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C. S. LEWIS

UNDECEPTIONS

ESSAYS ON THEOLOGY
AND ETHICS

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sible for many of our actions on Nature. Will and Reason cannot depend on anything but themselves, but Nature can depend on Will and Reason, or, in other words, God created Nature.

The relation between Nature and Supernature, which is not a relation in space and time, becomes intelligible if the Supernatural made the Natural. We even have an idea of this making, since we know the power of imagination, though we can create nothing new, but can only rearrange our material provided through sense-data. It is not inconceivable that the universe was created by an Imagination strong enough to impose phenomena on other minds.

It had been suggested, Mr Lewis concluded, that our ideas of making and causing are wholly derived from our experience of will. The conclusion usually drawn is that there is no making or causing, only "projection". But "projection" is itself a form of causing, and it is more reasonable to suppose that Will is the only cause we know, and that therefore Will is the cause of Nature.

A Discussion followed. Points arising:

All reasoning assumes the hypothesis that inference is valid. Correct inference is self-evident.

"Relevant" (re evidence) is a *rational* term.

The universe doesn't claim to be *true*: it's just *there*.

Knowledge by revelation is more like empirical than rational knowledge.

Question: What is the criterion of truth, if you distinguish between cause and reason?

Mr Lewis: A mountainous country might have several maps made of it, only one of which was a *true* one, i.e., corresponding with the actual contours. The map drawn by Reason claims to be that *true* one. I couldn't get at the universe unless I could trust my reason. If we couldn't trust inference we could know nothing but our own existence. Physical reality is an *inference* from sensations.

Question: How can an axiom claim self-evidence any more than an empirical judgment on evidence?²

² The essay ends here, leaving the question unanswered

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FIRST AND SECOND THINGS

(1942)

When I read in *Time and Tide* on 6th June [1942] that the Germans have selected Hagen in preference to Siegfried as their national hero, I could have laughed out loud for pleasure. For I am a romantic person who has frankly revelled in my Nibelungs, and specially in Wagner's version of the story, ever since one golden summer in adolescence when I first heard the "Ride of the Valkyries" on a gramophone and saw Arthur Rackham's illustrations to *The Ring*. Even now the very smell of those volumes can come over me with the poignancy of remembered calf-love. It was, therefore, a bitter moment when the Nazis took over my treasure and made it part of their ideology. But now all is well. They have proved unable to digest it. They can retain it only by standing the story on its head and making one of the minor villains the hero. Doubtless the logic of their position will presently drive them further, and Alberich will be announced as the true personification of the Nordic spirit. In the meantime, they have given me back what they stole.

The mention of the Nordic spirit reminds me that their attempted appropriation of *The Ring* is only one instance of their larger attempt to appropriate "the Nordic" as a whole, and this larger attempt is equally ridiculous. What business have people who call might right to say they are worshippers of Odin? The whole point about Odin was that he had the right but not the might. The whole point

about Norse religion was that it alone of all mythologies told men to serve gods who were admittedly fighting with their backs to the wall and would certainly be defeated in the end. "I am off to die with Odin" said the rover in Stevenson's fable,¹ thus proving that Stevenson understood something about the Nordic spirit which Germany has never been able to understand at all. The gods will fall. The wisdom of Odin, the humorous courage of Thor (Thor was something of a Yorkshireman) and the beauty of Balder will all be smashed eventually by the *realpolitik* of the stupid giants and misshapen trolls. But that does not in the least alter the allegiance of any free man. Hence, as we should expect, real Germanic poetry is all about heroic stands, and fighting against hopeless odds.

At this stage it occurred to me that I had stumbled on a rather remarkable paradox. How is it that the only people in Europe who have tried to revive their pre-Christian mythology as a living faith should also be the people that shows itself incapable of understanding that mythology in its very rudiments? The retrogression would, in any case, be deplorable — just as it would be deplorable if a full grown man reverted to the *ethos* of his preparatory school. But you would expect him at least to get the no-sneaking rule right, and to be quite clear that new boys ought not to put their hands in their pockets. To sacrifice the greater good for the less and then not to get the lesser good after all — that is the surprising folly. To sell one's birthright for a mess of mythology and then to get the mythology all wrong — how did they do it? For it is quite clear that I (who would rather paint my face bright blue with woad than suggest that there is a real Odin) am actually getting out of Odin all the good and all the fun that Odin can supply, while the Nazi Odinists are getting none of it.

And yet, it seemed to me as I thought about it, this may not be such a paradox as it looks. Or, at least, it is a paradox which turns up so often that a man ought by now to be accustomed to it. Other instances began to come to mind. Until quite modern times — I think, until the time of the Romantics — nobody ever suggested that literature and the arts were an end in themselves. They "belonged to the ornamental part of life", they provided "innocent diversion"; or else they "refined our manners" or "incited us to virtue" or glorified the gods. The great music had been written for Masses, the great pictures painted to fill up a space on the wall of a noble patron's dining-room

¹ This is found in R. L. Stevenson's fable "Faith, Half-Faith, and No Faith", first published in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde with other Fables* (London, 1896)

or to kindle devotion in a church; the great tragedies were produced either by religious poets in honour of Dionysus or by commercial poets to entertain Londoners on half-holidays. It was only in the nineteenth century that we became aware of the full dignity of art. We began to "take it seriously" as the Nazis take mythology seriously. But the result seems to have been a dislocation of the aesthetic life in which little is left us but high-minded works which fewer and fewer people want to read or hear or see, and "popular" works of which both those who make them and those who enjoy them are half ashamed. Just like the Nazis, by valuing too highly a real, but subordinate good, we have come near to losing that good itself.

The longer I looked into it the more I came to suspect that I was perceiving a universal law. *On cause mieux guard on ne dit pas Caution*.² The woman who makes a dog the centre of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping. The man who makes alcohol his chief good loses not only his job but his palate and all power of enjoying the earlier (and only pleasurable) levels of intoxication. It is a glorious thing to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman — glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. But clear the decks and so arrange your life (it is sometimes feasible) that you will have nothing to do but contemplate her, and what happens? Of course this law has been discovered before, but it will stand rediscov'ery. It may be stated as follows: every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made.

Apparently the world is made that way. If Esau really got the portage in return for his birthright,³ then Esau was a lucky exception. You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first. From which it would follow that the question, what things are first? is of concern not only to philosophers but to everyone.

It is impossible, in this context, not to inquire what our own civilization has been putting first for the last thirty years. And the answer is plain. It has been putting itself first. To preserve civilization has been the great aim; the collapse of civilization, the great bugbear. Peace, a high standard of life, hygiene, transport, science

² One converses better when one does not say "Let us converse".

³ Genesis xxx

and amusement — all these, which are what we usually mean by civilization, have been our ends. It will be replied that our concern for civilization is very natural and very necessary at a time when civilization is so imperilled. But how if the shoe is on the other foot? — how if civilization has been imperilled precisely by the fact that we have all made civilization our *summum bonum*? Perhaps it can't be preserved in that way. Perhaps civilization will never be safe until we care for something else more than we care for it.

The hypothesis has certain facts to support it. As far as peace (which is one ingredient in our idea of civilization) is concerned, I think many would now agree that a foreign policy dominated by desire for peace is one of the many roads that lead to war. And was civilization ever seriously endangered until civilization became the exclusive aim of human activity? There is much rash idealization of past ages about, and I do not wish to encourage more of it. Our ancestors were cruel, lecherous, greedy and stupid, like ourselves. But while they cared for other things more than for civilization — and they cared at different times for all sorts of things, for the will of God, for glory, for personal honour, for doctrinal purity, for justice — was civilization often in serious danger of disappearing?

At least the suggestion is worth a thought. To be sure, if it were true that civilization will never be safe till it is put second, that immediately raises the question, second to what? What is the first thing? The only reply I can offer here is that if we do not know, then the first, and only truly practical thing is to set about finding out.

3

THE SERMON AND THE LUNCH

(1945)

"And so", said the preacher, "the home must be the foundation of our national life. It is there, all said and done, that character is formed. It is there that we appear as we really are. It is there we can fling aside the weary disguises of the outer world and be ourselves. It is there that we retreat from the noise and stress and temptation and dissipation of daily life to seek the sources of fresh strength and renewed purity . . ." And as he spoke I noticed that all confidence in him had departed from every member of that congregation who was under thirty. They had been listening well up to this point. Now the shufflings and coughings began. Pews creaked; muscles relaxed. The sermon, for all practical purposes, was over; the five minutes for which the preacher continued talking were a total waste of time — at least for most of us.

Whether I wasted them or not is for you to judge. I certainly did not hear any more of the sermon. I was thinking; and the starting-point of my thought was the question, "How can he? How can he of all people?" For I knew the preacher's own home pretty well. In fact, I had been lunching there that very day, making a fifth to the Vicar and the Vicar's wife and the son (R.A.F.) and the daughter (A.T.S.), who happened both to be on leave. I could have avoided it; but the girl had whispered to me, "For God's sake stay to lunch if they ask you. It's always a little less frightful when there's a visitor."