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Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien on the Human Condition.*

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Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien on the Human Condition.* Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006. 212 pp. ISBN 0805440186..

In his study of Medieval cosmology, *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis explains that, contrary to modern interpretations, Medieval and Renaissance thinkers did not place Earth in the center of their model of the universe because they felt man was the most important part of creation; to the contrary, Lewis argues, they imagined Earth as the bottom of a funnel, the furthest remove from the Prime Mover, a symbol of distance due to human sin. In *Miracles*, he reiterates this argument, stating that it is man's unworthiness, his great need of grace, that drew the Divine Mercy. While rejecting the notion that mankind, by virtue of some inherent worth or achievement, had some claim on Divine Mercy, Lewis asks his readers to recognize man as the rather ridiculous figure he truly is: spirit, yet corporeal; rational, yet capable of great unreason; conscious of great self-importance, yet weak and small in his environment. Compounding all these paradoxes is man's ignorance of himself, his struggle to understand his own nature. It is to this question, understanding the identity of our own bizarre species, that professor and scholar Donald T. Williams attempts to address in his work, *Mere Humanity: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien on the Human Condition*.^[1]

When Lucy Pevensie joins Mr. Tumnus for tea the very first time, she notices a curious tome in his collection: *Is Man a Myth?* Although Lucy passes this by, busy with sardines, cake, and tales of woodland revelry, Williams uses this amusing detail as the impetus for his investigation into what he argues is the most important pair of questions for a society to consider: What is man? What is his purpose in life? The answers to these questions determine not only how an individual will act, but also how a society will progress. For example, Williams sites both abortion and education as current controversies which ultimately hinge on the participants' understanding of these questions. Williams proposes to compare two predominant world views: the traditional, which views man as created by God in His image with a creative, rational spirit and purpose; versus the modern (which Williams calls reductionist)

that defines man as no different from the animals, a mere coalescence of his physical matter. Williams aims to show that the traditional view offers a more complete and livable explanation of the human predicament. He musters British authors G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien as his primary support, for each directly responded to the reductionist push of their age. As he explains:

So now we may clamber onto the shoulders of those giants as we attempt to peer into the new millennium. Marion Montgomery has said that 'literature provides texts to which theology applies philosophy.' His critical epigram defines with admirable precision the kind of peering we will be trying to do. . . Our concern is not with such technicalities but rather with the larger view of man's nature and purpose and with the human condition as it is portrayed in a series of insightful literary texts that fruitfully embody an old and wise philosophy.[2]

Upon beginning this' work, the reader familiar with these writers notices first that Williams has not only studied these literary giants, he has imbibed their spirit. The adapted title is fitting: in *Mere Humanity* Williams' style suggests the flow, tone, and structure of Lewis' own logical argumentation. Mirroring Lewis' use of classical rhetoric, in the first four chapters he builds a strong foundation of reason and establishes definitions that pave the way for a conversation between the author and reader. He begins the introduction by presenting a question -- what is the nature and purpose of man? -- its pertinence, and its complications. He then introduces his intended method, defending the use of Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien both by the influence of literature on our understanding in general and by the significance of these authors in the modern world in particular. The next three chapters investigate each author's contribution to the debate between tradition and reductionism through their non-fiction. Walking his readers carefully through Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, and Tolkien's "On Faerie Stories," Williams accomplishes several important tasks. First, he elucidates these often overwhelming works by laying bare the bones of their arguments while retaining their essential truths. Second, he uses these works to develop a catalogue of terms he later uses in his own analysis, thus ensuring the reader will follow his precise meaning. Third, he combines the arguments of each writer to construct a cohesive response to and denunciation of reductionist materialism. In many ways, these first four chapters read like Lewis' *Miracles*, systematically crafting an argument through evidence that is appealing both to the reader's intellect and verified by his personal experience.

What Williams makes tangible and logical in those first four chapters, unfortunately becomes somewhat esoteric and hazy in the remaining four. Having established his central arguments by investigating the nonfiction works of Lewis, Tolkien, and Chesterton, Williams now applies the terms and rubrics described in the earlier chapters to various fictional works of Lewis and Tolkien.³ While these passages are interesting and even beautiful (especially that on Tolkien and human creativity), they fail to provide the same logical and careful argumentation suggested by the promising beginning. Rather than his previous systematic craftsmanship, these chapters read like conversations with a wise and congenial professor. They are a series of sketches rather than what the reader expects: a clear portrait of Man. To a reader familiar with Lewis and Tolkien, these chapters will be enjoyable reminders; to those unfamiliar or expecting a more definite climax to the investigation, these chapters will serve as a disappointing conclusion.

In addition to the core investigation conducted in the main eight chapters, Williams enriches the reader's experience in several creative and helpful ways. First, he provides a thorough list of works cited, ample annotations, and a complete index, equipping the reader for further investigation. Second, he includes two appendices to clarify certain crucial parts of his argument: the first defends Lewis' works of literary criticism and the value of secular literature to Christians; the second is a deeper investigation into the dangers of reductionism and postmodernism philosophies. Third, Williams draws from a myriad of classical and popular sources to strengthen his work, be it Shakespearean quotes heading chapters or Star Trek references to illuminate cultural inquiry. Williams separates each chapter from the next with a poem of his own which introduces the next key point; even these are respectful nods to the likes of Donne, Hopkins, Milton, and Wordsworth.

In *Mere Humanity*, Donald T. Williams presents questions in great need of consideration today. Drawing from great minds of the West, Williams succeeds in reiterating the traditional view of man in a presentation which is both compelling and pertinent.

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Notes

[1] Williams, Donald T. *Mere Humanity: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien on the Human Condition*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006.

[2] Williams, 10-11.

[3] Without explanation, Williams ignores Chesterton's fictional contributions to this argument, despite the pertinence of such titles as *Manalive* or *The Man Who Was Thursday*. This seems strangely imbalanced, especially considering that Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* provides a crucial cornerstone to William's investigation of non-fiction.

