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C.S. Lewis: The Abolition of Man

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C.S. Lewis: The Abolition of Man

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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C.S. Lewis: The Abolition of Man

Christopher Horton

C.S. Lewis: The Abolition of Man

by Christopher Horton

The abundance of words written by C.S. Lewis is nothing short of extraordinary. His bibliography extends eighty-two full pages at the end of a popular book about his life (Hooper 801-883). Essays, children's stories, reviews, scholarly papers and science fiction are all a part of his impressive literary resume. The only thing more amazing than the amount of writings by C.S. Lewis is the amount of writings about C.S. Lewis.

In this mass of both criticism and commendation, one theme continues to recur: C.S. Lewis's idea of a natural, moral law of the universe, which he calls the Tao. Once this principle of Lewis's thought is understood, the idea of the Tao becomes evident in almost every piece of C.S. Lewis's writings, from the fantasy to the scholarly essay. This essay will seek to define Lewis's idea of the Tao, demonstrate where the principle of the Tao is reinforced in Lewis's fictional works, and conclude with Lewis's 'prophetic' warnings to modern humanity's rebellion against the Tao.

Put quite simple and succinctly, Lewis himself defines the Tao as, "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" (Abolition of Man 29).

The very word 'Tao' may frighten some readers, as it sounds like a mystical Oriental concept with no bearing on the lives of modern American readers. However, Lewis uses the

word 'Tao' simply for brevity (AM 29). For Lewis, the word 'Tao' serves as an abbreviation for objective truth, or more accurately objective morality, which transcends human time and geography. Evidencing its universality, this concept of objective truth extends to Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and even Oriental writings. For example, "Thou shalt not kill" is a moral law that extends beyond Christianized American culture. This same moral law can be found in Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu, Ancient Chinese, Roman, and Norse codes of conduct (AM 99). In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis argues that this continuity of moral law is not coincidental.

The entire point of *The Abolition of Man* is to illustrate that the moral law transcends the physical realm, and is necessary for purposeful intellect (Aeschliman 79). Without the Tao, Lewis argues, one cannot suggest that one act is more virtuous than another, or one act is worse than another (*The Case for Christianity* 4). With the rejection of objective truth, all meaningful conversation is void, in addition to justice, benevolence, and mercy (Meilaender 189-90). For example, how shall we call what Hitler did to the Jews wrong, unless there is some kind of moral standard by which to judge him?

In conjunction with Lewis's Tao, Thomas Aquinas refers to a "law to which man is naturally inclined, and to act according to reason," and that "one standard of truth for all

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[people], although it may not be known by all [people]" (Aquinas 358). Aquinas provides support for his statement by observing how the Pythagorean theorem, though not "known" by all men, it is still true for all men, whether they have knowledge of its existence or not (Aquinas 358). The person in the 5th century BC who rejects the Pythagorean theorem and the atheist live under the same objective laws whether they acknowledge them or not. Just as the Pythagorean theorem is true for all, so also are objective morals—for the eleventh century Christian philosopher, for Lewis, for the anti-Pythagoreanist and today's atheist.

Having defined Lewis's idea of the Tao, let us observe how it appears as a recurring theme in Lewis's writing. A few examples will be examined here from his fictional works, *The Narnia Chronicles*, *Till We Have Faces*, and finally *The Screwtape Letters*.

First, C.S. Lewis depicts the human inclination to reject the Tao in several of his characters. Perhaps the most blatant rebellion against the Tao occurs in Uncle Andrew in the novel *The Magician's Nephew*. In response to Digory telling Andrew that telling a lie is a "rotten thing to do," Andrew replies, "... you must understand that rules of that sort, however excellent they may be for little boys... can't possibly be expected to apply to profound students, great thinkers and sages. Men like me... are freed from common rules" (MN 20).

By Andrew's statement, Lewis is showing the human tendency to exempt oneself from the authority of the Tao. It is interesting to note that in the third chapter of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis states that one who rejects the Tao eventually will contradict himself (AM 63). Lewis maintains that if any values remain, the Tao remains, and if the Tao is rejected, all value judgements are rejected (Hooper 336).

The Tao and value judgements go hand in hand; one cannot be kept when the other is rejected (AM 54). A person who denies the Tao simply *cannot* refrain from making value judgements themselves.

True to Lewis's prophecy, Andrew finds himself contradicting himself only a few pages later. He appeals to Digory's sense of "honour and dignity to go to the aid of a lady in distress" (MN 27). This appeal is simply a call to return to an unseen, moral standard, one which Digory seems to comprehend better than Andrew.

In the midst of this discussion between Digory and Andrew, Andrew brings out a box for examination. The box, according to Andrew, "might contain something highly dangerous" (MN 21). Andrew deduces that the box "isn't Greek, Old Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, or Chinese. It is older than any of these nations" (MN 22). He also concludes his study by stating that the box is from another world, indeed another Nature (MN 23). This box, universal to all, supernatural, and older than all the nations is offered by Lewis as a pictorial symbol of the Tao.

Interestingly, the box contains only dust—albeit magic dust, but dust nonetheless. It is supposable that Andrew believes that the Tao has died—ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Lewis has the opposite experience when he began to recognize the principle of a universal, objective moral law in 1929. Using bones instead of dust, and speaking of the Tao, he states: "As the dry bones shook and came together in that dreadful valley of Ezekiel's, so now a philosophical theorem, cerebrally entertained, began to stir and heave and throw off its graveclothes, and stood upright and became a living presence. I was allowed to play at philosophy no longer" (Hooper 330).

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For Lewis, bowing to the Law of the Tao meant mercy from God. Andrew exalts himself as if he were not under its authority and attempts to kill the Tao in his rebellion. Consequently, Andrew must live in hypocrisy, fear, and contradiction, and eventually be mocked and tortured by Aslan's creatures.

In another of C.S. Lewis's fictional novels, *Till We Have Faces*, Orual spends considerable time asking her wise teacher about the nature of the Tao. After her experience with Psyche on the mountain, Orual questions the principles of truth and reality to Fox in the inquiry, "You don't think—not possibly—there might be things real though we don't see them?"

Fox replies, "Certainly I do. Such things as Justice, Equality, the Soul or musical notes."

Orual responds, "Oh Grandfather, I don't mean things like that . . . are there no things—I mean *things*—but what we see?" (TWHF 150).

Peter Kreeft comments accurately on this dialogue: "The things which Orual suspects are not physical things, yet they are not abstract ideas, either. They [Justice, Equality, the Soul] are solid and substantial and real" (Kreeft 45).

This statement from Kreeft is exactly Lewis's position regarding the Tao. Lewis believes that morals do not become subjective simply because we cannot see them, nor are invisible objects less real (AM 25). Just as we established earlier, the Pythagorean theorem is not 'less real' because it is unseen and immaterial (Kreeft 16). Theories and symbols can be real, as well as trees and chairs. Our (and Orual's) limited perspective through eyesight should not be the only mode of interpreting reality.

As a conclusion to this section regarding Lewis's use of the Tao in his fictional literature, we will examine a statement from

Screwtape in *The Screwtape Letters*. The senior devil Screwtape states a blatantly true passage regarding the Tao: "All great moralists are sent from the Enemy [i.e. God], not to inform men, but to remind them, to restate the primeval moral platitudes against our continual concealment of them" (SL 107).

This statement is a very accurate summary of Lewis's view of the Tao, and needs but brief comment. Lewis states plainly in *The Abolition of Man* that men cannot create new morals (AM 57). He says, "the human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour" (AM 56). Therefore, moralists serve only to remind men of the moral law, rather than invent new laws. In Christian framework, this profane attempt to create new laws is called *legalism*; our blasphemous concealment of the true moral law is *sin*; and, our embracing of the moral law is called *repentance*. Even Christ could not invent new laws. His objective was to fulfill, and to remind the Jews of the law He had given them centuries before.

Far from being merely an abstract principle contained in children's fables and myths, Lewis's idea of the Tao has *crucial* implications for modern society. Through our rejection of an objective standard of right and wrong, education may be doomed, and with it the future society of America (Kreeft 65).

The subtitle of *The Abolition of Man* is "How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality." Most of this paper has dealt with the last four words of that phrase, but a thorough examination of *The Abolition of Man* would not be complete without also considering education.

Entangled with the Tao is that concept dubbed "man's sense of *oughtness*" (Sproul lectures). When a person appeals to the Tao, they recognize what *ought* to be done (*The*

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Case for Christianity 7). One ramification of removing the Tao from education is that the teacher can no longer appeal to a standard, objective measure of right and wrong. If Billy punches Susie, and claims that, in his own little reality, a boy punching a girl is honorable and chivalrous, the teacher must be left speechless without an appeal to the Tao. The issue becomes even more complex when benevolence, art, great literature, and music is taught. Why should a child read Milton instead of the Family Circus? This question also has no answer without appealing to the Tao. Thus, the teacher must use wisdom and tact to show the student that certain literature and music actually *merits* our approval (AM 25). The teacher must show that making a judgement "is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which *demand*s a certain response from us, whether we make it or not" (AM 29). Lewis is saying that the teacher's job is to instill a love in the student for the things that are great. Aristotle says, "the aim of education is to make a pupil like and dislike what he ought" (*C.S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia* 290). Plato declared that the ultimate goal of education is to give the student pleasure at pleasant things, liking for likeable things, disgust for disgusting things, and hatred for hateable things (*C.S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia* 290). A hatred of all great literature and all great music demonstrates apathy and poor judgement on the part of the student. It by no means indicates a shortage of brilliance in Spenser or Bach.

People who first read *The Abolition of Man* may have thought that the problem of subjectivism would correct itself. Will subjectivism automatically turn into the Tao? The answer to that question is no. We must

stand boldly for the principles of the Tao. If we are Christians, we must stand boldly for The Law and Jesus Christ being the same yesterday, today and forever.

Despite Lewis's repeated warnings in his fictional literature and blatant calls for repentance in *The Abolition of Man*, we have not listened. Is the cry of Lewis worthy of heeding? Was Lewis a prophet? We shall know by the fruits of the children being educated today. In twenty-five years, we will know, if it is not too late.

Peter Kreeft concludes fittingly:

Our question is a wartime question, in fact an apocalyptic question. Our question is whether there is a *Brave New World* at the end of our social mudslide. If anyone believes such language is exaggerated, I welcome him back from his nice vacation on another planet. For surely we are living through what may well turn out to be the most radical revolution in the history of human thought, a revolution which is not just a "culture war," but a spiritual war, a moral and religious war. At the human heart of this war is the revolution in values, a revolution away from moral laws to moral "values," away from objective natural law to subjective human values. Our question here is: How far can this revolution go? The natural law has been battered and has lost many battles; will it finally lose the war? (93-94)

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