


11-2001

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Recommended Citation

Greggersen, Gabrielle (2001) "Rejection of the Tao: Illustrations of the Chronicles of Narnia," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol3/iss1/15

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III

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

Taylor University 2001

Upland, Indiana

Rejection of the Tao: Illustrations of *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Gabriele Greggersen

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Gabriele Greggersen

Introduction: The sense of Tao

The *Tao*, or the *Rational Law*, is one of the key ideas that may be found practically throughout all Lewis's writings, especially through illustrations of its good use and the lack of it. In *The Abolition of Man*, where C. S. Lewis is more explicit in using that term, he is not referring to the Chinese Tao, but to a larger concept of objective, universal values that are correct, as opposed to others that are not. According to Lewis, these values, that are preserved by the arts and by education, are multicultural and transcend time and space. The main consequence of such a concept is that nobody is capable of "inventing" or "creating" totally new moral laws. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis called it the "Natural Law", perceivable by everyone, especially when one is the injured party or the first victim of somebody who has broken that law. The same happens with some people's consciousness of death. It only seems to be real, when they are right in front of it. Lewis also stresses the fact that, through all of humanity, nobody suspected that there was no such common-sense values, except for modern men. Modern men often ignore that; without that kind of *sense*, there would be no possibility of meaningful reasoning or talking at all.

In *Studies in Words*, Lewis offers us profound analyses of some essential concepts like this *sense*. Its meaning goes from bare perception, to the real, transcendental meaning of life, which could only be sensed in his supreme quality, his perfection, his virtue, through images, metaphors, thus through imagination. And there *is* such a meaning in the words and also in life, be-

cause there is a *God* who created it (the opposite case of that cited by Sartre—there is no meaning in life, because there is no God to conceive it). So, the search for meaning in the world and in life is, after all, the same sense of longing for the ultimate meaning of life or the search for the true reality, as conceived by the Creator, and also for the best of all virtues and perfections, for our true selves, and ultimately for our lost home in Heaven.

1. The Tao and Ethics Education

Written ten years after World War II, *The Abolition of Man* is considered Lewis's most important educational book. After his defense of the objectivity of moral values, the *Tao*, he prophetically foresees the critical future of humankind. In his view, those universal parameters keep on being rejected, due to their paradoxical and complex nature, by most societies—especially by the schools, which generally miss the essential point in human ethics, as he explained elsewhere:

...the ideal is a paradox. Most of us ... were taught in our youth that a bully is always a coward. Our first week at school refuted this lie, along with its corollary that a truly brave man is always gentle. It is a pernicious lie because it misses the real novelty and originality of the medieval demand upon human nature. Worse still, it represents as a natural fact something which is really a human ideal, nowhere fully attained, and nowhere attained at all without hard discipline. [1]

This immediately reminds us of Romans 7:18b "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." (As we know through letters and other sources, Lewis had a special admiration for Romans, as well as for the Psalms.)

But the best example of this twofold characteristic of human ethics can be found in Arthurian legend, if we observe the two sides of Lancelot's character. To combine both sides is not a product of nature, Lewis says, but of art, the art of discipline and the art of our Creator, if we *let* Him do his perfecting work. But nowadays, there are few who are in fact willing to do that. They are all far too occupied in wasting their time with such "triflings". Apparently the historic tendencies to ignore human nature, and therefore also moral standards, are still with us, as we may see in the daily news. The moral and ethical crisis in Lewis's society is visibly growing in all countries until today.

Due to Lewis's serious consideration of this topic (detailing all its consequences and offering consistent and hopeful yet not overly optimistic answers) and since the problems are even worse nowadays, Lewis's take is still considered relevant.

But, as a matter of fact, there are few who really read his books, especially outside of American and British circles, as school is increasingly becoming an *Ersatz* (substitute) for the reading of classics and for family education. And the first persons who are generally charged for this moral crisis, the educators, are not only considered socially responsible to "teach" ethics, in so far as that is possible, including those aspects that were used to be specially attributed to the family, but at the same time, teachers have lost their main tools of learning. [2] So they are put in an extremely difficult situations, asking themselves how to teach something that has lost its content and also its teaching methods.

Thus, the second consequence of rejecting the Tao, after missing the main trace of human nature and consequently of morals, which would be the same as to ignore envy, is even to stimulate the lack of discipline, in favor of a apparently "democratic" values, due to a complete inability of the teachers:

The kind of "democratic" education which is already looming ahead is bad because it endeavours to propitiate evil passions, to appease envy. There are two reasons for not attempting this. In the first place, you will not succeed. Envy is insatiable. The more you concede to it the more it will demand. No attitude of humility which you can possibly adopt will propitiate a man with an inferiority complex. In the second place, you are trying to introduce equality where equality is fatal...[3]

Afterwards, Lewis shows us how, in this sense, the real values of equality, beauty and even truth, which always have to be best, excellent or the best valued of all, are hardly democratic. In this sense he considers that ethics have to be "aristocratic," or exclusively destined for the best of all people. If all humans follow the false egalitarianism of the "I am as good as you" philosophy, real democracy will certainly have a fatal ending, loosing all its absolute references and all essential choices in life, will be left then to be decided by subjective emotions.

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis criticizes the lessons of Gaius and Titius that are present in one of the first ethical treatises in history, *The Green Book*, due to the very fault of having missed one important aspect of human nature: that, when faced with essential questions of life "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.” [4]

The first step to learning ethics, then, is to recognize a paradoxical human condition and the fact that there is a hierarchy of values which follows a universal structure, like the one which myths and fairytales have. The structure can only be learned with difficulty. If there is to be any good and evil at all, as presumed by all myths and fairytales, there must also be something that goes beyond all those relative values, which are merely based on subjective feelings. This “something” includes all *Best Values* of the world’s wisdom, and challenges all humans, Chinese, English, Brazilian or any other persons in the world, to make a rejoinder.

Thus the Rational Law is not sufficient to avoid the *Abolition of Man* and promote an ethical life because, “For those within (the Tao), the task is to train in the pupil those responses which are in themselves appropriate, whether anyone is making them or not, and in making that which the very nature of man consists...” [5]

On the other hand, those who are outside the Tao, who follow merely the law of instinct, which Lewis called *Natural Moral*, are also lost, as they are obliged to eliminate all emotions and intuitions. In its place, they put some kind of substitute, (satisfaction of basic necessities, material realizations, etc.), which is always highly self-destructive. As a solution for the dilemma, Lewis proposes a golden way, a type of self-management training program, which works like this:

The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat ... of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habits into stable sentiments. The Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiment—these are the indispensable liai-

son officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.[6]

So the instincts are the presupposition of all actions, and the Tao, which is their necessary—but not sufficient—counterpart, will work only if we go beyond the law, towards something that goes beyond mere satisfaction: towards real joy and happiness. Without that chest, the instinct-Tao paradox will lead Men to self-destruction.

To choose the golden way means to agree with the old wise men all over the world, who are ultimately concerned with “how to conform the soul to reality...”, and they all come to the same conclusion that “the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue.” [7]

Due to the simple fact that ultimate reality, as the German philosopher Martin Buber [8] argued so well in his own time, cannot immediately or directly be perceived as a whole, we depend on the world outside us—we depend on breaking reality into parts in order to catch the whole. In order not to lose the reference to the whole, we need to gather those parts we are incapable of seeing, but that others are able to see (including our true selves). We are dependent on each other and ultimately, on our first Other, on *Thou*. We are only able to recognize evil as really bad and good as really good, because there is something and Someone greater out there. As Lewis so well illustrated in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the most illustrative of all chronicles, there is a “deeper Magic” behind all deep magics, and our task is not to confound figure and background, but to increasingly approach that luminous background of reality, the *true reality*. Only

from that standpoint, we may recognize that:

...we all live between the 'fell, incensed points' of Michael and Satan. The difference between the Christian and the Dualist is that the Christian thinks one stage further and sees that if Michael is really in the right and Satan really in the wrong this must mean that they stand in two different relations to somebody or something far further back, to the ultimate ground of reality itself. [9]

According to Aquinas, the natural inclination of the human heart is to the true reality, which transcends even the logic of the Fall, although it started the process of rejecting the Tao, thus getting into a conflict with the first law. If we let the second tendency have precedence over the first, then the consequence will sooner or later be the abolition, or complete destruction of man.

2. The Tao in the Chronicles of Narnia

In the Chronicles of Narnia, Lewis uses the best illustrations and metaphors to depict the dilemma in human behavior resulting from the conflict between the two tendencies, the Tao and the instincts. At the end of *The Abolition of Man*, we find some keys to identifying and understanding some of the universal values of the Tao, in the form of comparative proverbs of the Greek, Nordic, Oriental and Christian traditions. We intend, in the next few pages, to systematically identify those universal values, or the consequences of the lack of them, in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, as a suggestion of an exercise that could be made for effective Christian ethics learning.

First of all, however, it must be noted that there are so many positive illustrations of those values in the Narnian

Chronicles that it is quite impossible to list them all. Secondly, we have to note that C.S. Lewis is not a moralist or someone who did not understand the relativity of mere common consents. He says that very clearly in the introduction of his Tao:

The list makes no pretence of completeness. It will be noticed that writers such as Locke and Hooker, who wrote within the Christian tradition, are quoted side by side with the New Testament. This would, of course, be absurd if I were trying to collect independent testimonies to the Tao. But (1) I am not trying to prove its validity by the argument from common consent. Its validity cannot be deduced. For those who do not perceive its rationality, even universal consent could not prove it. (2) The idea of collecting independent testimonies presupposes that 'civilizations' have arisen in the world independently of one another; or even that humanity has had several independent emergences on this planet.... It is at least arguable that every civilization we find has been derived from another civilization and, in the last resort, from a single center—'carried' like an infectious disease or like the Apostolical succession. [10]

As long as no human being is able to completely respect the Tao, or even the greatest part of it, we are always faced with a dilemma. We are always challenged to identify and discern the good from the bad decisions in life. We made a first tentative approach to the illustrations, with no pretence of completeness or exhaustion, indicating also some consequences of the rejection of the Tao in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, which are even more relevant, if we consider Lewis's paradox ethical structure.

2.1 The Magician's Nephew

1.1.1. Positive examples of the Tao

General Beneficence	The Cabman, although in his special way, and Sarah, the housemaid, who will be the first king and queen of Narnia.
Special Beneficence	Digory to Polly and vice versa. Fledge helping the children to get to their magic apple.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Digory and Polly to his mother.
Duties to children and Posterity	The cabman and the maiden show respect to the children throughout the story.
Law of justice	Digory's mother was cured by the apple he brought her.
Faith and veracity	Digory's certainty that all bad magic will be punished in the end.
Mercy	Sarah, the housemaid, who understand the feelings even of Jadis.
Magnanimity	Polly going side by side with Digory into strange and dangerous worlds in order to save his mother.

2.1.2 Consequences of the Rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	Uncle Andrew is not exactly educated through all history, and has to face the consequences.
Special Beneficence	Uncle Andrew could not hear the talking animals, as a result of his badness.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Aunt Letty's insubordination in front of Jadis.
Duties to children and Posterity	Uncle Andrew, using the children as animals for his experiments.
Law of justice	Uncle Andrew sending Pole to the other world. The witch invading other worlds in order to conquer them.
Faith and veracity	First Digory did not believe in magic, until he experiences it.
Mercy	Jadis's treatment of Uncle Andrew.
Magnanimity	Jadis is the prototype of selfishness, egotism and pride, throughout the story.

2.2. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

2.2.1 Positive Examples

General Beneficence	Mr. Tumnus is very educated. The Beavers are always very polite.
Special Beneficence	Lucy convinces her brothers to help Tumnus. The Beavers, guiding the children to the stone table.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Peter and Susan to the professor and their parents.
Duties to children and Posterity	The professor and the Beavers to the children.
Law of justice	Peter recognizes his part of guilt in the treachery of Edmund.
Faith and veracity	Lucy's behavior is a prototype of this virtue. The beavers show also a great confidence in Aslan and the prophecies.
Mercy	The children in relation to Edmund, after he repented.
Magnanimity	Edmund facing the witch.

2.2.2. Consequences of the rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	The wolf is perhaps the least educated of all the characters.
Special Beneficence	When Susan doesn't want to help Tumnus.
Duties to children and Posterity	The Witch is not interested in preserving the children's rights.
Law of justice	When Edmund betrays Lucy and his brothers.

2.3. The Horse and his Boy

2.3.1 Positive Examples

General Beneficence	The horse, Bree, is, in my opinion, the most educated of all characters.
Special Beneficence	Bree helped Shasta through all the story.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Shasta and Aravis in front of the Hermit. Shasta in relation to his father.
Duties to children and Posterity	The words of Shasta's father to Tarkaan: "Natural affection is stronger than soup and offspring more precious than carbuncles". [11]
Law of justice	Aslan tearing the shoulders of Shasta. Rabatasha is transformed in a monkey in the end.
Faith and veracity	The immediate friendship between Lucy and Aravis.
Mercy	Edmund suggesting the absolution of Rabatacha at the end of the story.
Magnanimity	The Hermit is a prototype of this virtue, but Bree also shows magnanimity, if we consider that he is the lost one of the two sons of King Lune.

2.3.2 Consequences of the rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	The Calormen in general are not very much concerned with good deeds or education.
Special Beneficence	Rabatasha was promoted most part of the sufferings and destruction.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	The son of the Tisroc only simulates his respect to his father. That was also a lack of veracity.
Duties to children and Prosperity	Shasta's father's bad-tempered treatment of his son. Shasta's father letting him go with the Tarkaan.
Faith and veracity	The son of Tisroc making truth in lies when he plans the kidnapping of Aravis..
Mercy	The Calormen always talk about their "hearts", but seems not to know what that means.
Magnanimity	The Calormen are also not particularly concerned with self-sacrifice.

2.4 Prince Caspian

2.4.1 Positive Examples

General Beneficence	Reepicheep is the prototype of chivalry and courtesy. But most of the speaking Narnian beasts are also very polite and good to Caspian and the children.
Special Beneficence	Dr. Cornelius is always helping Caspian out. The Narnians also do their part.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Caspian in front of Dr. Cornelius. The Narnians in front of the four children.
Duties to children and Posterity	Dr. Cornelius towards Caspian.
Law of justice	The restitution of Reepicheep's tail. Restitution of the Kingdom to Prince Caspian.
Faith and veracity	Caspian's belief in Narnia and Aslan, even before knowing them personally.
Mercy	Trufflehunter, in not letting Caspian be murdered. He is the kindest of all Narnians.
Magnanimity	Lucy going with her brothers, even when she knows about the danger.

2.4.2 Consequences of the rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	The King is more interested in defending his personal honor than his people's.
Duties to children and Posterity	Caspian's uncle, when he intends to murder his nephew.
Law of justice	The king hunting Caspian and trying to kill him.
Faith and veracity	Trumpkin did not believe in Aslan and Narnia, until he saw them with his own eyes.
Mercy	Caspian's uncle wants to murder him.

2.5 The Silver Chair

2.5.1 Positive examples

General Beneficence	Prince Rilian, after his disenchantment.
Special Beneficence	The owls and Puddleglum are always helping the children out.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Prince Rilian to Caspian. Eustace and Jill in relation to Puddleglum.
Duties to children and Posterity	Prince Rilian to the children. Puddleglum in relation to Eustace and Jill.
Law of justice	The task given to Jill, due to her approach to the border of the hill, making Eustace fall in the abyss.
Faith and veracity	Jill's confidence in the lion.
Mercy	Caspian to his best friend, who let Prince Rilian vanish.
Magnanimity	Eustace trying to catch Jill at the hill. Jill passes all the night trying to remember the signs. Puddleglum putting his hand in the fire. Eustace facing the dragon.

2.5.2 Consequences of the rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	Rilian, when he was enchanted. The giant's behavior.
Duties to children and Posterity	The bad treatment given to the children in school.
Law of justice	Eustace and Jill being hunted by their fellow-students. The giants wanting to devour the children after the children lie to them. The Green Lady murdering Rilian's mother and enchanting him.
Mercy	The cruelty of the Green Lady and her subordinates.

2.6 The Voyage of The “Dawn Treader”

2.6.1. Positive Examples

General Beneficence	The prototype of the gentleman is, once more, Reepicheep.
Special Beneficence	Prince Caspian rescuing the children from slavery.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Prince Caspian giving reverence to his father’s memory.
Duties to children and Posterity	The lost lords in front of Caspian.
Law of justice	Eustace is turned into a dragon.
Faith and veracity	Lucy deduces that only Aslan could have sent them to help Caspian.
Mercy	Reepicheep and the children deciding to go and search for Eustace.
Magnanimity	Lucy offering to go into the house to read the magic book. Reepicheep offering himself to go to the end of the world.

2.6.2 Consequences of the rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	Bureaucracy and social chaos in the Lonely Islands.
Special Beneficence	Eustace pulling Reepicheep’s tail.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Eustace laughing at his older cousins.
Law of justice	The children are sold as slaves. High taxes, slavery and social injustice in the Lonely Islands. Eustace trying to rub water in the night.
Faith and veracity	Eustace did not believe in his cousin’s stories about Narnia.
Magnanimity	Eustace, before becoming a dragon, is a prototype for egotism, pride and arrogance.

2.7 The Last Battle

2.7.1. Positive Examples

General Beneficence	Roonwit the Centaur is perhaps the best example.
Special Beneficence	Jewel, the unicorn, is always at the side of King Tirian.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	The centaur, in front of the King.
Duties to children and Posterity	The king shows respect to the children.
Law of justice	The talking animals who denied Aslan, lost their tongues. The apparently tragic ending of the story being merely the beginning of the true one.
Faith and veracity	When Jewel looks forward to a dinner with Aslan.
Mercy	Lucy tries to make friends with the dwarves. The Emeth becomes forgiveness.
Magnanimity	The Emeth going into the stable.

2.7.2 Consequences of the rejection of the Tao

General Beneficence	There are really few good examples and many bad examples of this virtue in <i>The Last Battle</i> —to begin with, the ape's and the dwarf's behavior.
Duties to parents, elders, ancestors	Griffle and the dwarf show respect neither to the King nor to Aslan.
Law of justice	The treachery and general behavior of the ape, in relation to all Narnians.
Faith and veracity	The Griffle best expressed the lack of faith, giving credit to the ape in spite of the King. The ape convincing the bear that he is a man. The dwarfs prefer not to believe in the King rather than give up their power over Narnia.
Magnanimity	The Ape is perhaps the best example of cowardice and selfishness.

There are certainly many more illustrations that could be mentioned. But those seem to be sufficient for our purpose, which is to show the richness of a more systematic study of the *Chronicles* for more effective learning in ethics, using the tools offered by C.S. Lewis in his main educational reflections. Besides the above exercise, there are also many other alternative strategies we could suggest; for example, to use other moral values as the cardinal and theological virtues (as per *The Four Loves*), a selection of Proverbs, biblical principles, main characters, etc.

But, the greatest example of all of these values is surely given by Aslan himself, as he is the synthesis of all virtues. The further up we get in reaching his patterns, the further in we reach the way to becoming who we really are, and into the grounds of real joy. And that will be an even more interesting journey: trying to discover the motives of virtue in the stories on our own, or even by observing those around us, as we experience a living story, being written by our Creator, all the time.

Conclusion:

Although the examples of virtues are much more present in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the bad examples are worse, not because they have an opposite value to the good (as the dualists and Manicheans believe), but due to the consequences of rejecting the Tao, which always end in destruction, death and despair. That is why the bad examples are more and more devastatingly present in the last stories. But we will always find goodness behind the scenes. There is no conceivable symmetry between goodness and badness. Good is always very, very good and evil is disastrous. The bad examples could be measured by the badness of the unavoidably destructive conse-

quences over nature in general and especially over human nature.

Still, although good is depicted in all of the *Chronicles* as *really* good, and bad as *awfully* bad—not because of its power over good, but because of the damage caused against nature—there is always an open possibility for those who are willing to repent and radically change their behavior.

It may be true that nobody is able to respect all principles of the Tao. That kind of universal standard is still meaningful and useful, however, as it potentially opens doors for our transformation into real human beings, when the universal principles are effectively expressed, transmitted and cultivated through tradition, education and imagination. That was at least the eager hope of men like C.S. Lewis, who were always engaged in fighting against the consequences of the rejection of the Tao and therefore ultimately against the “abolition of man.”

Notes

- 1 C.S. Lewis. “The Necessity of Chivalry”
- 2 See to this regard an interesting essay from Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” accessible at <http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html> .
- 3 C.S. Lewis. “Democratic Education.”
- 4 C.S. Lewis. *The Abolition of Man*.
- 5 Ibid., p. 31.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., p. 88

- 8 Martin Buber. *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*.
- 9 C.S. Lewis. "Evil and God," from *God in the Dock*.
- 10 C.S. Lewis. *The Abolition of Man*, pp. 95-96.

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