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LEADERSHIP AND BUSINESS

# Leadership Philosophy in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis

—  
AARON PERRY



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Aaron Perry

Leadership Philosophy  
in the Fiction  
of C.S. Lewis

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*To my wife, Heather, and our children Emma Beth, Wesley, and Donovan:  
You have read and listened to C.S. Lewis over long stretches and in quick  
snippets. You have endured the many moments I paused the story  
to ponder some detail. You are the family of my dreams and I'm never,  
ever going to trade you! (I suppose, in good Lewis fashion, I should also  
acknowledge our dog, Sugar.)*

*To the childhood influences who put the Chronicles of Narnia in my hands:  
My Dad (now in glory), who, among other things, gave up his weekend  
evenings to drive my brother and me to our grandmother's house to watch  
the BBC productions of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; my  
Mom, who was constantly encouraging reading and purchasing reading  
material; my brother, Tim, who made reading Lewis cool when I was  
tempted to grow out of it; my brother, Paul, who shared his boxset of the  
Chronicles with me. (By the way, sorry about the cover of The Last Battle.)*

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- Rev. Dr. Tim Perry was a consistent conversation partner and frequent manuscript reader throughout this project.

## Praise for *Leadership Philosophy in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis*

“I believe that leading is an intensified form of being human, which is, of course, a topic that C.S. Lewis knew so well and wrote about so eloquently. So it only makes sense that Lewis’s writings can provide an excellent way to grow in our understanding of leadership, and Perry’s perceptive writing in this book will edify those who love both leadership and the works of Lewis. But even those of us who are sometimes puzzled by Lewis will find valuable insight into the nature of being a leader and doing leadership. It has influenced my own thinking about leadership, and for that I am grateful.”

—Mike Palanski, *Professor of Management, Rochester Institute of Technology*

“Over the years, I have read many books on leadership. Some have been good, a few profound, one or two life-changing. But none have been as fresh and fascinating as this book. Lewis was, of course, a towering intellect. But perhaps the key to his success was his ability to wrap his leading insights in literary forms—not as ornamentation but as a way to make his ideas live, move and have being. Perry has done us a great service in surveying Lewis’s literary output for a leadership philosophy that we can not only learn from but implement as a way of life. A great book—highly recommend!”

—Todd Wilson, *President, The Center for Pastor Theologians*

“Perry’s insightful examination of the leadership themes in C.S. Lewis’s fiction is a welcome addition to Lewis scholarship and leadership studies. Perry seamlessly blends fictional analysis with leadership theory, providing an innovative lens with which to read and interpret Lewis’s most beloved stories.”

—Crystal Hurd, *Recipient, 2020 Clyde S. Kilby Research Grant*

“Most people have not read C.S. Lewis’s fiction looking for lessons on leadership. Perry shows us there are some fascinating insights for leaders in these remarkable stories. This book illumines those stories in some surprising ways and provides valuable guidance for those who would lead as well as those who follow.”

—Jerry L. Walls, *Professor of Philosophy, Houston Baptist University*



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## CHAPTER 1

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# Leading Between the Lines

### BITING OFF MORE THAN CAN BE CHEWED?

I bit his head: Shift's head, the malicious Ape antagonist from C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*. If you don't know Shift, perhaps you've had a similar visceral reaction to horrific leadership. Hopefully you didn't actually bite the head of someone whose leadership was resulting in disaster, but I did—I could, of course, because Shift is a fictional character. I was about ten years old and reading my older brother's copy of the final book from his boxed set *Chronicles of Narnia* where Shift's selfish, greedy, malicious, lying face was featured on the cover. I finally came to a point in the narrative where I had had enough of his schemes, so I bit his head. Sank my teeth right in, leaving a mark. (I don't think my brother yet knows and I don't think he'll read this book, so the secret's safe between us.)

I wanted to leave a mark on Shift's head because the story was leaving a mark on me. Leadership mattered in *The Last Battle*. "Everything could have been so different!" I thought to myself as a ten-year-old while seeing the problem escalate. While I wasn't naming the plotted problem as malevolent leadership, something was getting into my imagination through that story—the imagination that I still carry around even into my leadership research and teaching. Perhaps I became interested in leadership that day; perhaps a good story started forming my imagination to see the world as a context for leadership. Either way, I could bite Shift's head

because he is fictional, but the fictional world to which he belonged was impacting someone in the real world.

The story was, in a tangible sense, leading me. You could even say that Lewis was leading me. If someone sufficiently versed in Lewis put my life under a gracious microscope, they would, hopefully, see the influence of Lewis through characters like Peter, Puddleglum, and *Perelandra's* protagonist, Ransom. At least, that was the preliminary hypothesis that inspired searching Lewis' stories for a philosophy of leadership. But to be fair to an actual philosophy of leadership developed from Lewis' stories, I hurry to say that a philosophy of leadership cannot simply be studied, it must be lived. As Barfield once reminded Lewis of Plato's relationship to philosophy: Philosophy wasn't a subject; "it was a way" (Lewis, 1955/2017a, p. 275). So, this book might be considered the articulation *and* application of a philosophy of leadership from Lewis' fiction. To that end, I hurry to say three things:

First, like James March on using fiction in his courses, this is not a book about literature (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). I am not a scholar of literature, though, as should be obvious, I believe literature and stories can help us learn about and teach leadership.

Second, I am trying neither to be theoretically strict nor idiosyncratic when I talk about leadership in this book. It is famously acknowledged that as many people who talk about leadership define it differently, and the same might be true of authors telling stories that involve leadership contexts. To read literature with a strict definition of leadership might beg the question as to which kinds of literature or which parts of literature might tell us about leadership. At the same time, to read without any parameters would lose the leadership plot. So, while at times I will try to articulate a picture of leadership from Lewis' literature, I often have a broad view of leadership as a phenomenon that involves influencing and inspiring personally, articulating shared goals and achieving shared goals as a group, forming team unity through accountability, and so on.

Third, and expected, this book operates with a pragmatic philosophy. If leadership is, at some point, about achieving outcomes, then any philosophy of leadership must have some element of pragmatism. Yet because this book attempts, among other things, to name metaphysical realities, it may not provide immediate practical, technical pay-off. As a pragmatic text, then, its final value and, to the extent that I have read, assimilated, and articulated Lewis correctly, the very possibility of Lewis' literature forming

a philosophy of leadership, must be judged against whether or not it is eventually *useful* and *effective*.

For the rest of this introductory chapter, I will (1) flesh out the rationale for selecting Lewis, (2) articulate the spirit of the book, (3) further delineate the aims of the book, and (4) lay out the structure of the book which will hopefully apply the subject, exemplify the spirit, and accomplish these aims.

### WHY LEWIS? A RATIONALE

Besides his writing a book so engrossing that I bit its cover in anger at its antagonist, I chose to explore a philosophy of leadership from C.S. Lewis because I like Lewis! The excitement I feel in reading and sharing these texts, when applied to the field of leadership resonates with a spirit of post-modern organizational theory (Linstead, 2003, p. 2). Authors and researchers are wrapped up in their subjects.

While the researcher must attempt a measure of objectivity, the very nature of literature and stories must also be acknowledged. In his biography of Lewis, A.N. Wilson (2002), speaking of Lewis' work on Milton, noted Lewis' ability to enjoy that which he was critiquing (p. 173). In acknowledging my appreciation and joy at reading Lewis, I am not avoiding objectivity as much as acknowledging my prejudice and admitting that I am "probably even less equipped to notice" (Wilson, p. 173) whatever spirit I bring to the text. By acknowledging my appreciation and joy at reading Lewis for leadership, I also hope to exemplify the man's own ability to enjoy his own subject matter while remaining critical.

Of course, this posture to Lewis would be more disconcerting if it was not more widely shared among potential readers. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that you are a fan of Lewis (or the one who assigned you the task of reading this book is a fan of Lewis, in which case it might benefit you to try appreciation or, at least, to feign it!), but even more important is his prominence in popular culture and scholarly discourse. Lewis' famed series the *Chronicles of Narnia* has been the source of popular leadership reflection (Maister, 2002; Willard, 2014) and Lewis' work has been used to consider transformational leadership theory (Hurd, 2012). Further, the series remains important in popular culture as evidenced by three major film adaptations in the last fifteen years (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in 2005, *Prince Caspian* in 2008, and *The Voyage of the*

*Dawn Treader* in 2010) and Netflix's recent agreement to develop productions of the series (Netflix Media Center).

I must make a confession, though: I never met Lewis. It is possible that I know somebody who knew somebody who met Lewis, but I leave my vicarious knowledge there. With this concession in view, this book is not really about Lewis, as much as it is about the stories he has written. So, are we learning from Lewis or the stories? Discussing the nature of fiction as a tool for experiential reflection, Taylor (2008) writes,

It is the story itself that seems to teach us something. It draws us in, and by the time we get to the end of it, it is as though what we have been through is not just a reading experience but a series of events encountered at first hand, from which we have emerged wiser than we were before. (p. 265)

Taylor offers an example, “Nor do we feel we are relying on Leo Tolstoy as our authority on love, in the way you might rely on a doctor’s authority on a question of health” (p. 265). So, perhaps we are not learning Lewis’ experiences and reflecting upon them for leadership, but just his stories.

At the same time, however, isn’t the author a kind of authority because, well, they wrote the story? Unless one is expressly disagreeing with the author, the author remains the one who has provided at least the narrative context from which knowledge may emerge. Lewis might not be a leadership expert, but might leadership expertise flow through his writing in a way that is faithful to his life and thought, though perhaps not completely conscious to him? Lewis may not have been completely conscious of leadership wisdom contained in the stories, yet he remains the author and to the extent the reader seeks to learn, Lewis remains a kind of authority. One might see here another postmodern move, although one that does not completely do away with the author: I am attempting to learn from Lewis (deference) about a subject he was not explicitly addressing (difference).

Consider *The Screwtape Letters* as a brief test case. I read the book because it is bitingly enjoyable and brilliantly clarifying about the subject of temptation, but Lewis’ “ability to see through human failings, his capacity to analyse other people’s annoyingness, his rich sense of comedy and satire” (Wilson, 2002, p. 177) provides insights into leadership that would not be so readily seen unless one reads it a second time. In the second read, I am learning from Lewis but now I am providing the subject matter.



Lewis, as an actual person of history, was subject to his own foibles and failures. Those need not be discarded, ignored, or consistently dredged up in order to acknowledge the complexity or condemn the pursuit of learning from him. Even if we wanted to, we could not completely disentangle the man from his fiction when we read of the pious pettiness of older women, the joyous reunion of children with parents, the cruelty of some British prep schools, or the beauty and subtle wisdom of animals in a variety of stories. “How much is the bookish man distinguishable from his imagined self, the self he projects into the book he reads?” (Wilson, 2002, p. 45). We might slightly change Wilson’s question and make it about the book such a man *writes*. What this concession allows is for us to take Lewis’ stories as the prime focus of this study, while at the same time allowing various essays and sermons to confirm and clarify concepts his stories narrate. Lewis is in the stories and we ought not to ignore his presence.

Is this focus on stories while admitting the author is present yet not subject to historical critique a clever equivalent of having my cake and eating it, too? Probably. But the alternative would either be to say nothing on the subject as a kind of false deference or to so completely differentiate the stories from the author that what drew me to the stories and subject would be lost and its potential impact on the reader diminished. Perhaps I’m not eating the cake as much as serving it with lots of icing that, I admit, might mask some of the cake’s flavor.

### WHAT SPIRIT? A RELATIONSHIP

“Mr. McCabe thinks that funny is the opposite of serious. Funny is the opposite of not funny, and of nothing else” (Chesterton, 1905, p. 220). In his characteristic witty, cutting clarity, G.K. Chesterton put side by side things that might otherwise have been kept asunder: the serious and the funny. Of course, this is the very stuff of which the best jokes are made. A very good joke is like the crest on the wave: just as the crest is the context for something potentially elegant because beneath and behind the crest is something actually powerful, so is the joke a context for something funny because it might go horribly wrong. The risk is part of what makes the moment.

Likewise, this book will take a risk to put side by side things that are often kept asunder, academically speaking: play and research. I want to keep these together because if I ever meet you, then perhaps we will have not just content to discuss, but a style in which to discuss it. But, beyond,

I want to keep play and research together because that is faithful to the Lewisian corpus. Lewis' literature reveals extensive reading and informal and formal training in theology, philosophy, and literature, but without ceasing to be entertaining, and endorsed as fast-paced, clever, biting, and popular. Just as Chesterton's jocularities were not in contrast to his serious subjects, neither are Lewis' playful stories in contrast to wisdom.

Perhaps Lewis was wise to keep these together. Wisdom, of course, does not come without work. Hodgkinson (1983), in his work on the philosophy of leadership, says that "[w]isdom... must be worked for," which includes efforts that are "[r]eflective, analytic, synthetic, and intellectual" (p. 3). Further, Carl Jung is supposed to have warned against wisdom that was not earned. I would adjust the supposed Jung slightly to say, "Beware wisdom that comes without effort." Yet must the effort be on the part of both the teacher and the recipient of wisdom? Perhaps the wisest of all is the one who can take what *they* have worked for and impart it to the one who has not worked for it. It is not without effort, but the effort is not the same across all agents involved. This is not wisdom without effort, but the effort has already been given. I believe that my attempt to learn from Lewis and to make application to a leadership context has not come without effort, but I hope the style reflects the one from whom I learned and that what counts as wisdom (all credit to Lewis, of course) is imparted with a style and spirit of play.

I doubt there was another way to go about the task! If Lewis wasn't really talking about leadership but leadership can be learned through his stories, then, I submit, I've *played* with the stories. Play has not been the opposite of leadership wisdom, but the means of discovering it. I have not set aside the seriousness of the stories, but presumed their seriousness. Play presumes the very serious business of friendship, relationship, development, even fun (Edgar, 2017, pp. 1–3).

Playing with the stories acknowledges there has been more than one person in the game (Benson, 2013, p. 78), which, of course, is true of leadership—there has to be more than one person involved (or a context greater than one person). Stories don't just have tellers; they have tellers and listeners/readers. And now there is more than just me in the writing of this book because, if it is read, there is also you. And I'm presuming there is a *you*.

It should be clear that this is not a kind of frivolous play that doesn't care what toy gets broken along the way. Just as leadership's end is not a pursuit of chaos, neither is the goal of playing with the stories to stretch