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Some Reflections on *The Great Divorce* of C.S. Lewis

**Abstract**

Praises *The Great Divorce* because in it the two sides of the author—“the atomically rational Lewis and mythopoeic Lewis—I will not say united, but they do at least join hands.” Cogent argument is combined with “vividly imagined” narrative and descriptive imagery.

**Additional Keywords**

Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*
Some Reflections on The Great Divorce of C. S. Lewis
by Owen Barfield

THERE ARE TWO THINGS above all that characterize the world we have lived in since what is called the scientific revolution, by contrast with the world before it. One is the overriding importance of solidity in our estimate of what constitutes reality, and the other is our tendency to conceive of space as an infinite number of points and of time as an infinite succession of moments. The differential calculus, as its name testifies, originated as a device for applying exact quantitative measurements to motion, and therefore to both space and time. But it soon became more than that. Already before 1850, as William Whewell pointed out, people had begun "to mistake the use of the differential calculus for the evidence of a physical truth." The two together—the notion of "extended substance," used by Descartes to designate everything in the universe that is not mind or spirit, and the habit of thought induced by the calculus—led inevitably to "atomism" in physical theory. Atoms were the only ultimate reality, and atomism the only reality principle.

I am not referring to modern atomic theory, but to the "billiard ball" atoms, as they are sometimes called, of classical, nineteenth-century physics, since it was these that became the reality principle for ordinary men and led in their turn to the atomic psychology of thinkers like Hartley and Condillac and later of Bertrand Russell and others. During the nineteenth century, and it is still going on, the attempt was made to conceive not only psychology but everything under the sun, including sociology and ethics, in atomic terms. This need not have mattered much, since atomic thinking—that is, thinking solely in terms of isolated causes and effects—has the capacity to be very precise, very accurate, quite indispensable for practical purposes. What was disastrous was the failure to distinguish between atomism as method and physical atomism as the sole reality principle. For the result was that people gradually became incapable of thinking precisely, or indeed without hopeless confusion, about anything at all that was not reducible to physical units. Bentham, for example, reduced ethics to the physically atomic and quantitatively measurable principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." Berkeley and Bentham were only the beginning. By the early part of the twentieth century it had become much more than the fashion, it had become the ingrained habit of thought, often called "common sense," to regard ethics, and with it of course religion, as a mere offshoot of physics, and psychology itself as an offshoot of physiology.

It remained for the twentieth century, in the person of C. S. Lewis, to detect and expose the disastrous confusion, to discover that thinking atomically is not the same thing as thinking about atoms, and especially to show that it is possible to think in that way even about ethics without simply turning it into something else. That, it seems to me, is his distinctive contribution as a moralist and as a controversial writer in general. For his own thinking is eminently atomic. It is ruthlessly cause-and-effect; it is hard-hitting as billiard-balls are hard-hitting when they meet each other on a table. And it was badly needed, because it was relentlessly exploited in a mushy intellectual milieu where (provided it is the non-material you are talking about) nothing is definite, and anybody can always have everything both ways. Look again at the Pilgrim's Progress. Lewis was Jack the giant killer in an empire of King Huggermugger and Queen Mishmash; or he assailed the sullen concrete blockhouse of materialism (which is the only firmness in that world) with missile blocks of reinforced concrete, and the surrounding swamps are a little firmer now for being paved here and there with the process of Sarah Smith in glory; or, best of all, the man with the lust-

1 See Austin Farrer's essay in Light on C. S. Lewis.
let me begin with the fact that Dorothy L. Sayers was not an Inking. This needs saying because several authors, including Janet Hitchman, have said she was. Hitchman, in her "Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers" (1992-1997), at the Library, writes: "Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis were the most popular writers on religious questions in the thirties. [Surely a decade early.] Dorothy corresponded with both of them... and they formed themselves into a kind of loosely knit club, referring to themselves as the 'Inklings' because they thought they each had a glimpse of the meaning of God" (p. 177). This is going to be typical of popular writing on Sayers and the Inklings, I'm afraid—because, after all, she does have a common interest with Williams and Lewis.

Even to call Sayers an "Oxford Christian"—a name some have used for the Inklings—is misleading to a degree. She was born in Oxford (her father was then headmaster of Christchurch Cathedral Choir School, but four years later he