C. S. Lewis and America’s Health Care Debate

WILLIAM FRAATZ*

This essay questions the assumption that C. S. Lewis should be considered an advocate of social conservatism with reference to the political scene of the United States in 2012. It begins with a brief survey of Lewis’s political thought, before examining in detail his comments on the National Health Service as part of the post-Second World War Welfare State. When his correspondence is considered, Lewis is found to endorse without expressed reservation the single payer plan of the NHS and to recommend its adoption outside Britain. The essay concludes with a challenge to both liberals and conservatives to adopt in the style of Lewis a manner of discussion which might restore civility in political discussion, at least between Lewis’s appreciative readers.

It is a commonplace among readers of C. S. Lewis that his generally conservative theology is matched by a generally conservative social ethic. Socially conservative voters frequently assume Lewis would endorse their politics. When Barbara Walters asked resigned Governor of Alaska Sarah Palin about her reading, Palin replied, “I read a lot of C. S. Lewis when I want some divine inspiration.”¹ No one was surprised. This essay questions the easy assumption that Lewis’s political views would be consistent with contemporary American social conservatism by examining Lewis’s expressed statements concerning the currently volatile issue of the role of government in the provision of health care services. Following a brief survey of eight salient

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* William Fraatz is a graduate of Yale University Divinity School and the University of Minnesota Law School, where he was a Ford Foundation Scholar in Public International Law. An ordained Episcopal priest, he has served as the Fellows’ Chaplain of Magdalen College and as the Acting Chaplain of University College, Oxford University. He has also served as the Observer of the Anglican Consultative Congress at the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva, Switzerland. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona.

features of Lewis’s political thinking, this essay looks closely at Lewis’s views on the issue of national health care policy in light of the American political scene in 2012. It asks in an open-ended way “How would C. S. Lewis vote?” if health care were the deciding issue. Finally, the essay briefly explores in the spirit of Lewis the way political discussion itself might reflect the values his readers claim to hold.

Lewis was a towering figure in twentieth-century life, publishing nearly forty books and numerous essays. In addition to more than ten books in his professional field of literary history and criticism, he published poetry, popular theology, science fiction, and a novel. His incomplete translation of Virgil’s Aeneid was released in 2011. Most famously, he is the author of the Chronicles of Narnia, a series of seven fantasies written as stories for children, but which command a large adult audience as well. Much of his extant personal correspondence has been collected into three volumes that are over three thousand pages in length. Fifty years after his death, nearly all of his major works are still in print. His annual worldwide sales are in excess of one million copies. Literally hundreds of books have been written about him, his thought, and his specific works. Lewis continues to have tremendous appeal across the religious spectrum. His notion of a “mere Christianity” which coalesces around a core of unspecified common doctrine that unites all Christians has been especially popular among evangelicals, who also appreciate his thoroughgoing supernaturalism.2 Christian History and Biography, a companion journal to the evangelical monthly magazine Christianity Today, devoted an entire issue to Lewis.3 Roman Catholics frequently remark on how Lewis adopted their theological positions on such questions as Purgatory and prayers for the dead.4 To a lesser extent, he has a readership among the Anglican Communion of which he was a part. Perhaps because the intra-Anglican disputes in which he participated (he opposed both Prayer Book reform5 and the ordination of women,6 and he was openly disdainful

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4 See, for example, Milton Walsh, Second Friends: C. S. Lewis and Ronald Knox in Conversation (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2008), 249–254.
of theological liberals) were eventually decided against his position, his theological books have fallen out of favor. Furthermore, important conservative evangelical Anglican theologians such as N. T. Wright, writing on the historical Jesus, a theological topic Lewis thought absolutely unworthy of consideration, have warned that Lewis’s theology is at points woefully problematic. It would be incorrect to conclude, however, that Lewis is without serious Anglican readers. Many Anglicans contributed to the recently published Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis. But while Lewis has a place on the calendar of the Episcopal Church in the United States, this should not obscure the fact that endorsement of his writings is far more likely outside the Anglican Communion, which remains cautious of many of his ideas. Apart from specific church connections, Lewis remains an important cultural figure and his influence is likely to grow as the seven Narnia books are each successively made into major motion pictures.

**A Brief Survey of Lewis’s Political Thinking**

Before exploring the question of Lewis’s opinion on health care policy, a brief survey of eight aspects of his political thinking will be helpful. First, Lewis is no more systematic in presenting his political views than he is in his theological writings. This is not to imply that he was knowingly inconsistent, but because he expressed his opinions episodically, seeming tensions and contradictions are left unresolved. This intellectual approach is from the start characteristic of Lewis in the literary history and criticism which comprise the bulk of his professional writing.

Second, Lewis’s background was the unique world of politically charged Ulster prior to World War I, when a governmentally undivided Ireland was riven by bitter religious controversy and prone to violent insurrection. Different members of Lewis’s extended family espoused a wide range of political opinions. Aside from an adolescent flirtation with liberalism, Lewis would share his parents’ staunch

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conservatism, including their anti-Catholicism.\textsuperscript{11} The major political divide in Ireland related to the specific question of governmental structure: in what way, if any, was Ireland, with its majority Roman Catholic population, to be connected to England, where the Church of England was established and other forms of Protestantism were generally tolerated? The predominantly Roman Catholic proponents of Irish Home Rule sought the devolution of power at least over internal matters to an Irish Parliament; most would have supported complete independence. They were republicans in their political theory; that is, they rejected English rule over Ireland, opposed the monarchy and aristocratic privilege, and sought the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in religious affairs. The largely multidenominational Protestant Unionists favored Ireland remaining a constituent part of the United Kingdom, being ruled from Westminster and remaining loyal to the monarch. In other words, Unionism expresses a belief in strong central government, rather than the diffusion of power to local levels. It is philosophically antithetical to the states rights preferences of many American social conservatives. But to say that Lewis grew up in a Unionist family does not necessarily indicate his positions on the other vital political issues of the day. Indeed, Lewis’s grandfather, although a successful businessman possessed of conservative Unionist sympathies, worked diligently in the liberal cause of providing legal protection for the rights of laborers.

Third, for most of his adult life Lewis eschewed any interest in talking about politics.\textsuperscript{12} This may have been because politics bored him. But it is also possible that he avoided political controversy in the same way he tried to stay clear of discussing denominational differences. From family life he had learned that open disagreement on political matters divided from each other the people he was supposed to love and respect. Perhaps, in a sense, the strength of his conviction prompted him to voluntary silence because relationships mattered more than politics.

Fourth, Lewis found the basis of democracy not in an optimistic view of human virtue and aspiration, but in the need to control the evils humans inflict upon each other. Though he never says as much, it is likely that Lewis would have found the political philosophy


undergirding the *Declaration of Independence* either naive or abhorrent, if not both. Put in theological terms, for Lewis, democracy is properly based only on the reality of human sinfulness resulting from the fall, rather than in some supposed human dignity implicit in the act of creation. Democracy provides the best form of government to prevent people from abusing each other.\(^{13}\) Perhaps in order to spread that protection more widely, Lewis generally supported the advancing cause of democracy in legal matters and believed that democracy needed to be expanded economically.\(^{14}\) Later in life this led him to question the economics of colonial imperialism. He went so far as to suggest that China fell to communism in large part because the West had so cruelly exploited the Chinese people. Lewis may have believed that he had insight into the situation in China, given that his brother Warren was stationed there twice while serving as an officer with the Royal Army Service Corps.\(^{15}\)

Fifth, though comfortably a supporter of the Conservative Party at the polls, Lewis was strongly opposed to the notion of creating a Christian party in political life.\(^{16}\) Britain stands in contrast to many Western European countries where some political parties include the designation of “Christian” in their names and self-understandings.\(^{17}\) Perhaps reflecting the difficulties of Irish politics, Lewis recognized that such mixing of political and religious identities would diminish the influence of Christianity by effectively making non-religious opinions into measures of faith. Lewis’s position was not without personal cost. When Winston Churchill, on being returned to the Prime Minister’s office in late 1951, offered Lewis the honor of being named a Commander of the British Empire, Lewis turned him down in order to avoid the implications that his writings were politically motivated.\(^{18}\)


\(^{15}\) C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *The Latin Letters of C. S. Lewis*, trans. and ed. Martin Moynihan (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 75.

\(^{16}\) C. S. Lewis, “Meditation on the Third Commandment,” in *Lewis, God in the Dock*, 196–199. The essay was originally published in 1941.


Sixth, Lewis viewed politics of all sorts as the devil’s own business, “the citadel of his power.” He expresses this wonderfully in *The Screwtape Letters*:

> Whichever [position] he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the “Cause,” in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war effort or of pacifism.

Put simply, the devilish strategy does not worry about which political opinion is followed, so long as it can be used to subvert the religious impulse itself. For Screwtape, political activism can twist the human good of vital concern about the course a society should follow into a path that leads away from God. Politics, Lewis implies, might easily offer an alternate good to God, ironically, under the guise of being the will of God.

Seventh, Lewis’s correspondence shows a habitual disengagement from thinking about political matters unless they had a personal impact on him. For example, although he never once mentions the crumbling of the British Empire in the postwar years, he was quite focused on food rationing, which lasted throughout the decade after World War II ended. He takes aim at the postwar Labour government, not for rationing as such, but for having kept supplies marginally lower throughout the year in order to provide a bonus Christmas distribution. Lewis’s snideness notwithstanding, this might strike most people more as a matter of public morale boosting rather than political integrity. Though Lewis was personally extremely generous, he was also the recipient of numerous luxury food parcels from his American readers, and perhaps lost sight of the sufferings of his hungry neighbors who received no such largesse.

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Eighth, Lewis was noticeably liberal on a number of issues important to social conservatives. He was morally opposed to pornography and disliked the books of novelists like D. H. Lawrence, but he called Britain’s obscenity law “silly.”\textsuperscript{23} Lewis, along with the psychiatric profession at the time, thought of homosexuality as a psychological abnormality, but he objected to the criminalization of homosexual behavior.\textsuperscript{24} Apart from an amusing bet on “a bottle of port” recorded in the Wagering Book of the Magdalen College Senior Common Room,\textsuperscript{25} he was uninterested in gambling, yet he found it morally unproblematic and possibly beneficial when it provided jobs.\textsuperscript{26} He was certainly no creationist, never expressing any meaningful reservations about evolutionary theory as a scientific matter, though he was concerned about it as a philosophical principle.\textsuperscript{27} Respecting contemporary conservative interests in teaching intelligent design theory, Lewis regarded the “argument from design” as “the weakest possible ground for Theism”; in fact, he considered the lack of design to be a powerful argument in favor of atheism.\textsuperscript{28} He writes that while he had no particular wisdom to offer on the topic of contraception (an issue that reemerged in the 2012 Republican primary campaign),\textsuperscript{29} he opposed attempts to restrict access to prophylactics as a preventative to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.\textsuperscript{30} Though a thoroughgoing conservative in his attitudes toward sexual behavior, Lewis spoke so frankly about sex in the context of erotic love that the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation refused to broadcast the recordings on the topic which they had commissioned from him.\textsuperscript{31} These talks would later be published as \textit{The Four Loves}.\textsuperscript{32} He never commented on the volatile

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\item C. S. Lewis, \textit{An Experiment in Criticism} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 61.
\item Lewis, \textit{Letters}, 3:1154.
\item Hooper, \textit{Companion and Guide}, 726.
\item C. S. Lewis, “Answers to Questions on Christianity,” in Lewis, \textit{God in the Dock}, 59–60. The material was transcribed from a talk Lewis gave in 1944.
\item See C. S. Lewis, “A Reply to Professor Haldane,” in C. S. Lewis, \textit{Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories} (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 74–85. This undated essay was published posthumously.
\item Lewis, \textit{Letters}, 2:747.
\item C. S. Lewis, \textit{Mere Christianity} (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), ix.
\item Hooper, \textit{Companion and Guide}, 90.
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issue of abortion, and given that he never discussed the underlying question of when life begins, Lewis’s position cannot be discerned. Lastly, it should be noted that Lewis adamantly opposed, as a matter of underlying principle, the notion that Christians, either as voters or as office holders, ought to impose Christian values on the public as a whole.33

As the November 2012 election approaches, Governor Palin’s remark about Lewis and divine inspiration serves as an important reminder of the need to discern the way candidates use religious rhetoric and association, particularly with a view to determining whether they are attempting to co-opt a genuine religious impulse in the electorate to satisfy their own political ambitions. Lewis is easily portrayed as being generally sympathetic with conservative political ideology. This essay now turns to the question of health care to ask whether this assessment is accurate and to press the question of whether those who might cite Lewis in a political context are honestly following his lead, or simply co-opting his name and reputation for their own ends.

**National Health Care Policy**

One of the major legislative achievements of the Barack Obama administration was the passage of a comprehensive health insurance plan which will go into full effect in 2014. Unlike the “single payer plans” used by most industrialized nations, where health care is funded by the government through general taxation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) does not involve government funding. Critics frequently allege that introduction of a single payer system is a goal of the Obama administration.34 Without defining their terms, critics of the plan have alleged that it is a form of socialism.35 But if by “socialism” one means state control of the means of production and the distribution of products and services, the Obama plan is far from socialist. Under PPACA, health insurance remains dramatically private. Employers are mandated to provide health care

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35 See, for example, Rep. Michele Bachmann’s January 19, 2011 speech recorded on C-Span, www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lPYKrlmdck.
insurance coverage to workers; all other adults are required to purchase health insurance coverage from approved sources, all of which are private corporations. As in the present system, the federal government will continue to provide medical care to members of the military and their families directly, and to provide medical insurance to federal employees, including all members of Congress, even those who publicly insist that government-funded health care is bad. However, the federal government will neither sell such insurance to the public nor will it be involved with administering private insurance programs or the making of medical decisions. Opposition to PPACA has come from numerous conservative organizations, including The American Center for Law and Justice, The Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, Liberty Counsel, and The Traditional Values Coalition, to name but a few of the more prominent ones. The constitutionality of the PPACA is now before the Supreme Court. The challenge concerns whether the “individual mandate,” the provision requiring participation, is within the powers the Constitution grants to Congress. Because the plan is based on cost sharing, it might easily collapse, if participation were made optional. But however the constitutional issue of the individual mandate is resolved, the question of the provision of health care will remain an active political and ethical issue.

The plan contains no restrictions on individual selection of licensed physicians or hospitals. By mandating coverage for those with preexisting conditions who might otherwise be refused insurance, the plan might well enhance medical care for a segment of the population which is currently unprotected. The plan also recognizes the significant investment government already makes in the funding of medical facilities, subsidized care through Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and similar programs, and ongoing medical research. Whether one supports or opposes the PPACA, it clearly raises the pragmatic philosophical questions of the proper scope of government and its competence to arrange efficiently for the provision of goods and services by the private sector.

Seen in the context of health care around the world, it should be remembered that America’s European allies have had national health care systems in place for at least two generations. The National

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Health Service in the United Kingdom came into being on July 5, 1948 (having been approved by Parliament in 1946) as a constituent component part of what is frequently called the Welfare State, an array of programs to rebuild Britain physically and socially after the Second World War. As the war broke out, elections were suspended and a national coalition government, headed by the Conservative leader Winston Churchill but including representatives from all parties, ruled the country. Almost immediately, it became clear that should Britain win the war, there were particular needs which would require immediate attention. German bombing devastated the housing stock across the kingdom; over one million homes were destroyed. Because insurance policies typically exclude coverage of damage caused by war, homelessness was a genuine threat throughout society. The government assumed the responsibility to provide new housing and financed it through general taxation. Medical care, which had advanced significantly during the war, especially in the provision of emergency services, was similarly incorporated into the rebuilding effort. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had been wounded in battle, hundreds of thousands of civilians had been treated for bomb-related injuries. A societal expectation of adequate care at government expense was a result. The so-called Beveridge Report of 1942, which was heartily endorsed by Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple and Principal of the Church of Scotland John Baillie, formed the basis for Parliamentary action. It identified five “giants of concern”: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness. Although Lewis would humorously write that he preferred “Beverages not Beveridges,” any real preference that he had for beer and whisky over providing for those in need is far from evident. Yet it is also fair to say that younger friends of Lewis, such as his former student John Wain, a rising figure in literary circles and a member of the Inklings, noted how out of step his attitude was with the mood of the country for the very same economic justice that Lewis had earlier advocated in the abstract. As the Welfare State took shape, Lewis seemed caught between his lifelong conservative impulses and his dawning awareness that a new order was necessary; England could

38 Lewis, Letters, 2:614.
39 Carpenter, The Inklings, 206.
not simply return to the prewar social arrangements in which Lewis had lived comfortably as part of the intellectual elite.

The British Welfare State was based on the principle that education, housing, food, retirement benefits, protection for widows and orphans, and adequate medical care were “rights not privileges.” Following the surrender of Germany, Churchill’s coalition cabinet collapsed under pressure from citizens who believed they had already suffered enough. They believed they had earned these rights by sending their husbands and sons to fight, by bravely enduring bombing, by continuing to work in factories and dockyards which were targeted, and by sacrificing food and clothing to support troops in the field. Churchill’s Conservative Party was defeated in part because it seemed prepared in the name of necessary austerities to consign to homelessness and hunger a large number of people who had not only borne great hardships and sacrificed much in the war, but had actually won it with their lives.  

In order to understand the titanic social shift this involved in the field of health care, it is essential to see that prior to the war, medical care had been provided either on a cost per service basis (possibly covered by insurance for those who purchased policies) or through private charities. As a practical matter, this arrangement was widely recognized as inadequate to meet the needs of the poor, especially those working in high risk jobs in labor, mining, and agriculture. Many of them had no union representation strong enough to secure coverage for them. The Welfare State was designed, among other things, to close the gap between medical needs and their actual provision in a way which was consistent with the thinking of a new generation, including Lewis’s students. Indeed, it is interesting to see Lewis in middle age acknowledging that the younger generation had a much greater awareness of and genuine concern about poverty than did his own generation.

For much of his life prior to the Welfare State, Lewis approached the question of meeting social needs as a matter of charity. His principle might be put simply: Do good close to home. It is easier and

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more meaningful to assist the poor in your village than it is to invent a scheme to change the world. For Lewis this was not simply a rhetorical jab at government by someone who had no real intention of providing anyone with genuine assistance. He established a trust that, prior to his marriage to Joy Davidman, charitably distributed two-thirds of his book royalties. Shortly after the Beveridge Report was released, Lewis suggested that those who argued for the propriety of “producing a society in which there were no poor” might well be correct, but an obligation to care for the poor remained until that new society had emerged. That is, political opinions and plans for the future did not remove the duty to assist others in the meanwhile. In the middle of the war he described his personal Christian principle of giving in these words:

I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditures exclude them. I am speaking now of “charities” in the common way. Particular cases of distress among our own relatives, friends, neighbours or employees, which God, as it were, forces upon our notice, may demand much more.

Lewis himself seems to have lived in this way of extravagant generosity, and his example is perhaps a partial measure to use in evaluating political positions addressed to matters of how to meet social needs adequately. Those who assert the propriety of relying on charitable donations to provide for the needs of those unable to care for themselves cannot in the end be found unwilling to finance adequately their proposed solution themselves. Perhaps it is in that very position that politicians expose themselves most to charges of hypocrisy when they ask others to sacrifice when they themselves do not give.

In postwar Britain, funding the Welfare State inevitably meant an increase in taxes, which Lewis found more than slightly annoying.

43 Carpenter, The Inklings, 208.
44 Lewis, Mere Christianity, 68.
45 Lewis, Mere Christianity, 68.
Writing to an American in 1952, he comments on taking the train from Ulster into the Republic of Ireland. Once one crosses the border, on-board prices for alcoholic drinks drop by fifty percent; “You are through and out of the clutches of the Welfare State (now known by the way as the ‘Farewell State’).” But this is his only specific criticism, one which is hardly likely to gain much sympathy in an America that taxes tobacco and alcohol quite highly, both as a means to raise revenue and to control the personal habits of citizens by increasing purchase prices.

Given the failure of the Soviet Union to plan its way to significant improvements for its citizens, it is perhaps easy to see why Lewis’s ingrained suspicions concerning government planning never disappeared. But as a whole, when Lewis does comment specifically on identifiable aspects of the Welfare State, his tone is one of cautious praise. When writing to an American journalist in 1959, he first notes that would-be leaders play off the deepest fears of a society. He continues:

In England the omnipotent Welfare State has triumphed because it promised to free us from the fear of poverty. Mind you, the bargain is sometimes, for a while, kept... The Welfare State, at a cost, has come nearer than any society ever did before to giving every man a square meal and a good house to eat it in.

One can hardly resist the sense that Lewis is hedging his bets in this mixed review more from habit than for any articulate reason. A decade after the inauguration of the Welfare State he was still waiting for bad news.

As the National Health Service came into being in 1948, Lewis experienced it like much the rest of the upper middle class population did. His friend and fellow Inkling Robert Havard, who had begun treating Lewis the previous decade, remained his doctor. When he collapsed of exhaustion in June 1949, his extended hospital-based recovery was paid for by NHS. His decade of osteoporosis treatment was covered by NHS, as were dozens of blood transfusions, his prostate problems in 1961, his July 1963 heart attack, and his final

47 Lewis, Letters, 3:1104.
illness later that year. There is no record that he was ever threatened with non-coverage because of his habit of chain smoking three packs of cigarettes a day or his excessive consumption of alcohol. If he faced significant frustrations with the government-run system he never mentions them. Similarly, cancer treatment for Joy Davidman, Lewis’s American-born wife, was covered by NHS. This was one of the huge economic benefits she reaped from her civil marriage to Lewis in 1956. All in all, it would seem that Lewis himself had no specific complaints about the NHS in its delivery of health care to himself, to those he loved, or to society as a whole.

Thus, despite his general distrust of Welfare State planning, it comes as no surprise then that he mentions the NHS in quite glowing terms on at least three separate occasions in his correspondence with Mary Willis Shelburne, the “American lady” with whom he carried on a decade-long correspondence of well over one hundred letters written between October 26, 1950 and August 30, 1963. While she is described in less than flattering terms by some Lewis scholars, there is no reason to doubt that Lewis’s comments to her on the NHS are sincere. Both seem fixated at times on their respective medical conditions as matters of ongoing concern. A poet of some ability, Mary was twice widowed when she began her correspondence with Lewis. She appears to have had at best inadequate medical insurance. Lewis’s first reference to the NHS comes in response to Mary’s lack of finances to pay for medical care. On January 14, 1958 he writes: “The worst of all economies is on necessary medicines, tho’ I quite understand how you are tempted to it. What a pity you haven’t got our National Health system in America.” A year and a half later, on July 7, 1959, when Mary seems to have suffered from something she perceived to be life threatening, Lewis writes:

What you have gone through begins to reconcile me to our Welfare State of which I have said so many hard things. “National Health Service” with free treatment for all has its drawbacks—one being that Doctors are incessantly pestered by people who

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Lewis returns to the topic on June 10, 1963. The previous month Lewis had had his American publisher send Mary money to help pay for “all your expenses.”54 “I am sorry to hear of the acute pain and various other troubles. It makes me unsay all I have ever said against our English ‘Welfare State,’ which at least provides free medical treatment for all.”55 Finally, a fourth possible reference to NHS comes a week later on June 17, 1963. Again, the details which might have supplied a fuller picture are not available, but Lewis’s response is still interesting. “This is terrible news. The doctor who refused to come would, I think, be liable to criminal prosecution in this country.”56 It is worth noting that all four of these entirely positive comments about NHS were written to an American correspondent.

Lewis’s experience of the NHS can be summarized as follows. On a personal level, Lewis had his own significant medical needs met by the NHS, retaining his pre-NHS physician and utilizing fairly extensively the services of his local hospital as necessary. Those with whom he shared daily life also availed themselves of the NHS. In the case of Joy Davidman, Lewis’s wife, it is worth noting that as an American citizen she had not paid any significant taxes funding the NHS and yet made free extensive use of its services from the time of her arrival in England several years before marrying Lewis.57 When contrasting the single payer NHS with the American system of private insurance or payment for services rendered, Lewis recommends the English system without reserve. He even believed that house calls were in order and that the government ought to pay for them. In the story of the American doctor who would not be called out, he both faulted the physician on moral grounds and did not condemn the English system which might have found such a physician criminally liable. All told, Lewis seems disinclined to agree with conservative notions that government cannot do big things well, that change can only come incrementally, and that access to health care should be considered

54 Lewis, Letters, 3:1427.
55 Lewis, Letters, 3:1429.
56 Lewis, Letters, 3:1430.
anything less than a fundamental right. The NHS emerged essentially full grown and ready to operate. Nor would Lewis seem to agree that government cannot do things efficiently; NHS was for Lewis an excellent health care system. Whatever complaints Lewis had against government planning, he was willing to have general tax revenues pay for NHS, unafraid that as a single payer system it was unacceptably inching Britain toward either medical disaster or creeping socialism.

There is need for caution here in trying to assess the importance of Lewis’s thinking in the American context. Lewis lived removed from America in 2012 by an ocean and by more than half a century. The British Welfare State was designed to deal with social conditions produced by the Second World War, circumstances which may, despite some apparent similarities, be quite different from the contemporary American situation. In a very real sense the entire British population fought the Second World War; the civilian population was repeatedly attacked by German bombers, and the Welfare State in part acknowledged their service. Unlike Americans, British civilians were part of the daily course of the war and could claim to have won through their resilience and suffering the right to the Welfare State to restore their society. The children of the Second World War generation came to maturity enjoying the benefits that system produced. That rising generation which had not fought the war found the Welfare State to be its birthright.

This much can be said: Most fundamentally, Lewis endorsed the logic of a policy of regarding medical care for all as an enforceable right, and apparently perceived NHS as a just system to that end. It is not clear that he explicitly endorsed the national sacrifice basis of the Welfare State, but he certainly never rejected it. He did allow in the letters quoted above that NHS was justified on the grounds of political prudence and fundamental morality. He clearly believed the NHS to be within the scope and competence of government. Given his attitudes toward extravagance in charity, cost is perhaps not the best place to question his logic, especially when he acknowledges the need for an expansion of democracy in its economic dimensions. Since Lewis never says anything which qualifies these positions, it would seem incumbent on those who consider him to be a reliable guide to life either to follow his lead, or to produce a considered argument as to why his thinking in this case is inapplicable. In that regard, it is especially worth remembering that Lewis’s earlier, generalized, catastrophizing fears of government planning in the Welfare State did not materialize in the operation of the NHS, as he utilized its services.
There might still be a philosophical ground to consider against Lewis’s endorsement of single payer national health insurance. One could assert that personal freedom remains paramount in democratic life. The September 12, 2011 Tea Party Debate captured the essence of the idea. When Republican Presidential hopeful Congressman Ron Paul was asked by CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer what should happen if a thirty-year-old who had chosen not to purchase health insurance became catastrophically ill, the crowd enthusiastically applauded the suggestion that the person should depend on his own resources, or be left to die, if these proved inadequate. Congressman Paul did not exactly endorse that idea, but fell back on the “charity can handle these cases” response.\textsuperscript{58} Even if one endorses Paul’s unsubstantiated libertarian proposal, it is essential to note that Lewis’s moral theology still calls his appreciative readers to extravagant generosity. Lewis’s principle, that having the right politics is no substitute for doing one’s moral duty, applies as much in 2012 as it did during World War II when Lewis first set forth the idea. It is clear that charity does not provide sufficient funding to cover the medical needs of the poor. A libertarian is, of course, personally free to choose death over insurance. However, in terms of the moral theology that Lewis articulated, the Christian libertarian is not permitted to refuse to fund voluntarily the medical care of a neighbor; that remains an inescapable duty. But “mere Christians” who call for the charitable solution are acting immorally and hypocritically, according to Lewis, if they do not do absolutely all they are able, to the point of tremendous, genuine sacrifice, to meet as much of that societal need as they possibly can.

In Britain the NHS ended the rhetorical position that hopeful volunteerism, which had already been shown to be woefully inadequate before the war, was better than legally guaranteed access to medical care funded by the government. A new strategy was required to rebuild the country from its wartime damage. Meeting basic social needs was a government responsibility, and the cost should be spread through taxation. Private charity might supplement government in special cases, but it cannot morally replace it for the population as a whole. If he were privy to the current American debate, it would certainly come as no surprise should Lewis support the Obama health care plan of universal health insurance coverage. He probably

\textsuperscript{58} An unedited two-minute video of the question, answers, and crowd responses is available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/12/tea-party-debate-health-care_n_959354.html.
would regard as churlish anyone who disagreed. He might perhaps even make slighting remarks about them in his letters to others. He possibly would go even further to strengthen the PPACA through a transition to single payer funding, the very thing social conservatives seem to fear the most. He would have exposed as self-serving hypocrisy any argument against tax-funded medical care in favor of a charity-based system, if the person making that argument was not also a leading donor to the cause. He certainly would have been appalled by anyone suggesting that his writings were a source of divine guidance for devising a plan that leads to “let them die” being considered a part of public policy.

Conclusion

One of the great appeals of Lewis as an author is his inveterate insistence that the moral and religious dimensions of a problem need to be examined carefully, without self-coddling, and assisted by those who disagree. It is appropriate to ask whether Lewis’s support for NHS makes sense in terms of the eight general aspects of Lewis’s political thinking surveyed above. A positive correlation is frequently apparent. First, Lewis’s endorsement of NHS exemplifies the principle that Lewis was not systematic in his political thinking, but rather considered issues in isolation: although he generally thought of himself as a conservative, he backed the liberal health care system. Second, it is in line with Lewis’s Unionism: NHS is an example of a strong, central government program which regulated an important aspect of public and private life. Third, such support coincides with the observation that Lewis’s political interests were dominated by his personal interests: NHS clearly worked well for him. Fourth, support of NHS is simply one more of the many liberal causes Lewis endorsed on a piecemeal basis.

It should also be noted that there are ways in which Lewis’s position on NHS is at variance with his general political attitudes. First, for someone who eschewed political topics, Lewis had a great deal to say about NHS. Second, NHS appears to be at least one area where Lewis’s philosophy of democracy either shifts or is ignored. A society which does not care for its sick would be acting in a fallen manner in a way in which a society that provides them with care is not. Medicine, like railroads, highways, water, sanitation, and universities, might possibly be an area where working together for the good of a society is
possible. Lewis certainly believed it was. Third, Lewis was willing to 
break with the Conservative Party by offering his support of NHS. 
In these three aspects of Lewis’s thought, what is most interesting to 
observes is that his support for NHS leads away from a generalized 
conservative estimate of his politics. One might even say that Lewis 
seems to grow politically liberal where NHS is concerned.

The one general aspect of Lewis’s political thinking that remains 
to be considered in review is his assessment that politics is the dev-
il’s playground. One suspects he would look at the current debate in 
America, smile slyly, and suggest that American politicians were prov-
ing him right. But that does not weigh in on the question of what form 
of health care he would support. Nor would it tell us which side he 
thought of as the more devilish.

Readers who are generally appreciative of Lewis, and yet find 
themselves balking at reaching the conclusion that Lewis would sup-
sport the Obama health care plan, need to ask whether they do so for 
any truly rational reason. Are conservatives willing to admit that their 
darling religious intellectual disagreed with them on this major issue? 
If they actually care about what Lewis thought, and appeal to him 
in other matters of concern, might they need to rethink their own 
instinctively conservative impulses on this issue? They can, of course, 
simply ignore what he said and continue to oppose a plan for national 
health insurance. But that would be to treat Lewis as an ideological 
figurehead, rather than genuinely respecting his thought. Similarly, 
are liberals willing to admit that stodgy old C. S. Lewis got something 
surprisingly right? Might it be necessary for them to admit that more 
of Lewis than The Chronicles of Narnia is worth reading? Are they 
prepared to rethink whether his theological positions are worthy of a 
new look? They, too, might choose to overlook the broader implications 
of Lewis’s thought, but that is hardly an open-minded way to 
engage the mind of an author who continues to shape so many Chris-
tians half a century after his death.

Lewis’s friend and biographer George Sayer writes, “I have of-
ten felt that friends of C. S. Lewis cannot help being friends of each 
other.”59 Perhaps no place more than the political arena puts Sayer’s 
thought to the test. There is little evidence that self-professed Chris-
tian politicians and their supporters of either party are more civil than 
others. To the ordinary observer, it does not appear that a claimed

59 Sayer, Jack, xxix.
appreciative reading of Lewis necessarily changes that behavior; it may even make it worse in specific cases. In the current political climate it is essential to know that trading insults is not the same thing as debating issues. For there to be a successful exchange of ideas it is often necessary to have a meeting ground where mutual respect for a voice outside the immediate conflict can allow civility to prevail between intellectual combatants. Perhaps with regard to health care policy that place can be found in the writings of Lewis, if both sides are genuinely willing to be challenged by him.

Here is a Lewis-like way for Lewis readers to approach the coming election, at least with respect to national health insurance policy. Those who think Lewis is correct on the issue should not forget to show his gracious spirit in discussions with others. Remember Austin Farrer’s tribute to him at Lewis’s Cambridge memorial service: “He paid you the compliment of attending to your words. He did not pretend to read your heart.”60 Those who think Lewis is wrong about the issue should keep his face in mind when they talk to others, never saying to them words they would not say to him. In this way both sides can keep Lewis’s influence alive. Maybe, and remember that Lewis knew how to hope against hope, they will even begin to think of each other as friends.

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60 Cited in Hooper, Companion and Guide, 120.