

The Influences of Plato In The Thought and

Writing of C. S. Lewis

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Much of C. S. Lewis's thought and writing can be found to be influenced by Plato. Although abundant direct references to Plato are not found in Lewis's writings, Plato's ideas are clearly found in Lewis's works. Lewis held Plato in high regard along with the achievements of Greek culture. He frequently listed the thought of Plato and Aristotle together as the peak of intellectual development. By examining both Lewis's life and writings, one can see a clear foundation laid by this important classical writer in the areas of metaphysics, imagination, and ethics.

W. K. Kirkpatrick played an important role in laying a classical foundation for Lewis's education. Lewis in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, tells of the importance of his days spent with his tutor, W. K. Kirkpatrick, devoting an entire chapter to the "Great Knock," as the family referred to him. Lewis spent two years with Kirkpatrick at his home at Great Bookham in Surrey. Kirkpatrick was charged with the task of preparing the fourteen year old Lewis for college entrance exams. Lewis describes in chapter nine how Kirkpatrick disliked the practice of "making conversation" just for the sake of someone talking. Lewis wrote, "If ever a man came near to being a purely logical entity, that man was Kirk. . .The idea that human beings should exercise their vocal organs for any purpose

except that of communicating or discovering truth was to him preposterous(130-132). Lewis regarded Kirkpatrick's teaching as "red beef and strong beer" to him because "Here was a man who thought not about you but about what you said. No doubt I snorted and bridled a little at some of my tossing; but, sufficiently often I began to know a few guards and blows, and to put on intellectual muscle" (132).

Lewis studied the Latin and Greek classics with Kirkpatrick. Schooled in the classical tradition, Lewis could read the classics in the original languages and easily translate the texts. While with Kirkpatrick, Lewis composed a tragedy in the Greek mode, and was considered by Kirkpatrick to be the best translator of Greek plays the tutor had ever seen (Griffin 35). Lewis's immersion in the classics, including Plato and Aristotle, under the instruction of Kirkpatrick laid the foundation of Lewis's thought rooted deeply in logic, argument, language, and genre. Kirkpatrick, an atheist, also contributed to Lewis's own developing atheism. However, when Lewis became a Christian in his early thirties, it was Kirkpatrick's logic and reason that would under gird Lewis's own Christian apologetics.

One place to see clearly Plato's influence in Lewis's imagination and writings is in the series of children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. One question Lewis was often asked concerning the stories was whether they were allegory. Lewis has clearly embedded a Christian message into the stories, but Lewis defined them as symbolic rather than allegorical. In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis gives a definition of symbolism:

If our passions, being immaterial, can be copied by material inventions, then it is possible that our material world in its turn is the copy of an invisible world. . . .The attempt to read that something else through its sensible imitations, to see the archetype in the copy, is what I mean by symbolism or sacramentalism. . . .The allegorist leaves the given--his own passions--to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real. To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory. . . .Symbolism comes to us from Greece. It makes its first effective appearance in European thought with the dialogues of Plato. (45)

The Narnian character closest to Lewis himself is the old professor we find in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and later as Lord Digory in *The Last Battle*. In the first book, he chides the children for not seeing the possibility of there being more than one world and more than one time when they are unsure whether to believe or to not believe Lucy's account of her brief visit to Narnia through the wardrobe. He wonders what they teach children in school today, indicating the lack of classical teaching, particularly Plato's *Dialogues*. "Logic!" said the professor half to himself. "Why don't they teach logic at these schools?" (48).

Paul F. Ford in his *Companion to Narnia*, points out that the discussion between the Professor and the children

troubled over Lucy's story of visiting another world is an example of the Socratic Method. He replies not with answers but with questions that invite the children to step beyond their typical unexamined opinions about what is not possible, allowing the children "into a searching and thoughtful openness, which is precisely the method Socrates employs throughout the dialogues of Plato" (316) The children do not believe in the possibility of another country beyond the wardrobe because when they looked into the wardrobe it was not there, an example of the modern principle of verification which states that a thing is real only so long as it is publicly observable. Ford continues to discuss this important Platonic theme found throughout the *Chronicles* of the true knowledge of reality:

True knowledge of reality is for Plato an art, a struggle, and a discipline, not something easy or obvious or automatic as the principle of verification assumes. Those who would learn must not turn to the average, run-of-the-mill public consciousness of things but to genuinely philosophical and morally upright individuals. Within Christian Platonism, this position is amended so that it is God and especially Christ that one must turn to for guidance, since he is not only the Way and the Life but the Truth (316-317).

The best example of Lewis's use of symbolism and Platonic ideas in the *Chronicles* is found in *The Last Battle*, a story that tells how Narnia comes to an end. In Chapter 15, the children after a battle find themselves cast through a stable

door into another Narnian-like country. Peter is confused because Aslan had told him and the older children they would not be able to return to Narnia, and Lucy observes that this Narnia is like the other Narnia but somehow different. Lord Digory explains to the children how "our material world in its turn is the copy of an invisible world":

When Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here: just as our world, England and all, is only a shadow or a copy of something in Aslan's real world. You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream. . . It's all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what do they teach them at these schools! (194-195)

Lewis draws from Plato's *Dialogues* the idea that everything good and true in this material world is a "copy" of something in the eternal world of "Ideas" and "Forms." When the soul grasps the eternal Forms and participates in them, it attains its true well being. Again Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* summarizes this idea by stating, "All visible things exist just in so far as they succeed in imitating the Forms" (45-46).

A short essay by Lewis entitled, "Meditation in a Toolshed," parallels Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of *The Republic*. The narrator describes the following experience:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

But this is only a very simple example of the difference between looking at and looking along (212).

Lewis goes on in the essay to point out how the modern world "looks at" subjects, but does not "look along." He gives several examples like the difference between the young man "in love" and his perception of the experience versus the scientist who describes the young man's experience "from the outside" as the results of genes and a recognized biological stimulus (212). Lewis goes on to use examples to demonstrate the differences

between the mathematician and the physiologist and the dancing savage and an anthropologist. Lewis concludes that the modern world "looks at" the subject, but "refutes or 'debunks'" the internal account of something. "All these moral ideals which seem so transcendental and beautiful from 'inside', says the wiseacre, 'are really only a mass of biological instincts and inherited taboos'" (213). Modern thought assumes that distance lends perspective and provides a picture of reality. The result of this modern point of view is to discount inside experiences. Lewis challenges this modern perspective and concludes the value and importance of looking "both *along* and *at* everything," and since both approaches can be deceptive, "we must take each case on its own merits. In fact, we must start with no prejudice for or against the kind of looking (215). Lewis's argument counters the modern idea that only scientific observation of "the real world" leads to truth, discounting the metaphysical or ideal.

It is from Plato's *Republic* that Lewis's idea of heaven as an unchanging reality behind this shifting world of shadows, or as Lewis called it, shadow lands, comes. Lewis first used it in the title of the last chapter in *The Last Battle*, and in the same chapter as Aslan explains to the children they have died and are now in Aslan's country, no longer in the past world or the "Shadow-Lands." Lewis uses the term to communicate how insubstantial and temporary our world is in comparison to the solid reality of heaven. A similar idea is expressed in *The Great Divorce* where people who do not belong to heaven appear as ghosts. As the children wander around Aslan's country and find

reminders of their former worlds, they come to understand that their old worlds were merely shadows of the real worlds within Aslan's country. When they find the heavenly equivalent of England, they refer to it as "real England."

This Platonian idea of the shadow lands also forms the foundation of Lewis's concept of joy or a kind of romantic longing that is called in German, *Sehnsucht*. This feeling or state is triggered by experiences in this world which create a longing for something for which there is no possible satisfaction in this world. This longing is sought after, prized, even preferred over anything else in the world by those who have once felt it. The objects of this longing have been thought to be distant hills, one's past, imaginative settings through literature, a loved person, magic and the occult, historical or scientific knowledge. Lewis discovered, however, that this longing can only be satisfied by God and heaven. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis charts his own discovery of joy in brief experiences such as reading literature, enjoying a toy garden, and from nature. These experiences of joy led Lewis to faith and to conversion to Christianity, the true fulfillment of joy.

This consciousness of a higher reality touches on Platonic ethics that is directed towards the attainment of man's highest good in which our true happiness lies. This highest good includes the knowledge of God and is attained by the pursuit of virtue. This true knowledge as Paul Ford points out is "an art, a struggle, and a discipline" (316). It is particularly from

Plato that Lewis developed an interest in the ideals of the true, the good, and the beautiful. It is in the pursuit of these that one can become as most like God as humans can. Knowledge of God is the highest good.

Although Lewis explores these ideas in his theological writings such as *The Abolition of Man*, *Christian Reflections*, *God in the Dock*, and *Reflections on the Psalms*, there are multiple examples in the *Chronicles* to demonstrate how these ideas are worked out in situations the various children find themselves in. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children must choose to follow the beavers who have come to lead them to Aslan or instead to fall under the spell of the White Witch. When Edmund chooses instead to follow the White Witch, he is only redeemed through the death of Aslan. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory must choose between actions he believes will save his dying mother and following Aslan's instructions to save Narnia. In the *Last Battle*, the children are encouraged to go "further up and further in" as Paul Ford states, "into the very mind and being of God" (322). All of these experiences and choices made by the children in the *Chronicles* lead them closer to Aslan and deeper into the true Narnia.

Works Cited

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