

COMMENTARY

C. S. Lewis on Mere Science

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In [The Abolition of Man](#) C. S. Lewis noted that nothing he could say would keep some people from saying that he was anti-science, a charge he was nevertheless eager to refute. In fact he had received the kind of philosophical education at Oxford that enabled him, like John Henry Newman before him, to resist the two opposed temptations that the historian of science Richard Olson has labeled "science deified" and "science defied." On this centenary of Lewis' birth, we might describe his attitude as an appreciation of "mere science."

"Science deified" is scientism, radical empiricism, materialism, or naturalism, an implicit or explicit rejection of all nonquantifiable realities or truths, including the truths of reason. Its logical terminus is determinism or "epiphenomenalism," Huxley's notion that the brain and mind are fully determined by-products of irrational physical processes. As the German materialist Bernhard Vogt put it, "Thoughts come out of the brain as gall from the liver, or urine from the kidneys," implying that thoughts are just as irrational and beyond our control. Vogt and the other materialists contradict themselves, though, because—as Lewis often noted—they claim that their own scientific thoughts are true.

The deification of science first became explicit in the writings of the atheistic French philosophes La Mettrie, D'Holbach, and Diderot. Thoughtful twentieth-century commentators such as Lester G. Crocker and Aldous Huxley have seen its reductionism leading straight to the moral nihilism of the Marquis de Sade, and later to Social Darwinism and the Nietzschean transvaluation of values in the interest of amoral strength and force. Lewis' *Abolition of Man* is, inter alia, an extended treatise against the deification of science.

Yet there is an opposite temptation that Lewis also criticized—the temptation to defy science, from the standpoint of either romantic/pantheistic gnosticism or theological fideism. The first was familiar to him from the theosophy of his close friends Owen Barfield and A. C. Harwood and from the whole history of Romanticism, culminating in the work and world of W. B. Yeats. (Yeats was probably the model for the magician in Lewis' *Dymer* and for Merlin in [That Hideous Strength](#).) The appeal of pantheistic gnosticism was something that Lewis understood and withstood; it lies at the heart of occult "New Age" spirituality, "Deep Ecology," and a good deal of "Eco-feminism" today. Romantic self-absorption and pantheistic gnosticism are targets of Lewis' satire in [The Pilgrim's Regress](#). Much as he criticized radical empiricism and its sterile, truncated rationalism, he was himself too much of a rationalist in the classic, Aristotelian sense to countenance esoteric or occult mysticism and the depreciation of reason. He would not defy science on romantic or gnostic grounds.

Lewis knew that science was one of the great products of the human mind, but he insisted that it was a subset of reason and not simply equivalent to it. Scientific reason, if accurate, was valid, but it was not the only valid kind of reasoning: noncontradiction, validity, truth, value, meaning, purpose, and obligation were necessary presuppositions of the scientific method but not themselves scientific phenomena. Lewis thought that, in Alfred North Whitehead's words, scientists who were "animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting

subject for study." He satirically depicted such scientists in *That Hideous Strength*, especially in the figure of Frost. Of all radical empiricists, from La Mettrie and Hume to A. J. Ayer, who would undermine the authority of reason and its procedures, Lewis tirelessly pointed out this contradiction. He believed in the old adage that "the only way to avoid metaphysics is to say nothing," because in some important sense language and thought themselves are non-natural, supernatural, transcendent, and metaphysical. "In order to think," he wrote in 1942, "we must claim for our reasoning a validity which is not credible if our own thought is merely a function of our brain, and our brains a by-product of irrational physical processes."

Lewis' love of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was due largely to his loyalty to an epistemology that he thought had been caricatured and misunderstood by Bacon, Descartes, and the French Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century. As a careful student of the history of philosophy and ideas, he knew that the great flowering of scientific thought in the seventeenth century had not only Greek roots, but medieval ones. Whitehead pointed out long ago, in [*Science and the Modern World*](#), that the habits of medieval rationalism prepared the way for the scientific discoveries of the seventeenth century, an insight given far more documentation, depth, and scope in the writings of the historian and philosopher of science Stanley L. Jaki in our time. Long before Bacon, Jaki has written, Christian philosophy had steadily inculcated "the conviction . . . that since the world was rational it could be comprehended by the human mind, but as the product of the Creator it could not be derived from the mind of man, a creature." The "metaphysical realism" of St. Thomas Aquinas (and of Richard Hooker in England) avoided the extremes of empiricism and idealism and thus paved the way for Newton.

Jaki's work has confirmed some of Lewis' insights about the origin and development of Western science, and particularly its indebtedness to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo to escape from mistaken Aristotelian ideas about time and matter. The importance of the medieval thinkers Buridan and Oresme for science had been rediscovered by the great twentieth-century French physicist Pierre Duhem, whose own work Jaki has done so much to restore to the prominence it deserves. The active intellectual discrimination against Duhem, and subsequently against Jaki-despite their enormous erudition and unquestionable distinction-would not have surprised the man who wrote "The Inner Ring," "Bulverism," *The Abolition of Man*, and *That Hideous Strength*.

For among historians of science it is most prominently Duhem and Jaki who have provided the documentation of the importance of theism and "metaphysical realism" not only for the origin and development of modern science, but also for the possibility of its coherent continuation and moral direction. Duhem and Jaki have provided security for Lewis' claim that "Men became scientific because they expected Law in Nature, and they expected Law in Nature because they believed in a Legislator. In most modern scientists this belief has died: it will be interesting to see how long their confidence in uniformity survives it. Two significant developments have already appeared-the hypothesis of a lawless sub-nature, and the surrender of the claim that science is true. We may be living nearer than we suppose to the end of the Scientific Age."

And as a believer in the essential sanity and continuity of Western Civilization, Lewis would surely have concurred with Jaki's characterization of the Middle Ages: "In Western philosophy that was the first and thus far the last major epoch in which broadly shared respect was paid to the fundamental difference between ends and means. . . . If we do not wish to help turn this most scientific age of ours into the most barbaric of all ages, we had better stop using the term 'medieval' as synonymous with obscurantist. In doing so, we may make our mental eyes more sensitive to that light which comes from the Middle Ages."

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