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A Plea for Reasonable Discourse about Lewis's Views on Evolution

CHARLES A. HUTTAR

Jerry Bergman, *C. S. Lewis: Anti-Darwinist: A Careful Examination of the Development of His Views on Darwinism* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2016). xxiii + 136 pages. \$21.00. ISBN 9781532607738.

Evolution is a controversial subject in America, not just in churches but in the society as a whole, especially its legislative and judicial aspects. Some Christian writers take a firm position and draw their battle lines: hardly surprising in an age of increasingly polarized nature of public discourse more generally.¹ Others, wary of easy answers that package issues and reduce their complexity, aim at an understanding between the extremes and express their ideas more cautiously. A somewhat similar pattern can be observed in the ways C. S. Lewis is read (beyond sheer pleasure): to reinforce things we already know and strongly believe, or for new insight.

Lewis himself, we know, disapproved of partisan divisions within the church. He focused on the essential doctrines and the need to understand them better. Such understanding must begin, he thought, with careful definitions, to distinguish among the various connotations—even *opposed* meanings—that a key word can acquire over time. He devoted a whole book to this (*Studies in Words*), having seen the confusion that can otherwise result, even among thoughtful interlocutors.

The book here reviewed is recklessly imprecise in that respect, beginning in the title and continuing throughout. Does “Darwinism” refer to the process of natural selection that Darwin theorized to unify his and other scientists’ empirical observations, seeking patterns (which is the way of science); or does it also encompass the refinements that further scientific

¹ Writers a decade ago noticed how this controversy illustrates the prevalence of “name-calling” in the public square. Jimmy H. Davis and Harry L. Poe, *Chance or Dance: An Evaluation of Design* (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2008), 181.

work over 150 years has brought to the theory? Or does it refer to doctrines of another sort entirely: to the metaphysical speculations about the import of his work that Darwin sometimes committed to writing; or to the philosophical materialism (Lewis called it Naturalism) that is rampant in our culture and taken for granted by many biologists, though by no means all; or to the ways later writers (Herbert Spencer, for example), guided by their own metaphysical speculations and eschatological visions, tried to extend Darwin's theory to less rigorous studies outside biology, thus giving a putative theoretical basis to practices that Lewis found not just morally repellent but destructive? Or does it refer to what Lewis called the "great myth," long predating Darwin, that underlay those subsequent doctrines?² Lewis labeled that myth Developmentalism or Evolutionism and sharply distinguished it, repeatedly, from Evolution. He could accept the latter within a Christian framework but found the myth utterly false while recognizing its seductive esthetic appeal. Jerry Bergman, however, will not grant Lewis this crucial distinction. He lumps everything together under the one undifferentiated term.³

Moreover, Bergman spends most of his book proving again and again what we already knew, that Lewis was strongly opposed to *evolutionism*. Lewis's insights concerning the earlier rise of a "developmental" myth in the "folk imagination" and its ensuing impact on Darwin and others constitute a major contribution to historical understanding on the subject. But none of that sheds light on Lewis's views on evolution—which Bergman puts forward as his main subject. For his keyword "Darwinism," despite its range of possible meanings, is reduced to the vague sense it has in American popular culture today: namely, denial of a literal interpretation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:7.

Bergman's failure to observe the distinction, so important in Lewis's thought, between evolutionary process and materialistic philosophy adds to the confusion. For example, he quotes a long paragraph in which Lewis notes that evolution cannot address the question of "the origin and validity of reason. It may well tell you how the brain, through which reason

² C. S. Lewis, "The Funeral of a Great Myth," in *Christian Reflections*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), 82-93.

³ Lewis's 1925 letter cited to show his opposition to "Darwinism" (50) arguably refers to *evolutionism*, not Darwin's biological theory.

now operates, arose, but that is a different matter.” But he seems not to have caught the point Lewis is making (67).⁴ Is he is even aware of the much-discussed mind/brain question within current philosophy, with its substantial scholarly literature?

Another problematic word in the title is “careful.” The author doth protest too much, methinks. The discovery of some twenty factual errors and misreadings of text in a span of fifteen pages (8-22) tends to put the reader on guard. Getting on into the text, we find not only imprecision but also confusion in the author’s mind as to the meaning of several other terms. It is hard to say whether his definitions of “emergent evolution” (1, 45 [see my comments below], 58), “microevolution” (90, 104), and “macroevolution” (2, 58, 74, 104, 114 [cf. *OED*]) are simply erroneous or idiosyncratic (but giving no reasons—conceivably not realizing the need to).

Bergman’s book, then, is not likely to interest scholars, except ones studying modern Sophistic-style rhetoric. It flouts too many canons of scholarship. It is careless about references (I counted twenty defective footnotes and didn’t have time to examine them all) and cites Lewis’s essays without title, only by page number in the collection in which Bergman happened to find them, making it hard for readers to do any checking if they have the same essay (unidentified) but in a different collection (the lack of an index is also a hindrance). Often, instead of coming to grips with Lewis’s carefully crafted expressions, he leans heavily on other writers’ interpretations of what Lewis says. When he does quote Lewis, it is often out of context (by context I mean not only the words nearby but also the circumstances of writing and what we know of Lewis’s character, personality, and rhetorical habits); or truncated, excising a qualification Lewis includes; or adding his own spin in opinionated brackets or afterward—and putting the footnote at the end of the sentence to make the whole appear to be Lewis’s idea. Two examples of this are note 5 on page 46 and note 36 on page 94.

Bergman offers no continuing step-by-step argument but often strings together quotations from others in cut-and-paste fashion. It’s not always clear what point he wants to develop. He is not writing for scholars but pri-

⁴ To add to the confusion, he proceeds to quote what he says is the “context” just preceding the paragraph, and it turns out to be from a different book, the one Bergman mentioned the page before.

marily for people who prefer simple, undefined terms that label, however misleadingly, one side of a polarized issue (the prefix “Anti-” in the title is a giveaway), and who don’t know much about Lewis (hence the purpose of Chapter 3) except that he is a “Big Name,” so they want to be assured he is “On Our Side.” Any success the book might have can also be attributed either to readers’ unfamiliarity with what constitutes convincing argument or to their tendency to leave strongly held predispositions unexamined.

Here I need to revisit and expand on a point made two paragraphs ago, in my highly condensed list of ways the book violates the canons of scholarship. That list was so generalized it might be hard to appreciate the seriousness of Bergman’s selectivity in presenting quotations. Let me offer two particularly egregious examples. He cites a remark reported by one of Lewis’s former students which the student at the time took to be against evolution (20), but he fails to tell us how the writer goes on to explain that, upon reflection, he realized he had been wrong. From Jay Wile’s 2011 blog “Everyone Wants a Piece of C. S. Lewis,” Bergman borrows a telling critique of Michael Peterson for abridging a long quotation from the closing pages of *Mere Christianity* by omitting an important qualification Lewis makes (62-3). The omission doesn’t affect Lewis’s (or Peterson’s) main point, but clearly it was injudicious. However, if one takes the trouble to look at Wile’s blog,⁵ one will notice that after his exposure of Peterson’s comparatively trivial mistake he devotes nearly triple the space to similar errors (not just injudicious) in an article by Jerry Bergman in the *Journal of Creation*.

Equally troubling are Bergman’s repeated violations of logic in argument. Two examples will do. He presents fifteen quotations from A. J. Balfour’s 1915 book *Theism and Humanism* that are highly critical of “Darwinism”—Balfour’s immediate target being not Darwin himself but the “Social Darwinist” Herbert Spencer (33-7). Lewis cited Balfour’s book as an influence on his thinking. Ergo, Bergman concludes, anything Balfour said must have been Lewis’s view also. Two chapters later, using fourteen quotations from Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* and a secondary source, one that looms large in Bergman’s book, he sets forth Bergson’s observations on weaknesses in Darwin’s theory (46-9) and notes that Lewis found the Bergsonian critique “not easy to answer” (quoted, 46). However, he

⁵ blog.drwile.com/everyone-wants-a-piece-of-c-s-lewis/, accessed 27 July 2017.

refrains from telling us that scientists in their continuing study did answer it, to Lewis's satisfaction at least: "It covers more of the facts than any other hypothesis . . . and is therefore to be accepted unless, or until," a better one is developed.⁶

This chapter, "Lewis Rejects the Theistic Evolutionist Henri Bergson" (45-9), is problematic in a second way. It begins by (oddly) calling Bergson's theory "a form of theistic evolution" (45), on the strength of a truncated quotation from Lewis—who, however, would not agree. That would be true only if the word "theism" is taken very broadly, to mean belief in any deity. But if readers identify Henri Bergson's "Life Force" as a god, says Lewis, they are mistaken.⁷ The point is very clear in *Perelandra*, where Dr. Weston calls "that Force" into himself and immediately suffers diabolical, not divine, possession. Thus, it is not theistic evolution that Lewis here rejects, as Bergman claims (45).

The word "development" in the subtitle may catch some readers' attention and suggest that perhaps Bergman found new information they should know about. He does try to substantiate the claim, and he is to be commended for being aware (as scholars sometimes seem not to be) that the chronology of Lewis's writings is important: for Lewis was constantly open to new learning, fresh inquiry, and deeper understanding, as we see in one of his last books, *Letters to Malcolm*. However, such evidence as Bergman offers I do not find convincing. First, a little context. Bergman's argument for a significant change hinges on one letter Lewis wrote when he was fifty-two. Before that, Lewis was, as noted above, willing to accept evolution as a theory well supported though, like all scientific paradigms, subject to revision in the light of any further evidence. But, Bergman says patronizingly, that was only at an early "stage of his intellectual and spiritual growth" (62)—this, about a man who had already produced most of the works of apologetics and adult fiction for which he is valued by the worldwide Christian community. Yet even after that 1951 letter, the next year in *Mere Christianity* Lewis remained favorable to "some evolutionary ideas," as Bergman acknowledges (29), and when in 1960 he revised his

⁶ Lewis, "Funeral," 85.

⁷ Lewis develops this point more fully in his note at the end of chapter 4 in *Mere Christianity*, book 1. See also C. S. Lewis, "Evil and God," in *God in the Dock*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 21.

book *Miracles*, he left the statement that “we infer Evolution from fossils” unaltered.⁸

Scattered across sixteen years are letters from Lewis to one Bernard Acworth, who from the tone appears to have been an old friend. Acworth was one of the founders some eighty years ago in Britain of the Evolution Protest Movement (now renamed the Creation Science Movement). Acworth sought Lewis’s help in his crusade against what he considered brainwashing of the public by the schools and media. After Lewis wrote him that he saw no reason Christianity could not “still be believed, even if Evolution is true,”⁹ he continued to send Lewis books and pamphlets. Lewis read “nearly the whole” of a manuscript by Acworth and responded that his attitudes about evolution itself remained much the same. The reading showed him, however, that some “defenders” of evolution had “fanatical and twisted attitudes.” This was a new *datum* for him to consider in reevaluating whether or not he could agree with Acworth on the “importan[ce]” of the evolutionist ideology’s impact on society. Later, commenting on another of Acworth’s anecdotes, he said the “*disingenuousness* of [certain] orthodox biologists” was “suspicious.”¹⁰ Lewis tries to avoid offending his old friend (who had shown himself capable of fighting back in print), but never says he has come to agree with Acworth.

Did Lewis believe in theistic evolution? The question deserves ongoing cooperative study by scholars who don’t bring to it a simple answer. I can do little more here than ask some pertinent subquestions. First, what does “believe” mean? The word has various meanings (see Lewis’s “On Obstinacy in Belief”). Lewis recognized that, being outside the scientific profession, he must rely on the authority of honest practicing scientists (which excludes those few who venture outside their expertise to publish metaphysical statements). And he understood, based on the way science works, that that paradigm could not be a belief to cling to if it ever became untenable. These two limitations indicate how best to understand words

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 25-26.

⁹ Letter of 9 December 1944, in C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004-7), 2:633.

¹⁰ Letter of 18 September 1959, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 3:138, 1088. Bergman cites this correspondence on pages 29, 82-83, 97 (misquoting), and 123. The quotation from John G. West that he adds on 83 supports the reading I have given of the letters, which differs from Bergman’s reading.

like “vague” and “intermittent,” which Bergman quotes from Lewis thinking that they amount to denial.

Next, what does “theistic evolution” mean? That evolution itself is one of God’s instruments in creation, or that the Creator plays some role in the evolutionary process (I offer this quick definition subject to correction). It is a blanket term that includes various attempts to define that role exactly. Some of these, Bergman correctly says, Lewis rejects (chapters 8 on Bergson and 9 on Teilhard de Chardin), but he implies that Lewis would reject them all! It seems more typical of Lewis’s way of thinking, however, to say that for us mortals “it is dangerous to prescribe what God must have done.”¹¹ He does “not in the least deny . . . that organisms on this planet may have ‘evolved,’” but before the evolutionary process could begin, “the crude beginnings of life” were “‘dropped’ there by a full and perfect life.”¹²

Bergman speaks of Lewis’s works as “effective philosophical defenses of intelligent design and creationism” (124). In the original sense of these terms, yes. But Bergman intends them to be heard with capital letters in the contemporary ideological sense (2, 7, 93, 102, 111, 122, 129), and that is what needs further examination: it is one aspect of the question I posed. Lewis undoubtedly “teaches a creation worldview” (57)—it is, after all, the first article of the Creed, a belief in which, by contrast, he *is* prepared to be obstinate. If divine purpose implies design, as older theologians thought, and God is omniscient, then the other half of Bergman’s statement can easily be accepted, though not in the way he means it, for the word “intelligent” has undergone demotion over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, as Lewis pointed out, “Intelligence” was the highest way of knowing, while “Reason,” which operates sequentially in time, was the best that humans could manage. But in modern times those two terms have “swapped meanings, so that ‘intellect’ in mod[ern] English means the lower faculty.”¹³ Thus when Lewis argues in *Miracles* and elsewhere that the quality which makes humans more than beasts, transcending the merely physico-chemical, could have come only from the Creator, once evolution had brought them far enough, “Reason” is the term he uses. Scientific studies claim that some animals have intelligence. Is it possible, then, that the modern term “Intel-

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 112.

¹² Lewis, “Funeral,” 91.

¹³ Letter of 14 September 1936, Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:204.

ligent Design” may hint (albeit inadvertently) at the old anthropomorphic tendency to want a God who is manageable—to bring Infinite Wisdom down to a more human level? Harold Bloom perceptively calls Intelligent Design “a kind of parody” of Lewis’s creationist (old sense) view (quoted by Bergman, 19). Do the present-day overtones of the word “design” imagine God as a super-engineer? If so, what bearing on the discussion has Lewis’s preferred image of God as artist (compare George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy L. Sayers, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and others)? God created, Lewis said, “out of His love and artistry,”¹⁴ Why should that statement rule out evolutionary process as an instrument? Should we be content, in humility, to avoid speculating about the details of that process beyond what has been understood (provisionally, to be sure) by the work of scientists whose particular task it is to investigate such things? Given that their work is ongoing, might we best wait patiently for more light to be shed?

Do not take these as veiled statements. I cannot claim such expertise. They are offered as questions to ponder and discuss, bearing in mind that (as Lewis often said) questions about the Genesis “kinds” are only part of the mystery of creation. Darwin was a biologist, but by now the term “evolution” has been extended to questions of how life itself began and how the universe began and came to its present state. Could an Infinite Mind have encoded the whole in one creative instant (though to be realized over time) and still left room for what we call chance and, in humans, for free choice? What do we mean by glibly saying *infinite*?

In the ongoing discussion other voices need to be heard, especially those heard years ago but unnoticed by Bergman. I think of Sanford Schwartz, who explained how Lewis in his space novels dealt with evolutionary models, Darwinian and Bergsonian, not denying them outright but superseding them with deeper Christian insight, as was his way also with Pagan myths; Francis Collins, who saw the extremely intricate genome code as “God’s instruction book”; or Francisco Ayala, who brought his training in both theology and biology to bear on understanding the common interest that science and religion share in the idea of natural selection.¹⁵ There is also philosopher Michael Peterson, whose methodical and

¹⁴ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 148 (quoted by Bergman, 95).

¹⁵ Sanford Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Francis S. Collins, *The*

thoughtful article¹⁶ deserves better consideration than second-hand sniping at one purported flaw. The work of a non-believer could also contribute to the conversation: Stephen Jay Gould gave much attention (in works too numerous to list here) to identifying remaining puzzles in the now-massive body of work that has followed Darwin. Jerry Bergman and others would of course be welcome also if they wished to join a conversation aimed not at defending football-wise one end zone or the other but at discovering together a fuller understanding that is probably many-sided.