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**C. S. LEWIS**



*Exploring the Ideas  
of C. S. Lewis on  
the Meaning of Life.*

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McGRATH**

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*If I Had Lunch with C. S. Lewis: Exploring the Ideas of C. S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life*

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# Contents

Preface *v*

1. The Grand Panorama:  
*C. S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life* 1
2. “Old Friends to Trust”:  
*C. S. Lewis on Friendship* 27
3. A Story-Shaped World:  
*C. S. Lewis on Narnia and the Importance of Stories* 55
4. The Lord and the Lion:  
*C. S. Lewis on Aslan and the Christian Life* 79
5. Talking about Faith:  
*C. S. Lewis on the Art of Apologetics* 105
6. A Love of Learning:  
*C. S. Lewis on Education* 133
7. Coping with Suffering:  
*C. S. Lewis on the Problem of Pain* 159
8. “Further Up and Further In”:  
*C. S. Lewis on Hope and Heaven* 185

Acknowledgements 209

Appendix 1: For Further Reading 211

Appendix 2: Introducing Lewis 219

Notes 231

About the Author 240



# Preface

C. S. LEWIS is one of the best-known writers of the twentieth century. Big-budget movies of his Narnia novels have brought his books to a new, worldwide audience. Yet Lewis was famous long before the movies came along. In his day, he was celebrated as one of the world's experts on English literature. His lectures at Oxford and Cambridge were packed out with eager students, who hung on his every word.

Lewis is now remembered mainly for two things. First, he is revered as the author of the seven novels which make up the Chronicles of Narnia. These books—especially their showcase opener, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—have become classics of English literature. The Narnia books bring home the power of well-told stories to captivate the imagination and open up some of the biggest questions of human existence—such as how we become good people and how we discover the meaning of life.

They draw us into a rich, imaginative world, which helps us to think through the big questions of meaning and value in our own.

The second thing for which Lewis is now remembered is his Christian writings. Lewis was an angry atheist in his youth. He served in the British army during the First World War, and gave up on religion because of the suffering and destruction he saw around him. However, over a period of years he reconsidered his position and gradually came to the view that belief in God was the most satisfying way of looking at things. Lewis explained his change of heart in a series of bestselling books, most notably *Mere Christianity*.

Although Lewis is best known as a writer, we must never forget that his life was complex, difficult, and occasionally tragic. His mother died of cancer before Lewis was ten years old. He fought on the battlefields of France during the First World War and was seriously wounded in combat. He married late in life, only to suffer tragedy as his wife slowly lost her long fight against cancer. Lewis is a rare example of someone who had to think about life's great questions because they were forced on him by his own experiences. Lewis is no armchair philosopher. His ideas were forged in the heat of suffering and despair.

So why this book? What does "lunch with Lewis" mean? The idea for this book came while I was talking

to a group of students in Oxford about Lewis. I wanted to explore some themes in his writings—such as his rich and rewarding idea of “Joy.” The students, however, had very different ideas. They wanted to learn *from* Lewis, not learn *about* him. Lewis was a big name, a role model. They wanted to know what Lewis thought about the big questions of life. This, they told me, would help them sort themselves out. It sounded like a good idea. So we began to look at what Lewis had to say about the meaning of life. And this approach worked.

We all want to learn from people who have shown themselves to be thoughtful and helpful in dealing with the big questions of life. That’s why so many of us turn to close friends or trusted colleagues and ask if we can have some time with them to get their advice. “Let’s have lunch!” is not a suggestion that we just eat food; it’s a request to spend time together, to get to know people better and talk things through. We want to listen to those who have been through difficult situations like the ones we’re now facing, and learn how they coped with them. We want them to tell us how they made sense of things so that we can do the same.

That’s why so many people try to find “mentors”—older and wiser people who can pass on their wisdom and help us by their example and encouragement. Or “critical friends”—people who are on our

side but are still willing to say difficult things to help us move on. Or “life coaches”—people who help us achieve our goals. These are people we trust and respect, who can walk alongside us and help us move on in life and get more out of it. They are not just knowledgeable. They are something more important than that. They are *wise*.

It’s like that party game people sometimes play, in which they’re asked to name three people they would like to have lunch with. Who would the guests be? And why? What would the people hope to talk about? I’d like to have lunch with C. S. Lewis—and so would most of the people I know! It would be wonderful to sit down and discuss the greatest questions of life with him over some food and drink. After all, as Lewis himself pointed out, there are few greater pleasures than sharing food, drink, and companionship. See this book as my invitation to you, my reader, to sit down with Lewis and me in some quiet place to think about some of the persistent questions and dilemmas every human being faces in this life.

Lewis is one of a very small group of people who both learned from life’s challenges and was able to pass his wisdom on, elegantly and effectively. That’s why the sales of Lewis’s books today are greater than at any point during his lifetime. He is clearly someone whom many regard as helpful, informative, and

reflective. So why not see him as a mentor, coach, or critical friend? Lewis's writings show that he was more than willing to act in these roles to his friends. His vast correspondence, for example, regularly provided advice and wisdom to both close friends and relative strangers. His *Screwtape Letters* (1943) is one of the most original works of spiritual direction ever written.

This work is a series of imagined lunches with Lewis. What would he say to someone trying to cope with grief? Or someone wondering how best to explain the Christian faith to an atheist friend? Or someone wanting to be a better person, or worried that his or her faith might be something make-believe, invented to cope with the harshness of life? Thanks to Lewis's own writings, and the huge literature about Lewis, we know the sorts of things that Lewis would say to people asking those questions. And that's what this book is all about: letting Lewis help us as we wrestle with questions and try to become better people. Of course, as we'll find out, Lewis has some questions of his own that we must consider as well.

Anyone who has seen the movie *Shadowlands* might wonder if having lunch with Lewis—however imaginary—would be much fun. Anthony Hopkins portrays Lewis as a solemn, pompous, and rather tedious person who would probably bore his lunch

companions to death. Happily, the real C. S. Lewis was nothing like that. His friends—such as George Sayer—fondly remember Lewis as a witty person with a “glorious sense of humour” and a “rather boyish sense of fun.” He was a “joy to meet” and a “wonderful companion.” Lunch with Lewis would have been a treat. He would have dispensed wisdom with laughter and good humour.

Lewis’s ideas are often wise and worth listening to, but that doesn’t mean we must agree with everything he says. I once had to attend a course on management at Oxford University. At the time, I held a senior position in the university, which had managerial responsibilities. The course was intended to help me and other colleagues deal with these challenges more effectively. I remember one of those lectures vividly. It was about choosing friends who would help us make the best decisions. “Don’t surround yourself with clones of yourself,” we were told. “Talk to people you really respect—even if they disagree with you.” Such people may not agree with you on everything, but they will present you with options that you know you have to take seriously. Your final decisions will be much better, because you will have been forced to think about possibilities you might not agree with but which might turn out to be right.

That’s the spirit in which this book was conceived and written. Lewis will be our conversation partner.

That doesn't mean he's right about everything. It just means he is someone really worth listening to. Lewis is a profoundly interesting and worthwhile person whom we know we have to take seriously, even if we end up disagreeing with him.

Lewis died in 1963. So how can we listen to him? One way might be to invent some imaginary dialogue, putting words into Lewis's mouth. But that's not fair, either to Lewis or to my readers. It's far better to provide accurate summaries of Lewis's ideas, spiced up with some of his better phrases and quotes, to draw readers into his way of thinking. We will explore his ideas, see how they might work, and figure out how we might use them.

Let's pretend that we plan to meet Lewis regularly to talk about things. We will use a pattern suggested by the structure of academic terms at both of Lewis's universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Each university has three teaching terms of eight weeks. Lewis's working life was organised around these eight-week blocks of time. So let's pretend we are going to meet Lewis once a week during one of these terms. We might meet in one of Lewis's favourite watering holes in Oxford—such as The Eagle and Child or its close neighbour The Lamb & Flag. Or we might be more adventurous, following the walks that Lewis so loved along the river through Port Meadow to village pubs—such as The Perch at Binsey or The Trout at

Wolvercote. And as we have lunch, we can talk about some of life's big questions.

Each of the eight lunches brings together more or less the same elements. We will learn part of Lewis's story, allowing us to understand how a particular question or concern became important to him. (For a more complete look at Lewis's life, see "Introducing Lewis" on pages 219–229.) Then we'll look at how he responded to the question or concern. What did he do? What did he think? Sometimes we'll listen to Lewis's own words; sometimes I will paraphrase him or draw out his meaning using analogies or ideas that he didn't himself use but which help us to see what he's getting at. Finally, we'll work out how we might be able to use what we've learned for our benefit. How might his advice affect the way we think, or the way we live?

It always helps to have a major thinker like Lewis introduced by someone who knows his writings and ideas really well and can help you make sense of them. I've been reading Lewis for the last forty years and have come to appreciate his wisdom at many levels, as well as working out how best to explain and apply his ideas. But in the end, you need to read Lewis himself. Lewis has an elegant, winsome, and engaging style that virtually none of his commentators—and certainly not I!—can imitate.

You could see this work as a preface to reading

Lewis, just as Lewis once wrote a superb preface to the reading of John Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*. For this reason, the For Further Reading section (pages 211–218) makes very specific suggestions about which of Lewis's writings you might like to read if you want to follow through on the themes found in this book, as well as other works that might help you take things further. The editions used are noted in the bibliography at the end of this work. I'll also provide you with details of some books about Lewis that will help you get more out of reading him.

So where shall we start? There's little doubt where Lewis would like us to begin—his discovery of Christianity, which quickly became the moral and intellectual compass of his world. So let's begin our lunches by asking Lewis about the meaning of life.

*Alister McGrath*

LONDON, SEPTEMBER 2013



I

# THE GRAND PANORAMA

*C. S. Lewis on the  
Meaning of Life*



*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen,  
not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*

—C. S. LEWIS, “IS THEOLOGY POETRY?”





IT'S EASY TO IMAGINE arriving at our first lunch with Lewis with questions buzzing through our heads, not knowing quite what to ask first. But perhaps the first thing Lewis might emphasize is that meaning matters.

Maybe Lewis would have thumped the lunch table to emphasize his point, causing the crockery to shudder. We might be taken aback. Weren't we the ones meant to be asking the questions? Yet Lewis is challenging *us*! Perhaps that's because he realized how important it is to sort this out as a first order of business. We all need to build our lives on something

that is stable, solid, and secure. And until we find this foundation, we can't really begin to live properly. To use a distinction that Lewis teased out in *Mere Christianity*, there's a big difference between just *existing* and really *living*.

So why does meaning matter?

Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures. Deep down within all of us is a longing to work out what life is all about and what we're meant to be doing. Whether it's the university student wondering what to major in or the Christian seeking God's will or the armchair philosopher contemplating his or her purpose in the world, most of us want a reliable foundation for our lives and are asking questions that relate to it. Why am I alive? What is this life about? What is at life's core? What is my relationship to the physical world and the others around me? Is there a God, and what difference does it make?

We all need a lens through which to look at reality and make sense of it. Otherwise we are overwhelmed by it. The poet T. S. Eliot made this point in one of his poems, "Burnt Norton" (1935). Humanity, he remarked, "cannot bear very much reality." We need a way of focussing it or weaving its threads together to disclose a pattern. Otherwise everything looks chaotic—blurred, out of focus, and meaningless.

The French atheist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who shaped the thinking of many bright young

things in the 1960s, saw life as pointless: “Here we sit, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and really there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.”<sup>1</sup> Yet it’s hard to live in a meaningless world. What’s the point?

Realising that there is meaning and purpose in life keeps us going in times of perplexity and difficulty. This point was underscored by Viktor Frankl, whose experiences in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War showed the importance of discerning meaning in traumatic situations.<sup>2</sup> Frankl realised that someone’s chance of survival depended on a will to live, which in turn depended on being able to find meaning and purpose in hopeless situations. Those who coped best with apparently hopeless situations were those with “frameworks of meaning.” These allowed them to make sense of their experiences.

Frankl argued that if we can’t make sense of events and situations, we are unable to cope with reality. He quoted from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: the person “who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.” We need a mental map of reality that allows us to position ourselves, helping us to find our way along the road of life. We need a lens which brings into focus the fundamental questions about human nature, the world, and God.

Recent studies of trauma have emphasized the importance of sustaining a “sense of coherence”<sup>3</sup> as a means of coping with seemingly senseless or irrational events, particularly those which involve suffering.<sup>4</sup> In other words, those who cope best are those who can see beneath the surface of an apparently random and pointless world and grasp the deeper structure of reality. The great Harvard psychologist William James pointed out many years ago that this is what religious faith is all about. According to James, we need to have “faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found and explained.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, some would argue that any quest for meaning is simply misguided. There is nothing to find, so there is no point in looking. Richard Dawkins, who modestly declares himself to be the world’s most famous and respected atheist, insists that the universe has “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”<sup>6</sup> We may invent meaning to console ourselves, but there is no “bigger picture.” It’s all a delusion, something we have made up.

I took that view myself in my late teens. I thought people who believed in God were mad, bad, or sad. I was better than that! Atheism was an act of rebellion, an assertion of my right to believe whatever I liked. Admittedly, it was a little dull.

But who cared about that? It may have been austere to the point of being dreary, but it was right! The fact that it did nothing for me was proof that I had adopted it because of its truth, not its attractiveness or relevance. Yet a tiny voice within me whispered, *Are things really that simple? What if there is more to life than this?*

Lewis did not help me break free from this dull and lifeless worldview. Yet as I began to read Lewis from about 1974 on, he did help me in one very important way. Lewis enabled me to name what I had found wrong with atheism. He helped me to put a jumble of insights and intuitions into words. And as I struggled to find my feet and my bearings in the Christian world, he quickly became my unofficial mentor. I had never met him, yet his words and wisdom became—and have remained—important to me. I would love to have had lunch with Lewis, not so much to bombard him with questions, but simply to thank him for helping me grow in my faith.

It's time to bring C. S. Lewis into the conversation. Lewis was an atheist as a young man, yet he gradually realised that atheism was intellectually vulnerable and existentially unsatisfying. Let's find out why. Let's imagine that we're having lunch with Lewis, and one of us asks him how he came to find meaning in life—or, specifically for him, how he became a Christian. What might he say?

## Lewis's Doubts about His "Glib and Shallow Rationalism"

Lewis was a convinced atheist by the age of sixteen. He was quite clear that religion had been explained away by the leading scholars of the 1910s. All the best scholarship of the day had shown that religion was just a primitive human instinct. This scholarship seemed to say, "We've grown up now and don't need this." Nobody could take belief in God seriously anymore.

His views were hardened by the suffering and violence he witnessed while serving in the trenches in the First World War. Lewis had trained in an officer-cadet battalion in Oxford during the summer of 1917, before being commissioned as an officer in the Somerset Light Infantry and posted to northern France. The suffering and destruction he saw around him convinced him of the pointlessness of life and the nonexistence of God.

Lewis's experiences during the First World War made him angry with God—even though he believed that there was no God to be angry with. Like so many disillusioned and cynical young men, Lewis wanted someone to hate, someone to blame for the ills of the world. And, like so many before and after him, Lewis blamed God for everything. How dare God create him without his permission!<sup>7</sup> But his atheism did not

provide him with a “framework of meaning” that made any sense of the devastation and anguish caused by the war. And he had to face up to the awkward fact that, if there was no God, blame for the war’s horrors had to be laid firmly on human beings. Lewis seems to have gradually realised that the violence and brutality of the war raised troubling questions about a godless humanism as much as it did about Christianity. His “grim and deadly” atheism did not make much sense of Lewis’s wartime trauma, let alone help him to cope with it.<sup>8</sup>

The literature concerning the Great War and its aftermath emphasizes the physical and psychological damage it wreaked on soldiers at the time, and on their return home. The irrationality of the war called into question whether there was any meaning in the universe or in individual existence. Many students returning to study at Oxford after the war experienced considerable difficulty adjusting to normal life, which led to frequent nervous breakdowns.

Lewis himself hardly ever mentions the Great War. He seems to have “partitioned” or “compartmentalized” his life as a way of retaining his sanity. Literature—above all, poetry—became Lewis’s fire-wall. It allowed him to keep the chaotic and meaningless external world at a safe distance and shielded him from the existential devastation it wreaked on others.

Lewis's continuing commitment to atheism in the 1920s was grounded in his belief that it was *right*, a "wholesome severity," even though he admitted that it offered a "grim and meaningless" view of life. He took the view that atheism's intellectual rectitude trumped its emotional and existential inadequacy. Lewis did not regard atheism as liberating or exciting; he seems simply to have accepted it, without enthusiasm, as the thinking person's only intellectual option—a default position, without any particular virtues or graces.

Yet during the 1920s, Lewis reconsidered his attitude towards Christianity. The story of his return to the faith he had abandoned as a boy is described in great detail in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. After wrestling with the clues concerning God that he found in human reason and experience, he eventually decided that intellectual honesty compelled him to believe and trust in God. He did not want to; he felt, however, that he had no choice.

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells us how he experienced the gradual approach of God. It was, he suggests, like a game of chess. Every move he made to defend himself was countered by a better move on God's part. His arguments against faith seemed increasingly inadequate and unconvincing. Finally, he felt he had no option but to give in and admit that God was God, becoming the "most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

So what made Lewis change his mind? How did a hardened, dogmatic atheist become one of the greatest apologists for Christianity of the twentieth century and beyond? And what can we learn from this? Let's begin by looking at how Lewis's disenchantment with atheism began, and where it took him.

There are clear signs that Lewis began to become disenchanted with atheism in the early 1920s. For a start, it was imaginatively uninteresting. Lewis began to realize that atheism did not—and could not—satisfy the deepest longings of his heart or his intuition that there was more to life than what was seen on the surface. Lewis put it this way in a famous passage from *Surprised by Joy*:

On the one side, a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other, a glib and shallow rationalism. Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.<sup>10</sup>

So what did Lewis mean by this? For a start, Lewis was putting into words his growing dissatisfaction with the simplistic account of things offered by atheism. His “glib and shallow rationalism” dismissed the deep questions of life, offering only superficial responses. Atheism was existentially insignificant,

having nothing to say about the deepest questions of the human mind or the yearnings of the human heart. We can prove shallow, superficial, and unimportant things. But the things that really matter—the truths by which we live, whether they are political, moral, or religious—simply cannot be proved in this way.

Lewis began to realise that he had allowed himself to be trapped inside some kind of rationalist cage or prison. He had limited reality to what reason alone could prove. And as he came to realise, reason couldn't even prove its own trustworthiness. Why not? Because we would then be using reason to judge reason. Human reason would be both judge and defendant! As Lewis later put it, "Unless the measuring rod is independent of the things measured, we can do no measuring."<sup>11</sup>

But what if there was something *beyond* the scope of human reason? And what if this greater world dropped hints of its existence into our own world? What if an archer from that greater world were to shoot arrows into ours, alerting us to its existence? Lewis began to think that the world around us and our own experiences were full of "clues" to the meaning of the universe.

Gradually, Lewis came to realize that these hints and clues pointed to a world beyond the frontiers of reason. We may hear snatches of its music in the

quiet moments of life. Or sense its fragrance wafted towards us by a gentle breeze on a cool evening. Or hear stories of others who have discovered this land and are ready to share their adventures. All these “signals of transcendence”—to borrow a phrase from the American sociologist Peter Berger—help us to realize that there is more to existence than our everyday experience. As the great British apologist G. K. Chesterton (who was much admired by Lewis) pointed out long ago, the human imagination reaches beyond the limits of reason to find its true object. “Every true artist,” he argued, feels “that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Importance of Our Intuitions**

Alongside Lewis the cool-headed thinker we find a very different style of thinker—someone who was aware of the power of the human imagination and the implications of this power for our understanding of reality. Perhaps one of the most original aspects of Lewis’s writing is his persistent and powerful appeal to the religious imagination. Lewis was aware of certain deep human emotions and intuitions that seemed to point to a rich and enriching dimension of our existence beyond time and space. There is, Lewis suggested, a deep and intense feeling of longing within

human beings which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis named this sense “Joy,” and argued that it pointed to God as its ultimate source and goal. God shoots “arrows of joy” into our hearts to awaken us from a simplistic atheism and lazy agnosticism, and to help us find our way home.

Lewis explored this further in a remarkable wartime sermon, preached at Oxford in June 1941, titled “The Weight of Glory.” Lewis spoke of “a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy,” “a desire, still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies.” There is something self-defeating about human desire, he remarks, in that what is desired, when it is actually achieved, seems to leave that desire unsatisfied. Lewis illustrates this from the age-old quest for beauty. “The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing.”<sup>13</sup> Human desire, the deep and bittersweet longing for something that will satisfy us, points *beyond* finite objects and finite persons (who seem able to fulfill this desire yet eventually prove incapable of doing so). Our sense of desire points *through* these objects, and points persons towards their real goal and fulfillment in God.

Atheism had to dismiss such feelings and intuitions as deluded nonsense. For a while, Lewis went along with this. Then he realized that it was ridiculous. He was locked into a way of seeing things that prevented him from appreciating their true significance. Lewis began to trust his intuitions and explore where they led him. There was, he realized, a “Big Picture” that made sense of life. It was called Christianity.

### A “Big Picture”: Seeing Things in a New Way

In our lunchtime conversations, Lewis would be sure to drop in some wonderful statements we would take away and relish, turning them over in our minds to make sure we had fully appreciated their depth and brilliance. Here’s one he might have thrown into the conversation: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>14</sup>

What is Lewis getting at here? Basically, he is putting into words one of the most fundamental reasons he became a Christian. The Christian faith, Lewis discovered, gave him a lens that brought things into focus. It was like turning on a light and seeing things properly for the first time. The powerful image of the sun rising and illuminating a dark landscape properly summed up Lewis’s basic conviction that

Christianity makes sense of things—far more sense than his earlier atheism.

Lewis came to realise that truth is about seeing things rightly, grasping their deep interconnection. It is something that we “see,” rather than something we formulate logically. For Lewis, the Christian faith offers us a means of seeing things properly—as they really are, despite their outward appearances. Christianity provides an intellectually capacious and imaginatively satisfying way of seeing things, and grasping their interconnectedness, even if we find it difficult to express this in words.

Lewis’s strong belief in the reasonableness of the Christian faith rests on his own quite distinct way of *seeing* the rationality of the created order and its ultimate grounding in God. Let’s go back to Lewis’s line about the sun letting us see things. Using this powerful image, Lewis invites us to see God as both the ground of the rationality of the world and the one who enables us to grasp that rationality. Lewis helps us to appreciate that Christianity gives us a standpoint from which we may survey things, and grasp their intrinsic coherence. *We see* how things connect together.

This basic idea is found in one of the great works of medieval literature, which Lewis loved—Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, written in the fourteenth century. The great Florentine poet and theologian here expresses the idea that Christianity provides a vision

of things—something wonderful that can be *seen*, but is very difficult to express in words:

*From that moment onwards my power of sight  
exceeded  
That of speech, which fails at such a vision.*<sup>15</sup>

G. K. Chesterton made the point that a reliable theory allows us to see things properly: “We put on the theory, like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass.”<sup>16</sup> For Chesterton, a good theory is to be judged by the amount of illumination it offers, and its capacity to accommodate what we see in the world around us and experience within us. “With this idea once inside our heads, a million things become transparent as if a lamp were lit behind them.”<sup>17</sup> In the same way, Chesterton argued, Christianity validates itself by its ability to make sense of our observations of the world. “The phenomenon does not prove Religion, but religion explains the Phenomenon.”<sup>18</sup>

Lewis consistently uses a remarkably wide range of visual metaphors—such as sun, light, blindness, and shadows—to help us grasp the nature of a true understanding of things. This has two important results. First, it means that Lewis sees reason and imagination as working *together*, not *against each other*. Second, it leads Lewis to make extensive use

of analogies in his apologetics, to enable us to *see* things in a new way. For example, Lewis's famous defence of the doctrine of the Trinity in *Mere Christianity* suggests that our difficulties with this notion arise mainly because we don't see it properly. If we see it another way—as, for example, an inhabitant of a two-dimensional world might try to grasp and describe the structure of a three-dimensional reality—then we begin to grasp why it makes so much sense: “Try seeing it *this* way!”

Lewis does not try to prove the existence of God on purely rational grounds. His approach is much more interesting. Instead of launching an argument for the existence of God, Lewis invites us to see how what we observe in the world around us and experience within us fits into the Christian way of seeing things. Lewis's genius as an apologist—which we shall explore in more detail later—lay in his ability to show how a Christian viewpoint was able to offer a more satisfactory explanation of common human experience than its rivals, especially the atheism he had once himself so enthusiastically advocated.

Throughout his apologetic writings Lewis appeals to shared human experience and observation. How do we make sense of what we experience within us or observe outside us? Lewis came to realise that the Christian way of looking at things seemed to fit things in much better than the alternatives.

## Fitting Things In: The Case of Longing

Let's look at an example—Lewis's "argument from desire." This is not really an argument at all. It is more about noticing how theory and observation fit together. It is a bit like trying on a hat or shirt for size and looking at yourself in a mirror. How well does it fit? How many of our observations of the world can a theory accommodate, and how persuasively does it do this? Lewis's "argument from desire" invites us to notice how easily and naturally our experiences of desire fit into a Christian framework.

As we saw earlier, Lewis argues that we have desires and longings that no experience in this world seems able to satisfy. So how do we explain these? Lewis offers three explanations. First, we are never satisfied because we are looking for the wrong thing in this world. We must extend the scope of our search! Then we will eventually stumble across what will really make us happy. This, Lewis suggests, just leads to a long and hopeless search for something we never find. Or, second, we might give up in despair, believing there is nothing that will ever satisfy us. Why bother looking? Let's just give up.

But Lewis believes there is a third answer—one that chimes in with his own experience. When we see these longings through the lens of the Christian faith, we realise that they are exactly what we would

expect if Christianity is true. Christianity tells us that that this is not our true home, and that we were created for heaven. “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.”<sup>19</sup>

Lewis’s *explicit* appeal to reason thus involves an *implicit* appeal to the imagination. Perhaps this helps us understand why Lewis appeals to both modern and postmodern readers. Lewis gives us a way of looking at things that bridges the great divide between modernity and postmodernity. Each outlook has its strengths because it is part of a greater whole. Their weaknesses arise when they pretend to offer the full picture, when they really offer only part of the whole. Once the full “big picture” is seen, they are both seen in their proper light.

One of the reasons Lewis embraced Christianity is that it helped him to discern meaning in life. Life is about more than just understanding things: it is about being able to cope with ambiguity and bewilderment, and about finding something worthwhile to give us direction and meaning.

### **The Panorama and the Snapshots**

So how did Christianity help Lewis find meaning? One way was for him to realise that there is a “big

picture” which makes sense of “little pictures.” Or, to change the image slightly, there is a panorama into which each of the snapshots fits. Lewis doesn’t use this way of speaking, but it is a good way of representing his basic approach. Lewis explained the importance of such a “big picture” in 1936, when reflecting on medieval literature—such as Dante’s famous *Divine Comedy*, which offered a persuasive imaginative vision of a unified cosmic and world order. Lewis remarked that works such as the *Divine Comedy* reflected a “unity of the highest order” because they are able to cope with “the greatest diversity of subordinated detail.”<sup>20</sup> Lewis’s language here is technical and precise. There is a certain way of seeing things that brings them into the sharpest focus, illuminating the shadows and allowing an underlying unity to be seen. This, for Lewis, is a “realising imagination”—a way of seeing or “picturing” reality that is faithful to the way things actually are.<sup>21</sup>

We need to unpack this idea a little more to appreciate the point that Lewis is making. His basic idea is that Christianity sets out a way of seeing things which does two important things. First, it declares that the world is not meaningless, chaotic, or pointless. The world may look fuzzy and out of focus, so that we can’t see a pattern. But that’s because we need a lens to bring it into focus. For Lewis, Christianity provides a lens that allows us to see things more

clearly. Or, to switch images, instead of just hearing a noise, we hear a melody.

Second, Lewis tells us that this “big picture” helps make sense of its individual details—such as our own lives. We fit into something bigger. We’re in the picture, and are meant to be there. The picture is not complete without us. We realise that our familiar world is to be understood as a reflection of something more lasting and solid. Grasping this greater view of things helps us understand our own world—and ourselves—better.

Lewis was in good company here. The novelist Dorothy L. Sayers also discovered the remarkable ability of the Christian faith to make sense of things, and she saw this as a clear indication of its truth. Christian belief, she wrote to a colleague, “seems to offer the only explanation of the universe that is intellectually satisfactory.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Sayers was so attracted to this aspect of Christianity that at times she wondered whether she had “fallen in love with an intellectual pattern.”<sup>23</sup> Lewis, in contrast, saw Christianity’s ability to make sense of things as part of its attraction. But there were other benefits as well—not least the immense stimulus it provided for his imaginative life, and his exploration of the theme of beauty.

So what difference does this make? Perhaps the easiest way of explaining this is to compare Richard

Dawkins and C. S. Lewis. For Dawkins, there is no meaning or purpose in the universe. Nor is there any notion of goodness. That doesn't stop us from inventing ideas of meaning or goodness. But we're basing our lives on something make-believe. We're pretending that there is meaning to our lives, or that there are certain moral values that are reliable. But deep down, we know they're just our inventions, things we have created to help us cope with life and struggle with its puzzles and pain.

Lewis offers us a very different approach. There is meaning to life. There is a deeper moral order within the universe. And once we discover these, we can base our lives on them. This is not about *inventing* goodness and meaning but about *discerning* them. Lewis discovered that God was the one who both *disclosed* and *safeguarded* meaning and morality. We are invited to enter into a new way of seeing things, which is also the *right* way of seeing things—not because anyone imposes it on us, but because we have discovered it, and realised its reliability and trustworthiness.

Basing our lives on this meaning changes our perspective. As G. K. Chesterton points out, knowing that there is a deeper meaning makes life more interesting: “One can find no meanings in a jungle of scepticism; but the man will find more and more meanings who walks through a forest of doctrine and design. Here everything has a story tied to its tail.”<sup>24</sup>

But more than making life more interesting, discerning meaning invests our lives with significance. No longer are we mere observers. Instead, we have a role to play, and an obligation to play it. At the end of Lewis's sermon "The Weight of Glory," he addresses the burden that this meaning places on us. Our future glory (and that of our neighbours) should change the way we live our lives now:

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. . . . Our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.<sup>25</sup>

This perspective is much different from the self-centred, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" attitude that is so prevalent in the world. And this perspective is also part of the reason why so many

social services, charities, and hospitals find their roots in Christianity. Meaning matters. When we form a proper response to the question of what life is all about, it brings our lives into focus, and in turn points our gaze outward.

Now there's a lot more to say about this, and we'll come back to some of these points later in our reflections. But that's enough for one lunchtime conversation. Let's take a break, and prepare to join Lewis again for our next lunch, when we will think about the importance of friendship.