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The Apolitical and Political C.S. Lewis

I think especially of those young men of my father's generation who watched their own earlier ethical principles die along with the deaths of their friends in the trenches of the mass murder of Ypres and the Somme; and who returned determined that nothing was ever going to matter to them again and invented the aesthetic triviality of the nineteen-twenties.

– Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*¹

Mathematics nearly ended the remarkable career of C.S. Lewis before it began. In April 1916, William Kirkpatrick wrote to Albert Lewis about the future prospects for his eighteen-year-old son. Kirkpatrick was Lewis' tutor and noted that the young Lewis had remarkable literary gifts. He lacked, however, any aptitude in science or math, and this might limit Lewis' options for university. Kirkpatrick suggested a legal career, which would have had Lewis following his father's path.²

Lewis nevertheless intended to pursue an academic career, although Kirkpatrick's caveat about mathematics would prove prescient. The future don had applied to one Oxford college, only to be turned down and accepted by another. But before he could commence his studies, Lewis also needed to pass an additional test required university-wide, known as "Responsions," which included an examination on basic mathematics. Despite another tutoring sojourn with Kirkpatrick, Lewis

¹ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984 [1981]), 41.

² Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis – A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013), 44.

realized he was singularly unsuited for algebra and trigonometry. This did not bode well for his future at Oxford.

In addition to Responsions, there was another motivation behind Lewis' cramming with the Great Knock, as Kirkpatrick was known. By 1917 it was inevitable that every eligible young man would be called up for the Great War. Lewis and his father reasoned that an artillery assignment some distance from the lines would be far preferable to an infantry deployment in the trenches. Once again math stood in the way. For understandable reasons, the British military expected their artillery officers to have a rather strong competence in mathematics. Second Lieutenant C.S. Lewis was soon commissioned in the Somerset Light Infantry, where he fought, was wounded, and lost friends in the trenches of northern France.

One consequence of Lewis' military service seems almost trivial amid the broader canvas of the war, but nevertheless was instrumental for Lewis' future career in the academy: After the war Oxford University waived the Responsions entrance requirement for returning soldiers. Lewis' weakness in math, which had threatened an academic career while also putting him at the front lines, would no longer stand in his way.³ In retrospect, a man with Lewis' literary gifts would still have made a name for himself even without an elite university, yet it is difficult to think of C.S. Lewis without thinking also of Oxford. And there likely would have been no Oxford for Lewis without the war.

On his return to Oxford after his time in the trenches, Lewis wrote to his father about the experience of reconvening with his fellow students – many now veterans of a terrible war – in the Junior Common Room of University College in 1919, and reading the minutes from the last meeting, made some five years prior with nothing to record in the meantime. “I don't know of any little thing that has made me realize the absolute suspension and waste of these years more thoroughly,” Lewis reflected.⁴ The staggering waste and incomprehensible loss accompanying the Great War shaped the contours of subsequent world events and cast an immense shadow over the turn-of-the-century generation of Britons. This

³ Writing of the exemption, Lewis' brother Warnie wrote, “In this he was fortunate, for I do not believe that at any stage in his career he could have passed an examination of any kind in elementary mathematics: a view with which he himself agreed, when I put it to him many years later.” W.H. Lewis, “Memoir of C.S. Lewis,” in Warren Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, rev. ed. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003 [1966]), 28.

⁴ C.S. Lewis to Albert Lewis (January 27, 1919), in Walter Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 428.

generation of course included Lewis, even as an Irishman, and the war affected his life in even more profound ways than allowing him to escape the clutches of math.

Napoleon observed that we gain insight into a man's psyche by noting what was happening in the world when he was twenty years old. In his recent biography of Lewis, Alistair McGrath comments that Lewis turned twenty only a few weeks after the Great War ended, and thus we might expect to find that his "world of thought and experience would have been irreparably and irreversibly shaped by war, trauma, and loss."⁵ McGrath observes that this raises a puzzle for understanding Lewis, since Lewis always downplayed the effects of the war on his life, going so far as to rank their significance below his nightmarish experiences at English boarding schools prior to his happier tutelage under Kirkpatrick. Unlike many of his fellow soldiers – the young men of MacIntyre's father's generation – Lewis went on to become one of the foremost defenders of traditional ethical values and a lifelong critic of aesthetic triviality.⁶

McGrath treats this puzzle with a judicious mixture of historical biography and speculative but careful reconstruction of Lewis' mindset through use of his public and private writings. He concludes that Lewis' seeming dismissal of the importance of the war concealed a psychological strategy to protect himself from being overwhelmed. This distancing of himself from what he had been through was, as Lewis acknowledged in his autobiography, "a treaty with reality, the fixing of a frontier."⁷ Still, Lewis' protestations of insignificance notwithstanding, the meaninglessness and carnage of the war played a crucial role in facilitating Lewis' transformation from failed poet to Oxford don, Christian apologist, and one of the most enduring and influential figures of the twentieth century.

As Lewis conceded, he never did fully reckon with his formative war years. Perhaps Lewis' concerted "treaty with reality" explains his conspicuous silence, in his autobiography and elsewhere, about what led to the Great War in the first place: politics. Before all the enlistments and training, the viscera and trauma of the fighting men in the trenches and the resulting physical and spiritual brokenness were political decisions

⁵ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis – A Life*, 49.

⁶ In contrast to the description MacIntyre offers in *After Virtue*, 41. Lewis parodied the malaise of the 1920s in his first postconversion book, *The Pilgrim's Regress: Wade Annotated Edition*, ed. David C. Downing (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014 [1933]), 45.

⁷ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis – A Life*, 51; C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1996 [1955]), 158.

and counterdecisions made by European politicians and their civil servants and military officers. All the elements of politics are present in any consideration of the First World War: power, authority, scarcity, (in) justice, (in)security, and a tragic failure to promote and protect a vision of the common good.

One might expect some mention of these elements, if only a sardonic line or two, from a profoundly reflective man who fought and was wounded in the war. But Lewis is quiet about the politics of the time even in his mature reflections, and if the conventional wisdom about Lewis' subsequent career is correct, he remained quiet about politics for the rest of his life.⁸ We should not be surprised, then, given the conventional wisdom, that there is very little scholarly treatment of Lewis' political thought, despite an ever-growing literature on all things Lewis.⁹

Yet the conventional wisdom about Lewis and politics is mistaken, wrong in its understanding of Lewis and his works, and also in its reliance on a truncated view of what counts as genuinely "political." Not only was Lewis keenly interested in politics, but he also wrote a great deal about the subject. As we suggest in this book, students of Lewis and politics alike would do well to reconsider this towering twentieth-century figure from the unconventional disciplinary angle of political theory. In subsequent chapters we recover, historically situate, and describe Lewis' political thought and its application. The burden, at the outset, is to establish Lewis' credentials as a political thinker, even if an unconventional one, who is worthy of a volume dedicated to his political thought. This means first overturning the conventional wisdom that Lewis eschewed politics and political thinking.

THE APOLITICAL C.S. LEWIS?

Establishing Lewis' status as an interesting and insightful political thinker is something of a challenge, as it must overcome the testimony of some of Lewis' closest friends and even Lewis himself. The evidence for Lewis'

⁸ Lewis remained quiet about politics, though not uninvolved, if this speculation from Harry Lee Poe is correct. Poe has uncovered evidence that suggests Lewis may have acted on behalf of the British government during World War II. See Harry Lee Poe, "C.S. Lewis Was a Secret Government Agent." Christianitytoday.com, Dec. 10, 2015, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december-web-only/cs-lewis-secret-agent.html (accessed Dec. 10, 2015).

⁹ For a comprehensive overview of the secondary literature on Lewis as well as a critical analysis of the growing Lewis hagiography, see Samuel Joeckel, *The C.S. Lewis Phenomenon: Christianity and the Public Sphere* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013).

disdain for and ignorance of day-to-day politics is not hard to come by. “Jack was not interested in politics,” writes Lewis’ stepson, Douglas Gresham.¹⁰ Warnie Lewis, noting his brother’s reputation for having “contempt for politics and politicians,” explains that the household conversation in their childhood was dominated by a rather one-sided “torrent of grumble and vituperation” about Irish politics such that Lewis simply equated adult conversation with politics.

The Lewis brothers’ early stories of Animal-land and Boxen were replete with talking animals and dealt with mundane political intrigues and maneuvers. The twelve-year-old Lewis even wrote two novels that “revolved entirely around politics.” Warnie Lewis concluded that the early, stifling emphasis on politics in the Lewis home led to the “long-term result” of a “disgust and revulsion from the very idea of politics before he was out of his teens.” In an earlier biography of Lewis, George Sayer noted that the subject matter of Boxen was “military and political, aspects of life in which the adult Lewis showed no interest whatsoever.”¹¹ Lewis’ friend Chad Walsh, author of *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics*, wrote in that first book about Lewis that despite Lewis’ brilliance, “for a Christian social philosophy one turns to Maritain, Niebuhr, Berdyaev, George MacLeod and many others – not to C.S. Lewis.”¹²

The evidence from Lewis himself is extensive, though three short examples will suffice. In a letter to Warnie, Lewis mentions an argument he had with Owen Barfield about the extent to which a Christian should feel concerned about far-off foreign affairs; in this case the subject was the Soviet incursion into Finland and the Mannerheim line.¹³ Lewis’ commentary captures both his awareness of political matters and his frustration with how politics (and economics) have changed: “[T]he world, as it is now becoming and has partly become, is simply *too much* for people of the old square-rigged type like you and me. I don’t understand its economics, or its politics, or any dam’ thing about it.”

The claim about Lewis’ hostility toward politicians is well grounded, though even Lewis recognized that his antipathy to politicians might have been overwrought. Sixteen years after his 1940 letter to Warnie, Lewis

¹⁰ Douglas Gresham, *Jack’s Life: The Life Story of C.S. Lewis* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2005), 28.

¹¹ George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 50.

¹² Chad Walsh, *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 160, cited in Gilbert Meilander, *The Social and Ethical Thought of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947), 1.

¹³ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, p. 350.

offered high praise to Chad Walsh's *Behold the Glory*, noting that the bit he needed most was Walsh's defense of politicians. Walsh had likened politicians to physicians, most of whom do the best they can given the materials they have. Some are stupid, others wicked, but this does not distinguish them as a class from any other class of human beings, and many do attempt to do some good in a limited, earthly way.¹⁴ Lewis conceded it was a message he needed to hear.

A final example: Six days before he died in November 1963, Lewis responded to a Mrs. Frank Jones, noting that "Our papers at the moment are filled with nothing but politics, a subject in which I cannot take any interest." Immediately after declaring his indifference to politics, Lewis went on to lament the inevitability of a forthcoming and likely long-serving Labour government, though the "regimentation, austerity, and meddling" that accompany that party would be mitigated by the death of Sir Stafford Cripps, the "late nursery governess of England." In these snippets and anecdotes, Lewis proclaims both ignorance of and hostility toward politics, though as we shall see it is a paradoxically well-informed ignorance and a moth-drawn-to-the-flame hostility.

Other biographical details have become part of the conventional portrayal of the apolitical Lewis. In the early 1950s Lewis famously declined an invitation from Winston Churchill to become a Commander of the British Empire.¹⁵ He once wrote to his brother that he "loathed great issues" and would prefer to see a "Stagnation party – which at General Elections would boast that during its term of office *no* event of the least importance had taken place."¹⁶ Lewis famously claimed to avoid newspapers, and to the end of his life expressed skepticism and at times even despair about politics.¹⁷ Several commentators insist on Lewis' "fatuous

¹⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 713.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 147. His reasoning here was that this award might give ammunition to those who would dismiss his work as merely political, and conservatively political at that.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 368–369.

¹⁷ In a 1959 letter to the American newspaper editor Dan Tucker, Lewis wrote despondently, "A hundred years ago we all thought that Democracy was it. Neither you nor I probably think so now. It neither allows the ordinary man to control legislation nor qualifies him to do so. The real questions are settled in secret and the newspapers keep us occupied with largely imaginary issues. And this is all the easier because democracy always in the end destroys education. It did so for you sometime ago and is now doing so for us (see a speech of Screwtape's wh. will soon appear in the *Sat. Evening Post*). I am, you see, at my wit's end on such matters." Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 1105. A few years later, in 1962, Lewis wrote to the author and playwright J.B. Priestly: "I doubt if

ignorance of politics,” citing for support Warnie’s anecdote about how Lewis once mistook Yugoslavia’s Marshall Tito for the King of Greece.¹⁸

Lewis himself, those close to him, and more distant observers seem to present several compelling reasons *not* to write a book on Lewis’ political thought. There are several claims to be teased out here. One is that Lewis disliked politics. Another is that he was uninterested in politics and, therefore, third, that he was ignorant about political matters. One can conclude from these mixed claims what we have called the conventional wisdom about Lewis and politics, namely, that he doesn’t have much to say and what he does say is not particularly interesting.

It is undeniable and unsurprising that Lewis held many politicians in disdain and was pessimistic about the potential for political solutions to live up to their advertising. Nevertheless, the conventional claims about the apolitical Lewis are overstated. We know from Lewis’ personal letters, his education and teaching, and his published works that he was both very interested in and knowledgeable about politics and political thought. Of course, for our purposes, much depends on how one defines “politics.” It is true that Lewis was not actively involved in partisan politics and took little interest in transitory policy questions. But politics in the fullest sense means more than parliamentary intrigue and debates about taxes and tariffs. In reality, Lewis did have much to say about the underlying foundations of a just political order. Though he may not have been interested in contemporaneous political maneuvering, he was, as John West notes, always interested in identifying the “permanent in the political.”¹⁹

While we do not intend to provide a full biographical treatment of Lewis in this work, we have already offered some biographical evidence that Lewis was in fact deeply interested in political matters. The

I am a Tory. I am much more nearly a political sceptic.” Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 1371.

¹⁸ See, for example, Christopher Ricks, “Dabblers in Ink and Self-Admiration,” *New York Times* (April 8, 1979), www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/11/specials/tolkien-carpenter.html, and Joseph Sobran, “The Prophetic C.S. Lewis,” *The Imaginative Conservative* (May 13, 2012), www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2012/03/prophetic-cs-lewis.html. For Warnie’s recollection, see Clyde Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead, eds., *Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 236.

¹⁹ John G. West, “Finding the Permanent in the Political: C.S. Lewis as a Political Thinker,” in Andrew A. Tadie and Michael H. Macdonald, eds., *Permanent Things: Toward the Recovery of a More Human Scale at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996). Available at www.discovery.org/a/457.

Great War couldn't help but have had an enormous influence on Lewis, and, as we have seen, his childhood in politically turbulent Ireland was dominated by the unceasing political interests of his father.²⁰ We also note that Lewis' interest in politics and an antipathy toward politics and politicians are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but more likely reinforcing.

Nor was Lewis as ignorant of even partisan or mundane political matters as he is sometimes made out to be. While he may have mistook Marshall Tito for the King of Greece, his personal letters include more informed references to British elections,²¹ international summits,²² various political figures,²³ racism and democracy,²⁴ unions,²⁵ communist advances in China and Hungary,²⁶ Joseph McCarthy and American party politics,²⁷ the Cuban Missile Crisis,²⁸ and capital punishment.²⁹ Lewis should not be mistaken for a policy wonk or an expert in the minutiae of elections or international relations, but neither was he ignorant or apathetic about politics, as he is often made out to be.

Lewis' education was also more deeply steeped in politics and political thought than is appreciated. His interest in literature, learning, and politics began at an early age. His father was a lawyer almost obsessed with political matters and his mother a teacher who encouraged him to study logic. Flora Lewis worried about his health and consequently – as we've noted – Lewis and his brother spent most of their days inside reading and creating mythical, and political, stories of fantastic lands and talking animals.³⁰ Lewis kept a diary as a child, and by the age of ten not only had he recorded his observations from his reading of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, he had written an essay called "Home Rule" about the future relationship between Ireland and the British crown.³¹ Prior to his

²⁰ Adam Barkman, *C.S. Lewis and Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), 419. And we have not even mentioned the role it played in introducing Lewis to the Moore family, a set of relationships that would bear heavily in Lewis' life until the passing of Mrs. Moore in 1951.

²¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 62. ²² *Ibid.*, 382.

²³ The index to Lewis' *Collected Letters* contains several entries for major contemporaneous political figures such as Queen Elizabeth II, General Douglas MacArthur, Winston Churchill, and Dwight Eisenhower.

²⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 618. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1314.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 183 and 806, respectively. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 528–529 and 219, respectively.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1392–1393. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 246–247 and 1299–1300. ³⁰ Sayer, *Jack*, 46–52.

³¹ Barkman, *C.S. Lewis and Philosophy*, 444; Lewis, "Home Rule," in *The Lewis Papers: Memories of the Lewis Family, 1850–1930*, vol. 6, ed. Warren Lewis, 112–113.

entrance to University College of Oxford, Lewis had read the classics of English literature and mastered French, Italian, and Greek.³²

Although by any account Lewis possessed an impressive intellect, his early education that continued under Kirkpatrick and culminated at Oxford gave him a unique knowledge base from which to consider a host of academic subjects, including political thought. While at Oxford, Lewis earned three first-class honors degrees. Honor Moderations concentrated on the Greek and Latin classics. “Greats” included Roman History, translation of Plato and Aristotle, ancient history, Greek and Latin prose, logic, and moral and political philosophy. Lewis earned his third degree in a relatively new subject at the time, English, which included Anglo-Saxon. Both Cambridge and Oxford award their degrees by class: first, second, and third. Though first-class degrees were (and are) rare, Lewis earned three first-class degrees in Honors Moderations, Greats, and English.³³ This suited him very well for both philosophy and literature, and his first university position was as a lecturer in philosophy.

As a student and a teacher, Lewis read, wrote, and taught about many of the great political philosophers in the Western canon. As Adam Barkman points out in a note about Lewis’ early essay “On Bolshevism,” we know that Lewis was teaching his political science students about Lenin as late as 1939 and that even as a literary scholar Lewis continued to teach his students in history, English, and political science the canon of Western political thought beginning with Plato.³⁴ “While teaching English literature at Magdalen,” A.J.P. Taylor wrote, “Lewis helped in the history school by teaching political theory. He took the history students. His lectures covered Rousseau and Aristotle, et al. He loved doing this.”³⁵

Lewis was steeped in the classics of the Western tradition. With an education hard to imagine today, Lewis could appreciate the intellectual

³² Sayer, *Jack*, 94. Lewis confessed to his friend George Sayer that he often found himself “thinking” in Greek.

³³ Jeffrey D. Schultz and John G. West Jr., *The C.S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33–34.

³⁴ Barkman, *C.S. Lewis and Philosophy*, 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 447, citing A.J.P. Taylor, “The Fun of the Thing,” in *In Search of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Stephen Schofield, 117–122 (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge, 1983), 118. See also Barkman’s valuable discussion of Lewis’s two sets of lectures, “The Good – Its Place among the Values” and “The Moral Good – Its Place among the Values.” See Barkman, *C.S. Lewis and Philosophy*, 329–348. Lewis’ notes on Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and other figures are extant, many of which are housed at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College or the rare books collection at the Davis Library at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill.

and philosophical transitions that had transpired from Plato to Locke to the contemporary theorists of his own day in the mid-twentieth century. With his background in the ancient Greeks as well as the Scholastics and early modern thinkers, Lewis was well versed in philosophy and ethics and political thought, including natural-law theory, virtue ethics, and consequentialism. His interests in world mythologies also gave him a breadth of perspective that transcended a purely Western or parochial focus.³⁶

Lewis not only appreciated the classical and medieval authors in a sense that might well be impossible today, but he also saw himself as uniquely qualified to translate older thought for modern use. In his inaugural address after his appointment to Cambridge University, Lewis compared himself to a dinosaur because he was one of the last of a dying breed of students of the classics who could read them as a native.³⁷ Yet Lewis was also a product of the modern age, perhaps more so than he recognized. As we demonstrate in subsequent chapters, he ultimately subscribed to a Lockean form of social contract democracy, tempered by Millian concerns about social conformity, just one example of Lewis' affinity with modernity.³⁸ Lewis straddled the fault lines between modernity and antiquity in such a way as to allow him to comment intelligibly on both.

We are left with a puzzle at this point. Lewis' brother, his stepson, Lewis himself, and several friends and former students tell us that he both despised politics and had little interest or knowledge of the subject. Yet his letters, his education, and his teaching tell a different story. In assessing these claims about Lewis' supposed ignorance of political matters, much depends on what we mean by "politics." If we accept the definition of politics as the negative domain of sausage-making legislative deals, bureaucratic and institutional power structures, and the seemingly constant state of electoral campaigning, then we will not find much political thought from Lewis. We grant that Lewis disdained

³⁶ See, for example, the appendix to *Abolition of Man*.

³⁷ C.S. Lewis "De Descriptione Temporum," in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 13–14.

³⁸ Lewis' self-identification with democracy is found in his essay "Equality," in *Present Concerns* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 17–20. His simple description of what the social contract should mean is found in his essay "Delinquents in the Snow," in Walter Hooper, ed., *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 306–310.