

THEO 656A: Augustine: *City of God*

The Great Divorce: C.S. Lewis – Falling between the cracks

*Unless otherwise stated, all page numbers refer to:
C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946)*

The structure of this paper will be as follows. First a brief synopsis of the plot of *The Great Divorce* is provided. I then delineate aspects of the theological position which Clive Staples “Jack” Lewis appears to stake out in this work of fiction. Discussion follows of the implications, some possible difficulties and internal inconsistencies. Then, in the context of Saint Augustine of Hippo’s *City of God*, I do my best to get the texts talking to each other. Again, the caveat: my competence to implement the above is limited. I entreat your patience where necessary.

1. Plot synopsis: *The Great Divorce*

In this relatively short allegorical novel, C.S. Lewis’ first person narrator journeys by bus upwards from a dreary suburban purgatory / hell to another realm where above and beyond a pastoral idyll, an alpine divine resides.

We see, first on the bus, later in heaven, a series of undesirable characters. Their faults are usually obvious and serve to provide illustrations of why they will get back onto the bus and go back to purgatory / hell. The welcoming party consists of nominated counterparts who have interrupted their journey “further and further into the mountains” (p.69). In most of these cases they knew the arrival while they were alive and the pilgrim is required to walk with them, receiving assistance on the journey towards God. Roughly one person per chapter, most fail.

The environment of this heavenly realm is bright and hard. Reference is made to the approaching sunrise which will take the underworld out of its perpetual gloaming (p.64). The townspeople are almost transparent when they arrive and the substantial reality of what is later called “the Real World” (p.126) makes it difficult for them to walk on the grass or lift physical objects. However, in the long and continuing journey towards an ever-closer approach to the divine summit, the arrivals will become more solid.

The narrator meets George Macdonald and together they observe seven more ghosts of whom one (the man addicted to lizard) ascends towards God. To varying degrees, the others seem unlikely to.

It turns out that purgatory / hell is so small as to be negligible and it exists in some

cracks at the bottom of the heavenly realm.

Then there is the dream-within-the-dream in which Macdonald briefly shows our narrator an assembly of motionless and immortal figures observing the playing out of a dance to the music of time by chessboard-sized selves on this mortal stage. Then the sun rises and the narrator cannot endure its brilliance, purity and strength. But it was all a dream! Cue air-raid siren, fade to black.

2. Theological Position

- Heaven has purgatory-like qualities in this ever-closer union model.
- The place that looks like hell at the time will retrospectively come to appear as a purgatory for those who have left it. (p.63)
- George Macdonald – a strong influence on Lewis with the narrator’s quite specific reference to having bought *Phantastes* (p.61) on a frosty morning at Leatherhead Station at the age of about sixteen plausibly an autobiographical nod – gets re-dubbed on Universalism such that we may incline towards regarding him as a Lewis mouthpiece in *The Great Divorce*. Hence, the following, from Lewis, on lust. Although “The false religion of lust is baser than the false religion of mother-love or patriotism or art”, the lower passions are not necessarily worse passions since:
 - a.) when it comes to their conversion, they can at least not be mistaken for eternal love (“Brass is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is”, p.97); and
 - b.) when the less-base affections are perverted into something corrupt, they become worse – relatively speaking – than corrupted lower passions (“It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a fiercer devil” (p.97).
- Heaven and Hell are separate in this rejection of universalism. People make choices and because we experience these choices temporally, we are able to perceive them as acts of free will. This may or may not be accurate. Nonetheless, freedom is a deep truth:

The picture [with the chessmen] is a symbol ... every attempt to see the shape of eternity except through the lens of Time destroys your knowledge of Freedom. Witness the doctrine of Predestination which shows (truly enough) that eternal reality is not waiting for a future in which to be real; but at the price of removing Freedom which is the deeper truth of the two. And wouldn't Universalism do the same? (p.129)
- Not only would universalism overturn a conception of free will, but letting certain

people into heaven would prevent it from being heaven:

Every disease that submits to a cure shall be cured: but we will not call blue yellow to please those who insist on still having jaundice, not make a midden of the world's garden for the sake of some who cannot abide the smell of roses. (p.125)

- The chessboard image is expressly not supposed to affirm that all of the conversations between the Spirits and the Ghosts were “only the mimicry of choices that had really been made long ago” (pp.130-131). Neither can you assume that the temporal succession of choices we experience in time (p.129) is an adequate conceptual model for understanding the nature of our Freedom. Our analogy-hungry minds are just not going to get it. Keep the faith in free will, submit to prayerful reverence and humility on questions that are too big for our field of vision. It’s inscrutability again, but this time with more wonderment-inspiring analogies which may help us to concede our limitations. Perhaps, if we are using “inscrutability” in the sense of “really hard to look into and understand” we should also here add a twist of ineffability in the sense of “really hard to put into words”.
- In the context of the lizard addict’s critical moment of decision-making at the gates / fairway of heaven the following is said to him: “This moment contains all moments” (p.101). This Zen-like aphorism takes us back to doubts and questions about exactly what kinds of free will:
 - a.) it is desirable / helpful / beneficial for the individual to believe in
 - b.) it is politically feasible to believe in
 - c.) it is scripturally / doctrinally consistent to believe in
 - d.) it is possible to even think about.
- Good and Bad are best thought of as God-relative vectors, for Lewis: “There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier ...” (p.98)

3. Implications and Some Possible Difficulties

Going back to the penultimate bullet-point on page two¹, what would it mean to

¹ In my short-sightedness, I used bullet-points instead of lettered or Roman-numeralled paragraphs. Shucks.²

² Attentive readers will note that as well as being a stylistic lapse, this is also the third in a series of one-word sentences, a trope which I have been working diligently to refine over the course of this semester. “Incendiary.” and “Harrumph.” were earlier outings. If only I had been able to work it into the body of the writing. Alas.

write that the principle of Freedom is a “deeper truth” than Predestination? In what sense is one truer than the other?

In this text, Lewis needs to demonstrate that the people failing to enter heaven have faults which make their non-membership status just. Thus, for us as readers, the exposition of this identity parade of mildly to egregiously anti-social behavioural types is perhaps satisfyingly clear. Is there a certain smugness attendant to this didactic technique? I am puzzled as to why I do not find C.S. Lewis’ tone as irritatingly conceited as I once did.

I used the phrase “anti-social behavioural types” in a lamentably snide side-swipe at an important ethical foundation, above. This could serve well to bring me to my next point. Lewis has Macdonald say: “Ye call it the Sulks. But in adult life it has a hundred fine names – Achilles’ wrath and Coriolanus’ grandeur, Revenge and Injured Merit and Self-Respect and Tragic Greatness and Proper Pride” (p.66). It seems all very well giving names and caricatures to faults, but is not the effect of this to produce, in part, a rather middle-class ethics? From the moment we are waiting with the narrator at the bus stop of suburbia, are we not being encouraged to evaluate our fellow passengers’ behaviour in terms of “bad form”, “causing a scene” and “poor show” on the one hand, and “hoity-toitiness”, “giving it airs”, “holier than thou” or “a bit much” on the other. Once I had been properly cued-up, my tut-tutting-sense took over without me really having even to think about exactly how a given infraction of civil conduct might stand in the scheme of a God-centred ethics.

Lewis seems harder to fault in my view on the linguistic tropes undergirding false gods:

One will say he has always served his country right or wrong; and another that he has sacrificed everything to his Art; and some that they’ve never been taken in, and some that, thank God, they’ve always looked after Number One, and nearly all, that, at least they’ve been true to themselves. (p.65)

4. *The Great Divorce* and *City of God*

C.S. Lewis is in a dialogue with Universalists amongst others; St. Augustine is speaking to salon-frequenting pagans, amongst others. Where Augustine sees the Visigoths threatening the worldly instantiation of Christian legitimacy, C.S. Lewis writes in an age when the long-serving legitimacy of the Church-Leader-State iron triangle has taken a good beating: “And all through two wars what didn’t they say about the good time coming if only I’d be a brave boy and go on being shot at?”(p.49). Certainly there are major differences here,

allow me to stress the similarities.

Although one might expect Lewis to be more tolerant of dissenting points of view, more open to discussion than Augustine, there does remain the same inclination – albeit weaker – towards closing down the wrong kind of questioning. In part, both are speaking a domestic rhetoric to those within the fold. The unthinkable must remain unthunk, and if a rhetoric of fear (the creeping obviousness of a premise originally granted to enable discussion, dichotomies in which one term is normatively privileged, implicit threats of exclusion, dissent-contingent pejoration) serves the purpose, then so be it. Dick, the fat clean-shaven man with the cultured voice is addressed by one of the happy shiny people thus: “Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the Faith” (p.34). Would the kind of questioning which might jeopardise one’s faith be acceptable if it were conducted with due reflection? Or not at all?

Unlike Augustine’s Cuban missile crisis days, Lewis does not here seem to find himself hurtling towards apocalypse at eschatological speed with the manic gleam of the saved in his eye, anticipating the end of time, praying for Christ to reveal himself again in all his glory that all unbelievers might bow down and worship him at last. Ahem.² The phrase “the end of all things” only appears three times in this text and although the text does close at the event horizon of a revelation whereby “the rim of the sunrise that shoots Time dead with golden arrows” (p.132) is nigh, indeed is come upon us – I would argue that it is not the telos of the project in the same way that it might be said to be of Augustine’s work, *City of God*.

The Universalists would try to destroy hell, Lewis reasserts its existence and its compatibility with a divine pity (pp.124-5) which will not allow itself to be held hostage. Therefore just as Augustine also writes in places³ of evil as an absence of good (as opposed to a metaphysical entity) and as a turning away from God, both he and Lewis would want to retain a discrete place for the non-good in the afterlife. Why does Lewis propose a way out of final judgement, out of hell into heaven? (p.63) Does eternity sit uncomfortably with ideas of proportionality in justice? Who approved this state provision of public transport?

² I am either using humour as a way of carving out rhetorical space within which to write about awkward issues or I am simply being offensive. Or both. My intent and therefore my locus within the discourse and consequently my own faith are perhaps to some extent under scrutiny. At stake is probably my Character. Under such circumstances, the following footnote may provide light relief: Saint Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p.192, fn.19.

³ For instance, pp.480-481: Augustine, *City of God* (2003)