



C. S. LEWIS AND DERRIDA: AN EXPLORATION

Melody GREEN

Urbana Theological Seminary

Abstract

While many scholars have presented C. S. Lewis's understanding of language and meaning as directly opposed to those of Jacques Derrida, others have seen similarities between their understanding of these same concepts. This paper provides an overview of the two different perspectives while also introducing other concepts that they both address. These include their attitudes about the changing nature of how people understand the world they live in, and how words change meaning. They also share an interest in wonder, and in some ways, agree on how forgiveness works.

Keywords: *C. S. Lewis, Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, wonder, forgiveness*

INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for scholars of C. S. Lewis's work to position the writings of C. S. Lewis and Jacques Derrida in opposition. These scholars present Lewis as the champion of authorial intent, absolute Truth, and meaning itself, while Derrida is described as a nihilistic opponent of these, working toward the destruction not only of truth, but also of language. In doing so, these scholars engage in a binary opposition centered around the concept of Truth. Their own arguments against or dismissals of Derrida's work actually engage the exact linguistic phenomena identified by Derrida as problematic. A small number of other Lewis scholars, however, problematize this binary by arguing that Lewis and Derrida share some important concepts. They observe that while Lewis and Derrida do work with many of the same ideas, several of their concepts interact

with each other in very interesting ways, and are closer than they are often given credit for. While these scholars have started an important conversation regarding the connections between Lewis and Derrida, there are multiple similarities between their work that have not yet been addressed.

PERCEIVED OPPOSITION

Before exploring the connections between the writings of Lewis and Derrida, however, it helps to first see some examples of texts that present them in opposition. These texts can be divided into two categories, the first of which is made up of those that present strong attitudes about Derrida's writing without explaining how these attitudes were shaped. Two examples from the writings of Donald Williams will serve to demonstrate this approach. In *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition*, Williams declares that Lewis "predicted" the "dangers" presented in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (87). This simple statement succinctly presents the binary opposition without explaining either the nature of Lewis's "prediction," or why Derrida's text is so dangerous. It is such a short statement that the reader is left to wonder if it is assumed that the point is proven elsewhere, or if the statement is expected to be accepted as self-evident. Williams does write a little more on the topic in *Deeper Magic: The Theology behind the Writings of C. S. Lewis*, but explanation is still absent. Williams first states that Derrida's term "deconstruction" means the destruction of all meaning, then this statement follows with the claim that the ultimate purpose of deconstruction is the promotion of nihilism. While Derrida does present a nuanced reading of Nietzsche in more than one text, he does not present his own theories as promotional material for Nietzsche. Williams demonstrates how several scholars, because they do not explain the way they came to these conclusions, appear to unreflectively dismiss Derrida's theories. Before dismissing scholars such as Jerry Root and James K. A. Smith in turn, it does need to be understood that these scholars are generally respected in their own fields.

The second set of scholars who hold Lewis and Derrida in binary opposition allow the reader to see why they feel this way. It is worth noting that the scholars in the first camp may not be simply unmeticulous or subpar scholars, but may genuinely assume that the point has already been proven by

the scholars in the second camp, to the degree that they do not need to repeat other people's work. Therefore they would need no explanation for their own stance, because in their minds at least, it has already been done according to the needs of the conversation at hand.

An example of the second type of scholarship that presents Derrida and Lewis as binary opposites would be Bruce Edwards' *A Rhetoric of Reading: C. S. Lewis's Defense of Western Literacy*. Like Williams, Edwards also declares that Derrida's concept of deconstruction destroys all meaning, but presents a developed argument. Edwards compares the idea of deconstruction with the first passage in Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*. In this passage, Lewis describes a book he had been sent for review. Calling it "The Green Book" to protect the identities of the authors and keep the focus on the text itself, he explains that, under the guise of a grammar textbook for schools, this book teaches children that all statements of value are subjective. "The Green Book" tells the child reader that statements of ethics and aesthetics are mere expressions of arbitrary personal taste, and thus unimportant. Edwards goes on to explain that throughout his work, Derrida makes the same claims as the authors of the Green Book. Since the rest of *The Abolition of Man* is an argument against this claim of arbitrary—thus meaningless—value, Edwards then proceeds to use Lewis's response to "The Green Book" as the groundwork for his own attempted refutation of Derrida's writing. At first glance this may appear straightforward since Derrida, influenced by linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, does argue that all language, including expressions of statements of value, is subjective. But unlike "The Green Book," Derrida's work does not dismiss subjective statements as unimportant. The argument could even be made that Derrida believes subjective statements to be so important that the subjectivity of language is central to his own work. In fact, he believes it is so significant that he explains in multiple places that we need to identify what he calls "the center" of the ways that we think, find what that center marginalizes, and then look for ways to break out of that structural binary we are caught in.

Williams and Edwards both cite Derrida's statement that "There is nothing outside the text" as a statement that everything is meaningless (Williams, *Mere Humanity*, 87; Edwards, 40; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158). But that is a misunderstanding. Derrida is instead saying that the meaning of any

given use of language is determined by context, and those contexts change. Thus anyone who encounters a linguistic “event” will interpret it through their own context. This is a concept that is still uncomfortable for some who view postmodernism with suspicion, but it is not a concept limited to Derrida or postmodern theory. In 1946, a couple of decades before Derrida, Wimsatt and Beardsley made what proved to be a field-changing claim in an essay titled “The Intentional Fallacy.” Coining a term that has been used by English teachers, scholars and critics ever since, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that when a person reads a book, that person cannot know what the author actually meant. Instead, each reader brings a set of experiences and understandings to the text which are their own, and not the author’s. Worded another way, each reader is reading from a different context than the author’s at the time of writing. Intriguingly, they begin their essay by citing a book called *The Personal Heresy* as groundbreaking scholarship in the field. *The Personal Heresy*, first published in 1939, is a collection of essays in which C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard take turns discussing this concept that came to be known as authorial intent. Tillyard claimed that literature is read in order for the reader to connect with and understand the minds of great writers. Lewis responded by arguing that it is not possible to get to know a writer through what they have written. Throughout the argument, the two writers take turns defining their terms and developing their ideas.

SHARED IDEAS

While working through his own stance, Lewis makes several statements that sound as if they could have been written by Derrida. For example, Lewis begins his argument by stating unequivocally that “[T]he thing presented to us in any poem is not and never can be the personality of the poet” (*Personal Heresy*, 13). In the first essay, he explains one way that context changes meaning:

whenever we have ancient poetry at all, there will be language which was commonplace to the writers but which time has turned to beauty...every work of art that lasts long in the world is continually taking on new colors which the artist neither foresaw nor intended (19).

And a little later, he rewords this in a way that shows an even closer alignment with Derrida's understanding of how context changes meaning: "...every perception is what it is by virtue of its context" (27). Lewis argues that what happens in the reader's mind is created by "the subjective qualities which certain words and ideas have taken on" in the reader's particular time, place and experience (21). Notice that he not only argues for the subjectivity of language, but clearly names it as such. He even goes on to make a statement that could, taken out of context, be used to argue that language has no meaning, just as some of Derrida's have:

The objects, then, which we contemplate in reading poetry are not the private furniture of the poet's mind. The mind through which we see them is not his. If you ask whose it is, I reply that we have no reason to suppose that it is anyone's (32).

Lewis so far separates the reader's experience from the author's intention that he suggests that there is no "mind" present in a text at all. Lewis here separates meaning from any person. But he, like Derrida, does not argue that all is meaningless. As he explains: "if the world is meaningless, then so are we; if we mean something, we do not mean alone" (35). In other words, the meaning of a text is to Lewis not something created by an author for an audience to take in and absorb; it is an action that happens between the reader and the text at a particular time in a particular place. The statement that we "do not mean alone" involves the idea that meaning is a fluid thing that changes from person to person.

While Williams and Edwards both argue that Derrida's ideas about meaning and where it is found are in opposition to Lewis's writings, others such as Kyoko Yuasa in *C. S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism* and David Downing's article "C. S. Lewis Among the Postmodernists" argue that Lewis and Derrida are actually in agreement. They base this assertion in a nuanced understanding of deconstruction and its consequences, citing the variety of texts in which the idea itself is developed. Relying on "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, *Voice and Phenomenon*, and *Of Grammatology*, a summary of the definition of "deconstruction" held by both Downing and Yuasa could be worded this way: first, all Western thought has a

center—whether that center is God, or science, or justice, or whatever, is irrelevant. Meaning, according to Derrida, is shaped by that center and the relationship of individual words and phrases to that center. At the same time, for one thing to be the center, something else has to be marginalized. These centers shift over time. In these shifts, the *structure* of thought does not change; it just means a shift has happened. Something new—often the old center—is now at the margins. Within these binaries, as the centers shift, the context of language usage changes, thus the meaning of individual words. Derrida argues that we are all caught in these binaries. We do not, however, need to create new centers. Instead, we need to break out of the binary to see what other options exist for meaning—and in attempting to understand the shifting meaning of words, we are exploring the meaning of life¹.

Yuasa's *C. S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism* engages this complex understanding of deconstruction to develop and support the claim that Lewis's fiction deliberately breaks the binaries inherent in modernist thought. While Lewis first appears to engage these binaries in such books as *That Hideous Strength* by pitting science vs. faith, Yuasa argues that Lewis steps out of the binaries completely and provides a new paradigm that has nothing to do with such centers as science, materialism, and atheism. He does in books such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Till We Have Faces* by taking his reader to spaces where such things as loving your neighbor and putting others before yourself take precedence over these sorts of ideas.

¹ A concrete example of shifting centers and marginalizations would be the shifting role of the Christian Church in different parts of the world. In different places at different times, whether Orthodox, Catholic or something else, Christianity has been a center giving meaning to thought and language. But it is commonly understood that, in different ways, in over the last 150 years the center shifted from a form of Christianity to what C. S. Lewis calls in *The Abolition of Man* “scientism”—the belief that science is the route to a better future (87). When Christianity was the center, science was often marginalized. When science becomes the center, Christianity is now marginalized. Instead of simply switching sides within this binary, some scientists choose to break out of the Christianity/Science binary by embracing a framework that admits both. Examples of books working to break the binary by bringing the two centers together include the nuclear scientist Ian Hutchinson's *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?: An MIT Professor Answers Questions on God and Science* and director of the human genome project Francis Collins's *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*.

Downing's "C. S. Lewis Among the Postmodernists" provides the most detailed and wide-ranging exploration of the connections between Lewis and Derrida to date. This article begins with a personal story: Downing explains how, when he first read Derrida, the ideas he encountered were strangely familiar. This was because he had already encountered these same ideas in the literary scholarship of C. S. Lewis.

Downing uses several different texts by Lewis to explain the similarities that he sees. Comparing Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" to Lewis's "Meditations in a Toolshed," he explains that both essays insist that there is no way a person can objectively look at anything. Lewis words it this way: "you can only step outside one experience by stepping inside another," (Lewis, "Meditation," 215) while Derrida explains this same concept as having simply exchanged one center for another. Lewis goes on to say that "If all inside experiences are misleading, then we are always misled" ("Meditation," 215); Downing states that Derrida makes the same point when he claims that the exchange of centers makes language subjective. Both authors agree that language and experience always occur within a context that shapes the meaning of the words or events. At this point, one difference between the two stands out, even though Downing does not address it: in using the word "mislead," Lewis expresses concern with the individual having the experience. Derrida, however, in focusing on the subjectivity of language, comes across as more interested in the nature of language as experience itself instead of the individual that language and experience act upon. That is, if language, experience, and the person experiencing it can be separated at all.

Downing continues by claiming that Lewis explores this further in an essay called "Bulverism." This essay explains that Freud and others of his kind dismissed Christianity because it was "ideologically tainted." But, Lewis argues, Freud and company have the same problem: their structure of thought is also tainted by the simple fact that no system of thought can be viewed from any other location than from within another system of thought. Because of this, all systems of thought are, ultimately, tainted ideologically. Lewis's conclusion is that one cannot in good faith reject one system of thought on grounds shared by all systems of thought. In doing this, Lewis engages the same concepts as Derrida in acknowledging that there is no such thing as a truly objective perspective.

While Downing goes on to use other texts by both Lewis and Derrida to explore connections between them, the strongest point in his whole essay is the way he brings Lewis's *The Discarded Image* into the conversation. *The Discarded Image* is one of the last books that Lewis wrote. In this text he describes that, over time, entire models explaining the universe change. These changes, in turn, shape how the people living at different times in different places will have different definitions for individual terms. The meaning of words is thus fluid, and readers centuries apart from each other will not understand each other's meaning without understanding the changing model of the universe. Lewis also makes clear that the structures humans use to understand the universe do not reflect the real universe, but are instead models. The same is true of our current model of the universe, no matter how well it "works." In his own words,

no model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy. Each is a serious attempt to get in all the phenomena known at a given period, and each succeeds in getting in a great many. But also, no less surely, each reflects the prevalent psychology of an age almost as much as it reflects the state of that age's knowledge. (Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 222)

Lewis is claiming here that no understanding of the universe is a description of actual reality, but is instead a linguistic model that gives us a structure. This is closely connected to Derrida's claim that there is nothing outside the text—one model of understanding the world will eventually be replaced by another, and no model can ever reflect absolute reality. These models are simply linguistic concepts that give sense and order to our lives. They are based less on facts than on "mental tempers" (Downing).

The similarities between Lewis's and Derrida's ideas do not end with the texts that Downing identified; there is much more that needs to be explored. For example, Richard Kearney points out in "Dialogue with Jaques Derrida" that while deconstruction is often described as identifying the binary structures of one's society, ending a definition at this point only presents the first half of the concept. The second half is what Derrida described as an "openness toward the other" (124). This is, according to Kearney, about stepping out of the self, being willing to understand the perspectives of other people—especially those who are completely outside the set of binaries that the individual is trapped in.

Lewis claims that this stepping outside of oneself happens when one reads fiction. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis describes reading as entering a context other than one's own in order to understand the perspective of others. Lewis explains it this way:

In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do. (Lewis, *Experiment*, 140-141).

It is important to note that even here Lewis is not saying that the reader directly engages an author's intention or his "mind." Instead, the reader encounters these texts from a variety of perspectives, and it is not just one that shapes the meaning of the experience. Intriguingly, while Derrida presents this stepping outside of one's self as an important but difficult task, Lewis presents this as the fulfillment of a natural human desire: "We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own" (137).

WONDER

Another interesting connection between Lewis and Derrida is how others have interpreted their work through a concept they call "wonder." These others do not always mean the same thing by the term, but that is simply a part of the play of language that both engage in. In an essay called "Derrida and the Philosophical History of Wonder," Genevieve Lloyd states that while Derrida rarely uses the word "wonder," the concept is central to much of what he does. She goes on to explain that when he uses the term *aporia*, Derrida is redefining it to mean an encounter with "otherness"—that is, it is something so far outside of our own context that we do not know how to understand it. In experiencing "aporia" or "wonder," we are "disarmed, delivered to the other" (89). Ultimately, Lloyd explains, to Derrida, *aporia*, or "wonder," is the ground for philosophical questioning and research. It is not an end in itself, but it is the ground from which all reason and thought begin. *Aporia* is a sensation that leads the one who experiences it to read, to research, and to work toward understanding.

Like Derrida, Lewis also only occasionally uses the term “wonder,” but many scholars and fans alike have associated this term with Lewis. One example would be books with titles such as *Alive to Wonder*, *Awakening Wonder*, *A Well of Wonder*, and even *A Shiver of Wonder*. A quick online search of “C. S. Lewis” and “wonder” reveals videos, blog entries, and even songs based on Lewis’s work such as Alanis Morissette’s “Wunderkind” that use the word “wonder” to describe an aspect of Lewis’s work. Lewis himself tended to use the words “enchantment” or “joy” to designate the concept, or concepts, these book titles, videos, blog entries, and songs attempt to express with the word “wonder.”

“Enchantment” and “joy” are both important concepts to Lewis. For example, in his autobiographical book *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis explains how, when he was a small child, a toy garden his brother made out of sticks and moss transported him into a unique state—a sense of being lifted out of himself into something wholly other. From that time forward, young C. S. Lewis searched out experiences that gave him that same sensation. At first he valued this experience for its own value—that transporting sensation. Ultimately, however, Lewis’s attitude toward this experience changed. He explains this change at the end of *Surprised by Joy*:

But what, in conclusion, of Joy? for that, after all, is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian. I cannot, indeed, complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. I believe (if the thing were at all worth recording) that the old stab, the old bittersweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer (304).

For Lewis, like Derrida, that sense of wonder, that enchantment, that joy, that *aporia* is not an end in itself, but serves to point the person experiencing it to something else. For Derrida, it points to the ability to genuinely step out of one’s own context and into something completely different; for Lewis, it points to the Christian faith. Both, however, present this experience as an encounter with something completely Other that draws the individual out of their own set of preconceived center and binaries of meaning.

ON FORGIVENESS

Another interesting connection between Lewis and Derrida is that, intriguingly, they both wrote essays called “On Forgiveness.” While Lewis’s essay was published in 1947 and Derrida’s half a century later, both essays take into consideration not only personal forgiveness between individuals, but also engage the concept of forgiveness as a response to the atrocities of the second World War and other human rights atrocities. In these essays, Derrida and Lewis both address the idea that “forgiveness” does not involve finding reasons or excuses for someone’s behavior. The offering and accepting of an excuse is, for both writers, the agreement that in this particular context, forgiveness is not needed. This is because an acceptable reason for the offense was given. Bearing in mind the circumstances offered, the action for which an excuse has been offered was not actually wrong.

While the two writers are in agreement on the role of excuse in conversation, their understanding of forgiveness diverges after this point. Derrida argues that the concept of forgiveness as it is generally thought of today has been developed within the context of one particular religious tradition, which he identifies as the “Abrahamic religions,” and while media is making it more ubiquitous, it is a part of a specific binary construct that has a specific defined center (28).

According to Derrida, genuine forgiveness occurs only when there is absolutely no excuse for the offending action. The person who needs forgiveness has done something so blatant, so horrible, that the transgression cannot be swept away: there is no excuse. To Derrida, forgiveness under these circumstances is the only real forgiveness that can exist. At the same time, however, the very inability of any excuse to cover an offense also makes forgiveness an impossibility. If it cannot be excused, it cannot be forgiven. If it can be excused, it does not need forgiveness. To Derrida, the person who genuinely needs forgiveness has no hope of ever receiving it.

Like Derrida, Lewis explains in his essay “On Forgiveness” that forgiveness and excusing are two very different things that do not replace each other. Unlike Derrida, he speaks from the position of the one in need of forgiveness, instead of simply writing about theory:

I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing ("On Forgiveness" 178).

For Lewis, like Derrida, *excusing* someone ultimately means agreeing that the transgression was not really their fault, and therefore should not be held against them. Being excused is ultimately the same as being declared "not guilty." But forgiveness must include an awareness of guilt. Lewis explains: "If you had a perfect excuse, you would not need forgiveness; if the whole of your action needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it" (179). Real forgiveness, for Lewis, understands the damage that has been done and the ugliness of the situation, and chooses reconciliation anyway. "That, and only that, is forgiveness," says Lewis.

Like Derrida, Lewis also presents forgiveness as a concept shaped within the context of an Abrahamic religion. Derrida claims that everyone talking about forgiveness works from within this context, but a quick perusal of Lewis's explanation of forgiveness reveals a difference between the person who happens to be inside the binary because it was created by their culture, and the person who genuinely believes in that particular cultural structure. For Lewis forgiveness is not an abstract thing; it is a vital practice that begins with asking God for forgiveness of oneself.

Because of the differences between their individual grounding, Lewis diverges from Derrida in his understanding of the very possibility of forgiveness. Lewis believes that this genuine forgiveness, the forgiveness that responds with grace to that which cannot be excused, is something that "we can always have from God if we ask for it" (181). Derrida's insistence that forgiveness is impossible leaves the person who needs forgiveness without hope, but offers a certain amount of relief to the person who struggles to forgive. Lewis's perspective shifts the burden of the transaction from the person who needs forgiveness to the person who has been asked to forgive. Put together, Lewis's and Derrida's understanding of forgiveness appears at first to be simply shifting sides within the same binary opposition. The only shift is where the burden of the forgiveness exchange actually rests. It is possible, however, to view this from a different perspective: Lewis talks about God not as a religious concept, but as a person he

engages with. Where Derrida sees the forgiveness binary as a culturally-proscribed behavior shaped by religion, Lewis sees it as an active shared experience with a living being. In viewing forgiveness as an aspect of relationship, Lewis moves into a different paradigm. But Lewis does not make this easy for his readers. Not only can the individual know that God has forgiven them in this relational exchange, but he explains that “[T]o be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you” (182). Where Derrida declares that such forgiveness is impossible, Lewis points out that forgiving the unforgivable is not only not impossible, but required behavior. It is required of us because it is what Lewis’s God has already done for us. Derrida’s view of forgiveness ends in a place of despair; Lewis’s ends in hope—the hope of relationship

CONCLUSION

While there are many fascinating connections between the theories of Derrida and Lewis, their understanding of forgiveness brings us to the most important difference in their understanding of the world they found themselves in. Derrida believed that meaning is shaped by an endless chain of shifting binaries, every word being defined by its relationship to other words. In Derrida’s world, everything is in flux; meaning is shaped by shifting centers that marginalize former centers. Thus, the meaning of everything is always in a state of instability. Everything, to Derrida, is text. While Lewis agrees that language is always in a state of change and there are shifting centers within worldviews and paradigms, he writes from a different perspective. Unlike Derrida, Lewis believed in an absolute center, the God he believed he was in relationship with. Lewis’s God, however, could also be described as being absolutely outside these cultural structures; something absolute that the individual may be in touch with. Derrida believed that we needed to be freed from the systems that trap us; Lewis believed that a very real Person existed outside of the binaries—the person of Christ. If Lewis’s beliefs could be worded in Derrida’s language, it could be said that Lewis believed that Christ, from his position outside of culturally-shaped binaries, has done the impossible and broken people out of the systems of thought and meaning that trap them.

paper provided an overview of several classifications of legal texts developed for

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BIONOTE

Melody Green is the Dean and Associate Professor of Christianity and Culture at Urbana Theological Seminary. Dr. Green earned her Ph.D. from Illinois State University in English Studies with a Specialization in Literature for Children and Adolescents. At Urbana Seminary she teaches courses on C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton and a variety of topics courses such as

Christianity and Children's Literature. Dr. Green's most recent publications include co-editing *J. R. R. Tolkien and the Arts: A Theology of Subcreation* published by Square Halo Press in 2021, and "Tolkien's Sigurd and the Refracted Light", to be published in Volume 39 of *VII: Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*.

***E-mail:* mgreen@urbanatheologicalseminary.org**