

## THE ABOLITION OF MAN—NOTES AND INTRO

By Andrew Dósa, for the C.S. Lewis Society of California. February 25, 2015

C. S. Lewis's work covers an impressive range of topics and genres. Few of his books and lectures appear to be patently prophetic. One exception is *The Abolition of Man*<sup>1</sup>, a publication of three Riddell Memorial Lectures he gave in February 1943 at Durham University. Lewis was given two textbooks to review. The lectures are his criticism and rejection of the materialism and subjective moral philosophy promoted in *The Control of Language* (1940), by Australians Alex King and Martin Ketley, and *The Reading and Writing of English* (1936) by E. G. Biaggini.

Beginning with a tone of grace and courtesy, Lewis refers to the *Control of Language* as *The Green Book* and conceals the identity of its authors, calling Gaius and Titius (Latin forms of generally representative standard fictitious names.) Lewis wastes no time exposing the relativist philosophy the authors disguise in an English textbook for young impressionable students. These “innovators” want students to operate on their own moral foundation, which really means they will operate arbitrarily and without grounding or certainty. Their philosophy cuts the soul out of the student and sets him (and society) up for disaster in the future.

In marked contrast is the Tao—the Natural Law—which is written within us as individuals, and which every culture across the planet has recognized. The Tao informs us and sets out universal moral certainty and obligation. “This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as 'the Tao' . . . It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are .”(29)

### Chapter 1: Men Without Chests

Main Points of this lecture/chapter:

- 1a. The Green Book promotes a relativist, materialist, subjective morality. He calls the authors “innovators.”
- 1b. Teachers and our culture ought to both promote the Tao, objective truth and values, and train students in clear disciplined thinking, to advance the student's moral development.
- 1c. Man is a three part being. The head (reason) ought to rule our belly (appetites or desires/urges) through the chest (soul/passion for truth). If we are without this foundation, and sunk in the subjective, we will become Men Without Chests.

Gaius and Titus remind us of a story of author Samuel Coleridge. Two tourists respond to a waterfall. One says it is beautiful and calls it "sublime." The other esteems it less, thinking it is only "pretty." The authors reject the value statement about the waterfall. It is, they claim, a statement about feelings. "I have feelings associated in my mind with the word 'sublime.'" "I have sublime feelings. . . ." ““This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something: and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.”” (14).

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<sup>1</sup>The Abolition of Man: Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools (Oxford: University Press, 1943)

Lewis sees two profound implications and problems consequent with thinking this way. If morality (or every judgment) is subjective, will students will hear the message, and believe:

1. Every statement about morality and value only expresses a speaker's emotional state;
2. All statements about morality and value are unimportant and arational (p. 15).

Lewis asks if children will be persuaded to deny all value or truth statements in their thinking. He is convinced children will believe all their emotions and thoughts will be understood as contemptible and a-rational. Will children (and eventually adults) see things only as material? For example, will the Atlantic be nothing more than so many million tons of cold salt water (19-20)?

Lewis counters that the task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. He sees Gaius and Titius as propagandists for a philosophy that will destroy the humanity of students, who will have no means to analyze and reject the advertisements of moral subjectivity. Students will have no foundation for sound thinking and will not develop morally.

We all need to be trained to be sound thinkers and moral agents. Our emotional or instinctual reactions must be mastered by demanding and moral thinking. We must constantly measure what we hear, see, and experience by an objective standard of right and wrong.

Lewis cites educators before him who would agree with him. Aristotle said the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he or she "ought" to like or dislike:

When the age for reflective thought comes, the pupil who has been thus trained in 'ordinate affections' or 'just sentiments' will easily find the first principles of Ethic: but to the corrupt man they will never be visible at all and he can make no progress in that science (26).

Plato argued:

The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful . . . All this before he is of an age to reason; so that when Reason at length comes to him, then, bred as he has been, he will hold out his hands in welcome and recognize her (i.e., reason) because of the affinity he bears to her (26-27).

A contemporary of Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, would side with him.

Why would we want to maintain the traditional view rather than trade it in for a modern subjective to-each-his-own framework? Lewis thinks we humans can be complete and in harmony only if we are built on the foundation of the Tao.

Emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it) . . . they can be reasonable or unreasonable as they conform to Reason or fail to

conform. The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it. (29-30).

For those within the Tao, the task is to train the pupil to respond appropriately. "Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism." (33-34)

Without this training, we are troused apes, caught by a false structure for thought and decision making. Do we assume impulses, feelings, or urges, are instincts inherent to us, which we would logically follow and which we ought to follow? But how do we order these instincts: by the urgency of sensation, in any moment? By the importance of one urge over another? By pressure of the group? By gain we aspire to? By logic? Lewis notes this is a process of valuing different urges/feelings. It is outside the Tao, yet informed by it.

The logical end and danger of Gaius and Titius' attempt to "debunk" the traditional, objective standard of truth is that they must either reject all statements of value or work outside the Tao to produce their own standard. They might argue their own standard is governed by the need to advance the survival of the human species. But then the educator has moved from initiating the child's conscience to attempting to conform man in "his" own image. Is this not the shifting of the educator's promotion of truth and discerning proper values to turning the child by propaganda for their new morality?

Plato used an analogy of the king governed by his executive. Reason, our executive, must rule our appetites by the "spirited element." The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The head (reason) rules our belly (appetites or desires/urges) through our chests (passion for truth). The chest is to be informed by the educator in values of right and wrong. The Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment is the indispensable liaison officer between cerebral man and visceral man. It is this element (the middle of man) that is uniquely human. By intellect alone, man is merely spirit and by his appetite alone he is merely an animal. If we are not ruled/ordered accordingly we lose what distinguishes us as human. If the modern world's new morality replaces the Tao, we will have an entire generation "without chests"—without a passion for good and a hatred of evil.

As Lewis came to the close of his first lecture, he addressed a defense raised by the new educators. They called those in opposition anti-intellectual. But are they intellectual themselves? Lewis said they were creating a future of trouble, and they were, themselves, creating a generation of new men who will be anything but intellectual. "[In] the tragic-comedy of our situation[,] . . . we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. . . . In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." (35).

Follow up point: Could Lewis have said the educators were no more able to state the (superior) value about their own views, as they were merely sharing their own feelings about values and morality? We feel our morality that there is no overarching morality is superior to your morality that there is an overarching morality. After all, no moral view is superior to any other view, except that ours is superior to any other view.

## Chapter 2: The Way

Main Points of this lecture/chapter:

- 2a. What would the individual and society be like if it was on The Way—without the Tao? What if the Innovators prevailed? How would the Innovators justify the new morality? Is it instinct, true reason, promoting the survival of the species/posterity?
- 2b. What is the end result of life without the Tao? It is first, the end of man's morality, and second, the end of Life. Without the Tao, there is no morality and there is no life.

"The practical result of education in the spirit of *The Green Book* must be the destruction of the society which accepts it." (39). Besides that unacceptable result, Lewis lays out the "theoretical" difficulties of this philosophy.

Gaius and Titius are skeptical about the Tao, traditional values, but they are not skeptical about values they promote. They have their end game, but they avoid calling the end good. Rather, the end is necessary or progressive or efficient. They won't admit their opinion is that this is "good" or that their opinion does not simply describe their own emotions about it. They are not skeptical enough about their own values while they criticize the values of others. With a mind to debunk traditional values, they believe their own values are immune from the debunking process.

How would Gaius and Titius address death for a good cause, i.e., courage, valor, or martyrdom? Would they consider this a virtue? They would recognize the utility of the sacrifice of some for the whole, the community. This is about the value of death by some for the benefit of others. Would Gaius and Titius be willing to die for the community?

Would these Innovators honor selfishness as more rational or intelligent than altruism? We might agree with their use of reason when challenging traditional values, but we know they would not employ reason to debunk their own values. Is the refusal to sacrifice one's self more rational than consenting to do so? Do the innovators truly care about preserving society if they won't pay the price/cost of dying for the community? How can they ask others to do this?

If there is no true rational core, would they say we are driven by instinct? Which instinct among many? Is it the urgency of one instinct at a particular time? Is it the instinct most frequently felt? Is there a higher order of instinct? Lewis would argue we are not driven by instinct, but perhaps we feel the pull or push of impulse. But they are essentially the same. We have drives, appetites, impulses, impressions, ideas, urges; they are all variations on the theme. How do we control them or choose among them? This process involves moral choice.

"Each instinct, if you listen to it, will claim to be gratified at the expense of all the rest. By the very act of listening to one rather than to others we have already prejudged the case." (P 48)

Without a higher court of judgment we have no reason to prefer one instinct over another.

"Either the premises already concealed an imperative or the conclusion remains merely in the indicative." (49)

If we argue there are "basic", "fundamental", "primal", or "deepest" instincts, we are employing

the language of judgment about the instinct, and not deriving judgment from the instinct. We are falling into an infinite regress of instincts, without a moral foundation to determine which instinct to obey. How do these instincts clarify the need to keep promises or to respect individual life/another individual's life?

The Innovators voice the claims of posterity, and our duty to insure the species' survival. Do they truly believe we make any decisions based on a moral call to preserve the species? Lewis thinks this is an absurd question. "Unless the Innovator were himself using the Tao he could never have learned of such a duty. But side by side with it in the Tao lie those duties of justice and good faith which he is ready to debunk. What is his warrant?" (55) "[S]ide by side with it [i.e., instinct] in the Tao, and limiting it, lie the inflexible demands of justice, and the rule that, in the long run, all men are our brothers. Whence comes the Innovator's authority to pick and choose?"(55)

Lewis sees no answer to this or the other questions the Innovators cannot answer. Thus, he is left with the Tao, which "is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements." (56)

"What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) 'ideologies,' all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess." (56)

Lewis proceeds to the question of the immutability of the Tao. Does it change or is it ever subject to modification? The answer seems to be that its greater structure would not change, but there is room for innovation. "Those who understand the spirit of the Tao and who had been led by that spirit can modify it in directions which that spirit itself demands." But the modifications would, of course, be modest. Lewis says the Confucian "Golden Rule, "Do not do to others," is improved by the "Do unto others" of Jesus. (58-59)

Lewis concludes that without the Tao, there is no morality. No one can order others to do anything, if everything is relative. If subjective morality carries the day, there is no foundation for anyone but yourself, and a person is driven by the loudest voice among his instincts, appetites, thoughts, or impulses. One has not even a basis for deciding among the voices screaming or whispering in his head. Either the Tao, which the innovators reject, must inform us about what we "ought" to do or we must reject all such value statements.

The Innovator finds no basis for a system of values in his various propositions. The principles he requires are found outside of his position, and in fact he finds them in the Tao.

As Lewis closes this lecture, he asks how the modern mind could understand and embrace the Tao as an absolute? He implies we gain some control of the Tao, or perhaps, that by embracing it, we gain some authority to make decisions that result in our mastering ourselves. And then comes the invitation to explore man's pursuit of nature and appetite to conquer nature. He now sets the stage for his final lecture in the series. How does man master nature if he cannot master himself?

### Chapter 3: The Abolition of Man

Main Points of this lecture/chapter:

- 3a. Can Man conquer nature? Ultimately, man only gains understanding, but he does not change nature. The laws of nature are not undone by man's knowledge. (E.g., Man may fly but the law of gravity remains.) Controlling nature is really some men exercising power and control over other men. Lewis now begins to call the Innovators the "Conditioners", as they are now conditioning man to exercise control over others.
- 3b. Each gain, advance of man does not strengthen him; it weakens him.
- 3c. Without the Tao, man loses control over himself. Man cannot "control" nature if Man loses control over himself. Man will eventually cease to be Man. This new morality will lead to The Abolition of Man.

Man is proud of his "conquest of nature." Is there an element of truth in man's progression in the scientific enterprise of gaining power over nature? What has happened in our "conquest"?

Lewis considers man's progression and mastery in three examples: the aeroplane, the wireless, and the contraceptive. Man's power over nature really is "some" men's power over nature. Those who really possess the power over nature are those who control or provide others with this power. They choose who will benefit or profit by this, and who will not. (68) "...Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument." (69).

Specifically about contraception, Lewis argues that others who do not control the power, become the subject or patient of those with power, as do future generations. "...[T]here is a paradoxical, negative sense in which all possible future generations are the patients or subjects of a power wielded by those already alive. By contraception simply, they are denied existence; by contraception used as a means of selective breeding, they are, without their concurring voice, made to be what one generation, for its own reasons, may choose to prefer." (68).

"In reality . . . if any one age really attains, by eugenics and scientific education, the power to make its descendants what it pleases, all men who live after it are the patients of that power. They are weaker, not stronger: for though we may have put wonderful machines in their hands we have pre-ordained how they are to use them." (70).

Each advance will not strengthen man, but weaken man. Man will continue to lose control over himself, or, perhaps, he will be moving farther away from what could allow him to gain control over himself.

The final stage is, when Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology, believes he has obtained full control over himself. *Human* nature will be the last part of nature to surrender to man.... The battle will indeed be won. But who, precisely, will have won it?" (Italics original. 72)

Again, Lewis reminds us "the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what *they* please." (Italics original. 72) In the

past, people were cautious about or limited in exercising power. In the future, the power will be greatly increased. In the past, man understood he was subject to the Tao. In the future, values will be “mere natural phenomena.” (74)

Lewis now makes another transition. Those he previously called Innovators he now calls Conditioners. These Conditioners are to “choose what kind of artificial Tao they will, for their own good reasons, produce in the Human race. They are the motivators, the creators of motives.” (74-75.)

To this chilling picture, Lewis says he is not supposing these conditioners are bad. They are, rather, not men at all. They are, if you like, men who have sacrificed their share in traditional humanity in order to devote themselves to the task of deciding what ‘Humanity’ shall henceforth mean. ‘Good’ and ‘bad,’ applied to them, are words without content: for it is from them that the content of these words is henceforward to be derived.” (76)

“It is not that they are bad men. They are not men at all. Stepping outside the Tao, they have stepped into the void... Man’s final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man.” (77)

After the Good has been debunked, all that remains is “I want.” (78) If you will not obey the Tao, or else commit suicide, obedience to impulse (and therefore, in the long run, to mere ‘nature’) is the only course left open.” (79)

Under this new regime, society will look like the amoral world of Joseph Stalin. The whole human race will be subjected to some individual men, and they will be subject to themselves, and their irrational impulses. The ultimate end of the physical reality of nature is man. Without the Tao, man cannot control himself. “Man’s conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature’s conquest of Man.” (80)

So the battle to save Man involves understanding the efforts to control Man, of whatever level of sophistication. We know B. F. Skinner understood the issue. He was a behaviorist (i.e., a social conditioner) who envisioned a new society in which scientific planners control human behavior through stimulus-response mechanisms (see *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and *Walden Two*). Skinner argues that the only thing that prevents us from completely controlling human behavior are pesky traditional values which need to be swept away. His efforts to effectuate human control were not successful, but he represented the spirit of the new morality.

After World War II, the work of Nazi propagandists/behaviorists was not rejected. The U.S. government, and soon thereafter, “Big Business”, embraced the premises, also with mixed, limited results. But it planted seeds, and the Conditioners continued with renewed vigor. The scientific management of human behavior was built on the premise that human behavior was primarily the function of either natural or historical phenomena. Whether or not we like it, (it could be argued) the human race has been acting out as if it were true.

Lewis doubts “history shows us one example of a man, who, having stepped outside traditional morality and attained power, has used that power benevolently. I am inclined to think that the Conditioners will hate the conditioned.” (78) While he was probably considering the maintaining and exercising of political power, he would certainly agree the social manipulation by those in power, such as marketers, reflects the same abuses of power.

Lewis thinks we may arrive at this place by how we usually define "Nature." "Nature seems to be the spatial and temporal, as distinct from what is less fully so or not so at all. She seems to be the world of quantity, as against the world of quality: of objects as against consciousness: of the bound, as against the wholly or partially autonomous: of that which knows no values as against that which both has and perceives values: of efficient causes (or, in some modern systems, of no causality at all) as against final causes." (81)

"Now I take it that when we understand a thing analytically and then dominate and use it for our own convenience we reduce it to the level of "Nature" in the sense that we suspend our judgments of value about it, ignore its final cause (if any), and treat it in terms of quantity." (81)  
What happens when we reduce human nature to mere nature?

"[A]s soon as we take the final step of reducing our own species to the level of mere Nature, the whole process is stultified, for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same." (83)

"[O]nce our souls, that is, ourselves, have been given up, the power thus conferred will not belong to us. We shall in fact be the slaves and puppets of that to which we have given our souls. It is in Man's power to treat himself as a mere 'natural object' and his own judgments of value as raw material for scientific manipulation to alter at will. . . . [I]f man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite, that is, mere Nature, in the person his dehumanized Conditioners (83-84).

"Either we are rational spirit obliged forever to obey the absolute values of the Tao, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own 'natural' impulses." (84)

"Only the Tao provides a common human law of action which can overarch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of the rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery." (84-85)

"While we speak from within the Tao we can speak of Man having power over himself in a sense truly analogous to an individual's self-control. But the moment we step outside and regard the Tao as a mere subjective product, this possibility has disappeared." (86)

So how can we regain our sight? Our meaning? Our purpose? If we know the dangers presented by the banishing of the Tao, can we stop it? Can we recognize the lies? Can we see through the lies with insight to see the real?

"The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to "see through" first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To "see through" all things is the same as not to see (91).

Appendix: Illustrations of the Tao  
See pp. 95-121 for examples of Tao.