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## Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*: The Ascetic Devil and the Aesthetic God

Larry D. Harwood

Viterbo University in La Crosse, WI

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### Abstract

Considers “the puzzle of pleasure” in *Screwtape Letters*: why the devils cannot understand the reasons for which God created sensual pleasure.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *Screwtape Letters*

## Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*: The Ascetic Devil and the Aesthetic God

Larry D. Harwood

IN his very popular book *The Screwtape Letters* C. S. Lewis portrays his principal evil character as inculcating to fledgling disciples the “realism, dignity, and austerity of Hell” (50), whereas God, the opponent of evil, is pictured as “being a hedonist at heart” (116).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Screwtape, the evil character, in his advice to his student and underling Wormwood, often proudly contrasts his own asceticism to the aestheticism of God. Nevertheless, despite his moments of feeling superior to his opponent, Screwtape remains baffled by a Being who not only takes pleasure in pleasure, but who takes pleasure in the pleasure of others. Another and perhaps more significant reason for his failure to understand such an opponent is that Screwtape, like his lowly father, Satan himself, is exceedingly single-minded, and will allow no such perceived detouring pleasures as appear to occupy God to divert his own fiendish focus from the task at hand. Consequently, for Screwtape human sensual delights are relegated to the level of potent raw materials to be used in directing humans to his corner of the universe. They remain as mysterious to Screwtape as God Himself.

In *The Screwtape Letters* Lewis portrays God as a lavish materialist affirming delight in the sensual as a part of being human. Lewis depicts the pleasures of sense as an enigma to Screwtape, because although they present the very real possibility of downfall for humans, yet God delights in their human use. To Screwtape it appears that God took a gamble that not only makes little sense, but that also appears to have come with costs to Himself. In these particular differences between God and His opponents, I will contend that we catch a glimpse of Lewis's theological aesthetic. In this paper I will examine this as one of the many differences seen by Lewis between God and evil in his *The Screwtape Letters*.

### I. Theology, Angelology, and Demonology

Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* was certainly one of his most popular works, and by his own admission it was a work that he found easy to write. Lewis also confessed, however, “I never wrote with less enjoyment” than in compiling *The Screwtape*

*Letters (Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast* xiii). Lewis's attitude toward this work, moreover, bordered on revulsion, but for a significant reason: "The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch. Every trace of beauty, freshness, and geniality had to be excluded" (xiv). This statement from the Preface to *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast* suggests that for Lewis there is an aesthetic difference between the domains of good and evil. God and evil are not just ethical domains; they are also domains permeated with aesthetic properties.

This ethical/aesthetic conjunction is etched in further remarks made by Lewis in the 1961 Preface. While confiding that "the device of diabolical letters, once you have thought of it, exploits itself spontaneously" (xiii), he also confesses to "a sort of grudge against my book for not being a different book which no one could write. Ideally, Screwtape's advice to Wormwood should have been balanced by archangelical advice to the patient's guardian angel" (xiv). Lewis curiously contends he could not have written that book. Such a book would require a style or form appropriate to the content, and that he could not accommodate: "Mere advice would be no good; every sentence would have to smell of Heaven" (xiv). But had Lewis not so accommodated the ambiance of hell? Why could Lewis depict the dust, grit, thirst, and itch appropriate to the content of hell and evil, repulsive though it be, but not the smell, beauty, geniality, and freshness of heaven, inviting though they be?

The answer to this disparity is found in Lewis's contention that a conjunction exists between ethics and aesthetics, but also between good and evil. Though humans live between good and evil, Lewis suggests that the ease with which he wrote *Screwtape* arose out of a human experience more acquainted with evil than with good. Human nature on balance simply tilts in a certain direction—down. "My heart—I need no other's—'showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly,'" he wrote, quoting Psalm 36 from the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* (xiii). Thus Lewis can deny that it took him many years of "study in moral and ascetic theology" in order to produce the likes of a *Screwtape Letters* (xiii). This greater familiarity with evil than with good being the case, it is not odd that a human should be able to depict hell, but strain to depict heaven. Humans can climb down easier than they can climb up. The beatific vision is a harder thing to depict than the pit of hell simply because it is a much greater thing. Lewis, therefore, conceives of the aesthetic difference between the two realms simply as too disparate to permit any easy transition between the depictions of each.

Though claiming that aesthetics is part of the ethical domain, however, the aesthetics of good and evil are no more equal than are good and evil.

In a book written about the insides of hell, Lewis was intent that fallen angels look the part. Fallen angels must be seen as fallen, that is, wounded, weak, vulnerable, and therefore not overwhelming. These angels must be seen as groveling and not grand. In *Screwtape* Lewis had to be ever alert to this reality, for in a work with evil characters as the main characters, the demonic could easily be drawn larger than life. In exercising precaution against depicting devils as huge and powerful, Lewis makes a very brief but telling survey of the errors into which previous depictees of evil angels have fallen. Because he detested any depiction of fallen angels as high and mighty, he accordingly faults Milton for picturing them in a grandeur totally unbecoming their lowly state. However, outfitting devils in the wrong size is not the worst wrong of devil depictees. Another error is much more grievous for Lewis, that committed by Goethe. While Goethe rightly showed in *Faust* the “ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration upon self which is the mark of Hell,” he also “helped to strengthen the illusion that evil is liberating” through the “humorous, civilised, sensible, adaptable Mephistopheles” (ix). The latter characteristics are not traits of evil.

Lewis’s anthropology of evil, hinted at in his criticism of Goethe’s errors, is filled out in the rest of the book. For Lewis, evil is everything but liberating. Because in reality evil is confining, it is like a cage in which the preoccupation with self molds itself as a prison that only the self is allowed to occupy, for no devil true to form shares with another. For Lewis, real liberation would be an escape from practicing the cardinal doctrines of self-absorption—envy, self-importance, resentment. Though these sins are marks of gain to evil, there is nevertheless no beatific smile of achieved salvation on such a face, but at best only a repulsive grin, because the self is miserably bound only to itself, and has no thought of others without reference to itself. Evil is therefore not adaptable, but instead insistent and impatient that anything has escaped its clutches. Nor is humor welcomed by such a personality, because humor presents a sense of proportion—that is to say reality—entirely lacking and violently resisted by nervous self-absorption. This trait suggests that the devil and his cohorts are lacking in trust of any kind toward anyone, including each other.

## II. Satan’s Puzzle

That the difference between the kingdoms of darkness and light manifests itself in aesthetic difference becomes most pronounced in Lewis’s accounts of

Screwtape's befuddlement about the ultimate aims of his heavenly opponent. Though Screwtape is self-assured at times that he will win in his battle with God, a perplexity persists in his mind: that God might win as a result of Screwtape's ignorance of God's ultimate purposes. Screwtape finds himself at a loss to determine the real aims of God. A badgering weakness of his ability to deflect human attention away from God is his inability to understand an opponent he cannot pin down because he cannot fathom His position. At times Screwtape's speculations with Wormwood about God and His purposes are shrewd, but what Screwtape finds most unnerving is his quiet suspicion that his own possible doom would be a result of his inability to partake of and understand this secret about God. If this secret could be revealed, he might be able to use it against God, or he might—hell forbid—be taken in by it. Care must therefore be taken with any attempt at revelation.

The greatest burden Screwtape carries in his letters to Wormwood is referred to as the secret. The secret is millennia old, and yet Screwtape insists that he is completely unfazed by his utter failure to unlock this mystery. His tenacity in seeking a resolution is simply because the secret must be found out. That secret is how the "Enemy" can really love humans when, from Screwtape's perspective,

"That, of course, is an impossibility. He is one being, they are distinct from Him. Their good cannot be His. All His talk about Love must be a disguise for something else—He must have some *real* motive for creating them and taking so much trouble about them. The reason one comes to talk as if He really had this impossible Love is our utter failure to find out that real motive." (86)

In other words, there really is no secret, just a reality Screwtape cannot comprehend or accept. His inability to comprehend how one being could really love another from disinterested motives is so perplexing to Screwtape that God's real motive, love for something outside Himself, can only be a secret. What is most puzzling to Screwtape about this triangle between God, humans, and love is that God does not appear to incur a benefit out of this relationship of the kind understandable to Screwtape, but of course He must if Screwtape is to make sense of the whole thing.

Though Screwtape suspects the answer to the secret, he also realizes the dangers of the answer, acknowledging that "members of His faction have frequently admitted that if ever we came to understand what He means by

Love, the war would be over and we should reenter Heaven” (87). From the devil’s perspective, however, God has a love too free to be intelligible. The devil is at a loss to know why God competes with him for humans. He suspects an answer, but fears to utter it around his fellow devils, and once apologizes to Wormwood for having through mere carelessness let it slip in conversation. For this reason, the devil wishes the secret to remain a secret, for if it were ever fully out in the open devils themselves might bolt from hell, not to take heaven but to be taken in by it.

The rivalry between good and evil as they vie for human beings in *The Screwtape Letters* can sound as if the two competitors are equals. However, the aesthetic inequality between good and evil is paralleled by Lewis’s depictions of the unequal occupants of the two realms and his insistence that the inequality of the powers of good and evil be understood correctly. God and the devil are not metaphysical opposites for Lewis, but rather the devil must find his equivalent antagonist on a lower metaphysical plane—that of angels—for the devil is a fallen angel. Satan’s opposite is Michael, not God. The fact is, however, that the devil can look much bigger than he is simply because he has a very big job. This is why it is so important for Lewis that representations of fallen angels not be overdrawn. Certainly at times, Screwtape, to his chagrin, realizes that the only significance he and his work have derives from the sheer power of what he opposes. In this respect the power of evil resembles an assassin whose prominence is acquired from the prestige belonging to another, not to himself. For all his bravado, Screwtape lives with the guarded desperate thought that the kind of relationship God desires with humans places him at an unmistakable disadvantage, but he is ever on his guard not to be weakened by this realization. In the last letter Screwtape says, “Sometimes I am almost in despair. All that sustains me is the conviction that our Realism, our rejection (in the face of all temptations) of all silly nonsense and claptrap, *must* win in the end” (149).

However, the enticement to deny the devil’s reality represents a very real threat to evil. This is why the devil is and must always be a liar, for he must constantly be engaged in falsities so as to guard against a temptation undeniably greater than anything he has to offer. If it is the case that the truth will find one out, the devil must make sure the truth is not found. In reality the devil has no real offer to extend to anyone because he does not extend himself. The devil ultimately does nothing for the sake of his disciples, like Screwtape, nor does Screwtape for Wormwood. This anthropology of evil, therefore, is a fact that

must be hidden from humans who entertain it. When evil does appear to extend itself, it is only as the first required movement of an eventual retraction that returns to self. The devil really is intent on drawing all things to himself, but not as in the wedding feast of the Lamb spoken of in Scripture: not to mingle with and sustain His guests, but rather to devour them. Consumption at a sordid banquet is the end the devils have in mind for prey, whereas the banquet of God is a beginning of a shared relationship in well-doing.

The sheer enormity of the task of countering the temptation offered to humans by God makes the devil and his angels constantly irritable and dour. Though I remarked earlier that no devil true to form would want to get away from it all, it is also the case that, for want of rest, devils are probably greatly tempted by the picture in Revelation of the lamb lying down with the lion. They cannot rest, however, but must remain forever up and about as long as anything besides themselves populates the earth. This means they can never rest. For this reason, as Screwtape warns his underlings in the toast Lewis composed for him later, "How often you will envy the humans their faculty of sleep!" (154).<sup>2</sup>

Plenty of humans in our experience, and in Biblical examples, have maintained their distance from God because of their perceived unworthiness before God, but as Lewis depicts the devil, this is not his situation. The earthy human believes that God is the source of good. The human believes that God gives good gifts to humans, but human failing occurs because the human is either too ashamed or too proud to admit what he has done with them. The devil, on the other hand, cannot fathom why God even gave gifts to humans in the first place. For this reason the devil shows much greater diffidence toward God than do humans. Screwtape is suspicious of what God is up to, and thus he spends an inordinate amount of time trying to unravel the secret. The inability of the devil to understand such a purpose of God derives, of course, from his inability to understand God's unselfishness.

Greatly compounding this lack of understanding of true love, however, is the fact that Screwtape does not understand his own selfishness as a deviation from reality, but regards it as reality itself. The tenuous hope of victory for the power of evil rests on the misperception that its opponent is not grounded in reality. God's murky purposes, then, would constitute a deviation from reality. This is why the secret does not totally overwhelm Screwtape. At bottom Screwtape accepts his inability to understand God's purposes simply as due to

its deviation from the norm or reality. Screwtape, had he been God, would have seized upon the attribute of power, and left ungiven the gifts God gives to humans—the sensual pleasures of earthly embodied living. That these have nothing to do with the devil is underscored by Screwtape’s admission to Wormwood that they must “Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours” (41).

### III. The Puzzle of Pleasure: The Aesthetic God and the Ascetic Devil

The world of God is permeated with love, while the abyss of Screwtape is a vacuum totally devoid of love, though extinction of the desire for love is not automatic, even in hell: Wormwood the apprentice still feels the need, whereas Screwtape the veteran teacher has weaned himself of any need. While Screwtape’s mature world is a hardened hell, part of any optimism Screwtape has for his own ultimate victory over the Enemy is that humans will find themselves on a path in life that will choke out the grace of God:

“Thus gradually there comes to exist at the centre of the creature a hard, tight, settled core of resolution to go on being what it is, and even to resist moods that might tend to alter it. It is a very small core [. . .] almost, in its own way, prim and demure; like a pebble, or a very young cancer. But it will serve our turn. Here at last is a real and deliberate, though not fully articulate, rejection of what the Enemy calls Grace.” (157)

Screwtape intends that humans live out this experience. The trick is to get them to see that what God offers to humans is simply too good to be congruous with reality; as a result, they will maintain safe distance from grace.

The divine gift of pleasure presents a formidable problem for Screwtape. The assumption in Screwtape’s mind, sometimes surfacing in the *Letters*, is that the gifts of pleasure given by God would lead humans to God. For this reason he regards the aesthetic human experience of beauty as teeming with potential danger. Pleasure must not be allowed to become a vehicle for grace; Screwtape must subvert the gift of pleasure given to humans by God. In Letter 27 he says to Wormwood, “Even if we contrive to keep them ignorant of explicit religion, the incalculable winds of fantasy and music and poetry—the mere face of a girl, the song of a bird, or the sight of a horizon—are always blowing our whole structure away” (133).

Lewis sees Screwtape's manipulation of the pleasures provided by God as closely related to his inability to understand God's grace. For Lewis the grace and love of God do not manifest themselves solely in the salvific gift of God in Christ. Thus, there is a real sense in which rejection of either of these unprompted gifts of God would be rejection of both because they are connected, both deriving from the same motivation of love on the part of God. Screwtape's bafflement over the goodness of a God who gives to humans freely ultimately arises from bafflement over the nature of a Being who would bestow His goodness with such plenty and with no obvious self-interest. The devil's unbelief concerning God is remarkably consistent. A devil who cannot understand grace should not be expected to grasp any other divine gift.

The devil, moreover, in using the lure of the gifts to provoke their abuse among humans, is baffled that God in a sense has played into his hand. After all, God ultimately provided the very weapon with which Satan wages his war. God surely is not stupid, but how could God have made such a capital error? Or is it possible that God did not really make a mistake, that the only mistake involved is the human abuse of such gifts? In short, the gifts of sense are as non-sensical to Screwtape as the gift of salvation. It would be difficult to overemphasize the utter bafflement this picture presents to Screwtape. As he grapples with the eternal perplexity of this issue, Screwtape reminds Wormwood that in preying upon the pleasures of humans, they are using the goods of Someone Else, and he seems at times close to feeling actual remorse for what amounts to stealing. He clearly recognizes that these gifts of God are not of his making, nor could God have provided them for his purposes, since he and God have different purposes. Ultimately, then, the devil ends up as perplexed about the divine origin of these gifts to humans as he is about the divine impetus for the salvific gift. For Screwtape, as for Lewis, the gifts are ultimately one, all of a piece. To reject one would be to reject the other. To accept one is to accept the other.

Failing to understand their divine justification, Screwtape must nevertheless turn gifts from God into a hindrance to God. Screwtape therefore uses the gifts of God to serve his own evil ends.

"All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable." (41-42)

Least pleasurable? This last intent is important because it confirms that Screwtape must minimize a pleasure perceived by him—and Lewis—to lead humans to God. Screwtape sees that there is a divine aesthetic that must be severed in order to sever the human from God. This notion is prominent in one of Screwtape's most severe rebukes of Wormwood:

“And now for your blunders. On your own showing you first of all allowed the patient to read a book he really enjoyed, because he enjoyed it and not in order to make clever remarks about it to his new friends. In the second place, you allowed him to walk down to the old mill and have tea there—a walk through the country he really likes, and taken alone. In other words you allowed him two real positive Pleasures. [. . .] How can you have failed to see that a *real* pleasure was the last thing you ought to have let him meet? Didn't you foresee that it would just kill by contrast all the trumpery which you have been so laboriously teaching him to value? And that the sort of pleasure which the book and the walk gave him was the most dangerous of all? That it would peel off from his sensibility the kind of crust you have been forming on it, and make him feel that he was coming home, recovering himself?” (58-59)

To combat such situations, the cunning of Screwtape and the power of evil have not been ineffectual. In order to achieve a separation between God and the gifts of pleasure, the disciples of evil have concocted the invaluable tool of propaganda. Screwtape confides proudly to Wormwood how much service they have derived from the leveling charge of Puritanism at those who would rightly use the gifts of God: “May I remark in passing that the value we have given to that word is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years? By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life” (47).

While Lewis acknowledges how fear of the charge of “Puritanism” aids and abets the world of evil, he also indicates that the sensual pleasures God gives to humans are things oftentimes opposed in Puritanism. In part Lewis addresses this point toward the end of Screwtape's toast, in Screwtape's remarks on the presumed followers of God contained in the glass of wine he raises:

“Some were all rules and relics and rosaries; others were all drab clothes, long faces, and petty traditional abstinences from wine or cards or the theatre. Both had in common their self-righteousness and the almost infinite distance between their actual outlook and anything the Enemy really is or commands.” (171)

This last point may initially seem hardly in keeping with the perplexity about theology evident in Screwtape's letters to Wormwood. However, we must

remember that although he does not understand why God does what He does, Screwtape does not debate the fact that He does it. In his remark Screwtape reveals that he has some knowledge of God missed by these presumed followers. In that infinite distance spoken of by Screwtape, such humans, by eschewing the pleasures given by God, come close to the God-rejecting devil with his dour contempt for pleasures. However, while the devil's contempt for real pleasures is obvious, the similar puritan propensity manifests itself in a brand of religiosity where the foregone pleasures are replaced by a high seriousness thought to be closer to God. The puritan in a sense reverses the errors of Screwtape. The puritan rejects the gifts as not of God, but presumably does not reject the grace of God, while Screwtape accepts that pleasure is of God but rejects the grace of God. Can the puritan actually partake of one of these errors, but not both? In Lewis's estimation, apparently not. After all, these "followers" do not end up in heavenly communion with God, but in a fiery drink for the devil. Their mistake, manifest in the words and understanding supplied by Screwtape, was to think they bought favor with God by adding to or taking away things never commanded and never prohibited by Him.

Like Screwtape, the puritan fixes upon the misuse rather than the use of the sensual gifts of God to humans, though for different reasons. Nevertheless, Puritanism can end up in extreme forms by failing to see any link between the gifts of God and God. Also not unlike Screwtape, the puritan may secretly wonder what God was thinking by putting such things into the world. The puritan therefore has his own secret about God to unravel, one not unlike the "secret" that badgers Screwtape. In the worst forms of Puritanism, the gift of pleasure comes to be regarded as of satanic origin, whereas the point of Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* is that the devil knows it to be of divine origin. That much about the secret Screwtape understands.

Like Screwtape, the puritan would expunge these gifts, because they seem to detract from the matter at hand. Aside from the matter of love, this is because the puritan and the devil share a mindset that sees between two points a straight line, and therefore they both trim the tree in the literal and not the figurative sense in which we have grown used to that phrase. Pleasures are seen as detours delaying progress toward the goal. These sorts of things simply are not the "real thing"; they are superfluous, sinful, spurned. Lewis did not believe in any such separations between the true, the good, and the beautiful, simply because they have the same origin and justification: the free love of God for humans. In

Lewis's view the life God has given to humans is much fuller and much more joyous than either Screwtape or the contents of his drink ever thought.<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The thirty-one Screwtape letters were first published as weekly installments in the *Guardian*, from 2 May through 28 November 1941, and later as a book (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1942).

<sup>2</sup>"Screwtape Proposes a Toast" was first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* (December 1959). It was reprinted in *The Worlds Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1960) and in *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1961). All quotations are from the 1961 edition.

<sup>3</sup>I would like to thank Peter J. Schakel, who anonymously (to me at least) read and recommended this essay for publication in *Mythlore*, for his helpful criticism, recommendations, and suggestions.

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