

Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination

BY PETER J. SCHAKEL

Without the imagination, morality remains ethics—abstract reflections on principles that we might never put into practice. With imagination, we connect principles to everyday life and relate to the injustices faced by others as we picture what they experience and feel. Stories feed the moral imagination, C. S. Lewis reminds us, and nurture the judgments of our heart.

Except for salvation, imagination is the most important matter in the thought and life of C. S. Lewis. He believed the imagination was a crucial contributor to the moral life, as well as an important source of pleasure in life and a vital evangelistic tool (much of Lewis's effectiveness as an apologist lies in his ability to illuminate difficult concepts through apt analogies). Without the imagination, morality remains ethics—abstract reflections on principles that we might never put into practice. The imagination enables us to connect abstract principles to everyday life, and to relate to the injustices faced by others as we imagine what they experience and feel. Though Lewis did not use the term "moral imagination" and recent writers on moral imagination rarely cite or draw upon him, he presented a clear, accessible, and powerful delineation of the concept long before it became popularized in the 1980s and 1990s.¹

The term originated with the Irish philosopher and political thinker Edmund Burke (1729-1797), in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a book Lewis mentions in a letter to his father as the best introduction to the medieval idea of love.² The French Revolution, Burke asserts,

put an end to the system of opinion and sentiment that had given Europe its distinct character. The “new conquering empire of light and reason” has torn off “all the decent drapery of life.”

All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.³

Burke saw the new regime in France as epitomizing unrestricted rationalism, stripping away the values and institutions developed and valued by a society through the years. For Burke, it is sentiment—thought infused with emotion, achieved through the moral imagination—that makes human beings human and sets them apart from animals. Sentiment makes our moral precepts personal and practical through the creative activity of the imagination. This sort of emotion-rich practical reason, not abstract rationalism, civilizes human beings and societies: without it and the human values it creates (“super-added ideas”) humans are, in Lear’s words, “unaccommodated man,” no more than “a poor, bare, forked animal.”⁴

TRAINING MORAL SENTIMENT

Lewis’s slender but very important book *The Abolition of Man* corresponds to and amplifies Burke’s position, though Lewis may not have been influenced directly by Burke and acknowledges no indebtedness to him. The book contains the Riddell Memorial Lectures, delivered at the University of Durham in February 1943. Although the word “imagination” does not appear in the lectures, this is Lewis’s fullest articulation of the importance of moral imagination. Addressing educators (but also by implication parents, who are a child’s first educators), he raises the problem of imaginative impoverishment. The educational system of the 1940s, he believes, has misread the need of the moment: fearing that young people will be swept away by emotional propaganda, educators have decided the best thing they can do for children is to fortify their minds against imagination and emotion by teaching them to dissect all things by rigorous intellectual analysis. Lewis says in reply, “My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.”⁵ Children’s and adolescents’ imaginations need to be fed, not starved.

The central argument of the book propounds “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” (12). *Mere Christianity* refers to these attitudes as “the Law of Human Nature” and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* depicts them imaginatively as

“Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time” (127).⁶ The Law of Human Nature, Lewis believes, is like language, both innate (as emphasized in *Mere Christianity* 1.1) and something that has to be learned, absorbed from parents and society, nurtured by example and precept.

Such nurturing is the central theme of *The Abolition of Man*. The role and approach of education are totally different for parents and educators who accept objective norms and values and for those who do not. For those who accept objectivity, “the task is to train in the pupil those responses which are in themselves appropriate, whether anyone is making them or not, and in making which the very nature of man consists” (13). The child must be guided “to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful” (10). Those who do not accept objectivity must decide either “to remove all sentiments, as far as possible, from the pupil’s mind: or else to encourage some sentiments for reasons that have nothing to do with their intrinsic ‘justness’ or ‘ordinacy’” (13).

Crucial to such nurturing is the child’s internalization of the standards and the appropriate response. Intellectual apprehension of abstract principles is not enough. When a child is tempted to steal a sweater that appeals to him or her

greatly, the goal is not to have the child intellectually weigh the moral issues at stake; the child must “feel” that stealing is not only wrong but repugnant, feel it through trained emotions: “Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism” (15). A person possessing trained emotions—the equivalent of practical reason—relies not on the abstract reflections of the

head, but on the properly nurtured judgments of the heart: “The Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man” (16).

Lewis goes even further and, like Burke, calls this the defining quality of the human species: “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” (16). Education, whether at home or school, that is aimed only at developing knowledge and intellect produces children who are

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emotionally and imaginatively impoverished and who grow up to be “Men without Chests” (the title of the first lecture). The loss of belief in moral law and its implementation through practical reason will ultimately, inevitably, Lewis believes, lead to the abolition of man, to the loss of the qualities that define the human species.

Practical reason needs to be nurtured first by the direct moral guidance of parents, teachers, and society, through instruction in accepted attitudes and mores. It is such practical nurturing, not abstract ethical study, that builds a life-long foundation for sound moral behavior. The faculty of reason is important in perceiving and articulating principles of morality, but in one sense it remains subservient to imagination because until those principles are internalized by a person and connected to life situations, they do not become meaningful and affect behavior. As Lewis expresses it (using his imagination to create images and invent a memorable analogy), “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” (15).

That initial grounding in practical reason can be further nurtured through reading and responding to literature. The imaginativeness of stories enables children to form and internalize “sentiments,” those complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment. They are helped to learn and live out “magnanimity,” the nobleness of mind and generosity that enable one to overlook injury and rise above meanness. In “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” Lewis wrote that a writer should not impose a moral lesson upon a story: “Let the pictures [i.e., verbal images] tell you their own moral.”⁷ Here, in sum, is Lewis on the moral imagination: the moral of the story must be embodied in the images and the images can be perceived only through the imagination.

MORAL IMAGINATION IN STORIES

Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man* as a philosopher, attempting to make abstract concepts and arguments clear and convincing, and to persuade readers to adopt and follow them. The book makes a powerful case, but for many readers the abstractness of its concepts and the intricacy of its argumentation make it tough going. Much easier to grasp and remember is Lewis’s imaginative depiction of a boy without a chest in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Eustace Clarence Scrubb grew up in a “modern” household, one that didn’t instill traditional values and behavior: “He didn’t call his father and mother ‘Father’ and ‘Mother,’ but Harold and Alberta. They were very up-to-date and advanced people. They were vegetarians, non-smokers and teetotallers and wore a special kind of underclothes” (1). Eustace’s education had been in modern schools that “didn’t have corporal

punishment" (28) and emphasized the sciences. As a result, Eustace liked insect collections (1) and informational books about "exports and imports and governments and drains" (71), but dismissed anything imaginative: he did not like fairy tales or romances and, because he "was quite incapable of making anything up himself," did not approve of other people doing so either (5).

The result of this lack of moral instruction is that Eustace has little respect for others and lacks a sense of fairness: he tries to take more than his rightful share of water rations and lies about it, and later he slips away from his companions to avoid doing his part of the work. His behavior is beastly, and he turns literally into a monster, cut off from other human beings: he becomes a dragon—a creature straight out of the imaginative stories he had resisted. Only then can he begin to get outside himself, imagine how others see him, and "wonder if he himself had been such a nice person as he had always supposed" (75). After being undragoned by Aslan, he is able to escape the limited, materialistic, rationalistic world in which he had grown up, aided perhaps by Reepicheep's stories about "emperors, kings, dukes, knights, poets, [and] lovers" who had fallen into distressing circumstances and recovered (84). Moral imagination comes to play an important role in Eustace's life, and as readers respond to Eustace first with antipathy and then sympathy, they too can experience moral imagination at work in their own lives.

The importance of story and moral imagination in the nurturing of a child's values comes out also through the character of Mark Studdock in Lewis' science fiction novel, *That Hideous Strength*. He, like Eustace, was not nurtured in practical reason as a child and, like Eustace, he ended up insensitive to the arts and literature and morally obtuse. "In Mark's mind hardly one rag of

noble thought, either Christian or Pagan, had a secure lodging. His education had been neither scientific nor classical—merely 'Modern.' The severities both of abstraction and of high human tradition had passed him by" (226). His lack of ethical standards and alert judgment allows him to be seduced into joining an organization (the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments—N.I.C.E.) that seeks absolute social and political control over England. He slides without noticing it into writing fraudulent

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news stories as part of its propaganda campaign. His moral imagination is badly undernourished and in need of sustenance.

Mark awakens to the peril of his situation and escapes from the N.I.C.E. just before its headquarters are destroyed by supernatural power working through the wizard Merlin. As he trudges down the road with other evacuees fleeing from the holocaust in which Belbury was consumed,

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he stops in a small, countryside hotel, the kind Lewis always wanted to find in the late afternoon when he was on a walking tour with a friend or two. As Mark has tea, he notices in the cozy sitting room two shelves of books, "bound volumes of *The Strand*. In one of these he found a serial children's story which he had begun to read as a child, but abandoned because his tenth

birthday came when he was half-way through it and he was ashamed to read it after that." He begins reading and chases the story "from volume to volume till he had finished it. It was good. The grown-up stories to which, after his tenth birthday, he had turned instead of it, now seemed to him, except for *Sherlock Holmes*, to be rubbish" (446-447).

The nourishing of his imagination has begun. Even this much food for the imagination is sufficient to lead him to transcend his self-centeredness and do some serious moral reflection, perhaps the first he has undertaken as an adult. He realizes that, when he married, he needed Jane and used her, rather than really loving her. Sensing the vitality in her from her openness to the imagination, he had hoped to be enriched by association with her: "When she had first crossed the dry and dusty world which his mind inhabited she had been like a spring shower; in opening himself to it he had not been mistaken. He had gone wrong only in assuming that marriage, by itself, gave him either power or title to appropriate that freshness" (448). He reaches another moral decision: "He must give her her freedom," "he would release her" (447, 475). As readers follow and respond to the importance that moral imagination comes to have in Mark's life, they may similarly find sustenance to promote their own moral growth.

Examples of the use of story and imagination to nurture the moral attitudes of readers appear frequently throughout Lewis's works, and are particularly evident in the Chronicles of Narnia. Readers often concentrate on

their Christian dimension, and Lewis says explicitly that in them he used imagination to slip past the barriers created by being told how to feel about the sufferings of Christ: "An obligation to feel can freeze feelings.... But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons?"⁸

But equally or more important is the moral dimension of the Chronicles. Stealing past watchful dragons was the second stage in the imaginative process, according to the essay. Prior to that came the impulse, even the need, to write a story about some mental images circling through his mind, a story which it turned out needed to be a fairy tale: "I wrote fairy stories because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say" (37). Fairy stories do not always, or often, deal with Christianity, but they almost always, by their nature, deal with moral issues; they explore the conflict of good versus evil, and portray traits such as loyalty, fairness, and courage. Fairy stories are fundamental nurturers of moral imagination. Before Lewis knew the stories would be Christian, he knew they would involve moral issues, and an important aim of the books for Lewis was the nurturing of his readers' moral imaginations.

Edmund, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, illustrates Lewis's approach well. After mocking Lucy cruelly when she says she has been to Narnia—"Quite batty" (18)—he stumbles into Narnia himself. Lucy is delighted because this will confirm that she has been to Narnia. But when they return, Edmund does "one of the nastiest things in this story," "the meanest and most spiteful thing"—he lies. "Oh, yes, Lucy and I have been playing—pretending that all her story about a country in the wardrobe is true. Just for fun, of course. There's nothing really there" (35-36). Lewis here gives imaginative embodiment to the basic moral principle of good faith: "The foundation of justice is good faith" (Cicero, quoted in the appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, 58). Later, when all four children go to Narnia, Edmund leaves his siblings and goes to the evil White Witch with the intention of betraying them to her, thus violating perhaps the most basic of moral principles: "Anything is better than treachery" (Old Norse *Hávamál*, quoted in *Abolition*, 58). In both cases Lewis chooses a situation that all children reading the book will recognize as wrong. When the White Witch later says to Aslan, "You have a traitor there" (113), readers know that the charge is justified and that Edmund deserves punishment: the narrative conveys the negative lesson powerfully and memorably.

In other cases the Chronicles use moral imagination to convey positive values, such as Lucy's honesty, integrity, and courage; the valor and sense of justice displayed by Peter; and the utter goodness, lovingness, and bravery of Aslan. Doctor Cornelius shows loyalty to Caspian in *Prince Caspian*, at great risk to himself. Jill Pole shows prudence in *The Silver Chair* when

she, Eustace, and Puddleglum the Marshwiggles are imprisoned in the House of Harfang and she uses quick wit and common sense to find a way to escape. In *The Last Battle* Tirian and Jewel live by a high standard of honor which requires that they submit themselves to Aslan's justice for killing two Calormenes who were beating talking horses. In the tragically ironic world of this story, their honorable action contributes to Narnia's doom, but it comes across to us as admirable and inspiring nonetheless, enriching our moral attitudes.

Morality forms a key theme in *The Magician's Nephew*. At the heart of its narrative is the introduction of evil into the "new, clean world" Aslan had just created (121). With that as its center, it is not surprising to find examples of moral imagination throughout the story. We are repelled by the negative examples of Uncle Andrew and Jadis, who break promises (16, 54) and are cruel (19, 55), cowardly (20, 54), greedy (12, 56), selfish (20, 55), and vain or proud (67, 53). And we are attracted to the positive examples of Digory and Polly, who keep promises (146) and are decent (24), prudent (33), courageous (24), truthful (121), and loyal (24, 146-47). Particularly striking is the importance of Digory's early nurturing, which embedded in him proper moral attitudes: "Things like Do Not Steal were, I think, hammered into boys' heads a good deal harder in those days than they are now" (142). That moral grounding enables him to resist when Jadis tempts him to use an apple to save his mother instead of taking it back to Aslan: "'Mother herself,' said Digory, getting the words out with difficulty, 'wouldn't like it—awfully strict about keeping promises—and not stealing—and all that sort of thing'" (146).

But it is not just children whose imaginations become undernourished, as the example of Mark Studdock indicates clearly. Adults too need constant nourishment through the moral imagination, and Lewis's stories for adults also are deeply grounded in moral imagination. *That Hideous Strength* is—Lewis says in the preface—a fictionalized version of *The Abolition of Man*, embedding its "serious 'point'" in an imaginative story. By subtitling the novel "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups," Lewis signals that the book will involve moral issues and that it is intended to nurture moral imagination in adults the way the Chronicles as fairy tales do for children. The role of moral imagination in *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and *Till We Have Faces* would be easy to demonstrate, if space permitted.

CONCLUSION

Lewis derived enormous pleasures, probably daily pleasures, from the imagination. Without it, his life would have been diminished in many ways—dimmer, more constricted, and less rich and rewarding. But he also recognized its importance for faith and moral development. His own moral attitudes were shaped by his early reading and his imaginative writings

later were intended—like those of medieval and early modern writers he admired greatly: Dante, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, for example—not just to entertain but to nurture. He, like Burke, did not want the civilized values of the past to be lost or dismissed as no longer relevant. Through the use of moral imagination in his writings, Lewis was attempting to preserve and pass on the traditional values of earlier ages to the modern world.

NOTES

1 Russell Kirk's *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1971) stimulated a wave of interest in moral imagination. See also Philip S. Keane, *Christian Ethics and Imagination* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984); Christopher Clausen, *The Moral Imagination: Essays on Literature and Ethics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986); Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Patricia Hogue Werhane, *Moral Imagination and Management Decision Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2 Letter from 10 July 1928, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (1966), edited by W. H. Lewis, revised and enlarged edition edited by Walter Hooper (London: Fount, 1988), 256.

3 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), edited by J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 67.

4 *King Lear*, 3.4.105-107. For more on the term "practical reason," see Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism" (1943) in *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 72-73.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 9.

6 Quotations of the Chronicles of Narnia are from the editions published in the United States by Macmillan. The original American editions incorporate Lewis's last revisions and they, not the British versions used in the recent 1994 uniform edition, should be regarded as the authoritative texts. See Peter J. Schakel, *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 35-38.

7 C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" (1952), in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, edited by Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), 33. Lewis's essay is reprinted in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 31-43.

8 C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said" (1956), in *Of Other Worlds*, 37. This essay is reprinted in *On Stories*, 45-48.



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