

Book Reviews

Justin Dyer and Micah J. Watson, *C.S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Vii+160 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-10824-0.

This new book by political scientist Justin Dyer and Micah J. Watson adds to recent Lewis scholarship by addressing a largely untouched area – a book-length argument about Lewis as a political thinker.

The first chapter provides a short biography of Lewis, highlighting his education in Greats (classical and some modern philosophy), which substantiates the claim that Lewis was far from ignorant with respect to the major Western political thinkers. The authors admit that Lewis was indeed a-political, if by politics we mean day-to-day policy-making and local elections (5). But rather than rely solely on a truncated definition of politics, they argue that Lewis was deeply concerned about the ‘perennial questions that pertain to human beings’ (11). Dyer and Watson employ a definition of politics more akin to the Greek use of polis, where the whole organism and socio-economic fabric of the community were tied together by concerns for the good life, moral education, and purpose. The rest of the first chapter outlines how these authors will argue for Lewis as a political thinker steeped in the Natural Law tradition.

Chapter Two, in order to lay the foundation for Natural Law, rehearses Lewis’ arguments for Creation, the Fall, and the reliability of human reason. The book generally follows a pattern of introducing an issue with one or two thinkers (in Chapter Two they are Charles Darwin and Thomas Pangle) representing a

materialistic understanding of the universe and harnessing two of Lewis' texts (in this case *Miracles* and "The Poison of Subjectivism") to rebut naturalism as a tenable position from which to view the world. For Lewis, a right reliance on reason means the universe must have a supernatural origin because a materialistic universe, being the product of evolutionary chance, undermines the validity of one's own powers of reasoning.

Once the basis for trusting human reason is established, the next chapter is more interesting as Barth and Lewis are interlocutors on the subject of Natural Law. The centuries-long debate regarding God's command that must be obeyed, or a moral law holding God to account, is epitomised in these two thinkers. Barth sees Natural Law as not a distinctly Christian principle but one that can be capitalised on by totalitarian ideologies. For the Swiss theologian, only a reliance on the 'command of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ' will support the weight of Christian ethics (52). However, Lewis thought that Barth's reliance on divine command made the law arbitrary and untied it from God's character, which, to Lewis, was tantamount to 'devil worship' (53). The authors finish Chapter Three by showing the political implications of rejecting Natural Law through Lewis' arguments in *The Abolition of Man* and identifying '[t]he cure, [which] is not primarily to win debates, [but] rather...to shape emotional dispositions through moral education' (59).

At last, the authors come to more patently political matters in Chapter Four: Lewis' critique concerning the politics of modernity. Lewis saw the modern political apparatus as failing to train young people in the proper emotional responses, particularly as meted out in modern language theories. Dyer and Watson here set *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and Lewis' various articles against the political frameworks of Hobbes, Machiavelli, and later Rousseau and Hegel. The final blow to the anti-teleological politics of the aforementioned is Lewis' most straightforward defence of Natural Law, what he calls the Tao, in *The Abolition of Man*. Three arguments conclude the fourth chapter: we must be trained to

know and love the good; although we have impaired moral sight, we can still perceive the good; and finally, the consequences of adopting moral subjectivism will lead to nihilism.

In chapters five and six, there is a turn from Lewis' critique of politics to his political affirmations, which come as a surprise at this point in the book. Dyer and Watson have introduced a biography of Lewis that is deeply reverent of the Natural Law tradition, appreciative of Aristotle, Aquinas, and hierarchy, only to tell us that Lewis actually adopted not only a Lockean liberal democratic position, but also a version of John Stuart Mill's harm principle for legislating morality. The authors make a strong case demonstrating the common ground between Locke and Lewis: limited government and protection of individual rights, God as the ground of morality, morality as accessible through God and natural reason, a detestation of theocracy, and adherence to social contract theory to ground government. However, Lewis did not believe in democracy for Enlightenment reasons (everyman ought to have a share in government), but rather because of fallen human nature; he did not trust rulership to any one person. Similarly, the authors argue, Lewis did not believe in Mill's harm principle so each member of society could have maximal pleasure or because an individual is sovereign over their own body. Rather, it was a way to procure the integrity of the church from excessive meddling in moral legislation and another way to limit the role of government from potentially engaging in 'soulcraft'.

There is enough reason to call upon Locke to support Lewis' positive political positions; however, the authors acknowledge that Lewis was not a utilitarian (121) and that Lewis, in fact, thought Mill was wrong 'about nearly everything' (118). We are left confused, then, why the authors continue to say 'Lewis subscribed to Mill's harm principle' when it dies the death of a thousand qualifications (119). It is said that Lewis endorsed a version of Mill's harm principle rather than *categorically* accepting it. But it remains a mystery how Lewis is able to maintain his Natural Law teleological philosophy while also accepting Mill's principle, only to

refrain from religious overreach and maintain individual rights. Mill is called upon to support Lewis' political thoughts on three issues in particular: the crime of the homosexual act, enforcing moral education of the public, and aligning divorce laws with Christian principles. To all three Lewis says Christians should not force their ideal vision of society on the public. But then to what extent is the good to be cultivated in the young? Whose vision of the good shall we go by? And, how exactly should Christians engage in politics and legislation? There seems to be a gap that Lewis refrains from filling, as Dyer and Watson continually point out; Lewis was not a political theorist and never submitted a fully orb'd political programme (122).

The closest Lewis comes to providing a framework for thinking through the details of political questions appears in his essay, 'Why I am Not a Pacifist'. Dyer and Watson lay out Lewis' conscience-authority method that relies on Natural Law, Scripture, and Church tradition to arrive at the correct conclusion in (presumably) any moral conundrum. Lewis used this formula to come to the conclusion that pacifism is not a necessary Christian position, and although the authors readily acknowledge the weaknesses in these ever debatable questions, they regard Lewis as 'setting up the chess pieces in such a way as to connect Christian faith and doctrine with the categories of thinking necessary to engage the modern world' (131). In like manner, the reader must not come to this book with the expectation that Lewis will have all the desired political answers, but rather Lewis' thought provides a deep well of insight on the human condition, major western thinkers and ideas, as well as a fresh perspective, having 'the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through' his mind by the reading of old books (85).

The final chapter, 'Politics in the Shadowlands', reveals the authors' familiarity with and appreciation of Lewis' Cosmic Trilogy and Chronicles of Narnia as they seek to draw out the political implications of his imaginative constructs. The book ends with the helpful acknowledgement that as a Christian Lewis understood questions of governance and institutions to be of penultimate

importance, and that the greatest political act is to bring people to an encounter with Christ.

In the final analysis, this book is recommended to initiate one into a survey of Lewis' thought and how it might integrate with broadly political (or political-philosophical) concerns in the general Christian tradition. It seems that Lewis himself had not quite worked out how his pre-modern predilections and his modern existence could be perfectly amalgamated, and I admire the tenacity of these authors to uncover these insights; but inasmuch as this book purports to be on politics, it hardly begins before concessions are made and the book ends. As the authors concede, Lewis merely sets up the chessboard; others must move the pieces. One thing *C.S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law* does very well is to stir the imagination and make links that were in the background all the while, driving one back to the wisdom of C.S. Lewis, even if he did not spell out exactly how to run a country.

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Wesley A. Kort. *Reading C. S. Lewis: A Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 299 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-022134-8.

The central thrust of *Reading C. S. Lewis* by Wesley Kort is to describe what he calls the 'larger project' of Lewis' works. In doing so, Kort has written a solid and often insightful study of the common themes and purposes found in Lewis' novels, autobiography, and apologetic works. Perhaps some of Lewis' followers, particularly evangelicals, will be put off by Kort's

purpose to evaluate much of Lewis' work more broadly, that is, bring to light the principles and processes apart from Christianity that Lewis accepted and employed. However, it will be helpful to any admirer or critic of Lewis to read Kort's study. The author's claim that this 'larger project' is separable from Lewis' Christianity is cogently argued and well documented. Kort contextualises Lewis' conversion experience by setting it within broad philosophical and cultural concerns. This is not to say that Kort's commentary is free of omissions and difficulties, including politically correct gestures towards gender and race that sometimes obscure rather than illuminate Lewis' contributions.

Kort's study is divided into three parts, of which the first is concerned with what he labels 'reasonable assumptions'. Kort examines *Surprised by Joy*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Mere Christianity* to harvest a number of ideas fundamental to Lewis' *Weltanschauung*. He describes the underpinnings of Lewis' attitude toward humans, the world, and their relationship to one another, linking the confidence in daily experience that Lewis maintained with his more celebrated sense of joy (*Sehnsucht*). Lewis' joy and abiding optimistic attitude toward the world caused his rejection of much of the intellectual elite's hostility toward Western Civilisation, especially after WWI. Foundational to Lewis' worldview, according to Kort, was his antipathy toward theoretical materialism, a philosophical perspective essential to modernity. The author understands the ubiquitous presence of materialistic thinking in the present age and correctly identifies Lewis' rejection of it as central to his 'program'. Kort's explanation of Lewis' attitude is straightforward and fair, stating that 'materialism for Lewis provides a hopelessly inadequate account of who as persons we are' (113). Human self-awareness and faculties of reason, morality, imagination, and especially volition are not adequately explained by materialism. Kort explains that Lewis' conversion arose from his rejection of materialism and his perception that Christianity made sense of the world by embracing complexity rather than by reduction to dogmatic simplicity. Neither fear of Hell nor the authority

of church or scripture motivated Lewis' turn to Christ. Rather, his conversion originated in the intellectual quest for a paradigm of sufficient depth and nuance to give scope to our very real experiences outside the material world. Kort drives this point home with great force and command of the evidence.

Kort examines the Cosmic Trilogy and *The Abolition of Man* to collect Lewis' major contributions to social criticism. In this section, he is quite successful in substantiating his claim to have excavated a 'broader project'. Lewis' social criticism is essentially a critique of modernity, and although Kort does not mention it, he makes clear that Lewis' role as critic rests not merely on his self-proclaimed dinosaur-like status, but rather on many astute observations of modernity, which we would be well advised to consider thoughtfully. The first of these elements of social critique Kort calls *dissociation*, or put more simply, a misapplication of science. By the use of the scientific method (isolation, reduction, abstraction, etc.) and the growth in science's power and prestige, the realm of science grows to absorb people (treated as facts) and values (treated as illusions). Kort uses, to great effect, the persona of Weston and the institution of N.I.C.E. to show how Lewis powerfully enjoins readers to understand this misapplication and its dehumanising consequences.

Materialism comes under scrutiny in this section as well. Kort backpedals unnecessarily when claiming that materialism, in Lewis' view, is weak not because of its inadequate explanation of the world but because of its tendency to glorify power. This is not to say that Kort is not correct in his description of Lewis' critique of power as the insatiable expression of pride and thus the aggrandisement of the self. Materialism is the philosophy that gives human beings power over Nature (the programme of Francis Bacon whom Kort mentions in passing via footnote) and, in turn, empowers some individuals, nations, and cultures over others. Through the creation of more powerful machines, which provide mastery over nature as well as of person over person, the present is eclipsed by the future. It is this infatuation with the future that de-emphasises the

only real time, namely the now. Kort ties this critique of modernism to Lewis' respect for the texts of the Western canon. Scholars traditionally apply these texts to the interpretation of the present. But these humanistic texts are trivialized and marginalized by the misapplication of science to human values, the love of machines and the anticipation of the future. Kort refreshingly directs our attention to how these infatuations in modern Western culture have encouraged the oppression and disparagement of other cultures not dominated by materialistic philosophy. Lewis was thus no fan of colonialism and imperialism.

Kort's commentary uses four of the Narnia tales and *The Four Loves* to find 'principles' that hint at a sort of general technique or even a system of the world employed by Lewis. There is insufficient space to discuss all of these, so a sample must suffice. Some may react to Kort's organization as artificial, but his systematic classification fits into his intent to excavate Lewis' broader concerns. Briefly, Kort identifies two types of principle: doctrinal and moral. Of his doctrinal principles, one of the more interesting is that of relatedness, by which Lewis understands reality as a fabric that intimately connects wholes to parts and focuses on the idea that meaning in life as well as personhood arises from these relations. Section three of Kort's commentary is a useful, structured, clear, and yet complex discussion of the 'broader project'.

In general, Kort's commentary, descriptions, and explanations of the various works discussed are enlightening and accurate. His book could well be used as a supplementary text in an introductory course on Lewis. However, in his chapter examining *Perelandra*, Kort has the curious habit of referring to the scientist Weston exclusively as Weston, giving the wrong impression that the man himself is the tempter and debater of Ransom. Kort's commentary acknowledges that the satanic invasion of Weston has resulted in the empty shell of the 'Un-man'. However, Kort's consistent use of the name Weston, when Lewis' text almost never refers to the tempter as Weston, results in a profound diminution of the intense horror flowing from the pages of *Perelandra*, and distorts Lewis'

pervasive sense that it is no longer Weston but an entity entirely evil and unhuman – Satan himself – who is the real tempter of The Lady.

On the whole, and despite Kort's protestations of neutrality vis-à-vis Lewis' devotees and detractors, it is clear that Kort takes a positive view of Lewis. He appears quite sympathetic to Lewis' criticism of materialism. Despite his disclaimer that he does not necessarily find Lewis' arguments regarding religion convincing, Kort boldly states that Lewis' 'project' deserves to be taken seriously and treated with 'respect' (267), and makes clear that Lewis' original perspective and social critiques go far beyond those who hijack Lewis for rigid or merely doctrinal or sectarian purposes. Kort sympathises with criticisms of the profound problems associated with the overarching paradigm of materialism that threatens our textual canon's relevance and confines our humanity within a deterministic and mechanised society. In this important regard, any appreciator or critic of Lewis will benefit from the efforts of Kort.

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Raymond Edwards, *Tolkien*. London: Robert Hale, 2014. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0719809866.

For decades, Humphrey Carpenter's esteemed *Tolkien: A Biography* has been not only the chief biography of this influential author, but virtually the only reliable, book-length narrative of his life. Studies of various sorts certainly appeared, from David Doughan's short sketch for the Tolkien Society,¹ to John Garth's focused investigation of Tolkien's formative early years, to Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond's thorough but encyclopaedic reference works. Readers

1 This can be found on the Society's website, and remains one of the best concise outlines of Tolkien's life available: <https://www.tolkienesociety.org/author/biography/>

of Tolkien have also been confronted by an extensive outline of his creative life through various posthumous publications, especially *The History of Middle-earth*. While dedicated readers of Tolkien have surely appreciated this wealth of detailed study, there is a clear need for synthesis of such a potentially overwhelming mass of data.

In *Tolkien*, Raymond Edwards gives us exactly this, a deeply informed but very readable digest of Tolkien's life – especially his mental life. The basic events of Tolkien's life (youthful bereavement and romance, war, scholarship, the Inklings, fame, etc.) are naturally related, building on, without supplanting, the classics of Tolkien biographical scholarship. But where Edwards really excels is in considering Tolkien's intellectual, creative, and emotional life through these largely familiar events. He asks not just what Tolkien did, but what Tolkien was reading, writing, or (not) publishing, what he was teaching, who he was talking (and listening) to: in short, what he felt and thought over the course of life – or even after it, since the book appropriately includes two short chapters at the end treating the posthumous publications of Tolkien's writings² and the adaptations of his work into film.

This perspective is not only highly appropriate for a creative academic best-known for his writings, but is often fruitful in shedding clearer light on aspects of Tolkien's life. Edwards has a particular sympathy for the many practical and intellectual difficulties Tolkien faced in both his academic and creative work. Very often, the discussion is concerned with why Tolkien was unable to finish this or that project, from the deeply frustrating Clarendon Chaucer, to a surely-expected but never-begun academic monograph, to (of course) "The Silmarillion". Edwards ably and judiciously untangles the many factors: challenges with publishers and collaborators, dis-

2 Edwards begins with the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977, and only later mentions in passing the prior publication in 1975 of his translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo*. Given Edwards' usual attention to the importance of Tolkien's academic works, it would have been interesting to hear his thoughts on Christopher Tolkien's choice to privilege these Middle English works even above the much-anticipated *Silmarillion*.

ruptions from poor health and moves, and Tolkien's own perfectionism and self-doubt – not to mention the inhibiting effect one project (such as the aforementioned stalled-out Clarendon Chaucer, or the immensely consuming *Lord of the Rings*) could have on his other work. Against this backdrop, the central creative accomplishment of Tolkien's lifetime – the completion and publication of *The Lord of the Rings* – emerges as more remarkable a feat even than it has already seemed.

Tolkien's long struggles with both *The Lord of the Rings* and 'The Silmarillion' certainly feature (Edwards selectively draws on the voluminous *History of Middle-earth* to good effect), and will be the most obvious point of interest for many of Tolkien's fans, but Edwards also spares a great deal of attention for Tolkien's other major concerns: philology, religion, and personal relationships.³ The first stands out in particular, and in some ways *Tolkien* approaches a 'biographical' sketch of English philology from the later 19th into the later 20th centuries. This is treated expansively, with Edwards even going so far as to print *Schleicher's Fable*, a short tale in the reconstructed 'asterisk language' of Proto-Indo-European, in two versions (Schleicher's original and a modern reworking of it).⁴ Tolkien's core professional field of medieval English philology (a

3 Edwards does note the fundamental place that a further intellectual activity had for Tolkien: his habit of inventing new languages. He is, however, not able to incorporate this strand of Tolkien's creative life in the same way he does Tolkien's work on the *Legendarium*, in part because many of the relevant materials are still in the process of being published (and in any case, such writings as have been published are technical, and have received exceptionally little critical commentary, making them very difficult to incorporate into the larger picture of Tolkien's creative work).

4 The second version, by Adams, is meant by Edwards to illustrate how in 'recent years, Indo-European philology of a technical stamp has become unattractively wedded to diacritics, superscripts and subscripts, and similar typographical horrors' (59). Indo-Europeanists may well have an unhealthy taste for such things, but if so, it is a vice inherited from the Neogrammarians, whose desire for philological accuracy led them since at least the 1870s to strew their journals and books with an array of symbols that must have surely tried their printers' patience.

topic extending to, in this context, Norse and Gothic) is outlined, not only in its subject material, but also in its practical embodiment in university departments, syllabi, and lecture topics. This could have made substantial portions of the book rather 'academic' (in its sense as a synonym for 'dull'), but Edwards relates all this material with both clear enthusiasm and a sense of self-restraint that makes the philological sections some of the most enjoyable parts of the book.⁵

Edwards, himself Roman Catholic, is also careful to note Tolkien's connections with other Catholics in his life. This results in a particularly clear portrait of Tolkien's life and relationship with Father Francis Morgan, and a fair degree of attention on his friendship with figures such as Robert 'Humphrey' Havard. Edwards also includes an appendix on 'Tolkien the Catholic'. Throughout, Edwards is critical and judicious, careful not to exaggerate or distort the Roman Catholicism of Tolkien or his creative writings, while also quite appropriately giving a sympathetic and intelligent account of this important element of Tolkien's life.

Much of the book is given over to Tolkien's relationships, especially the TCBS and the Inklings (and among the latter, especially C.S. Lewis). Though all these subjects have been treated extensively before, Edwards does a good job of contextualizing Tolkien's friendships, both with respect to his academic and creative work, and within the history and culture of the day. His treatment of the Inklings is particularly welcome for emphasizing that company and socializing, rather than literary mission, stood at the centre of this (sometimes amorphous) group. Edwards certainly recognizes the significant literary output by individual members of the group, and the importance to Tolkien of having a sympathetic reader like Lewis, but he is rightly leery of the tendency to near-hagiography that can sometimes be found in discussions of the group and its members.

5 The chief criticism one might make is that there is too little: Welsh, in particular, features surprisingly sparingly.

Indeed, the grounded judgement of the book is one of its most valuable qualities. Edwards is opinionated and individual in his writing. Even where one might disagree with him – and such moments inevitably do arise, though not frequently⁶ – he is scrupulous in distinguishing known fact from reasoned inference and personal judgement. The overall effect is both intellectually rigorous and pleasurable to read, not always a common combination. This book will serve both more casual readers as an excellent introduction to Tolkien's activities and passions, and seasoned readers and scholars who will appreciate the wide-ranging and intelligent synthesis of the life of a remarkable and complex mind.

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- 6 One such point of criticism might be Edwards' acceptance of Tolkien's poor qualities as a lecturer (e.g. 239, 243). These are certainly remarked on by some students from his later years as a teacher, but we should not forget the highly positive impressions reported by early students such as W.H. Auden and J.I.M. Stewart (see Carpenter, *Biography*, 133). Edwards does discuss Tolkien's various problems with his teeth and throat (and his ill-health in general) later on in his career (e.g. 224f.), but does not link these to a possible decline in Tolkien's physical ability to deliver the sorts of captivating lectures which, perhaps, helped philology to thrive under Tolkien's direction at Leeds.

