



### **What Matters About Matter**

by Robert Moore-Jumonville

In the introduction to our study of *The Screwtape Letters*, I suggested we begin with the last chapter first—to lead us into the ancient spiritual practice known as *memento mori*: remember (or contemplate) your mortality. Letters 28–31 concentrate more narrowly on the war, and the threat of death to the patient, but the topic is introduced quite early in the book (in Letter 5). After all, Lewis was writing during the war. At the time, England stood apparently alone against the Nazi threat to civilization: the Battle of Britain (for air supremacy) was raging, his brother Warnie had just been evacuated from Dunkirk, and Churchill delivered his Finest Hour speech calling the nation to courage.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wants to wake us to our finitude, to the fragility of our existence; but also to open our eyes to daily life as a tremendous gift. Spiritual growth so often requires a shift in awareness. Perhaps there is a connection in the book, then, between the war, which reminds the patient of eternal realities, and the theme of getting mired in worldly materialism.

The opening letter describes Screwtape’s plan to fix the man’s mental focus on the stream of ordinary events—the No. 73 bus, for instance—as what’s most *real*. Can our reading of the book thus prompt us to pay better attention to the spiritual reality that pulses through every moment, so that we don’t fall prey to a mainly material view of life? In several passages Wormwood is instructed to promote in the man a contented worldliness—the gentle gradual slope to hell (Letters 5, 12, 28). The devil would have us in a nursing home where everyone consoles and then deflects questions about eternity. Murder is “no better than cards” at diverting the patient, according to Screwtape. Really? You’ve heard about putting a frog in a pot of water and then turning up the heat slowly, right? Hell does not want to startle us into paying attention to eternal verities.

Recently, my brother-in-law used an example I found helpful. Think of the human being as a house with three levels: basement, main floor, and upper floor. Although we know what lie in the basement—our shadow sides and gremlins—we become adept at hiding those cubby holes from others, and even from ourselves. The top story represents our capacity for transcendence. Saints spend more time living on this level. Most of us, however, live the majority of our lives on the main floor of ordinary mundane existence, largely unaware of the spiritual reality around or within us.

Notice in the book, then, how Screwtape hopes to keep the patient from any deeper awareness. In chapter three he tells Wormwood, *You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office* (12). Hell not only wants to keep the patient from knowing about devils (Letter 7); it wants to keep him from knowing much about himself. Don’t wake him up. Don’t use reason, Screwtape urges. Instead, fuddle him; get him confused with feelings.

In order to get a better sense of what makes human beings tick, let me suggest an exercise. Read Letter 6 as a basis for drawing a diagram of the inner workings of the human being. We see Lewis lay out a set of concentric circles in this letter to depict human motivation—with the will at the center and the imagination (and feelings) on the circumference. Screwtape warned earlier, *The Enemy will be working from the center outwards, gradually bringing more and more of the patient’s conduct under the new standard* (11). Anything good, coming from God, Wormwood ought to push out toward the



man's imagination and feelings, while directing all *evil* in toward the will. Why? For Lewis, the will means something like the Hebrew notion of *heart*, or the central choosing self. Force the patient out toward the subjective and away from the present moment; for only by choosing in the present can a person draw near to God. Valuing free will, God *leaves them to 'do it on their own'* (7).

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis describes the process of human becoming:

*Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature.... Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.*

The same spiritual anthropology runs through the heart of *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and much more of what Lewis wrote. He consistently offered a robust view of sanctification: “the end for which we were formed” is to become “little Christs.”

It may be interesting at this point for those of us committed to spiritual formation to notice that Screwtape applauds focus on “feelings” as a good objective. He gives Wormwood advice like: *If once they get through this initial dryness successfully, they become much less dependent on emotion and therefore much harder to tempt* (8); or *Keep his mind on his inner life....* (11); or *Keep them watching their own minds and trying to produce feelings there...* (16). Why? What's the point? What Screwtape fears most is when the patient experiences what appears to be the absence of God and, *feeling* forsaken, “still obeys” (40). As I said earlier, Screwtape dreads a human will that is devoted to God. It is precisely this “perseverance” of Christian faith—humans making small daily choices for God, and for good, over time—that Screwtape hopes can be weakened through getting the world into the patient (Letter 28).

Next, however, we ought to ask why the patient's “reconversion” happens as it does, in chapter thirteen, through contact with things worldly: reading a book he really enjoyed, delighting in his walk through the country to the old mill for tea. Here, the material world leads the patient to God. Screwtape elsewhere accuses God of hedonism (Letter 22). Through the book, therefore, Lewis asks us to consider our relationship to pleasure, humor, joy, and God's good creation gifts. God made all good things and with discernment they can be enjoyed—in Him (see 1 Timothy 4:4). The question arises: are we aware of what sort of stewards are we becoming?