

“On Living in an Atomic Age”
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by C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)

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In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How are we to live in an atomic age?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.”

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors — anaesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

“But,” you will reply, “it is not death — not even painful and premature death — that we are bothering about. Of course the chance of *that* is not new. What is new is that the atomic bomb may finally and totally destroy civilization itself. The lights may be put out for ever.”

This brings us much nearer to the real point; but let me try to make clear exactly what I think that point is. What were your views about the ultimate future of civilization *before* the atomic bomb appeared on the scene? What did you think all this effort of humanity was to come to in the end? The real answer is known to almost everyone who has even a smattering of science; yet, oddly enough, it is

hard ever mentioned. And the real answer (almost beyond doubt) is that, with or without atomic bombs, the whole story is going to end in NOTHING. The astronomers hold out no hope that this planet is going to be permanently inhabitable. The physicists hold out no hope that organic life is going to be a permanent possibility in any part of the material universe. Not only this earth, but the whole show, all the suns of space, are to run down. Nature is a sinking ship. Bergson talks about the *élan vital*, and Mr Shaw talks about the “Life-force” as if they could surge on for ever and ever. But that comes of concentrating on biology and ignoring the other sciences. There is really no such hope. Nature does not, in the long run, favour life. If Nature is all that exists — in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort somewhere outside Nature — then all stories will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without possibility of return. It will have been an accidental flicker, and there will be no one even to remember it. No doubt atomic bombs may cut its duration on this present planet shorter than it might have been; but the whole thing, even if it lasted for billions of years, must be so infinitesimally short in relation to the oceans of dead time which preceded and follow it that I cannot feel excited about its curtailment.

What the wars and the weather (are we in for another of those periodic ice ages?) and the atomic bomb have really done is to remind us forcibly of the sort of world we are living in and which, during the prosperous period before 1914, we were beginning to forget. And this reminder is, so far as it goes, a good thing. We have been waked from a pretty dream, and now we can begin to talk about realities.

We see at once (when we have been waked) that the important question is not whether an atomic bomb is going to obliterate “civilization.” The important question is whether “Nature” — the thing studied by the sciences — is the only thing in existence. Because if you answer *yes* to the second question, then the first question only amounts to asking whether the inevitable frustration of all human activities may be hurried on by our own action instead of coming at its natural time. That is, of course, a question that concerns us very much. Even on a ship which will certainly sink sooner or later, the news that the boiler might blow up *now* would not be heard with indifference by anyone. But those who knew the ship was sinking in any case would not, I think, be quite so desperately excited as those who had forgotten this fact, and were vaguely imagining that it might arrive somewhere.

It is, then, on the second question that we really need to make up our minds. And let us begin by supposing that Nature is all that exists. Let us suppose that nothing ever has existed or ever will exist except this meaningless play of atoms in

space and time: that by a series of hundredth changes it has (regrettably) produced things like ourselves — conscious beings who now know that their own consciousness is an accidental result of the whole meaningless process and is therefore itself meaningless, though to us (alas!) it *feels* significant.

In this situation there are, I think, three things one might do:

(1) You might commit suicide. Nature which has (blindly, accidentally) given me for my torment this consciousness which demands meaning and value in a universe that offers neither, has luckily also given me the means of getting rid of it. I return the unwelcome gift. I will be fooled no longer.

(2) You might decide simply to have as good a time as possible. The universe is a universe of nonsense, but since you are here, grab what you can. Unfortunately, however, there is, on these terms, so very little left to grab — only the coarsest sensual pleasures. You can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behaviour of your genes. You can't go on getting any very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a "good time"; but just in so far as it becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between your own emotions and the universe in which you really live.

3) You may defy the universe. You may say, "Let it be irrational, I am not. Let it be merciless, I will have mercy. By whatever curious chance it has produced me, now that I am here I will live according to human values. I know the universe will win in the end, but what is that to me? I will go down fighting. Amid all this wastefulness I will persevere; amid all this competition, I will make sacrifices. Be damned to the universe!"

I suppose that most of us, in fact, while remain materialists, adopt a more or less uneasy alternation between the second and the third attitude. And although the third is incomparably the better (it is, for instance, much more likely to "preserve civilization"), both really shipwreck on the same rock. That rock — the disharmony between our own hearts and Nature — is obvious in the second. The third seems to avoid the rock by accepting disharmony from the outset and defying it. But it will not really work. In it, you hold up our own human standards against the idiocy of the universe. That is, we talk as if our own standards were something

outside the universe which can be contrasted with it; as if we could judge the universe by some standard borrowed *from another source*. But if (as we were supposing) Nature — in the space–time–matter system — is the only thing in existence, then of course there can be no other source for our standards. They must, like everything else, be the unintended and meaningless outcome of blind forces. Far from being a light from beyond Nature whereby Nature can be judged, they are only the way in which anthropoids of our species feel when the atoms under our own skulls get into certain states — those states being produced by causes quite irrational, unhuman, and non-moral. Thus the very ground on which we defy Nature crumbles under our feet. The standard we are applying is tainted at the source. If our standards are derived from this meaningless universe they must be as meaningless as it.

For most modern people, I think, thoughts of this kind have to be gone through before the opposite view can get a fair hearing. All Naturalism leads us to this in the end — to a quite final and hopeless discord between what our minds claim to be and what they really must be if Naturalism is true. They claim to be spirit; that is, to be reason, perceiving universal intellectual principles and universal moral laws and possessing free will. But if Naturalism is true they must in reality be merely arrangements of atoms in skulls, coming about by irrational causation. We never think a thought because it is true, only because blind Nature forces us to think it. We never do an act because it is right, only because blind Nature forces us to do it. It is when one has face this preposterous conclusion that one is at last ready to listen to the voice that whispers: “But suppose we really are spirits? Suppose we are not the offspring of Nature...?”

For, really, the naturalistic conclusion is unbelievable. For one thing, it is only through trusting our own minds that we have come to know Nature itself. If Nature when full known seems to teach us (that is, if the sciences teach us) that our own minds are chance arrangements of atoms, then there must have been some mistake; for is that were so, then the sciences themselves would be chance arrangements of atoms and we should have no reason for believing in them. There is only one way to avoid this deadlock. We must go back to a much earlier view. We must simply accept it that we are spirits, free and rational beings, at present inhabiting an irrational universe, and must draw the conclusion that we are *not derived from it*. We are strangers here. We come from somewhere else. Nature is not the only thing that exists. There is “another world,” and that is where we come from. And that explains why we do not feel at home here. A fish feels at home in the water. If we “belonged here” we should feel at home here. All that we say about “Nature red in tooth and claw,” about death and time and mutability, all our half-amused, half-bashful attitude to our own bodies, is quite inexplicable on the theory that we are simply natural creatures. If this world is

the only world, how did we come to find its laws either so dreadful or so comic? If there is no straight line elsewhere, how did we discover that Nature's line is crooked?

But what, then, is Nature, and how do we come to be imprisoned in a system so alien to us? Oddly enough, the question becomes much less sinister the moment one realizes that Nature is not all. Mistaken for our mother, she is terrifying and even abominable. But if she is only our sister — if she and we have a common Creator — if she is our sparring partner — then the situation is quite tolerable. Perhaps we are not here as prisoners but as colonists: only consider what we have done already to the dog, the horse, or the daffodil. She is indeed a rough playfellow. There are elements of evil in her. To explain that would carry us far back: I should have to speak of Power and Principalities and all that would seem to be a modern reader most mythological. This is not the place, nor do these questions come first. It is enough to say here that Nature, like us but in her different way, is much alienated from her Creator, though in her, as in us, gleams of the old beauty remain. But they are there not to be worshipped but to be enjoyed. She has nothing to teach us. It is our business to live by our own law not by hers: to follow, in private or in public life, the law of love and temperance even when they seem to be suicidal, and not the law of competition and grab, even when they seem to be necessary to our survival. For it is part of our spiritual law never to put survival first: not even the survival of our species. We must resolutely train ourselves to feel that the survival of Man on this Earth, much more of our own nation or culture of class, is not worth having unless it can be had by honourable and merciful means.

The sacrifice is not so great as it seems. Nothing is more likely to destroy a species or a nation than a determination to survive at all costs. Those who care for something else more than civilization are the only people by whom civilization is at all likely to be preserved. Those who want Heaven must have served Earth best. Those who love Man less than God do most for Man.