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## C.S. Lewis and the Struggle for Existence

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The works of C.S. Lewis are steeped in the conviction that man's relationship with God is located upon a continuum of existence and nonexistence. God beckons man higher into a greater reality, one in which man is both more independent and more united with God; meanwhile, Satan attempts to drag man downward into increased nonexistence. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that in calling man into a higher existence, God is not calling us to be Him; God is calling us to be more human, existing as the humanity that He intended.

Throughout the extensive body of C.S. Lewis' writings, from *Mere Christianity* to *Till We Have Faces*, specific themes underlie story and discussion, influencing both contemplation and narrative. One such central, dominant theme concerns God's summoning man into the true reality, with Satan seeking to lure him into the false. Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity* that each choice in life further transforms man into either a "heavenly creature" or a "hellish creature" (92). In *The Great Divorce*, ghosts face the consequences of their choices by traveling deeper into Heaven or deeper into Hell, and their decisions result in dramatic physical and spiritual changes to their existence. Souls that wander further from Heaven gradually transform into "grotesque phantoms in which hardly a trace of the human form [remains]" (81). Ghosts that decide to live in Heaven, however, are referred to as "solid people" (25). In one situation, Lewis crafts a physical representation of the spiritual occurrence when a soul turns from God, as the reader witnesses the physical disappearance of a ghost. The ghost has a two-fold soul, with a dwarf representing the good in the ghost and a puppet representing the evil. With each action and thought, the ghost faces the choice of transforming the dwarf into a man, or allowing the man to diminish, until a mere, hollow puppet, a "lie," is all that remains (133). When the ghost decides to return to Hell, his true nature dissolves, and the only semblance of existence that remains is a false, foolish facade, an imitation of a man.

In Lewis' view, man's level of existence is a reflection of his spiritual location, as Heaven and Hell in *The Great Divorce* are portrayed as greater and lesser realities, respectively. Furthermore, as each ghost chooses to align itself with one of these locations, it determines its own existential reality. Lewis' heaven contains daisies that, compared to the ghosts, are as "hard as diamonds" (25); it holds rivers that the ghosts can run upon, and one leaf is described as "heavier than a sack of coal" (21). Initially, the narrator believes that he and the other visitors from Hell have changed to become ghosts, as they are "fully transparent" in the light and "smudgy and imperfectly opaque" while in the shadows (20). After readjusting his vision, however, the narrator realizes that no change to the visitors' bodies has occurred; rather, it is the surroundings in Heaven that are "made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men [are] ghosts by comparison" (21). Conversely, Hell is described as much smaller than "one pebble" of earth, and "smaller than one atom" of Heaven, the "Real World" (138); thus, to attempt to understand Hell is to attempt to understand something that is "nearly Nothing" (77). According to Lewis, Heaven is true existence, earth exists less, and Hell is an almost nonexistent realm. By extension, man's level of existence depends upon his proximity to each of these locations and is determined by which he chooses to pursue as a home.

For this reason, Lewis consistently depicts life on earth as a shadow of man's true home. In *The Last Battle*, after the Pevensie children have died and passed into heaven, Aslan joyously explains to them, "the dream is ended; this is the morning." (210). While death typically bears the connotation of falling asleep, Lewis explains here that death is more akin to awakening. Heaven is the sunrise that banishes the fog. This life is merely a mirage, a semi-existence. By moving toward Heaven in this life, man moves from shadow to light, false to true, transparency to solidity. Lewis symbolizes this idea in his novel *Till We Have Faces*. As the main character Orual chooses to turn away from the reality of both the gods and her soul, she assumes a veil, the

physical act mirroring her spiritual situation. The reader observes as Orual's true nature, the part of her that truly exists, begins to crumble. As she approaches death, however, the veil is removed and she sees her true nature. Similar to Orual, on this earth, man dwells within a haze of uncertainty. There exists the promise, however, that one day the veil will be cast aside and man will not only see the truth of God and his own existence; he will truly exist.

How, from Lewis' perspective, does this change in existence occur? The idea begins with God as man's Creator. If God created man, then by traveling in the opposite direction of our Creator, man essentially "uncreates" himself. As Lewis scholar Eric Mataxas explains, Satan is in the constant process of unraveling man, "uncreating" him until all that remains of his former existence are pieces of himself floating throughout the cosmos. This idea creates an image of God, the Fisherman, attempting to reel man in with all of His strength; when man finally decides to tear himself away from this overwhelming force, his soul is torn apart.

When God initially created humanity, He placed it as the steward of the entire earth. Humanity's position in the created order was one of power and leadership bestowed by God, as God made man "for a *little while* lower than the angels...[crowning] him with glory and honor...[and] putting everything in subjection under his feet" (*English Standard Version*, Heb. 2:7-8, emphasis added). After the *Fall* into sin, however, humanity plummeted from this lofty placement in the created order, earning the word *human* a connotation of "weakness, imperfections, and fragility" ("Human"). Since this initial dive from the exalted presence of God, humanity has continually sought to lower itself from its God-given level in the order of creation, denying its intended existence.

C.S. Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity* that "there are two things inside [man], competing with the human self which [he] must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self" (103). These other "selves" did not exist within man until his descent into sin. In

the Fall, man followed the Devil, who was communicating through an animal, and he thus attained these diabolical and animalistic selves; by choosing these less-than-human states, man essentially lowered himself out of existence as a human being. He was no longer simply man; he was also both animal and devil. At this moment, humanity, as God intended it to be, ceased to exist.

C.S. Lewis' works consistently demonstrate the idea that man *is* as he *does*. In this post-Fall world, if a man lives without Christ's justification, he has only one choice: to sin. In practicing this sin, he becomes the sin. This idea is communicated by the account of a Ghost named the "Grumbler" in *The Great Divorce*. The Grumbler's ultimate fate remains unknown, but it is learned that her salvation depends on whether she is a "grumbler, or only a grumble." (77). For "if there is a real woman—even the least trace of one—still there inside the grumbling, it can be brought to life again" (77). Because of Christ, a sinner can be saved, but sin cannot. Without Christ's death and resurrection, a man is no longer one who sins; he is the sin that he practices. Living as sin is to deny one's existence as a human, as well as to reject Christ's sacrifice on the cross, where He became sin so that man could escape this fate.

The Fall is a proper label for man's descent into sin. In the moment of disobedience, man became bound to a sort of spiritual gravity, which effectively dragged him away from the presence of God. In this moment, humanity was condemned to forever seek the *Below*, until all humanity eventually settled within the depths of hell. This would be the case unless the Creator intervened in His created order, devising a way for man to evade this spiritual gravity. Astonishingly, this is exactly what the Creator decided to do. In becoming a human, God allowed himself to momentarily be constrained by spiritual gravity in descending to earth; He then, however, chose to rise from the dead, allowing man also the capacity to rise again.

Now that man has been given the *ability* to rise again, he also has been given the *mission* to rise above. In his essay, “On Living in an Atomic Age,” Lewis explains, “those who want heaven most have served earth best,” and “those who love man less than God do most for man.” According to Lewis, it is those who most yearn to emulate God, striving for the *Above*, that most satisfy their role as human beings. Although Christ has now allowed man to rise, spiritual gravity continues to burden man, attempting to drown him in the depths of his sin. It is through this constant battle to ascend to God, however, that with God’s help man is able to resist this force. When a man is burdened with a ball and chain, it is only by fighting to swim upward that he keeps from sinking to the ocean floor. He may never rise out of the water, but by straining upward, he stays where he is supposed to be: at the surface; and one day, someone may come who is able to lift him out of the sea. This worshipful striving to emulate one’s Maker, similar to a child who wants to be “just like Dad,” characterizes God’s original intent for humanity. Man constantly fails, but as Lewis says in *The Screwtape Letters*, “if only the will to walk is really there, [God] is pleased even with [man’s] stumbles” (40). Therefore, humanity must never cease to seek higher, striving tirelessly to attain the existence for which it was made, because in this pursuit humanity more fully becomes humanity, and begins to fulfill its role in God’s created order.

Lewis’ focus on striving for the *Above* is connected to a sort of heavenly ambition. In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis explains, “if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak” (26). Often Christians believe that in order to serve God, they must smother their natural desires, redirecting their goals to pursuits that are unrelated to this world, as if even non-sinful pleasures are ungodly. Rather than disregarding and stifling all earthly desires, Lewis explains that one must raise them higher. One must lift these desires

beyond the realm of this earth, creating a vast pyramid of desire in which every earthly goal falls within the domain of the overarching heavenly goal of serving God. With this heavenly ambition, this insatiable Christ-focused drive, each moment on earth will be viewed as an opportunity to achieve the heavenly goal of glorifying God, and man will begin to live for eternity now.

Throughout his works, Lewis also explains that only when man is one with God will he truly exist as an individual. He states in *The Screwtape Letters* that Satan battles to remove man's existence by absorbing and consuming him, seeking "cattle who can finally become food," and "[drawing] all other beings into himself" (39). On the other hand, God wants human beings to be "united to Him but still distinct... one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve" (39). In truth, He "sets an absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them" (65). God yearns for each human being to exist exactly as He intended, as a unique individual, but He knows that man can never exist as intended unless fully united with the Giver of existence.

Along this same line of thinking, Lewis explains that in finding his own true existence, man begins to find God. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape instructs, "as a preliminary to detaching him from [God], you [want] to detach him from himself," and states that "while [God] is delighted to see [humans] sacrificing even their innocent wills to His, He hates to see them drifting away from their own nature for any other reason" (65). As man draws near to God, his true nature—sensing its Creator's presence—begins to emerge from its crusty, world-hardened, sinful exterior. Lewis, again speaking through Screwtape, states that "when [human beings] are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever" (65). It is as if Lewis is saying that when man sees himself clearly, sees who he truly was made to be, his true existence, he may very well glimpse the fingerprints of his Maker and be led into to His arms.

This idea of finding one's individual existence through unity with God is a symbol of the divine Trinity. God is only one, but He is three Persons. In a similar manner, the closer man comes to being one with God, the more his individuality as a person becomes apparent, just as beams of light shine brighter the closer they are to the flame. In *Perelandra*, Lewis discusses a marriage that seems to parallel the Trinity, and reasons, "it must be part of the Divine plan that this happy creature should mature, should become more and more a creature of free choice, should become, in a sense, more distinct from God and from her husband in order thereby to be at one with them in a richer fashion" (133). Thus, understanding God's own inner relationship, man must seek to enter a similar relationship with God, a divine marriage. In this loss of "himself" within God, he will find that he, his true essence, the man he was made to be, has been fully and completely found.

It is in this realization that the following conclusion, while extraordinary, becomes evident: the human race is called not to be less human, but more human. Man can never be God, but this was never God's intent for man. Rather, God created humans to be Godlike creatures, imitations of Himself. God wants man to exist fully and perfectly, exactly as He created him. Man now has the calling to fulfill God's plan for humanity, to become real human beings. This is one reason that God the Father sent Jesus; in Jesus, a man finally lives in the manner that God intended, and perfect humanity is displayed. Jesus Christ finally and completely fulfilled God's intent for man's existence; therefore, all humans can now exist.

There is something profoundly beautiful when a creation fulfills its role to its full capacity, when it does exactly what it was made to do, when it is exactly what it was made to be. Consider, for example, a flower. A flower does not attempt to become a clump of soil, because God made it to be a flower. Besides, why would it try to become more like the dirt below, when it has been given a position closer to the sun? No, the flower, while knowing it can never be the

sun, chooses to grow toward the sun, spreading its leaves to absorb as much of that sun as possible. In absorbing the sun's rays, it is ever more a flower.

As the flower would not exist apart from the sun, humanity *would not* exist apart from the Creator; therefore, it *should not*. With this knowledge, then, man must seek to complete his mission: to strive endlessly to grasp God's intended existence for humanity, for only when this lofty lifelong pursuit is obtained does man truly exist. Man is to be nothing less, and view himself as nothing more, than what God created him to be. He must lose himself in God, and remarkably, in doing so, he will find himself. He will fall, but he must pray continually for the grace of God, that he may rise again. Man must daily find his existence in God, with the hope that he shall gradually be made more and more real; for, as Lewis reveals, there is a greater reality for which man must prepare. In each earthly day, humanity must raise its veiled eyes to the new day that is coming, the day that will light up the universe from horizon to horizon. For it is as Lewis so evocatively proposes: this world is but a shadow, a dream. Soon, however, very soon, the Son will break through the clouds, and we shall run with Him into an eternal morning.

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