

JEFFREY W. BARBEAU

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM  
SARAH BORDEN, MATTHEW LUNDIN,  
and KEITH L. JOHNSON

THE  
LAST  
ROMANTIC

C. S. LEWIS,  
ENGLISH LITERATURE,  
AND MODERN THEOLOGY



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## C. S. LEWIS AND THE “ROMANTIC HERESY”



### THE TRIAL OF C. S. LEWIS

Autumn 1967. Several members of Wheaton College entered a lively debate about art, imagination, and Christianity. Parts of their discussion appeared in at least three outlets: a faculty workshop, the *Wheaton Alumni Magazine*, and the *Faculty Bulletin*. Among the contributors to this debate were several prominent faculty members, including philosopher Arthur Holmes, Bible and theology professor Morris Inch, and, initiating the whole discussion, literary critic Clyde S. Kilby.

Only two years earlier, Professor Kilby had successfully petitioned the Wheaton College Library to form a new collection in its holdings. During the prior decade, Kilby had maintained correspondence with the chair of medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge, whose popular reputation as an apologist and author of several works of fiction had brought him international acclaim. With the establishment of a formal library collection, Kilby was well on his way to the formation of what we now know as the Marion E. Wade Center. So few will be surprised that Kilby's

colleagues associated his thoughts about art and imagination with his overseas interlocutor: C. S. Lewis.

Kilby's remarks, delivered as he looked back on more than thirty years of teaching at the college, appeared in the *Faculty Bulletin* under the provocative title, "The Aesthetic Poverty of Evangelicalism." The essay focuses squarely on what he deems a lack of imagination among Christians in matters of faith. An "evangelical skittishness toward imagination" led to impoverished readings of the Bible and a lack of creativity in the arts. Instead of symbols, figures, and parables, preachers offer little more than strange and negative moral statements that diminish the power of narrative to transform lives.

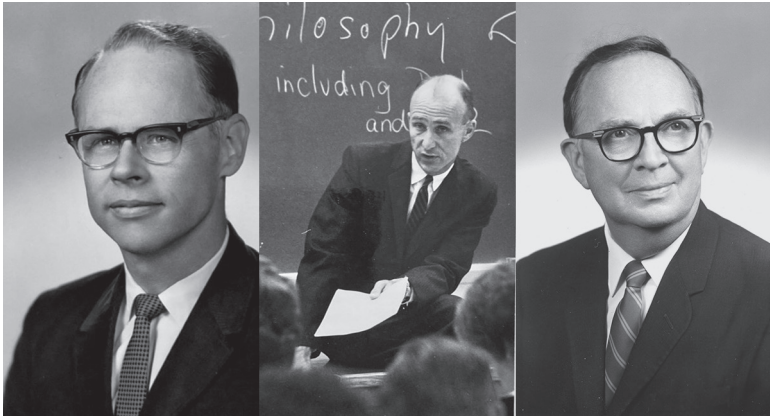
Fresh attention to aesthetics brought the possibility of renewal. Through the power of imagination, sterile faith might be exchanged for a vibrant awareness of divine mystery, for only such a path could avoid the tendency to fall into cliché, and only such a faculty can give us "the power to see" and express God's glorious ineffability.<sup>1</sup> A renewed vision of aesthetics, Kilby thought, wasn't the safe choice. It was the right one: "You can no more remove the danger from Christianity than you can remove the danger from water, food, light, and love."<sup>2</sup>

While Kilby's essay refers to many significant literary figures—John Milton, Robert Frost, John Donne, among others—there is no mention of Lewis at all. Yet many of Kilby's peers seemed to detect the influence of Lewis behind it all, so it is no exaggeration to suggest that his indictment was understood by many as simultaneously a defense of Lewis. In fact, Kilby's initial paper drew multiple responses in what might be described as a tribunal focused on Lewis's reputation as an orthodox exponent of Christian doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup>Clyde S. Kilby, "The Aesthetic Poverty of Evangelicalism," *Faculty Bulletin* 31, no. 1 (1967): 9.  
<sup>2</sup>Kilby, "Aesthetic Poverty," 6.

“The trial of C. S. Lewis” can hardly be imagined today. As Mark Noll (my immediate predecessor in the Ken and Jean Hansen Lectureship series) has already explained, C. S. Lewis’s earliest reception among North American Christians was mixed, but after a tepid response in some circles, his readership steadily expanded among not only Roman Catholics but also Protestants generally. Nevertheless, one can be forgiven for thinking that members of Wheaton College surely had never suffered *any* doubts about Lewis at all—and certainly not in the years immediately after his death—but this is simply not the case. In fact, the most damning charge against Lewis at Wheaton in the 1960s focused on his relationship to the subject of this book. For Lewis was branded a proponent of none other than “the Romantic trend in religion” that some thought had imperiled the historic Christian faith.



**Figure 1.1.** Morris Inch, Arthur Holmes, and Clyde S. Kilby

The originator of this startling charge against Lewis came in an essay by a Bible and apologetics professor at the college named Morris Inch.<sup>3</sup> While in his essay Professor Inch compliments Kilby for his “outstanding contribution” to the community, he also explains that

<sup>3</sup>From the fall 1969 semester, Inch began serving as chair of the Bible Department at Wheaton College.

Kilby's attention to religious epistemology is marked by an acquiescence to a dangerous and outmoded vision of God and humanity alike: "Dr. Kilby rightly warns us against Bibliolatry—the worship of the letter, but seems to leave us vulnerable to idolatry—worship of the profane. His demand for artistic sensitivity needs to be heard and implemented, but the implied flight into an emotive limbo must be contested, if not in the name of Christianity, at least in that of sanity."<sup>4</sup>

What was the heart of Morris Inch's concern? He feared that Clyde Kilby risked a misguided, dangerous Romantic epistemology—in his view, a theory of human knowing that replaced objective fact with subjective feeling. Inch describes the Romantic movement at some length, calling it "more of a mood than a creed, a rejection of the classical norms in literature and art, and an attack on eighteenth-century rationalism. It pled for a return to the natural instincts, to individual predilection, and to creative spontaneity. It looked at life through the eyes of wonder, and glorified the mystery of nature."<sup>5</sup>

If Inch's definition seems rather innocuous to our ears today, his readers surely perceived the objectionable tenor of his claim, for he proceeded to explain that none other than Friedrich Schleiermacher was the "great champion" of Romanticism. In Schleiermacher, the Christian faith had succumbed to a damaging liberalism that threatened true doctrine. Romantics valued emotion rather than reason, navel-gazing introspection over submission to objective facts, and immanence instead of transcendence.

By associating Kilby with Schleiermacher, Inch had already muddied the waters. This was midcentury Wheaton, where

<sup>4</sup>Morris Inch, "Shades of Schleiermacher?," *Faculty Bulletin* 31, no. 1 (1967): 32.

<sup>5</sup>Inch, "Shades of Schleiermacher?," 29. Inch's definition brings to mind two recent works: Kristen Page, *The Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth*, Hansen Lectureship Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), and Jeffrey W. Barbeau and Emily Hunter McGowin, eds., *God and Wonder: Theology, Imagination, and the Arts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022).

evangelicals were in the process of distinguishing themselves from the fundamentalist culture wars through the likes of *Christianity Today* and Billy Graham. Inch acknowledged as much, recognizing that contemporary evangelicalism was heir to both the “heroic stand for Christian orthodoxy” that those fundamentalist leaders assumed and the “cultural neurosis which developed in its wake.”<sup>6</sup>

Professor Inch knew that he was already making an unwelcome claim in associating Kilby’s views with the father of modern liberal theology, but instead of stepping delicately around the insinuation, Inch doubled down: “A more recent illustration of the Romantic trend in religion is that of C. S. Lewis.”<sup>7</sup> At this point, Inch makes clear that he is fully aware of the gravity of his charge. He has thrown down the gauntlet, implicating both Kilby and Lewis with Schleiermacher. Then, Inch cautiously proceeds: “Some will be horrified to hear me mention Lewis in the same breath with the ‘father of modern theological liberalism.’” This was indeed a damning charge, but, having come so far, he would not be dissuaded. “I do,” he declares, “and for good reason.” For Inch, while Lewis affirms orthodox Christian doctrine, his methodology and epistemology share the defective traits of Schleiermacher’s Romanticism. Inch’s final judgment is catastrophic: Lewis was a great apologist, but his understanding of biblical authority, theological anthropology, and doctrine of God are all utterly calamitous.

One year later, the *Faculty Bulletin* published a detailed rejoinder to Inch’s critique of Kilby. The article, titled “The Romantic Heresy,” was written by J. Randall Springer, a graduate student who was soon to complete a master’s thesis on C. S. Lewis at the college.<sup>8</sup> From the outset, Springer admits that while his essay focuses on

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<sup>6</sup>Inch, “Shades of Schleiermacher?,” 27.

<sup>7</sup>Inch, “Shades of Schleiermacher?,” 29.

<sup>8</sup>J. Randall Springer, “‘Beyond Personality’: C. S. Lewis’ Concept of ‘God’ (Wheaton, IL: MA thesis, 1969). Springer later completed a PhD in philosophy at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (1972) before teaching as a faculty member at Westmont College.

Lewis, he regards his contribution to the debate equally as a defense and “vindication” of Kilby.<sup>9</sup> Springer maintains that most of Inch’s charges against Lewis are misguided. At the heart of Springer’s argument is a subtle distinction between objective truth and the creative means whereby an individual might express such ideas. Springer writes, “Nothing could be further from Lewis’s mind than the Subjectivism of Schleiermacher,” for “Man’s values must be derived ultimately not from within himself, his own ‘experience’ or ‘feeling,’ but from without.”<sup>10</sup> Lewis, in Springer’s account, is a rationalist, his epistemology is orthodox, and any sign of Romanticism in his writing is little more than “a reaction against the positivism and scientism which we all equally repudiate.”<sup>11</sup>

I suspect that Kilby, Inch, and Springer each recognized something in Lewis that remains relevant to understanding his works today. What is the role of what might be called the “subjective” in the thought of C. S. Lewis? While many of Lewis’s readers favor his emphasis on the “objective” or rational aspect of his works, I think Professor Inch’s critique is not so easily dismissed, even if I don’t entirely agree with either his unmitigated condemnation of Romanticism or Springer’s naming this tradition the “Romantic heresy.”

I think many readers intuit in Lewis’s writings something they cannot quite identify—an instinct about Lewis and the ways he appeals to conscience, feelings, and the interior life that asks us to reexamine the role of the subjective in his religious epistemology. Such an emphasis appears throughout many of Lewis’s works, but in this chapter I will focus on two of his most beloved nonfiction compositions: *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*. My investigation will necessarily take us back to Schleiermacher and the German Romantics, but I will devote far more of my attention to

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<sup>9</sup>J. Randall Springer, “The Romantic Heresy,” *Faculty Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (1968): 18.

<sup>10</sup>Springer, “Romantic Heresy,” 20.

<sup>11</sup>Springer, “Romantic Heresy,” 22.

the British Romantics that Lewis studied with unceasing interest over the course of his entire life. Through an examination of Lewis’s works and his engagement with modern thought, we might begin to see just how significant the influence of Romanticism was for Lewis’s life and writings.

### THE LAW OF HUMAN NATURE

Perhaps Morris Inch had *Mere Christianity* in mind when he made his disquieting charge. Among the most well-known books in English in the twentieth century, first published as a single text in 1952, *Mere Christianity* began as a series of radio talks between 1942 and 1945. Yet this renowned work displays precisely the sort of emotive rhetoric that leads some to ponder Lewis’s method.

Notice the opening line of his opening talk: “Every one has heard people quarrelling.”<sup>12</sup> Lewis begins in a rather strange place for a series of lectures on “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.” The chapter, titled “The Law of Human Nature,” resonates with readers because Lewis begins precisely with that which some of Lewis’s contemporaries would rather he exclude, namely, individual human experience. Instead of identifying a philosophical principle of the good or the true, Lewis starts with the familiar occurrence of arguing with another person. Not only has everyone heard others engaged in such verbal bouts, but everyone also has participated in just such brawls. “It’s my turn, not yours!” “You wouldn’t like it if I broke your favorite mug!” “Didn’t we agree to clean this up together?”

Lewis’s purpose in drawing his readers’ attention to such language is to demonstrate the existence of a law that is shared by all people, in all places, at all times. Lewis’s moral canon works precisely because it is not only known by all *intellectually* but also felt

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<sup>12</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 1.

by all *personally*. His examples thereby serve as reminders of a connection between what we sometimes call the subjective and objective. Note well: Lewis does not begin with the affirmation of a knowledge taught only in the Scriptures and available to a few but with an appeal to a universal experience of individual morality (whatever exceptions might be found in the population as a whole).

Notice, too, that Lewis makes clear that the law of human nature is not the same as something so unswerving and unalterable as the law of gravitation.<sup>13</sup> This is neither a fact of nature—such that humans must always and necessarily behave in a particular manner—nor some inventive fancy. Human nature is the result of neither intellection nor appetite. The law of right and wrong results from some third aspect that dictates human behavior: “a moral law, which they did not make, and cannot quite forget even when they try.”<sup>14</sup>

Lewis later identifies this sense of the moral law as *conscience*. For Lewis, the notion implies both a consciousness of *something* within human nature and a *someone* “inside ourselves as an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way.”<sup>15</sup> Here, at the crossroads of a law we feel compelled to meet and a mind behind that law we know we ought to obey, Lewis grounds his case for the personal God described by Christianity.

The question I wish to ask is why Lewis begins his case for Christianity with an appeal to personal experience. And I think an additional question that might be posed is why his defense of Christianity was so successful among his listeners and readers. The answer to these questions, I suspect, lies in several different but related movements within modern thought—movements that I think Lewis was more aware of than some scholars admit.

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<sup>13</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 20.

<sup>14</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 23.

<sup>15</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24.

First, I ought to clear up a bugbear that has plagued Lewis’s reputation for decades. How many times have I heard it said that Lewis was *not* a theologian? In truth, I myself have said it more than once. Yet, as I began to prepare for my lectures on “C. S. Lewis and the Romantic Imagination,” after many years away from his works, I found myself startled by just how attuned he seems to be to both ancient and modern theological and philosophical discourse. As I began to read his unpublished marginalia—carefully examining inscriptions appearing in many of the twenty-five hundred books in his personal library held by the Marion E. Wade Center—I realized that Lewis’s knowledge of theology and philosophy exceeded what most readers imagine. Lewis was no mere dilettante, however often he protested the suggestion that he was an expert in such matters.

In fact, I think we ought to be wary of trusting Lewis’s bald-faced statements about his own inexpertness too much. To adapt an old adage of writing: distrust what Lewis *tells* you; believe what he *shows* you. As we will see at several points in these chapters, Lewis’s tendency to self-deprecation is a rhetorical technique that allows an Oxford scholar to appear as something of an everyman. He can *tell* us that he writes and speaks as an amateur, but the record of his reading and his delicate handling of complex theological and philosophical concepts often *shows* a different reality. One need only examine Lewis’s careful notation of Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics* in Latin or his close reading of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* to recognize that he was not, strictly speaking, an amateur.

Lewis’s literary gift is the remarkable ability to take complicated ideas and make them accessible to a wide audience. This explains quite a lot, for Lewis knew the needs of his audience and wrote with an acute sense of how people really think. In the lectures that make up *Mere Christianity*, Lewis offers a defense of Anglican theology that speaks to a people shellshocked by the advent of war—a war he knew well and personally suffered from

only two decades earlier. This twin awareness—of the intellectual traditions of the times and the existential crisis of the moment—made Lewis peculiarly equipped for the task he assumes in *Mere Christianity*.

### A TASTE FOR THE INFINITE

To understand why reference to Schleiermacher and the tradition that follows him worried Inch, a bit of background may be helpful. For the theologian, Lewis's apologetic gambit in favor of subjectivity makes perfect sense in light of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophy and theology. While Lewis was not an authority, he was proficient enough to understand recent shifts in the literature. During the prior century, Friedrich Schleiermacher had offered one of the most influential defenses of Christianity in the modern world. In *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), Schleiermacher addressed a population increasingly wary of Christianity and religious truth

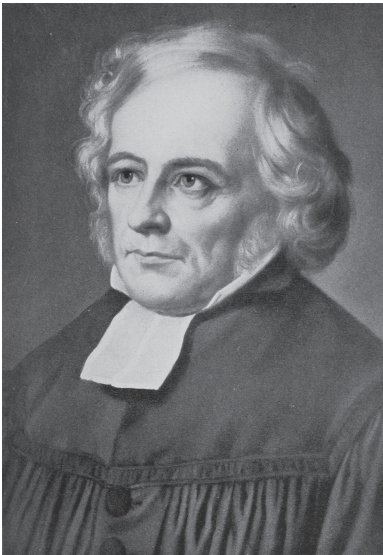


Figure 1.2. Friedrich Schleiermacher

claims generally. Raised in the home of a Prussian military chaplain and trained in Moravian schools before attending the pietist University of Halle, Schleiermacher defended the Christian faith as something far more personal than either right doctrine or ethics alone.

Decisively, in a sign of the times, Schleiermacher addressed his listeners in the language of broad religious need, describing “true religion” as a

“sense and taste for the infinite.”<sup>16</sup> In a move against what he perceived around him—a growing tendency toward a cold, rationalist faith—Schleiermacher thought the essence of all religious life was not intellectual attainment or strictly moral action but something deep-seated within the human heart. Religious faith, he explains, “wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overthrow the universe’s own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe’s immediate influences in childlike passivity.”<sup>17</sup>

In his monumental *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher describes this as “the feeling of absolute dependence” that points the individual to God.<sup>18</sup> This means that religious feeling, far from being an unreliable source of knowledge, is at the heart of human understanding of the divine. Religious intuition reflects the “influence of the intuited on the one who intuit.”<sup>19</sup> In this, subjectivity points not to subjectivism but to the universal experience of sin and, consequently, the need for redemption.

In fact, though not identical, Schleiermacher and Lewis each make an argument that depends on the notion that something identifiable is happening *within* us that draws us into a knowledge of the God who is also *beyond* us. Schleiermacher describes this as a process in which the finite consciousness becomes aware of “the intuited one” in the universe. Lewis names this as a someone “inside ourselves” who tries to get us to recognize that which lies outside us. So, in a very powerful way, Lewis is admitting that part of what might convince someone to believe in God is the strange feeling that we all have a need for something beyond ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. and ed. Richard Crouter, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23.

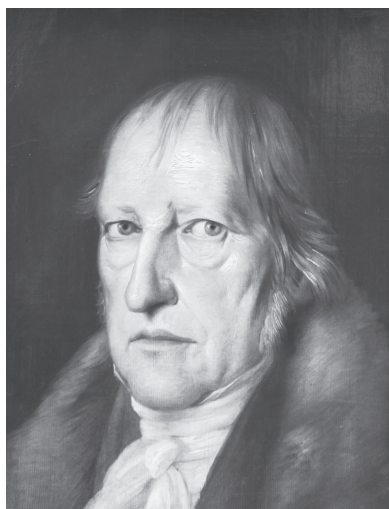
<sup>17</sup>Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 23.

<sup>18</sup>F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 26.

<sup>19</sup>Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 24.

<sup>20</sup>On Schleiermacher, see also Lewis’s marginalia in his personal copy of Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays: A Supplement to “The Idea of the Holy,”* trans. Brian Lunn (London:

Schleiermacher's influential theological vision shaped modern Christian thought throughout the nineteenth century, but he shared his dominion with an intellectual giant who was also one of his colleagues at the University of Berlin. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel rejected Schleiermacher's approach to religion as a "feeling of absolute dependence," calling the *Speeches* a "virtuoso of edification and enthusiasm."<sup>21</sup> The wording of Hegel's critique is telling. Unlike Schleiermacher, Hegel found such an emphasis on feeling and



**Figure 1.3.** Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

consciousness destabilizing and self-alienating: "There is nothing that cannot be felt and is not felt. God, truth, and duty are felt, as are evil, falsehood, and wrong. All human states and relationships are felt; all representations of one's own relationship to spiritual and natural things become feelings."<sup>22</sup>

For Hegel, ideas about God and freedom are an objective content that do not depend on the whimsy of individual opinion. Instead, Hegel theorized a new consciousness of the Absolute that emerges in that which the incarnation of Jesus Christ represents, namely, the manifestation of God in the world.<sup>23</sup> Hegel's

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Oxford University Press, 1931), 72 and verso of rear free endpaper (C. S. Lewis Library collection, Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Hereafter, "Wade" © copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd. Used by permission).

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 1:117.

<sup>22</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, "Foreword to Hinrich's *Religion* (1822)," in *G. W. F. Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 166-67.

<sup>23</sup>On Hegel's concept of Christianity, see Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 1:117-27.

idealism translates Christian doctrine into strikingly philosophical terms, leaving the concrete historical events of the incarnation in a position of only secondary importance. For Hegel, Christianity thereby articulates the real goal of history as the union of finite and infinite. Such a union occurs in the current age as individuals engage in acts of self-abdication, surrendering to the kingdom of the Spirit.

Lewis knew the challenge of even understanding Hegel: he once compared his own incapacity to lecture during severe illness to “a Lecture on Hegel from a drunk man.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, more seriously, Lewis feared that Hegel’s thought led only to a pantheistic identification between God and the world. This, he believed, was the state of mind most people would slip into on their own. In religion, Lewis believed such a view shared more with Hinduism than Christianity, since the latter is the only significant alternative to pantheism.<sup>25</sup> But when pressed on the matter, Lewis admitted to one correspondent that his own views were likely shaped as much if not more by Hegel’s interpreters than by the writings of the man, since few interpreters seemed to agree on Hegel’s real meaning.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the most incisive developments to the problem of conscience after Schleiermacher and Hegel appear in what has become known as “left-wing Hegelianism.” Although several philosophers and theologians belong to this tradition, including demythologist David Friedrich Strauss, one of the most fateful developments of Hegelian philosophy appears in the writings of his erstwhile student at Berlin, Ludwig Feuerbach. The varied conceptions of self-consciousness that Schleiermacher and Hegel each theorized in defense of Christian faith become in Feuerbach the basis of one of modern theology’s severest critiques.

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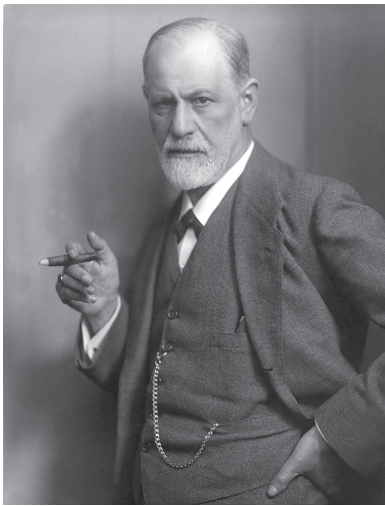
<sup>24</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harper-Collins, 2004-2007), 3:1442 (July 15, 1963); hereafter *CLCSL*.

<sup>25</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 132.

<sup>26</sup>*CLCSL* 3:1388 (December 8, 1962).

In his landmark publication, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach maintained that Hegel’s vindication of Christianity (even in starkly modern terms) falls short since any discussion of human consciousness of an “other” points not to the existence of God but only to the existence of the self: “In the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself; consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man.”<sup>27</sup> Such a shift also implicates Schleiermacher: the feeling of the Absolute really amounts to little more than the projection of the self as other. Consciousness is not the perception of God or Absolute Spirit but only the “I” supposed as a “thou.” Faith, in such a view, is little more than a function of human psychology.

Feuerbach’s materialism was the most devastating critique of Christianity since David Hume’s naturalist empiricism. For some, such a projection of the self makes suspect all religious truth claims as little more than illusory wish-fulfillment (as for Sigmund



**Figure 1.4.** Sigmund Freud

Freud). Alternately, the self as other only provides a means of coping with economic and political alienation (as for Karl Marx). Lewis rejected these ideas as inadequate and misleading, for they fail to take account of how Christian doctrine and practice often run counter to self-interest.

Still, one might reasonably ask whether Lewis really had nineteenth-century theology and philosophy in view—from

<sup>27</sup>Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amhurst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), 5.

Schleiermacher to left-wing Hegelianism—when he opened his lectures in *Mere Christianity*. As even a few examples can easily illustrate, such an appeal to self-consciousness and moral experience is certainly not foreign to the Christian tradition. Augustine’s opening meditation in the *Confessions* involves a deep sense of self-knowledge that leads him from restlessness in sin to peace in God. Later, Anselm’s ontological

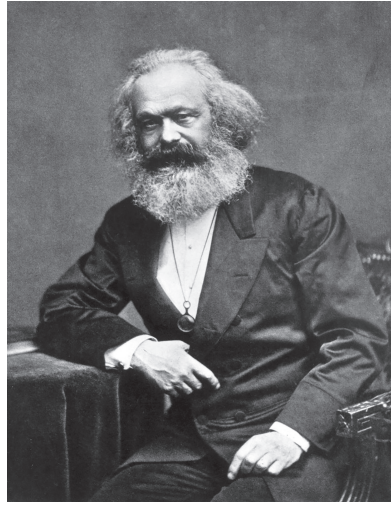


Figure 1.5. Karl Marx

argument for the existence of God depended on the supposition of the divine as the realization of the highest conception of being. Even John Calvin’s *Institutes* looks to the interior self, beginning with the inward-looking gaze that shifts abruptly from the self to God when faced with the reality of sin. Certainly, Lewis’s appeal to self-consciousness and the interior life belongs to a longer tradition of reflection on the relationship between knowledge of God and the self.

I must admit that, for some time, I was unsure about Lewis’s intellectual debts in his appeal to individual conscience in *Mere Christianity* and elsewhere. I had no doubt that Lewis was aware of modern philosophy, but I remained skeptical. Then I discovered a book in C. S. Lewis’s own library that corroborates what I had never previously been able to confirm. In his copy of Friedrich von Hügel’s *Essays & Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion* (1928), Lewis notes a history of nineteenth-century materialism that verifies his familiarity with this intellectual history. Breaking with his frequent practice of limiting handwritten notes to direct underlining, marginal lines,

or summary comments, Lewis's personal copy includes a detailed sketch of the nineteenth-century Hegelian tradition.

In the chapter "Religion and Illusion," von Hügel makes a statement that Lewis identifies as potentially confusing, claiming that the subject requires attention to none other than Ludwig Feuerbach: "I want to take the problem, not according to any formulation of my own, but in the combination of remarkable psychological penetration, of rare knowledge throughout large reaches of the religious consciousness, and of sceptical assumptions and passion presented by Ludwig Feuerbach, in by far his greatest work, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*."<sup>28</sup> At this point in the text, Lewis adds his own footnote, directing the reader to weigh this statement carefully: "To the English reader this seems a very odd person to select as a representative."<sup>29</sup> He then points readers to a later page in the same book.

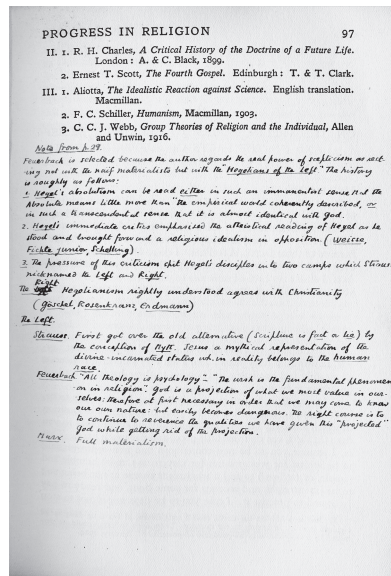
Turning to the later passage, the reader discovers a precis in Lewis's own handwriting at the close of a chapter "Progress in Religion" (figure 1.6). Referring back to the prior page, Lewis traces the intellectual history of Hegelianism with specific attention to Feuerbach: "Feuerbach is selected because the author regards the real power of scepticism as resting not with the naïf materialists but with the 'Hegelians of the Left.'" He then highlights a series of steps, beginning with an explanation of two schools of thought: "Hegel's absolutism can be read either in such an immanentist sense that the Absolute means little more than 'the empirical world coherently described,' or in such a transcendental sense that it is almost identical with God." The immediate response to Hegel, Lewis claims, was an "atheistical reading" that brought about a philosophy of religious idealism in two camps. Right-wing Hegelianism "rightly understood

<sup>28</sup>Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays & Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1928), 29.

<sup>29</sup>Marginalia by C. S. Lewis in von Hügel, *Essays & Addresses*, 29 (C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade).

agrees with Christianity.”<sup>30</sup> The left wing includes Strauss, who relied on myth to bypass debates about Scriptures as “fact or lie,” and Feuerbach, who claimed, “All theology is psychology” and “the wish is the fundamental phenomenon in religion.” Lewis continues, briskly summarizing his understanding of Feuerbach’s thought: “God is a projection of what we most value in ourselves: therefore at first necessary in order that we may come to know our own nature: but easily becomes dangerous. The right course is to to [*sic*] continue to reverence the qualities we have given this ‘projected’ God while getting rid of the projection.” Lewis concludes his exercise with a final stage in the history: “Marx. Full materialism.”<sup>31</sup>

These previously unpublished marginalia provide insight into what may be driving Lewis’s rhetoric in books such as *Mere Christianity*. While his published works include only passing reference to German philosophers such as Hegel, his private marginalia indicate a keen attentiveness to recent developments in continental philosophy and theology—developments that had made a public defense of Christianity peculiarly challenging in the middle of the twentieth century. Feuerbach was still



**Figure 1.6.** Marginalia by C. S. Lewis in Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays & Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion*

<sup>30</sup>Here, Lewis specifically mentions the work of Karl Friedrich Göschel (1784–1861), Karl Rosenkranz (1805–1879), and Johann Eduard Erdmann (1805–1892).

<sup>31</sup>Marginalia by C. S. Lewis, in von Hügel, *Essays & Addresses*, 97 (C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade).

relatively unknown among many English readers, but for the Christian apologist his work on subjectivity shapes the possibilities and limits of arguments from conscience.

### ALONE IN THE DESERT

When Lewis begins *Mere Christianity* with an appeal to the law of right and wrong, he does so because he recognizes something about his audience that we might overlook. Part of this harks back to the thorny nineteenth-century debates about subjectivity and objectivity that I have just traced. However, the German philosophical tradition is only part of the story. Lewis knows that his listeners will find the argument from morality convincing because he knows that arguments from personal experience are also powerful in the English theological tradition.

Understanding this background may clarify what appears to be a contradiction in terms at the commencement of the fourth section of *Mere Christianity*: “Beyond Personality: or First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity.” In what I regard as among the most compelling passages in the entire work, Lewis compares Christianity to a map of the ocean, offering a remarkable explanation about the relationship between personal experience and the truths of faith. Here, Lewis cautions against the error of subjectivity, even as he affirms religious experience as profoundly meaningful.<sup>32</sup>

The passage begins with one of those characteristic remarks that Lewis uses to redirect his readers. He shrewdly suggests that some think he ought not tell them about theology—but he will do it anyway. Instead of treating his readers as children, he will give them the mature insights that he believes they really desire. This is Lewis at his best: disarming readers by reminding them that they are too sophisticated to follow their own, baser instincts.

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<sup>32</sup>Consider Kathleen Norris’s description of *Mere Christianity* as a book that advances not a philosophy but a life, alluding to a similar remark in Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* (1825). (See the foreword in *Mere Christianity*, xix.)

Lewis then tells the story of the hard-bitten officer.<sup>33</sup> A member of the Royal Air Force, the man interrupts Lewis—seemingly mid-sentence during a lecture at an otherwise staid event—to say that any talk of theology is a distraction from a genuine, personal experience of God. He doesn’t require dogma or doctrine. He’s felt God himself “out alone in the desert at night: the tremendous mystery.”<sup>34</sup> This man claims to know a truth that many in the church seem to ignore. Christian doctrine is stale and rigid when compared to the real thing. Creeds and formularies make an organized religion, but the one who really knows God recognizes all that as little more than a pale imitation. Theology is forgery. Counterfeit beliefs stand in the place of enigmatic power.

Disarming his readers yet again, Lewis immediately affirms the hard-bitten officer’s experience. His was indeed a real, experiential knowledge of God compared to which formulaic statements of historic Christianity offer little more than insipid impersonation. But—and here’s the rub—Lewis thinks something similar is in play when an individual turns from the experience of swimming in the ocean to a map of an ocean designed for maritime navigation. Suddenly the cool water, splashing waves, and salt-filled air are nullified in solid lines and static colors that diminish the effervescence of the real thing. Unlike our experiences of the seas, however, maps collate many different perspectives, fitting them in a single, accessible portrait.

In this, Lewis is careful not to deny the power of the personal. Instead, he situates it, contextualizes it, and corrects our misunderstanding of its limits. Sources of knowledge such as the Bible and the creeds are both “less real” and “less exciting” than experience, but they have the capacity to move beyond the elementary and myopic notions that sometimes mislead us. In other words, maps allow us to correct course. If religion by experience alone risks

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<sup>33</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 153-55.

<sup>34</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 153.

yielding only a vague creed “all about feeling God in nature, and so on,” then maps allow us to discover how it is that the joys of a scenic landscape might draw us into the riches of historic Christian faith.<sup>35</sup>

### REVOLUTIONARY POETICS

Here we encounter a second—and even more powerful—stream of influence that shaped C. S. Lewis’s understanding of the Christian faith: the British Romantic movement. On the Continent, Romanticism produced a wide-ranging literature that gave fresh, if disparate, emphasis to feeling, experience, and intuition in writings by authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Novalis, and Heinrich Heine in Germany and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and François-René de Chateaubriand in France. This is the same European Romanticism within which Schleiermacher wrote his defense of Christianity and to which Hegel and his disciples eventually responded. Meanwhile, in Britain, Romanticism found its own adherents in writers who offered new perspectives on poetry and poetics in a time of political revolution and reform.

Lewis knew British Romantic literature very well indeed. His own relationship to the ideas of the British Romantics is complex and will be a subject for closer treatment in the next chapter, but for the moment we must trace at least the outlines of his engagement with this unique group of authors who shaped English literature between the late 1780s and the early 1830s. In fact, throughout his published and unpublished writings, references to Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, William Blake, and many other Romantic-era authors abound. Some allusions to their works are

<sup>35</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 155. A further discussion of the role of experience in Lewis might examine the notion of “numinous” religious experiences, described in Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (Eng. trans., 1923) and *Religious Essays*, which Lewis annotated and linked to Schleiermacher in a personal index (see C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade); cf. David Werther and Susan Werther, eds., *C. S. Lewis’s List: The Ten Books That Influenced Him Most* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

obvious, while in other cases he throws a veil over his sources as if to obscure an influence.

Lewis’s earliest acquaintance with the British Romantics came during his time as a student. As a professor, he recommended that students read and obtain as many of the great, “long” authors as possible: “as much reading and book-buying as you can possibly afford without getting tired or bankrupt,” he told one correspondent.<sup>36</sup> His list of essential authors for the serious student includes many Romantic-era notables—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley—and some who were favorites in his own library, such as Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, and Jane Austen.<sup>37</sup> Not all were equal in his eyes, of course; at the close of Byron’s *Don Juan*, Lewis memorably quipped, “Never again!”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, these were authors he read and reread (including Byron), and they crucially shaped Lewis’s thinking about language, literature, and faith.

Two English Romantics stand out for special notice: William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). Best known for the poetic experiment that resulted in the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), their work remains a watershed contribution to the movement, arising from the *annus mirabilis*, the year of wonders, between 1797 and 1798, when their collaboration produced some of the best-loved poems ever written in the English language. During this remarkably productive period, these young men (alongside Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy) rambled across the Quantock Hills of England’s West Country and produced the work that first introduced English readers to an abandoned abbey, an albatross-laden mariner, and the strange sight of

<sup>36</sup>CLCSL 3.1571 (July 8, 1947).

<sup>37</sup>CLCSL 3.1571 (July 8, 1947).

<sup>38</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Boston: Mariner, 2012), 214; cf. Lewis’s personal library copy, which allows us to date his reading to February 1924: Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: J. Murray, 1906), 612 (C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade).

a wretched woman mourning by an old thorn bush. These were radical poets in tumultuous times—a season of revolution and change when war with France, the rise of Napoleon, terror, dissent, and political and religious strife reoriented the cultural landscape.



**Figure 1.7.** William Wordsworth

nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.”<sup>39</sup> Such poetic activity depends on feeling, for poetry itself is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” and the poet’s work is “to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes.”<sup>40</sup>

The poetic emphasis on feeling corresponds to a revitalized philosophy of the artistic imagination. In past centuries, imagination often suffered under a cloud of suspicion. The apostle Paul had warned against “every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:5), and many in the tradition feared

Not only in their poetry but also in their prose, Wordsworth and Coleridge signaled the new poetic sensibility with a depth of focus on feeling and imagination in the arts. When Wordsworth later wrote of their aims in the preface to the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he fostered the idea of a poet as “a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human

<sup>39</sup>William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose*, Norton critical ed., ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2014), 85.

<sup>40</sup>Wordsworth, “Preface,” 92, 86.

the potential for self-deception in the unfettered delusion that imaginative activity could so easily generate.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, British Romantics picked up on German philosophical developments to adopt a more positive assessment of the imagination, likening the creative work of the artist to the creativity of God.

Coleridge famously defined the primary and secondary senses of imagination in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), distinguishing between the creative perceptivity of the primary imagination—“a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation”—and the willed creativity of the secondary imagination: “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.”<sup>42</sup> Such a definition drew deep from the Neoplatonic wells of the Christian tradition, likening the vocation of the artist to the operations of the divine in the formation of all creation.

Lewis studied Wordsworth and Coleridge intensely during his earliest years as a student, and they remained steadfast companions throughout his life. At first, he seems to have disliked Wordsworth’s poetry, but by age twenty, he reported to Arthur



**Figure 1.8.** Samuel Taylor Coleridge

<sup>41</sup>For a review and defense of the theological imagination, see my “A Theology of Imagination,” in Barbeau and McGowin, *God and Wonder*, 13-29.

<sup>42</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1.304.

Greeves of a gradual change of heart. He had read Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, and discovered with unexpected delight his enjoyment: "You will perhaps be surprised to hear that I am reading 'The Prelude' by way of graduating in Wordsworth-ism. What's even funnier, I rather like it!"<sup>43</sup>

The youthful Lewis comes off a bit smug in his earliest appraisal of Wordsworth, judging the poet with unflappable, youthful conviction. Over time, however, this attitude changed significantly. In fact, his "graduating in Wordsworth-ism" corresponded to a deeper longing to write poetry of his own. On the blank pages at the back of Lewis's personal copy of *The Shorter Poems of William Wordsworth* (1917), he even tried his hand at writing lines that meditate on death:

Death has called to heel  
 All sound: cut short the thunder in mid peel  
 Laid dumbness upon every tongue: the shout  
 Of millions like a puff'd flame is gone out  
 Follows the darkness closing like a chest,  
 No light, no sound, no thought, impartial rest  
 For each frayed sense. Oh never any more  
 Will cockcrow + reveille at their door  
 Come stirring. No hard duty shall have power  
 Forever to break on them for one hour<sup>44</sup>

These previously unknown and unpublished lines—thematically reminiscent of World War I poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen—personify Death as a master calling brute creation to obeisance. Death hems in the soldiers, encircling them within the darkness. Written in a somewhat uneven iambic pentameter

<sup>43</sup>CLCSL 1.466 (to Arthur Greeves, September 18, 1919).

<sup>44</sup>Marginalia by C. S. Lewis, in William Wordsworth, *The Shorter Poems of William Wordsworth: Poetry and Drama*, Everyman's Library (London: Dent & Sons, 1917), rear verso free endpaper and inside rear recto flyleaf (C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade); for a full transcription of these previously unpublished poems, see the appendix.

(a staple in Wordsworth’s poetics), the series of couplets explores grief and loss in simple, rhyming lines that reflect Lewis’s own experience of war and the haphazard destruction of life.

Whatever the literary merit of these and other lines in his marginal scrawl at the back of his copy of Wordsworth, they are an indication that the Romantics inspired and motivated Lewis’s early poetic efforts. Indeed, appreciative references to Wordsworth’s works pervade Lewis’s writing. In both published prose and personal correspondence, Wordsworth appears and reappears in Lewis’s writings, culminating in the decision to title his own autobiography after Wordsworth’s celebrated poem, “Surprised by Joy.”<sup>45</sup>

We also know that Lewis studied Coleridge’s poetry with similar care and could recall apt lines from memory throughout his life. As early as 1915, while still a teenager, Lewis mentions “Christabel” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” recommending them to Arthur Greeves, and in subsequent years refers to “Kubla Khan,” “Christabel,” and other works regularly.<sup>46</sup> Lewis even documents how, during his first meeting with W. B. Yeats, a reference to Coleridge came to mind as he sheepishly prepared to join the vigorous conversation. Lewis was overawed on the occasion—he was still in his early twenties—and Yeats had terrified the “room into silence” as he pronounced on all matter of eighteenth-century literature.<sup>47</sup> Luckily Lewis held his tongue, for Yeats disclaimed the reference to Coleridge in the strongest terms almost at the same moment Lewis hoped to introduce it. Yet, forty years later, Lewis still quoted lines from “Christabel” to comfort his American correspondent (the so-called American Lady) Mary

<sup>45</sup>Though, notably, he claimed the title was incidental to its interpretation (*CLCSL* 3.614, June 1, 1955). On the relationship between these works, see chapter two.

<sup>46</sup>*CLCSL* 1.138 (July 24, 1915), 1.460 (July 14, 1919), 1.466 (September 18, 1919), 1.538 (April 20, 1921), 1.484 (April 11, 1920).

<sup>47</sup>*CLCSL* 1.532 (March 14, 1921).

Willis Shelburne, after learning of her most recent predicament: “to be wroth with one we love / Doth work like madness in the brain.”<sup>48</sup>

The compositions of Wordsworth and Coleridge had a direct bearing on English religious life in the nineteenth century. In fact, some believed their poetry and prose had been inspired by overtly pietistic sources, leaving them open to charges of religious fanaticism (a topic I will take up in the next chapter). For now, I will only note that the emphasis on feeling and imagination in such poets brought fresh interest in the role of personal experience.

### THE SUBLIME WATERFALL

Thus far, I have established two traditions of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Romanticism with which C. S. Lewis was intimately familiar. On the one hand, the German philosophical and theological tradition after Immanuel Kant had wrestled with the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, leaving the existence of God in a state of limbo. On the other, a similar pietistic impulse led British Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge to connect the work of the poet to feeling and the creative imagination. Little more than a century after these pivotal writings, no adequate defense of Christianity could fail to grapple with the relationship between personal experience and claims of a universally accessible, “objective” truth. The foregoing account is essential for understanding one of C. S. Lewis’s most well-known and misunderstood prose works: *The Abolition of Man*.

In 1939, Lewis read a new publication by two Australian educators. The green cloth cover, perhaps symbolizing the youthful disposition of its prospective readers, enveloped a carefully constructed argument about reading and writing for students. The

<sup>48</sup>“Christabel,” lines 412-13, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1.1.496; cf. *CLCSL* 3.1203 (October 28, 1960).

so-called *Green Book*, as it is now widely known, was originally published by Alec King and Martin Ketley under the title *The Control of Language: A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing*.<sup>49</sup>

I have held Lewis’s personal copy of *The Green Book* in my own hands. While many volumes in Lewis’s library contain only scant markings—slight editorial notes, cross-references, or occasional summary observations—this slim volume includes numerous annotations, signs of his frustration and disapproval with the authors. The now infamous title is almost universally understood as the key to Lewis’s prophetic denunciation of an educational system that had replaced objective moral values with feelings alone—precisely the opposite of Professor Inch’s argument about Lewis’s worrying subjectivity!

Some have thought that Lewis’s argument in *The Abolition of Man* is altogether bewildering. For while Lewis begins the book with a rather confounding discussion of false ideas about language, readers gradually recognize that Lewis wishes to evaluate the relationship between universal moral values and personal experience. The close of his first chapter begins to signal this larger, ethical concern: “We make men without chests” but “are shocked to find traitors in our midst.”<sup>50</sup> These are fighting words for Lewis, to be sure. Yet, in case any readers have missed his point, he opens the second chapter with the strongest possible condemnation, claiming that students formed by *The Green Book* will inevitably destroy the society in which they are raised.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis contends against such a fate by advocating for the existence of objective truth. Lewis claims that all

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<sup>49</sup>Alec King and Martin Ketley, *The Control of Language: A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing* (London: Longmans, Green, 1939) (cf. Lewis’s personal copy in the C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade).

<sup>50</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 26.

<sup>51</sup>Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 27.

have access to a knowledge of universal values through what he calls the “Tao.” This “Way,” as he names it, depends not on our feelings or instincts for its existence or justification. Rather, the Tao names the universals that some traditions identify with the natural law.<sup>52</sup> The law is an innate idea and not based on deduction or argumentation. Thus, he refers in the appendix to laws ranging from beneficence, justice, and mercy to duties toward family and the wider community. For Lewis, then, the law depends not on the whimsy of individuals or the variances between communities but that which serves as the basis of all value systems that exist in any time, place, or religion.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, for all its strengths as an argument for the existence of a universal moral law, *The Abolition of Man* opens with a surprisingly confusing treatment of language, centering on a discussion of *The Green Book* and an obscure illustration from the life of Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Lewis claims that the authors of *The Green Book* (whom he identifies as “Gaius” and “Titius”) repeat the story of an encounter at a waterfall, where Coleridge met two tourists and engaged in a brief conversation. One of the tourists, overawed by the waterfall, called it “sublime,” while the other dubbed it “pretty.” Lewis explains that the authors of *The Green Book* wrongly suggest that the reason Coleridge prefers “sublime” to “pretty” comes down to Coleridge’s feelings about the waterfall. Here’s the relevant passage in *The Control of Language*:

Why did Coleridge think the one word was exactly right, and the other exactly wrong? Obviously not because the one adjective described correctly, as we say, a quality of the water or the rocks or the landscape, and the other adjective described

<sup>52</sup>Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 43.

<sup>53</sup>Notably, Lewis claims that not only the Greeks and Romans knew such things but also those in ancient Babylon and across the populations of twentieth-century Asia. Lewis was no expert in world religions, but his library provides direct evidence of his studies in the Qur’an, the Gita, and other religious philosophies.

this quality incorrectly. It is not as if the man had said “That is brown” (referring, say, to the water) and the woman (also referring to the water) had added, “Yes, it is green.” No, Coleridge thought “sublime” exactly the right word, because it was associated in his mind with the emotion he was himself feeling as he looked at the waterfall in its setting of rock and landscape; and he thought “pretty” exactly the wrong word, because it was associated with feelings quite different from those he was actually feeling at the time, and with feelings that, to his way of thinking, no sensitive person would ever have while looking at such a sight.<sup>54</sup>

King and Ketley argue that words such as *brown* and *blue* differ from *sublime* and *pretty* because the former communicate features of the thing itself (the waterfall), whereas the latter express only the feelings or emotions of the viewer (whether Coleridge’s or the tourists’).

Lewis’s marginalia in *The Control of Language* indicate that such claims leave pupils unable to name emotions, for the interior state of being is lost in favor of external realities alone. In fact, Lewis worries that such a position reduces any writing about emotion to mere propaganda. When the authors claim, “The difficulty of thinking and writing about idealism and ideals is that these words do not stand for anything definite, as the word ‘sofa’ stands for something definite,” Lewis counters: “They do when I use ‘em!”<sup>55</sup>

The opening of *The Abolition of Man* signals the deep Romanticism of Lewis. On a most basic level, the illustration is one that shows familiarity with Romantic literature—though I should note that Lewis need not have read the illustration in Coleridge to pick up on the example, for he had read and noted it in *The Control of Language*, and the authors themselves most likely derived it from

<sup>54</sup>King and Ketley, *Control of Language*, 17-18.

<sup>55</sup>Lewis marginalia in King and Ketley, *Control of Language*, 92 (C. S. Lewis Library collection, Wade).

Dorothy Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour in Scotland, A.D. 1803* (published in 1874). I am also not referring to the simple fact that the first chapter of *The Abolition of Man* contains a surprising number of references to British Romantic literature—though if the thrust of his argument was to make a case *against* Romanticism, it surely is surprising that Lewis's chapter repeatedly cites the works of not only Coleridge but also such beloved Romantics as William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Rather, a Romantic argument runs throughout *The Abolition of Man* in Lewis's insistence that our personal experiences not only matter but also correspond in a meaningful way to the world around us. While many students will find themselves roused emotionally by cultural propaganda, many more need to be roused from cold (and seemingly rational) listlessness.<sup>56</sup> Such a reality requires something of educators that Lewis feared had been lost, namely, a pedagogy of personal development. Objective reality and subjective experience may not always be congruous, but education involves formation. Students must learn to identify when their feelings are incongruous with the thing itself: "The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful."<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, Lewis's discussion of the sublime waterfall—surely an obscure reference to most of his audience—was no accident. Readers familiar with the Romantic tradition will immediately recognize that Lewis's use of the term *sublime* recalls one of the foremost controversies of British Romantic literature, namely, the relationship between the external, objective world and the internal, subjective feelings. For the Romantics, influenced by the writings of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and others, the word *sublime*

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<sup>56</sup>Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 13.

<sup>57</sup>Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 16, cf. 21.

resounds with meaning—philosophically, aesthetically, and theologically—since these authors sought to understand the relationship between the objective and subjective.

In addition to serving as a reminder of Lewis’s own indebtedness to British Romantic aesthetics, the sublime waterfall also intimates a peculiarly religious concern. For some, a sublime waterfall is one that overwhelms the viewer with its majesty or threatens personal well-being, but such a feature of the landscape might also lead to wonderment when faced with the transcendent mystery of God’s creative power. The sublime identifies our inability to name the numinous—a mystery beyond the capacity of language. Just such a power is revealed in the encounter with nature that Wordsworth describes in *The Prelude* (1805), after the poet ascended Mount Snowdon:

A meditation rose in me that night  
 Upon the lonely Mountain when the scene  
 Had passed away, and it appeared to me  
 The perfect image of a mighty Mind,  
 Of one that feeds upon infinity,  
 That is exalted by an under-presence,  
 The sense of God, or whatsoever is dim  
 Or vast in its own being . . .<sup>58</sup>

It’s not hard to see why the language of the sublime crossed easily into the language of the numinous—the mysterious language of encounter with a holy God.

In taking up the sublime at the commencement of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis thereby engages in a distinctly Romantic debate. Neither Lewis nor the Romantics before him sought to erase either universal values or personal experience. Instead, Lewis feared that

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<sup>58</sup>William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), book 13.66-73, in *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose*, 367. On Coleridge and the sublime, by comparison, see Murray J. Evans, *Coleridge’s Sublime Later Prose and Recent Theory: Kristeva, Adorno, Rancière* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

the authors of *The Green Book* risked obliterating the interior life as ephemeral when the true goal of education was to help others recognize the congruity or incongruity of the heart.

### THE LIMITS OF EXPERIENCE

When members of Wheaton College engaged in debate over C. S. Lewis, they were asking questions about the legacy of the Romantic movement itself. Appeals to the role of imagination in the pursuit of truth risked imperiling the Christian faith to the whimsy of individualism and subjectivity. When Morris Inch contested Clyde Kilby, asserting that Lewis dallied in a Romanticism with “Shades of Schleiermacher,” he appeared to have fundamentally misunderstood Lewis’s commitment to universal values. I think Inch picked up on something that is easily overlooked in Lewis’s writings, for he not only embraced the power of imagination but also recognized the vitality of the interior life as a key aspect of all human knowing.

In both *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis engages in arguments that reflect the modern temperament and disputes over the ability of the individual to perceive and understand truth. Lewis does not ignore religious feeling—he builds on it and seeks a means to correct it. Yet references to the subjective inform many of Lewis’s other works, too. For instance, in *The Screwtape Letters*, the theme appears repeatedly in letters devoted to rationality, prayer, and the temptations surrounding individual experience. Whereas in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis directly counters the traditions of left-wing Hegelianism in his efforts to undermine self-idolatry, wish-fulfillment, and a broader cultural tendency toward materialism.

Indeed, such a tendency to consider the relationship between what some Romantics called the “objective” and “subjective” reflects the most profound and pressing questions of his own life—a time when world wars and the destruction of innocents weighed heavily

on the minds of both Lewis and his contemporaries. Without the ability to appeal to personal experience, he risked speaking about faith in the language of cold rationalism. Yet without universal moral values, Lewis thought there would be no way to condemn the Germans, the Japanese, or any other power that might assert itself by military strength. In such a world, judging something good or right would amount to little more than a socially constructed feeling.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, these remain questions that face people in our day. Can I trust my own experience? How do my experiences of faith relate to those of other people? Who (or what) has the authority to challenge, correct, or augment my religious beliefs? Such perennial questions mean that any author who takes up “feeling” or “experience” or “the numinous” as a religious category—as a means of verifying belief—runs the risk of severe criticism.

Writing in a decidedly less optimistic age than his forebears, Lewis recognized the limits of arguments from experience. If apologists for experience in the nineteenth century saw new possibilities in the advancing kingdom of God, defenders of faith in the twentieth recognized the existential threat of human self-interest. Sin, seemingly forgotten in the optimism of a prior generation, now appeared as the most compelling obstacle to any unfettered experience of the divine or any wholly rational access to truth. As I will explain later, Lewis recognized this limitation and attempted to account for it.<sup>60</sup>

Lewis’s preoccupation with subjectivity is the legacy of Romanticism. That his argument turns from personal experience to the universality of an objective law is not a denial of Romanticism but

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<sup>59</sup>C. S. Lewis, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in *The Seeing Eye, and Other Selected Essays from “Christian Reflections,”* ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 101, 99-112; cf. Jean Bethke-Elshtain, “The Abolition of Man: C. S. Lewis’s Prescience Concerning Things to Come,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, 2nd ed., ed. David J. Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University Press, 2017), 77-87.

<sup>60</sup>Gilbert Meilaender, “On Moral Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, ed. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 119-31.

an extension of it. For example, many know that Coleridge appealed to the subjective in his defense of the Bible, stating that “whatever *finds* me” bears witness to its inspiration, but fewer realize that Coleridge saw the experience of such inspiration as a mirror of what might be called the “objective” truth of the Scriptures.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Lewis’s discussion of the moral law might be confused as a rejection of the interior life (the “whatever *finds* me” part of faith), but I think this is a matter of emphasis. Lewis often begins with the individual to point his readers toward the general, building on the foundation of the personal to recognize that which is beyond the personal.

Lewis’s place in the history of modern thought should be reassessed. As I have argued throughout this first chapter, C. S. Lewis was not the hostile opponent of Romanticism that he might at first glance appear. Rather, Lewis ought to be regarded as the last in a prestigious heritage. Chronologically, his life began long after the end of the Romantic movement in Britain, but Lewis’s prose writings cannot be understood without reference to their debates and interests. The Romantics were his abiding dialogue partners, and reading him as an inheritor of their legacy reshapes our understanding of his thought.

In fact, as I will show in the next two chapters, the Romantic element is one of the most compelling aspects of Lewis’s contribution to modern thought and, I think, a considerable part of his ongoing appeal to readers today. Yet Lewis’s fear about popular conceptions of Romanticism led him to prevaricate and redirect readers, always deflecting attention away from the movement when we might otherwise expect him to embrace it. In the next chapter, such discomfort appears again and again in his effort to write about his own life. Surprisingly, a rather startling anxiety surfaces as Lewis writes personally about faith and memory, leading him to make one of the most paradoxical claims in the history of modern autobiography.

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<sup>61</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 26.



## RESPONSE

*Sarah Borden*



It has been a joy both to read carefully—and then listen to—Jeffrey Barbeau’s work on C. S. Lewis’s relationship to Romanticism. His opening history tracing Wheaton College faculty responses to C. S. Lewis was illuminating (and oddly encouraging), and his account of Lewis’s engagement with German philosophy has helped open up new ways for reading Lewis; I am delighted to have learned through Dr. Barbeau’s evidence that Lewis was far more thorough in his study of the philosophers of the last centuries than at least I had been aware! Of particular interest to me, however, is the question animating Dr. Barbeau’s paper on Lewis and the “Romantic heresy”: What role do emotions play in the pursuit of truth? This is a question of profound significance and deeply relevant to both our personal and theoretical lives.

The question of the “truth of feelings” is an old one, showing up, for example, in vivid form in Augustine’s *Confessions* as he explores emotional contagion, discernment of emotional states, and the relation of feeling and knowing. Ultimately, Augustine claims that, although knowing and feeling differ, we cannot *know* rightly if we do not *love* rightly. This relationship between knowing and feeling is core to the ancient Augustinian vision—and it is a vision that has been lost in much of our contemporary world.

There is a long story that could be told about how knowledge and truth got separated from our feelings and emotions, and Dr. Barbeau points to several pieces of this story with the European Enlightenment and the German Romantic response. But, even more importantly, Jeffrey Barbeau paints a portrait of Lewis as an Augustinian on this point and perhaps even a significant figure in

retrieving that ancient Christian vision. Dr. Barbeau argues that C. S. Lewis neither embraces emotions as simply a way to capture attention or give color to his claims (as J. Randall Springer argues in his “defense” of Lewis), nor appeals to emotions in a way that will ultimately compromise one’s pursuit of what is true (as Morris Inch fears). Rather, Lewis is, on the issue of emotions, truly working with and helping retrieve the older Augustinian vision that our knowing and our loving work in tandem.

This project is both deeply exciting and timely, and I would like to offer a small contribution to Dr. Barbeau’s way of reading Lewis. Dr. Barbeau tells the story of Lewis’s engagement with emotions and truth by placing Lewis within conversations: first, on the European continent, including Hegelian notions of the progress of reason, Feuerbachian reductions of religious feelings to human psychology, and a Schleiermacherian retrieval of the Romantic tradition for theological conversations; then, second, with the British Romantics, including particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge. I suspect Dr. Barbeau is exactly right to focus on each of these two intersecting lines. In these brief comments, however, I would like to pause for just a bit longer with the European philosophical conversations.

There are at least three developments in the German conversations on knowledge and emotions, especially as developed by the twentieth-century German phenomenologists, that fit particularly well with themes in Lewis’s way of working out his “Augustinian answer.” These are, first, concerns that the very language of subjectivity and objectivity that has become dominant in modernity have contributed to a crisis in our ability to think well about truth; second, that there are paths forward for articulating better models, including greater focus on emotions themselves and attention to intersubjectivity. Both of these paths are ones taken by Lewis, and putting him into greater conversation with those emphases in phenomenology may prove productive. Finally, I would like to raise a

brief caution, one that both Augustine and Lewis were well aware of and that should be part of any substantive engagement with questions of truth and emotions.

## A WORD

First, a word on terms to use: Dr. Barbeau draws from language common throughout modernity, distinguishing the “subjective” from the “objective.” He quotes Morris Inch’s concerns that Lewis, in embracing the subjective, may lose objective fact, and he describes how Lewis’s attention to our subjective experiences can “correspond in a meaningful way to the objective world around us.” Although Dr. Barbeau need not be guilty of a problematic version of this language, Enlightenment-era thinkers had long used the term *subjective* to refer to what is individual, personal, and unreliable, in contrast to the *objective*, which is taken to be true, impersonal, and reliable.<sup>1</sup> Given this legacy, language of the subjective and objective is already part of a heritage that has questions about what positive role personal feelings could possibly play in objectivity.

Although language of the subjective and objective may have a role, the twentieth-century phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger pointed out in particularly clear ways that one cannot sharply separate the two; there is no access to what is “objective” except through personal, subjective experience. This is as true for claims about math and tables as it is for claims about a waterfall’s

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<sup>1</sup>One might look at René Descartes’s explicit rejection of tradition and other “subjective” prejudices or Francis Bacon’s analysis of various “idols” of the mind. Once subjectivity and objectivity were sharply distinguished by the early modern and Enlightenment eras, the philosophical question became how one gets from subjectivity to objectivity. Many Enlightenment thinkers celebrated the universal power of Reason as the only reliable bridge, while others focused on distinctively universal feelings, empirical or sense experience, etc. Each answer, however, carried suspicion regarding the very type of emotions and feelings Lewis discusses, considering them as unlikely bridges. One concern I have, however, is whether we should have ever accepted the sharp separation of subjectivity and objectivity in the first place, rather than thinking in terms of *truth* or other terms less liable to spatialized visions of the person and knowledge.

beauty. There is nothing that can be said or judged to be true about a table that has not been experienced or personally accessed by someone. Any attempt to sharply separate the “objective” from all subjectivity is impossible, and many of the early modern attempts to radically limit objectivity to simply what is accessible via some refined sense of reason or via one’s five senses suffer from incoherence or arbitrariness.<sup>2</sup> The question should not be “How do we get the subjective *out* of our objective claims?”<sup>3</sup> but, rather, “How and on the basis of *which aspects* of each of our subjective, personal experiences can one make responsible, evidenced truth claims?”

Addressing this latter question well will require many steps and likely a thoroughly developed theory of knowledge, but at minimum, one might distinguish notions of subjectivity from a subcategory of the “merely subjective.” Not all that is subjective is merely subjective. The subjective or first-personal includes anything a subject might experience, which—for most people—includes experiences such as seeing, hearing, and tasting as well as feeling. People see tables, hear the wind in the trees, taste sweet desserts, and feel joy at good news. Our visual, aural, and taste experiences can reveal true things, such as the features of a table, the wind, and this slice of chocolate cake. They can also, however, be merely subjective, such as when I see the something before me spinning while I whip around in the wind or suffer from dizziness, or when the cake tastes flat rather than sweet as one suffers the side effects

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<sup>2</sup>Defending this claim lies well beyond the limits of a brief response, but the pall David Hume’s skepticism placed on early modern epistemology makes clear the depth of the challenge, a skepticism Kant may have avoided in name but not in relation to projects such as classic metaphysics.

<sup>3</sup>Morris Inch’s worries about contaminating “objective fact” with “subjective feeling” articulate well the problematic version of the question. I take Inch’s fact/feeling dichotomy to be particularly problematic, insofar as fact is identified with truth while feeling with individual, personal, and/or passing experience. But equally problematic is the identification of objectivity with facts and subjectivity with feelings, as if subjectivity had nothing to do with facts and objectivity nothing to do with feelings.

of COVID-19. In the latter such cases, my personal experiences have become *merely* subjective.

Our emotions or experiences of feelings, like experiences of seeing and tasting, are first-personal and subjective, but they are not thereby merely subjective. To argue that being personal or subjective per se is sufficient for being unreliable or non-truth-functional will cut against far more than the truth-orientation of feelings. The key question should not be whether feelings are personal or subjective but whether they are merely subjective. And defenders of the truth-orientation of feelings, like Dr. Barbeau and Lewis himself, can make use of the similarities of feelings with all other first-personal experience to argue that the subjectivity of emotions may well be relevant to grasping certain objective features of reality.

## TWO PATHS

This leads, second, to the question of *how* one should attend to emotions in one's pursuit of truth—of what path one should take to move through subjectivity to what is true. The early twentieth-century phenomenologists, particularly Edmund Husserl and his students, were deeply interested in the nature of subjectivity and its relation to our grasp of objectivity or truth, so interested in fact that Husserl saw the post-Hegelian European conversations on the topic to be in a state of crisis. For Husserl, key to moving forward is detailed attention to our first-personal experiences, and this attention to a first-personal analysis of our feelings animated the work of Edith Stein, Max Scheler, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Martin Heidegger.

Such a turn *to* the personal and emotional appears similarly in Lewis's work. In the opening chapters of *Mere Christianity*, as Lewis discusses the Moral Law or law of decent behavior, he says that we *feel* that law pressing on us.<sup>4</sup> His description is not of someone

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 21.

intellectually grasping the moral law and then, because of that knowledge, coming also to feel it. Rather, he argues that even those who might intellectually deny the Moral Law still *feel* that law, so much so that the individuals *feel* a need to make excuses for their failure to follow it.

As Lewis develops his argument in the opening sections, he addresses a series of objections, including the objection that the Moral Law could simply be reduced to a “herd instinct.” In order to respond to this objection, Lewis distinguishes a number of differing types of feelings, articulating how we experience instinctual drives versus how we experience, or feel, the Moral Law. That is, he does not point to something *other* than our feelings but calls us to look more closely *at* our feelings. Making clear distinctions among differing types of feelings and describing (and naming) how they are experienced is core to Lewis’s response. Lewis does not give a detailed map of our emotions in *Mere Christianity*, but attention to our emotions—or the discernment of emotional states—is nonetheless at the heart of Lewis’s arguments there.

Things can, of course, go wrong in the analysis of our feelings. One might, for example, not have a very good set of names for one’s differing feelings or modes of experiencing. One might also fail to notice all that one is experiencing affectively.<sup>5</sup> Or one might live in a community or family that does not encourage or in any way celebrate attentiveness to emotions. It is not easy to read well one’s own feelings. (Nor, incidentally, is it easy to read well one’s taste, smell, or other sense experiences, as expert sommeliers and perfumers make clear.)

Lewis’s advice appears to be, first, to slow down. Name and notice what we are in fact experiencing. Doing so is essential for learning

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<sup>5</sup>And we certainly should also ask whether all affective experiences or feelings are emotions. For the sake of this brief essay, I am using *emotions* and *feelings* interchangeably, but I am not committed to this identity ultimately. At the very least, I would want to distinguish, within affective experiences, *moods* and *emotions*.

to distinguish what might be merely subjective (or perhaps a type of preference) in contrast to what reveals something quite different. Lewis's response to the objection that the Moral Law is simply a herd instinct turns on the ability to discern differences in feelings and affective experiences, and he calls us to note the features by which certain feelings reveal objectivity and a Moral Law.

This move in Lewis shares much with Augustine's project in book III of the *Confessions*. Careful discernment and self-knowledge are necessary. If we do not know what we are feeling, if we cannot distinguish those emotions from other, related feelings, we are liable to misread them. This inattentiveness would make it easy to confuse a moral feeling with something that is merely subjective (such as, perhaps, a passing mood or a mere individually conditioned preference), or it could lead us to conflate in problematic ways differing parts of an experience. Lewis's claim appears to be—like Augustine's—that, via attention and adequate language and categories, one can discern rightly *what* one is feeling and whether it is merely subjective or truth-conducive. This project of carefully discerning our various emotional states and then arguing that certain objective truths are grasped through certain types of emotional experiences is, I think, an essential (and fascinating) argument. It is also central to fully defending the thesis on Lewis's account of emotions that Dr. Barbeau's analysis points us to.

A second feature of Lewis's path through the question of emotions and truth likewise echoes another theme emphasized by the twentieth-century students of Edmund Husserl, particularly Edith Stein: in order to discern well what is merely subjective versus truth conducive, one must also attend to the role of intersubjective experiences. In answering the objection of the "hard-bitten officer" in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis moves from one's personal experiences to a type of coalescing of the many perspectives of others, which enables the drawing of a map. Such an "interpersonally" developed or

intersubjectively informed vision provides a key feature for articulating what can be truth-conducive in one's personal experiences and what may not be.

Accounts of intersubjective experience were not a mainstay of Descartes or the early moderns, and the idealism dominating Hegel and his German successors often gave little room for the nuanced distinctions necessary to giving a fully adequate account of how we can experience others' personal experiences and can thus incorporate them into a full epistemology. But I think Lewis is correct that attention to intersubjectivity will be crucial, and I would commend the nuanced and detailed analyses that have developed particularly in the last century among the European phenomenologists, including especially Husserl, Stein, and the more recent commentators on these two.

### A CAUTION

Finally, I would like to end with a caution. Dr. Barbeau cites Professor Morris Inch's concerns about the dangers of emotions and imagination. Augustine begins his own analysis in book III of the *Confessions* with "the sizzling and frying of unholy loves"<sup>6</sup>—and, as the prophet Jeremiah reminds us, "The heart is deceitful above all things" (Jer 17:9). For all the promise of moving through subjectivity to objectivity—and I do think this is both a promising and right move—Professor Morris Inch was not wrong to caution us about our emotions and the complications involved in reading and discerning well our states of heart.

Despite all the similarities, moving through subjectivity to objectivity (or from personal experiences to truth claims) surely must work at least somewhat differently for seeing versus feeling. If we treat our emotional lives as analogous to our perceptual

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<sup>6</sup>*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), III.1.

lives—which is, I think, what Augustine and Lewis are doing—there is, nonetheless, something different in the discernment of emotional versus perceptual experiences. Our emotions are both more personal than seeing or hearing and also distinctively liable to go wrong in numerous ways. Thus, unpacking and evaluating the effects of sin on what one might call “the cognitive contributions of feelings” is central to Dr. Barbeau’s project. I am optimistic that there is a way forward and one that does not require that one deem all emotions merely subjective. But the path from emotional “data” to objectivity has additional complications, and acknowledgment of those complications is crucial. Pursuing study of the objectivity and truth-orientation of emotions is not a job for the faint-hearted.

I am convinced by Dr. Barbeau both (1) that this is something significant about how Lewis treats emotions that has not yet been adequately unpacked and (2) that Lewis’s use of the Romantics is central to his vision of emotions. But following Lewis in this project of showing how our emotions reveal truth—and how loving rightly is essential to knowing rightly—is no small task. It will fly in the face of assumptions shaping much of modernity, and it will take time, deep self-awareness, and adequate language and conceptual models, as well as, likely, substantive communal support and engagement. Recruiting the beauty of the Romantic poets seems wise, both for their insight and inspiration. Engaging as well the work of twentieth-century phenomenologists, especially the early phenomenologists focused on these very questions, may also prove productive. It is a path well worth traveling, even as it is one that has yet many miles to go.

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