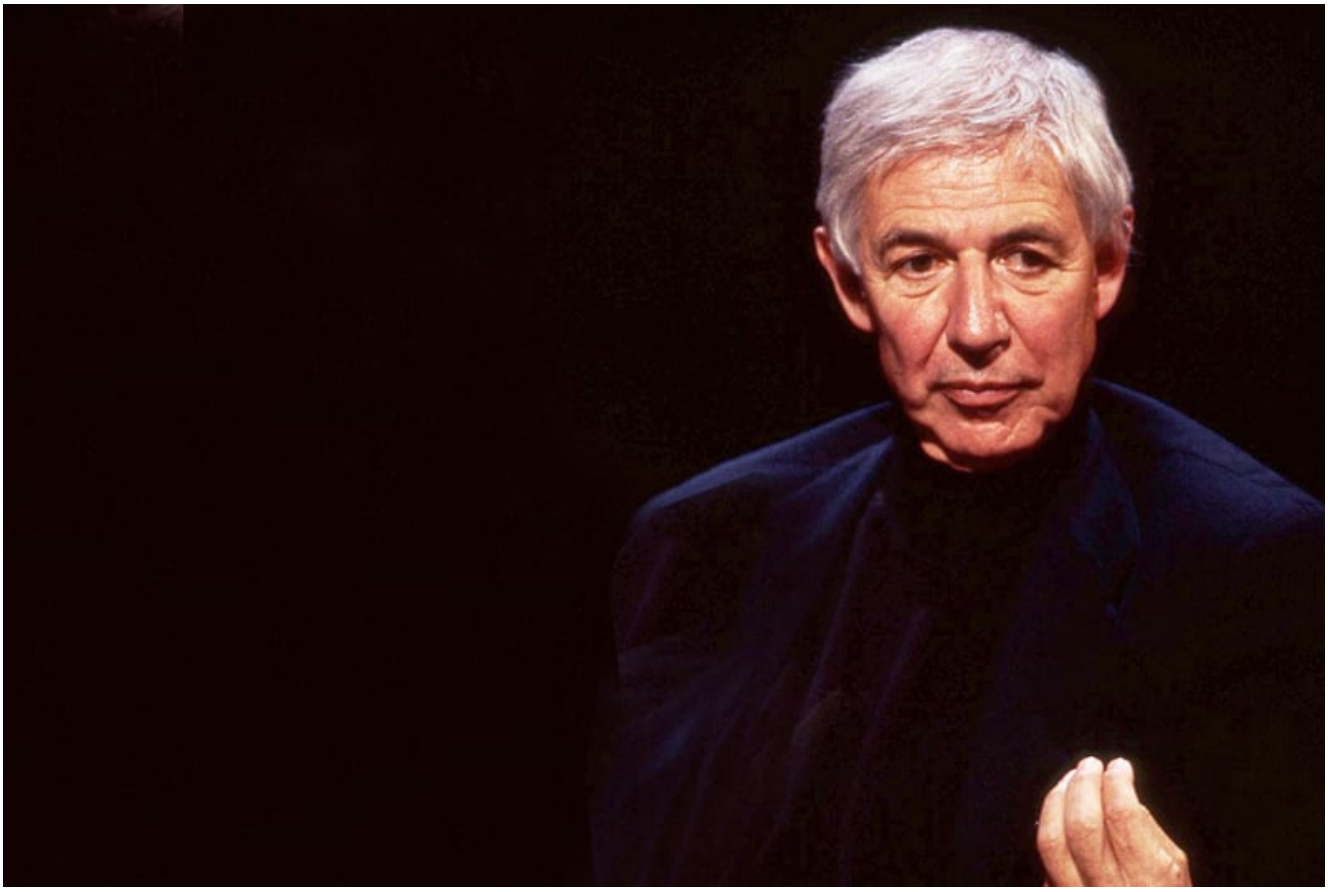
Lewis Wolpert: In Appreciation

by Jillian Becker (March 2021)



Lewis Wolpert , who died early this year at the age of 91, was a very distinguished, much honored scientist. Wikipedia provides a summary—as clear as a non-scientist could hope for I suppose—of his important contributions to "cell and developmental biology," the subject of which he was Professor at University College London. For his work he will long be remembered.

But it is not Wolpert the Scientist I am writing about here—I could not—but Lewis my lifelong friend.

While not knowingly related to each other, we were both descendants of Lithuanian Jews who emigrated to South Africa in the late 19th century. We grew up in the same lush and spacious suburb of Johannesburg. His father was in partnership for a while with my mother in a book-publishing enterprise. His aunt, Helen Suzman, renowned as a doughty fighter against apartheid in the South African parliament, was a protégée of my father, Dr. Bernard Friedman.

Lewis was two and half years older than I, but still at the University of the Witwatersrand studying Engineering (he was an engineer before he became a biologist) when I started there as a student majoring in English and History in 1949. We met at parties, sometimes danced with each other. Decades later, when both of us were parents, both divorced, both on the downward slope of life, dining pleasantly tête-à-tête in London, I asked him why he had never dated me in our university days.

"I need you to give me an explanation," I said, "because whatever reasons you had for not asking me out probably apply to all the others who should have swarmed about me, vying jealously for my company, but did not."

"I must remind you," he said, "that your father was intimidating and your mother was *terrifying*."

On the nail! I didn't need further explanation.

I will miss Lewis more than I will most of the lost friends of my generation—of whom I am now, since his death, the last survivor. Something that made him specially valuable to me was that he was a living witness to the fact that my mother was terrifying. I mentioned her as that to some fellow guests once at his house. One of them commented that everyone thinks they had an unhappy childhood and blames their mother for it. Lewis promptly came to my defense. "Oh, but in Jillian's case," he said, "it's absolutely true."

He made up for having failed me as a boyfriend in our youth by being charming to me in our later years. Gossip, reminiscences, boasts about our children, laughter, over many a dinner. Visits to the theater, followed by ruthless criticism of the plays on the rides home. One memorable night, lobster at the Savoy followed by the pre-view of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. No criticism that night. We chose to bask in reflected glory. "What our boy has achieved!" we crowed, acting the roles of our grandparents who'd escaped from oppression in eastern Europe and crossed half the world to open a bright future for their children. That was our only claim to relationship with the playwright whose Jewish family had fled Czechoslovakia in 1939, but we made the most of it because we'd loved his play.

I tried never to miss Lewis on radio or TV. His unstrained brilliance was on full display in interviews and debates about science versus religion, in a quiz show that he dominated, and in programs that he wrote and presented himself. There were two of those I found particularly interesting: a review of the altercation between Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Isaac Newton as to which of them was the first to invent calculus; and one in which Lewis deplored the omission of Rosalind Franklin when a Nobel Prize was awarded to the two men whom she significantly helped in the discovery of the structure of DNA.

About religion we were in perfect agreement. We were both atheists. Not only were we against Belief, we were devotees of Doubt. When a university colleague—not a scientist—told him that he feared being wrong about something he was teaching, Lewis expostulated, "You fear being wrong? I try to be wrong *every day*!" Could there be a better description of the scientist's ideal state of mind?

Yet he did insist that science could arrive at the truth. On a radio program (*Desert Island Discs*, in which a celebrity named the recorded music he would like to have with

him if he was stuck on a desert island, and related the music to something that had happened in his life, or that he had thought or achieved), Lewis was asked by the interviewer how he could be sure that any scientific finding was true. The implication, covertly in defense of religion, was that it was arrogant of scientists to trust their conclusions. Lewis's unforgettable reply was, "The blood *does* circulate!"

We were not, however, in agreement about politics, Lewis and I. He voted Labour, I voted Conservative. But he was not very interested in politics. He was on the Left because, it was understood without needing to be said, "we" Jews in the diaspora, aware of the tragic history of our people, could not be on the side of the pogrommists, the genocides, the kings and doges who instituted ghettoes and who surely constituted the historic Right.

That he took this difference between us lightly was obvious in the way he would introduce me, saying cheerfully, "This is Jillian—she is *very* right-wing." It was not a criticism. More the imparting of a somewhat startling fact, as one might say, "Meet Serena, she's a trapeze artiste."

He found it least troublesome just to accept the Left's consensus on political issues. The Left held that Israel was an illegitimate state that colonialists had planted on territory belonging from time immemorial to "the Palestinians" who continued to be bullied by their Jewish usurpers? Okay, got it, was Lewis's amiable attitude to what he felt was a tediously argued topic. Once when it came up and I declared, "The Israelis are far too lenient with the Palestinians!" he burst out laughing the way people do when a notion they have unquestioningly accepted is suddenly contradicted and they can only take the remark as a daring quip.

We were fellow guests at a dinner party when a discussion arose on the morality of hedonism versus

asceticism. Strong opinions were expressed on both sides of the argument. Finally one who had been arguing for asceticism turned to Lewis and asked, “What do *you* think?” Without a moment’s hesitation he replied, ‘Oh, nothing’s too good for me!” I applauded. The remark put Things firmly in their place.

Despite his spectacular achievements and all the honors poured on him, and despite his being pre-eminently a man of Reason, he suffered bouts of deep depression. “Clinical depression” he said it was, and explained to me that it had nothing to do with outward circumstances—though it helped him, he said, to remember at such times that he was a Fellow of The Royal Society (Britain’s national academy of sciences). When I was mourning the death of my spouse, he felt that I was a fellow sufferer, even though the nature of my sadness was not the same as his. Mine was not “clinical depression” but simply grief. I was prescribed certain drugs to help me endure my misery—which they did not. Lewis and I would talk on the phone about the inefficacy of this or that drug to assuage the anguish of despair—inexplicable in his case, irremediable in mine. Eventually time brought me relief. But his affliction returned again and again, at one point making him seriously consider killing himself.

Death was not frightening to him. He and his second wife, Australian novelist Jill Neville (who also became a close friend of mine), made a pact that if either of them were to face an agonizing death, the other would act to prevent it. And when Jill’s death from cancer approached with its crippling pains, he saw to it that she had the morphine she needed regardless of regulations and moral strictures. Her loss was a circumstance of his life that could have been expected to cause depression but, agonizing as it was, he said he did not find it as hard to bear as the sickness of depression itself.

There were events in his professional life that would seem to justify melancholy if not despair. Among the worst of

them was the rejection of his theory of how DNA caused cells to become the various parts of a developing embryo. Only one or two of his peers accepted it—fortunately one or two of those whom he held in highest esteem. They bolstered his self-confidence when it was nearly shattered, and eventually he convinced his critics that he was right.

His private life had its shocks. His father was murdered by a burglar. His first wife, Bettie Brownstein (related, rumor had it, to the Bronsteins of Odessa including Trotsky), left him to live with her lover, a black woman. Their multi-storeyed house with its large well-tended garden where crowds of summer guests would take their wine out for a stroll on the lawn, was sold. There, Lewis had lived like a millionaire, because that's what Betty was. Her father was a stockbroker with only one client, himself. He liked to say he had "made a fortune by getting out too soon". He bequeathed the fortune to Betty.

Lewis moved into a garden flat in nearby Belsize Park. There he lived as he had in his student days—bookshelves made of planks supported by columns of bricks from building sites, paintings by friends covering the walls, ready-cooked meals brought in from Marks and Spencer—happy with Jill who had never stopped living like a hippy.

He was widowed in 1995. But it was not in his nature to live a celibate life. He would tell me about his love affairs, or some of them. One in particular he spoke of with obvious satisfaction, repeatedly informing me, as if he could hardly believe his good luck, "You see, it's so convenient—she lives just round the corner of my street!"

He remarried when he was in his eighties. By that time I had come to live in America and we exchanged news only by email. He wrote to me that his third wife, Alison, "looks after me very well." Dreadfully for a man who needed to think and write almost as urgently as to breathe, he suffered from

Alzheimer's disease in his last few years. Old and vulnerable, he died from "Covid19-related complications" during the pandemic. He must have hated being kept in quarantine, missed having company. He was gregarious. He enjoyed giving parties where famous scientists and writers mingled with his neighbors and old friends. All in the past now. The revels ended. Not a rack left behind.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary, The New Criterion, The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter, The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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