

# The Relevance of C.S. Lewis's Anthropology for the Contemporary World

Florin MATEI

*Rev. PhD(c.), Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania  
mateiflorin07@gmail.com*

**ABSTRACT:** C. S. Lewis was one of the great intellectuals of the 20th and 21st centuries. Among other things, he distinguished himself as an apologist and a man who loved Scripture. His anthropological thinking may prove essential in the complex world of the 21st century. This paper will summarize the most significant anthropological views that C.S. Lewis addressed in his work and which he considered essential in human relations. These viewpoints can serve as starting points towards a broader understanding of the world and the interactions within it. His views remain relevant in the contemporary context in which we capture different perspectives on humanity.

**KEYWORDS:** Tao, Imago Dei, man, redemption, free will, sin, human nature

## Introduction

C.S. Lewis through his approach can be an important resource by offering insights into understanding humanity and building a future. It is important to identify in his works those landmarks that make it necessary to understand man and the perspectives that are opened up by understanding him. His theological perspective proves necessary and useful in its realism, but also in its grounding in the realities of our troubled world. Although we are currently talking about the potential of the human being, C.S. Lewis manages to capture its vulnerabilities and lead us to a solid, grounded and balanced understanding of how man should relate to the complex realities of the world. Following the anthropological elements of C.S. Lewis' thought, one cannot help but find its relevance to the world we live in.

## *Imago Dei*

Starting from the statement, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the beasts and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen 1:26, Catholic Bible). C.S. Lewis went beyond the classical understanding of this idea and saw that man's likeness to God means more than rightly affirming the dignity, worth and sacredness of all of God's creation, but also the special, chosen character of human beings. By this he meant a call from God to recognize the likeness to God of every person, thus reminding us of the need to love and honor our fellow human beings in a noble and dignified way. C.S. Lewis defines this idea more broadly when he says that we also speak of God-likeness when we look at the creative capacity of human beings. From this point of view, being human is seen in our ability to create. Through an act of mind and body, creatively, to be able to bring into being what is then seen. However, approaching God through relationship enhances this likeness to God. C.S. Lewis puts it this way: "The states in which man is 'nearest' to God are those in which man approaches most surely and most rapidly his final union with God, the seeing and savoring of God" (Lewis 2021, 222).

### ***Tao***

Each of us has a defining anthropological conception which forms the foundation of our relationship to life. We use concepts taken from the environment in which we live, we value them and make use of them or, on the contrary, we allow ourselves to be influenced by the concepts of man that are proposed to us through various means and instruments. When we talk about the Irish apologist, we notice his concern to show us how a linguistic loan can form the basis of a discussion about anthropology. That is why he proposes the Chinese term *Tao* for understanding how people are united by various moral norms and judgments of moral significance, regardless of culture, historical period or geographical area. The *Tao*, being “the only source of value judgments, subsumes written or unwritten laws, but present (still) in all peoples, such as: duty to children and offspring and duty to ancestors and parents” (Rodica 2006, 12). In the *Tao* we also find essential values related to truth, collective and private good and the manifestation of important inner acts: mercy, altruism or generosity.

From C.S. Lewis' point of view, we thus have a common denominator of humanity, a factor that unites people everywhere, regardless of the geographical area and culture in which they live. Speaking of morally significant values and judgments, the apostle Paul also sees a common element ingrained in the human mind when he says: “14 While the Gentiles, who have not the law, make [the works] of the law by nature, they, who have not the law, are law unto themselves. 15 They show that the deed of the Law is written in their hearts, and to this their consciences bear witness, and their thoughts, which by turns accuse them or exonerate them” (Rom. 2:14-15, Catholic Bible). He also says: “For what can be known about God is made known in them, since God has made himself known to them” (Rom. 1:19, Catholic Bible). Don Richardson in the book *Eternity in Their Heart* argues for this idea of a God and moral values that exist in all humanity using various experiences from distant parts of the world where monotheism or the existence of a God was accepted and even anticipated. The author (Richardson 1996, 34) builds his argument on the statement made by the sage Solomon who says: “He hath made all things beautiful in their season, and hath even put eternity in [man's] heart, though man cannot know the work that God hath wrought from the beginning to the end” (Eccles. 3:11, Catholic Bible).

The first consequence related to the *Tao* is in relation to the training of children and how education should be carried out. Referring to these issues and particularly to the influence exerted on the child, C.S. Lewis says that “It is not a theory, but a premise which is impressed on his mind, and which, ten years later, when he has forgotten whence it came... he is not aware of its presence” (Lewis 2023, 12). C.S. Lewis says of the child who has become an adult, that he may not see the opinion conveyed as controversial. Therefore, it is important that true education be governed by the *Tao*, because “the task of those who adhere to the Tao conception is to form in the scholar those reactions which are in themselves appropriate, whether they will be required of him or not, and the possession of which defines human nature itself” (Lewis 2023, 31).

Although we capture a pattern of moral values found in human beings everywhere we see a tendency for human beings to annihilate themselves. “Man's whole course in the world retains its optimal character so long as it evolves in harmony with Natural Law or Traditional Morality, which Lewis prefers to call concisely the Tao” (Rodica 2006, 15). Conflicting conceptions of the world and life are, in fact, more than an individual's choice, they are life itself because failure to follow Natural Law leads to self-destruction. Our choices should follow a path that man tends to take. The good functioning of human nature should be linked to the Tao and to the choices we make in accordance with this Moral Law with which we were created.

C.S. Lewis talks about several aspects that lead man to self-destruction, to the annihilation of the fundamental values (*Tao*) according to which we were created. The first enemy we are presented with is identified in the rise of new ideologies that partially

affirm values of the *Tao* or are contrary to it. The Irish apologist here uses the image of branches rebelling against the tree which can bring nothing good, perhaps only the destruction of the self. The idea of the progress of perceptions of values is not dismissed, but only affirmed, encouraged and supported from within the *Tao* (Lewis 2023, 61-63).

The second enemy that attacks human integrity is man's intention to conquer Nature. Here we are dealing with a formulation specific to human progress “and demonstrates the real possibility that power is exercised by a diminishing minority, and that every power gained by man is - indeed is - also a power over and against man” (Rodica 2006, 12). By endowing man with power, who, with the powers of scientific institutions and techniques at his disposal, may believe that he will be victorious against Nature, that he can shape the present and the future and that nothing can stand in his way, but in reality we are describing a sure path of man's destruction. One of the ways in which we see this means at work is “the way in which traditional values are dismantled, demythologized, relativized, and the will of a lucky few shaping 'ideologies' to their liking is also reflected in the way our language is affected” (Rodica 2006,14). The relativization of language is part of the elites' arsenal of struggle against the values that define it.

In the twentieth century - in which C.S. Lewis lived - it began to be asserted that there is no natural order to the world and that things do not possess an objective value that demands a particular response; rather, people simply give value to themselves and it is feelings that give objects their value. These feelings were culturally conditioned and relative to particular societies and individuals, and thus completely subjective. Lewis notes that from this conclusion followed certain corollaries, principally that “value judgments are unimportant”, “all values are subjective and trivial” and “emotion is contrary to reason” (The Art of Manliness 2022).

### **Free will**

Speaking of the way man was created, but also of his ennoblement, C.S. Lewis speaks of a great asset of the human being: free will. From his point of view we cannot talk about the fall into sin without talking about the power of the free will of the first humans. This is the supreme value from which we can start to understand human nature and how we can function. Free will, although it creates the premises for the fall (man can always choose something other than good), shows the dimension in which man was created: the relationship and understanding of self-awareness. This is why C.S. Lewis says that “free will... is also what gives value to love, goodness and joy” (Lewis 2019, 64). Uplifting values are brought to light by human free will. He is created to do good. Only in this good will he find himself and be able to live fulfilled. The understanding of free will is linked to the way man functions in relation to the supreme values.

Both C.S. Lewis and Thomas Aquinas (Rotaru 2005, 316-323) come to the conclusion that the human will is moved neither by power, nor pleasure, nor prestige, but by an appetite for our own well-being, something that will fulfil and satisfy us. If C.S. Lewis remarked that even after the best moments we experience in life we are still left with a sense of emptiness, Thomas Aquinas concludes thus: “From which it follows that nothing can obstruct the will of man except the supreme good which is not to be found in anything created, but only in God” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q.2. A.6 arg.I.).

### **Definition of sin**

C.S. Lewis notes that compared to first century Christianity, cultural and ideological changes make it difficult for modern man to accept this diagnosis. The notion of sin has undergone many transformations, and calls for change must take account of this change in the concept.

Thus, we need a rediscovery of the meaning and depth of sin. “As long as we do not fully feel the truth of this assumption of His, we are not part of those to whom He has spoken, even though we are part of the world He came to save” (Lewis 2021, 397). He goes on to say where these shortcomings can lead us: “And when people try to be Christians without this prior awareness of sin, the result is almost inevitably a kind of resentment against God as One who is always inexplicably wrathful” (Lewis 2021, 397). The risk of self-deception and confusion over rightly relating to sin and feeling guilty makes a right understanding of personal sinfulness unnecessary. Consequently, a correct understanding of sin leads to a correct approach to repentance and a correct view of God's requirements.

For C.S. Lewis, the concept of sin conceals several meanings that can make us aware of the path we have taken as human beings. He speaks of the man fallen into idolatry of self, the one who worships his own person and goes in describing things to the point of “the appearance of a new configuration was a radical alteration of his constitution, a disturbance of the relation between the component parts and an inward perversion of one of them” (Lewis 2021, 420).

The factor that led to the fall into sin of the first humans is closely related to the use of free will in a destructive direction. Satan is the architect of the inoculation of ideas harmful to people and their future. C.S. Lewis says that “the idea that they could be 'god-like' that they could exist on their own as if they had created themselves - that they could be their own masters - inventing a kind of happiness of their own apart from God, apart from God” (Lewis 1991, 65). By this, C.S. Lewis does not mean that free will is harmful, only that it has been used independently of God and the result has led to man's moral downfall.

### **The meaning of life and the pursuit of happiness**

The meaning of life is understood by C.S. Lewis in relation to man's inner life, his emotional side, aspects that have to do with pain, purpose, happiness that a man experiences during his life at various stages. Therefore, C.S. Lewis is dedicated to understanding how these interact with the spiritual life and become the means by which man's understanding of God is impaired or enhanced. Although he lived in a philosophical context in which logical positivism dictated the relationship to life and which said that the purpose of life is neither good nor bad and that we must verify statements through the five senses, C.S. Lewis was not swayed by this school of thought, although his mentor William Kirkpatrick was an ardent believer in this approach to life. In Lewis's view, the purpose of life is “that we should experience a happiness which he invariably described as eternal, infinite, complete or perfect. The experience of this happiness is the life of the blessed” (Goetz 2018, 65). For C.S. Lewis, the fact that we were created in this way is an expression of our future and our ideals.

Seen from another point of view, the question of the relation of pleasure to life itself should lead us to God - the Irish author says that the smallest pleasure is in fact a foretaste of God's intended purpose for us which should lead us to God (Lewis 1931-1949, 463). Aware that it can be misinterpreted by the strong emphasis on pleasure and the role it plays in the life of the individual, C.S. Lewis traces a new direction from which we can understand that man is created to seek certain things which are fundamental to his existence, and which testify to a much deeper need of his, namely, the genuine and profound search for God. For C.S. Lewis, “every pleasure a person experiences in this life is an indication of the purpose for which he was created, which is the joy of God, where to enjoy God is to experience pleasure” (Goetz 2018, 66).

Experiencing happiness is the basic engine of society and how we function. This premise is particularly important for understanding the quests of ancient and postmodern man. Man's goal, from C.S. Lewis's perspective, is happiness, which he seeks in the

wrong directions. As such, man's efforts and strivings are directed towards the fulfilment of this need. Dissociated from God, for C.S. Lewis, the pursuit of happiness in this way is a delusion, an illusion, for we can only function as we were created and that happiness apart from God does not exist. We are created to function only in relationship with Him; until this is initiated and functional, all our seeking and trying will be in vain (Lewis 2019, 66). Elaborating on this idea, C.S. Lewis tells us that we should not make these searches an end in themselves, but that they are merely means by which we remember that God promises us greater happiness. Thus, "God invigorates us along the way with pleasant inns, but does not encourage us to mistake them for our home" (Lewis 1970, 318). It should come as no surprise that C.S. Lewis devotes ample space to this topic, for the change in his conception of the world and life is also related to how he views happiness on an individual and collective level. Trained as an atheist and drawn to Christianity, he understands that one of the fundamental changes that take place in man also has to do with what brings us happiness.

### **The conflict between emotions and faith**

In the writings of C.S. Lewis, we must also capture another side of human nature where we see signs of moral decay: the conflicting relationship between faith and emotions. In his view, the dimension of faith is challenged through imagination and emotions. In this sense, he says: "It is not reason that takes away my faith; on the contrary, my faith is based on reason. Imagination and emotions are to blame. The battle is between faith and reason on the one hand, and emotions and imagination on the other" (Lewis 2005, 92). Emotional and spiritual falls often lead to doubt on the one hand, but they are also born of doubt, and in these circumstances reason must sustain faith: 'Faith in Christ is the only thing that saves you from despair when you come to that point: and out of this faith in him good works must inevitably be born' (Lewis 1991, 103).

In *The Screwtape Letters*, this important idea that vulnerability to emotion is directly proportional to the intensity of temptation is highlighted: "If they get through the dry spell, they become much less vulnerable to emotion, and then they will be more difficult to tempt" (Lewis 2021, 19). How, however, can emotions fight against faith? To the question of how emotions can annihilate faith, the apologist gives several examples, among which we recall the case of the boy who knows from personal observation that people can swim, but who should believe that alone and unsupported by anyone he will be able to achieve this and not be overcome by panic (Lewis 1991, 98).

We understand in this way that emotions conflict with faith and annihilate the truths revealed by the God of human reason. Therefore, man becomes a slave to his emotions, which rob him of his ability to be guided by what he knows and what he calls truth. They thus make him act contrary to reason and faith.

Despite the fact that C.S. Lewis develops this thesis of the struggle and mastery of emotions, he places great emphasis on the inner dimension of man and their role in his relationship with God. Even his conversion is described by Lewis in an emotional note:

Try to imagine my moments of solitude in Magdalen's room, night after night, feeling, when I interrupted my work, if only for a second, the approach with measured, implacable footsteps of Him whom I had so earnestly desired to avoid. The fact I had feared was finally upon me. In the last quarter of 1929 I gave up, acknowledged that God was God, knelt down and prayed: I was, perhaps, that evening, the most faltering and dejected convert in all England. (Lewis 2008, 245)

If we are to look objectively at the relationship between emotions and faith in the writings of C.S. Lewis we will notice that the Irish writer argues that emotions should conform to the vertical plane of faith.

### **Pain, suffering and death**

There is no greater evidence in the world of the consequences of sin than the experience of suffering and pain. Thus, Lewis not only dealt with the issue of suffering and death from a theological point of view, but also put it through the filter of personal experience when he was faced with the death of his wife. Lewis puts the problem of evil into question from the point of view of grief, which is the key element showing the nature of evil. In *The Problem of Pain*, he says, “So long as the evil man does not realize the obvious presence of evil, in the form of pain, in his existence, he is the prey of illusion” (Lewis 2021, 428). It is therefore through pain that God addresses us and seeks to awaken us to the true meaning of life: “God is our whisper in pleasure, our voice in conscience, but our cry in pain: it is the megaphone with which he awakens a deaf world” (Lewis 2021, 429).

Through the filter of a theocentric approach we can understand the problem of evil involving God's character and man's free will. Therefore, he says that “the possibility of evil is necessary for us to have the possibility of the realization of the great good that God desires” (Peterson 2020, 248). However, we should not see a dependence of good on the existence of evil, but only a means by which it becomes more evident.

### **Science, technology and the destruction of man**

The consequences of moral degradation are seen when human beings cannot manage progress achieved in various forms. The great challenges are given by the way man relates to science and technology. For Lewis there is a strong opening for both. Biblical understanding gave him the perspective from which to look at things in a balanced way, namely that, in its fallen state, humanity is intelligent enough to know that life ends in death, but not strong enough to bear that knowledge. A statement that is quite important if understood in the right context. The development of technology has to do with what man is at his core. That is why technology has been proposed to redefine man, when the possibility of creating cyborg man has been discussed, but also when technology is given a philosophical meaning, namely that man comes out of hiding, interacts with the world. The aim being to relate to the world (Heidegger 1995, 1-45). Therefore “precisely these possibilities of being, of coming out of hiding are taken up by posthuman philosophy which proposes innovative conceptualizations of man” (Ghioancă 2021, 80). His vision of the world must take into account these two factors, namely the inhumanity/dehumanization of man to man and our fear of death.

With science as an instrument in our hands, Lewis knew that it would be used depending on who guides those hands. He was fascinated by outer space and even had a telescope at his home, but was adamantly opposed to colonizing other planets, even if Earth ran out of resources. History has already shown many times how we treat less developed cultures when we want their land. So when Lewis described the first encounter between humans and beings from another planet, he made colonization one of the key themes of *Out of the Silent Planet* (Clark 2007, 35-50).

### **Redeeming human nature**

Central to Christian theology are the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ for the redemption of man (Lewis 2019, 74-75). For C.S. Lewis, the whole of Christian theology hangs on these two important moments in redemptive history. The fact that God became man and died for us speaks of God's desire to draw near to man and save him. For Lewis, it is in Christ that man's broken relationship with God can be mended.

If we are to speak of the theological position that C.S. Lewis took, it is best summarized by Michael L. Peterson who says that “Lewis is a universalist who asserts

that the opportunity for salvation must be universally available; he is a pluralist only in the sense that he believes that other religions can contain fragments of spiritual truth and sustain the moral life” (Peterson 2020, 248). The role of Jesus Christ cannot be denied in the transformative relationship that man has in approaching God.

The ideas of restoration are more about a path that man chooses, a journey that begins with God and is crowned at the end by the unlocking of all human potential. Restoration is seen from this point of view also through the prism of the cultivation of values. The most appropriate expression is best found in the form of the four loves, which he describes (Lewis 2021, 272-326) as affection, pity, eros and friendship. Perhaps the one Lewis insists on most is the notion of friendship, which he analyses from various points of view. This is why the novel *The Horse and His Boy* (Lewis 2016) in the Chronicles of Narnia series can be interpreted as an attempt to translate into a narrative the reflections on friendship included in C.S. Lewis's *Four Loves* and his other books dealing with this subject. The main problem here apparently lies in the challenge of reconciling the necessarily elitist nature of friendship with its inclusive rather than exclusive aspects (Wicher 2013, 61-75).

### **Transforming human nature**

Although all people need Jesus Christ, Lewis distinguishes two categories of people who may struggle with needing God's grace. The first category is those who are gifted with God's gifts, who find personal and meritorious value in them, making God's appeals unnecessary; the second category is the weak, unbalanced, vulnerable who try to be good without crying out for divine help. For these categories, Lewis says that “their only chance is Christ. If they do not take up their cross to follow him, they are left with nothing but despair. They are the lost sheep and Christ has come specifically to find them.” (Lewis 2019, 232-233). The change of life is seen by Lewis in radical terms, God has come to produce a new kind of people, not to produce better people (Lewis 2019, 234) Lewis's statement resembles the thought conveyed by the apostle Paul who says, “therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old has passed away, behold, it has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17 Cornish Bible). In Christ, man is a new creation, a new creation, a new building made by God. Looking at man's transformation through the prism of Lewis's experience, we can say that it has some special coordinates. It brings a balanced and profound understanding of the reality in which we live, and in a special way the change of man brings an inner order that could not have been achieved otherwise (McGrath 2015, 145-149).

### **The meaning of “in Christ”**

Both C.S. Lewis and the apostle Paul use the phrase “in Christ” to emphasize the present and future power of Christianity. For Lewis the phrase is determinative of how a believer can relate to earthly reality and live for God in this world. He clarifies the meaning of this expression when he says: “To become new people is to lose what we call 'ourselves'. We must come out of ourselves and into Christ. His will to become our own and we must think as He thinks, to have “the mind of Christ” (Lewis 2019, 242). Speaking of the changes that take place in man and a retention of his individuality even after this transformation, he continues, “The more we remove more of what we call 'ourselves' and let Christ take over, the more we become ourselves” (Lewis 2019, 243). Here Lewis gives new meaning to human identity. We are not ourselves apart from Christ. This world and the inner man have no meaning without him. Therefore, our sense of identity is related to and derived from who He is for us and what we become in Him. The first step of this surrender is “... to seek to forget ourselves” (Lewis 2019, 244). The meaning of this statement can still be found in the

explanation Lewis gives when he says that we need not concern ourselves with our own lives. Thus “it is only by self-denial that we discover true being” (Lewis 2019, 245) Life without Christ does not exist and we only waste it. Also Lewis says: “Look to Christ, however: you will find him, and you will find everything with him” (Lewis 2019, 245). The theology of the new, redeemed man is centered in C.S. Lewis's view on “Christ in you the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:27, Cornish Bible).

We are tempted to think that there is nothing after this stage, but Lewis sees here a movement to maintain the spiritual life of man in Christ accomplished through baptism, holy communion and liturgy. Emphasizing that they do not give life, but only animate it, keep it alive. The concern is not to let the Christian life fall into a deadly rut. The active preservation of the spiritual life must become the main concern of the man drawn to Christ.

## Conclusions

From C.S. Lewis's anthropological conception we understand that man is complete when his primary need is to enjoy God and that nothing in this world will fully satisfy him. Through the fall into sin, man discovers in himself the signs of the fall, of alienation from God and a destructive use of freedom of choice which is oriented towards the satisfaction of pleasure and which has as its end a fulfilled life apart from God. The pursuit of happiness, though the great goal in a man's life, must be achieved in the way God desires. Although we speak of a moral degradation that is seen in human nature, in the experience of pain and suffering, in the use of technological progress and inner conflict, Lewis sees in man his potential when man turns to God. Although there are unfortunate consequences to the understanding of one's own moral state, the image of God in man is preserved, and the concept of the Tao speaks to human values, but also to the universality of those values. The restoration of human nature occurs when we understand that human potential can only be unlocked through God and through relationship with God. At the heart of the Christian life is the transformation brought about by Christ.

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