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Human Enhancement and *The Abolition of Man*

Stephen A. Phillips

Over 60 years ago C. S. Lewis wrote a book about the importance of values in education. In *The Abolition of Man* Lewis began by exploring the importance of values in education, but by the end Lewis addressed how the relentless pursuit of the conquest of nature divorced from traditional values could result in the conquest of mankind by nature and the destruction of what it means to be human. However, what he imagined might happen by the hundredth century A.D. is beginning to be possible in the twenty first. Preliminary successes in gene therapy suggest that germ line gene therapy capable of changing the future of the human genome may be possible in the near future. Gene therapy can be directed at the correction of errors that cause genetic disease, but also holds the potential for enhancing human abilities. Germ line gene therapy for the purpose of human enhancement opens up ethical concerns about the alteration of human nature. An analysis of the process described by Lewis can help us understand the destructive potential that exists in the pursuit of human enhancement and the alteration of human nature.

Human Enhancement and *The Abolition of Man*

Stephen A. Phillips M.D.

Objective Values

C.S. Lewis expressed his concern at the start of *The Abolition of Man* that, in the context of teaching students about English composition, the writers of a text that he referred to as *The Green Book* were actually teaching philosophy. Lewis stated that the authors of the text, while ostensibly instructing about the use of language, were teaching "firstly, that all statements containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and, secondly, that all such statements are unimportant" (15). The students who used the text would understand that statements about values were not objective statements that could be true or false because objective values did not exist.

To deny the existence of objective values is to deny an essential part of what makes us human. We are not just animals that respond instinctively to their appetites. As human beings we are a type of being capable of perceiving how things are intended to be and conforming ourselves to that intent. We are able to make moral choices in which we use our rational capacity to moderate how we respond to our appetites. Lewis, following the thoughts of Plato and the medieval theologian Alanus, stated that human beings are made in such a way that reason, symbolized by the head, governs the appetites, symbolized by the belly, by means of the chest which is the seat of not just emotions, but also sentiments and values (34). For our values to be capable of controlling our appetites they need to be more substantial than emotions and based on something more solid than the appetites that they control. There need to be objective values which have a truth that is outside of ourselves on which our personal values are based for

our values to be able to play that controlling role. To deny the existence of objective values is to remove the foundation of that governing part of a person. One is left with unmediated intellect and appetites. In Lewis's terms it created men without chests (34).

The chest or heart of a person which depends on values to function is essential to our being human. It includes our ability to love and have relationships, to hope, and to have faith. A sense of objective moral value allows us to understand what is good. It allows us to love because love desires what is good for the one we love. It allows us to hope, because hope is an expectation of a future that is good. It allows us to have faith, because faith is the belief that the one in whom we put our trust is good and therefore trustworthy.

Contemporary Denial of Objective Values

Lewis was concerned with those who denied the existence of objective values by defining statements about values to be statements about the speaker's emotions. That method of denying objective values is not as common today. More frequently those in our society who deny the existence of objective values do so by an appeal to the virtue of tolerance and an evolutionary concept of human nature. We live in a pluralistic society in which people hold many beliefs that are incompatible with each other. A common response to that fact is a very broad understanding of tolerance that says all belief systems are to be tolerated in the sense that no one set of values has more claim to truth than another. However, as J. Budziszewski has noted, that understanding of tolerance is logically self-contradictory since it is necessary to commit to some objective good that is furthered by tolerance to have a reason to assert that tolerance is good (40). True tolerance is being able to differentiate what should be tolerated, such as erroneous beliefs, and what should not be tolerated, such as rape or slavery. That differentiation depends on objective values. It does not entail the idea that all beliefs or values have the same claim on truth.

Those who hold such a broad understanding of tolerance in spite of its contradictory nature commonly understand values as being based in an evolutionary form of cultural relativism similar to that proposed by E. O. Wilson. It states that values exist due to the survival benefit that they confer to human beings in a society that functions better due to those values. This allows for different cultures to have different values and makes the survival of the social group the ultimate evolutionary value. Even though those who deny objective values today do it differently, that denial suffers from the same problems it did in Lewis' day.

Even Those Who Deny Objective Values Live by Them

Although the writers of *The Green Book* taught there were no objective values, they still acted as if the values they did hold were true. Lewis noted they had written a book with the practical purpose of influencing its readers to agree with the ideas they were teaching. They had an end in sight that they held to be good for more than just themselves, and therefore must have believed that there was something that was good for its own sake (40). Lewis wrote that "a great many of those who debunk ... traditional values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process" (41). Those who believe in cultural relativism still have values such as tolerance, equal rights for minorities and women, and fairness that they would apply to all cultures. To hold evolutionary cultural relativism as the basis for morality and still live as if values that you hold are universally true is inconsistent. There are some who assert that there are universal moral values that are based on human evolution that are not different for different cultures, but are still not objective because they are simply genetically derived adaptations that appear to us to be objective (Ruse). However, this leaves the problem that once we know that those values that appear to be objective are just evolutionary adaptations, then we have no reason to follow them. There are only two valid options. One is to accept that there are objective moral values. The other is to deny all values and live by your appetites.

Since the majority of people, including the writers of *The Green Book* and those who propose evolutionary cultural relativism, live as if there are objective values, what is the basis for those values? Lewis held that the values of common morality, which he called the Tao, were self-evident. They were "things so obviously reasonable that they neither demand nor admit proof" (53). The basic precepts of the common morality have been understood universally across cultures and across time. It is "not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole

source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained" (Lewis 56). This does not imply that any one person or society has perfectly understood this ultimate source of moral value, but says that progress in understanding it can only come from within the common morality and not by the denial of it. The only option other than accepting common morality is to say that the existence of human moral values is a natural psychological phenomenon that served a purpose in human development, but has no objective validity, and is just one more part of nature that we can seek to control (Lewis 62-63).

Human Control of Nature and the Abolition of Man

The desire to enhance human functioning and capabilities lies within the human project of controlling nature through the use of science and technology. We have benefited from this project in many ways, not the least of which is the ability of modern medicine to cure or control many diseases that have afflicted mankind for ages. There is, however, a cost that we pay when we use science and technology to control nature. By analyzing it into predictable parts we lose the sense of awe we have for its complexity and lose our sense of wonder at its design. We also lose the ability to see it in its wholeness. As Leon Kass has put it, "knowledge permitting prediction and (some) control over biological *events* has been purchased at the cost of deep ignorance, not to say misunderstanding, of *living beings*, ourselves included" (282).

Lewis saw the danger that existed in the application of the scientific project of controlling nature to human life. He understood that "what we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised over other men with Nature as its instrument" (69). Lewis's insight that "all long-term exercises of power, especially in breeding, must mean the power of earlier generations over later ones" (69) relates to the potential effects of germ line genetic enhancement. This

power is manifested by reducing the power and freedom of later generations by the decisions made by those engaging in germ line genetic therapy. To presume to know how to shape the future of the human race requires a certain arrogance. As Gilbert Meilaender has said, "What estimate of ourselves – our virtue and wisdom – would we need even to want to become so fundamentally the shapers of humanity?" (43) If those who believe that human values are determined by evolutionary genetics are even partially correct, then the project of achieving ultimate control over nature includes being able to influence human understanding of moral values by germ line genetic therapy. Those who have control over what future human beings believe to be moral have no reason to believe that traditional morality is true since they are the ones determining future moral thoughts. Since they believe morality is something they control they have no reason to believe in any objective morality and no reason to believe any moral impulses they have. They have no basis for how they design future generations other than their own desires and appetites. Their desires and appetites are a part of nature, so nature ends up controlling man. Thus, Lewis can conclude that the project of man's control over nature ends with nature controlling humanity and the abolition of man (80).

Human Enhancement and Objective Values

The scenario leading to the abolition of man imagined by Lewis was something he thought might happen by the hundredth century A.D. (71). However, it is beginning to be possible in the twenty first. Preliminary successes in somatic gene therapy and research in germ line gene transmission in mice suggest that germ line gene therapy capable of changing the future of the human genome may be possible in the near future. Gene therapy can be directed at the correction of errors that cause genetic disease, but also holds the potential for enhancing

human abilities. Somatic gene therapy to eliminate errors causing genetic disease is very similar in concept to most other forms of medical therapy and its ethical concerns are limited to safety and efficacy. Somatic gene therapy done to attempt to enhance human abilities is morally more concerning particularly from the viewpoint of justice. Germ line gene therapy for the purpose of human enhancement opens up ethical concerns about the alteration of human nature

When we seek to apply Lewis' understanding of the importance of objective values and the danger of science and technology devoid of objective values to the area of germ line gene therapy for human enhancement it raises several questions. Is there a distinction between curing diseases and enhancement? How do we know that an alteration is enhancement and not degradation? How do we know that a change in the nature of future human beings is good? Objective moral values depend on the concept that there is a way that things were intended to be, and that we are obligated to conform to that intent. Does this imply that there is a way human beings are intended to be that we should not change?

Since the time of Hippocrates medicine has been understood as a profession dedicated to doing things for the benefit of the sick. Sickness has been understood as a deviation from how human beings are intended to be. It is not a deviation from a statistical norm, but from an intuitively understood idea of how we are made. In that sense our idea of what it means to be well is very much like the values of common morality which are self-evident ideas of how we are intended to live. Similar to common morality, people across cultures and time have a common understanding of what it means to be sick and to be well. The proper role of medicine has been understood to be the restoration of those who are sick to the state in which they were intended to be. As the ability of medicine to achieve that goal has progressed we have also included the idea of preventing sickness before it occurs as a part of that role.

Enhancement is a different sort of thing. Instead of focusing on restoration of people to an intended norm, it seeks something beyond that. If we understand Lewis' argument about common morality or the Tao, we will understand that to have any concept of what is good we must accept the self-evident values of common morality that are based in conformity to how we are intended to be. The idea that there is a way we are intended to be implies the existence of a designer who formed that intent. Lewis chose not to discuss that implication in *The Abolition of Man*, leaving that to another discussion, and we will do the same. No matter how we understand the source of that intent, objective values are based on a concept of how we are intended to be that is intrinsic to what we are as human beings. Without that we have no concept of what is good or right.

Enhancement includes the idea that something is being made better. For something to be better there must be a concept of what is good that it is becoming more like. If the concept of good in common morality is based on how we were intended to be, then to become better would be becoming more what we were intended to be. However, the concept of enhancement in modern medical science includes the concept of moving beyond what we have traditionally understood about how we are intended to be. As Lewis understood, the basic goal of science and technology has been the conquest of nature by analyzing it into parts that we can predict and then control. When we applied that in medical research to ourselves, we first sought to understand the causes for sickness and to be able to control those causes in order to make those who are sick well and prevent others from becoming sick. Human enhancement as understood by those who advocate it embodies the scientific project of taking control of nature and applies it to taking control of our own nature. Not content with the healing of the sick, we desire to have control of

how we are made and move beyond the limits that we have as human beings. To have ultimate control over nature we must be able to make ourselves what we want to be.

The Dark Side of the Control of Nature

Lewis understood that within the desire to control nature, including our own nature, were some things that can be very destructive. Even when it is not directed at changing the nature of human beings, scientific control over nature turns out to be the control of some men over other men (69). Long term control of human nature involves the control of a small number of men in one generation over future generations, decreasing the freedom of those future generations. Those who would ultimately take control over human nature would need to take control over how human beings understand what is right and wrong. Science already has the tendency to cause people to focus on the material and lose sight of such things as objective values that are understood in a different manner than scientific data. By having the control of how people understand right and wrong as a part of the project of the ultimate control over nature, those who desire to manifest that control have no way to comprehend those objective values. They have no standard for values and must be motivated solely by their appetites. Since their appetites are a part of nature, nature ultimately wins if man tries to control it without limits set by objective values and an understanding of how nature and human beings are intended to be.

If it is true that there are objective values and that we have been designed such that those values are based on how we are intended to be there may be limits to what parts of human nature can be changed. It may not be possible for those who would seek to change the nature of human beings by germ cell genetic enhancement to change how we understand right and wrong. Common morality may persist in spite of any efforts to manipulate it. If this is the case, Lewis'

thought experiment of taking the control of nature to its logical conclusion in the abolition of man may not be one that is capable of playing out in reality. However it still stands that those who would seek to take control of the nature of humanity by germ cell genetic enhancement will by the nature of the task tend to think that they can control all of human nature. Thus they will think of human moral ideas as something they can manipulate and lose their own respect for common morality. They will be just as controlled by their appetites as those who actually could change human moral concepts. Hence nature would take control of mankind just as surely as if human morality could be controlled by genetic alteration.

Avoiding the Abolition of Man

However the abolition of man seen by Lewis is not inevitable. The flaw in the scientific project is the desire for total domination of nature including human nature. That desire includes the desire to enhance human capabilities beyond what they were intended to be and to transform human nature into something determined by men. If we are willing to listen to the wisdom of common morality we can understand that we have been made with an intended purpose and that the proper goal of science is not domination of nature, but the understanding of what nature in general and human nature are intended to be. That understanding can be used for the common good of all human beings to help us be more like we were intended to be. That would be real human enhancement.

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