

## ABSTRACT

The Lens Through Which Ye See: Philosophy of Time in the Works of C.S. Lewis

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What can modern philosophers of time learn from the fictional works of C.S. Lewis? In this thesis I demonstrate that Lewis's conception of time as exemplified throughout his works, but particularly in the Chronicles of Narnia and *The Great Divorce*, makes up a coherent philosophy of time. This philosophy of time draws on Christian theology, particularly the works of Augustine and Boethius, but it is nonetheless applicable to the modern debates about the ontology of time. C.S. Lewis lived through the years following J.M.E. McTaggart's famous essay "The Unreality of Time" and the subsequent polarization which resulted in two distinct conceptions of time called the A-theory and the B-theory. I argue that in his fiction, and particularly in the final chapters of *The Great Divorce*, Lewis provides a potential answer to this division by creating a synthetic view of the relationship of A-theory and B-theory time series.

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THE LENS THROUGH WHICH YE SEE:  
PHILOSOPHY OF TIME IN THE WORKS OF C.S. LEWIS

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *A Pervasive Fascination*

When Lucy Pevensie first steps through the wardrobe in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, she finds herself in the mystical realm of Narnia. She encounters a faun, Tumnus, makes friends, joins him for tea, falls asleep, and at last returns through the wardrobe to England fearing that her brothers and sister will be worrying about her. After all, she has been gone for several hours. Instead she finds that the moment she stumbles back out of the wardrobe is the moment just after she stepped in: while those hours passed in Narnia, no time at all has passed outside the wardrobe in the "real" world.

This mystifies Lucy, and perhaps quite often mystifies the reader. When I first read and fell in love with the *Chronicles of Narnia*, this was one of the elements of the series which most charmed and baffled me. What can it mean, for time in one world to be wholly disconnected from time in another? Furthermore, what implications does it have for the Pevensie siblings to age in Narnia and then return to England and find themselves once again children? They have the memories and experience of having lived nearly full lifetimes, fighting and winning wars, serving as kings and queens, and growing old together, and nonetheless have yet to start secondary school.

One may begin to notice a kind of fascination with the idea of time in C.S. Lewis's fiction. Lewis seems intrigued by both time's nature and by its effect on people.

The Wood between the Worlds in *The Magician's Nephew* is a place between worlds where time seems to have no meaning. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the White Witch's knowledge is said to go back to the dawn of time, but Aslan's knowledge goes back to "the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned." In *The Silver Chair* we actually see Father Time himself, who is revealed to be a great sleeping giant who is dreaming of all that goes on in the world. In *The Last Battle* Father Time reappears, awoken this time by Aslan, and assists in the apocalypse of Narnia.

Lewis's preoccupation with time stretches far beyond the *Chronicles of Narnia*, however. In *Perelandra*, the second book of his *Space Trilogy*, the Eve-like Lady discusses the nature of time directly in discussion with Ransom, and idiomatically refers to expansion in wisdom and knowledge as "growing older." In *That Hideous Strength*, a discussion of the broader nature and pattern of time is held between Dr. Dimble and other members of the Pendragon's followers, the resurrection of Merlin from the distant past brings in further questions, and the nature of the link between time and prophecy is examined in the foretold child who has not been born of Mark and Jane. *The Great Divorce* can perhaps be considered the ultimate testament to Lewis's fascination with the nature of time, with its explicit focus on the connections between time, eternity, and freedom.

### *The Point of the Project*

The first question to be asked about Lewis's apparent fascination with time is a rather simple one: why should we particularly care? Many authors have been interested in many diverse subjects, and yet the mere notice of such an interest does not necessarily justify a lengthy study. An essay detailing Tolkien's pervading focus on community, or

Dostoevsky's interest in Orthodox iconography, is worthwhile only insofar as it tells us something new about Tolkien or Dostoevsky, or gives us some new way to interpret their works. The same principle holds true here: unless a study of C.S. Lewis's fascination with time yields new insights into C.S. Lewis as writer or into the interpretation of his books, then it is a fruitless study and not worth pursuing.

I believe, however, that an examination of Lewis's preoccupation with time will be fruitful in a variety of ways. For the literary scholar, the benefit can perhaps be best defined negatively. For Lewis, the nature of time is not a mere passing interest but one which pervades his writing. I will make no argument for this claim beyond simply pointing to the extensive (though far from complete) list of references to time throughout Lewis's fiction already given in this introduction. These references span series, genres, and Lewis's career from one end to the other. If the literary scholar fails to take such a constant theme into account, the interpretation of not only the individual works but of Lewis's project as a whole will suffer. Furthermore, several of Lewis's passages involving time are remarkably difficult to interpret. How, for example, are we to understand his portrayal of Time as a living being in *The Silver Chair* and *The Last Battle*? We are not used to dealing with incarnations of metaphysical entities! If the literary scholar is able to recognize this passage as an instance of a broader theme which runs through Lewis's work, however, she suddenly has access to a plethora of new interpretive tools.

I suggest, however, that Lewis's treatment of time should be of interest not only to the literary scholar but also to the philosopher and theologian. While it is true that Lewis does not typically make explicit arguments for his views, the various fragments

which run through his works can be assembled to reveal a coherent philosophical and theological position. As I will demonstrate in Chapters Three and Four, this position draws heavily from the Christian theological tradition and responds quite directly to modern philosophical debates on the nature of time.

An objection may arise here. Few, I think, will argue that Lewis may be classified as a theologian—perhaps as a “popular” theologian rather than a “professional” one, but such hairsplitting is unnecessary here. His *Mere Christianity* alone, even disregarding such smaller works as *Miracles* or *The Weight of Glory*, is enough to place him firmly in the theologian’s camp. Arguably, all of his works of fiction are also at heart theological. However, I suspect that some may worry about treating his insights regarding time as philosophical. After all, Lewis never engages in an explicitly philosophical mode when writing about time. It might be suggested, therefore, that to place him in conversation with such philosophers as J.M.E. McTaggart (who might perhaps be called the father of modern philosophy of time) can only lead to confusion. After all, McTaggart and his colleagues write in the language of a technical and analytic discipline of philosophy, while Lewis’s so-called philosophy of time is expressed not through technical terms but through narrative and allegory. This is true, it is worth noting, not only in his fiction but even in the passages about time in *Mere Christianity*. To attempt to compare Lewis with such professional philosophers therefore seems to be a category mistake.

In response to these concerns I will first make a simple biographical point. When Lewis graduated from Oxford he had achieved a rare “triple first”—i.e., he had received top honors in three distinct subjects, approximately equivalent of graduating *summa cum*



*laude* as a triple major in the American system. His three subjects were Classics (then called Greats), English, and Philosophy.

By 1920, when Lewis finished his philosophy degree, the study of philosophy was already beginning to turn towards a more analytical method. Gottlob Frege's work on a coherent, unambiguous logical language in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was already beginning to change the philosophical world, and the critiques of Hegelianism by Bertrand Russell and others were starting to have their effect. The Oxford department still followed older methods to a great degree, and the young Lewis considered himself a Hegelian, but nonetheless he must have been exposed to this new current of thought—and to such philosophers as Cambridge fellow J.M.E. McTaggart, whose 1908 paper “The Unreality of Time” served as fuel for a rapid expansion of interest and debate in the philosophy of time. In his course of study, Lewis mastered the philosophical methods and language of his day; his top honors in the discipline prove this. Yet he never writes an explicitly philosophical treatise, instead dealing with philosophical ideas through allegory and metaphor. This must therefore be a conscious and deliberate choice, not due to a lack of ability.

Why would a scholar trained in philosophy and fascinated by a number of philosophical ideas (the ontology of time and the freedom of the will particularly) choose to write about them only obliquely? An answer may once again be found in Lewis's biography. After Lewis finished his philosophy degree from Oxford in 1922, he stayed on to study English. This was not due to any dissatisfaction with philosophy *per se*, but merely because there were not any philosophical posts available and his father suggested that he ought to add “a second string to my bow” (*Surprised by Joy* 205). It was during

this time that Lewis at long last became a Christian, in no small part due to his love of great works written by Christians of ages past.

All the books were beginning to turn against me. Indeed, I must have been as blind as a bat not to have seen, long before, the ludicrous contradiction between my theory of life and my actual experience as a reader.... The upshot of it all could nearly be expressed in a perversion of Roland's great line in the *Chanson*—

*Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores. (Surprised 206-7)*

Lewis found that those authors whom he loved the most were nearly all Christians.

Chesterton, MacDonald, Spenser, Johnson, and Milton; each of these authors was brilliant, each had depth, each had work which spoke to Lewis... and each, unfortunately, was a man of faith. This irritated Lewis to a degree, but he did not at first see any connection. Each of these men was good in spite of his religion, not because of it. And yet Lewis consistently was left disappointed by those authors who shared his own secular views. Shaw, Mills, Voltaire, and others “all seemed a little thin; what we as boys called ‘tinny’” (*Surprised* 214). Lewis in retrospect viewed this dissatisfaction with secular authors and attraction to religious ones as part of God's final “checkmate” which brought about his conversion to Christianity. Lewis's eventual conversion thus not only comes at a time in which the study of literature is in the forefront of his life, but moreover the literature itself plays a significant role in the conversion.

To suggest that Lewis simply rejected certain philosophical methods because they were associated with his pre-conversion self would be overly simplistic.<sup>1</sup> I do suggest, however, that Lewis's conversion and his experience with literature in the process of his

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<sup>1</sup>Though not entirely groundless: Lewis states in *Surprised by Joy* that in the end he realized that he was “to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer,” and that his “dry philosophical theorem” about the Absolute had risen up and “became a living presence” (227).

conversion had significant effect on the way he thought about means of conveying truth. Pure argument had on the whole failed to convince Lewis of the truths of Christianity. What he discovered in the works of Chesterton, MacDonald, and others was not syllogistic argument but a kind of richness. These were authors “on whom [Lewis] could really feed,” who had “depth,” whose writing spoke to the “roughness and density of life” (*Surprised* 207). There was something new here, or, better said, something very old.

The idea that some truths are more easily conveyed by narrative than by argument is an ancient one, and not uniquely Christian—Plato’s *Symposium* and even, in a way, *Republic* use this method, and the myths and folk tales of both Eastern and Western traditions operate on the same principle. However, Christianity not only embraces this but takes it farther, suggesting that some truths not only are better conveyed by narrative but can only be conveyed thus. One of the primary Western examples of narrative philosophy is the parables of Jesus, by which He spoke to His disciples of the Kingdom of God; such truths could not be reduced to philosophical theorems.

Lewis is not therefore being “unphilosophical” when he approaches philosophical ideas through narrative. He is taking a step back into an older tradition, a step motivated in large part by his conversion experience. We should no more hesitate to put his views in conversation with those of Bertrand Russell, therefore, than we would hesitate to put Russell’s in conversation with Plato. They speak in different dialects, as it were, but not different languages. Both are doing philosophy, albeit in different ways.

In conclusion, Lewis’s philosophy of time is a coherent philosophy despite its form of expression. As such it both deserves and necessitates consideration alongside other prominent philosophical positions, despite the difficulty of such comparisons.

### *The Structure of the Project*

Clive Staples Lewis was many things: literary critic, poet, novelist, popular radio figure, and apologist for the Christian faith among others. As has been established, however, he was not an analytic philosopher. He does not often make explicit arguments for his positions, even in his essays. He certainly never makes explicit arguments regarding his views on the ontology of time; the closest he comes is in his chapter “Time and Beyond Time” in *Mere Christianity*, and even this chapter does not contain arguments, strictly speaking, so much as the statement that a particular position (which has been argued for by others) may remove some difficulties for the Christian faith. This poses a significant problem for the reader who wishes to extract from his various works a coherent philosophy of time. Rather than simply being able to point out arguments and discuss them, the reader will have to piece together Lewis’s beliefs from many disparate and occasionally obscure references across works and even across genres.

Discovering what Lewis believes about time will be like assembling a puzzle, but a puzzle in which the pieces themselves must first be assembled from elements which are smaller still. These smallest elements are excerpts from Lewis’s work, from essays, fiction, or even poetry. These may be connected and assembled to reveal Lewis’s beliefs about particular elements or properties of time. In the second chapter of this thesis I will consider four of these elements: God’s relationship to time, time’s created and contingent nature, the effect of time on the mind and soul, and the relationship of time to eternity. These four elements can then be considered together to create a total picture of Lewis’s philosophy of time, towards which end I will examine *The Great Divorce* as the culmination and synthesis of Lewis’s total philosophy of time.

Once the puzzle has been assembled, the second stage of the project will be to step back and look at the larger picture. In Chapter Three I will examine Lewis as theologian, and discuss the ways in which Lewis's philosophy of time converses with the Christian tradition of which he is a part. I will particularly focus on the works of St. Augustine and Boethius, whose respective discussions of time in the *Confessions* and *Consolation of Philosophy* best embody an orthodox theology of time. In the fourth chapter, I will consider how Lewis's views fit into the modern debates on the philosophy of time, particularly as characterized by the categories established by J.M.E. McTaggart; that is, in relation to what are known as the A-series and B-series theories.

## CHAPTER TWO

### C.S. Lewis On Time: A Philosophy In Four Parts

#### *Introduction*

As has already been mentioned, *The Great Divorce* is in a sense the culmination of Lewis's fascination with the philosophy of time. This is not true, of course, in the sense that it is the last work he writes on the subject; far from it, as *The Great Divorce* (published 1946) preceded all of the *Chronicles of Narnia* which, as we shall see, display the same fascination. *The Great Divorce* is, however, the one work of Lewis's canon in which time is a central focus from beginning to end. The very first paragraph speaks of the dreaming Lewis's sense that time has stopped in the Grey Town; the Bright People and Lewis's own guide, MacDonald, refer to the nature of time constantly, and the final chapters paint a complex image of the interwoven natures of time, freedom, and eternity. From beginning to end, the theme of *The Great Divorce* is intimately linked to a theology and philosophy of time.

*The Great Divorce* is, on the surface, the story of a dream-vision in which Lewis takes a bus ride from a grey, dreary Town which exists in unchanging dusk to a massive open country in which everything possesses such an overabundance of existence that he and his fellow passengers are themselves mere phantoms in comparison, and the grass does not even bend beneath their feet. The grey town is shortly revealed to be Hell, or at least what will become Hell when night falls at last. The country is Heaven, or what will become Heaven fully when day at last breaks. In his journey through Heaven Lewis acts

as a silent observer to the conversations of his ghostly companions with the solid, bright, heavenly people who have come from the mountains to offer them the choice to stay and become solid themselves. Some of the ghosts accept this grace, many do not, and with a few the final choice is unclear.

On a deeper level, it soon becomes apparent that *The Great Divorce* is at heart a book about the nature of free choice in relation to temporal and eternal reality. The final chapters make explicit the implicit nature of all the action that precedes them. Even made explicit, however, the theology and philosophy of time and eternity present in the final pages of *The Great Divorce* is far from transparent. In fact these chapters are, on a glance, remarkably obscure. The dominant images Lewis uses are that of a reversed telescope, whose lens is Time and through which one can see Freedom, and a great chess set surrounded by silent and still figures who each are represented by one of the moving chess pieces. Each of these is difficult to understand, and it is yet more difficult to articulate the connection between them.

In order to reach an understanding of these images, I will first turn away from *The Great Divorce* entirely. I will examine a number of discussions of time drawn from a variety of Lewis's other works in order to establish what I understand to be the four cornerstones of Lewis's temporal philosophy. Having established Lewis's general temporal vocabulary, I will return to the obscure passages of *The Great Divorce* and demonstrate how they build upon and in some ways complete the philosophy of time which runs through his other works.

## *Outside of Time*

In the Pevensies' third adventure in the land of Narnia, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy is alone in the tower of an unknown magician trying to find a magic book and use it to reverse a spell of invisibility. When at last she succeeds, Aslan appears in the doorway—made visible by her success, he tells her. After a short conversation, however, Aslan departs again in order to go back to Caer Paravel and see Trumpkin the dwarf, who is acting as steward there in the king's absence. Before Aslan leaves he reassures Lucy that they will see each other again.

“Do not look so sad. We will meet again soon.”  
“Please, Aslan,” said Lucy, “what do you call soon?”  
“I call all times soon,” said Aslan; and instantly he was vanished away and Lucy was alone... (162)

This extraordinarily enigmatic statement, “I call all times soon,” is intrinsically paradoxical—after all, the word soon is itself time referential. Aslan's statement can therefore be translated roughly as “For me, all moments of time are only a short while away.” But how could this be possible? In their article “Time in the Chronicles of Narnia,” Michael and Adam Peterson characterize this remarkable idea as follows:

This claim is tantamount to the assertion that Aslan is not limited by any frame of reference or the speed of light, but that he can simultaneously encompass all other frames of reference. The very best in contemporary science has no categories to explain this! (209)

Indeed it does not, but the very best in well-worn theology just may.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis devotes a chapter to answering several grave objections to the Christian faith, each of which revolves around God's relationship to time. Lewis suggests that we naturally assume that our experience of time is fundamental. “You and I tend to take for granted,” Lewis says, “that this Time series—



this arrangement of past, present, and future—is not simply the way these things come to us but the way all things really exist “ (*Mere Christianity* 138). In other words, we tend to think of our experience of time as exactly equivalent to the ultimate nature of time. This assumption implies in turn that God interacts with time in the same way that we do—that His divine life is, like ours, a series of moments, and “one moment disappears before the next comes along: and there is room for very little in each” (*Mere Christianity* 137).

If we accept this picture of God’s interaction with time, Lewis argues, we leave Christianity open to at least three serious objections. The first of these deals with the issue of prayer.

A man put it to me by saying ‘I can believe in God all right, but what I cannot swallow is the idea of Him attending to several hundred million human beings who are all addressing Him at the same moment.’ And I have found that quite a lot of people feel this. (*Mere Christianity* 137)

In fact this objection seems equally strong without the massive numbers cited by Lewis’s friend. Even if we imagine an instant in which only two people in the whole world are addressing God in prayer, it seems impossible that God could in that instant be giving His full attention to both of them. Either He must attend to one and exclude the other, or divide His attention so that neither of them has it in full. Either of these options seems unsatisfactory, and is not in line with the intuition that in prayer God ought to give His full attention to each and every person.

A second objection which arises from this view of God’s interaction with time is related to the incarnation. According to Christian doctrine, God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived on Earth for some thirty years before being crucified, resurrected, and ascending into heaven. During this time, however, he was still fully God

although He accepted human limitations. When Lewis was not yet a believer, he says, this doctrine was the source of one of his objections to the Christian faith. God was supposed to be the one who “keeps the whole universe going”—how could he keep the universe going while he was a tiny child in Palestine, or even while, as a necessary part of his humanity, he had to sleep? How, indeed, could he be fully the omniscient God and yet at the same time still be “a man asking his disciples, ‘Who touched me?’” (*Mere Christianity* 139) The heart of this objection is temporal—the issue is how God could have both human and divine natures at the same time.

The last of Lewis’s temporal objections concerns the compatibility of freedom and divine omniscience. Assuming that God is in the timeline as we are, the fact that God is held to have foreknowledge of future events becomes extremely problematic for an account of human free will. Lewis does not explicitly develop this problem, but he is likely thinking of a line of argument such as would be later given by Nelson Pike in the essay “Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action” in 1965.

Pike gives the hypothetical example of a man named Jones mowing his lawn on a particular Saturday afternoon. Given God’s omniscience and thus foreknowledge, God believed 80 years before that particular afternoon that Jones would mow his lawn at that time. Now, if Jones was truly free to mow his lawn he must have been free to do otherwise than to mow his lawn. But was he? If he was in fact able to refrain from mowing his lawn, then he must have the ability to either a) make God’s past beliefs change, b) make one of God’s beliefs wrong, or c) make God not have existed 80 years ago. All of these possibilities are absurd, so we must conclude that Jones could not do otherwise than to mow his lawn on that particular Saturday afternoon. As this can be

applied to all events in exactly the same way, we can conclude that if God is omniscient then human freedom is impossible (Pike, 29-30).

In response to all three of these objections, Lewis states the following.

We tend to assume that the whole universe and God Himself are always moving on from past to future just as we do. But many learned men do not agree with that... Almost certainly God is not in Time. (*Mere Christianity* 138)

Again, Lewis does not make an explicit argument for this position, but cites two reasons to hold such a view: first, because it has been held by “learned men” throughout the Christian tradition, and second, because it solves all three of these grave objections against the possibility of a Christian God. If God looks at the world from the perspective of eternity, rather than individual moments in time, then “He has all eternity in which to listen to the split second of a prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames” and thus all eternity to listen to each individual prayer with all his attention (*Mere Christianity*, 138). Likewise, from the perspective of eternity there is not a particular time when God is human and another particular time when He is divine, but rather humanity and human experience is a timeless part of His eternal and divine nature. Finally, if God is outside of time then his knowledge is not foreknowledge, but simply the knowledge as of an observer who is aware of all reality. “You would never assume that your actions at this moment were any less free because God knows what you are doing. Well, He knows your tomorrow’s actions in just the same way” (*Mere Christianity* 140).

Now, at last, we can return to the magician’s tower with Lucy. Aslan’s meaning at last becomes clear; all times must indeed be soon from the perspective of God’s eternal now. As son of the Emperor-over-the-Sea, Aslan is the Narnian manifestation of the

second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. Therefore he, like God, must be in his essence outside of Time.

### *Created and Contingent*

Several elements in Lewis's ontology of time follow directly from this foundational assertion that God stands entirely outside the time series. The first of these is that time is a created thing, an artifice. This, in turn, implies that time is a contingent thing. This is a rather hasty sequence of moves, and requires some explanatory expansion.

When considering the nature of time's relationship to God, we really only have three options. Either time is an uncreated thing which is not part of God's own nature, it is an uncreated thing which *is* part of God's own nature, or it is a created thing. We can rule out the first two options relatively easily, as follows.

If God exists, could any other entity exist which is neither created by Him nor part of His own nature? It seems not. If an entity was neither created by God nor part of His nature, then that entity would be entirely independent of God. One traditional definition of God, frequently used in entry-level philosophy seminars, is "a maximally great being." To be depended on for the existence of another entity seems quite obviously to be a great-making quality—e.g. the artist is greater than the art work he produces at least partly because the art work depends on him for its existence. If God is maximally great, then, all entities must depend on him for their existence and no entities can be completely independent of Him. After all, if anything were able to exist wholly independently of God then that thing would have just as much right to be considered a deity as God himself. Thus we rule out the first option.

Could time, then, be part of God's nature? Some philosophers have argued that abstract entities, such as mathematical entities, may be understood this way. Yet if God truly stands outside of time, then He must be unaffected and unconstrained by time. No entity is ever wholly unaffected and unconstrained by its own nature. The second option is therefore ineffectual. The only remaining option, therefore, is that time was created by God.

For the next step, we will need to define a few terms. There are certain entities in the world which are said to be necessarily existent. These entities and relations are "necessary" insofar as they depend on no other entities. One way of thinking of this is that a necessary entity would exist in any possible world. The opposite of necessary is contingent: contingent entities are those that *do* depend on other entities and thus would not exist in every possible universe. Any created entity is contingent, for it depends for its existence on its creator. As we have concluded that time is created, therefore, we must also conclude that time is a contingent thing.

What does it mean for time to be created and contingent? One obvious consequence is that time must have an absolute beginning. There is not an infinite sequence of past events, but rather there is a definite initial moment of time. Furthermore, if time is contingent it is possible, if not necessary, for time to have a definite end. All necessary entities are eternal, but contingent entities at least can end even if they do not necessarily have to end. Another consequence of Time's status as an artifice is that it may be different in different worlds. Each of these elements in Lewis's ontology of time is reaffirmed throughout his fiction.

Lewis does not show the beginning of time in Narnia. Even when Polly and Digory first arrive in Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew* and it is only empty darkness, time already exists—indeed Lewis makes reference to the fact that it seems nothing has grown in this empty and barren place “since the beginning of Time” (105). Yet this reference makes it clear that he believe that time did have a beginning, even if it is impossible to show. Likewise in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* Aslan tells Lucy and Susan the following:

...though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little farther back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned<sup>1</sup>, she would have read there a different incantation. (193)

Likewise Lewis reaffirms his belief that time has an ultimate end with *The Last Battle*. After Tirian, Eustace, and Jill come through the stable door and find themselves in Aslan's country, they return to the door with Aslan and watch the ultimate apocalypse of Narnia. Aslan calls out to the great Time giant who sleeps beneath the northern moors, and this great figure assists in the destruction of the world. Aslan tells the children “while he lay dreaming his name was Time. Now that he is awake, he will have a new one” (172). Thus time ends, not by dying with the world but by being transformed into something new.

Finally, if time is created and contingent it is possible for it to be different in different worlds—or, better said, it is possible for different worlds to have different time series. If time were necessary and thus existed in all worlds it might be reasonable to

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<sup>1</sup>Note that any discussion of this nature is problematized by the nature of language. “Before Time” is technically a meaningless statement, as “before” is a time-referential word. However, Lewis is doing his best to convey this transtemporal idea through a language which, like most, is intrinsically temporal.

suggest that there was a single overarching time series in which all worlds participated. If time is contingent, however, the time series in each world which possesses a time series at all—it may well be possible for there to be worlds without one<sup>2</sup>—need have no connection to the time series of other worlds. Narnian time need not be connected or even slightly similar to Earth time.

This is, indeed, what we see in Lewis's *Chronicles*. One year of time passes in England between the Pevensies' first adventure in Narnia and their return in *Prince Caspian*, but in that year of Earth time 1303 years of Narnian time go by. When they return for the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* after another single year of Earth time, only three years have passed in Narnia. The differences are erratic and unpredictable.

Narnian time flows differently from ours. If you spent a hundred years in Narnia, you would still come back to our world at the very same hour of the very same day on which you left. And then, if you went back to Narnia after spending a week here, you might find that a thousand Narnian years had passed, or only a day, or no time at all. You never know till you get there. (*Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 14)

Michael and Adam Peterson, in their article "Time in the Chronicles of Narnia," suggest a possible interpretation of this unpredictability based on Einstein's theory of relativity. Einstein theorized (and modern experimentation has confirmed, at least in a limited sense) that time flow is affected by velocity. If twin atomic clocks are separated from one another and one remains stationary while the other is placed on a supersonic jet which flies around the world, they will no longer register the same passage of time. Therefore, the Petersons suggest, it might be possible to imagine that Narnia is a planet

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<sup>2</sup>A world of this kind is perhaps impossible to imagine, but it is not logically impossible given time's contingency. A world could exist which consists only of two dimensions, for example... such as a universe whose sole content is a Cartesian coordinate system. (We will actually return to this idea for an illustration in Chapter Four.)

which changes velocity erratically, and thus account for the strange changes in time flow. Even they, however, accept that “this strains even the bounds of children’s fantasy” (208). While their idea is interesting, I believe a far better explanation exists. Narnia is not a distant planet in our own universe, but part of another universe altogether and therefore has its own, entirely separate time series.

This case is, in fact, extremely easy to make. Consider the creation narrative given in *The Magician’s Nephew*, in which Digory, Polly, and the rest watch the first moments of Narnia. One of Aslan’s first actions is to sing into being the stars—stars which, if Narnia were merely a planet in some distant solar system, would necessarily be there already. Furthermore, in *The Last Battle* these very stars are revealed to be something more than might be expected:

Stars began falling all around them. But stars in that world are not the great flaming globes they are in ours. They are people (Edmund and Lucy had once met one). (*The Last Battle* 173)

If the very nature of a star in Narnia is different from the nature of a star in our world, then clearly Narnia is not some distant planet but an entirely different realm of reality—a parallel universe, if you will. If Narnia is such a parallel universe, and time is indeed a contingent and universe-dependent thing, then we should not be surprised to find that there is no clear connection between time in our world and time in Narnia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>It is worth noting here that Lewis has definite motivation for placing Narnia outside our own universe. If he did not, there could be severe theological objections to his work. Christ died once for the sins of all in our universe: to portray Him in different form dying again, albeit on a distant planet, could be read as blasphemous. If, however, there is a multiplicity of universes and God ultimately stands outside them all (as is a reasonable corollary from His standing outside of time), then Lewis through portraying God’s actions in an *alternate* universe is not doing any harm to an orthodox theology.



### *Time and the Mind/Soul*

This disconnection between time in our world and time in Narnia has several interesting consequences. The most obvious of these is of course the effect of Narnian time on those who visit there. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy all enter the Wardrobe as young children and find themselves in Narnia. The adventures primarily described in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, however, are but the very beginning of their time in that other world. After the White Witch is defeated and the four children are crowned Kings and Queens of Narnia, Lewis gives a brief timelapse view of their long lives spent living as kings and queens at Caer Paravel. After describing their many feats, Lewis describes the men and women they grow up to become.

And they themselves grew and changed as the years passed over them. And Peter became a tall and deep chested man and a great warrior, and he was called King Peter the Magnificent. And Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman... and she was called Susan the Gentle. Edmund was a quieter and graver man than Peter... He was called King Edmund the Just. But as for Lucy, she was always gay and golden-haired... and her own people called her Queen Lucy the Valiant. (184)

These are clearly more than mere physical changes—the grown Pevensies, as Kings and Queens of Narnia, are not merely children in adult bodies. They do in truth grow up in Narnia, and their characters develop as per their new epithets. Yet when these great lords and ladies accidentally stumble back through the wardrobe, having themselves forgotten their origins, they are suddenly once again children, clothed not only in their school attire but their younger bodies.

After they exit the wardrobe, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy have lived (it may be guessed) probably at least twenty or thirty years longer than their bodies have aged. What effect, if any, has this great stretch of Narnian time had on the children? It has had

none on their physical bodies, yet it does seem to have changed them. They have a multitude of new memories, perhaps even new character traits. “Once a king or queen in Narnia, always a king or queen,” as Aslan tells the children at their coronation, and as Professor Kirk later confirms (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* 182, 188). The events of their Narnian lives change them permanently.

Here Lewis gives us insight into an aspect of time which perhaps can only be explored in fiction: time divorced from space or spatial change. Time is often defined in terms of spatial change, particularly in the common modern formulation in which time is a fourth dimension which is not fundamentally distinct from the three spatial dimensions. The duration of Narnian time, however, is clearly not connected to space in England. When the children tumble out of the wardrobe, the formidable Mrs. MacReady is still standing in the hall outside with the visitors, presumably finishing the sentence she had been speaking when the children first entered Narnia. The room has not changed, and they find that their bodies have not changed in England despite changing in Narnia. Indeed, no physical or spatial change of any kind has been enacted by the years spent in Narnia. Yet the children are conscious of these years having passed, and while the elapse in time may not have affected Mrs. MacReady it have certainly affected the Pevensies. Lewis has thus isolated temporality from simple spatial change. What, then, is the ultimate effect of pure time?

The children do not, Lewis is quite clear, retain the talents and abilities they gained while in Narnia. This is made obvious in the opening chapters of *Prince Caspian*. It is revealed that Lucy and Edmund are not very good swimmers, but while they were queen and king in Narnia they had learned how to swim.

“But couldn’t we all swim long ago—when we were Kings and Queens in Narnia? We could ride then, too, and do all sorts of things. Don’t you think—”

“Ah, but we were all sort of grown up then,” said Peter. “We reigned for years and years and learned to do things. Aren’t we just back at our proper ages now?” (*Prince Caspian* 31)

Physical abilities are lost when the Pevensies return to England, then. After all, such abilities are primarily connected to spatial properties such as physical strength. Yet the memory of these physical abilities remains—perhaps as a temporary paralytic would remember the use of his limbs before he gradually regains them. (It is worth noticing that the longer the children spend back in Narnia, the more their lost abilities begin to return to them; only shortly into *Prince Caspian* Edmund finds he has almost entirely regained his swordplay, and Susan is able once again to perform extraordinarily well with a bow. When they return to England for a second time, however, these abilities are presumably lost once again.)

Indeed the memory of Narnia seems to be the primary remnant of their years of adventure. We can reasonably conclude, then, that in Lewis’s view the primary effect of time per se, divorced from its spatial counterpart, is an effect on the mind or the soul. Consider, for example, the experience of Eustace Scrubb. Eustace falls into Narnia entirely by accident and against his will, and proceeds to make himself an extraordinary nuisance. Before he first enters Narnia, he is described by Edmund as a “record stinker”; Lewis says “deep down inside him he liked bossing and bullying” (*Voyage* 4-5). He is selfish and mean-spirited. His adventure on the *Dawn Treader*, however, fundamentally changes him. Already dragon-like in his greed and selfishness, Eustace is actually turned into a dragon. During this period he begins to take a real interest in helping others for the first time, and ultimately is transformed by Aslan back into a boy after repenting of the

dragonish characteristics which had previously defined him. The change is not instant, but Eustace turns from a spoiled brat into a brave and kind, if occasionally somewhat tactless, young man. Upon his return to England, these character changes remain:

Back in our own world everyone soon started saying how Eustace had improved, and how “You’d never know him for the same boy”: everyone except Aunt Alberta, who said he had become very commonplace and tiresome and it must have been the influence of those Pevensie children. (*Voyage* 210)

Let us return to Peter’s intriguing phrase “our proper ages” from the passage in *Prince Caspian*. What he meant by it in that particular case was their respective ages according to time in England. But what is the truest account of the Pevensie’s ages throughout the *Chronicles*? In England their physical bodies mature according to English time. In Narnia their physical bodies mature according to Narnian time. Their minds and characters, however, as we have seen, seem to develop in a continuous linear path regardless of the switching between different physical “time streams,” as it were.

Consider the content of the first two books in the *Chronicles*. It makes sense to say that, from their perspective, the Pevensies first entered the wardrobe, then reigned in Narnia, then exited the wardrobe, then went to school, then returned to Narnia. In the duration of this process their characters develop and change, memories are formed, etc. From the perspective of either English or Narnian time alone, however, this temporal progression makes no sense. The English perspective is simply that the children enter the wardrobe, immediately exit with no elapse of time, and go to school. The Narnian perspective is that the children enter Narnia, reign, disappear, and appear again centuries later. The temporal events of England have no place in the Narnian time stream, and vice

versa. Neither alone can remotely capture the actual moment-by-moment experience of the children.

What I suspect Lewis is actually embracing here is a concept which is suggested by relativity theory and borne out by experiment: that any given entity has its own relative time stream. The idea first appeared in Albert Einstein's 1905 paper "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," and caused such a stir in the scientific world that an intellectually curious man like Lewis would likely have become familiar with its concepts early in his life. Remember the previously mentioned example of the two atomic clocks, one in a jet and one left sitting still; the one which is moving faster actually registers less passage of time. This time dilation is made possible by time being relative to particular reference frames. To speak of "time in England" and "time in Narnia" is actually somewhat misleading, therefore. We can speak of a general "time in England" only because most objects which count as part of England are moving at the same relative velocities and under the same gravitational effects, and the same would be true in Narnia. It is more accurate, however, to say that every single particle in England and Narnia has its own relative time.

What about the particles which make up the Pevensie children? In England, their physical bodies enter the wardrobe and leave it, identical, with "no time at all" having elapsed.<sup>4</sup> Thus the general time stream of their bodies in England seems to be

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<sup>4</sup>It seems possible, therefore, that the bodies the children possess and which grow old in Narnia are not the same bodies they inhabit in England—an odd thought! This would give a reasonable explanation for how and why they revert back into children upon their return. It raises other issues, however: for example, how would one explain the fur coats which disappear into Narnia but do not return? If the English bodies of the children never actually disappeared from the wardrobe, as "no time" had elapsed, then why would

synchronous with the time stream of the other objects around them, i.e. all of England. Likewise their bodies in Narnia change in sync with the time stream of their Narnian environment, growing old as do their surroundings. Where the synchronicity breaks down, as previously noted, is the character. Eustace enters Narnia through the painting in one second and is “back” in the same. His body and its various particles is unchanged—the time-stream of an electron somewhere in his big toe has remained entirely synchronous with the time stream of an electron in the bed post on the other side of the room. Yet his soul is thoroughly changed. If Lewis thought in relativistic terms at all, then he believed that there is a relative time stream for the soul, as much as there is one of each particle within the body. It is possible therefore to speak of “time relative to Eustace,” “time relative to Edmund,” and so on, not referring to any particle or group of particles within those individuals but to this psychological, soul-based time stream.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis was not a scientist, nor (here, at least) a writer of science fiction, and undoubtedly he would have never described his thinking about the effects of Narnian time in such terms. The usefulness of explicating it in such a way here is simply to provide some degree of clarity. It does seem highly probable that the concept of relativity influenced his thinking, even unconsciously, as it was simply part of the popular scientific climate in which he lived. Regardless, the essential point to be gained from the preceding section is that Lewis sees the essential action of time as extremely

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the fur coats have acted in a different way? Demanding such a degree of consistency from a work which is ultimately a children’s book, however, would be excessive.

<sup>5</sup>The truth of this depends to a degree on Lewis being a mind-body dualist, of course. However, ample evidence to support this can be found throughout his works, particularly in the chess table image of *The Great Divorce* which will be examined later in this chapter.

focused and narrow. The primary effect of time *qua* time is not physical but psychological.<sup>6</sup>

### *Time and Eternity*

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Lewis's philosophy of time is the relationship between time and eternity. Let us return once again to the end of *The Last Battle*. When Aslan calls on the great giant Father Time to assist in the destruction of Narnia, he explains to Eustace and Jill that this immense figure, whom they had in fact see once before (sleeping beneath the hills as they descended into the Underland in *The Silver Chair*), was only named Time while he was asleep. Now that he is at last awake, he will be given a new name. Lewis does not tell us what this name is. I believe a strong case can be made, however, that the name Lewis intends but leaves unspoken is Eternity.

According to Lewis, God is outside of time. But what does "outside of time" mean? What does the absence of temporality actually look like? It seems intuitive to imagine timelessness as utterly stagnant, without motion or change of any kind. Lewis, however, seems to believe something quite different. Timelessness for Lewis is synonymous with eternity, and eternity is the very opposite of stagnation.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, the devil Screwtape writes to his nephew Wormwood about the relationship of time to eternity.

The humans live in time but our Enemy [God] destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and that point in time which they call the Present. For the

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<sup>6</sup>This is not to say that the events in Narnia are merely mental, of course, any more than to say that events in England are merely mental. The point is that temporal change is divisible from spatial change, and the sole effect of isolated temporal change is mental and spiritual.

Present is the point at which Time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. (*The Screwtape Letters* 228)

This fascinating idea that eternity is most closely related to the present is remarkable.

When writing of God's eternity, Lewis (and indeed other philosophers and theologians) frequently resorts to the phrase "the eternal Now." Lewis here gives a compelling reason for the use of this phrase: the present is the time in which we both act in ("freedom") and observe ("actuality") the world around us. If we believe that God can both act in and observe the world at all times, rather than in a sequence of particular moments, then it is natural to imagine His experience of time in its entirety as most closely linked to our experience of the present—and vice versa. However, this relationship between the present and eternity is not merely one of likeness: Lewis states that the present actually "touches" eternity. Lewis reaffirms this belief in his essay "Historicism" in *Christian Reflections*: "Where, except in the present, can the Eternal be met?" (113)

To put it in rather unphilosophical terms, Lewis believes that eternity is "the present, but even more so." Just as in his *The Great Divorce* heaven is not non-spatial but trans-spatial, with the very grass being so much more real than that of earth that it will not even bend beneath the visitor's feet, so the eternity of heaven and of God himself is not nontemporal but transtemporal. Eternity is more real, not less real, than temporality.

Consider the final chapters of *The Last Battle*. Upon the closing of the great door upon the Narnia that was no more, Time is gone. He has fully woken, and presumably been given his new name. Yet Aslan's country is full of life and vigor and movement. In fact this kind of movement seems to be its very essence. "Further up and further in!" The Pevensies, Digory and Polly, Tirian, Jewel, Puzzle and all the rest are in perpetual



movement towards though the “layers of the onion,” as Tumnus describes it, growing nearer and nearer to the center in a journey that never ends. The same idea appears in *The Great Divorce*, in which all those who have died and come to heaven are in constant movement towards the Mountains (with the exception of those who come back temporarily in order to speak with the visitors from Hell). The eternal involves not less vigor and movement than the temporal but infinitely more.

Let us return now to Father Time. When Eustace and Jill first encounter the great giant he is lying asleep beneath the northern moors.

And here, filling almost the whole length of [the cave], lay an enormous man fast asleep. He was far bigger than any of the giants, and his face was not like a giant's, but noble and beautiful. His breast rose and fell gently under the snowy beard which covered him to the waist. A pure, silver light (no one saw where it came from) rested upon him...  
“That is old Father Time, who was once a King in Overland,” said the Warden. “And now he has sunk down into the deep realm and lies dreaming of all the things that are done in the upper world. Many sink down, and few return to the sunlit lands. They say he will wake at the end of the world.” (*The Silver Chair* 146)

The meaning of Father Time's having once been a King in Overland is unclear, and he unfortunately is not physically represented in the origin of Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew*. Yet I suggest that he does make an appearance behind the scenes. When Father Time first awakes in *The Last Battle*, the apparent effect is that time seems to speed up dramatically. In the matter of what seems a few moments, the spectators at the door watch as the stars go out, great lizards appear and take over the face of the world, the world is made increasingly barren until these creatures themselves die, shrivel up, and turn to skeletons before the watcher's eyes (*Last Battle* 198). If we pay attention to the initial creation of Narnia by Aslan, we will witness something remarkably similar: the stars and sun form in the blackness almost instantly, and trees sprout from the ground and

are full grown within minutes. This, I suggest, is the brief period at the very beginning of Narnia in which Father Time is awake (and therefore not in fact Time) and reigns as King: after this he gradually falls asleep, becoming the gradual, dreamy, and slow progression of temporal events until the end of the world when he will gradually wake again.

For the duration of Narnia's ordinary existence, Father Time lives a kind of half-life—sleep and dream, rather than wakefulness. He dreams of all temporal events, rather than experiencing them fully. When he wakes these events will be experienced in actuality rather than dream, becoming more real than they had been before—and he will no longer have the name Time, as we are told by Aslan, but a new name. It seems quite clear, therefore, that Father Time's waking up parallels the transition from temporality to eternity, and that Eternity is in fact Father Time's new (and ancient) name.

*Ye Cannot Know Eternal Reality by a Definition*

At last we return to the pinnacle of Lewis's philosophy of time: *The Great Divorce*. Before plunging into interpretation, we ought first to recognize a few facts which may help us to avoid fundamental blunders. We have pieced together a puzzle of four parts, the four dominant elements of Lewis's philosophy of time, but before we attempt to use them for interpretation it will be necessary to recognize where we will and will not find them helpful.

On the surface, the narrative of *The Great Divorce* seems to follow a simple chronology. The inhabitants of the Grey Town (and the heavenly lands) have lived their lives out on earth and died. They have ended up in their respective places, and now, at some point during an interim between death and the Last Judgment, the so-far

unrepentant sinners in the Grey Town have a chance to go visit Heaven and decide whether to stay there or not. Conversations occur between the inhabitants of heaven, the Bright People, and the ghostly visitors, and some return while at least one does indeed stay. At last, the Final Judgment occurs. All this appears to take place in a simple, chronological order.

Almost immediately, however, it becomes clear that “time” in the tale works very oddly if at all; the Grey Town is in a state of unchanging dusk, the Valley of the Shadow of Life in a state of unchanging pre-dawn. Though Napoleon Bonaparte died on earth less than a hundred and fifty years before Lewis’s vision occurs, it apparently took “about fifteen thousand years of our time,” according to one of the Grey Town dwellers, for two inquisitive damned souls to travel out to where he was and return (*The Great Divorce* 22). Of course, with no change in season or even time of day, one wonders what these “years of our time” even signify. It seems that the point is not about the passage of something we could actually call “time” but about the stagnation and sense of endless dragging on which rules in Grey Town, in stark contrast to the brightly alive, present feeling of the heavenly lands.

One must not forget that *The Great Divorce* is a dream. Unlike Narnia, the Grey Town and the heavenly country are not supposed to be actual worlds into which Lewis is traveling. They are a vision. And it becomes clear at least by the end that the apparent chronology we have been witnessing is itself metaphorical rather than an attempt to portray reality. Lewis does not subscribe to the belief that the damned will actually have a second chance to be saved after their deaths, or at the very least he need not subscribe to such a belief in order to write the tale he does. It is used here as an image in which the

relation of free choice to time and eternity can be seen, as it were, through a clearer lens than is possible on earth. But the apparent chronology of the tale is just that: only apparent. Lewis's philosophy of time, as it has been laid out, is not therefore truly applicable here, nor will an examination of the apparent chronological sequence of the dream add to our understanding of that philosophy.

*The Great Divorce* is, however, essentially a narrative treatise on the interaction of time, eternity, and freedom. While the apparent chronology of the events of the dream may not be directly relatable to Lewis's philosophy of time, the dream does contain explicit statements and images about the nature of time. Time is as much the subject of *The Great Divorce* as it is a part of the plot. While there are brief mentions of time running throughout the book from beginning to end, I will focus primarily on the two interconnected images which crown the final chapters of Lewis's tale: the inverted telescope, and the silver chess table.

Before we begin, a few words of caution are once again necessary. One must not forget when examining these images that they are, in fact, images. This is not an essay on metaphysics and ought not to be reduced to such, though it may be tempting to do so. Lewis himself warns against this. "The picture is a symbol: but it's truer than any philosophical theorem (or perhaps any mystic's vision) that claims to go behind it," and, still more explicitly, "Do not ask of a vision in a dream more than a vision in a dream can give" (*Great Divorce* 122-4). I will not, therefore, attempt to pick the images apart and analyze the meanings of each particular. Instead I will first lay out both images in full, demonstrating their interconnectedness, and then proceed to point to the ways in which

they build upon and, in some sense, complete the philosophy of time which has been previously articulated.

In the penultimate chapter of *The Great Divorce* the dreaming Lewis expresses a concern to George MacDonald, who has been acting as his guide. They have just discussed Christ's preaching to the damned souls in hell, and MacDonald has said that some hear Him and are redeemed. Lewis asks whether, as MacDonald had hinted in his own works (here thinking, certainly, of *Lilith*), all men would be saved in the end. MacDonald says that such questions are problematic because "all answers deceive" (121).

"If ye put the question from within Time and are asking about possibilities, the answer is certain. The choice of ways is before you... But if ye are trying to leap ahead to the final state of all things as it *will* be (for so ye must speak)... then ye are asking what cannot be answered to mortal ears. Time is the very lens through which ye see—small and clear, as men see through the wrong end of a telescope—something that would otherwise be too big for ye to see at all. That thing is Freedom..." (122)

The image has four essential elements: the implied observer (here Lewis, the reader, or indeed any human being), the inverted telescope lens of Time, the image seen through this lens (predominantly the image of Freedom), and the eternal reality all around which exists whether seen through the lens of Time or no.

If you have ever looked through the wrong end of a telescope, you will quickly get the point at which Lewis's portrayal of MacDonald is driving. An inverted telescope lens lessens one's ability to see the scale and grandeur of a landscape, but allows at the same time a "small and clear" view of the largest mountain which otherwise would loom too huge and close to be comprehensible. Likewise, the human mind cannot comprehend the stuff of eternity without this kind of restrictive lens. Time allows us to see Freedom

as “a picture of moments following one another and yourself in each moment making some choice that might have been otherwise,” not because this is the ultimate nature of Freedom but because it is the only way our minds can grasp it. And any attempt to look at the nature of eternal reality without “the lens of time” will miss Freedom entirely.

MacDonald’s purpose in using this image is thus an admonition: he is warning Lewis against attempting to see eternal reality without the lens of time. This, he says, is the mistake of the Calvinist and the Universalist alike. They recognize the great truth that “eternal reality is not waiting for some future in which to happen,” but in doing so they abolish the idea of freedom; the Calvinist does so by suggesting that the elect are predestined to their salvation and the reprobate predestined to perdition from the dawn of Creation (or even before), while the Universalist likewise denies freedom by stating that all will ultimately be saved and thus no one can choose to refuse God in the end. Any attempt to know eternal reality “by a definition” will fail, MacDonald says. Instead, “Time itself, and all acts that fill Time, are the definition, and it must be lived” (*Great Divorce* 122).

MacDonald concludes his admonition with a demonstration. Having warned Lewis of the dangers of attempting to see the shape of eternity without the lens of Time, MacDonald grants just such a vision. “How long could ye bear to look (without Time’s lens) on the greatness of your own soul and the eternal reality of her choice?” he asks. The veil is stripped away.

And suddenly all was changed. I saw a great assembly of gigantic forms all motionless, all in deepest silence, standing forever about a little silver table and looking upon it.<sup>7</sup> And on the table there were little figures like

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<sup>7</sup>This passage has strong echoes of the “great cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12, who have already finished the race of faith and have entered eternal life. They watch as

chessmen who went to and fro doing this and that. And I knew that each chessman was the *idolum* or puppet representative of some one of the great presences that stood by. And the acts and motions of each chessman were a moving portrait, a mimicry or pantomime, which delineated the inmost nature of his giant master. And these chessmen are men and women as they appear to themselves and to one another in this world. And the silver table is Time. And those who stand and watch are the immortal souls of those same men and women. (*Great Divorce* 123)

The very presence of this vision in the work may raise some eyebrows, occurring as it does immediately after a long admonition against attempting to see such eternal realities at all. The dreaming Lewis's reaction is, indeed, first of "vertigo and terror," and then he asks questions of MacDonald which demonstrate that this vision without the lens of time has indeed shaken his belief in Freedom. "Is *that* the truth?... These conversations between the Spirits and Ghosts—were they only the mimicry of choices that had really been made long ago?" (*Great Divorce* 123-4). It is confirmed, not denied, that a vision of eternal reality without the lens of time is dangerous and unsustainable. Yet this second image allows Lewis to show certain truths about the relationship of time to the mind and to eternity which would not be possible with the first alone.

Neither of these images explicitly portrays God, but nonetheless the idea of God standing outside of Time is implicitly present. Freedom is described in the first image as "that gift whereby ye most resemble your Maker and are yourselves parts of eternal reality." The image of freedom provided through the lens of time is "a picture of moments following one another," but Lewis says that "neither the temporal succession nor the phantom of what ye might have chosen and didn't is itself Freedom. They are a

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those who come after them continue to run the same race. A professor and friend of mine suggested, in considering the connection between Hebrews and this passage in Lewis, the idea that in fact our eternal souls are indeed already part of that great cloud of witnesses because they are beyond the bounds of time.

lens” (*Great Divorce* 122). The true nature of Freedom is not temporal but eternal.

Therefore the eternal souls of men, due to their freedom, stand outside of time—hence, in the second image, the immortal souls stand outside of Time looking down upon it. As this freedom is a way in which men resemble their Maker, therefore, how much more must God stand outside of time?

The created and contingent nature of time is yet more obvious here. In the first image, the lens is obviously not a necessary part of eternal reality. Even for the human mind it is possible to step back (intellectually, though not experientially) from the lens and attempt to see eternal reality in itself without the mediation of the temporal. Lewis suggests, of course, that such attempts are ill-advised.

Every attempt to see the shape of eternity except through the lens of Time destroys your knowledge of Freedom. Witness the doctrine of Predestination which shows (truly enough) that eternal reality is not waiting for a future in which to be real; but at the price of removing Freedom which is the deeper truth of the two. And wouldn't Universalism do the same? (*Great Divorce* 122).

One can try to ignore the lens of Time, but it will result in missing parts of the picture simply because they are too large to see. However, this is a limitation of the human intellect, not a limitation of eternal reality itself.

The relationship between time and the soul is seen most clearly in the second image. MacDonald first hints at it when he states that “Time itself, and the events that fill Time, are the definition” of eternal reality. This is borne out in the second image: the *idola* which move about the table of time are living out and “delineating the inmost nature” of their corresponding souls which stand outside time. The nature of the causality is unclear here, but whether the actions of the temporal being define the soul or whether the soul defines the actions of the temporal being is not actually important.



What is important is that there is an intrinsic and mutual connection between temporal action and the qualities of the soul—i.e. the character—just as we saw in the Eustace story in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Finally, both images speak to the relationship between time and eternity. These new images reinforce the same idea. Looking through an inverted telescope restricts ones view, lessens the sense of the whole. It provides a “small, clear image” but simultaneously loses the true scale and grandeur of things. Lewis suggests that one can only see Freedom through the lens of Time because it is otherwise “too big”; likewise with all of eternal reality, presumably. The scale is too great for the human mind to comprehend without the restriction that the lens of Time provides. Time itself in both these images is something far smaller than the eternity which surrounds it. The inverted telescope lens is tiny in comparison to the eternal realities, Freedom particularly, which can be seen through it. In the same way, the chess table of the second image is described as “little” in comparison to the “gigantic forms” who stand silently around it. The temporal is encompassed and dwarfed by eternal reality.

As we have already seen, Lewis believes eternity to be more real than time; in Narnia time is likened to a dream, while eternity is likened to waking reality. Likewise what is seen through an inverted telescope is only an image of what lies beyond the lens, and thus less real than the actual objects. As for the chess table, the *idola* or temporal beings which move about upon it are referred to as “puppet representative[s],” while the souls which stand about them are their “giant master[s].” The *idola* only represent the real beings, just as an image in a telescope lens only represents that which actually lies beyond.

This remains only a brief sketch of the final images of *The Great Divorce*, but hopefully it has been made clear that these images stand solidly upon the foundation of the four cornerstones of Lewis's philosophy of time. We will return to discuss these images at length once again in the fourth chapter, viewing them as a direct response to the A-series and B-series temporal theories of the post-McTaggart philosophical world. For now, let us turn towards the theological foundations of Lewis's philosophy as they appear in the works of Boethius and St. Augustine.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Lewis in Conversation with the Tradition

#### *Standing Within A Tradition*

In the previous chapter it has been argued that Lewis's philosophy of time can be reduced essentially to four distinct elements: that God stands outside of time, that time is created and contingent, that the fundamental effect of time is on the mind or soul, and that the respective natures of time and eternity are fundamentally connected to one another. These four elements are combined in Lewis's work in a particularly notable way, but none of them is unique to him. Lewis is standing on the shoulders of an older tradition, both philosophical and theological, to produce the conception of time which appears throughout his *corpus*. Primarily, however, this older tradition is not classical but medieval. Lewis's philosophy of time quite explicitly disagrees with that of Aristotle in his *Physics* on several crucial points; on the other hand, it has deep connections with the thought of Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy* and Augustine in Book 11 of his *Confessions*.

There are a number of potential reasons that this would be so, but I will present the reason I find most plausible. The nature of the various treatments of time throughout Lewis suggests that his interest in time is rarely, if ever, merely philosophical in nature. Aristotle's treatment of time is in terms of simple ontology, what we would today

consider the domain of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Lewis is interested in time's basic ontology as well, but his chief fascination seems to be with the respective relationships of time to eternity, to the freedom of the will, to the development of the human soul, and to God. While these are indeed all philosophical concerns, they are all in the primary jurisdiction not of metaphysics *qua* metaphysics but rather of the philosophy of religion and, more broadly, of theology. Lewis himself is a theologian, as was stated in the introduction to this thesis; he may not have attended seminary or studied theology while at Oxford, but a number of his works are explicitly theological and (though I will not argue for this position) I suggest that all of his works are at least implicitly theological. It is through the lens of theology that Lewis engages philosophical issues. A strong draw to the writers of the medieval period, whose philosophy was likewise deeply theological in nature, is therefore understandable.

In this chapter I will examine the theological philosophies of time presented by Augustine and Boethius respectively, and illuminate the various ways in which Lewis's own philosophy of time echoes and harmonizes with them. It is crucial to note that I am not arguing here that Lewis explicitly based his philosophy of time on these early writers. Such a case cannot be proved; Lewis does not leave any written commentary about the discussions of time present in Augustine or Boethius. We can be certain that he read their works, as he cites them in *The Discarded Image* and elsewhere. The point to be proven is that Lewis knowingly stands in a theological tradition when he writes about the

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<sup>1</sup>This is, of course, an ironic use of terms; Aristotle himself considered time to be a matter of physics rather than metaphysics (hence its inclusion in the volume of that name) due to its intrinsic connection, in his view, with physical change. Nonetheless, "physics" is not a modern philosophical category, and the ontology of time is universally treated as the domain of metaphysics in modern contexts.

nature of time, and that he actively responds to that tradition as he develops his own philosophy.

*Augustine: Distentio Animi*

“*Quid est enim tempus?*”<sup>2</sup> In the eleventh book of his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo devotes himself to a consideration of the nature of time. After long deliberation, he ultimately concludes that time can be defined as a distention of the mind or soul: *inde mihi visum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi*<sup>3</sup> (XI.XXVI.33). What exactly this intriguing definition entails has been the subject of extensive debate, and multiple contested readings exist.

The chief objection to Augustine’s definition of time is that it seems to place time in the realm of the subjective. Bertrand Russell, for example, goes so far as to accuse Augustine of solipsism.

St. Augustine, whose absorption in the sense of sin led him to excessive subjectivity, was content to substitute subjective time for the time of history and physics. Memory, perception, and expectation, according to him, make up all that there is of time. But obviously, this won’t do... Subjective time might suffice for a solipsist of the moment, but not for a man who believes in a real past and future, even if only his own. (*Human Knowledge* 212)

A number of scholars have attempted to defend Augustine against this grave charge. One common move is to state that Augustine never intends to present an ontology of time, but merely a psychology. Such is the case made by Robert Jordan in his essay “Time and Contingency in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” for example, in which he states that for this

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<sup>2</sup>“What, truly, is time?” *Confessions* XI.XIV.17. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are the work of Joshua Jeffrey.

<sup>3</sup>“Thence it appears to me that time is nothing except some distention: but of what thing, I do not know (how extraordinary) if not of the mind/soul itself.”

reason Bertrand Russell's objections are of "staggering irrelevance" (396). Paul Ricoeur's long discussion of *Confessions* Book XI in *Time and Narrative* gives a similar interpretation on which Augustine is presenting a theory of the relationship of time and the mind rather than a theory of time's nature. This defense has merit but is potentially dangerous insofar as it may fail to make clear that Augustine believes that there is an ontology beyond this psychology—which would potentially lead the reader to assume that Augustine believes that time is *merely* psychological, and lead directly back to Russell's initial objection.

In response to this danger, and with Ricoeur specifically in mind, David P. Goldman states in his recent article "The Divine Music of Mathematics" that Augustine "implies an ontology as well as a psychology of time" in his *De Musica*, even if he may not make this explicit in his *Confessions* (35). In the *De Musica* Augustine posits the existence of the *consideratio*, a faculty which allows the hearing of rhythm in poetry or music "on a higher order than sense perception or simple memory" (34). Goldman gives the example of the introductory lines to Coleridge's famous "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

It is an ancient Mariner,  
And he stoppeth one of three.  
"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,  
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"

Goldman identifies Augustine's *consideratio* with the intuition which enables the reader of this poem to read it instinctively in ballad meter, thus reading it correctly despite the fact that Coleridge has added unexpected syllables—a feat which a computer's text-to-voice program, Goldman points out, could never accomplish. Sense perception and logic alone are not enough; only the *consideratio* makes it possible to "hear" the coming

rhythm and anticipate it even before it arrives. Augustine says that this *consideratio* is an ordering principle based on numbers which he calls the “numbers of judgment,” and that these numbers must come from God because they are eternal—unlike the “numbers” of the rhythm itself, which pass away immediately. Goldman astutely points out that when the *consideratio*, which is a faculty which in some sense reaches into the future, is asserted to have objective existence and come not from the human mind but from God, this implies the real existence of time beyond the mind.

Goldman’s argument is intriguing, but it is not fully fleshed out in his article—primarily because it is a side concern rather than his ultimate focus. I wish to go a step beyond Goldman’s argument and suggest that Augustine does, in fact, imply the real extra-mental existence of time in his *Confessions* as well as the *De Musica*. I will do so by offering a new construal of the word *distentio* as more directly related to its etymological ancestor *distendere* than is granted by the interpretations of Russell, Jordan, or Ricoeur, and will use this new construal to illuminate the meaning of the phrase *distentio animi*.

Augustine’s primary project in the last half of Book XI of the *Confessions* is stated at the beginning of XI.XII:

*Ecce respondeo dicenti: quid faciebat deus, antequam faceret caelum et terram? ... audenter dico: antequam faceret deus caelum et terram, non faciebat aliquid.*<sup>4</sup>

It is in defense of this claim that God did nothing before He made the earth that Augustine finds it necessary to discuss the nature of time. For, as he points out, the

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<sup>4</sup>“Behold, I respond to those asking; ‘what was God doing, before he made the heavens and the earth?’ ... daringly I say: before God made the heaven and the earth, He was not doing anything.”

ignorant will ask why God waited doing nothing for countless ages ere He made the earth and all things in it. Augustine's reply is that time itself is an artifice, and that God is the *operator omnium temporum* just as he is the *operator creationis*<sup>5</sup> (XV.XIII.15). God's act of creation is the beginning of time as well as space. The rest of the book is Augustine's attempt to understand how time, as an artifice and a part of creation, fits in with the rest of created reality.

Augustine ponders and rejects several classical understandings of how time and spatial reality interconnect. First he rejects that time is dependent on the movement of the spheres, stating that even should they stop turning one could still measure time by the rotation of a potter's wheel (XI.XXIII.29). He then rejects the theory (one held generally by modern science) that time is simply the movements of all physical bodies, and thus a function of change, based on the fact that time allows us to measure not only movement but its absence (XI.XXIV.31). He then attempts to discover a way in which time could be measured in the way that we can measure space, but fails. He concludes that time is a kind of *distentio*, an extension or stretching out of something, and finally that this something is the mind itself.

Bertrand Russell's acute irritation with Augustine arises from the final stage of this progressive inquiry. Augustine, satisfied at last that he has come to at least a partial understanding of time, expands on his definition by saying that time appears to pass from future through the present into the past only because *in animo, qui illud agit*,<sup>6</sup> three

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<sup>5</sup>“Maker of all times” and “maker of creation”

<sup>6</sup>“in the mind-soul, which performs this”



distinct actions are occurring: *expectatio*, *attentio*, and *memoria*.<sup>7</sup> It is apparent from the nature of Russell's argument that the clause he fixes on and so bitterly disputes is *in animo qui illud agit*, and his interpretation of this clause is what leads him to reject the whole of the argument. For, Russell argues, if time is dependent on an action done by the mind itself, then time exists only in the mind. This promotes a wholly subjective understanding of time, a kind of temporal solipsism which he rejects out of hand as ludicrous. After all, as he points out:

All [Augustine's] memories and all his expectations occurred at about the time of the fall of Rome, whereas mine occur at about the time of the fall of industrial civilization, which formed no part of the Bishop of Hippo's expectations. (202)

Therefore time must exist outside the mind, and Augustine's definition and understanding of its nature is false.

These concerns may be satisfactorily answered by a modified construal of the term *distentio*. The noun descends etymologically from the verb *distendere*, which is translated often as "to stretch out" or "to extend." It is typically connected to the idea of a torture rack which stretches out its victims, or a measuring rod which is stretched out in order to gauge the width or length of an object. This seems to be the construal which creates Russell's concern; if time is the mind's yardstick, then indeed time seems to be contained wholly within the mind and this is indeed solipsistic. A secondary meaning of *distendere*, however, is a expansion by means of being filled up on the inside, as of a water skin that stretches out as it is filled (a connotation which English retains when referring to a distended belly or a distended balloon.) If, rather than implying a linear extension like that of a yardstick, Augustine's *distentio* derives from this image of a

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<sup>7</sup>I.e. "expectation," "attention," and "memory"

water skin filled to capacity, the meaning of time as *distentio animi* is remarkably altered. Time is not something which only exists in the mind; rather it is something which fills up the mind-soul and expands it. This leaves time as an objective reality, even though it is only through its entry into the *animus* that it becomes perceptible and measurable.

It is difficult to judge whether this interpretation is valid, as the word *distentio* only appears in the Confessions within the context of Books XI and XII, and even then there are only five occurrences. Several of these occurrences are of little use to us, as they merely state Augustine's perplexity about what kind of distention time is. The following occurrence, however, proves most useful:

*Sed quoniam melior est misericordia tua super vitas, ecce distentio est vita mea, et me suscepit dextera tua in domino meo, mediatore filio hominis inter te unum et nos multos, in multis per multa...*<sup>8</sup> (XI.XXIX.39)

If *distentio* is construed in this passage to be extended or stretched out as a measuring rod, the meaning is obscure; such a phrase seems distinctly out of place in between two clauses praising the abundant mercy of God through his Son. The connotation of *distentio* as a filling up, however, fits perfectly: as in Psalm 23 when David praises the Lord who fills up his cup until it overflows, here we have Augustine praising the Lord whose mercy is so overabundant that it fills him up and stretches him out as though he were an overloaded water skin.

Given this precedent for the validity of the construal, what does Augustine's *distentio animi* actually say about time? The image becomes that of the mind-soul as a water skin being filled from a spring or a fountain. That time which is about to come is

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<sup>8</sup>“But because Your mercy is greater than life, behold my life is a distention, and your right hand held me up, through my Lord, Your Son, the mediator to men between You the One and we the many, in many things by many means....”

anticipated through the *expectatio* just as the first drops of water touch the outer rim of the water skin. This expectation does not see far, however, just as we can only anticipate accurately a small part of what the future will hold. The neck of the skin is the present, the *attentio*, through which the water flows from the outside to the inside. Finally, the *memoria* is the inside of the skin, in which the water which has flowed through the *attentio* is stored. As the skin is filled more and more, it expands and distends. (As we grow old, perhaps it springs a few leaks!) This interpretation of *distentio animi* prevents Russell's concern of solipsism; with *distentio* construed thus it is not the mind that defines time, but rather time that defines the mind. Time is that which fills and distends all *animi*, not a mere extension of the individual *animus*. This interpretation of Augustine embraces Ricoeur's insight that Augustine is presenting a psychology of time, yet also leaves it abundantly clear that time is not a mere mental construct.

#### *Lewis and Augustine*

Several connections between C.S. Lewis and Augustine are patently obvious. Augustine's focus on the nature of time as an artifice (created and contingent) is obviously reiterated in Lewis's thought, along with the connection between the beginning of physical reality and the beginning of time. It is Augustine's focus on the intimate relationship between time and the mind or soul, however, which Lewis echoes most strongly.

It is impossible to prove whether Lewis would have read Augustine's discussion of time in the *Confessions* in the light presented in the previous section. It is not entirely inconceivable that he might have done so; Lewis was a superb Latinist, as is evidenced by his years of correspondence in that language with Don Giovanni Calabria, which has

been published as *The Latin Letters of C.S. Lewis*. He also had a bone to pick with those who read literary criticism first and then turn to the original texts, as is evidenced in his introduction to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*—and he makes explicit that this is an even greater concern when dealing with the matters of theology, citing Augustine as one of a number who are too often ignored in favor of their modern commentators (3). These two facts make it reasonably likely that Lewis would have read Augustine in the original Latin, and that he would have paid little heed to the contemporary criticisms of Augustine's philosophy by Russell and others. Despite all this, however, no conclusive case can be made that Lewis would construe *distentio animi* as presented above.

Nevertheless, Lewis's portrayal of time's relationship to the mind has remarkable parallels with this reading of Augustine. Recall that Lewis's system suggests that the ultimate result of pure temporal change, abstracted from spatial change, is an effect on the mind and soul. Eustace Scrubb's experience in his journey to Narnia and back, during which no apparent change occurs to his physical body in England, nonetheless brings about a tremendous change in his character. This is consonant with the idea that time is something which fills out or distends the mind and soul, i.e. defines and changes it. Recall also the lines in the penultimate chapter of *The Great Divorce*: "Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition. Time itself, and the events that fill time, are the definition, and it must be lived." It seems that here Lewis is speaking not of time's relationship to the soul but rather to eternity, but the context of the statement reveals a blurring of the lines between these two. The discussion in which these lines occur is about the eternal fate of human souls, and the "eternal reality" in question is deeply personal rather than abstract. It is the eternal nature of each individual soul which time

defines, as is illuminated further by the chessmen “delineating the inmost nature’ of the great silent souls which stand around the board.

A further parallel exists in the work *Perelandra*, which has not yet been discussed. In this work of theological science fiction, the protagonist Ransom is sent to the planet Venus and interacts with the first inhabitants of that world—primarily the Eve-like figure known as the Lady. As the Lady discourses with Ransom and his antagonist Weston, who plays the role of the tempter, she repeatedly refers to her increases in knowledge and wisdom as “growing older.” This is established in the very first words the Lady speaks to Ransom.

“I was young yesterday,” she said. “When I laughed at you. Now I know that the people in your world do not like to be laughed at.”  
“You say you were young?”  
“Yes.”  
“Are you not young today also?” (*Perelandra* 60)

This pattern repeats itself throughout the work. When Ransom comments that the strange beasts of the world are so tame that they seem almost rational, the Lady responds, “We make them older every day” (65). On being told by Ransom that Weston is a servant of evil, she says that they should “go and make him older” (84). This connection of the passage of time with both intellectual and spiritual growth is perhaps the most explicitly Augustinian treatment of the relationship of time and the mind which exists in Lewis’s fiction.

#### *Boethius: Freedom and Foreknowledge*

In the previous chapter of this thesis, the argument presented by Nelson Pike in his essay “Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action” was briefly summarized. One aspect of the argument which was not made clear, however, is that Pike is conscious that

he is merely restating an older argument first presented in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius. Indeed, his intent in writing is to restate, clarify, and add to Boethius's initial argument, though without presenting Boethius's own solution. Pike is interested primarily in clearly stating the problem, for as he says,

If a theologian is to construct a doctrine of God's foreknowledge which does not commit him to determinism, he must first understand that there is a way of thinking about God's knowledge that would so commit him. (27)

Having already discussed Pike's argument at some length, Boethius's concerns will sound familiar. However, unlike Pike, he presents a definite answer to the problems which he lays out.

The *Consolation of Philosophy* is laid out as a dialogue between Boethius himself, who is in prison awaiting his eventual execution, and the female figure of Philosophy who, as the title suggests, consoles him in his time of trouble. One of Boethius's concerns in Book V of the work is about the nature of divine foreknowledge, and whether both divine foreknowledge and human freedom can coexist. This concern is laid out at length by Boethius (the character) in Book V section III, and answered gradually by the character of Philosophy in the following three sections.

Boethius's concerns are primarily based on his understanding of what constitutes knowledge. Knowledge for Boethius is by definition certain and unchangeable; he states "when I know something is, it is necessary that it be" (121). God's foreknowledge, then, must be likewise certain and unchangeable if it is to be called true foreknowledge, rather than mere uncertain opinion. And yet if God's foreknowledge is certain and unchangeable, then it seems that "no action or desire will be able to exist other than that which God's infallible Providence has foreseen." Unlike Pike, who suggests that one of

the theologian's options when facing this problem is to modify or remove God's foreknowledge, Boethius is just as concerned with potential damage to God's omniscience and Providence as he is with the loss of the free will. If future events are simply uncertain, then God's foreknowledge will either be deceptive, as events could still happen which He could not anticipate (and to imagine this would be blasphemous) or God's foreknowledge will in fact be no higher than human "foreknowledge"—i.e. His foreknowledge will only consist in knowing that an event either will or will not happen, which is meaningless. However, to Boethius as character the only other option appears to be fatalism.

Philosophy answers Boethius's concern slowly, over the course of three sections. Rather than following through the entire logical progression, I will move for the sake of brevity to the conclusion which she ultimately provides.

Since, therefore, all judgement comprehends those things that are subject to it according to its own nature, and since the state of God is ever that of eternal presence, His knowledge, too, transcends all temporal change and abides in the immediacy of His presence... Just as you see certain things in this your present time, so God sees all things in His eternal present. So that this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and property of things; it simply sees things present to it exactly as they will happen at some time as future events. (134)

God's nature is eternal, and therefore he does not experience time as mortals do. Rather He sees all events in an "eternal present," and such mere seeing cannot inflict necessity upon events any more than our own observation of present events inflicts necessity upon them.

Boethius adds one final concern which will be pertinent to our discussion, asking whether God's vision of future events is thus constantly changing to accommodate our free choices. Wisdom responds in the negative, stating that God's knowledge "does not

change, as you think, with alternate knowledge of now this and now that, but with one glance anticipates and embraces your changes in its constancy.”

Two particularly important words thus center our understanding of Boethius: immediacy and constancy. God’s knowledge of all events, past, present, and future, is immediate and all-encompassing, embracing the whole of eternity simultaneously in His eternal present. Likewise, God’s knowledge is constant and unchanging, timelessly knowing the ultimate ends of all things.

### *Lewis and Boethius*

The belief that God stands outside of time, which Lewis suggests to his readers as a helpful way to understand prayer in *Mere Christianity* and portrays so vividly in Aslan’s enigmatic statement “I call all times soon,” quite clearly finds its origin here. Lewis’s direct reliance on Boethius may not be certain, but a stronger case can be made here than in the case of Augustine. First, this passage in Boethius has not led to numerous contested readings; most commentators, medieval and modern, agree on the essential interpretation. Second, we know for certain that Lewis had read Boethius—he mentions having been exposed to his thought while at Oxford in *Surprised by Joy*, and cites him on multiple occasions in *The Discarded Image*. Third and most important, we also know that he found Boethius’s treatment of time compelling. In *The Discarded Image* Lewis gives an extensive summary of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, including the section on time. He ends his discussion with the remarkable words “I cannot help but feel that Boethius has here expounded a Platonic conception more luminously than Plato ever did himself” (*Discarded* 89-90). Lewis’s obvious admiration



for Boethius's treatment of time lends weight to the belief that he may have consciously based some of his own thought upon its precepts.

It is not merely in the idea of God's eternal nature that Lewis has remarkable correspondence with the thought of Boethius. Lewis's portrayal of the relationship between time and eternity also finds strong parallels here. Consider Boethius's focus on the idea that God's eternity is a kind of immediacy, and the use of the phrase "eternal present." This idea is clearly present in the passages in *The Screwtape Letters* in which Lewis suggests a deep connection between eternity and the present, going so far as to say that "the Present is the point at which Time touches eternity" and that our experience of the present bears the most resemblance to God's experience of all of time (*Screwtape* 228). Furthermore, Lewis portrays the eternal as not timeless but what might be called timeful—i.e., it contains all times within itself and transcends them. Eternity is more real, not less real, than temporality. This seems to be a dim echo of Boethius's assertion that God's eternal knowledge "embraces all the infinite recesses of past and future and views them in the immediacy of its knowing" (134).

One of the most fascinating connections between Lewis and Boethius, however, is contained within the final passage from the *Consolation* which was mentioned in the previous section. The character Wisdom states that God's knowledge "does not change, as you think, with alternate knowledge of now this and now that, but with one glance anticipates and embraces your changes in its constancy." Consider this passage in the context of the chess table image presented in the final chapter of *The Great Divorce*. The great souls which stand around the table are unmoving and unchanging, yet their nature is defined by the actions and changes in time of their *idolum* counterparts. This can be

easily rendered into Boethian terms; just as the figures on the chessboard represent how people in this world “appear to themselves and one another,” the figures which stand outside the chessboard represent how people appear to God’s eternal knowledge, in which their all their changes are embraced in constancy.

### *In Conclusion*

Once again, Lewis may or may not have explicitly intended to base his philosophy of time on the work of these two early medieval thinkers. However, he was familiar with the work of both of them, and thus he knows that he stands in their theological tradition when he deals with the issue of time. Connections between his writings and their theology, therefore, are to be expected. What may be less expected is that Lewis’s four chief points in his philosophy of time are not merely responding to the theology of these two men, they are in complete harmony with them. Augustine affirms the created, contingent nature of time and deals at length with the relationship of time to the mind. Boethius affirms that God stands outside of time and deals at length with the relationship of time to eternity. C.S. Lewis brings all these insights together in his work, both fictional and nonfictional, to create a coherent philosophy of time which stands firmly on the foundation of early medieval theology.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Lewis in Conversation with Modern Philosophy

#### *A Matter of Mind*

As we have seen, C.S. Lewis's fascination with time has a firm foundation in ancient philosophical and theological tradition. It also placed him in company with a multitude of his contemporaries: debates about the nature of time were increasingly commonplace in the early to mid-twentieth century, particularly in the philosophical circles of Oxford and Cambridge. There were a number of reasons for this, but chief among them was a significant shift in philosophical atmosphere that was occurring right around the years of Lewis's schooling.

In 1908, J.M.E. McTaggart, a fellow and lecturer in philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge, wrote an essay boldly titled "The Unreality of Time." In this essay he claims to disprove the existence of time by first demonstrating that time can be defined according to two distinct "series," the A-series and the B-series, and then showing that an understanding of time based on either one has crippling logical problems. The paper was published in *Mind*, a journal issued by the Oxford University Press. Despite its remarkable claims, very few early responses were negative. V. Welby<sup>1</sup> contributes a

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<sup>1</sup>"V. Welby" was, in fact, Victoria, Lady Welby—quite a remarkable woman. Lady Welby published articles in *Mind* on at least five occasions in addition to writing several books, including one on the nature of time entitled *Time as Derivative* (1907). Lady Welby never had a formal education, but after her children had left the house she decided to educate herself through correspondence with the great minds of the day. Among these were C.K. Ogden, C.S. Peirce, and Bertrand Russell. This last demonstrates the deeply interconnected and nuclear nature of the philosophical culture of the day:

rather sharp criticism in the subsequent issue of *Mind* in 1909, and Hugh A. Rayburn makes an extended attack on McTaggart's position in his essay "Idealism and the Reality of Time" in the 1913 issue of the same journal. Yet a number of responses were affirmative—J.S. Mackenzie writes, in the 1909 edition of *Mind*, that "Dr. McTaggart has emphasized the unreality of time in a remarkably clear and cogent fashion" (Mackenzie 523)—and a general lack of uproar suggests that his conclusions were largely accepted as reasonable.

This may seem surprising to a modern reader, but it is quite easily explained. In the early years of the twentieth century idealism still reigned supreme in Britain. McTaggart himself states in the introduction to his essay that "in the philosophy of the present day the two most important movements (excluding those that are as yet merely critical) are those which look to Hegel and to Mr. Bradley" (McTaggart 31). That the two dominant and opposing factions were both forms of idealism is a powerful statement about the general philosophical atmosphere at the time of McTaggart's writing.

The importance of this is that one of the tenets held by many (though not all) contemporary supporters of idealism was a belief in the unreality of time. Both Hegelians and followers of Bradley alike denied that time really existed, stating instead that it was a constant illusion of the mind. Thus, McTaggart's claims in "The Unreality of Time" claim were not radical ones. He simply was making a new case for a well-worn idea. Yet McTaggart stood on the cusp of change. Those very movements which he calls "as yet merely critical" would in a few short years bring British idealism to its knees and

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Bertrand Russell had been both taught and mentored by J.M.E. McTaggart, to whose paper Welby gave the first critical response, and all three of them published their most famous essays in *Mind*.

establish the tradition of analytic philosophy which has lasted to this day. This radical transition is just beginning in the early 1900s, and comes to a head right around the time that C.S. Lewis is enrolled in University College at Oxford.

By the 1920s Hegelianism and British idealism were beginning to lose their firm foothold. The work of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore had created a new philosophical ideal, and its reputation was increasing rapidly. The followers of this new analytic method decried the vagueness and ambiguity so common in idealism, calling instead for clarity and a well defined logical system. The clash of the new analytic method with the older idealist one had effect throughout all branches of philosophy, but its effect on the philosophy of time was particularly noticeable. While the claims of McTaggart's 1908 essay had received little criticism when first published, they were now the subject of direct attack—in part due to his restatement of some of its essential ideas in a new book, entitled "The Nature of Existence," in 1921. A veritable explosion of papers offering refutations of McTaggart's views appear in philosophical journals around Britain in the late 1920s and early 1930s, including Gotshalk's "McTaggart on Time," McGill's "An Analysis of the Experience of Time," and J. Alexander Gunn's "Time and Modern Metaphysics." In some sense this sudden attack was in rather poor form, as McTaggart himself had just died in 1925 and could hardly defend himself. Nonetheless, it was a natural product of the changing times—in the absence of a widespread idealist framework, his views on time became obvious targets of the new generation.

Lewis falls right into the middle of this debate, both chronologically and locally. Many of the chief arguments against McTaggart both early and late were published in the journal *Mind*. This placed the epicenter of the debates about the nature of time, not to

mention the larger battle between idealism and analytic philosophy, squarely in Oxford itself. Many of the major players were not from Oxford themselves—McTaggart was a Cambridge man and Gotshalk was from London, for example—but Oxford was the intellectual center of England, and *Mind* was the intellectual center of English philosophy. Nearly every important philosopher of the day contributed regularly to *Mind*, including Francis Bradley, Bertrand Russell, and G.E. Moore. It would be quite surprising if Lewis, first as a student of philosophy and later simply as a man of intellectual curiosity, were not reading every issue of this prominent journal as it was issued.

It cannot be conclusively proven that Lewis encountered the ideas of J.M.E. McTaggart. Nonetheless, the likelihood is quite high. Lewis was ideally placed, both geographically and intellectually, to come across McTaggart's theories. Even should Lewis have managed to finish his education without encountering the thought of McTaggart, Lewis would have been hard pressed to avoid learning of him in the subsequent years; any man with an interest in philosophy in general, let alone time in particular (as has been quite clearly demonstrated of Lewis) would have had to hide under a rock to avoid hearing about McTaggart in the sudden explosion of papers in the late twenties and thirties. It is quite probable, therefore, that Lewis was familiar with the work of J.M.E. McTaggart.

The importance of this probable familiarity does not lie in McTaggart's conclusions, which were almost universally denied after the fall of British idealism in the mid-twentieth century, and would certainly be denied by Lewis after he rejected idealism in favor of theism. McTaggart's legacy for the philosophical world is the fundamental

distinction between two conceptions of time in which he couched his argument. After the 1920s, nearly all debate about the nature of time uses his language of the “A series” and “B series” of time. C.S. Lewis, though he never uses McTaggart’s terms, is in dialogue with these essential ideas.

### *McTaggart’s A and B Series*

At least a brief overview of McTaggart’s fundamental distinction is here necessary. McTaggart’s paper, as previously stated, identifies two different “series” of time, which he entitles the A and B series. The A series is the series of temporal positions defined according to the relations of past, present, and future; the B series is the series of temporal positions defined according to the relations of earlier than, simultaneous with, and later than. The actual temporal positions and the events that make them up are the same regardless of the series, of course: whether viewed in terms of an A-series or a B-series, the death of Queen Anne (McTaggart’s example) is still the death of a British queen. The difference is not in the contents of time, but in the nature of the relationships of those contents to one another.

The A-series views these relationships in a manner which is essentially subjective. The death of Queen Anne was, from the perspective of Queen Anne herself at the time, quite woefully present; from the perspective of the writer and readers of this thesis it is a past event; from the perspective of the royal physicians earlier that year it was a future event. The temporal relations of the A series are thus defined according to the perspective of individuals. The B-series, on the other hand, is essentially objective. That Queen Anne’s death followed the earlier event of her taking sick, and preceded the later event of her death being announced to the British public, are facts which remain constant entirely

regardless of perspective.<sup>2</sup> As McTaggart puts it, “distinctions of [the B-series] are permanent” (McTaggart 458).

McTaggart states that “we never observe time except as forming both these series” (McTaggart 458). However, he suggests that the A-series is fundamental to the nature of time in a way the B-series is not. His argument can be stated in a simple syllogistic form. Change is essential to the nature of time, and thus any time series which does not account for change cannot constitute the fundamental nature of time. The B-series does not account for change; as has been already stated, the relationships of the events in the B-series are permanent. Viewed in the B-series, the death of Queen Anne has *always* been the same event, preceded by certain other events, and followed by certain more. None of its properties ever change. Therefore, McTaggart concludes, the B-series cannot constitute the fundamental nature of time, at least in and of itself. Change is only made possible by the A-series, in which properties of events do change; e.g. the death of Queen Anne was, prior to 1714, a future event, it became a present event, and now it is a past event. The A-series thus provides a real change in properties, which the B-series by itself cannot provide.

McTaggart concludes that only the A-series may possibly constitute the fundamental nature of time, and then proceeds to argue that it has its own crippling problems. While the A-series can account for real change, it is logically inconsistent.

Past, present, and future are incompatible determinations... But every event has them all. If M is past, it has been present and future. If it is future, it will be present and past. If it is present, it has been future and

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<sup>2</sup>Barring, of course, a view on which future events have no real existence—a presentist might here state that in fact before Queen Anne’s death it was *not* true that her death preceded any events or was subsequent to any events, as no facts about her death could yet be true.



will be past. Thus all the three incompatible terms are predicable of each event, which is obviously inconsistent with their being compatible...  
(McTaggart 468)

As McTaggart says, this seems on first glance to be easily explained—the crucial point is that a present event *was* future and *will be* past, rather than it possessing all three properties at the same time. Yet this recourse is not available, for it creates a vicious circle. Tensed language like this is only functional insofar as it presupposes the existence of time, and according to McTaggart the A-series is essential to time. Thus “the A series has to be pre-supposed in order to account for the A-series” (McTaggart 468). McTaggart concludes that, as the B-series is insufficient to account for change in time and the A-series is logically inconsistent, time itself does not exist.

Despite a general rejection of McTaggart’s conclusions after the 1920s, his terms have become intrinsic to all current philosophy of time. In the subsequent decades, those philosophers of time unwilling to accept McTaggart’s counterintuitive conclusion have gradually divided themselves into two camps. A-theorists argue that McTaggart’s argument against the fundamentality of the B-series is sound, but present a way in which the A-series can provide a functional understanding of time despite his dismissal. The B-theorists, on the other hand, argue that the B-series can indeed account for change and therefore time (or that McTaggart’s understanding of what change means is flawed) but that McTaggart’s argument against the A-series is sound.<sup>3</sup> This is an odd result in many ways, and doubtless one that McTaggart himself could never have foreseen. He did not

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<sup>3</sup>These characterizations are overly simplistic, of course. Few of the modern proponents of either theory make use of McTaggart’s original arguments (which have in general been satisfactorily answered) against their opponents, rather creating original arguments. Many B-theoretic arguments of the late twentieth century, for example, are based on Einstein’s relativity theory.

view the two series as ultimately divisible from one another, but rather as fundamentally connected. According to his argument the B-series is not “fundamental” to time, as it cannot account for change, but he nonetheless considers it “essential” to time if time were to exist (McTaggart 464). However, an unintended consequence of his essay was a complete polarization of the debate on the ontology of time, and that polarization has continued until today.

### *Polarized Theories*

The new A-theory and B-theory, it is important to add, do not simply state that the A and B-series, respectively, are the essential reality of time. Each involves certain logical outgrowths of that fundamental premise. In the case of the A-theory, this manifests itself as the claim that only the present is truly real, while the future and past are real only in some derivative sense or not real at all, depending on the particular A-theorist in question. This position is sometimes called presentism. In the case of the B-theory, the natural outgrowth is the belief that all times are equally real, and that there is no true objective present—the present is merely an illusion of the mind and not indicative of ultimate reality. Furthermore, all physical entities in the world can be defined in terms of four dimensions—thus, for example, the true identity of the pen I hold in my hand is not merely the three-dimensional physical object as it resides in this particular time, but is rather a four dimensional object which includes the physical form of the pen in all moments of time in which it exists. This idea of a four-dimensionally stretched identity is often referred to as a “space-time worm,” and this overall B-theoretic view is sometimes known as either four-dimensionalism or eternalism.

The polarization of the philosophy of time into these two positions is not necessarily a positive result. It must be recognized that giving up either the A-series or B-series in favor of a conception which is exclusively based upon its alternative is no light matter. There are some basic prephilosophical assumptions that push us towards both series, and which must be ignored or claimed as illusion in order to create a theory based solely upon one of the two. In the case of the B-theorist, one of the primary problems is how to understand the basic idea of freedom. Our conscious experience of time is as a succession of moments following one another in which we have choices to act one way or another, in the knowledge that those choices will have future effects. In the B-theoretic framework, however, the relations of all temporal events are permanent. Consider my sitting down to breakfast this morning, hereafter called event E. It is a timeless truth about E that it was preceded by my waking up, event W, and succeeded by my writing these very sentences, event S. In a B-theoretic framework, the fact that my actions would follow this sequence of W to E to S was as true when the first atoms were spiraling into existence as it is now, and as it will be a hundred years hence. It is difficult to see, then, how any of my actions could be truly free. In a sense, they are only a pantomime in time of a reality which is true timelessly. It may be recognized that this contains echoes of Nelson Pike's argument summarized in Chapter Two, yet here the restriction of freedom comes not from a foreknowing Deity but from the nature of time itself. This is a difficulty which cannot be easily sidestepped. The B-theorist who takes her position seriously generally has to give a new account of freedom, or deny it altogether—neither a particularly appealing option.

The A-theorist has problems as well. A variety of arguments have been offered against it from the standpoint of modern science, particularly relativity theory. I will not address these particular issues, as they are both beyond my field of expertise and, I believe I can reasonably claim, likely of little interest to Lewis. What might well be of interest to Lewis, however, is that the A-theory runs into significant problems in a theistic context. The first of these involves the notion of God standing outside of time, a view which Lewis himself holds. In a purely A-theoretic context, God's standing outside of time creates a puzzling quandary for His omniscience. Consider the question "What time is it?" If the ultimate reality of time is the A-series, then there is a real present in which there is a single true answer to such a question. Yet a God who stands outside time cannot provide any answer. If He sees all of time at once, He cannot know what time it is *now*. He can know the relationships of the event of my writing this sentence with all other relationships in time and yet not know whether any particular moment is the present or not.

From a purely A-theoretic view, however, does it even make sense to suggest that God *can* stand outside of time? If the present is real, yet the past and future are not (at least in the same sense), then what would God's standing outside of time mean? How would He view the universe? The very idea seems somewhat nonsensical. From an external perspective, A-theoretic time would appear only as the present, which is constantly changing—precisely the same way time looks from an internal perspective. If the A-theory is true then it seems that time from the "outside" and time from the "inside" are identical, suggesting that the very idea of "outside of time" is completely meaningless in an A-theoretic framework. And this leads, naturally, to further theological problems.

Recall Nelson Pike's argument, yet again; without recourse to the idea that God can know all of reality timelessly, no obvious refutation of his case exists and one may therefore be forced to choose between theological fatalism (with or without an unintuitive redefinition of freedom to salve the sting) or a restriction of God's omniscience which is in potential conflict with Scriptural evidence.<sup>4</sup>

### *A Search for Synthesis*

Now, at last, we return to C.S. Lewis. Once again, we may reasonably suspect that he was familiar with the ideas of J.M.E. McTaggart, and also with the gradually diverging schools which based themselves on those ideas. Yet examining the philosophy of time throughout Lewis's canon will lead to some odd results if one expects him to fit into the mold of an A or B-theorist in the proper sense. One moment he will seem wholly in the B-theoretic camp, and the next he will seem to have switched sides. One notable example of this is in a previously quoted section of *The Screwtape Letters*, which I will repeat here.

The humans live in time but our Enemy [God] destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and that point in time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which Time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. (*Screwtape* 228)

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<sup>4</sup>If one takes seriously the idea of divine prophecy, which runs through both the Old and New Testaments, then generally one must believe that God has knowledge of future events. There are a few philosophers of religion who attempt to get around this problem, however—for an example, see Nicholas Walterstorff's essay "God is Everlasting."

To attend primarily to eternity is the trademark of the “eternalist” B-theorist; to attend primarily to the present is the trademark of the “presentist” A-theorist. The idea of God experiencing reality as a whole in the same way humanity experiences the present is, as we have already seen, a notion which cannot exist in a purely A-theoretic context, and in subscribing to it Lewis may appear momentarily to be a pure B-theorist. Yet in the same sentence he states that only in the present can humans experience “freedom and actuality,” which sounds suspiciously A-theoretic. In truth, Lewis is subscribing to neither theory, but instead is bridging the divide between them. He is promoting a new, or rather an old, theory of time which does not divide the A and B-series but considers them a cohesive whole. Thus Lewis suggests here that God, whom Screwtape calls “the Enemy,” wishes humanity to not to focus on either the present alone or eternity alone but to attend equally to both. Furthermore he suggests that there is in fact an essential link between the two—that the present is in fact “the point at which Time touches eternity.”

It may be objected immediately that any attempt to bring the A and B-series of time into a single theory would surely have all the aforementioned problems of each joined into one incoherent bundle. Yet this is not necessarily the case. Recall that there are significant differences between the simple time series as defined by McTaggart and the ontological theories that grow out of them. A synthesis of the A and B-series of time would not involve all the conclusions and implications of the A and B-theories in their later forms, as many of these conclusions and implications arise directly out of the isolation of the two series from one another. For example, McTaggart’s definition of the A-series no more implies that the present is the only reality than it implies that the moon is made of green cheese; this idea arises solely when the A-series is taken *by itself* as the

ultimate reality, without the B-series as an equally essential part. Thus, a theory of time which involves a synthesis of the A and B-series is hardly unreasonable. Despite having been placed in opposition to one another throughout much of modern temporal philosophy, the original conception of the two in McTaggart's essay was as two equally essential aspects of a unified whole. C.S. Lewis is returning them to this original state, but doing so without following McTaggart to his conclusions. In Lewis's philosophy, time is certainly held to be real.

In the final chapters of *The Great Divorce*, Lewis presents two images which we have already examined in some detail: the image of the inverted telescope, and the image of the chess table. It is in these images that Lewis demonstrates his synthetic theory of time which brings the A and B series into harmony with one another. The perspective of the inverted telescope image is essentially that of the A-series: in it one stands in the position of the observer, looking through Time's lens at the individual and progressing events of history as we perceive them. The perspective of the second image is drawn back, so that one is no longer looking *through* Time but *at* it, and thus the perspective of this second image is dominantly that of the B-series. But each of these is simply a matter of perspective. Each image involves both the A and the B-series of time, and each shows Lewis's understanding of the intimate and indivisible connection between the two.

The image of the inverted telescope was discussed at length in Chapter Two, and I will not give a full restatement of it here. Nonetheless, a brief review will be helpful. The dreaming Lewis's guide through Heaven, George MacDonald, states that time is like an inverted telescope through whose lens one can see the things of eternity, particularly freedom, which otherwise would be too big to see. The crucial elements of the image are

the lens of time, the things seen through the lens (individual moments and events proceeding chronologically), and eternity, which is the true reality beyond the lens.

Lewis never uses McTaggart's terms, of course, but if one is familiar with the A and B-series terminology then things fall into place remarkably well. The image seen through the lens is "a picture of moments following one another and yourself in each moment making some choice that might have been otherwise" (*Great Divorce* 122). This image is representative of Freedom, strictly speaking, but it is also representative of time as seen by the A-series. Through the lens one can see the present moment primarily, and the past in the derivative sense of memory—hence the ability to see the sequential nature of the moments "following one another." The lens does not grant vision of the future, however—though Lewis does not specifically say this, he implies it heavily by stating that the vision involves choices that "might have been otherwise." This element of the vision depends on the absence of future knowledge. A complete picture of all future events would presumably eliminate any idea of alternative possibilities. Even without this, of course, the vision through the lens of time is supposed to represent the way we experience the world naturally, and true future knowledge does not enter into that natural experience.<sup>5</sup>

The picture seen through the lens is inherently subjective, just as the A-series is. Each viewer sees the events which are present or past to him or her—the picture I see through the lens of time now is not identical to that which Lewis saw as he wrote those lines. Indeed Lewis's image could easily match up to the idea that time itself is relative to each individual, i.e. the relativity-based idea discussed in the "Time and the Mind"

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<sup>5</sup>Augustine's *expectatio*, though considered to be future knowledge of a kind, is not the kind of foreknowledge which would be problematic here.



section of the second chapter. Yet each person's view through the lens, or each person's individual lens, is focused upon the same object: the eternal reality which lies outside and beyond the lens.

This eternal reality can only be described in terms of the B-series. The B-series contains all the events of time and is objective, rather than subjective—so too is the eternal reality beyond the lens. There is no present, past, or future, but merely a timeless reality which is, as MacDonald puts it, “not waiting for some future time in which to be real” (*Great Divorce* 122). MacDonald tells Lewis that those who attempt to look at eternal reality without the lens of time, however, lose all knowledge of freedom—he gives the example of the Calvinist and the Universalist, but he might just as well give the example of the B-theorist who faces precisely the same problem.

The B-series reality is still better seen in the second image, however. Here, as we have discussed before, Lewis is given a vision of a small silver chess table with great still figures standing around it, and knows that the little pieces on the board are representative of each of the great figures. The chess table, he says, is Time; the great figures represent the eternal souls outside it, and the little figures moving to and fro on its surface represent people as they see one another in the world.

It seems both crude and insufficient to compare the eternal souls standing outside of time with the “space-time worms” of the B-theory. The B-theory claims that the essential reality of any entity is defined in terms of its whole existence throughout time as well as space. Here Lewis suggests that the ultimate reality of any person is timeless, which indeed goes rather beyond the space-time worm idea. Yet there is a certain connection between the two. Lewis states that the actions of the *idola* or chess-pieces

“delineate [the] inmost nature” of the souls which stand around, and earlier MacDonald says that “time, and the events that fill time, are the definition” of eternal reality. These eternal figures, then, are defined by the actions in time of their *idola* counterparts, just as the space-time worm is defined by the three dimensional reality stretched through the fourth dimension of time.

Lewis mentions that the great figures are static; they are “silent” and “unmoving.” The totality of events in the B-series is likewise static and unchanging—this is, after all, McTaggart’s primary qualm with it being the fundamental reality of time. Finally, the figures stand physically outside of time in the image, which is (as we have discussed) only a possible concept given the B-series. That which they stand around and look into is the A-series of time.

The chessboard is the only piece of the image which involves active movement. The *idola* are constantly moving “to and fro,” unlike their giant counterparts. Each piece who is moving through time presumably has his own temporal perspective at each successive place, for that which it is moving “to and fro” in is time itself. Each looks at time from where it is, and that moment is the present for it. But the souls which stand around survey the entire board, seeing all of time in one glance. The idea of a “present moment” for these timeless souls is as meaningless the idea that one square on a physical chess board is the “real” one.

It is the relationship between the two series of time which is the truly important part of each image, however. If one merely looked at the second image, one might begin to think that Lewis is in fact a true B-theorist and that he thinks the A-series is merely an illusion. The changeless souls seem to be portrayed here as the controlling puppeteers of

their representatives in time—hence Lewis’s own horrified question of whether this was in fact the true reality, and the apparent choices we make in time are only a “mimicry of choices made long ago” (*Great Divorce* 124). MacDonald responds, “Or might yet not as well say, anticipations of a choice to be made at the end of all things? But ye’d do better to say neither.” Recall MacDonald’s earlier statement in discussing the inverted telescope image: “Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition. Time itself, and the events that fill time, are the definition, and it must be lived.” The relationship here is not one-directional, but is instead reciprocal—even as the eternal souls in the B-series direct the actions of the temporal bodies in the A-series, the actions of these temporal bodies in turn define the nature of the eternal souls. This seems a logical circle, and indeed in a sense it is. Yet it need not be a vicious one. The point is that the two series mutually define each other, and are fundamentally interconnected. To separate either from the other only leads to confusion.

Lewis’s theory of time, then, is a union (or rather reunion) of the A and B-series. It suggests that the primary difference between the two is a matter of perspective; from within time, one experiences time as an A-series of past, present, and future, and from outside of time, one can see time as a B-series sequence of events that follow one another in an order of earlier, simultaneous, and later. This idea can perhaps be made clearer by imagining it in terms of physical dimensions. Consider the function of  $x=y$ , a perfect diagonal line crossing a Cartesian coordinate plane at the point (0,0) and continuing at a forty-five degree angle to the x axis. Now make the rather ludicrous stretch of the imagination that this function is sentient. What exactly this sentience would mean is unimportant, as long as it involves at the very least an ability to be aware of its Y-axis

position at any given point along the X axis—i.e. at  $x=2$  the function, whom we shall call Steve, is aware that it is at  $y=2$ . Now, this odd little sentient being exists in one axis and yet two—Steve is a one dimensional line yet he is extended in two dimensions, just as a human being is a three dimensional being extended in a fourth dimension, i.e. time. The experience of progression along the y-axis for Steve is essentially equivalent to the experience of progression through time for a human being, while Steve’s experience of progression along the x-axis would be equivalent to the experience of motion through three dimensions for a human being.

What would Steve’s experience be like, then? Naturally, at any given x value he experiences the equivalent y value. He may also, if he possesses Augustine’s category of *memoria*, have some residual experience of the y-coordinates of lesser magnitude which he experienced at lower x-coordinates (i.e. his version of the “past”), and the perhaps the corresponding “future” experience from an equivalent of the *expectatio*. Nonetheless, the essential internal experience of Steve the function is of one y-coordinate per x-coordinate. That is the only way he can see the world.

From an external perspective, however, such as that of a three dimensional being like you or me, Steve’s existence is not a matter of one x-coordinate per y-coordinate. Stepping back into the third dimension enables us to see him instead as an entire line. In just such a way, a being capable of transcending time would be able to see us. The example of Steve is, of course, imperfect—it is difficult to imagine what a function would look like from the outside if it had free will to choose what x-coordinates it would lie in, for example. Yet it illustrates that which I suggest is Lewis’s fundamental point. We can only see from within time, and this perspective gives us our understanding of

time as an A-series. Yet seen from the outside, the timeline is a B-series. Neither is necessarily time's fundamental reality; each is simply a different perspective on the same entity.<sup>6</sup>

### *In Conclusion*

Whether Lewis's narrative and image-based philosophy can answer all the various objections which have been posed to the A and B series individually is a matter best left for a later date. I suspect the material would ultimately be enough to fill a book. For this thesis it is sufficient to show that Lewis's philosophy can be read as a response to the A and B-theories as they arose post-McTaggart, and that it attempts to bring the two time-series back into a coherent whole. This synthetic philosophy of time may not be written in the same analytic language as the opposing views against which it stands, but it ought at least to be placed alongside them. It is a consistent system which contains all the prephilosophically appealing elements of both the divergent modern theories of time, and it offers a call back to simplicity which I, for one, find arresting.

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<sup>6</sup>It may be argued that the entire example I have given is based on a kind of B-theoretic perspective, and that any A-theorist would never accept the basic premise that time can be likened to physical dimensions at all. This, however, is unimportant, for I believe I have given good evidence that Lewis himself *would* accept such a premise. The point to be proven here is that Lewis's system as a whole is coherent and consistent, and using his system to demonstrate that is not an instance of begging the question.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Concluding Remarks

This thesis has proposed that Lewis presents a coherent philosophy of time in his works, and that this philosophy is both grounded in Christian theological tradition and applicable to the modern debates which are the result of McTaggart's polarizing essay. I believe that these basic points have been sufficiently demonstrated, but a few intriguing questions remain which are simply too big to answer fully in the context of this thesis. By way of a partial remedy I will make mention of these questions here, and sketch out a few road signs, as it were, towards potential answers and further reading.

#### *What Has Athens To Do With Alexandria?*

Tertullian, a second century Christian theologian and author, once famously asked the question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? or the Academy with the church?" Perhaps we may borrow his turn of phrase in order to express pithily the first of our questions: "What has Athens to do with Alexandria? or the Academy with the theatre?" In other words, what has philosophy to do with literature and the arts (and vice versa)? To what degree do they or should they interact with one another? Can philosophy be truly expressed through such literary forms as fictional stories, parables, metaphors, or poetry?<sup>1</sup> Ought it to be so expressed? Are there cases in which philosophical ideas can be better expressed through such means than through logical syllogisms?

Putting argument aside for the moment, let us begin by observing that whether or not the philosophers or the literary critics have ever given a justification for such a

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<sup>1</sup>For the sake of convenience, any uses of the word "literary" and "literature" in the remainder of this section will refer to this rather narrow category of works.

position, an overwhelming number of historical philosophers and authors seem to have acted on the assumption that the philosophy and literature are indeed deeply connected with one another. As was mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, much of early philosophy was expressed through intrinsically literary forms. Consider Plato's famous *Republic*, for example. The primary mode of the work is discursive, acting through dialogue, and this is "literary" in our sense to a degree—there are characters and a setting, and the characters are given flavor and dimensionality beyond merely representing different philosophical viewpoints. Nonetheless, this aspect of the work is quasi-literary at best, and is being used primarily as a mere vehicle for the interface of philosophical ideas. The actual content of these philosophical ideas as they develop, however, is firmly entrenched in literary methods. Socrates seeks to answer the question "what is justice" not through theorems or syllogisms but through telling a story—the story of the city and the republic which gives the dialogue its name. This story has definite plot development, as the city progresses from its birth through gradual development and specialization of laborers to the heightened and feverish state in which it begins to seek luxury and engage in war with other provinces. Furthermore, the entire story of the city is intended as an elaborate allegory ultimately referring to the constitution not of a state but of a human being. There is no better example of philosophy expressed through story and metaphor.

What of the last of our questions—whether there are philosophical ideas that can be expressed better through literary forms than through logical syllogisms? This is perhaps an impossible question to answer, but again there are some potential precedents. One of the common interpretations of Jesus' choice to express the truths about the

Kingdom of God through parables is that they could not be as fully expressed through philosophical theorems—that such theorems would lack some element which is gained through the use of narrative. Whether or not this is a correct interpretation is a further question which would require a chapter of its own to answer, yet it gives at least potential precedent for a belief that some truths are better expressed through literature than logic.

Regardless of whether a direct argument can be made regarding the applicability of literary methods to the pursuit and study of philosophy, then, Lewis is standing firmly in a tradition as he uses fiction to address philosophical issues. We as readers are standing in the same tradition when we tease philosophical ideas out of his fictional works. If mere tradition is not enough, however, arguments do exist which contend that certain philosophical points are best made through the means of literature. Chief among these, and most pertinent to our study of Lewis and the philosophy of time, is Paul Ricoeur's three-volume work *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur's fundamental claim is that the philosophical idea of time is intrinsically connected to narrative, and that "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence" (52). I will not attempt to summarize his argument here, but merely point to it for the sake of further reading. If Ricoeur's insight is correct, then Lewis's use of literature to discuss the nature of time is not merely appropriate but necessary.

### *Participatory Fiction*

When considering Lewis's depiction of the relationship between time and the mind in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, an intriguing idea may naturally arise: is there an allegorical relationship between the children's adventures in Narnia and the experience of



the reader who enters through imagination into the world of the fictional work? Lewis does not suggest this directly, but the foundation for such an idea is laid in *Mere Christianity*. In the context of discussing God's relationship to time, Lewis gives the example of an author who can in some sense both enter into and withdraw himself from the time stream of the narrative which he is writing (*Mere Christianity* 138). This hints at the idea that the reader can likewise enter into the time stream of a work of fiction.

In some sense this seems to be intuitively true. A reader can pick up a book and, depending on her own temperament and the quality of the work in question, be so absorbed into the story that she ceases to notice the external passage of time. Time still passes "normally" for her body, of course, but her consciousness seems to enter partially into a new time stream as it follows characters progressing temporally through an imaginative world. The experience of a great work of fiction can often cause this kind of reverie for the attuned reader.

In this imaginative venture into a new time stream, the reader may experience some of the same mental effects that Lewis suggests are the effect of pure time—while a complete character shift like that of Eustace is quite unlikely, it is not infrequent for people to make use of expressions such as "that book changed my life." Can we in fact take this utterance at face value? It is perhaps not entirely unreasonable to suggest that a reader, through entering imaginatively into the experiences of a fictional character for a mere hour of "real" time, may undergo some degree of character development which could only otherwise be achieved through personally facing similar experiences—a process which would take not an hour but perhaps weeks or months.

All this is highly speculative, of course, and may be written off as simply ludicrous. After all, the reader does not truly leave the time stream of the real world as the Pevensies do in the *Chronicles*. Nonetheless, I suggest that the basic idea here is worth further consideration, and might provide some insight into the true nature and benefit of fictional stories—that beyond merely entertaining us, they actually offer a chance to distend our minds and souls through participation in an imaginative world.

### *Conclusion*

These are only a few of the many intriguing questions which could not be addressed directly in the scope of this thesis. All too often the nature of such a project as this one is to raise more questions than it answers. However, I hope that I have given satisfactory answers to the fundamental questions of the thesis—i.e., does Lewis present a coherent philosophy of time? where do the roots of this philosophy come from? and is any of this applicable to the modern philosophy of time? By way of a final conclusion to the project, I will briefly resketch the answers to these fundamental questions.

Lewis does present a remarkably consistent and coherent philosophy of time throughout his works. Despite spanning at least three different genres and some twenty years of his writing career, each mention of time fits quite neatly with all the others to present a total system which I have summarized in four parts: God stands outside of time, time is created and contingent, time is intimately connected to the mind, and time is intimately connected to eternity. It may be noted that this four-part division is in some sense artificial—time's created and contingent nature can be logically derived from the idea that God is transtemporal (see page 16), and the connection of time to the mind and eternity respectively can become blurred in certain cases (see page 49). Nonetheless, it is

convenient to summarize Lewis's temporal philosophy in such a way because it enables easy comparison with both his early medieval sources and contemporary philosophers.

Once again, a definite case cannot be made that Lewis explicitly relies on Augustine or Boethius as he develops his philosophy of time. Yet the parallels which exist certainly suggest their influence, and our knowledge of Lewis's own reading of their works adds a further degree of likelihood. Certainly Lewis's temporal philosophy does not develop in a vacuum, but is a product of the philosophical and theological environment in which he is steeped; in the case of Lewis, this is certainly that of the medieval period. He jokingly called himself a "dinosaur," and with good reason.

It is even less possible to make a case that he intends a direct response to J.M.E. McTaggart's essay or to the philosophical debate which it sparked. However, such a case is not necessary. Whether or not Lewis explicitly intends his philosophy of time to respond to the A and B-theories of time, the important thing is that it can respond to them. The synthetic philosophy he presents stands against the reductionistic metaphysics of the modern philosophers of time, and if it does so effectively then it matters little whether Lewis explicitly intended it to or not. Whether Lewis's philosophy can effectively stand up to the criticism it would doubtless receive from either side of the debate were it put forward is yet another question which this thesis raises but cannot answer, but I believe it has every chance of doing so. Like Lewis himself, I am a firm believer in the principle that newer is not always better. Perhaps the very medicine needed to heal the divide in the modern philosophy of time is this renewal and revitalization of an older tradition.

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