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## C. S. Lewis on Atheism

JOEL D. HECK

I would gladly believe that many atheists and agnostics care for the things I care for.<sup>1</sup>

C. S. Lewis, "Lilies that Fester"

C. S. Lewis once wrote that atheism was as old as the Greek philosopher Epicurus (371-270 B.C.).<sup>2</sup> Lewis had a lot to say about atheists and atheism, mentioning the topic at least seventy-eight times in at least thirty books and essays. Having been an atheist himself, he understood Christianity from—as he put it—the outside. He held many of the same positions that atheists did in the 1910s and 1920s and for many of the same reasons that still influence people today. Although he did not compose any sort of systematic description, definition, or formal reaction to atheism, we can glean a great deal from his writings. Perhaps most important of all, Lewis knew quite a few atheists but avoided making generalizations about them. He knew how different they were from one another and that people become atheists for a wide variety of reasons.

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Lilies that Fester," in *Christian Reunion and Other Essays*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Glasgow: Collins, 1990), 44.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 3 vols., ed. by Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004-7), 2: 633.

## Lewis's Atheist Encounters

The atheist that Lewis knew best was William T. Kirkpatrick, his tutor, who lived in Great Bookham, Surrey, and with whom he studied between 1914 and 1917. Kirkpatrick taught him how to think with strict rationality, but he did not cause Lewis's atheism.<sup>3</sup> Lewis was already an atheist before he arrived at Great Bookham, although he gained additional support from his tutor for his unbelief. Kirkpatrick's rationalistic atheism, was "chiefly of the anthropological and pessimistic kind,"<sup>4</sup> the same type that Lewis had adopted. This apparently meant not only that Kirkpatrick was pessimistic about human nature (although Lewis does not explain how), but that he failed to see evidences that human beings are made in the image of God. Kirkpatrick was convinced that Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a famous anthropological study of comparative religions first published in 1890, explained the origin of religion in the ancient mythologies,<sup>5</sup> and Lewis adopted a similar position.

During his undergraduate years, Lewis was influenced by Dr. Frederick Macran,<sup>6</sup> the Irish Anglican priest, whose lack of belief in a personal God was oddly mixed with a desire for immortality. Macran motivated Lewis to avoid anything, including God, that might lead him to want to be immortal, as though immortality were some kind of reward or bribe instead of something that needs to be sought for its own sake. In addition to Macran, Lewis's undergraduate friends A. K. Hamilton Jenkin,<sup>7</sup> R. M. S. Pasley, and George Arnold Rink<sup>8</sup> were atheists with whom he frequently socialized. And Lewis's own brother Warren described himself as an atheist at one time.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Fern-seed and Elephants," *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), 122.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 139.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 139.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1: 547.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2, 241.

<sup>8</sup> Entry for 1 February 1923, C. S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis, 1922-1927*, ed. by Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt, 1991), 189.

<sup>9</sup> Entry for 13 May 1931, Warren Hamilton Lewis, *Brothers & Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis*, ed. by Clyde Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 80.

Lewis's convictions about atheists resulted from his experience with these and many others, both past and present, whom he either knew, socialized with, corresponded with, read, or mentioned in his writings. These include Lucretius, the English novelist Arnold Bennett,<sup>10</sup> the English literary critic I. A. Richards,<sup>11</sup> his former student Alan Richard Griffiths, the biologist J. B. S. Haldane,<sup>12</sup> the philosopher C. E. M. Joad, the philosopher Antony Flew, the poet and novelist Kathleen Nott, the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold,<sup>13</sup> the novelist Thomas Hardy and the poet A. E. Housman,<sup>14</sup> the artist Wayland Young,<sup>15</sup> several of his colleagues at Magdalen College,<sup>16</sup> probably including philosopher T. D. Weldon and historian A. J. P. Taylor,<sup>17</sup> an Oxford undergraduate named Edwards,<sup>18</sup> and scores of others in Oxford and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> He met and corresponded with former atheists, such as Margaret Gray, to whom he recommended books for reading.<sup>20</sup> He also corresponded with and met another of his atheistic contemporaries, science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, who wrote to Lewis to complain about his fictional story *Perelandra*.<sup>21</sup> Lewis even married a former atheist, Joy Davidman. His contact with so many atheists led Lewis to make few assumptions about their beliefs, apart from some fundamental convictions, which follow.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2: 240.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Haldane addressed the subject of "Atheism" at the Socratic Club on 15 November 1948. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, rev. ed. (San Diego: Harcourt, 1974), 217.

<sup>13</sup> Devin Brown, *A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013), 6.

<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 93.

<sup>15</sup> "Chronologically Lewis," 23 February 1952. See <http://www.joelheck.com/chronologically-lewis.php>. See also Lewis: *Collected Letters*, 3:167-8.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:495; 3:521.

<sup>17</sup> See Kathleen Burk, *Troublemaker: The Life and History of A. J. P. Taylor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> See "Chronologically Lewis" for 19 May 1917. <http://www.joelheck.com/chronologically-lewis.php>. The first name of Edwards is not known.

<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Interim Report," in *Present Concerns*, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 95.

<sup>20</sup> He wrote to her on 9 May 1961. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 3:1264.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:593-4, for a letter written by Lewis on 7 December 1943, in response to Clarke's letter.

## Conclusions of Atheism

The most fundamental conclusion of atheism is defined by the word itself: that God does not exist.<sup>22</sup> Atheists, Lewis says, assume that most of the human race is wrong, and has always been wrong, about the existence of God.<sup>23</sup> The vast majority of human beings, over eighty percent,<sup>24</sup> believe in some deity, whether the God of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, or one of the lesser known religions. Therefore, an atheist has to believe that the majority of humanity is wrong on this topic.

The atheist Lewis was willing to accept this conclusion, too, but when he became a Christian, he began to see how the universal existence of religion throughout history was itself an evidence of the reality of God. “When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view.”<sup>25</sup> As a Christian he could accept the theistic position of most religions. Furthermore, the universal moral law, which, he argued in *The Abolition of Man*, has been common to most religions and civilizations throughout history, was another proof of the majority of humanity intuiting the divine. He did not think that all religions were completely wrong about their most basic affirmations.

According to Lewis, atheists believe that they “see through” the sham of religious and mythological worldviews. They are confident that they see life as it really is because they adopt a scientific understanding of the world,<sup>26</sup> which is good, as far as it goes, but as it only deals with the mate-

<sup>22</sup> Many scholars distinguish between positive atheism (affirming the non-existence of God) and negative atheism (the failure to affirm the existence of God). Before his conversion Lewis was a positive atheist, and most of what he later wrote addressed positive atheism. An atheist can also be wide or narrow, in the former case denying that any god exists and in the latter case denying the existence of a specific deity. Lewis was a wide atheist. These distinctions will not be made in this article, especially since in his apologetics Lewis responded to particular atheists whom he had met rather than addressed atheism as an abstract subject.

<sup>23</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. See <http://www.pewforum.org/>. See also <http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/2012/dec/23/84-percent-world-population-has-faith-third-are-ch/>.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 204.

rial world it does not address whether or not something can exist beyond matter. Many atheists regard the existence of humans and animals simply as the result of biological processes.<sup>27</sup> In other words, human beings are an accidental product of natural selection, random chance, and vast amounts of time. They are merely a more advanced evolutionary product, no more valuable than any other form of life.

While atheism can lead down dark and depressing paths, it at times may allow the sensitive non-believer “to enjoy the aesthetic trappings of Christianity” in a way that Christians cannot.<sup>28</sup> Lewis saw something similar in Lucretius (ca. 99-ca. 55 B.C.), the Roman poet and philosopher, who was better able than many of his pagan contemporaries to see the beauty of the gods, in particular their eternity, their peace, and their remoteness.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, without any commitment to the truths of Christianity, the nineteenth-century Matthew Arnold admired the beauty of the Gothic cathedrals and medieval art while denying the existence of God.

Another conclusion of atheists comes in their rejection of Scripture and their denial of the historicity or relevance of the Fall of Adam and Eve into sin. Lewis would argue, in part, that this is because they underestimate the reality of evil, which is true of nearly everyone.<sup>30</sup> Evil is out there, in other people, cultures, societies, systems, but not in here, in my own person. It was not until Lewis looked inside himself and saw a “zoo of lusts”<sup>31</sup> that he understood the reality of evil in himself, not just in those around him. He learned about the problem of personal failings, but he seemed unable to do anything about it.<sup>32</sup> One of the consequences of the underestimation, or rejection, of the Fall is an overestimation of the value of education. Sometimes atheists assume that, since evil is either non-existent or mini-

<sup>27</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Bles, 1940) 142.

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 93.

<sup>29</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 83.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis states this, not so much of atheists, but of everyone, both Christian and non-Christian, in “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967), 78, where he wonders if he “ignore the Fall” by trusting our own reason. If non-Christians do this, then atheists are among them. If Christians do this, then they are just as guilty.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 226.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” 79.

mally invasive, mankind can be “put right” by education.<sup>33</sup>

In his essay “Religion and Rocketry,” Lewis also wrote about two scientific proposals: the first, that biological life only exists on earth and nowhere else in the universe through the rarest of accidents; and the second, proposed by Cambridge astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle, that such life probably exists in many places in the universe. Both positions, Lewis wrote, claim to show the absurdity of the Christian belief that God created the universe and that God became man in the Incarnation of Christ. One argues that life began as a mere one-time accident, and the other argues life probably exists in many other places in the universe. Arguments from two contradictory positions are used to attack Christianity. Lewis once concluded that “those who do not find Him on earth are unlikely to find Him in space.”<sup>34</sup>

Another conclusion of some atheists, Lewis believed, is that the vast size of the universe in comparison with the relatively small size of the Earth invalidates Christianity, and, therefore, theism.<sup>35</sup> In comparison with the universe itself, some atheists claim, the stars and planets that move in this universe are so few and so small that it is hard to believe that human life on earth is more than a byproduct.<sup>36</sup> For Lewis, however, the size of our planet and the vastness of space do not provide evidence against the existence of God. While Lewis did not explain why size and vastness tell us nothing about the existence of God,<sup>37</sup> he thought that planet Earth below and the heavens above are part of our natural order, whereas the existence of God is a question about the supernatural order, that is, the order that is “supra” or “above” the natural. The heavens and the Earth are physical realities, while

<sup>33</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Revival or Decay,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 252. These are Lewis’s exact words: “I had found the assured belief that whatever was wrong with man would in the long run (and not so very long a run either) be put right by ‘Education.’”

<sup>34</sup> C. S. Lewis, “The Seeing Eye,” in *Christian Reflections*, 171.

<sup>35</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 73.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 1. Lewis states, “The bodies which move in this space are so few and so small in comparison with the space itself that even if every one of them were known to be crowded as full as it could hold with perfectly happy creatures, it would still be difficult to believe that life and happiness were more than a by-product to the power that made the universe.”

<sup>37</sup> Lewis’s appreciation of the medieval view of the size and order of the universe, a medieval cosmology which glorified God, is documented in C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

God is a spiritual reality.<sup>38</sup>

Lewis also briefly mentions an atheist position on animals. He believes that they regard the coexistence of mankind and animals as a mere biological fact. Thus, for some atheists the taming of an animal by humans is an arbitrary interference of one species with another—the natural animal is the wild animal, while the tame animal is unnatural. Christians, however, think that God appointed mankind to have dominion over the beasts, and every way in which people interact with animals is either a proper exercise or an improper abuse of that God-given authority.<sup>39</sup>

### Causes of Lewis's Atheism

The immediate reason for writing his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, appears in the Preface, where Lewis states that he had received requests to explain how he traveled the road from atheism to Christianity. As a result, his autobiography contains a good deal of information about the reasons he became an atheist as well as the reasons he left atheism.

The reasons for which Lewis adopted atheism are familiar. Both the argument from the frailty of the world and “the argument from un-design”<sup>40</sup> were among those reasons. Nature behaves badly,<sup>41</sup> and if God is the creator of nature, then either God is evil or a poor designer. Perhaps He is not good. Perhaps He is not all-powerful. Perhaps He simply does not exist. Later Lewis would argue that the selective or undemocratic quality in Nature in the apparent randomness of catastrophic weather, for example, is neither good nor evil,<sup>42</sup> believing that pain and death in the natural world are the result of the historic Fall of Adam and Eve and not the fault of God. Related to this apparent cruelty in Nature is the fact that the argument from design is a weak basis for theism.<sup>43</sup> Had the current findings of microbiology about the vast complexity of the inner workings of an individual cell been available to Lewis, he might have considered the argument from design to be far weightier. He also argued that attributing certain behaviors

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 17-18.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis's exact words. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:747.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 155.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:747. The date of this letter is 20 December 1946.



to instinct, for example, in the world of insects, comes from the refusal to recognize design in that behavior,<sup>44</sup> and, hence, the failure to recognize a Designer.

The fact that human beings have an inherent vanity, that life preyed on life, and that beauty and happiness were produced only to be destroyed was difficult for Lewis to accept. Furthermore, Lewis noted that reason enables human beings “by a hundred ingenious contrivances to inflict a great deal more pain than they otherwise could have done,” and the history of mankind is “largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror.”<sup>45</sup> Lewis also wrote about his own pessimism as a contributing cause of his atheism,<sup>46</sup> undoubtedly pessimism caused by the suffering, pain, and death he saw around him, especially the death of his mother. Elsewhere he indicated that the loss of his mother, unhappiness at school, the memory of the First World War, and his experience of that war had all led to his pessimistic view of existence and either caused or confirmed his adoption of atheism.<sup>47</sup>

One of the more telling comments Lewis made in one of his letters is his belief that many atheists come from pious homes.<sup>48</sup> He advocated a different approach to the Christian faith, one that showed itself in the power of story.<sup>49</sup> He also refers to the superficial training in Christianity he received at home and the harsh legalism of Ulster Christianity.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Lewis argues that the positions of theological liberalism, especially the higher critical theories of some New Testament scholars, at times drive people to atheism.<sup>51</sup>

Lewis argued that some atheists hold to their atheism because they want it to be true, just as some might adopt Christianity because they want

<sup>44</sup> C. S. Lewis, “On Ethics,” in *Christian Reflections*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 190. See also Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:747.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to Bede Griffiths on 20 December 1946. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:747.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 3:506.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 3:506. See especially C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), 35-8.

<sup>50</sup> On the legalism of Ulster Christianity, see C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 4-5.

<sup>51</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” in *Fern-seed and Elephants*, 105.

it to be true.<sup>52</sup> But nothing can be proven by merely wanting or wishing. Freud thought that religious people imagined a father figure who was far better than their earthly father. He also—Lewis maintained—denied the existence of God and an after-life because he wished not to be held accountable in the next life.<sup>53</sup> It is possible for both the theistic and the atheistic positions to contain irrational arguments.

### Contradictions of Atheism

Lewis found that some atheists deny the existence of God yet, illogically, are angry with God for not existing.<sup>54</sup> He claimed that it was not uncommon to find atheists “perpetually angry with God for not being there.”<sup>55</sup> The major reason for such anger is their difficulty in making sense of suffering. This was the case with the atheist Aldous Huxley, whom Lewis commended for his serious attempt to understand the problem of suffering.<sup>56</sup> One of the

<sup>52</sup> C. S. Lewis, “On Obstnacy in Belief,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 19. Strange though it may seem, Lewis actually wrote, “A man may be a Christian because he wants Christianity to be true. He may be an atheist because he wants atheism to be true. He may be an atheist because he wants Christianity to be true. He may be a Christian because he wants atheism to be true” (19). In other words, wishful thinking can happen on both sides of the issue, either for atheism or for Christianity.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis, “On Obstnacy in Belief,” 19. See, for example, American philosopher Thomas Nagel, who writes, “I am talking about . . . the fear of religion itself. . . . I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God, and naturally, hope that I am right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.” Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 130.

<sup>54</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 115. See also Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 93.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:223-4. The letter is dated 18 April 1938. Some years ago Julie Exline, Case Western Reserve University psychologist, reported that college students, atheists, and agnostics are more angry with God than are religious people. In this study, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Exline and her co-researchers studied people who were angry with God because of bereavement and cancer. They also found young people, even young atheists, more likely to be angry with God than older people. J. J. Exline, C. L. Park, J. M. Smyth, and M. P. Carey. “Anger toward God: Social-cognitive predictors, prevalence, and links with adjustment to bereavement and cancer.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100 (2011): 129-48.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 93. While Lewis does not indicate which Huxley, he probably meant Aldous Huxley, who wrote *Ends and Means* (1937).

other contradictions in Lewis's "whirl of contradictions"<sup>57</sup> is the fact that some atheists frequently have a sense of God's presence. That was certainly the case during the last days of his atheism. Whenever he had a moment's leisure he felt "the steady, unrelenting approach" of the One whom he did not want to meet.<sup>58</sup>

As he indicated in his series of poems, *Spirits in Bondage*, atheists are often ambivalent in their denial of the existence of God. As a Christian, Lewis candidly admitted, he at times had moods when his Christian views looked improbable. On the other hand, when he was an atheist he had moods when Christianity looked quite probable.<sup>59</sup>

As Lewis wrote in a letter to Alan Griffiths, he knew the universe to be bad. But he asked himself where he got a standard of straightness by which he could judge the world as crooked?<sup>60</sup> Atheists seek justice, whether it be for the environment, the migrant worker, the child caught in human trafficking, or the pet that is abused by its owner. But if there are such injustices, where does the idea of right and wrong come from? If all of human experience is relative (a worldview that derives from a failure to base morality on divine authority), if life is the product of random or accidental processes with no inherent meaning, then nothing can be determined as objectively right or wrong. No moral judgment is more valid than another. And yet, when he was an atheist, Lewis considered some actions to be objectively wrong but could find no philosophical basis for his moral position.

To say that one's idea of justice is just a private idea rather than something based on objective truth, Lewis argued, is to turn one's position into a subjective opinion that is no more valid than anyone else's opinion. To say that one's idea of justice is universal—i.e., that everyone ought to agree—is an appeal to a standard. But if there is no such thing as God, and no objective standard of right and wrong, why should one's private idea be any more correct than another person's idea? But if the idea of justice is sensible, then there is meaning to the universe.<sup>61</sup> Then right and wrong have a much

<sup>57</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 115.

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 140. See also C. S. Lewis, "Religion: Reality or Substitute?" in *Christian Reflections*, 41.

<sup>60</sup> Letter of 20 December 1946, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:74.

<sup>61</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 38-9.

more valid foundation. If the universe had no meaning, he wrote, we would never have learned that it has no meaning.<sup>62</sup>

In a related argument on the importance of reason, Lewis once cited atheist J. B. S. Haldane, who had candidly written, “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”<sup>63</sup> The idea of rational inquiry assumes that there are truths to discover. If, however, the universe has no meaning, there is only nonsense and no truths to discover. Therefore, the idea of rational inquirers discovering the truth that the universe has no meaning contradicts itself.

### Relating with Atheists

Finally, atheists are also human beings, wired in the same ways that Christians are. “I would gladly believe,” Lewis wrote, “that many atheists and agnostics care for the things I care for.”<sup>64</sup> And, undoubtedly, they do.

The one place where Lewis interacted most with atheists was at the Oxford Socratic Club, where he and many Oxford undergraduates invited intelligent atheists to come and speak—men such as Antony Flew, Archibald Robertson, C. E. M. Joad, and J. B. S. Haldane. There they were treated with respect. Respect, for Lewis, meant seriously considering the positions they held and discussing them with an open mind. He critiqued their views when they had finished speaking, sometimes settling into an impromptu debate. He had no difficulty understanding a position he had once held and discarded, but he also treated his opponents with the respect that he would have wanted for himself.

Lewis had respect for those atheists who honestly grappled with the apparent problems of theism and Christianity.<sup>65</sup> When he invited his atheist friend Hamilton Jenkin to join him and his friends on a multi-day coun-

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> J. B. S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 209, cited in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 24.

<sup>64</sup> Lewis, “Lilies that Fester,” in *Christian Reunion*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Lewis, “De Futilitate,” in *Christian Reflections*, 70.

try walk, he told him that his friends would respect Jenkin's position.<sup>66</sup> He respected Jenkin's views since Lewis himself had been in a similar position for many years. Perhaps owing to his generosity of respect, two of Lewis's fellow students, Edwards<sup>67</sup> and Butler, as well as Alan Richard Griffiths, the latter a student of Lewis's, eventually moved from atheism to accept Christianity, as have others.<sup>68</sup>

C. S. Lewis knew many atheists, understood their reasons for adopting atheism, identified with their ambivalence, and respected their philosophical position and their honest attempts to grapple with the problems of suffering and injustice. However, he fundamentally disagreed with them, arguing that atheists assumed the validity of reason in adopting their position, which is not possible in a purely naturalistic world. And in their complaints about the problem of evil or Christian moral teaching, they also assume the existence of an objective moral standard. According to Lewis, the atheists were cutting off the branches they were collectively sitting on.

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<sup>66</sup> Lewis *Collected Letters*, 2:241.

<sup>67</sup> See "Chronologically Lewis," 19 May 1917, <http://www.joelheck.com/chronologically-lewis.php>.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis *Collected Letters*, 1:307.