Week 1: God, joy and desire

Books: ***Surprised by Joy*** (esp. chs. 5 and 11)*;* *Pilgrim's Regress* (book one)

Essay: 'Transposition' (1944)

We begin with an idea that seems fundamental to Lewis' thought: that humans are naturally oriented towards a good that is outside the natural world. We encounter this orientation in experiences of joy, beauty, but also in the inexhaustibility of our deepest desires.

See also: R. Holyer, 'The argument from desire' in *Faith and Philosophy*, 5:1.

Notes

To begin the course, we will look at Lewis's own account of his conversion, and the central concept involved: joy. Fascinatingly, Lewis's movement towards theism, and then to Christianity, is overwhelmingly driven by the relationship between his imaginative and intellectual life, and the experience of 'joy'.

On the one hand, Lewis describes joy as connected with pleasure, especially the pleasure he found in imaginative immersion. The pleasure of joy is such that it is highly desirable; he finds himself trying to recover the experience, in various ways, for this reason. On the other hand, it is also understood as a kind of painful longing. His first detailed description comes in connection with three moments from his early childhood. The first is the experience of memory - the memory of being happy in a garden; the second of somehow falling in love with 'autumn', via Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin;* the third comes then when reading a stanza from Longfellow's poem 'Tegner's Drapa'. Analysing these experiences, together, he writes:

> For those who are still disposed to proceed I will only underline the quality common to the three experiences; it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.

So the close connection of these apparent opposites—pleasure and desirability; painful longing and the sense of insufficiency—is central to the experience, and the concept.

Later on Lewis recounts catching sight of an illustrated edition of *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*, which brings rushing back this earlier sense of longing:

> Pure "Northernness" engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity . . . and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago [. . .] And with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I had now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience, which, as I now stared round that dusty schoolroom like a man recovering from unconsciousness, had already vanished, had eluded me at the very moment when I could first say It is. And at once I knew (with fatal knowledge) that to "have it again" was the supreme and only important object of desire.

This makes Lewis's account of the experience even more complex: his vision of 'Northernness' is an imaginative pleasure, and yet this imaginative pleasure immediately causes him to recognise something that he has known, but lost; somehow, though, this sense of loss is itself pleasurable, because it means a sense of return to himself; finally, the whole complex experience is immediately lost as it recedes, leaving behind it a sense of longing – but a longing for the experience *of* longing.

And this then introduces an important dynamic into the account, because Lewis then finds that, although he is driven to experience again the painful pleasure of longing, the desire to recapture it leads him further away. In chapter XI, Lewis again finds that it is the memory of an experience of joy that painfully awakens the experience of joy itself. On a walk one day, he recalls an earlier walk, and what he had felt at that time:

> But then what I had felt on the walk had also been desire, and only possession in so far as that kind of desire is itself desirable, is the fullest possession we can know on earth; or rather, because the very nature of Joy makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting. There, to have is to want and to want is to have. Thus, the very moment when I longed to be so stabbed again, was itself again such a stabbing.

He is filled with longing for longing itself, but because it is the longing which is desirable he finds that, in one sense, he has what he is longing for - in the form of longing. This leads him to reflect on the experience as one in which the difference between desire and possession is broken down, and on the foolishness of his attempts to recapture the experience by seeking out the external forms in which the longing emerged.

Lewis comes to understand that joy is ultimately oriented to God; and this explains both the pleasure and the pain. God is the good, and that which is most of all to be desired – in one sense, the ultimate pleasure. On the other hand, as Lewis emphasised in a range of ways, if humans are made to love God, it must also mean that they are made to be transformed utterly, and this transformation might well be painful, and involve sacrifice.

This point can be compared with a passage in a notebook passage by Simone Weil (another famous 20th century Platonist) written in around 1943:

> All I can do is to desire the good. But whereas all other desires are sometimes effective and sometimes not, according to circumstances, this one desire is always effective. The reason is that, whereas the desire for gold is not the same thing as gold, the desire for good is itself a good. If the day comes when all the desire in my soul is detached from the things of this world and directed wholly and exclusively towards the good, then on that day I shall possess the sovereign good. Will it be said that I shall be left without an object of desire? No, because desiring in itself will be my good. Then will it be said that I shall still have something left to desire? No, because I shall possess the object of my desire. Desire itself will be my treasure. (First and Last Notebooks: 316).

But whereas Weil imagined that the desire for an 'absolute good' must be wrenched away from all finite objects, and 'directed wholly and exclusively towards the good', Lewis seems to envisage something different. On the one hand, he insists, like Weil, that there is a sense in which God must be loved first, and this means that in ordinary human experience, the love of God is connected with an absolute demand for uncompromising allegiance ('have no other gods before Me'/'seek first the Kingdom of Heaven'/'not my will, but yours', etc.). As will see, Lewis explores this point time and again in his fiction (e.g. Digory being commanded to throw away the fruit that could heal his mother; Psyche commanded not to examine the face of her divine lover). But Lewis is also keen to show that the 'lower' medium can also become, sacramentally, the expression of the higher, and even the desires which are the most bound up with physical existence, can be inhabited by joy – the desire for that which infinitely transcends physical existence.

It seems clear that Lewis was particularly interested in the relationship between sexual appetite and joy. He reflects on this in point in *The Pilgrim's Regress* in the (problematic!) image of the 'brown girls', who represent lust.[1] John, the protagonist, has

[1] At first glance, the 'brown girl' passages seem (to me, at least) to be fairly obviously racist. Readers have also often noted how the presentation of the Calormenes in some of the Narnia books betrays a distinctively British kind of racism. Whereas the Calormenes are clearly characters with the same kind of being as the other protagonists in the story, in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, it seems very clear that the 'brown girls' do not represent characters with the same kind of individuality and agency as John, the protagonist: all they are intended to do is represent John's sexual appetite or desire. Various attempts have been made to justify Lewis's use of this image. Perhaps the easiest way to point to what is wrong with it is to

an ongoing struggle to understand the relationship between joy—represented by his desire to find The Island—and sexual desire, including a discussion with 'Lady Reason' about the Freudian idea that religious desire is a disguise for sexual desire. Lady Reason explains a riddle to him:

> 'The people in the country we have just left have seen that your love for the Island is very like your love for the brown girls. Therefore they say that one is a copy of the other. They would also say that you have followed me because I [Reason] am like your mother, and that your trust in me is a copy of your love for your mother. And then they would say again that your love for your mother is a copy of your love for the brown girls; and so they would come full circle.'
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> 'And what should I answer them?'
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> 'You would say, perhaps one is a copy of the other. But which is the copy of which?'
>
> 'I never thought of that.'

The Platonic overtones are clear here: rather than reduce spiritual or mystical experiences to the sexual level, Lewis thinks it makes more sense to interpret sexuality in terms of the spiritual. Which is to say that the ways in which sexuality is liable to be become complicated or degraded in human experience is a result of the fact that spiritual desire is pursued mistakenly, by sexual means. John, in *The Pilgrim's Regress,* finds that, as a result of his entanglement with 'the brown girls', has has come to desire less, not more than he wants to desire. Throughout his work there are examples of his insistence on understanding the realm of the spirit – the heavenly – as being like the earthly, but more: more real, heavier, livelier, etc.

The Platonic flavour of Lewis' thought are also clear in the example he gives in his essay 'Transposition' [2]. A woman is thrown into a dungeon, where she gives birth to, and raises a son. She tries to convey to him the reality of the world outside, but can only do so by drawing on the walls with a pencil. The drawings convey roads, trees, clouds, etc. But then, she has to also tell him that the world she is communicating to him contains no pencil marks. Her 'negation' is not conveying an absence, but something positive, because the realities that are depicted by the pencil marks are far more real than those marks. In the same way, Christians should imagine that, when it comes to heaven, 'every negation will be only the reverse side of a fulfilling.' As Lewis sees it, Joy is an

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ask: what would a young South Asian woman reading these passages find in the 'brown girls'? Would such a reader be able to appreciate the point Lewis is making without immediately finding themselves derailed by the apparent ease with which 'brown' is used as a stand-in for an ultimately degrading pursuit of sexual desire?

[2] Note that this 'fable' is not included in the version first published in the collection *Transposition;* the later version in *Weight of Glory* includes the fable and a number of additions. See Arend Smilde, *'*C S Lewis's Transposition: Text and Context' in *Sehnschucht: The C S Lewis Journal, 13: 1*.

experience that can only be given a satisfying interpretation with reference to the idea of heaven; a good that is somehow more fulfilling than any earthly object can be, but in a way that it is, in one sense, impossible to imagine.

We will explore this issue more thoroughly in another session, in connection with *The Great Divorce*. But the passage which most clearly expresses the connection between joy and heaven comes in the third part of Mere Christianity, in the chapter on hope. First of all, he reflects that we very often do not recognise the desire for heaven as what it is:

> ‘Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy.’

So, as we’ve already seen, joy is a desire for something that cannot be had in this world, but which is a satisfying experience in and through this. Lewis then states that there are two ways of responding to this impossibility: either to flit from one attempt at fulfilment to another, pursuing various objects or experience as if, despite previous failures, this time we will find satisfaction. Or, we can attempt to ignore and crush the desire itself, characterising it as childish, and something to be overcome. In contrast to both, is the Christian way:

> The Christian says, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.

As Lewis sees things, a central part of being a Christian, and of finding Christianity intellectually plausible, is concerned with properly interpreting the desire that he calls ‘joy’. And his understanding of heaven is intimately connected to this task: heaven, as Lewis understands it, is the implied object of our deepest, most persistent and

desirable desires. On the one hand, that means that the relationship between the desire of joy and heaven must be, in some respects, like the relationship between ordinary desires and their satisfactions: heaven is to joy what food is to hunger. On the other hand, it must be completely different, because whatever it is that satisfies the desire of joy must necessarily be unlike anything else.