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## Is Man a Myth? Mere Christian Perspectives on the Human

Donald T. Williams

Toccoa Falls College, GA

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## Is Man a Myth? Mere Christian Perspectives on the Human

### Abstract

Explores the nature of humanity from the perspectives provided us by G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien, and forces us to consider such difficult questions as “why are we here” and “what is our purpose.”

### Additional Keywords

Chesterton, G.K.—Religion and philosophy; Lewis, C.S.—Religion and philosophy; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religion and philosophy

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## Is Man a Myth? Mere Christian Perspectives on the Human

Donald T. Williams

*"What a piece of work is a man."*

Hamlet

"WHAT is Man," the Psalmist asked his God, "that you are mindful of him?" It was a good question and is a pressing one. For nothing else can be properly decided until we know the answer. How else shall we know, to pick just one current and highly emotional question, when and whether it is a good thing to terminate the uterine development of members of the human species whose conception has proved inconvenient? And how, if they are allowed to be born and to live, can we best educate them or govern them unless we know what kind of thing they are, what their nature is, what purposes (if any) they are meant to serve (by whom?), what they are for? Never have we known more about their physical makeup, their psychology, and their history—yet never have we been less confident about the Answer which all that information is meant to inform. Which is certainly a precarious position for the race to find itself in.

The Question is obviously not an easy one. Whatever we may make of Alexander Pope's answer, he certainly recognized the complexity of the subject:

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Skeptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,  
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;  
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,  
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little or too much:  
Chaos of Thought and Passion all confused;

Still by himself abused or disabused;  
Created half to rise and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world. (516)

Is Man, as a venerable definition has it, a featherless biped? That answer, while certainly accurate, is surely inadequate. Is he a beast, a god, or a demon—or, with the advent of the Couch Potato, should we add vegetable to the list of options? Is he the most erected simian that climbed up out of the primordial ooze or the least erected spirit that fell from Heaven? Is he a monkey with an opposable thumb or a marvel made in the image of God? According to the head Agent in that intriguing movie *The Matrix*, it is wrong even to classify him as a mammal, for mammals find an equilibrium with their environment. But Man multiplies heedlessly and uses up all the available resources, destroying the environment so that he has to expand to a new territory and repeat the process. Therefore, he should be classed with the only other species that lives in the same manner: the virus. Is he the measure of all things or just a measurement, a number, a statistic? Or is he, in the words of Sir Thomas Browne, “that great and true *amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live, not only like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds?” (339). And how do we find out?

There have been two main approaches to trying to answer the question. The first is represented by Pope:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of Mankind is Man. (516)

The second is that of Calvin:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes, and gives birth to the other. (37)

The first approach seems to manifest an admirable humility: Let's stay away from abstract and exalted theories and just deal with what we know, human experience. Just the facts, Ma'am. But what if God is one of the facts?

Though this approach does not necessarily exclude God from existence, it does exclude Him from relevance. And therefore, Pope's method actually arrogantly begs the question and commits us to a purely secular description, of Man 'under the sun.' And we know the conclusion the author of Ecclesiastes reached when he tried the experiment of looking at us that way: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," saith the Preacher."

The second approach seeks to understand Man as related, not just to the impersonal order of things, but to Someone behind it. If we are indeed, as one major tradition insists, created in the image of God, then we cannot be understood at all except in that context. This method would carry its own kind of arrogance if indeed we thought we could presume to "scan" the infinite—unless, that is, the Divine had taken the initiative and revealed Itself to us, which is precisely what Christians claim has happened in Christ, the place where Calvin's quests for knowledge of God and of Man come together.

How then ought we to proceed, since each path of inquiry seems already at the outset committed to a certain kind of answer? Perhaps the best procedure is to explore them both together, and then ask which one leads us to the place where we actually find ourselves. Because Man is the only object of study that we know from the inside as well as the outside, that is a question we just might be able to answer.

We are surrounded by profoundly trivial examples of what lies at the end of Pope's path. If there is one God, Matter, and Science is its prophet, then we should expect to be completely satisfied by "material girls" who want to "just get physical," by soulless yuppies who actually seem to believe that he who dies with the most toys wins. If people find such an approach to life deeply fulfilling, if when lying awake alone in bed at night they feel not the slightest urge to ask, "Is that all there is?", then they have their answer, and I need trouble them no further. But if, though they hardly ever dare be vulnerable enough to admit it, there is something deep within that remains empty for all that Matter can do; if, when they do look at humanity long and hard and honestly from the inside, they are forced to admit that the material and temporal can titillate and entertain, can distract life from pain for awhile but cannot justify its existence, then I would beg leave to suggest an Alternative.

One of the most fertile minds of the early Twentieth Century tried the experiment of looking at Man as an Animal, and discovered that there was no more fearful wildfowl than your human living, that to make this very attempt

proves that we are spirits of a different sort. Two of the most fertile minds of the middle of the Century built on that work in rich and incisive ways. They were G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien. And now we may clamber on to the shoulders of those giants as we attempt to peer into the new millennium. "Is Man a Myth?" we will ask. Perhaps not, we will discover; but there was a time when a Myth became a Man.

### Chesterton and The Everlasting Man

If we take Pope's secular path to understanding Man, we will of necessity view him as an animal: a chimpanzee with less hair, an opposable thumb, and a more flexible jaw, as it were. For the only viable destination which lies down Pope's path for modern people is an evolutionary model. Man would be a simple extension of what is seen in the animal kingdom, produced by the same processes and adapted to the same ends. It was Chesterton's contribution to take this idea more seriously than its proponents in order to see if it could really be made to work.

What Chesterton discovered in this experiment was that "It is exactly when we do regard man as an animal that we know he is not an animal" (xxii). His evidence for this conclusion is given in a series of impressionistic brush strokes that add up to a compelling portrait behind which is hidden a linear argument known as the *reductio ad absurdum*. His brilliant mind darts about the intellectual landscape like a hummingbird. The flight may at times seem erratic, but he never forgets either what nectar he is seeking or where his nest is.

"George Wyndham once told me," he notes, "that he had seen one of the first aeroplanes rise for the first time and it was very wonderful; but not so wonderful as a horse allowing a man to ride on him" (xviii). What is so wonderful about this? Rhinoceri allow tickbirds, sharks remora to ride on them. But the very analogies self destruct as defenses of the evolutionary approach. For these other symbiotic relationships are instinctual, and the relationship between man and horse anything but. Rhinoceri are not directed by tickbirds whither they shall go by bit and bridle and the pressure of knees. Wherever the two species are found, moreover, the birds are found upon the backs. But it did not occur to all men at all times that horses could be persuaded to bear them, nor have all horses at all times been so persuaded. And while the word "persuaded" is no doubt a metaphor, it is a singularly apt metaphor. Even where men and horses have been performing this exotic behavior together for centuries, it does

not “come naturally” to either species but has to be learned by both. When the first man thought of the idea, it was not a linear evolutionary projection from anything Nature had done before but an outlandish notion that was probably laughed to scorn until he actually pulled it off. And while our species has a long history of coming up with such outlandish notions that for good or evil veer straight off into space from anything that evolution could project, nobody will seriously argue that the horse was the one first to propose riding in exchange for warm stalls, currycombs, and oats. Why not?

Chesterton does not stop to elucidate his observation as I have done; he is off to look at another flower. But there is one kind of blossom he keeps circling back to:

It is the simple truth that man does differ from the brutes in kind and not in degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey and that it sounds like a joke to say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of a man. Something of division and disproportion has appeared; and it is unique. Art is the signature of man. (16)

The most primitive forms of humanity that we have uncovered manifest this amazing trait: “After all, it would come back to this; that he had dug very deep and found the place where a man had drawn the picture of a reindeer. But he would dig a good deal deeper before he found a place where a reindeer had drawn a picture of a man” (15).

Once again, analysis only deepens and widens the chasm between us and the other species. Monkeys may sharpen sticks to make primitive tools for digging termites out of the ground; they may arrange boxes into a pile they can climb to retrieve a banana hung from the ceiling. They do not arrange the sticks or the boxes into intricate patterns simply so they can sit back and lose themselves in the contemplation of their symmetry. Other species, in other words, pursue the practical arts on a rudimentary level, but know nothing of what we call the fine arts. And this impulse to “fine” (or what me might better call “unnecessary”) art in the human species extends itself to touch all the practical arts as well—in fact, may be most impressive there:

The very fact that a bird can get as far as building a nest, and cannot get any farther, proves that he has not a mind as man has a mind; it proves it more completely than if he built nothing at all. If he built nothing at all, he might possibly be a philosopher of the Quietist or Buddhist school, indifferent to all but the mind within. But when he builds as he does build and is

satisfied and sings aloud with satisfaction, then we know there is really an invisible veil like a pane of glass between him and us, like the window on which a bird will beat in vain. But suppose our abstract onlooker saw one of the birds begin to build as men build. Suppose in an incredibly short space of time there were seven styles of architecture for one style of nest. Suppose the bird carefully selected forked twigs and pointed leaves to express the piercing piety of Gothic, but turned to broad foliage and black mud when he sought in a darker mood to call up the heavy columns of Bel and Ashtaroth; making his nest indeed one of the hanging gardens of Babylon. Suppose the bird made little clay statues of birds celebrated in letters or politics and stuck them up in front of the nest. Suppose that one bird out of a thousand birds began to do one of the thousand things that man had already done even in the morning of the world; and we can be quite certain that the onlooker would not regard such a bird as a mere evolutionary variety of the other birds; he would regard it as a very fearful wild-fowl indeed. (21-22)

Analogies to human arts in the animal kingdom, in other words, serve only to reinforce the conclusion that we are looking across a vast chasm which evolution alone could not bridge, and in fact has not bridged. Birds do not gather to listen to the songs of other birds for pleasure or fulfillment, nor do they sing to express sorrow or joy, but rather to tell the other birds to stay the heck out of their territory. What we call birdsong is song only after it has been filtered through a human mind. Art is the signature of man because it constitutes a radical break with animal behavior, not a development from it:

[T]here is in fact not a trace of any such development or degree. Monkeys did not begin pictures and men finish them; Pithecanthropus did not draw a reindeer badly and Homo Sapiens draw it well. The higher animals did not draw better and better portraits; the dog did not paint better in his best period than in his early bad manner as a jackal; the wild horse was not an Impressionist and the race-horse a Post-Impressionist. (17)

The arts, in other words, show that man is not merely adaptive, like the animals, but more than that—he is creative: “This creature was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature” (18). He is not merely responsive to his environment; he initiates new things not dreamt of in Nature’s philosophy. He is able to do this because he acts not from instinct but from understanding; he has an irresistible urge to try to see things in terms of principles. He has therefore, in a sense not shared by the other animals, a mind. And there is something in that fact that is more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. For on naturalistic principles, it is a thing that ought not to be.



[N]o philosopher denies that a mystery still attaches to the two great transitions: the origin of the universe itself and the origin of the principle of life itself. Most philosophers have the enlightenment to add that a third mystery attaches to the origin of man himself. In other words, a third bridge was built across a third abyss of the unthinkable when there came into the world what we call reason and what we call will. Man is not merely an evolution but rather a revolution. (6)

We know that evolution is, at most, less than the whole truth because the mind of man is something it could not have produced. The assumption that it could results from mere inattention to the reality of who we are as developed above, driven perhaps by reductionist philosophies that focus only on the physical:

There may be a broken trail of stones and bones faintly suggesting the development of the human body. There is nothing even faintly suggesting such a development of this human mind. It was not and it was; we know not in what instant or in what infinity of years. Something happened; and it has all the appearance of a transaction outside time. (22)

One either allows for a transaction from outside of time, or one is left with a secularist reductionism. Various forms of such reductionism—economic, psychological, sexual—have naturally been the dominant paradigms for processing human experience in our secular age. And they are all ultimately dehumanizing, leaving out of the story much of what makes it worth telling: “Cows may be purely economic, in the sense that we cannot see that they do much beyond grazing and seeking better grazing grounds; and that is why a history of cows in twelve volumes would not be very lively reading” (158). Why is the story of humanity, appalling though it often is, very lively reading indeed? Because secularism *is* reductionism, and man, even secular man, will not be so reduced:

[T]he story only begins where the motive of the cows and sheep leaves off. It will be hard to maintain that the Crusaders went from their homes into a howling wilderness because cows go from a wilderness to a more comfortable grazing-ground. It will be hard to maintain that the Arctic explorers went north with the same material motive that made the swallows go south. And if you leave things like all the religious wars and all the merely adventurous explorations out of the human story, it will not only cease to be human at all but cease to be a story at all. (159)

We know of course where Chesterton is going: the only explanation of humanity that actually explains it is the one that says we are adventurous

because we are a venture; that we are creative and mindful because we were created in the image of the Creator who is still, as the Psalmist marvels, mindful of us. Ultimately nothing less than full Christian orthodoxy allows man to be fully human. Western secular philosophies reduce him to an animal, and eastern religious ones to nothingness: "I maintain that when brought out into the daylight these two things look altogether strange and unique. . . . The first of these is the creature called man and the second is the man called Christ" (xvii). They look strange, that is, when we come to them with either secular or pantheistic presuppositions, yet without letting those assumptions blind us to the full reality of what they are. This of course is difficult to do while we are still in the grip of those stifling ideologies. It needs a thinker who has already outgrown them to show us the way. It is Chesterton's ability to do just that which makes him so valuable.

We need not follow here all the details of how our darting hummingbird zeroes in on Bible and Creed as the foundations of anthropology. It has much to do with the plentiful lack of plot in the history of cows in twelve volumes, together with the fact that the Bible gives us the plot that makes sense of us, hence providing a foundation for what Chesterton calls "the philosophy of stories" (307). Once the plausibility of naturalism has been exploded, the rest of the path is fairly plain. And once he has opened our eyes to it, his conclusion strikes with inevitable force: "It is not natural to see man as a natural product" (20). Man is the only one of the physical creatures with enough of a self to want to sign his name; art is his signature; and he gets both from the greatest Artist of all.

### C. S. Lewis and The Abolition of Man

Chesterton, by taking the secular approach more seriously than the secularists, made it collapse into absurdity. But not everyone was serious enough to laugh with him. Another generation passed, the effects of reductionism proceeded apace, and by mid-century the farsighted had begun to wonder whether our insistence on seeing man as merely an animal might become so addictive that we would lose the ability to function as more. If the human *differentia* came, as Chesterton argued, from God, they could hardly be abolished. But still, we could try, and in trying do a great deal of damage. So we move, in an ironic procession of titles, from Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* to Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, a book in which he charts the form those reductionistic efforts were taking by mid century.

Changes in our view of human nature inevitably show up in educational theory and practice, even if they are not articulated there as such. So Lewis begins by being concerned about language he finds in a book for teaching English to schoolchildren. He charitably disguises the authors as Gaius and Titius, and refers to their volume as “The Green Book”: “Gaius and Titius comment as follows: ‘When that man said *That is sublime*, he appeared to be making the remark about the waterfall. . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings” (14). In this seemingly innocent observation, Lewis smells nothing less than the Giant Rat of Sumatra: “The schoolboy who reads this passage in *The Green Book* will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speakers, and, secondly, that all such statements are unimportant” (15).

What happens when we switch from statements about the aesthetic beauty of waterfalls to statements about moral values—or about the value of human life? If naturalism is true, then only the physically quantifiable is real. So if we are taught to treat only the physically quantifiable as real, then we have created a presumption that naturalism is true. And that presumption digs a chasm between us and the whole history of human experience and understanding: “Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt” (25). They felt that way because, having not yet accepted the premise that only the physically quantifiable is real, they were free to believe in the reality of other than numerical values. Lewis calls this traditional approach to life “the doctrine of objective value,” and the hierarchy of values perceived in the universe in the light of it the *Tao*:

It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are. Those who know the *Tao* can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which *demand*s a certain response from us whether we make it or not. (29)

The humanity of the human species, those qualities that according to Chesterton separate us from the merely animal, depends on the existence of

this objective but not physical *Tao* and our ability to perceive it. If only the physically quantifiable is real, then the evolutionary model is adequate and Man's uniqueness an illusion. But if naturalism is false—if we are creative minds because we were created by the ultimate Mind—then values are not merely subjective. The valuations made by the Creator Himself have the same reality as the physical objects He made and which He values, and discovering those values is the path to fulfillment for humans who want their lives to have value as well. If this is true, then Milton's Satan—and the hordes of modern and post-modern thinkers who follow him—are wrong when they claim that "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1.254-55). In other words, there is the potential for a rational, not merely an instinctual, grounding for what humans value and how they feel about it:

[B]ecause our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order, therefore emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it). (*Abolition* 29)

Lewis does not at this point specify the Christian theistic grounding of the *Tao*—he saves that task, in effect, for *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*, being here content to appeal to the universal perception of the *Tao* in pre-Modern times that he documents in the appendix. What he zeroes in on is the fact that modern secularist reductionism, by defining the *Tao* out of existence and insisting that nothing but the physically quantifiable can be real or objective, also rules out of court precisely the central essence of human nature.

The peculiarity of that nature is that humanity is indeed located precisely on Pope's "isthmus of a middle state." This much he had retained of the Tradition. We are that being that, like the animals, has a physical body influenced by instinct, but, like the angels, has a spiritual nature capable of perceiving the *Tao*. The reality of our animal nature provides plenty of evidence for those who would reduce us to that nature alone, but the uniqueness of our position in creation is that, as far as we know, we are the only creature that has to deal with the sometimes difficult integration of that animal nature with the spiritual. Lewis recognized this aspect of our situation and stressed its importance for how we conceive the process of education, specifically the danger of ignoring it:

We were told it all long ago by Plato. As the king governs by his executive, so Reason in man must rule the mere appetites by means of the ‘spirited element.’ The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat, as Alanus tells us, of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal. The operation of *The Green Book* and its kind is to produce what may be called Men without Chests. (34)

The *Tao* perceived by the mind, in other words, is not automatically followed by the body. That is what it means to have a mind rather than operating by mere instinct. So part of the role of education is to foster well-ordered emotions, “sentiments” that aid the mind in governing the body according to the *Tao*. It is, in other words, to transmit to the next generation the developed ways of feeling about things that have been discovered by the bitter experience of many previous generations to be in accordance with reason and the *Tao*—to transmit civilization. If we insist that thoughts about values are really only feelings, and then debunk feelings about values as baseless because the values cannot be stuck into either a test-tube or a calculator, we foster barbarism instead. And as human beings, neither animal nor angel, we need both the thoughts and the feelings:

Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite sceptical about ethics, but bred to believe that ‘a gentleman does not cheat,’ than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers. (33-34)

Education in the spirit of *The Green Book*—in the spirit of reductionist materialism—trains something that is less than human. Because of the way it denies or devalues the mind, it leaves out entirely the middle element, seeing no necessity to integrate something that transcends the physical with a physical nature conceived as the whole person. (Attempts to deal with teenage pregnancy through that oxymoronic method of “values-free” sex education come to mind.) As Lewis describes it, “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful” (35). It is then impossible

to underestimate what is at stake in these rival conceptions of human nature: "The practical result of education in the spirit of *The Green Book* must be the destruction of the society which accepts it" (39).

We cannot make human beings less than human, but by training them to think of themselves as less than human we can get them to act as less, with disastrous consequences. Therefore, Lewis speaks with hyperbole perhaps but nevertheless makes a valid point when he says of those who operate on the basis of materialist reductionism that, "It is not that they are bad men. They are not men at all. Stepping outside the *Tao*, they have stepped into the void" (77). They have tried with mixed success to give up something that is essential to full humanity, at least. The two rival conceptions of humanity stare at each other across a great chasm, and what is at stake is the very possibility of a civilization in which man can be whole, develop to his potential:

Either we are rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own 'natural' impulses. Only the *Tao* provides a common human law of action which can overarch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery. (84-85)

In summary, to be human is to be an animal who is aware of spiritual values. Though reductionists deny the existence of such creatures, implying that Man in that sense is in fact a myth, they themselves cannot escape the *Tao*. For they think that we *ought* to reject traditional values as an impediment to human progress; but if they are right, the word *ought* is meaningless. In a materialist world, no manipulation of any of the ciphers properly admitted to that world could ever possibly produce such a concept:

If he had really started from scratch, from right outside the human tradition of value, no jugglery could have advanced him an inch towards the conception that a man should die for the community or work for posterity. If the *Tao* falls, all his own conceptions of value fall with it. Not one of them can claim any authority other than that of the *Tao*. Only by such shreds of the *Tao* as he has inherited is he enabled even to attack it. (54)

Or, in other words,

[The *Tao*] is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort

to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There never has been, and never will be, a radically new judgement of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) 'ideologies,' all consist of fragments from the *Tao* itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the *Tao* and to it alone such validity as they possess. (56)

Lewis illustrates this point in *Out of the Silent Planet*, when Oyarsa, the governing spirit of Malacandra, diagnoses Weston's "bentness" as proceeding from the fact that there are laws known to all *hnau* (the Old Solar word for sentient animal), including pity, straight dealing, and love of kindred. But Weston has taken the love of kindred, a true law in itself, out of its context in the *Tao*, and made it into "a little, blind Oyarsa in your brain" (138). As a result, he breaks all the other laws and does not even truly keep that one, for he is willing to sacrifice any individual human being for what he considers the abstract good of the race. Even Weston can be evil, not by creating new values apart from the *Tao*, but only by truncating and twisting the ones it gives us. Thus Satan's program of creating his own values in the mind's own place inevitably fails even in its greatest success: in spite of itself, it is forced to give ironic witness to the reality and validity of the *Tao*.

If the *Tao* is indeed an inescapable reality, then the conception of human nature it calls for is upheld: "In the *Tao* itself, as long as we remain within it, we find the concrete reality in which to participate is to be truly human" (*Abolition* 86). To deny this is indeed to attempt to abolish humanity itself.

### J. R. R. Tolkien: Humanity and Faerie

Lewis's friend J. R. R. Tolkien fought the abolition of Man not only by writing a very unbovine history of Middle-earth, but also by thinking profoundly about the nature and significance of certain kinds of stories that our strange species keeps coming back to. His essay "On Fairy-Stories" is full of insight not only into the stories themselves, but also their makers. He finds them as creative as Chesterton did and participating in a very Lewisian *Tao*; for they are compelled to make stories full of magic and marvels, stories in which Good confronts Evil and in which "keeping promises (even those with intolerable consequences)" forms "one of the notes of the horns of Elfland, and not a dim note" (67). But Tolkien goes on to be more explicit about where these myth-making qualities in our race come from, answering a friend who had questioned the value of myth for "enlightened" moderns:

"Dear Sir," I said—"Although now long estranged,  
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned.  
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:  
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light  
through whom is splintered from a single White  
to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build  
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right  
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:  
we make still by the law in which we're made." (54)

"We make still by the law in which we're made." Man, in other words, is inexplicable by materialist reductionism because of the *Imago Dei*; we love to tell and hear stories because we are made in the image of the Creator whose creation is in fact the Story we call History and Redemption. Or, in terms more in keeping with Tolkien's defense of Faerie, the human race is incapable of being fully explained or portrayed by either philosophical or literary naturalism. We are also irrepressible inventors and expressers of ourselves because we are made in the image of the Creator. But Tolkien focuses on stories. Every writer, like God, creates a world, determines the laws of its nature, and peoples it with characters whose significant actions give that world its meaning. God's "primary world" is reflected in our "secondary worlds," which, far from being mere escape or wish fulfillment, reflect back into the primary world the marvelous quality—the "enchantment"—that is really there by virtue of its created, its non-reductionist character, but which familiarity and secularist philosophy work to obscure.

One feature of the Faerie Story which is central to Tolkien's literary apologetic is the Happy Ending. It is, he concludes, essential to the form. But it is not just the fact that things turn out well: "It is a sudden and miraculous grace . . . It does not deny the existence of . . . sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" (68). That is why, when the "turn" comes, there is "a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart . . . as keen as that given by any form of literary art" (69). To this moment he gives the technical name *eucatastrophe*.



Tolkien suggests that this moment of *eutastrophe* in a well-constructed story moves us so because it carries a glimpse of deeper realities about who we are—about our own story, as it were. And just as he made explicit what Chesterton had been hinting at when he appealed to role of the *imago Dei* in our making or beginning, so here he is not reticent about spelling out the theological meaning of the climax of our larger story either:

God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces the essence of fairy-stories. . . [A]mong the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable *eutastrophe*. But this story has entered History and the primary world. (71)

The incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ not only complete and fulfill Old-Testament prophecy, they complete and fulfill the plots of all the great myths and fairy stories of the human race. All the hints in our literature that we are more than mere collocations of atoms coalesce into a coherent explanation of who and what we are when we see that this *eutastrophe* is indeed the Happy Ending we were made for. We make because we were made in the image of the Maker. What we make is sometimes corrupted because we fell from His grace. But the stories we make still speak of our longing for restoration, because we were made in the image of the Maker who is Savior and Redeemer as well. And Christ is what we have always been looking for. He is the ultimate definition of true humanity. So the one vantage point from which our whole strange and unbovine history makes sense is also the one place where Myth and History are one: the spot where, in the light of the rising sun, the shadow of a Cross points to the open door of an Empty Tomb.

## Conclusion

Chesterton had found two things inexplicable on a materialistic basis: the creature called Man and the man called Christ, neither of which would consent to being reduced to mere nature. Lewis explicated the ethical implications of our irreducibility in the non-material *Tao*, rebellion against which in the name of reductionist philosophies threatens our very humanity. Tolkien brings us full circle, explaining why story telling is central to this irreducible human nature, and finding the fulfillment of our most moving stories in the story of Christ, that point where, as Lewis would put it, myth entered history.

So the human race still hangs on. In spite of every attempt to define it out of existence, it keeps building its very unbirdlike nests and writing its very unbovine histories. Perhaps if we could read the faun's-eye view of our race that Lucy saw in Mr. Tumnus's library, we should find the answer to its titular question laden with Chestertonian irony. Is Man a Myth? It depends on what we mean. Man, the spiritual animal whose mind transcends the physically quantifiable in ways that are of mythic proportions, is not a myth (in the sense that he does not exist), though he is both *mythopoeic* and *mythopathic*. But Man the product of evolution who can be explained fully in terms of material and mechanical processes is definitely a myth, a myth created by Man the Mythmaker. For this Man is a story that attempts to explain the world, and explains it well as long as we do not step outside the limited vision of reductionist materialism. But there are older myths, more redolent of the full truth about us if not more powerful to shape our conceptions. And one of those, if these men were right, is the True Myth, the one story that really does explain the world.

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