

C.S. Lewis: creationist and anti-evolutionist

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Oxford University professor C.S. Lewis was one of the most important Christian apologists of the last century. Toward the end of his career, he concluded that the modern theory of evolutionary naturalism is “pure hallucination”. Lewis detailed the reasons for this conclusion in several of his later writings.

Clive Staples Lewis (29 Nov. 1898 – 22 Nov. 1963; figure 1) was one of the most celebrated Christian apologists of the last century. Called “one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century”, Lewis was a professor of medieval and early modern English literature at Oxford University from 1925 until his death in 1963.¹ He earned a triple first class degree in philosophy from Oxford and wrote about 50 books, mostly dealing with literary criticism and Christian apologetics.² No narrow specialist, Lewis wrote on a remarkable variety and range of subjects.³ Although reared a nominal Christian, at age 15 he became an atheist, due in part to the arguments against design that he learned in college such as the claim that life was poorly designed—a view called dysteleology.

Lewis returned to Christianity at age 33 after much self soul-searching and intensive reading of works by scholars such as George MacDonald, who used stories to convey Christian apologetics just as Lewis would become famous for doing later. Lewis soon became the “leading popular Christian apologist of the twentieth century”.² He is also the “most widely read religious spokesman of our time and yet his main occupation was scholarship and university teaching.”³

A respected Oxford scholar

Widely respected, Lewis frequently published in both academic and non-academic venues. Lewis was enormously influential in his day, and his popularity shows no signs of diminishing in ours. His writings have been translated into 30 languages and have sold millions of copies. Lewis’ fiction book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (figure 2), part of the seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, was adapted for a major Hollywood film.¹ His *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Abolition of Man* are all still extremely popular and influential Christian apologetic works.

Many well-known Christians were converted from atheism by his literature. These include former atheist Chuck Colson and leading genetic scientist Francis Collins, the former head of the Human Genome project.⁴ Lewis saw his mission as bringing Christianity to the post-Christian world by his lectures and books, a goal he has achieved beyond anyone’s expectation, most of all his own.⁵

Opposes evolution and naturalism

Two topics of special concern to Lewis were evolution, and naturalism, which he concluded were self-refuting because they are contradicted by both fact and reason.⁶ In his early writings, such as in *Mere Christianity* (figure 3), he appeared to accept evolutionism, at least in part, but as he researched the subject, his writings reflect a vivid opposition to organic evolution, what he came to call the Great Myth. As Ferngren and Numbers conclude, with study and reflection “Lewis grew increasingly uncomfortable with the claims being made for organic evolution.”⁷ Nor did he accept theistic evolution as he continued to research the matter. In 1960 he wrote that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s theistic evolution theory is “evolution run mad ... which is being praised to the skys.”⁸ Although Lewis attacked Teilhard’s mystical evolutionism and not his theistic evolution per se, nonetheless, Lewis’ criticism applies to some degree to other attempts to explain theistic evolution. Furthermore, Lewis regarded the question as critically important, concluding that “since men were able to think, they have been wondering what this universe really is and how it came to be.”⁹ He then explained that

“... very roughly, two views have been held. First, there is what is called the materialist view. People who take that view think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think.”⁹

He was not too impressed with the first view, naturalism, explaining that the probability is less than one in a thousand that

“... something hit our sun and made it produce the planets; and by another thousandth chance the chemicals necessary for life, and the right temperature, occurred on one of these planets, and so some of the matter on this earth came alive; and then, by a very long series of chances, the living creatures developed into things like us.”¹⁰

The other view, the religious view, Lewis explained is far more reasonable because

“... what is behind the universe is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know. That is to say, it is conscious, and has purposes, and prefers one thing to another. And on this view it made the universe, partly for purposes we do not know, but partly ... in order to produce creatures like itself—I mean, like itself to the extent of having minds.”¹⁰

Lewis then attacked the view that creationism was the old view superseded by the modern, “scientific” view, evolution, noting that he did not

“... think that one of these views was held a long time ago and that the other has gradually taken its place. Wherever there have been thinking men both views turn up.”¹⁰

Last, Lewis stresses that all too often science has become a religion, concluding that one cannot determine which view, creation or evolution, is the correct position on origins by science because science only

“... works by experiments. It watches how things behave. Every scientific statement in the long run, however complicated it looks, really means something like ... ‘I put some of this stuff in a pot and heated it to and such-and-such a temperature and it did so-and-so’.”¹⁰

He then stressed that he is not

“... saying anything against science: I am only saying what its job is. And the more scientific a man is, the more (I believe) he would agree with me that this is the job of science—and a very useful and necessary job it is too. But why anything comes to be there at all, and whether there is anything behind the things science observes.”¹⁰

Lewis concludes that this is not a question the scientific method can answer because

“If there is ‘Something Behind,’ then either it will have to remain altogether unknown to men or else make itself known in some different way And real scientists do not usually make [claims about theology]... . It is usually the journalists and popular novelists who have picked up a few odds and ends of half-baked science from textbooks who go in for them.”¹⁰

In his later writing Lewis detailed in more depth his concern about both evolution and naturalism.



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Figure 1. Portrait of C.S. Lewis, called Jack by his friends, taken after he achieved international fame as a writer and a Christian apologist. Note the serious pensive look and the tweed jacket, a symbol of professors during the 1940s and 1950s when Lewis was active as an author.

Lewis’ opposition to evolution

Darwinists attempt to show, through science and reasoning based on naturalism, that our world and its inhabitants could be fully explained as the product of a mindless and purposeless system that evolved due to chance, time, and the laws of physics and chemistry. Lewis strongly opposed this idea based on both science and reason. As early as 1925, Lewis’s personal view on naturalism and Darwinism was clear. In a letter to his father Lewis wrote:

“It will be a comfort to me all my life to know that the scientist and the materialist have not the last word: that Darwin and [Herbert] Spencer undermining ancestral beliefs stand themselves on a foundation of sand; of gigantic assumptions and irreconcilable contradictions an inch below the surface.”¹¹

Victor Reppert, in his book *C.S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea*, offers a careful, logically sequential development of Lewis’s thought and

demonstrates—contrary to the dismissals of critics—that the basic thrust of Lewis’s argument can stand up to modern philosophical scrutiny.⁶

One of his more important works titled *Miracles* (figure 3), is an excellent critique of naturalism, the worldview at the foundation of evolution and humanism. Lewis wrote that naturalists assume that life “was not designed” because they do not believe there was a designer. He then documents the fact that, at its core, naturalism is atheism.¹² Lewis stresses that we must “infer Evolution from fossils” and that “all possible knowledge ... depends on the validity of reasoning”; thus unless “human reasoning is valid no science can be true”.¹³

The funeral of the Great Myth

Lewis, in his essay titled “The Funeral of a Great Myth”, explained why he regarded evolution as “the great Myth of nineteenth and early twentieth century”, one that he wanted to bury.¹⁴ He even calls the evolutionary myth a tragedy.¹⁵ In 1951 Lewis wrote that evolution was “the central and radical lie in the whole web of falsehood that now governs our lives” and modern civilization.¹⁶

Evolution, Lewis explained, is a picture of reality that has resulted from imagination and is “not the logical result of what is vaguely called ‘modern science’.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Lewis notes, most people believe in evolution on authority, “because the scientists say so”.¹⁷



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Figure 2. Statue of C.S. Lewis looking into a wardrobe. From Lewis' fantasy novel for children with a Christian theme titled *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* written in 1950 and set in the 1940s. It was the first-published and best known book of Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. CS Lewis was born in East Belfast and this statue, in the Holywood Arches Library, Belfast, celebrates their most famous novelist.

Lewis concludes that evolutionary theory emerged long before the necessary scientific research had been completed, and, in making the Myth, imagination has, and still does, run ahead of the scientific evidence.¹⁵

Evolution, Lewis argues, affects minds as different as professors and media personalities such as Walt Disney and “is implicit in nearly every modern article on politics, sociology, and ethics.”¹⁴ It has even affected English literature, such as the poet Keats in his *Hyperion* (II. 206-15). Lewis stressed that the Myth is bolstered by selecting facts from scientific theories, a selection that is “modified ... in obedience to imaginative and emotional needs.”¹⁸ He was especially concerned with the harm done by the “disingenuousness of orthodox biologists.”⁸ Lewis was not anti-science, but believed that “all scientific theories are tentative and as dependent on changing presuppositions and climates of opinion as on new empirical data.”¹⁹

Lewis writes that, in true science, evolution is only a hypothesis about the change we observe by studying nature. Conversely, the Myth is believed in the popular mind to be a “fact about improvements” in living organisms.²⁰ The popular view of evolution involves things moving “upward and onward”, and “if science offers any potential instances that seems to satisfy that demand, they will be eagerly accepted. If it offers any instances that frustrate it, they will simply be ignored.”²¹

Lewis concluded that we live in what he called an absurd age. To illustrate this conclusion, he gave the example of a teacher who had been teaching evolution by explaining that “life developed from simple organisms up to the higher plants and animals, finally to the monkey group, and from the monkey group to man.” Lewis concluded: “You need much more *faith* in science than in theology.”²²

Lewis stressed that the doctrine of evolution is “certainly a hypothesis”, adding that he has concluded “the doctrine of Evolution as held by practicing biologists is ... a less satisfactory hypothesis than was hoped fifty years ago.”²³ Lewis then noted that evolution in this strict sense should be distinguished

“... from what may be called the universal evolutionism of modern thought. By universal evolutionism I mean the belief that the very formula of universal process is from imperfect to perfect, from small beginnings to great endings, from the rudimentary to the elaborate; the belief which makes people find it natural to think that morality springs from savage taboos, adult sentiment from infantile sexual maladjustments, thought from instinct, mind from matter, organic from inorganic, cosmos from chaos. This is perhaps the deepest habit of mind in the contemporary world.”²³

Lewis concluded that evolutionary naturalism is “immensely implausible, because it makes the general course of nature so very unlike those parts of nature we can observe.”²⁴ Referring to the “chicken or the egg” question, Lewis wrote that the modern acquiescence to

“... universal evolutionism is a kind of optical illusion, produced by attending exclusively to the [chicken's] emergence from the egg. We are taught from childhood to notice how the perfect oak grows from the acorn and to forget that the acorn itself was dropped by a perfect oak. We are reminded constantly that the adult human being was an embryo, never that the life of the embryo came from two adult human beings. We love to notice that the express engine of to-day is the descendant of the ‘Rocket’; we do not equally remember that the ‘Rocket’ springs not from some even more rudimentary engine, but from something much more perfect and complicated than itself—namely, a man of genius. The obviousness or naturalness which most people seem to find in the idea of emergent evolution thus seems to be a pure hallucination.”²⁵

His point is that both of these examples are evidence not for evolutionary naturalism, but, rather, are the result of development due to intelligent design.²⁶ The growth of a tree from a seed was programmed by design to mature, and likewise the development of better machinery was a result of human intelligence. Neither evolved by random chance mutations, the mechanism of evolution; both came about by the opposite means, namely intelligent design. He added that

“... since the egg-bird-egg sequence leads us to no plausible beginning, is it not reasonable to look for the real origin somewhere outside [the] sequence altogether? You have to go outside the sequence of engines, into the world of men, to find the real originator of the rocket. Is it not equally reasonable to look outside Nature for the real Originator of the natural order?”²⁷

His concerns about natural selection

Another problem Lewis had with evolution was that its basic foundation, natural selection, was problematic because it violates the truth that the

“... incurably evolutionary or developmental character of modern thought is always urging us to forget. What is vital and healthy does not necessarily survive. Higher organisms are often conquered by lower ones. Ants as well as men are subject to accident and violent death.”²⁸

Lewis quotes Professor Watson, who wrote that evolution “is accepted by zoologists not because it has been observed to occur or ... can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative, special creation, is clearly incredible.”²⁰ In another essay, after again quoting Watson, Lewis asked rhetorically,

“Does the whole vast structure of modern naturalism depend not on positive evidence but simply on an *a priori* metaphysical prejudice? Was it devised not to get in facts but to keep out God?”²⁴

Lewis objects specifically to twisting facts so that they fit into the Myth, such as turning “what was a theory of change into a theory of improvement”, thus making evolution into a theory that explains all creation:

“Not merely terrestrial organisms but *everything* is moving ‘upwards and onwards.’ Reason has ‘evolved’ out of instinct, virtue out of complexes, poetry out of erotic howls and grunts, civilization out of savagery, the organic out of inorganic, the solar system out of some sidereal soup or traffic block [emphasis added].”²¹

Lewis concludes that evolution is not a deduction from the data using accepted scientific methods, but, because it is a product of imagination, the human mind is all too easily convinced of its validity. We *prefer* to believe that our generation and we are better than our parents and theirs, and any theory that seems to reinforce this belief, Lewis stresses, has ego appeal.¹⁴

Commercial advertisers welcome the Myth

Lewis also notes that advertisers welcome the Myth because it reinforces the belief that *the new model* that *supersedes the old* must be improved, more economical, and better in other ways. Humans tend to believe what they *want* to believe, and the evidence is often secondary. Lewis cites a powerful reason why politicians want to keep the Myth alive: they want us to believe that their package is better than previous ones. This was seen in the 2008 American election’s stress on “change” advertised by both parties, especially the Democrats’ “change we can believe in”.

Lewis also cites the wonder of the human mind as an example that negates evolution, noting that

“... the Myth asks me to believe that reason is simply the unforeseen and unintended by-product of a mindless process at one stage of its endless and aimless becoming. The content of the Myth thus knocks from under me the only ground on which I could possibly believe the Myth to be true. If my own

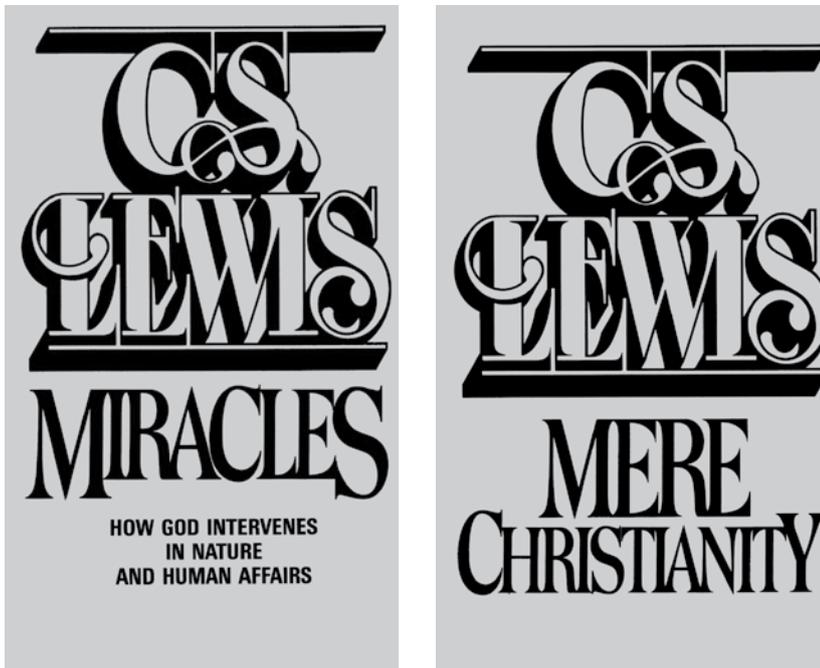


Figure 3. Covers of popular editions of two of Lewis' most important, and also most popular, Christian books. Both books eloquently critique naturalism, the cornerstone of Darwinism. *Mere Christianity* was instrumental in converting no small number of persons from atheism to Christianity, and is still popular and in print and used as a textbook in many colleges.

mind is a product of the irrational—if what seem my clearest reasoning are only the way in which a creature conditioned as I am is bound to feel—how shall I trust my mind when it tells me about Evolution?”²⁹

Lewis stresses that, although the Myth is “nonsense ... a man would be a dull dog if he could not feel the thrill and charm of it.”³⁰ Nonetheless Lewis’ advice is to “treat the Myth with respect” because

“It gives us almost everything the imagination craves—irony, heroism, vastness, unity in multiplicity, and a tragic close. It appeals to every part of me except my reason. That is why those of us who feel that the Myth is already dead for us *must not make the mistake of trying to ‘debunk’ it in the wrong way.* We must not fancy that we are securing the modern world from something grim and dry, something that starves the soul. The contrary is the truth. It is our painful duty to wake the world from an enchantment [emphasis added].”³⁰

Lewis concludes that he grew up believing the evolution myth and once felt—and still feels—“its almost perfect grandeur”:

“Let no one say we are an unimaginative age: neither the Greeks nor the Norsemen ever invented a better story. Even to the present day, in certain moods, I could almost find it in my heart to wish that it was not mythical, but true. And yet, how could it be?”³¹

After he studied the Myth in detail, he concluded that he could not accept it because he cannot accept the claim that humans and human reason are “simply the unforeseen and unintended byproduct of a mindless process at one stage of its endless and aimless becoming.” One reason for this is because the Myth itself negates the only grounds on which the Myth could possibly be true—reason.²⁹ Victor Reppert⁶ documents that Lewis effectively demonstrated that the Darwin argument was circular; if materialism or naturalism were true, then scientific reasoning itself could not be trusted. If we take our obligation to share our Christian faith seriously, we will realize that the Myth is a very real impediment for evangelism today, both that done behind the scenes and out in the open. Our world is being bombarded with the Myth in hundreds of ways in schools, books, national parks, the media, and news-telecasts.

Lewis also argued for an eternal God by reasoning that “there was never a time when nothing existed; otherwise nothing would exist now.”³² He concludes “For my own part, though, I believe it no longer.”³³ Lewis also argued that “creation”, as applied to humans, is “an entirely misleading term” for the reason that we as humans can only *rearrange* what God has created because no *vestige* of real creativity *de novo* exists in us:

“Try to imagine a new primary colour, a third sex, a fourth dimension, or even a monster which

does not consist of bits of existing animals stuck together ... we are recombining elements made by Him and already containing *His* meanings.”³⁴

Lewis censors his views on evolution

A major source of Lewis’ anti-Darwinism views is his manuscript titled *The Myth*, which was not published until after he died. A second major source is his collection of unpublished letters to Captain Acworth, head of *The Evolution Protest Movement*.³⁵ Lewis was less open in public than in private about his opposition to evolution for several reasons. One reason was that he was not a biologist and did not want to openly confront them as he felt somewhat insecure in the science area. Secondly, he realized that actively attacking evolution would produce a great deal of opposition to his person and writings and, as a result, would detract from his main work of Christian apologetics. Thirdly, he had once accepted theistic evolution and only as he explored the issue in detail did he come to have major doubts about Darwinism. Finally, he did produce a well-reasoned book against naturalism, titled *Miracles*, which was his major concern.¹² This book is still in print and is considered a classic.

Nonetheless, Lewis did teach the idea of creationism in many of his books, if only indirectly. For example, he wrote that

“... when God made space and worlds that move in space, and clothed our world with air, and gave us such eyes and such imaginations as those we have, He knew what the sky would mean to us. And since nothing in His work is accidental, if He knew, He intended. We cannot be certain that this was not indeed one of the chief purposes for which Nature was created.”³⁶

He also wrote that “we finite beings may apprehend the Emperor. He translates His glory into multiple forms—into stars, woods, waters, beasts, and the bodies of men” and it is in them—the argument from design—that we see the proof of God.¹⁹ Implications of the two views are obvious:

“When you are feeling fit and the sun is shining and you do not want to believe that the whole universe is a mere mechanical dance of atoms, it is nice to be able to think of this great mysterious Force rolling on through the centuries and carrying you on its crest. If, on the other hand, you want to do something rather shabby, the Life-Force, being only a blind force, with no morals and no mind, will never interfere with you like that troublesome God we learned about when we were children.”³⁷

Conclusion

As he read and thought on the matter, Lewis became increasingly opposed to what is today called the theory

of evolution. As Ferngren and Numbers note, “Lewis especially objected to the idea that human reason and an ordered universe could have arisen from the inorganic and irrational.”³⁸ Lewis was evidently cautious about openly criticizing evolution in his early years because, as Ferngren and Numbers explain

“Evolution was a creed so pervasive and so deeply held that even to appear to question it was to invite attack. For example, in a vitriolic article the Marxist geneticist J. B. S. Haldane accused Lewis of getting his science wrong and of traducing scientists in his works of science fiction. It is probably because evolution formed the basis of theories of philosophical naturalism like Haldane’s, which had become the dominant secular world view, that Lewis agreed with Acworth in regarding it ‘as the central and radical lie in the whole web of falsehood that now governs our lives’.”³⁹

This is why, later in his life, “Lewis became increasingly critical of evolutionism and what he called ‘the fanatical and twisted attitudes of its defenders’.”³⁸

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