everyman's Theologian'?" offers a careful and thoroughly researched analysis of Tolkien's apparently rather snide throwaway line (or sound bite?) to the effect that Lewis was "Everyman's Theologian." Banks demonstrates that Lewis was nothing less than a "mere theologian."

Jim Stockton in "C.S. Lewis and the Oxford Philosophers: A Philosophical Review of the Oxford University Socratic Club (1941-69)" provides welcome light on a topic that has generated some heat in Lewis circles: the impact of the famous Lewis versus Anscombe encounter in 1948, both on Lewis and on his writing. Some have suggested that Lewis's supposed trouncing in this debate precipitated him into a different kind of writing from the apologetic works of the 1940s, that is, into the fantasy writing of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This essay offers a helpfully detailed account of the Socratic Club (the context for the Lewis versus Anscombe encounter, but also very much more than that) as well as of the debate itself and its aftermath.

Jonathan Fruoco's "C.S. Lewis and T.S. Eliot: Questions of Identity" outlines a detailed history of the difficult relationship between Lewis and T.S. Eliot, bringing out the depth and longevity of Lewis's antipathy to Eliot and all that Lewis believed him to stand for, as well as describing their eventual reconciliation on a personal level.

Kyoko Yuasa's "C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*: Christian Postmodernism and 'The Inverted Telescope'" offers what might be called a kind of postmodernist "close reading" of Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, stressing the blurry borders between fact and fiction and suggesting that truth lies beyond the limitation of human language.

Part B – Lewis as Friend and Correspondent – opens with Michael Apichella’s “Friendship as Philosopher: C.S. Lewis – Atheist, Deist, Christian Apologist” which sketches the influence on Lewis of his eclectic circle of friends, some of whom Apichella met during his residence in The Kilns, Lewis’s former home near Oxford, as the first curator of the C.S. Lewis Study Center, Gregory Bassham’s philosophically informed “Who Could Have Deserved It? C.S. Lewis on Friendship” suggests that although Lewis was a loyal, engaging, and much-loved friend, the theoretical account of friendship he gives in *The Four Loves* is seriously dated and one-sided. These deficiencies are rooted, Bassham argues, not only in changed social conditions, but also in Lewis’s “personal particularities,” such as his unusual (even for his gender and historical context) reserve about his personal life.

William Gray in “‘A New Literary Species, a New Rhetoric, a New Climate of the Imagination’: C.S. Lewis on E.R. Eddison” discusses the debt of gratitude Lewis felt to E.R. Eddison, especially for his epic fantasy novel *The Worm Ouroboros*. However, Lewis disliked others of Eddison’s novels, not least for their explicit exaltation of Venus in a kind of “theology” which did not go down well with the Inklings, whose meetings Eddison attended twice. Nevertheless the common animosity that Eddison and the Inklings bore towards the spirit of the modern age made them allies until such time as “the androgynous and petrol-nourished monstres of this age” were slain.

Part C – Associates and Influences – begins with Crystal Downing’s intriguing essay “Identifying Theopoetics: The Theopoetics of Dorothy L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis.” This essay sketches a brief history of the development of *theopoiesis* out of the *cul de sac* of “death of God” *theology* and its mirror-image, traditional propositional theology. Downing discusses the subsequent submersion of the nascent theopoetic movement in the floods of postmodern discourse, until postmodernism itself entered a channel that became known as the “religious turn.” Both D.L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis were, Downing argues, “theopoets” ahead of their time, producing a kind of double-helix of *theo* and *poiesis* that nurtures the identity of Christian faith better than do many contemporary theopoets. *Pace* those who like Bultmann argue that human beings cannot simultaneously use electric lights and think about the supernatural, Sayers pointed out (in 1941 – the same year as Bultmann’s (in)famous demythologizing essay) that conceptualizations of “light, or oysters, or battleships” rely as much on metaphoric, anthropomorphizing language as

do conversations about God.¹ Lewis made a similar point in 1944: “We can make our language duller; we cannot make it less metaphorical.”² For Downing, as for Lewis and Sayers, we need the double-helix of *theo* and *poetics*, “the balance between tradition and progress,” for the DNA of theology to be endlessly renewed.

In the second of two essays on Sayers, Christine Colón’s “‘Detachment is a rare virtue’: Dorothy L. Sayers and the Construction of Female Identity” discusses Sayers’s recognition that social pressures often compel women to fulfil gender expectations, a theme Sayers explores in several of her works where women face challenges when they reveal a trait that is contrary to gender stereotypes. Particularly significant for Sayers personally were the problems posed when a woman displays an unladylike detachment that compels her to analyze situations rather than become emotional about them. Sayers recognized in herself a lack of “appropriate” emotion and an unwillingness to make herself vulnerable to overpowering feelings. In her construction of Harriet Vane, Sayers manages to negotiate a version of feminine identity in which a woman’s detachment may truly be seen as a virtue. But even more than the novel, drama was for Sayers, not simply an intellectual enterprise, but something that she could throw her entire self into – even her emotional self. Sayers’s own self-presentation was, as C.S. Lewis noted in a panegyric written after her death, also something of a performance in which she appeared both “richly feminine” and “gleefully ogreish.”³

In the first of two essays focussing on Charles Williams, Gavin Ashenden’s “Issues of Identity: C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams – Intelligence and Magicians” surveys the overlap between Williams and Lewis, referencing four aspects of their identities: as poets, as Platonists, as apologists and as magicians. Others have written about the first three of these aspects; Williams and Lewis (to begin with) saw themselves essentially as poets. According to Ashenden, however, the role of magician is relatively neglected. Lewis the apologist dominates the first half of his adult literary life as a Christian, but the essential route into his more expansive and inclusive persona as a novelist is through Lewis the Magician (readers might want to compare Ashenden’s colourful version of the 1948 debate where Anscombe “acted as matador to [Lewis’s]

¹ D.L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1941/1979), 23.

² C.S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces* (London: Fontana, 1965), 53-4.

³ Lewis, “A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers,” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 95.

pugilistic bull, and pierced him surgically as he made his passes, wounding him fatally” with Stockton’s more sober account above). Williams and Lewis turned to the world of magic because it permitted a form of Neoplatonic cosmology and provided a way of capturing readers’s imaginations and describing the process of identity transformation that is at the centre of the Christian narrative. The etymology of Magic, Magus, is ultimately from the Old Persian “Magush”: to be able or to have power. Our word “machine” derives from it. But machines are neutral: what they accomplish depends upon the tasks they are directed to. Similarly there are different uses of magic, not only “black” magic but also the magic implied in the famous quotation from “Sometimes Fairy Stories may say what’s Best to be Said” (where Ashenden stresses the etymological connection of “makes” with “magic”): “But supposing by casting these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained glass and Sunday school associations, one could *make* them for the first time appear in the real potency?”⁴

Richard Sturch in “Orthodoxy versus Originality in Charles Williams” argues that while Williams was well within “mainstream” Christianity – to the extent of refusing to insist that one particular stream was the only *true* one – there were, however, occasional peculiarities in his writings. Williams’s originality took the form of seizing on things that others have overlooked. Most important among Williams’s original theological ideas are of course those of “co-inherence” and “exchange,” but these are beyond the scope of his present paper, Sturch admits; they are also well within the bounds of orthodoxy. Williams believed that certain principles could be applied far more widely than is generally supposed; but whether he is right or wrong, orthodoxy has nothing to say against him. But at other times Williams seems to have looked at the Church and her history in a distorting mirror. Sturch finds Williams’s interest in the esoteric rather embarrassing, not because Williams went in for actual magic or sorcery, like some of the villains in his novels, but rather because it seems so odd that someone as intelligent as he should have taken seriously what Sturch sees as nonsense. Though Williams found in esoteric symbolism something that illuminated Christianity, it is significant that, when he came to found his own group, the “Companions of the Co-inherence,” no mystical or alchemical symbolism was incorporated. And although Williams was personally drawn towards an extremely dark vision, it is based firmly in the orthodoxy of the Incarnation; as C.S. Lewis said in the

⁴ Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories may say what’s Best to be Said,” in *Of This and Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York, Harcourt, 1967), 37. Emphasis added.

volume of essays dedicated to his friend: “[s]cepticism and pessimism were the expression of his feelings. High above them, overarching them like the sky, were the [orthodox] things he believed, and they were wholly optimistic.”⁵

In the first of three essays on Lewis and his “Master” George MacDonald in the present volume, Daniel Gabelman’s “Miraculous Identity: How Miracles Shaped C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald” begins by observing that Lewis was working on three books – *The Great Divorce*, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* and *Miracles* – in the final year of World War II, when both MacDonald and miracles were evidently much on Lewis’s mind. Surprisingly, however, MacDonald’s *The Miracles of Our Lord* seems to have had no direct influence on Lewis, who apparently hadn’t read it; nevertheless Lewis encountered MacDonald’s ideas on miracles indirectly through his sermons, novels and fantasies. Whereas Lewis’s approach to the subject of miracles is mainly rational and apologetic, MacDonald’s approach is by contrast emotive and aesthetic. However, Lewis also admits, after spending most of *Miracles* addressing the rational mind of his readers, that the real force of miracles is not their obviousness: they are not scientific “evidences” but have a subterranean influence that circumvents our reason and even common sense. The aesthetic tools of suggestion and stimulating desire may seem foolish to serious philosophers, but they are far more effective in transforming individuals than rational apologetics. Returning to a theme addressed more than once in the present volume, Lewis’s greatest works after *Miracles* were not rational apologetics but fairy tales for children which appealed not to the intellect but to the heart and soul. They are stories which, like miracles, awake hope and arouse desire. Fairy tales work covertly within an individual’s mind to reorder their consciousness without the person being fully aware that it is happening. In Lewis’s famous phrase, they “steal past those watchful dragons” of the conscious mind. For both Lewis and MacDonald, there was something about thinking and writing about miracles that prepared them for writing fairy tales for children.

Tim Mosteller in “George MacDonald’s Philosophy and C.S. Lewis: The Identity of Student and Master” looks systematically at the main philosophical areas where we can see that Lewis has clearly been to school with MacDonald: ontology, epistemology and ethics. The discussion is illustrated with many relevant quotations from MacDonald, some of which come from novels by MacDonald that not all readers may be

⁵. Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles William* (London: Oxford UP, 1947), 13.

familiar with. And as well as the constant presence of the Great Teacher who inspires both MacDonald and Lewis, there is also much reference to Plato, in whose writings philosophical truth is after all always already present, as Professor Kirke points out in *The Last Battle*.

In the third Lewis/MacDonald essay, Sophie Dillinger's "C.S. Lewis as Disciple and Anthologist of George MacDonald" develops a full and thorough account of Lewis's role as a follower, advocate and anthologist of MacDonald, including many quotations not only from Lewis's and MacDonald's more familiar works, but also from MacDonald's less well-known writings. In an essay which shows a close knowledge of both the primary and the secondary literature, Dillinger discusses not only the similarities between the aims and methods of both writers, but also the areas where they diverge, especially when Lewis apparently misrepresents MacDonald in *The Great Divorce*.

Finally, in a piece which may seem surprising given that these are the proceedings of a C.S. Lewis conference – but unsurprising, given the author – Robert-Louis Abrahamson's "Truth Out Of Tusitala Spoke: Stevenson's Voice in Post-Darwinian Christianity" gives a jolt to those of us who thought that Lewis's attitude to RLS is summed up in his critique of Stevenson's famous dictum that "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive."⁶ A decade later Lewis gave high praise to Stevenson's *Lay Morals*, a book Lewis chose for his reading on the first Christmas Day of the Second World War, and pronounced to be "not only the best (non-fiction) book of [Stevenson], but one of the best books by anyone, I've ever read."⁷ This essay follows through Chesterton's arresting line in his Dedication to *The Man Who Was Thursday*, "Truth out of Tusitala spoke ...,"⁸ exploring why Stevenson's writing meant so much in a religious sense not only to Chesterton but also to Lewis.

Abrahamson's piece is a good example of the kind of essay in this collection which may surprise those of us who thought that we knew our Lewis, and are jolted out of that complacency by some new facet of Lewis's work, or by some unexpected connection with a writer or figure with whom we wouldn't normally associate him. Equally, however, this is a book for those just beginning to explore the life and works of a writer whom they may know from only a few works. Thus for the newbie Lewis

⁶. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper. Volume 1 (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 931.

⁷. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper. Volume 2 (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 312.

⁸. G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (London: Arrowsmith, 1944).

enthusiast who is just beginning to realize that there is much more to CSL than the few famous works they know, as well as for the more seasoned Lewis scholar who maybe needs a jolt of defamiliarisation to bring alive again the sheer wonder of the breadth of Lewis's knowledge and the range and power of his achievements, as scholar, creative writer, Christian apologist and – not least – correspondent and friend, this collection of essays has much to recommend it.

PART A:
DEFINING C.S. LEWIS'S IDENTITY

C.S. LEWIS AS A LAY MINISTER

CHRISTOPHER MITCHELL

Even the most cursory examination reveals how extraordinary C.S. Lewis's ministry activity was in both its breadth and depth. As to its breadth, it spanned more than 30 years, during which he published approximately two dozen books of an apologetic or religious nature (including fiction and non-fiction), as well as hundreds of shorter pieces for church magazines, letters to editors, various essays and articles and introductions to others' books, many of which were directly or indirectly aimed at furthering the church's Gospel witness. He also preached sermons, delivered religious talks to the Royal Air Force, church groups, and Christian societies, as well as to the general public over BBC radio, and participated as president in the weekly meetings of the Socratic Club whose aim was to provide a reasonable defense of the Christian faith. Perhaps most significantly, he responded by letter to thousands of requests for spiritual guidance and doctrinal clarification, prayed daily for numerous people (children included), and gave away the majority of the income from his literary earnings for the care of others.¹ Toward the end of his life he served as a member of the Commission to Revise the Psalter.

Speaking of the depth of Lewis's religious work, Basil Mitchell, the late Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Religion at Oxford University, stated:

One can think of people who are greater Christians, but it's difficult to think of anyone whose influence was so widespread – and it wasn't a shallow influence. It was an influence with a great deal of intellectual and spiritual weight behind it.²

Another tribute, given in 1946 by Professor D.M. Baillie, Dean of the Faculty of Divinity of the University of St Andrews, on the occasion of

¹ Lewis's charitable giving was managed by his friend Owen Barfield, see George Sayer, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 252.

² Basil Mitchell, *Oral History Interview*, conducted by Christopher Mitchell for the Marion E. Wade Center, Woodstock, England, October 21, 1997.

awarding Lewis with an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity, reveals in a most compelling way this quality of depth.

It is because he [Lewis] has made striking contributions to the literature of religion that he stands before us in a place of honour today ... Both with his pen and with his voice on the radio, Mr Lewis has succeeded in capturing the attention of many who will not readily listen to professional theologians, and has taught them many lessons concerning the deep things of God. For such an achievement, which could only be compassed by a rare combination of literary fancy and religious insight, every Faculty of Divinity must be grateful. In recent years Mr Lewis has arranged a new kind of marriage between theological reflection and poetic imagination, and this fruitful union is now producing works which are difficult to classify in any literary genre: it can only be said in respectful admiration that he pursues 'things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'. It is not very frequently that the University confers its Doctorate of Divinity upon a lay theologian, but it may well be proud to give this acknowledgement to the work of C.S. Lewis.³

Lewis's religious activity began attracting wide public attention in Britain as early as 1939 and by 1947 had grabbed the attention of *TIME* magazine, which gave the Oxford don a six page spread. "Any fully ordained minister or priest," the article observed, "might envy this Christian layman his audience."⁴ During the war years, it is estimated that each of his BBC radio broadcasts reached a million people and that, next to Winston Churchill, Lewis's was the most recognized voice in Britain at the time.⁵ But not all welcomed Lewis's Christian activity. The "Naturalists" in particular, the *TIME* article went on to say, found his

³. D.M. Baillie, (speech) recorded in *St Andrews Citizen*, 29 June 1946. In her review of *Surprised by Joy* in *Time and Tide*, Dorothy L. Sayers had this to say:

Professor Lewis writes with delightful and humorous candour, and shows all his accustomed skill in translating complex abstractions into vivid concrete imagery. The limpidity of these waters may disguise their depth, so clearly do they reveal the bottom. But any illusion about this can be quickly dispelled by stepping into the river." (Sayers, in *Time and Tide*, no. 36 (1 October 1955): 1263-4.)

⁴. *TIME*, Volume L, no. 10, September 8, 1947, 65.

⁵. Dr. James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting for the BBC, wrote to Lewis on February 7, 1941 asking him to consider helping them with their work of religious broadcasting. At one point he observed, "for any talk we can be sure of a fairly intelligent audience of more than a million." See Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, eds., *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, Fully Revised & Expanded Edition (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 240.

supernaturalism baffling at best and repellent at worst. Little has changed. Today assessments of Lewis's Christian influence continue to range from the heroic, to the overly aggressive, even to the wicked.⁶ Yet, however one views Lewis's religious work, all are in agreement that it was extraordinary for a lay person.⁷

The fact that Lewis made quite clear that his one wish in life prior to his conversion was to be left alone raises the question of the relationship between his conversion and his religious activity. What changes did his conversion create that moved him to efforts that were clearly contrary to his natural impulse for autonomy and won him an enormous appreciative audience, at the same time placing him in direct conflict with the prevailing thinking of the day?⁸ What was it that impelled him, a comfortable and successful academic, to direct so much of his writing and speaking toward helping people recover the capacity to believe in God? The question is one of motivation. It is a question I addressed more than ten years ago, but it is worth revisiting here because there is more to be said, and that more says much about the man and his sense of identity.⁹

Two things in particular have contributed new light on the matter. The first is Lewis's understanding of the nature of God, particularly as represented in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. Long before his conversion to the Christian faith, Lewis's idea of God contained a strong sense of Divine right; God, if there were a God, he reasoned, was to be obeyed simply because he was God. And if that God turned out to be the God of Christianity, then one's obedience would naturally reflect the particular demands of that God and would by right take precedent over everything else. This conviction, as I intend to show, informs much about the energetic nature of his religious activism. The second, and a related idea, involves Plato's well-known allegory of the cave found in *The Republic*. Lewis was well acquainted with the cave allegory, and the

⁶ *TIME*, 65. For an insightful and pithy commentary on more recent negative assessments of Lewis's influence see Anne Atkins, "Thought for The Day," BBC Radio 4 *Today*, December 12, 2005.

⁷ Lewis is routinely held up as one of the most influential Christians of the twentieth century, and that includes professional clergy as well as lay persons.

⁸ As late as 1956 Lewis reveals that the old impulse of desiring a life of limited liabilities still haunted him. See C.S. Lewis, "A Slip of the Tongue," in *The Weight of Glory and other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1996), 138.

⁹ Christopher Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C.S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3.

similarities between his experience and Plato's cave dweller were certainly not lost on him. In fact, Plato's commentary on the allegory, much like Lewis's allegory, *Pilgrim's Regress*, reflects his own story and sheds light on his understanding of the implications his conversion had on his life and for his vocation.

Surprised by God

In the preface to his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis stated that he wrote the account partly in response to questions concerning how he moved from Atheism to Christianity. Why therefore, it may be asked, is the weight of the narrative concerned predominantly with his conversion from Atheism to Theism? He spends the entire book moving from his childhood circumstances and experience in Belfast to his conversion to Theism, using only a few sentences at the very end of the book to unpack the final step from Theism to Christianity. The matter of disproportion is, I think, in this case significant. Lewis was too clear and careful a thinker for this narrative structure to be without purpose. The question is not why he went into detail about his journey to Theism, but rather why so little said about his journey from Theism to Christianity. The answer is important because it directs us to a fundamental aspect of Lewis's motivation to religious activity.

Lewis's conversion to Theism abruptly shifted the ground of his journey from an issue of the intellect to a Person. Up until his acceptance of Theism, Lewis had held out the hope that the "heart of reality" would prove in the end to be something more like a place than anything else. Why? Because as long as the essence of all things remained impersonal, Lewis reasoned, one was still safe, no ultimate interference was in the offering, one's life was still one's own. But with the acceptance of a personal God a wholly new situation arose. Lewis likened the moment of revelation to Ezekiel's valley:

As the dry bones shook and came together, ..., so now a philosophical theorem, cerebrally entertained, began to stir and heave and throw off its grave-cloths, and stood upright and became a living presence.¹⁰

What he feared most, Divine right resting in a Divine Person, he now was forced to acknowledge as the center of all reality; and not merely with his intellect, but more profoundly with his will.¹¹

¹⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harcourt Brace & Company: New York, 1984), 227.

¹¹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 230.

Before Lewis had bowed his head that night in Magdalen College to Theism the primary intellectual obstacles to belief had been resolved. The narration of the final step in his theistic conversion is caught up with volitional barriers to belief, not rational objections to belief.¹² The final act is a “picture” of the surrender of his will to another. The epigraph, taken from George MacDonald, that begins the chapter of his conversion, “The one principle of hell is – ‘I am my own’,” provides us with an unmistakable signal that his journey, which up to this point had been dominated by issues of the intellect, was to culminate with a decision of the will. Having become convinced that the center of reality was a Person, Lewis was left with a choice, and he made it – he chose to move away from self will to the will of another.¹³ Although he did not yet know who this divine Person was or what it would demand of him, his will was now captive to this “tremendous” presence and he knew its demands would be non-negotiable: anything, absolutely anything, could and would be required.¹⁴

Lewis drives this point home as he begins the last chapter of his journey. Stating that his theistic conversion was not a conversion to Christianity, but rather to a bald sort of Theism “pure and simple,” he goes on to clarify that the God to whom he had surrendered that night in Magdalen was thoroughly “nonhuman” and possessed none of the unique characteristics of the God of Christianity, certainly nothing approaching the doctrine of the Incarnation.¹⁵ And yet, though nonhuman, it was still a Person and that, said Lewis, changed everything. Starting with his upbringing in Northern Ireland, but more concretely through the gods of Asgard and later through the notion of the Absolute, he had been taught that a thing could be “revered not for what it can do to us but for what it is in itself.”¹⁶ Now faced with that reality he bowed and accepted as true that God’s nature sanctions His commands – “To know God is to know that

¹² R.B. Braithwaite, the late Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge made a similar observation in the context of the nature of religious belief:

C.S. Lewis’s conversion from an idealist metaphysic – a religion Lewis said cost nothing – to theism was predominately a “re-orientation of the will” rather than an intellectual shift. R. B. Braithwaite, “An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief.” *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford UP, 1971), 82.)

¹³ See in particular Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 225-29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 227-29, 231-32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 231.

our obedience is due him. In His nature His sovereignty *de jure* is revealed.”¹⁷ From this point on in the narrative, that is between his conversion to Theism and his conversion to Christianity, little more takes place. Both his intellect and will were already captive and surrendered to God. The biggest change Lewis tells us is that after he became a Theist he began attending his parish church on Sundays and his college chapel during the week. He did this, not because he believed in Christianity, but simply because, as he put it, he thought “one ought to ‘fly one’s flag’ by some unmistakable sign” and in “*obedience* to a sense of honor.”¹⁸

Now this brings us back to the question of structure. A theory, a proposition, a doctrine, a school of thought can be unpacked, explained, defended, illustrated; a person, on the other hand, does not lend itself so easily to such un-packing, and a Divine person even less. Once the intellectual side of things had been sufficiently resolved and what had been merely a “philosophical theorem cerebrally entertained” had revealed itself as a living presence, there was nothing left to do but to realign one’s will in direct accordance with the Divine nature. But which God? The answer to this question was the last step and required the sorting out of what he referred to as the “perplexing multiplicity of ‘religions’.” Lewis makes quick work of this aspect of the story because much of the groundwork had taken place even before his Theistic conversion. In short it had to do with connecting the Pagan myths of the Dying God with the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Here and here alone it is claimed that what the human race had been dreaming of for millennia had become a historical fact – myth had entered into the primary story.¹⁹ The last piece of the puzzle had been found. Speaking of the Gospels, Lewis had concluded that if “ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this.”²⁰

So what was left to the telling? Only to record his decision to accept and submit to what he had come to believe about the “heart of reality,” which he did in two sentences: “I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.” It is interesting to note here what Lewis says about this decision.

¹⁷ Ibid., 232.

¹⁸ Ibid., 233. Italics mine.

¹⁹ See letter dated October 18, 1931, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 1: Family Letters, 1905 -1931*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 976.

²⁰ Idem.

As I drew near the conclusion, I felt a resistance almost as strong as my previous resistance to Theism. As strong, but shorter-lived, for I understood it better. Every step I had taken, from the Absolute to “Spirit” and from “Spirit” to “God,” had been a step toward the more concrete, the more imminent, the more compulsive. At each step one had less chance “to call one’s soul one’s own.” To accept the Incarnation was a further step in the same direction.²¹

Once the intellectual issue had been resolved in favor of the Gospel, the final step involved simply an acceptance of the divine authority made manifest in Jesus Christ. The God of his theistic conversion was now the God of the Christians. Lewis now was under orders to grow in the knowledge of God and in obedience to his will. The enormous implications of these two things on his life and for his vocation he was already painfully aware of. They were and remained a “horror” for his self will. Captive though he was to what he believed was his duty before God, he continued to wrestle with the implications his obedience required; he found within himself both a willingness and yet at the same time a reluctance to be a representative of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This sense of reluctance yet compulsion to ministry is captured in a letter to Sister Penelope in 1941 just as his public ministry was being launched. Speaking of some upcoming scheduled talks, he confessed they are “jobs one dare neither refuse nor perform.”²²

To return to the two questions posed at the beginning, what ought to be clear by now is that Lewis’s understanding of the nature of Divine authority goes a long way in explaining why he took up what he understood to be his Christian responsibilities so energetically, and at times even aggressively. Fundamental to his thinking was the understanding that if God’s “power could vanish and his other attributes remain, so that the supreme right were forever robbed of the supreme might, we should still owe Him precisely the same kind and degree of allegiance as we now do.”²³ Whether he liked it or not, his life now belonged to another and he was prepared to re-orient his life in obedience to the will of God. It is worth remembering here that even before submitting to Christ he began attending church and weekly college chapel services simply because he

²¹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 237.

²² Letter dated May 15th, 1941, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 2: Books, Broadcasts, and War, 1931-1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 485.

²³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 232.

felt he needed to show in some demonstrable way his obedience to his new found theistic faith.

And as to the second question, Lewis's will and mind had already surrendered themselves to God. All that remained was to come to an understanding of which of the multiplicity of gods available was in fact the true God. Much of the groundwork for determining this had already been established through his journey to Theism and little remained to be explained. Once he had made his choice he needed only to say when and where he began to believe – on the way to Whipsnade.

In Plato's Cave

While I would argue that Lewis's understanding of God's sovereignty *de jure* was the primary motivating factor behind his strong and unwavering commitment to ministry, I want to argue as well that the particular path his journey took to Theism and to Christ provided added motives that helped shape the direction his lay ministry took. And here is where Plato's allegory of the cave comes in. The similarities between Lewis's conversion narrative as set forth in *Surprised by Joy* and the narrative of Plato's cave allegory are striking and provide a fruitful angle by which to probe further this question of motivation. The reader may not be familiar with the cave allegory so I will begin with a brief review of its essential features.²⁴

Plato asks us to imagine some men living in a cave where from childhood they have been chained so that they cannot move and cannot see each other; they can see only what is in front of them and they can speak to one another. Behind them the elevation of the cave rises sharply from the level where the prisoners are seated. Above and behind them there is a fire and beyond that the entrance to the cave. Between the prisoners and the fire is a bridge. On the bridge there are persons walking back and forth carrying artificial objects, including figures of animals and human beings made out of such material as wood and stone. The prisoners, who cannot see one another, see only the shadows projected on the wall of the people walking in front of the fire. When they see a shadow and hear a person's voice echo from the wall, they assume that the sound is coming from the shadow. Consequently, since they are not aware of the existence of anything else, the prisoners accept as reality only the shadows formed on the wall. Now what would happen, Plato asks, if one of the prisoners were

²⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Walter J. Black, 1942), Book VII, 398-401.

released from his chains, forced to stand up, turn around, and walk with eyes lifted up towards the light of the fire and the objects being carried? All of his movements would be painful and the objects would appear less meaningful than the shadows he was accustomed to seeing on the wall. And this being the case, the prisoner would undoubtedly seek to return to the shadows being convinced that they were truer and more meaningful than the objects he had been forced to look upon in the firelight. But suppose he is forced up the cave to its entrance and out into the sunlight. The adjustment would be terribly painful at first and he would be unable to see things as they are; their shadows would at first prove most congenial, and the night sky a welcome escape from the sun. But in time, the prisoner would come to the full realization that the real world is the one revealed by the sun, and would come to understand that the objects on the wall were merely shadows and reflections of things as they really are in the real world made visible by the sun.

Having escaped the illusions of the cave, Plato now asks, how would the liberated prisoner feel about his previous life in the cave, about what he and his fellow prisoners took to be real and what they considered true wisdom? Would he still envy these men and their place and the ones who received honors? Indeed not! He would have only sorrow and pity for them and would himself endure anything rather than again think and live as they do. He further contemplates what would happen if he went back down into the cave to his former seat with the view of freeing the others and leading them up out of the cave. His eyesight being ill-adjusted to the darkness and his lack of practice would undoubtedly frustrate his attempts to compete with the others, leading them to believe his leaving the cave had ruined his eyesight, at the same time convincing them that to leave the cave would be a grave mistake. Indeed, says Plato, if they could lay hands on the man who was trying to free and lead them out, they would “put him to death.”²⁵

The majority of humankind, the allegory suggests, live in the darkness of the cave, their life and thoughts informed by the deceptive world of shadows. But just as the prisoner had to turn his entire body around in order for his eyes to begin to see light instead of the darkness, so it is necessary for the entire soul to turn away from the deceptive world of appearance alone in order for it to see the world as it truly is. Consequently, those who have been enlightened, says Plato, cannot be allowed to remain in the higher world of ideas, but must be made to descend again among the prisoners with the aim of educating them out of

²⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 401.

their ignorance by turning them in the direction of the light and leading them out of the cave of mere illusion. They must be converted.

Lewis began his journey to Christianity captive to a view of reality known as naturalism. This naturalistic conception of reality not only defined Lewis's own position, but also dominated the British intellectual landscape of his day. Belief in anything outside the empirical world in which we live (i.e. the world of our five senses) was simply inadmissible. Like the prisoners of Plato's allegory, he was shackled in self-imposed chains and facing a wall that intellectually admitted nothing but atoms and evolution and the premise that scientific laws were adequate to account for *all* phenomena. Lewis's cave, in other words, admitted nothing beyond the natural world; any thought of a supernatural reality existing alongside the natural world was rejected. But during his years of study at the University of Oxford he faced potent challenges to his naturalistic doctrine.²⁶ In time his defenses against the claims of Theism, in particular, began to suffer defeat, and he began shifting his ground, eventually taking refuge in a position known as Absolute Idealism. Lewis's adoption of Absolute Idealism was his attempt to overcome some of the inconsistencies that had been exposed in his materialism without going all the way to Theism. The Absolute was not personal, but rather a sort of glorified mind that existed solely to help make sense of things and to give them some vestige of meaning.²⁷ But a step of enormous moment had taken place with his acceptance of the Absolute – he had become convinced of the necessity of such an existence in order to sustain some measure of meaning to the universe in which he lived.

This stage in Lewis's journey may be likened to the uncomfortable moment when Plato's prisoner is first unchained and forced to stand up and turn around and look at the artificial objects revealed by the fire. His inability to stop further movement up out of the cave is due to his concession to the Absolute which led to his acceptance in 1929 of the belief that there was

²⁶. To begin with, he began to read learned and responsible writers who, though non-Christian, nevertheless rejected materialism, and believed in a world behind, or around, the material world. Next came the reawakening of the old longing from childhood for something outside and beyond the walls of this world. It came with a vengeance through the spell cast by George MacDonald's fantasy, *Phantastes*. In the pages of this book, Lewis was confronted with a sense of the numinous in the form that he could only describe as holiness. He later referred to the experience as the baptism of his imagination. At the time, he had no way of knowing what he was letting himself in for. But the spell had been cast: time and other encounters would eventually lead him out of Atheism to a position of Theism.

²⁷. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 209-10.

indeed a God. He was then thirty years old and the parallels between his account of his conversion to Theism and Plato's cave dweller are again most striking. In heightened prose, Lewis speaks of his sense of desperation at the thought of meeting a personal God, of his feeling of extreme discomfort, the horrible sensation of being under compulsion, the violent recoiling and the kicking and struggling and resentment that accompanied the acute longing to escape.²⁸ Moreover, Lewis's commitment to Theism parallels the early stages of adjustment after emerging from the cave, from the land of shadows into the real world God had made. Although still blind to the true identity of the God to whom he had surrendered, he was now convinced that what he before thought to be the whole show, naturalism, was no longer tenable. There was more – much more – and that more was God. The moment of final adjustment for Lewis came nearly two years later with his belief in Jesus Christ, a profession that not only placed him well outside the cave but adjusted to the light of reality as defined by the God of the Christian faith.

Lewis had now come to the point in the cave narrative when Plato reveals that those who have escaped from the cave into a clear understanding of things are under obligation to return to the shadows, to the unfortunate souls whose lives remain captive to mere illusion, and to engage them with the aim of leading them out of darkness and up into the light of truth. As an educator, Lewis was familiar with the implications Plato's injunction was intended to have for his vocation. As a Christian, the sense of obligation and aim implied by Plato now took on new and profound implications. In short, Lewis found himself under obligation to return to the world of unbelief with the aim of converting souls to Christ. For Lewis the primary motive, as we have seen, was obedience to God. Having come to faith in Jesus Christ, however, his obedience took on a new specificity that was informed by the Bible. Here, in the pages of the Bible, he learned that believers in Jesus Christ were called to do what they could to bring people to a knowledge of the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Out of the Cave

But Lewis's journey created other motives that reinforced the biblical injunctions to which he had surrendered. Reflective of the cave dweller's pity for the souls still imprisoned in the cave, Lewis's journey from Atheism to Christianity had produced a burden for the souls who remained, as he now perceived them, shackled to shadows of unbelief. Preaching to a group of Oxford undergraduates in 1939 about the importance of education even

²⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228-29.

during a time of war, Lewis stated that one of the values of the learned life was the ability to help protect uneducated people from the anti-God thinking that pervaded the culture. “To be ignorant and simple now – not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground,” said Lewis,

would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our *uneducated brethren* who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. The cool intellect must work not only against cool intellect on the other side, but against the muddy heathen mysticisms which deny the intellect altogether.²⁹

Lewis believed he was under obligation to use his academic position and training, in defiance of contemporary academic protocol, to nurture and spread an intellectual and imaginative climate favorable to Christianity. Having been freed himself, he worked through his fiction, critical works, essays, apologetics, speaking and preaching, and even his correspondence to assist and encourage his audience to carefully “think through” the relationship between the Christian faith and true and reliable knowledge, and to transmit the understanding necessary to appropriate that knowledge wisely and virtuously.³⁰

This burden for souls was given further impetus by the Christian doctrine of immortality which taught the eternal value of each human soul. The work of his lay ministry now took on dimensions of eternal significance. I have dealt with the implications of this particular motive before, and so I need give only the briefest attention here.³¹ In his essay,

²⁹ Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 28. Italics mine.

³⁰ This particular aspect of Lewis’s ministry is aptly illustrated by the experience of Lady Elizabeth Catherwood (daughter of renowned minister Martin Lloyd-Jones). Although she never attended a Socratic meeting (she attended the Christian Union which met at the same time as the Socratic Club), her friends did. When they would return, they would sit up, often until two in the morning, going through all the discussions. What she remembers most from those late night discussions, was Lewis’s “way of thinking through a thing.” Lady Catherwood, *Oral History Interview*, interview for the Wade Center, Wheaton College, unnumbered.

³¹ See Christopher Mitchell, “Bearing the Weight of Glory,” and “C.S. Lewis and Historic Evangelicalism,” in *C.S. Lewis and the Church: Essays in Honour of Walter Hooper*, eds. Judith Wolfe and Brendan Wolfe (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2011).

“Man and Rabbits”, Lewis pinpoints the revolutionary change the new perspective brought:

To the materialist things like nations, classes, civilizations must be more important than individuals, because the individuals live only seventy odd years each and the group may last for centuries. But to the Christian, individuals are more important, for they live eternally; and races, civilizations and the like, are in comparison the creatures of a day.³²

Matters of eternity were now at stake. The Christian doctrine of the immortality of the human soul had changed everything. A passive approach was no longer an option. One had to go back down into the cave with the view to rescue. Lewis clearly grasped the essential conversionist impulse of the New Covenant. He understood that the mandate to evangelize had a particular claim not only upon his own personal life but also on his vocation.

One final motive reflected in the cave allegory remains to be set forth here. In 1946, through his reading of B.G. Sandhurst’s study, *How Heathen is Britain*, Lewis became aware of an arresting fact about Britain’s spiritual condition. Sandhurst’s study claimed that neither the content nor the case for Christianity was being put before most pupils under the current school system. Lewis reasoned that this was because the generation of the 1920s, dominated as they were by an anti-theistic mental climate, failed, either because they were unwilling or unable, to transmit the content of the Christian faith to the next generation. The result, Lewis concluded, was that the younger generation was “never told what the Christians say and never heard any arguments in defense of it.” But what Sandhurst’s study also revealed was that when they were put before pupils a majority found them acceptable.³³ If this is true, then the prevailing ignorance of Christianity that informed both the lower and higher forms of schools and society in general, as well as the prevailing agnosticism or indifference among the younger generation, was not due to an antipathy towards the faith but to simple ignorance and lack of instruction.

³² Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 109-10. Lewis expresses this sense of the eternal value of the human soul most memorably in his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), 25-40.

³³ See Lewis’s Preface to B.G. Sandhurst’s book, *How Heathen is Britain*, reprinted in *God in the Dock* under the title, “On the Transmission of Christianity,” 115.