



22 November 2015
The Sunday Next before Advent
Choral Evensong
Genesis 2 vv. 7–15, 19
Mark 8 vv. 11–25

C.S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason

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My subject is ‘C.S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason’ particularly as they relate to Science and Religion.

C.S. Lewis is best known for his Narnia Chronicles and for works of Christian apologetics such as *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*. But he wasn’t professionally a fiction-writer or popular theologian. Professionally, he was a literary critic and literary historian, who finished his career as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English here at Cambridge, having spent the first part of his career at another university in a small town west of London and south of Birmingham. From that academic perspective, Lewis thought and wrote a good deal about the relationship between imagination and reason, and how imagination *and* reason together play a role in both science and religion, in particular that religion to which he himself converted in his early thirties, namely Christianity.

Some people are inclined to think that imagination plays no part in science and that reason plays no part in Christianity. According to such people, the thinking of scientists is purely rational, and the thinking of Christians when it comes to their religion is merely the product of their over-heated imaginations. That’s the dichotomy with which we’re often presented. In Lewis’s view, reason and imagination are not only *not* opposed, they’re very intimately, albeit asymmetrically, related.

In Lewis’s view, reason could only operate if it was first supplied with materials to reason about, and it was imagination’s task to supply those materials.

In order to provide an easy - and I hope amusing - introduction to Lewis’s thinking on this subject, let me relate the following (untrue) story.

One day I took my car into the repair garage for its annual overhaul. At the end of the repair job, I collected the car and, as I was driving it out of the garage forecourt, realised I had forgotten to check on something, so I stopped and rolled down my window and called over my shoulder to the car mechanic (let’s call him Jeremy), and asked, ‘Is my rear indicator light working?’ To which he replied, ‘Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes.’

This little exchange neatly encapsulates Lewis’s definition of imagination. According to Lewis, imagination is simply ‘the organ of meaning’, and Jeremy the car mechanic’s ‘organ of meaning’ was sadly deficient. A flashing phenomenon, as far as he was concerned, could have only one possible meaning: insecure connection. Jeremy was able to see the raw data – light on, light off, light on – but was unable to discover the correct meaning of those brute facts. He had sight, but no insight. He focussed on externals and failed to perceive their inner significance.

Not that Jeremy was entirely without the capacity to perceive meaning. He knew the basic meaning of an electrical circuit. He knew that when a light shines a connection has been made and when a light goes out a connection has been broken. But he was unable to find a meaning in the *relationship* between a completed and a broken electrical circuit, imaginatively incapable of perceiving that, in this case, an intermittent light means ‘indicator’, not ‘insecure connection’.

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So, Lewis defines imagination as the organ of meaning; imagination is that faculty of our being by which we apprehend things as meaningful. He then asks, 'What's the opposite of meaning?' Is it error, he wonders? No, the opposite of meaning is not error but nonsense. The opposite of meaning is – pretty obviously – meaninglessness, nonsense. Things must rise up out of the swamp of nonsense into the realm of meaning if the imagination is to get any handle on them. Once the imagination has determined that the thing at hand is meaningful, we can then begin to judge whether its meaning is true or false. Before something can be either true or false it must mean. Only nonsensical things mean nothing.

Back to Jeremy and the car. Not every flashing light on a car is meaningful. Sometimes there really are loose connections, whose occasional bursts of luminosity, flickering on and off in no particular rhythm, we should best describe as nonsensical: the connections are arbitrary, random, meaningless. If the connections were regular or patterned, however, we'd be inclined to conclude that they were significant, meaningful. But what kind of meaning would they have? A true meaning, showing that the driver was about to make a turning? Or a false meaning, showing that the driver had forgotten to cancel the lever? It's human reason, in Lewis's view, that judges between meanings, helping us to differentiate those meanings that are true and illuminating from those which are false and deceptive. Reason, for Lewis is therefore the 'natural organ of truth', it compares the possible meanings in a given situation and tries to arrive at the true meaning. Meaning itself is 'the antecedent condition of both truth and falsehood'. Before something can be either true or false, it must mean.

So, we shouldn't think of reason and imagination as opposed to each other, facing off against each other like two angry motorists, revving their cars loudly at the traffic lights, rivals to see who can get away fastest. Rather we need a much more organic and mutually supportive picture. We should think of reason as being like a tree and imagination as being like the ground in which it grows. Reason rests upon, indeed relies upon, imagination, as a tree roots itself in the ground. Without imagination to rest upon, reason would be left floating in mid-air, spinning its wheels, wagging its roots, unable to get traction on any meaningful stuff, unable to pull up any nutrients from the soil. Reason can't survive without imagination.

Now, it will be obvious, how, working with these definitions, Lewis viewed both science and Christianity as necessarily and foundationally imaginative, for both science and Christianity work with meaningful things that they then reason about. Scientists and Christians (who are often the same people, of course) go out to meet the world expecting to find it intelligible. Like Adam naming the beasts in our first reading, they rationally identify and catalogue the meaningful things they encounter.

The next issue to investigate is what are the things that science and Christianity characteristically find meaningful. And to help us in this investigation I turn to one of Lewis's essays called 'The Language of Religion', which opens with him listing three different sentences, as follows:

- (1) It was very cold.
- (2) There were 13 degrees of frost.
- (3) 'Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers was a-cold;
The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers . . .'



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Lewis describes the first sentence – ‘It was very cold’ - as Ordinary language. He describes the second sentence – ‘There were 13 degrees of frost’ - as Scientific language. And he describes the third sentence (it’s a quotation from John Keats’s poem ‘The Eve of St Agnes’) as Poetic Language. Scientific language and Poetic language are two different artificial perfections of Ordinary language, in Lewis’s view: by ‘artificial’ he simply means that Scientific language and Poetic language both depend on certain skills: in the case of Scientific language, the skills of inventing, using, and reading a thermometer; in the case of Poetic language, the skills of metre, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, allusion, connotation and so forth.

Lewis notes that Ordinary language (‘It was very cold’) could advance a little towards either of the other two kinds so that you could pass by degrees into Scientific or Poetic. For ‘very cold’ you could use instead ‘freezing hard’ and for ‘freezing hard’ you could use ‘freezing harder than last night’. By such tweaks your Ordinary language would be getting nearer to the Scientific. Alternatively, you could say ‘bitterly cold’ instead of ‘very cold’ and then you’d be getting nearer to Poetic language. In fact you would have anticipated one of the terms used in Keats’s poem.

Having made these general observations about different kinds of language, Lewis then proceeds to draw the following conclusions:

The superiority of the Scientific description clearly consists in giving for the coldness of the night a precise quantitative estimate which can be tested by an instrument. The test ends all disputes. If the statement survives the test, then various inferences can be drawn from it with certainty: e.g., various effects on vegetable and animal life can be predicted. It is therefore of use in what [Sir] Francis Bacon called ‘operation’. We can take action on it. On the other hand [the Scientific description] does not, of itself, give us any information about the quality of a cold night, does not tell us what we shall be feeling if we go out of doors. If, having lived all our lives in the tropics, we didn’t know what a hard frost was like, the thermometer reading would not of itself inform us. Ordinary language would do that better: ‘Your ears will ache’ - ‘You’ll lose the feeling in your fingers’ - ‘You’ll feel as if your ears were coming off.’

Turning to Poetic language, Lewis says that its superiority to Ordinary language is a much more troublesome affair than the superiority of Scientific language. He says that he feels fairly sure what this example of Poetic language doesn’t consist in: it doesn’t consist either in discharging or arousing mere emotion. It may do one of these things or both, but he doesn’t think that’s its distinguishing feature:

I don’t think our bit of Keats differs from the Ordinary ‘It was very cold’ primarily or solely by getting off Keats’s chest mere dislike of cold nights, nor by arousing mere dislike in me. There is, no doubt, some mere ‘getting off the chest’ in the exclamation ‘Ah’ and the [adjective] ‘bitter’. Personally, I don’t feel the emotion to be either Keats’s or mine. It is for me the imagined people in the story who are saying ‘Ah’ and ‘bitter’; not with the result of making me share their discomfort, but of making me imagine how very cold it was. And the rest is all taken up with pictures of what might have been observed on such a night. The invitation is not to my emotions but to my senses. Keats seems to me to be simply conveying the quality of a cold night . . . He is in fact giving me all that concrete, qualitative information which the Scientific statement leaves out. But then, of course, he is not verifiable, nor precise, nor of much use for operation.



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That reference to the qualitative nature of the information provided by Poetic language implies the kind of things that Science finds meaningful. Science typically finds not qualitative things but quantitative things meaningful, things that are quantifiable, measurable, testable, repeatable, and instrumentalizable, - that is, useful in ‘operation’. And it’s for this reason that scientific statements are so verifiable or falsifiable; they are, as Lewis puts it, ‘far more easily “cashed”’ than statements made either in Ordinary language or Poetic language. ‘But the poet might of course reply that it always will be easier to cash a cheque for 30 shillings than one for 1,000 pounds, that the scientific statements are cheques, in one sense, for very small amounts, giving us, out of the teeming complexity of every concrete reality only “the common measurable features”.’

The smallness of scientific statements is often obscured by their successfulness. Scientific statements succeed in defining and predicting certain pockets of the natural world, definitions and predictions which can then be put to use, in curing small-pox, or building the internal combustion engine, or devising the microchip. The magnificence of such scientific achievements is so huge that it can mislead us into thinking that they’ve said a great deal, when actually they’ve said relatively little, but said it very well. A true scientific statement *has* to be relatively small, because it’s only relatively small things that can be said with sufficient precision, with sufficient univocality, to be empirically verifiable or falsifiable. You might think it preposterous to describe the mapping of the human genome as a ‘small statement’, but genetics is only one department of biology, and biology is only one department of science, and science is only one department of human knowledge. Seen in the context of all that there could possibly be said about a human being – socially, emotionally, physiologically, psychologically, artistically, spiritually, economically, historically, geographically, anthropologically, psephologically (you get the picture!), – any genetic statement, however marvellously correct, is still a minuscule fraction of the total. When you start trying to make larger statements you move into the language of the humanities and then into the arts and then into religion. The word ‘religion’, we should remember, means something like ‘tying back together’: re-ligaturing, re-ligamenting, - gathering up the fragments, that nothing may be lost, as in our New Testament reading; seeing people as they most truly and deeply are, and not just as ‘trees walking’. Religious thinkers are searching for oneness, for union, for ‘the theory of everything’, you might say (!). And not just everything, but everyone; for personal as well as material meanings and truths, for the qualitative as well as the quantitative. Religious statements, by saying things which attempt to explain life in the round, use language which admittedly is hard to verify or falsify in a laboratory. But that’s because religious statements are trying to say a very great deal; they’re trying to find the unity, the secret, the heart of all reality.

In Lewis’s case he found that heart not in a theory, but in a person, the person of Jesus Christ, in whom, he believed, all human activities, poetic, scientific and ordinary, find their meaning and their rationale. Lewis converted to Christ in his early thirties and lived the second half of his life (today, by the way, is the anniversary of his death) trying to follow Christ, worshipping and loving him, finding Christ in his neighbours, in his work, in the natural world. ‘Christ,’ Lewis wrote, ‘is the all-pervasive principle of concretion or cohesion by which the universe holds together.’ The stake Lewis played for here was not a mere thirty shillings, but every penny he had.