C.S. Lewis and the Importance of Words

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When we first began to discuss the notion of spending an evening at Augustine School discussing and exploring the relationship of C.S. Lewis to classical education, my mind almost immediately (if I remember correctly) went to the idea of exploring something of what C.S. Lewis thought about the nature of words, or of language.

There is a good chance that I have had the opportunity to sit down with the vast majority of you to discuss the mission of Augustine School. And somewhere in that discussion I would have likely shared with you what we consider to be five key tenets or pillars of classical education:

The second, third, fourth, and fifth tenets are:

(2) The centrality of a *goal* in education

(3) The centrality of the past

(4) The centrality of the classical languages

(5) The centrality of thinking, speaking, and writing

But always at the top of the list is

(1) The centrality of *words*

Words. In one sense this really *is* what education is about. Helping form students who love language, understand language, and can use language well in the various callings God has for them.

Great education has always emphasized the importance of words—and we depart from this understanding at our own peril. And C.S. Lewis understood the importance of words being at the center of being educated. An older understanding of education has always affirmed that to be educated means—at least in part—to understand language, and to be able to communicate using words (both in terms of speaking and in terms of writing).

C.S. Lewis himself had what we would call a classical education. He read and studied the Greek and Latin classics, and was proficient in both Greek and Latin. This training undoubtedly prepared him for a life of scholarship, teaching, and writing—whether of studies in the nature of literature, or his books on Christian apologetics, or his Narnia stories, or his science fiction trilogy.

Why C.S. Lewis Matters

I just want to say a few words here about C.S. Lewis, words, and classical education here at Augustine School. And I will do this by suggesting three ways why C.S. Lewis matters.

1. C.S. Lewis as a Bridge to the Past

First, C.S. Lewis matters for us today because he can be a bridge by which we discover our own intellectual heritage. Let me illustrate by telling a story. As I began to study theology and to develop intellectually I read Lewis voraciously. I was challenged by what he wrote, helped in understanding many things, and encouraged in my faith as a Christian living in what has become truly post-Christian culture. But I slowly I began to realize something. At many points C.S. Lewis was articulating a truth he had learned from some ancient writer—often Christian writers.

One example: Lewis in *Mere Christianity* speaks of the sinful human person as "bent." That is, as sinful beings our wills are "bent"—and thus (as fallen) we are inclined to sin and rebel against our maker. As a young man I read that and thought "brilliant!" "What an amazing insight!" Well, it is a helpful way to put things, but at some point I read Augustine and realized, "Oh, Lewis probably got the idea of us as 'bent' from Augustine." Now, this does not change the fact that speaking of us sinners as "bent" is a helpful way to put things. However, it is important to realize that Lewis has likely picked this up from Augustine. And here is my point. It can be intimidating to be told that we are supposed to read the books of western culture! We all generally like the path of least resistance, and the idea that we, or our children, should take it upon themselves to well-versed in the Great Books of western culture can be a bit daunting. But what Lewis does is serve as helpful guide to our intellectual inheritance. Lewis can be a bridge by which we begin to grasp our own intellectual and cultural inheritance. And this is in no small part because Lewis writes *so* well, and is—frankly—*enjoyable.* So, one reads Lewis (perhaps simply out of enjoyment) and one finds oneself being drawn into the "Great Conversation" that is so central to a great education.

2. C.S. Lewis as a Sentinel On Behalf of Objective Values

Second, C.S. Lewis also matters because he was concerned with the affirmation of truly objective values. This is seen especially in his classic work, *The Abolition of Man,* which is subtitled *reflections on Education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of schools.* This book is ultimately a defense of the notion that morality is not something

we *create,* but rather that morality is something that *impinges* upon us because it is "built in" to the very structure of reality.

Now I would think that everyone in this room would say: "Of course! *Obviously* there is such a thing as true and objective morality." Great! But it is instructive how Lewis opens up his discussion of the objectivity of morality. He broaches the issue by criticizing an illustration from a grammar book for English high school students! You may know the illustration. In the grammar book in question (what Lewis calls, in order to protect the authors, *The Green Book*) the authors recall a story in which tourist calls a waterfall, "sublime" (we might think of "elevated" or "lofty"). The authors of the grammar say, "When the man said *That is sublime,* he appears to be making a remark about the waterfall . . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word 'Sublime',* or shortly *I have sublime feelings.*"[1]

We cannot linger long here, but Lewis' response is something like the following. While pretending to teach *grammar* the authors are in fact teaching *philosophy* or even *theology,* and a destructive one at that! That is, the authors are, in a sense "under the radar," teaching these students that statements that *seem* to be statements about something out "there," about something *outside of us,* are really simply expressions of feelings *internal* to us. Thus, the authors are, again in an "under the radar" kind of way, teaching their students that there is nothing really "objective" outside of me, or at least that I cannot really *know* or *say* anything about what—darn it!—sure *seems* to be a world outside of me. And Lewis moves from here to say that if the

[1] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 2.

authors' teaching takes hold in students, the students will eventually (if they trust their teachers!) be logically required to deny any sort of objective morality.

We could spend all night on *The Abolition of Man*, but my point here is simply this: Lewis mounts his criticism of *The Green Book* by a penetrating and engaged reading of *words*. He takes the authors seriously, and calls them to task for what they are *really* doing—which is, undermining (ultimately) the notion that there is a real world that we can know and speak of, and of undermining the possibility of any sort of objective morality. And this leads to my third and final point.

3. C.S. Lewis as Apologetic Tutor

So first I have noted that Lewis is helpful as a bridge to the past. Second, I have noted that Lewis is helpful as an ally in the effort to affirm the existence of objective truth and hence objective morality. Now third, Lewis is helpful as an apologetic tutor.

At Augustine we are trying to help shape and form students in a certain way. We talk about the forming wise and virtuous young men and women who are learning to submit all things to the universal lordship of Christ. One thing Lewis helps us to do is to think through exactly what that looks like in our day. What does it really *mean* to be wise in our present context? A part of what we are trying to do at Augustine is to give all of our students certain tools, so that they will be prepared to take on the vast and nefarious challenges which will meet them (indeed are *already* meeting them). By being precise and thoughtful about language, by helping students grasp grammar, by having all students third grade and above study Latin, we are helping students to develop the tools by which *they* can mount thoughtful responses to, criticisms of, and

engagement with, the various challenges that will face them all of their lives. Lewis held that our age was a post-Christian age—and he wrote that some fifty-five years ago. We must attend to the fact that we and our children are growing up in a radically post-Christian culture, and so we must think about the formation of persons as being *a formation which will prepare students to live faithful lives amidst not only a fallen world, but a world that continues to reject the gospel and which may only get more wicked day by day, month by month, and year by year.*

By attending to language we help our students to articulate the faith in meaningful and compelling ways. By having our students read great stories of virtue and vice we help develop our students' imaginations, and we provide models that can be admired and emulated. We really *do* want our boys to have the courage and faithfulness of Reepicheep, who was willing to sail to the end of the world in search of Aslan's ultimate home. We really *do* want our daughters to have the moral courage of Lucy, who—even when betrayed by her brother Edmund—insisted that she really *had* met Aslan, and that Narnia was *real.*

Augustine School then can learn many things from Lewis as we seek to form a certain kind of person. And we must come to terms that as the dominant culture becomes more and more debased, and as the dominant culture becomes more and more confused about the most basic realities of existence, we really are preparing students to live counter-cultural lives. Lewis was apparently fond of calling himself "dinosaur," and by this he meant that he was very much behind the times in much of his thinking. He was—in a sense—a prehistoric specimen. He warned his readers to be careful, for such dinosaurs would not live forever. He quipped: "use your specimens well. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs." But perhaps we can prove Lewis wrong. If we think of such dinosaurs as thoughtful, engaged lovers of wisdom, and of lovers of God and neighbor, willing to articulate the faith once delivered to the saints, willing

to think long and hard about objections to the faith—and then to offer winsome and compelling responses, maybe we can grow up a new generation of "dinosaurs," a new generation of thoughtful Christian young persons, prepared to articulate the truth in part because of the tools passed on to them, and due to person-forming and person-shaping and wisdom and virtue-cultivating kind of education they received in this place.