

Review of Wesley Kort, Reading C.S. Lewis

This beautifully produced little volume by Wesley Kort, Emeritus Professor of Religion at Duke University, is the latest in a sequence of books by Oxford University Press that seek to shape the recent academic turn towards C.S. Lewis by giving contextualizing analyses and research-intensive accounts of his work. The introduction promises a nonpartisan, contextual reading that identifies those ‘stable, basic, and even controlling constants’ in C.S. Lewis’s ‘broader project’ which ‘led him to give attention to religion and to value Christianity so highly’ (viii).

This is an exciting and potentially provocative undertaking. However, its realization never comes clearly into view. The structure of the book is not conducive to the development of a sustained argument, being somewhat uneasily divided into three sequences of ‘commentaries’ on Lewisian texts, each capped by a conceptual chapter that outlines the texts’ contributions to a ‘controlling constant’ of Lewis’s project. As Kort himself acknowledges, the commentaries and the conceptual summaries do not always neatly map onto each other, since Lewis’s books are more than illustrations of governing principles. While this is a legitimate point, the conceptual chapters, at about ten pages each, do not provide enough scope to bundle the relatively incidental emphases of Kort’s individual commentaries into significant arguments.

The ‘controlling constants’ that emerge from the three sequences of commentaries are ‘shared assumptions’, ‘cultural critiques’, and ‘principles applied’. The first series of works – *Surprised by Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *Mere Christianity* – is presented as illustrative of Lewis’s confidence in shared, ‘reasonable assumptions’; that is, of his conviction that certain intuitions, experiences and suppositions are so broadly shared that they furnish a stable basis of appeal. Among these, Kort lists the experience of the numinous, or ‘joy’. The second sequence, comprising the Cosmic Trilogy and *The Abolition of Man*, exemplifies certain ‘cultural critiques’ that shape Lewis’s work: above all the critique of modern materialism as reducing the world and humanity to standing resources or dissectible objects of examination. The final sequence, comprising four of the Chronicles of Narnia and *The Four Loves*, is framed as demonstrating the unavoidable and potentially generative friction between dogmas and everyday experience, of which Kort believes Lewis was acutely (if not always explicitly) aware. This last chapter is the finest of the conceptual studies, and merits re-reading.

Despite perceptive observations, the ‘controlling constants’ Kort identifies hover uncomfortably between the specific and the abstract. There are contentious details. Kort’s account of Lewis’s unreserved affirmation of intuition and direct emotional response, for example, seems to me to insufficiently attentive to the author’s insistence on the need for emotional formation. The larger difficulty, however, is the ambiguity of the intended valency of these constants. The claim that there are assumptions, criticisms, principles, and practices which are constant in Lewis’s thought, independently of his Christian convictions, might be meant in at least three different ways: One (clearly not intended here), it might point to very basic dispositions such as valuing truth, morality, or human relationships. (This probably wouldn’t merit a book, at least not one specifically about Lewis.) Two, it might pick out specific assumptions, priorities and concerns of Lewis’s time or milieu that inescapably shaped him. Three, and most provocatively, it might suggest that there were personal commitments and goals more basic to Lewis’s project than the Christian faith by which he professed to orient himself. Philip Zaleski’s blurb suggests the second; but the book does not in fact consistently relate the ‘controlling constants’ it enumerates to Lewis’s cultural and intellectual contexts, either those he

inhabited or those he chose through his reading. The author himself sometimes suggests the third; but if that is his claim, he is surprisingly half-hearted in pursuing it. In either case, it is difficult to assess what Kort's argument amounts to.

One surprising but perhaps indicative result of Kort's presentation is the close though unintended resemblance of his Lewis to a non-Christian philosophical critic of modernity like Martin Heidegger. The critique the post-Enlightenment dissociation of human interests, potential, and identities from their relations to their wider contexts (190); the deconstruction of materialism as an ultimately self-destructive reduction of the world to an arsenal of standing resources, obstructing things from showing forth their being; the high value placed on intuition and ordinary and embodied experience, including religious experience (e.g. 14, 263); the valorization of Christianity as 'doing justice to what...is most immediately available to us and important for us, namely, our personhood' (115) – all these are Heideggerian as much as Lewisian concerns. This similarity raises interesting questions about the uncomplicated continuity Kort assumes between Lewis's foundational assumptions and his Christianity – after all, similar assumptions led Heidegger away from rather than towards the faith. But this is not the book to address these.

The short commentaries on individual texts that constitute the longest part of the book can be read independently of the book's larger claims and of each other. They are hard to categorize, partly because they are relatively disparate, some comprising chapter-by-chapter or letter-by-letter précis, some high-level observations or contextualization, and some more incidental reflections. Though miscellaneous, these commentaries contain much that is of value, especially when they offer analyses that build on the author's other work (e.g. on religious identity and autobiography) or demonstrate his gift for sensitive literary readings (e.g. describing the role of walking or of Lewis's spatial imagination). Coupled, for example, with Arend Smilde's brilliant notes on Lewis's works, which are freely available online, these commentaries would be useful reading in an introductory course on C.S. Lewis.

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