

Why the Devil Loves Democracy

It may surprise many that [C.S. Lewis](#), the beloved author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, has some interesting takes on topics like unselfishness and democracy. Although a Christian apologist, Lewis, like Ayn Rand, believes unselfishness is a vice, not a virtue, and he skewers democracy for its pandering to the average, for its leveling effect, and its disdain for excellence. He does this all in the context of his marvelously witty and trenchant work, *The Screwtape Letters*, a series of “found” letters of advice from a senior devil to his young nephew, a junior devil just learning the ropes.

Lewis and Tolkien both taught English literature at Oxford. Lewis left the school in 1954 after 25 years to take the chair in Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, where he remained until his death in 1963.

The Narnia series is said to be a Christian allegory with Aslan the lion representing Jesus Christ, but, ironically, Lewis was an atheist for over 15 years. He became an atheist at age 15, and it was not until 1929 that he became a theist and 1931 when he became a Christian, influenced by the writings of G.K. Chesterton and conversations with his good friend J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Christian and later author of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Screwtape Letters were published in 1942 during the Second World War, dedicated to Tolkien. It is his most well-known work after the Narnia series. It's a fascinating book, not only as a brilliant satire on how a devil might think – very much in a Machiavellian way – but also as an insight into Lewis's view of how to be a good Christian and how easily one can be subverted from that path.

One might well ask why I, an avowed atheist, would want to read an apparently religious tract. Firstly, it is a work of philosophical fiction concerned with moral issues which can be appreciated in its own right. Secondly, it is a work of fantasy fiction with an intriguing premise. And thirdly, I had come across a quote from the

book somewhere that made it sound especially interesting from a libertarian view.

The book, despite its epistolary style, has a plot. The novel is set during World War II, and the war plays a minor role in the story. The demon Wormwood is working on a particular human, a man known just as “the patient.” He seeks Screwtape’s advice on how to tempt the man into sin and ultimately lose his soul to “our Father below.”

What is significant in the story is the subtlety of Lewis’s view of good and bad behavior – in a word, of sin. Wormwood is looking for the big score. He wants to get his man to sin in a big way. Screwtape advises against this, suggesting that a more fruitful path, one more likely to end in success, is to chip away at the man’s soul step by step by seeding his mind with doubts and subtle temptations.

Lewis focuses on various specific sins including gluttony, pride, and sexual desire. He spends several letters discussing sex, love, and lust. But in discussing all of these, Screwtape sees them as a way to instill bad feelings – feelings of self-righteousness, envy, and pride. They are the real sins, he avers.

At one point, “the Patient” falls in love. And not just with anyone, but with a devout Christian girl. Lewis lathers it on thick in describing Screwtape’s horror at this turn of events:

“I have looked up this girl’s dossier and am horrified at what I find. Not only a Christian but such a Christian – a vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouselike, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss. The little brute. She makes me vomit. She stinks and scalds through the very pages of the dossier. It drives me mad, the way the world has worsened. We’d have had her to the arena in the old days. That’s what her sort are made for. Not that she’d do much good there, either. A two-faced little cheat (I know the sort) who looks as if she’d faint at the sight of blood and then dies with a smile. A cheat every way. Looks as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth and yet has a satirical wit. The sort of creature who’d find ME funny! Filthy insipid little prude – and yet

ready to fall into this booby's arms like any other breeding animal. Why doesn't the Enemy blast her for it if He's so moonstruck by virginity – instead of looking on there, grinning?"

As you can see, Screwtape is a rather petulant devil with little regard for the human race except as fodder for the fires of Hell.

The Virtue of Unselfishness

A letter that will be of interest to libertarians and Objectivists is number 26, which deals with unselfishness. Screwtape starts with a cynical comment that "courtship is the time for sowing those seeds which will grow up ten years later into domestic hatred." He goes on to note that Hell's Philological Arm has made great strides in substituting the negative word unselfishness "for the Enemy's positive Charity." And the sexes see the issue differently: "A woman means by Unselfishness chiefly taking trouble for others; a man means not giving trouble to others."

Each sex, then, can consider the other as inordinately selfish, particularly when the physical attraction has worn off. "The erotic enchantment," writes Screwtape, "produces a mutual complaisance in which each is really pleased to give in to the wishes of the other."

A successful tempter must make the married couple believe that this degree of giving to each other is "a Law for their whole married life" so when the bloom fades, "they will not see the trap since they are under the double blindness of mistaking sexual excitement for charity and of thinking that the excitement will last."

Lewis brilliantly summarizes the folly of professing unselfishness as an ideal:

"In discussing any joint action, it becomes obligatory that A should argue in favour of B's supposed wishes and against his own, while B does the opposite. It is often impossible to find out either party's real wishes; with luck, they end by doing something that neither wants, while each feels a glow of self-righteousness and harbours a

secret claim to preferential treatment for the unselfishness shown and a secret grudge against the other for the ease with which the sacrifice has been accepted."

The Unselfishness game is even more fun when more than two players are involved. Suppose a garden tea is proposed. One of the group makes it clear he would rather not attend, but will do so because he doesn't want to be selfish. The others immediately withdraw the proposal "because they don't want to be used as sort of a lay figure on which the first speaker practices petty altruisms."

The first speaker then counters that he'll do whatever the others want:

"Soon someone is saying, 'Very well then, I won't have any tea at all!' and then a real quarrel ensues with bitter resentment on both sides. You see how it is done? If each side had been frankly contending for its own real wish, they would all have kept within the bounds of reason and courtesy; but just because the contention is reversed and each side is fighting the other's battle, all the bitterness which really flows from thwarted self-righteousness and obstinacy and the accumulated grudges of the last ten years is concealed from them by the nominal or official 'Unselfishness' of what they are doing or, at least, held to be excused by it. Each side is, indeed, quite alive to the cheap quality of the adversary's Unselfishness and of the false position into which he is trying to force them; but manages to feel blameless and ill-used itself, with no more dishonesty than comes natural to a human."

The point here, of course, is that unselfishness, far from being a virtue, is a seductive trap that leads to the sins of resentment, hatred, and misanthropy.

Lewis throws in two delicious quotes here. Who he is quoting is not specified and some speculate he is quoting himself.

First quote: "If people knew how much ill-feeling Unselfishness

occasions, it would not be so often recommended from the pulpit.”

Second quote: (I really like this one!) “She’s the sort of woman who lives for others – you can always tell the others by their hunted expression.” Wow! Burn!

Those familiar with Ayn Rand’s argument for selfishness as a virtue will be struck by Lewis’s description of Unselfishness as a subtle tool in the devil’s toolkit.

The Screwtape Letters end with the patient going off to war and getting killed, engaged to a Christian woman, filled with Christian love and a soul destined for Heaven. Wormwood failed miserably and his fate is to become snack food for the other devils, and especially Screwtape.

“Screwtape Proposes a Toast”

Later editions include an additional essay, one solicited from Lewis by *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1959. It’s called “Screwtape Proposes a Toast,” a speech given by our wise old devil to the graduating class at the annual dinner of the Tempters’ Training College for Young Devils. This essay is better than all of the previous collection combined. Nothing short of brilliant. (You can read part of it in the original *Saturday Evening Post* [here](#).)

“Mr. Principal, your Imminence, your Disgraces, my Thorns, Shadies, and Gentledevils,” he begins. What follows is an attack on modern democracy. Since it is a speech by a devil, it actually is a speech praising democracy, but for all the wrong reasons. I’ve included generous excerpts in the description which follows, but it is worth getting the essay and reading it in its entirety. It is truly remarkable.

He begins by apologizing for the so-so dinner they have enjoyed. “It would be vain to deny that the human souls on whose anguish we have been feasting tonight were of pretty poor quality. Not all the most skillful cookery of our tormentors could make them better than insipid.” Lewis writes with great wit and great gusto.

Oh to munch on a Hitler or a Henry VIII, he opines. Now that would be tasty! But what they lack in quality, they more that make up for in numbers. "Gastronomically, all this is deplorable... But we never had souls in more abundance." Why is that?

Screwtape recalls the late 19th century and the movement towards liberty on earth. A regrettable movement that did away with slavery and ushered in a new era of freedom. People were "becoming cleaner, more orderly, more thrifty, better educated, and even more virtuous." Not good for the Satanic realm. But thanks to a counter-attack orchestrated by "Our Father Below," disaster was averted.

"Hidden in the heart of this striving for Liberty there was also a deep hatred of personal freedom," Screwtape explains. This condition was later exploited by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "In his perfect democracy, you remember, only the state religion is permitted, slavery is restored, and the individual is told that he has really willed (though he didn't know it) whatever the Government tells him to do." This led to both the Nazi and the Communist dictatorships. (I discussed Rousseau's influence in some detail in [another essay](#) on my blog, The Jolly Libertarian.)

But the essence of the Satanic purpose is to tempt individuals. The Enemy, he says, seeks to save individual souls. And while large-scale evil like Nazism and Communism are certainly good things, there is a more insidious way to corrupt the soul – democracy. As he tells the young graduate tempters,

"Democracy is the word with which you must lead them by the nose. Of course it is connected with the political ideal that men should be equally treated. You then make a stealthy transition in their minds from this political ideal to a factual belief that all men are equal. Especially the man you are working on. As a result you can use the word Democracy to sanction in his thought the most degrading (and also the least enjoyable) of all human feelings."

That feeling, he says, is the one that says "I'm as good as you." This gets him "to enthrone at the centre of his life a good, solid

resounding lie. I don't mean merely that his statement is false in fact, that he is no more equal to everyone he meets in kindness, honesty, and good sense than in height or waist measurement. I mean that he does not believe it himself. No man who says I'm as good as you believes it. He would not say it if he did."

"The claim to equality," he goes on, "outside the strictly political field, is made only by those who feel themselves to be in some way inferior." This festering awareness leads to resentment. The patient "resents every kind of superiority in others; denigrates it; wishes its annihilation." This leads to a demand for uniformity. No one should be different. "They've no business to be different. It's undemocratic."

This attitude used to be called envy, he notes. And it used to be regarded as odious. "The delightful novelty of the present situation is that you can sanction it – make it respectable and even laudable – by the incantatory use of the word democratic." This allows those who are in any way inferior to pull others down to their level.

Screwtape goes on to argue that democracy now does what tyrants used to. He tells the story of one dictator asking another for advice. The second dictator takes him into a cornfield and with his cane, snicks off any corn stalk that is an inch or so taller than the others.

"The moral was plain. Let no pre-eminence among your subjects. Let no man live who is wiser, or better, or more famous, or even handsomer than the mass. Cut them all down to a level; all slaves, all ciphers, all nobodies. All equals. Thus tyrants could practice, in a sense, 'democracy.' But now 'democracy' can do the same work without any other tyranny than her own. No one need now go through the field with a cane. The little stalks will now of themselves bite the tops off the big stalks. The big ones are beginning to bite off their own in their desire to Be Like Stalks."

Destroy their individuality and you destroy their soul.

What About Democracy in Education?

Screwtape lauds the fact that this perversion of the democratic ideal has worked itself into the school system. "Dunces and idlers must not be made to feel inferior to intelligent and industrious students. That would be 'undemocratic.'" Individual differences "must be disguised":

"Children who are fit to proceed to a higher class may be artificially held back, because the others would get a trauma – Beelzebub, what a useful word! – by being left behind. The bright pupil thus remains democratically fettered to his own age-group throughout his school career, and a boy who would be capable of tackling Aeschylus or Dante sits listening to his coeval's attempts to spell out A CAT SAT ON THE MAT."

The mantra of I'm as good as you will destroy education, he says. "We shall no longer have to plan and toil to spread imperturbable conceit and incurable ignorance among men," he tells the graduating devils. "The little vermin themselves will do it for us."

Tyranny vs. Democracy

While tyranny is to be preferred, Screwtape warns not to underestimate the seeds of self-destruction inherent in democracy:

"For 'democracy' or the 'democratic spirit' (diabolical sense) leads to a nation without great men, a nation mainly of subliterates, morally flaccid from lack of discipline in youth, full of the cocksureness which flattery breeds on ignorance, and soft from lifelong pampering. And that is what Hell wishes every democratic people to be."

But, he warns, don't labour under the delusion that the fate of nations is more important than that of individuals:

"The overthrow of free peoples and the multiplication of slave states are for us a means (beside, of course, being fun); but the real end is the destruction of individuals. For only individuals can be saved or damned, can become sons of the Enemy or food for us. The ultimate value, for us, of any revolution, war, or famine lies in

the individual anguish, treachery, hatred, rage, and despair which it may produce. I'm as good as you is a useful means for the destruction of democratic societies. But it has a far deeper value as an end in itself, as a state of mind, which necessarily excluding humility, charity, contentment, and all the pleasures of gratitude or admiration, turns a human being away from every road which might finally lead him to Heaven."

That is powerful stuff and more relevant today than ever before with our society of trigger warnings and bruised egos, righteous indignation, and hatred.

Postscript

[This compilation](#) of additional quotations from *The Screwtape Letters* may also be of interest.

While researching some background on Lewis I discovered he had also written a utopian sci-fi trilogy called [The Space Trilogy](#). One commentary said it compared favorably with Orwell's 1984 as a dystopian novel of the future so it is now on my "to read" list. Below are some additional links of interest.

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This article was originally published by FEE. Read the [original article](#).

[Image credit: *The Devil's Advocate*]