

# C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: an Investigation of a Pervasive Theme

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## Abstract

C. S. Lewis mastered multiple modes of communication. He is a rhetorician, and every time he puts his pen to paper he seeks to persuade his readers. One topic that is pervasive in his writing is the problem of evil. I argue in this thesis that Lewis is making the rhetorical claim that evil is sustained by subjectivism. Subjectivism, as Lewis describes it, represents a projection onto the world whatever one wants it to be, and is unresponsive to the inexorable claims of objective value. One's unwillingness to accept things as they are removes the necessary checks to the predilection towards evil. The rhetorical theories of rhetorician Richard M. Weaver provide a means for making critical judgments about Lewis's thought.

Lewis argues the case for objectivism in his essay *The Poison of Subjectivism*, and also in The Abolition of Man. He questions whether a person can be just if he does not render to things their due. He speaks of the *Tao*, as the 'doctrine of objective value'. His concerns about subjectivism lead him to set forth, throughout his work, various ways his readers might guard themselves from this error. Weaver's classifications of ethical rhetoric make it possible to critique Lewis's arguments in the Abolition of Man.

I argue that the pervasiveness of Lewis's concern about evil, and the subjectivism that sustains it, grows out of his own life's experience. His development can be traced in relationship to Weaver's notion of *pathos*, *logos* and *ethos*. Lewis's emotional reactions to the suffering of his youth cause him to reject his childhood faith. His commitment to objective value eventually leads to a recovery of faith, and he seeks to engage rhetorically in an apologetic defence of Christianity. He seeks to address these issues by means to the written word and by use of reason. The suffering of his later life causes him to look afresh at the issues of evil in recognition that there will always be further complexities. Respect for these complexities adds to the *ethos* of his mature work.

Since this matter of evil, as it develops through subjectivism, is pervasive in Lewis's work, I argue that his concern about it can also be observed in the rhetorical declarations found in his literary criticism. He opposes many forms of critical approach that take readers away from the text. He says criticism must be about objective texts and, in saying this, he counters the propensity towards subjectivism wherever it occurs.

Some have argued that Lewis's interest in writing imaginative literature was a consequence of his failed apologetics and his lack of philosophical and theological sophistication. I argue that such a judgment cannot be supported by the facts. His interest in fiction is actually prior to his apologetic and literary critical work. He employs fiction because it works best as a literary genre to address rhetorically the problems of subjectivism and the evil which is sustained by it. In order to support this point, I analyze four works of Lewis's fiction, examples from four consecutive decades of his life, to demonstrate the subjectivism in his evil characters and the growing objectivity in his characters which move toward goodness. Lewis's rhetorical strength is manifest in his ability to address the problems of subjectivity as a support for evil by means his facile skill in many expressive modes, not the least of which being fiction.