

**Peter Kreeft, *C.S. Lewis for the Third Millennium*,
Review by Philip Zoutendam
The C.S. Lewis Chronicle Vol. 6, No. 2, Trinity 2009**

C.S. Lewis for the Third Millennium. By Peter Kreeft. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990. 193 pp. ISBN 0898705231

For students and admirers of C.S. Lewis, Peter Kreeft's book *C.S. Lewis for the Third Millennium* begins with considerable promise. To the immensely interesting and valuable project announced in his introduction—nothing less than the exploration of the future and fate of mankind—Kreeft clearly brings an impressive knowledge of Lewis' corpus: he appears to have read everything, quoting not only the major works, but the essays, the poems, the literary treatises, and even obscure prefaces written for forgotten books. But Kreeft's education in the school of Lewis, whom he calls his 'master' (31), is gapingly incomplete; despite all that he has learned in his reading, he fails to emulate in his writing his teacher's wit, clarity, and careful presentation of tightly-ordered, well-defended arguments. Each of the essays comprising this book contains significant defects, and most are fatally flawed. They wander from their projected course, sometimes neglecting it entirely; they rely on imprecise language or logic and draw faulty conclusions. They fail to accomplish what the author claims they will, and, ultimately, they leave the reader disappointed, frustrated, and sometimes even annoyed.

The first chapter, 'How to Save Civilization: C.S. Lewis as Prophet', contains an admirable and enjoyable compilation of Lewis quotations, but the author's analysis of these passages is inaccurate and misleading from the beginning. Kreeft claims in the book's introduction that this essay 'summarizes Lewis' philosophy of history', but then promptly sabotages his own thesis by directly quoting Lewis' profession of 'desperate' scepticism towards 'anything that could be called 'the philosophy of history' (10, from '*De Descriptione Temporum*'). Kreeft unsuccessfully attempts to extract himself from this quandary, asserting that Lewis meant to 'exclude...only firm generalizations' about history—a weak explanation and a laughable phrase. Though the author enumerates no fewer than twelve of what he calls 'major principles about history from Lewis' (12), this description is thoroughly inaccurate. Many of the twelve points listed in the chapter are not principles but extrapolations from Lewis' rejection of Evolutionist Progressivism, and most are not even 'about history' per se, but are primarily concerned with the universe and the human condition. Though these strains of Lewis' thought certainly can be applied to history, the implication that they form a systematic 'philosophy' is unfair to both Lewis and the reader. But even worse than this is Kreeft's conclusion to the essay,

in which he relates the counsel that Lewis ‘would offer us’ regarding the future (29). Though it is wise, Christian counsel, only one of the four points of advice offered is substantiated with a quotation from Lewis. It seems that Kreeft himself has appropriated Lewis’ voice and is using it to proffer his own advice; though he may have done so inadvertently, this is unacceptable in a published essay.

If Kreeft’s first essay suffers from carelessness and imprecision in its claims and its distinctions, his second essay, ‘Darkness at Noon: the Eclipse of “The Permanent Things”’ betrays the same carelessness and disorder in the layout of its argument. Initially, this essay’s mushy organization slips by the reader or only slightly annoys him. All of the author’s points at least generally cohere, and his general theme is easily apprehended: modernity has abandoned morality, he says, and Christian behavior and belief is the only remedy. But any attempt to return to the essay and trace the progression of its arguments is nearly maddening. Though Kreeft identifies a clear paradigm to which he intends to conform his essay—observation of society’s symptoms followed by diagnosis of its disease, then prognosis, and then prescription of its cure—, this adds little clarity to most of the essay. Kreeft never defines the symptoms plaguing modern civilization, and thus when he diagnoses modernity’s disease (amidst myriad digressions) as the ‘eclipse of the permanent things’, the relationship between cause and effect is indiscernible. Disease and symptom are confounded: both seem to signify alienation and moral dissolution in this essay. Fortunately, the author presents his prognosis and cure with more lucidity, but his exhortation to hope and love, though valuable encouragement, is insufficient to redeem his essay.

Clarity and order, at least in structure, is preserved through the next two chapters, yet these are perhaps even more deeply flawed than their predecessors. In his third essay, ‘The Goodness of Goodness and the Badness of Badness’, the author systematically relates C.S. Lewis’ responses to twenty (Kreeft’s lists are quite wearying!) branches of modern philosophy in an effort to arm his audience with ‘intellectual weapons, arguments’ (67). But in reality, Kreeft offers his readers little more than empty cartridges. Many of the ‘refutations’ recorded are undeveloped arguments or simply naked assertions—they prove nothing—and several examples, taken from Lewis’ fiction, are not arguments at all, which Lewis himself would surely point out. Without extensive elaboration, much of this chapter would be useless in a philosophical debate.¹ It is surely a strange error for a respected academic to regard such inconclusive material as adequate, logical proof, but Kreeft makes the mistake again in the fourth essay, ‘Can the Natural Law Ever Be Abolished from the Heart of Man?’. Here the author ‘puts Lewis in dialogue with Saint Thomas Aquinas on whether the abolition of man (i.e., man as moral) can ever

happen' (10), and though he lays out both sides' cases quite clearly, he draws a dumbfounding conclusion. To support Lewis' argument that humankind can irreversibly shed its sensibility to natural law, Kreeft cites great thinkers such as Pascal and Kierkegaard, as well as the research of Dr Scott Peck, who has discovered 'living instances of genuinely amoral people, specimens that cannot exist', admits Kreeft, 'according to the con side of our debate' (102). The 'con side' rests on the Thomistic assertion that the apprehension of Natural Law forms part of man's essence, and no creature may shed or alter its essence. Though he openly concedes that Aquinas only asserts and fails to 'supply any direct demonstration of his thesis', Kreeft, after augmenting the Summa with several of his own suggestions, bafflingly sides with Aquinas and his (admittedly unproven) a priori argument (123). This conclusion not only betrays the essay's defective logic, but it also weakens the coherence of the entire book. In two other chapters, Kreeft seems to affirm Lewis' position, and he propounds the prophetic character of *The Abolition of Man* throughout his book. Why should he warn so urgently against a fate that he admits here cannot occur?

Kreeft promises to put aside logic and argumentation and provide some 'comic relief' in Chapter Five, 'Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos: The Abolition of Man* in Late-Night Comedy Format', but the essay offers little relief for the reader's frustration. The two works mentioned in the essay's title affirm, according to Kreeft, the same truth, and therefore 'it seems a very right, proper, and obvious thing to compare them' (134)—but he seems to do everything in the world but compare them. For the first thirty pages of the essay, Kreeft expounds on the virtues of comedic presentation, repeating the same points several times (sometimes verbatim); he explains the merits of Jewish comedy specifically ('God', after all 'is Jewish. Therefore his universe is full of Jewish humor, Jewish ironies' [145]); he attempts his own humor, staging a (miserably unfunny) conversation between American political figures; he even quotes at length from Lewis, Kierkegaard, and Jewish humorists—every remotely relevant author not named Walker Percy. Not a single excerpt from, or even basic summary of, Percy's work appears until the final three pages of the essay, thus any reader unfamiliar with *Lost in the Cosmos* is lost in this essay. It is difficult, one imagines, for most readers (not commissioned to review the work) simply to finish the essay.

After all of this, Kreeft's final essay, 'The Joyful Cosmology: Perelandra's "Great Dance" as an Alternative World View to Modern Reductionism', comes like a good chair and a warm fire at the end of a weary journey. Its general outline is clear, and, except for some minor ramblings, the author holds to it; his analysis is lucid and untainted by any of the fatal errors plaguing his other essays; his central theme,

Lewis' attempt through a remythologized cosmology to unbind the black spell of Tao-less Reductionism, is insightful, illuminating, and encouraging. And Lewis himself, quoted at astonishing lengths, does much of the talking in this chapter (though Kreeft sometimes annoyingly augments the quotations with his own, very distracting, bracketed commentary).

Kreeft consistently saves the best for last throughout this book. The sixth chapter is without a doubt the finest of the work, and inside the other essays Kreeft is very careful to conclude by poignantly reminding his readers of their Christian duty and their hope in Christ. If we trust in Charity and in our Lord, he says, and if we look to the luminaries He has given us, we may save civilization after all, and, what is more, we will surely save our souls. Of course, one bright essay and a few shining paragraphs are not enough to save a book. The work is most enjoyable when Kreeft is quoting Lewis; if its title is of any interest, I suggest that you bypass Kreeft's commentary and revisit Lewis' own writings directly.

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Notes

1. In addition to the flaws outlined above, this chapter contains Kreeft's unexplained, off-hand assertion that 'Lewis can help us only a little' in cultivating 'suffering love and persistent prayer', the spiritual weapons of cultural warfare. This constitutes a grave indictment of much of Lewis' work, and must be either defended or discarded