

AFTER HUMANITY

A Guide to C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*

MICHAEL WARD

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In memoriam

Ennio Morricone
(1928–2020)



Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast in 1898. He taught Philosophy at University College, Oxford (1924–1925), was a Fellow and Tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford (1925–1954), and concluded his career as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge (1955–1963). (See figure 12.)

In 1931, Lewis converted to Christianity, encouraged by his close friend J.R.R. Tolkien. He became a popular defender of the faith with works such as *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) and *Mere Christianity* (1952). His seven Chronicles of Narnia (1950–1956) achieved huge acclaim and have been translated into over forty different languages.

Lewis died at his home in Oxford in 1963. On the fiftieth anniversary of his death, a national memorial in his honour was unveiled in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

The Abolition of Man originated as a series of lectures given during the Second World War. In this enduringly influential work, Lewis defends the objectivity of value, pointing to the universal moral ecology that all great philosophical and religious traditions have acknowledged as self-evident. Though Lewis writes as an apologist for Christianity in many of his other works, he here constructs his argument on purely philosophical grounds, making an anthropological claim, not advancing a theological case. Objective value, he maintains, is humanity's ethical inheritance, which we can extend and develop but may not properly escape. Insofar as we try to deny or subvert this way of being moral, we make ourselves (and those whom we raise or teach or otherwise influence) essentially less than human. We produce "men without chests," or in other words, people who have no stable heart, no reliable capacity to liaise between intellect and appetite, no ability to distinguish between what is good in itself and what is good for them. Right thus dissolves into might and sheer willpower takes the place of reason. The result is the erasure of our own true identity, "the abolition of man."

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The appendix to *The Abolition of Man* lists “the law of general beneficence” and “the law of special beneficence” as the first two guiding principles of the Tao. I have been the recipient of both general and special beneficence as I have researched and written this Guide and I now gladly discharge my duty of thanking those people who have helped me in many and various ways.

First and foremost, I must name the late lamented Walter Hooper, C.S. Lewis’s editor and biographer. All scholars of Lewis’s work owe Hooper a huge amount: my decades-long indebtedness to him, both professionally and personally, is beyond calculation.

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The Clarkson and Fink-Jensen families deserve my humble and hearty thanks for helping preserve my sanity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three generous friends deserve my particular gratitude: Steve Beebe and Jerry Root for permission to reproduce figures 12 and 3 respectively; and Malcolm Guite, for permission to reproduce the poem “Imagine” from *The Singing Bowl* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013).

Professor Alasdair MacIntyre, with typical modesty, questioned why a photograph of him should appear in a book about C.S. Lewis. I sent him chapter VI by way of persuasion and was honoured to receive his go-ahead in return.

Finally, a word about the dedication of this book. I never met the great Ennio Morricone, but ever since first seeing the film *The Mission* (1986), for which he composed the acclaimed soundtrack, I have associated him with the works of C.S. Lewis by way of waterfalls. Viewers of Roland Joffé’s movie will remember that the picture opens with a man on a cross disappearing over the Iguazú Falls. Readers of Lewis will recall that *The Abolition of Man* begins with a dispute about a waterfall and ends, in the closing citation of the appendix, with a reference to John 12:24 (“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies...”); and also that *The Great Divorce* features a huge heavenly waterfall, which turns out to be a crucified angel pouring himself down perpetually with “loud joy.” Mr. Morricone died as I was completing the final draft of this volume, and so I dedicate this Guide in honour of his memory and in gratitude for music that I have always regarded as (if I may use a contested term) sublime.

Michael Ward
Oxford
Feast of St. Lawrence

Note to the reader: This Guide to *The Abolition of Man* refers to the second edition (United Kingdom printing released in 1946, United States printing in 1947). The differences between it and the first edition (1943) are few and mostly very minor; they will be commented upon only where they rise to the level of significance.

References to C.S. Lewis’s works cite page numbers of the editions listed in the Bibliography. The only exception is references to the Chronicles of Narnia. There are so many different editions of the Chronicles that citations to these works are given by chapter only, not page number.

CHAPTER I



Reception

THE *ABOLITION OF MAN* “HAS BEEN ALMOST TOTALLY IGNORED BY THE PUBLIC.” So wrote C.S. Lewis in 1955, more than a decade after he published this his most purely philosophical work, based on a series of three lectures he had delivered during the Second World War.¹ His friend and biographer, George Sayer, agrees that the book was not “well received” and accounts for its supposed lack of popularity on the grounds that the lectures were “too closely argued,” adding that “it seems that few members of his audience understood them.”²

Sayer is right that the lectures are closely argued and not always easy to understand; one of the main reasons for the Guide you are reading at this very moment is to make Lewis’s admittedly sometimes challenging work more easily accessible. But is Sayer right to say that *The Abolition of Man* was not well received when it first came out? Is Lewis right to say it had been almost totally ignored?

To judge by sales figures, the book was actually very well received. The first print run, released in 1943, sold out almost instantly, and there were three reprints within the next ten months. There was sufficient demand that a revised second edition was issued in 1946.* It is hard therefore to see why Lewis regarded it as “a v. poor seller so far,” as he wrote in 1954.³ By comparison with the extraordinary success of his own most popular works it might perhaps be so regarded, but by normal measurements for a volume of this kind – academic philosophy – *Abolition* was a solid seller right from the start.†

And the book was also well received if we judge by the early reviews. “No summary can do justice to the fineness of Mr. Lewis’s thought,” said one British reviewer.⁴ A second called it “paradoxically and shrewdly” argued.⁵ A third declared it “a most thought-provoking book [which] deserves the attention and study of all those interested

* The first edition was released in the United States in 1944; the second edition was released there in 1947.

† The lectures themselves were also unusually well attended. Lewis attracted audiences numbering 520, 432, and 391, across the three nights that he spoke. The previous year’s lecturer had 232, 210, and 191; the subsequent year’s lecturer 207, 210, and 189. UND/CBI/R6a/4 Riddell Memorial Lectures 1943–1945, in the Durham University archives.

in the education of the young.”⁶ Across the Atlantic the verdict was similarly positive, with the *New York Herald Tribune* describing it as “an all-too-plausible picture of man’s destiny after the concept of absolute values has gone out the window.”⁷

If the downbeat views of Lewis and Sayer about the work’s initial reception were ill-founded, they are even further from the mark with regard to its standing today, for *The Abolition of Man* has gone on to establish a reputation as a genuine and seminal classic. It has proved to be influential with a large and diverse readership – philosophers, educators, literary critics, intellectual historians, jurists, atheists, agnostics, people of faith – and is now generally (though of course not unanimously) considered among his most perceptive, penetrating, and important pieces of writing.

Oxford philosopher John Lucas dubs it “a powerful argument, reminiscent of Plato, Pascal and Dostoevski, and worth elaborating afresh in each generation.”⁸ Literary critic Alan Jacobs ranks it as “the most profound of Lewis’s cultural critiques.”⁹ To writer A.N. Wilson, it exhibits Lewis’s “supremely workable intelligence” and “deserves to command his widest audience.”¹⁰ English Professor Tony Nuttall deems the argument “dazzling” and claims it “thoroughly routs whole volumes of Nietzsche and Sartre.”¹¹ Moral philosopher Mary Midgley considers it “first-rate,” praising its “clear, balanced answer to current mistakes.”^{12*} Lord Hailsham, the longest-serving head of the British judiciary in the twentieth century, has meditated on it in print at some length.¹³ It has been cited on the floor of the United States Congress† and referred to by the Chair of the President’s Council on Bioethics‡ The “keen accuracy” of its moral diagnosis has been acknowledged by Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI)¹⁴ and its “taut brilliance” applauded by theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.¹⁵ Atheist philosopher John Gray calls it “prescient,” “prophetic” and “as relevant now” as when it first came out, “if not more so.”¹⁶ Political scientist Francis Fukuyama§ and novelist-environmentalist Wendell Berry¶ have found its analysis compelling and quoted it in support of their own

* Midgley pairs *Abolition* with Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) as being among those “very few modern books of philosophy which people outside academic philosophy find really helpful. . . . Both books effectively debunk the colourful, fantastic screen of up-to-date ideas inside which we live – a screen which, despite a lot of surface activity, has not actually changed much since they were written.”

† “This act to be signed by the President takes the first step to prevent what C.S. Lewis referred to as ‘the abolition of Man.’” Speech of Hon. Mark Souder of Indiana, in the U.S. House of Representatives, 7 December 2006, www.congress.gov/crec/2006/12/08/CREC-2006-12-08-pt2-PgE2211.pdf.

‡ Leon Kass, Chair of the President’s Council of Bioethics (2001–2005), quotes *Abolition* numerous times in his *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (2002).

§ “[Lewis suggests] that nature itself, and in particular human nature, has a special role in defining for us what is right and wrong, just and unjust, important and unimportant.” Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, 7; cf. 148. See also *The End of History and the Last Man*, 188, where Fukuyama, I think, misreads or at any rate misapplies Lewis’s picture of “men without chests.”

¶ “C.S. Lewis pointed out in *The Abolition of Man* that if your choices are on a grand enough scale, it’s possible to make choices for people unborn that they perhaps wouldn’t make for themselves. We’ve done that over and over again.” Quoted in “Field Observations: An Interview with Wendell Berry,” interview by Jordan Fisher Smith, 93.

thinking. Official biographers Green and Hooper declare: "As the threatened 'abolition' seems more and more likely, it has become one of the most admired of all Lewis's works."¹⁷ For examples of that admiration, we might look to the *National Review* and to *The Intercollegiate Review*, both of which have placed *The Abolition of Man* among the ten best nonfiction books of the twentieth century.¹⁸

Inevitably, it also has its detractors. Ayn Rand, the novelist and founder of objectivism, covers the margins of her copy with blisteringly hostile reactions ("The abysmal bastard!... The cheap, drivelling non-entity!" etc).¹⁹ Philosopher John Beversluis finds Lewis's case far from convincing.* Inklings biographer Humphrey Carpenter brands the book "not an argument but a harangue."²⁰ Philosophy professor Gregory Bassham ranks the work as "one of the most jaw-dropping straw-man attacks in literary history."²¹ Historian and theologian George Every considers it "very dangerous."† Behaviourist philosopher B.F. Skinner does not dispute Lewis's claims but flips them on their head, embracing the apocalyptic dystopia sketched by Lewis as welcome and long overdue.‡

In this guide, I shall make no attempt to adjudicate between the different responses to Lewis's argument; the matters at stake are of perennial concern to philosophers, and even if I had the skill I do not have the space, in the narrow span of these pages, to shed new light on the substantive issues. *After Humanity* examines *what* Lewis said, *why* he said it, and *how* he did so. The question as to whether his overall argument is actually right, wrong, or a mixture of both is outside my remit. Readers are referred to the Commentary and Gloss below (chapter VII) for my own further observations and analysis, along with reflections on the text cited from the extensive secondary literature. That these reflections are not always in agreement with one another indicates the complexity of the matters at hand and my own intention that this Guide should foster debate and continuing enquiry.

However, though I offer no judgement on the merits of Lewis's overall case, I will venture to suggest one particular explanation for *Abolition's* largely positive reception-history. It has to do with the effect of the Great War on Lewis's life and its bearing upon the argument that he propounds.

The distinguished historian of Victorian England, G.M. Young, was fond of remarking that, in order to understand a figure from the past, a good question to ask is,

* "*The Abolition of Man* reveals the excess of emotion that Lewis was capable of committing to print when discussing views he found uncongenial, his tendency to fall on his opponents, and to impute to them the worst possible motives. It also reveals the magnitude of his misunderstanding of the view ostensibly under investigation." John Beversluis, *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 91.

† See letter of 2 June 1947 from Dorothy L. Sayers to C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, vol. 2, 779. Every seems to have considered the book dangerous because it defended what Lewis, countering arguments propounded by I.A. Richards, called "stock responses." For more on their divergent opinions about stock responses, see below, pages 68–69.

‡ "C.S. Lewis put it quite bluntly: Man is being abolished.... What is being abolished is... the man defended by the literatures of freedom and dignity. His abolition has been long overdue.... To man *qua* man we readily say good riddance." B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, 200–201. For more on Skinner, see below, page 162.

“What was going on in the world when he was twenty?”* Lewis turned twenty in the same month that the Great War Armistice was signed. Over 700,000 British servicemen perished in that conflict and Lewis himself had cheated death by a hair’s breadth. (See figure 1.) “I am the only survivor,” he wrote, recalling the quintet of friends with whom he did his officer training. “I think of Mr. Sutton, a widower with five sons, all of whom have gone.”²² And there was one loss that affected Lewis more directly than any other. That was the death of Paddy Moore, who had been his roommate in the billet of the Officers’ Training Corps. (See figure 2.) The two men had known each other for just a few months, but it was a friendship that would prove pivotal for Lewis’s future. Lewis promised Moore that, if the worst happened, he would take care of his friend’s mother and sister. Following Paddy’s death in battle (see figure 3), Lewis became a *de facto* surrogate son and brother to Jane and Maureen Moore, respectively. He would go on to live with them for decades.

The personal and social impact of his relationship with the Moore family has been much commented upon by biographers, but its impact on his philosophical development ought also to be considered as we observe how *The Abolition of Man* has been received. Lewis presents “death for a good cause” as the crucial test of objective value. For him, as for so many of his first readers, the meritoriousness or otherwise of dying for one’s country was not merely an intellectual matter, it was an emotionally charged question that was raised every morning by the presence of an empty chair at the breakfast table. “I just lived all my life for my son,” wrote Mrs. Moore in October 1918, “and it is hard to go on now. I had built such hopes on my only son, and they are buried with so many others in that wretched Somme.”²³ As Lewis established his Oxford household with her and her daughter in the years that followed Paddy’s death, the validity of Horace’s dictum – *it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country* (that “old lie,” as poet Wilfred Owen called it) – was remorselessly put under the microscope. If there is a gravity and heft to the argument forwarded in *Abolition*, as I think there is, and if readers pick up on these qualities, as I believe many do, the cause may be found, at least in part, in the personal crisis Lewis went through in the year he turned twenty.

The fact that this slender volume made an impact on its first readers and continues to fascinate and provoke today testifies to the enduring value of its philosophical seriousness and rhetorical power. However positively or negatively the argument may strike us, I think it is fair to receive *Abolition* as, among other things, a mental product of the “war to end all wars.” And in Lewis’s insistence on the objective goodness of laying down one’s life for one’s friends, we may discern, with a profound irony, an example of what Wilfred Owen had written about shortly before his own death in November 1918: “The pity of war, the pity war distilled.”²⁴

* G.M. Young, “Continuity” (Leslie Stephen Lecture, 1949), in his *Last Essays* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1950), 49. It is a line frequently misattributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.

CHAPTER II



Occasion and Context

IT IS FEBRUARY 1943. THE UNITED KINGDOM IS STILL AT WAR after three and a half years. The Battle of Britain has been narrowly won, and the Blitz has somehow been endured, but the blackout and food rationing remain in force and the V-2 rockets have yet to rain down on eastern England. D-Day (the Allied invasion of Normandy that will liberate northwest Europe) is more than a year away. Victory in Japan is a distant dream.

Life goes on in the universities but is much depleted and disrupted. Lewis has been distracted from his academic pursuits by service with the Oxford branch of the Local Defence Volunteers (the “Home Guard” as Churchill preferred to call them) and by travelling about the country to address the men of the Royal Air Force, whose life expectancy is now generally measured not in years but in months.

When the outbreak of hostilities loomed, back in 1939, Lewis had found himself deeply depressed, recalling how memories of the Great War had haunted his dreams for years: “I think death would be much better than to live through another war. . . . I have even, I’m afraid, caught myself wishing that I had never been born.”¹ But though the prospect of a second great conflict initially pushed Lewis towards despair, its arrival had the effect of awakening his fighting spirit. He was too old to reprise the active service he had seen during the First World War, when he had been a teenage officer on the Western Front, but he now felt he could and should engage in combat with some of the philosophical and religious issues that this new conflagration had forced to the forefront of people’s attention: hence his willingness to write *The Problem of Pain* (1940) and to broadcast talks about Christianity over the BBC when requests to do so came his way.* Hence also his most popular work to date, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), a satire upon the psychology of temptation. Behind the war was “the War”: the unchanging moral and spiritual conflict that faces people of every culture in every place in every generation.

* It is worth pointing out that *The Problem of Pain* (1940) and the BBC broadcasts were not initiated by Lewis but were the result of commissions conceived by other people (Ashley Sampson in the case of *The Problem of Pain* and J.W. Welch in the case of the BBC talks). As with *The Abolition of Man*, and indeed his involvement with the Socratic Club and his addresses to the RAF, Lewis was responding to invitations, not proactively determining to take such work upon himself. In this sense, Alister McGrath’s description of Lewis as a “reluctant prophet” is accurate.

The intellectual threats to freedom that Lewis considered worthy of his attention were not confined to the regimes of the Axis powers led by Hitler and Mussolini; they were present also within democratic societies, including that of the United Kingdom. One such threat, a relatively new school of thought known as logical positivism, was increasingly gaining traction.* Lewis regarded it as a “menace” and as the philosophical ante-room to “the complete void.”†

Two figures who were associated with that school attracted his particular attention. They were A.J. Ayer and I.A. Richards “who imported logical positivism to Oxford and Cambridge, respectively.”‡ If we are to look for contemporaneous thinkers whom Lewis had in his sights as he wrote *The Abolition of Man*, we would do well to focus on these two men as representative names. Richards, indeed, is targeted repeatedly by Lewis in the course of his argument, and we will come on to him presently. Ayer escapes mention, which is probably an indication that Lewis did not esteem his work as highly as that of Richards, but, given that Ayer was an Oxford colleague, he represented the more proximate challenge.§

A.J. Ayer was a lecturer at Christ Church, the grandest of the Oxford colleges.¶ (See figure 10.) In 1936, he had published an influential book called *Language, Truth and Logic*, in which he denied the possibility of attaching meaning to sentences that were not either tautological (e.g., “All bachelors are unmarried”) or empirically verifiable.

* In highlighting logical positivism, I do not mean to suggest that it directly occasioned *Abolition*, as if Lewis were merely trying to refute Ayer, Richards, and their intellectual company, but only to point it out as the latest and most prominent representative of a general ethical position that Lewis had had in his sights for many years. Logical positivism was the fashionable metastasis of a long-standing philosophical malady: the chronic condition was what Lewis sought to address.

† “Don’t imagine that the Logical Positivist menace is over.” Letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, 22 April 1954 (*Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 462). In *That Hideous Strength* (1945), the fictional counterpart to *Abolition*, Lewis describes John Wither as one who “had passed from Hegel into Hume, thence through Pragmatism, and thence through Logical Positivism, and out at last into the complete void” (353).

‡ Lewis tends to cover in a cloak of anonymity thinkers whose work he has little respect for, if he engages it at all (see below, page 47). The fact that he so frequently names I.A. Richards, not only in *Abolition* but in several other works too, indicates that he thought him a serious figure. Though he considered Richards “jejune” as a practising critic, he nevertheless acknowledged that sometimes he could “rightly expose” language that was groundlessly emotive (letter of 12 September 1940, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 443). He did not consider Richards “woolly or confused”; he was asking “some of the right questions” and was therefore “worth powder and shot” (letter of 7 November 1947, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 810) and should be attacked on the right grounds (letter of 13 January 1937, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 209f). Ayer receives no such courtesies and is instead politely left unnamed throughout Lewis’s public writings.

§ Alfred Jules (“Freddie”) Ayer (1910–1989), educated at Eton and Christ Church, was only in his mid-twenties when he published his most famous book. He lectured in philosophy at Christ Church from 1933–1940 and finished his career as Wykeham Professor of Logic at New College. He served as President of the British Humanist Association and was knighted in 1970. It is possible that Lewis glanced at Ayer in creating the character of Horace Jules, the Director of the N.I.C.E., in *That Hideous Strength*. Critics have likened Jules to H.G. Wells, not least because he is described as “a distinguished novelist and scientific populariser” (43), and this is a fair comparison (the figure of Jules Verne perhaps lurks in the background here too); but the fact that Jules shares Ayer’s middle name may not be a complete accident.

Statements of moral condemnation cannot pass this “Verification Principle”; they are “pseudo-concepts” possessing no more meaning than an expression of emotion. Ayer explains:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, “You acted wrongly in stealing that money,” I am not stating anything more than if I had said, “You stole that money.” In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, “You stole that money,” in a particular tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.³

This attempt to reconfigure moral philosophy and bring about “the elimination of metaphysics”^{*} was riddled with problems, as Ayer himself eventually recognized.[†] It can be seen as the logical endpoint that certain strains of Cartesian philosophizing were destined to reach sooner or later. But for all its weaknesses, it achieved a huge currency, so much so that John Lucas states, “Logical Positivism had swept all before it.”[‡] Lewis himself considered the movement serious enough that he publicly debated Ayer at the Socratic Club in 1946.[§] It was after this debate that Lewis, in conversation with a colleague, described Ayer as “a cross between a rodent and a firefly.” Having had this reported to him, Ayer wrote dryly, “I did not feel altogether flattered, but I had some idea what Lewis meant.”⁵

As mentioned above, I.A. Richards is the other figure whom we would do well to know about if we are to understand the intellectual context of *Abolition*, for he was Lewis’s “main target.”⁶ (See figure 9.) Richards is harder to classify than Ayer: he was more inter-disciplinary, ranging across history, philosophy, medicine, and literacy programs, not to mention his fascination with Confucianism, developed during lengthy

^{*} This was the title Ayer gave to his opening chapter.

[†] When asked what were the “real defects” of logical positivism, Ayer replied, “I suppose the most important of the defects was that nearly all of it was false. . . . Well, perhaps I’m being too harsh on it, I still want to say it was true in spirit – the attitude was right. But if one looks at it in detail . . . very little survives” (A.J. Ayer, “Interview with Bryan Magee,” 130).

[‡] The Socratic Club was a debating society at the University of Oxford, 1941–1972. (See figure 7.) Lewis served as its first president till he took up a professorial chair at Cambridge in 1955. In 1946, Ayer was slated to debate with Michael Foster, but, as Ayer records, “I dealt with his paper rather harshly, and when he made little effort to defend it, C.S. Lewis took over from him. Lewis and I then engaged in a flashy debate, which entertained the audience but did neither of us much credit, while Foster sat by, suffering in silence” (A.J. Ayer, *Part of My Life: Memoirs of a Philosopher*, 296–297). Lewis suggested that Ayer be invited back to the Socratic Club in 1950 for a second bout (letter to Stella Aldwinckle, 12 June 1950, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 35; cf. 447), but no return visit took place.

visits to China.* As regards logical positivism, Richards's early enthusiasm for it appears to have waned, and it would probably be better to characterise his more settled view as broadly subjectivist rather than strictly positivist.† Nevertheless, Richards "had, at one time, in logical positivist fashion, referred to the 'untruthfulness of poetry' as 'pseudo-statements,'"‡7 echoing Ayer's use of the term "pseudo-concepts."

The approach that Richards represented was less of an issue in pure philosophy than in practical literary criticism. In his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), Richards defended a subjectivist approach to the critical task:

We are accustomed to say that a picture is beautiful, instead of saying that it causes an experience in us which is valuable in certain ways. . . . We continually talk as though things possess qualities, when what we ought to say is that they cause effects in us of one kind or another. . . . Few competent persons are nowadays so deluded as actually to hold the mystical view that there is a quality Beauty which inheres or attaches to external objects. . . . The remarks we make as critics do not apply to such objects but to states of mind.⁸

Thus Richards "throws overboard the notion of beauty as an objective principle."⁹ He makes the same subjectivist moves in the field of aesthetics as Ayer does in the realm of ethics.‡ The beauty of art, just like the wrongness of theft, is an interior feeling only, a personal experience in the mind of the onlooker, not an external reality that merits a certain response.

Lewis took a dim view of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, but it did at least provide him with an opportunity for a well-executed joke on the occasion when the two men met in Oxford:

Richards recalled a lecture he gave at Oxford in the 1920s or early 30s. . . . Afterward he went back with his host C.S. Lewis to Magdalen [College], but Lewis had forgotten to arrange a guest room. Collingwood [R.G. Collingwood, Lewis's colleague] was away, however, so Richards could stay in his rooms – only there were no books. Lewis said he would be right back and returned with *Principles of Literary Criticism*. 'Here's something that should put you to sleep,' he said. But Richards could not sleep because the margins were full of Lewis's biting comments.¹⁰

* Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893–1979) was an undergraduate at Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he later became an adjunct instructor in English. He acquired a keen interest in China and Chinese thought, holding a number of academic positions in Beijing in the 1930s, before moving to Harvard, where he taught from 1944 to 1963.

† "Richards was never a very good positivist": Richard Foster's verdict as quoted in John Paul Russo, *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*, 200. The precise boundaries of positivism and subjectivism (and for that matter emotivism, expressivism, associationism, non-cognitivism, etc.) need not detain us. Suffice it to say that positivism is more narrowly focused than subjectivism and more concerned to practise philosophy in a way that makes it ancillary to empirical science.

‡ Lewis recognised the link between Richards's ideas and subjectivism in a letter he wrote to Br. George Every, 4 February 1941 (*Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 468f).

It is this very book, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, that Lewis eviscerates in his notes to chapter 2 of *The Abolition of Man*. Richards is also named in the main text, where his ideas about “badness in literature” are weighed and found wanting (13). He was by now used to such treatment, for he had become a frequent target of Lewis’s broadsides in other works.* The barrage in *Abolition* prompted Richards to consider writing an essay in response, but in the end he did not do so.†

The personal interactions that Lewis had with Ayer and Richards remind us that positivism and subjectivism were not for him merely academic abstractions: they were associated with real live human beings whom he knew and met and argued with. He was not just playing with counters: there was “skin in the game.” During the crucial period when Lewis was coming of age as an academic in the 1920s and 1930s, positivist and subjectivist ideas were increasingly gaining traction and represented an immediate challenge that he had to reckon with, as did the academy more generally.

For nobody could deny that, if Ayer, Richards, and their intellectual kin were correct, ethics and aesthetics as they had hitherto been understood were radically misconceived and had now arrived at a sort of dead end. To that extent these new ideas reflected the contemporary world situation, for the international crisis was also bringing matters to a head. Had human civilization run its course? With entire sections of the population in mainland Europe being systematically exterminated, with food scarce and death falling out of the sky, no one could avoid wondering what had led humanity to such a pass or whether it would ever regain its equilibrium. And did it even deserve to? Did the word *deserve* itself still mean anything? The status of desert, of objective realities *meriting* certain responses, had become an inescapably pressing matter of concern politically no less than ethically and aesthetically. Modernity was evidently producing barbarism, but did it really matter? And if so, why? Few people were aware of the new terror being developed in the Manhattan Project, but even in the absence of that knowledge, it was clear that humanity stood on a precipice.

It was in this context that Lewis found himself being invited to give the fifteenth series of annual Riddell Memorial Lectures at the University of Durham.‡ (See

* See, for example, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare” (1939), “High and Low Brows” (1939), “Christianity and Culture” (1940), and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). Lewis attacks Richards on a number of fronts, including his approach to metaphorical language, the definition of “badness” in literary criticism, the purposes of reading, and “stock responses.”

† See Stephanie L. Derrick, *The Fame of C.S. Lewis: A Controversialist’s Reception in Britain and America*, 75. The essay Richards actually wrote was entitled “Responsibilities in the Teaching of English,” in *Essays and Studies*, 7–20. Richards mentions Lewis in two of his published letters, both of them written to T.S. Eliot (1 October 1946, 27 September 1962); see John Paul Russo, *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*, 115, 164. See also James T. Como, *Branches to Heaven*, 122.

‡ The University of Durham is, by most reckonings, the third oldest university in England (after Oxford and Cambridge); it was given its Royal Charter in 1837. The cathedral city of Durham is located in County Durham, 240 miles north of Oxford. The Riddell Memorial Lectures were endowed anonymously in 1928 in memory of Sir John Walter Buchanan-Riddell, Bt. (1849–1924), sometime High Sheriff of Northumberland, and a barrister active in public affairs. Lewis refers to the Fourteenth Series of lectures, those by Sir Edmund Whittaker, in his 1943 essay “Dogma and the Universe.”

figure 8.) The lecturer each year was asked to address a subject that explored “the relation between religion and contemporary thought.”^{11*} Surprisingly, Lewis’s lectures turned out to have very little to say about religion, except perhaps implicitly. What he wished to explore would require his audience to delve into something even more fundamental than what we ordinarily understand by “religion,” as we shall explore further in chapter IV. On 24 February 1943, Lewis, accompanied by his brother, Warren, boarded a train and journeyed north from Oxford to the University of Durham (see figure 34) to give three lectures on consecutive nights: “Men Without Chests,” “The Way,” and “The Abolition of Man.”[†]

* The inside back cover of the first edition of *The Abolition of Man* listed Lewis’s predecessors in the lecture series since its inception in 1928. Two entries appear dated 1935. There were no lectures in 1938.

First Series: *Religion and the Thought of To-day*, C.C.J. Webb, 1928.

Second Series: *The Scientific Background of the Christian Creeds*, W.M. Thornton, 1929.

Third Series: *Philosophy and the Cross*, O.C. Quick, 1930.

Fourth Series: *Purpose in Evolution*, Sir J. Arthur Thomson, 1931.

Fifth Series: *The Eternal Values*, The Very Rev. W.R. Inge, 1932.

Sixth Series: *On the Nature and Grounds of Religious Belief*, J.L. Stocks, 1933.

Seventh Series: *The Foundations of Faith and Morals*, Bronislaw Malinowski, 1935.

Eighth Series: *Evolution and the Christian Concept of God*, Charles E. Raven, 1935.

Ninth Series: *Religion and Contemporary Psychology*, T.H. Pear, 1936.

Tenth Series: *History, Freedom, and Religion*, F.M. Powicke, 1937.

Eleventh Series: *Knowledge of the Individual*, W.G. De Burgh, 1939.

Twelfth Series: *Conventionalization and Assimilation in Religious Movements as Problems in Psychology*, Robert H. Thouless, 1940.

Thirteenth Series: *Science and Faith*, Sir William Bragg, 1941.

Fourteenth Series: *The Beginning and End of the World*, E.T. Whittaker, 1942.

† Lewis presented the talks in the King’s Hall at King’s College, Newcastle, then a constituent college of the University of Durham, on the evenings of 24, 25, and 26 February 1943. King’s College became Newcastle University in 1963; the Riddell Memorial Lectures continue to be hosted there, though they are no longer annual and now consist typically of two lectures rather than three. Lewis’s warnings about the destruction of objective value seem to be borne out by the title of the Sixty-Sixth series, given by Lucy Winkett in 2019: “Good News in an Age of Fake News? The Place of Mercy in a Post-truth Society.”

CHAPTER III



Overview

THE ABOLITION OF MAN – a suitably cataclysmic phrase for this war-time oration – became the overarching title for the lectures when they were published in book form in late 1943.* (See figure 13.)

The subtitle Lewis chose was less arresting: “Reflections on education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of schools.” This was a dull mouthful and a misleading one. In fact, the education Lewis had chosen to talk about was not confined to schools, still less to the “upper forms” thereof, nor was it principally about English language and literature. He tackles “education” in the widest possible sense and takes it to mean something like moral inheritance, the legacy of humane wisdom that the older generation imparts to the younger and which the younger have a duty to hand on in due course. The subject of his lectures turns out to be not so much schoolroom pedagogy as moral philosophy, and a broadly based moral philosophy at that, embracing aspects of epistemology, virtue ethics, linguistic theory, and anthropology. Lewis, of course, never uses such technical terms as these in presenting his case; he was

* There has been considerable confusion in the literature on *Abolition* about when it was published; for instance, Walter Hooper mistakenly gives the date as 6 January 1943 (*C.S. Lewis, A Companion and Guide*, 804; *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 545). Lewis delivered the lectures in February 1943, and made final corrections to the proofs in August, but the book itself had to wait till just before Christmas to be released. Though the lectures were given at Durham University, it was Oxford University Press that was contracted to publish the volume. Owing to the exigencies of war-time, the printing presses at OUP were “fully taken up” with “the demands of Government work,” according to a letter from Sir Humphrey Milford, head of OUP, dated 15 October, explaining the delay to Roy Niblett, the Acting Registrar at Durham (see UND/CBI/R6a/4 Riddell Memorial Lectures 1943–1945 in the Durham archives). Niblett wrote to Lewis on 18 November, expressing concern about the delays at OUP and suggesting that he “may like to prod them a little.” On 23 December, Milford finally sent an invoice to Durham “for printing and doing up Mr. C.S. Lewis’s Riddell Memorial Lecture.” Eight hundred copies were issued in the “Series style” – that is, in the style adopted by Durham for the annual series of lectures. Once this batch had sold out, which it did very quickly, OUP issued a reprint in a different style (in January 1944), thus establishing the title as a work in its own right, distinct from the series. A second edition of the book, lightly revised, was published in 1946. The U.S. hardback edition was issued in 1947, the paperback not until 1965. Early cover designs may be viewed on the website *The Disordered Image: An Image Catalog of C.S. Lewis’ English Editions*, <https://cslewisedititions.com/abolition-of-man/setting-1/#01a>.

too good a writer for that. Like a poet, he keeps things particular, dramatic, and easily picturable. Let us now proceed to summarise the three chapters of his book.*

1) Men Without Chests

Lewis opens his argument by talking about an English textbook he has recently been sent for review and which he finds serious fault with. He dubs it *The Green Book* in order to spare the blushes of its two authors, whom he names Gaius and Titius, but the book was actually entitled *The Control of Language*, and its authors were Alec King and Martin Ketley. (See figures 16, 17, and 18.) Not that it matters much who they were or what their book was called. It soon becomes apparent that *The Green Book* is a foil, a useful opponent against which Lewis can swiftly establish his anti-subjectivist case by means of contrast.

Gaius and Titius claim that when a man describes a waterfall as “sublime,” he appears to be making a remark about the waterfall: “Actually,” they contend, “he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings” (2). His remark had no referential meaning, only emotive meaning.

With this dismissive comment, Gaius and Titius have opened a can of worms, and one which betokens a widespread philosophical error. Their throw-away remark about a man supposedly describing a waterfall, when really he was describing the state of his own emotions, is taken and used by Lewis as a convenient way to introduce his thesis.

But before we pursue that thesis, we should briefly note the layered nature of Lewis’s argument here in his opening pages: *The Green Book* by Gaius and Titius represents *The Control of Language* by King and Ketley, but King and Ketley’s subjectivism in *The Control of Language* represents in turn the thought of I.A. Richards once it had become simplified and popularised in a school textbook. Lewis admitted as much in a 1947 letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, stating flatly, “As for [Richards] being the precursor of my *Green Book* villains, yes.”¹ We will have more to say about Richards in the Commentary and Gloss below (see below, pages 63, 115). At this point, all we need to register is why Lewis chooses to tackle King and Ketley in the opening chapter of *The Abolition of Man* rather than Richards.

In Richards’s work, the subjectivism on offer was “all above-board, a theory advanced for adult consideration and argued for”; as a result “there is no crime in it, only error.” What especially irks Lewis about King and Ketley is that they are committing a kind of intellectual felony, smuggling subjectivism in “without argument in a book on a slightly different subject”; that this book is “for children” makes the misdemeanour even more irresponsible. He concedes that they are probably not “even aware that it [their

* The summary given in this chapter is not a mere précis of Lewis’s work, but contains a degree of explanation and evaluation en passim to assist the reader’s understanding. For more précis-like summaries (one longer, one shorter), the reader is referred to Arend Smilde, “C.S. Lewis: *The Abolition of Man*: A Summary.” See also Doris T. Myers, *C.S. Lewis in Context*, 77, who summarises the three chapters of *Abolition* by reference to the beautiful, the good, and the true, respectively.

implicit subjectivism] was controversial,”² but this only adds ignorance to impropriety – hence the withering comments that Lewis inserts into the margins of his copy of their book. (See, for example, figure 19.)

We see here Lewis’s concern for intellectual honesty and self-awareness on the part of academics, especially in writing for children; also his recognition of the fact that a controversial idea expressed innocently enough at the professorial level (by someone like Richards whose work he respected even while he disagreed with it) can turn out to have much less innocent effects when taken and used more crudely in a popular work like a school textbook.*

Whether or not Gaius and Titius know that their theory is controversial, they certainly know of its connection to Richards, for the distinction they draw between “referential” and “emotive” language is derived from a work that Richards had written (with C.K. Ogden) in 1923: *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923). King and Ketley openly profess their debt to Richards and Ogden in the preface of their book.†

Having clarified the precise nature of Lewis’s opening target, we are now well placed to observe how he proceeds with his argument.

As Lewis unfolds his case, it becomes evident that he is concerned with how human beings relate to reality, especially by means of language and sentiment. Does what we say about things correspond to how they really are, or does it not? Are our feelings about external matters nothing more than private emotions or can they somehow be true – true not just for ourselves, but true objectively? Gaius and Titius hold that aesthetic and moral knowledge can never be more than merely individual and personal; they “debunk” any claim that tries to assert that objective value can be known and articulated. Lewis disagrees. And not only does he disagree, he thinks that Gaius and Titius don’t really hold as true the viewpoint they appear to be promoting. For if they really believed that words do nothing more than express people’s feelings, they would have to conclude that *The Green Book* itself is only the expression of *their* personal feelings. But Gaius and Titius don’t want us to respond, as we read *The Green Book*, “How nice you feel that way!” They want us to agree with them that language is merely the expression of private

* This point is dramatized in *That Hideous Strength* when Arthur Denniston says of his old colleague Churchwood, “All his lectures were devoted to proving the impossibility of ethics, though in private life he’d have walked ten miles rather than leave a penny debt unpaid. But all the same... was there a single doctrine practised at Belbury which hadn’t been preached by some lecturer at Edgestow? Oh, of course, they never thought anyone would act on their theories! No one was more astonished than they when what they’d been talking of for years suddenly took on reality. But it was their own child coming back to them: grown up and unrecognisable, but their own” (371).

† “The authors, realizing that the book makes no claim to any great originality, wish to acknowledge their debt to two writers, Mr. C.K. Ogden and Prof. I.A. Richards, whose work on language was the starting-point and the inspiration of the book. If the ideas of these writers have been mishandled in the following pages, the authors can only plead as an excuse that the gap between the expert and the apprentice writer is not always easy to bridge” (Alec King and Martin Ketley, *The Control of Language: A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing*, xviii).

emotion. In other words, they want us to grant that they have said something *true*. Though they are great debunkers of other people's evaluative statements, they do not want their own evaluative statements to be debunked by the same technique. With their subjectivist philosophy they are in error, Lewis thinks, but at least "they are better than their principles" (23).

So begins his critique of the philosophical presuppositions that govern many modern beliefs about beauty, goodness, and truth. Are things beautiful, good, and true just for us as individuals, or can we speak and feel about them in ways that take us beyond our isolated perspectives into a shared discourse of objective value? Are we mere geldings (castrated horses), neighing to ourselves and circling endlessly round our private paddocks, or can we be, philosophically speaking, stallions, leaping over the fences of subjectivism and interacting fruitfully with the outside world?

Lewis closes his first lecture with a verbal sketch of the human person in three parts: head, belly, and chest. In "the head" we have thoughts and in "the belly" we have sensations, but only when we learn to integrate the rational and the sensual in stable sentiments, located in "the chest," do we really discover ourselves as human beings. The philosophy that Gaius and Titius promote is dehumanizing, Lewis maintains, because it makes for "men without chests," people who have heads and bellies but no capacity to unite their cerebral self and their visceral self in their thorax, which is the definitively human faculty.* "It is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal" (25). Lewis's message in this first lecture could be summarized in the pithy words of E.M. Forster: "Only connect."† Only connect the angel and the animal and you will have the anthropological. The human being is a synthesis of the human brain and the human belly in the human breast.

2) The Way

In his second lecture, Lewis expands upon the importance of this "middle element." He starts with an epigraph from Confucius: "It is upon the Trunk that a gentleman

* Of course, this "chest" is philosophical, not physiological. However, it is striking how much Lewis's own physical chest was a topic of recurrent concern as he grew up. His father, Albert, stated that his young son had a "poor chest – the poorest I think I ever saw in a boy of his years," "weaker than any other I have known" (George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*, 65, 49). In an unfinished story that Lewis wrote around this time, the protagonist has a weak chest, and in a letter home (28 November 1913), Lewis writes, "I have been condemned by the school doctor... to join the ranks of people who do 'special exercises for delicate chests' in the gym." When Lewis went to Oxford and learnt to row, his father was pleased because he viewed rowing as "the very best exercise for putting a chest on a man" (letter of Albert Lewis, 7 May 1917, *Lewis Papers*, V:208). One wonders whether this medical anxiety played a part in the development of his ideas about the chest philosophically considered and hence to his depiction of physiques in the *Narnia Chronicles*, where we find, with symbolic appropriateness, that Peter Pevensie grows up to be a "tall and deep-chested man," while Shift, the ape, reveals that apes always have "weak chests" (see below, pages 84, 86).

† "Only connect": words used as the epigraph to E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910). Lewis read *Howards End* and quotes from it approvingly in his essay "Lilies That Fester" (1955).

works” (27). By working on the trunk, the “chest,” the liaison officer between our heads and our bellies, we become integrated wholes and so learn the wholesome way of being human in the world. Lewis’s choice of “The Way” as the title for this second lecture refers us back to “the *Tao*,”* the term he introduced in his first address, which he uses not because he wants to single out Chinese philosophy as uniquely insightful but in order to de-emphasize Western categories and remind his readers that moral reality is universal.

And not only is moral reality universal, it is universally held to be objective, for even Gaius and Titius, who *say* that value is subjective, act in a manner which reveals they believe otherwise. (Lewis’s first note to chapter 2 seeks to identify their ultimate values, which, though not very exalted, are at least regarded by them as objective.) It is impossible to live in a logically consistent fashion holding to the belief that value is based on instinct. In practice we all act as if we did indeed recognise an objectively real ethical ecology, within which we morally live and breathe, just as we physically live and breathe within the earth’s atmosphere. We cannot get out of it, however much we might sometimes wish to. All cultures exhibit an awareness of this reality, Lewis argues, and he is happy to quote, alongside Confucius, a wide array of authorities in defence of his claim: Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Jesus, St. Paul, Locke, Shelley, and many others – a diverse chorus of voices, indicating that the human family is a real family, with certain core values in common. It is something of a *mêlée* at times, like any family, but still it is united at the root.†

He admits that by lumping together “the traditional moralities of East and West, the Christian, the Pagan, and the Jew,” we will find “many contradictions and some absurdities” (44–45). But his thesis is not that all moralities coincide on every point, only that they all derive from a single source, the universally accessible Tao, and all therefore agree in principle on the objectivity of moral value. The Tao is not something that human beings simply make up; it is something they discover.

Which is not to say that all cultures are morally equivalent. Some expressions of the Tao are better than others, and progress can be made as particular societies refine and correct their understanding of it. But these improvements can only be made, Lewis avers, from *inside* the Tao. Adjustments have to be organic, not surgical. They have to be carried out from within, because it is only from within that one has grounds for making any moral judgement whatsoever. As soon as one steps outside the Tao, one has stepped into the void.

* The initial letter of the word “Tao” is best represented in English by the letter *D*, and the word’s pronunciation is best approximated by the word *Dow*, as in the Dow Jones Index.

† Lewis expands on this claim in the appendix, where, with the help of the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, he roams freely through the world’s cultures – Babylonian, Hindu, Jewish, Egyptian, aboriginal Australian, Greek, Roman, Christian, and others besides – in order to drive home his point.

3) The Abolition of Man

This brings us to the final lecture, and here Lewis shifts up a gear into full prophetic mode. If chapter 1 was the check-up and chapter 2 the diagnosis, chapter 3 is the prognosis, and it does not make for comfortable reading. In closing the coffin-lid on objective value, humanity has opened Pandora's box. We no longer find the solution to the problems of life in "knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue," but increasingly in willpower, technological control, and surgical alteration of nature to suit our own convenience. This is "the world of post-humanity which, some knowingly and some unknowingly, nearly all men in all nations are at present labouring to produce" (75).

But although nearly everyone has fallen prey to this disease, not everyone will be equally affected. The vast majority of people will be far worse affected than those small minorities (in politics, education, medicine, and other fields) who hold positions of influence, for those minorities will admit no moral constraint upon their behaviour, and the majorities will have no grounds for disputing any enormity they happen to endorse. Indeed, the very word "enormity" will have lost its meaning. And when we factor time into the equation, we find another minority exercising undue power. The people alive at the moment of mankind's maximum strength will have immeasurably more power than their posterity, a posterity whose characteristics they can eugenically engineer and educationally manipulate however they wish.

These manipulators – or "Conditioners," as Lewis calls them – are not bad men; they are "not men (in the old sense) at all" (63). They ceased to be human when they stepped outside the Tao, for it is only within the Tao, the framework of practical reason, that human beings can make rational moral choices. Outside that framework, the only basis for ethical decision-making is sheer impulse, dependent on heredity, digestion, the weather, or the random association of ideas, and these impulses are all, by definition, outside the realm of reason. Though human beings are rational animals in their essential nature, they are free to act against that nature if they wish. They may choose – by wilfully abandoning objective value – to bring about their own abolition.

And having destroyed their humanity, these ex-men will be unable to revivify it among succeeding generations, even if they wanted to. Self-conditioned to be morally blind, these formerly human beings will necessarily pass on their blindness to any children whom they raise and to any pupils whom they educate. These subjects of the Conditioners will also be "not men at all," but rather "artefacts" (64). And thus the blindness will become endemic, permanent, inescapable. Gradually, even the memory of it will pass out of knowledge.

Before concluding the final chapter, Lewis briefly outlines an alternative to this bleak vision of a posthuman future. A "new Natural Philosophy" might begin to gain traction, an attitude to the world which "when it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole" (79). But Lewis is not very hopeful that this better path will be followed. More probably, we will go on dominating

nature until we have dominated ourselves, without noticing that, by doing so, we have defeated the whole process, “for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same” (71).

The measured but insistent tone that Lewis maintains even as he forecasts wholesale lawlessness makes for a discomfiting conclusion. Manner and message are effectively at odds as the work reaches its climax. Over the course of the book he has orchestrated a gradual crescendo, and that on two scores.* Philosophically speaking, the issues have expanded from cynics casually debunking value, to ideologues offering a hollow epistemological basis for moral judgement, to Nietzschean voluntarists asserting their will to power. Practically speaking, the behaviours under examination have developed – or rather, devolved – from aesthetic appreciation and patriotism, to wayward and warring instincts, to eugenics and wilful self-blinding.

It has been a Dead March in three movements, performed with steadily increasing disquiet by “Gaius and Titius,” “The Innovator,” and “The Conditioners.” Shortly before the final cadence, Lewis lets us in on his deepest fear: “The reply that I am ‘only one more’ obscurantist.” Here we discern Lewis’s profound earnestness. His lectures have not been an academic exercise in theoretical philosophy but a *cri de coeur*, a moral warning uttered in all seriousness and made more urgent and arresting by the wartime context in which he speaks:

The process which, if not checked, will abolish Man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists. The methods may (at first) differ in brutality. But many a mild-eyed scientist in pincenez, many a popular dramatist, many an amateur philosopher† in our midst, means in the long run just the same as the Nazi rulers of Germany. (73–74)

His grouping of Communism and Fascism with Democracy is telling. The malaise that Lewis would diagnose is not peculiar to totalitarian dictatorships, and there is no room for complacency, even in stable, tolerant, democratic England. The philosophy he has in his crosshairs is one that threatens, like Cronos, to devour its own children. Hence Lewis implores his readers to remember that “there are progressions in which the last step is . . . incommensurable with the others” (80). The solution is “dogmatic belief in objective value,” for this is a belief necessary “to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery” (73).

Lewis could not be clearer about the peril he foresees nor about the antidote he prescribes. What is less clear is whether he sees any real hope that his cautions will be listened to and acted upon. Does he consider himself to be playing the part of Paul

* “Rarely has such a crescendo succeeded in forty pages; at the beginning one thinks one hears a fly buzzing, later a strong engine, and finally one has to cover one’s ears as if in the middle of the battle of Stalingrad” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, Foreword, 10).

† Wilson glosses the mild-eyed scientist, the popular dramatist, and the amateur philosopher as, respectively, Sigmund Freud, George Bernard Shaw, and A.J. Ayer. See A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, 199.

Revere, successfully warning about the coming calamity, or that of Cassandra, doomed to utter true omens that go unheeded?* That he concludes on a negative note, with a description of pervasive moral blindness (“To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see” [81]), suggests that the latter role is the one he is assuming.

* Paul Revere (1735–1818), Boston silversmith and patriot in the American Revolution, whose midnight ride in 1775 warned the colonial militia that the British were coming. Cassandra, priestess of Apollo in ancient Greek mythology, was cursed to utter true prophecies that were never believed.

CHAPTER IV



A Religious Work?

THAT LEWIS SHOULD PLACE CHRISTIANITY on a level with other religions sometimes confuses readers who come to *The Abolition of Man* after encountering his more explicitly Christian writings; they tend to presume that this work will be a further example of the same kind, based on Christian premises and arguing to a Christian conclusion.* However, the book is not an apologia for Christianity, nor even for theism. Lewis makes no particular defence of his own religious commitments but sets out his stall much more broadly, showing himself prepared to make allies wherever he can find them. In doing so, he emulates Christ's own counsel to his disciples: "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). Lewis's readiness to strike a concordat even with some unlikely bedfellows was something Balthasar commended: "He does not care, as long as he is in line with the Great Tradition, which he sees shining everywhere."¹ God is "the Father of lights," as St. James's epistle has it – a verse that Lewis was fond of quoting[†] – and these "lights" include any moral or philosophical illumination, anything good, true, or beautiful, that a given tradition might possess. Such lights bear witness to "common grace" and therefore to the value of natural theology.[‡] It is in this context

* For example, "Over a period of approximately two decades, Lewis published a series of widely-read works of Christian apologetics, including *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *Miracles* (1947), and *Mere Christianity* (1952)" (Gregory Bassham, "Oxford's Bonny Apologist," 1).

† For example, "I do believe that God is the Father of lights – natural lights as well as spiritual lights (James 1:17)" (Interview with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1963, reprinted as "Cross-Examination," 264). Cf. Lewis's assessment of Richard Hooker, who thought that "all kinds of knowledge, all good arts, sciences, and disciplines come from the Father of lights and are 'as so many sparkles resembling the bright fountain from which they rise'" (*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* [1954], 460).

‡ In "The Poison of Subjectivism" (1943), an essay published in the same year as *Abolition* and that covers very similar ground, Lewis more directly addresses the relationship between his Christian faith and his acceptance of the "primary platitudes of practical reason as the unquestioned premises of all action." He argues that humanity's knowledge of the moral law has not been depraved "in the same degree as our power to fulfil it." In other words, we need divine help to fulfil the requirements of righteousness more than we need divine help to perceive the requirements of righteousness. He also argues that "God neither *obeys* nor *creates* the moral law"; the moral law is, rather, an expression of God's nature. For more on this point, see pages 113–114 below.

that Lewis, the noted Christian apologist, makes bold to put the Bible on a par with the Hindu *Vedas*, to quote St. Paul in the same breath as Confucius, and to bracket Christ's "Greater love hath no man" with Horace's *Dulce et decorum est* (30). The similarity he finds between Christian and non-Christian wisdom does not lead him to conclude, "So much the worse for Christianity," but "So much the better for these other traditions."*

In other words, Lewis viewed the argument he was advancing in support of "the Tao" to be perfectly compatible with a defence of the Christian faith, and even a pre-requisite of such a defence. Nothing he proposes in *Abolition* should be taken as a diminution of his belief in Christ or as a tacit acceptance of the validity of secularism.† Indeed, for those with eyes to see, his personal loyalties are still subtly discernible even here, as for example in his decision to close the appendix by citing John 12:24 ("Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies..." [101]), thus ending the book on a profoundly Christian note. But an apologetic for Christianity per se it is not.

Lewis is clear that he is only arguing for the objectivity of value; the question as to whether the Tao has a "supernatural origin" is not a question he is concerned with at the moment (49). (Readers who wish to see how he proceeds when that is his concern should read book I of *Mere Christianity* [1952]: "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.") Not only does his argument not rest on an explicitly Christian foundation, it does not even demand a belief in God: "Though I myself am a Theist, and indeed a Christian, I am not here attempting any indirect argument for Theism" (49). This resolutely non-religious (but not necessarily un-religious, still less anti-religious) framework is one of the major reasons why *Abolition* has appealed to such a broad readership. It propounds an argument that doesn't require its adherents to be signed-up members of a particular confession.‡

* Lewis had made a similar point about the commonalities of different religious traditions in at least three places prior to the publication of *Abolition*. In his first work of nonfiction apologetics, *The Problem of Pain*, he writes: "What is common to Zarathustra, Jeremiah, Socrates, Gotama, Christ and Marcus Aurelius, is something pretty substantial" (51). For more on this, see below, page 91. In *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), Lewis has Screwtape speak truly (for once) when he says that "the Enemy" (that is, God) sends into the world great moralists "not to inform men, but to remind them, to restate the primeval moral platitudes against our continual concealment of them" (letter 23). And in *The Allegory of Love* (1936), Lewis remarks that "it is doubtful whether any moralist of unquestioned greatness has ever attempted more (or less) than the defence of the universally acknowledged; for [in the words of Dr. Johnson] 'men more frequently require to be reminded than informed'" (158f).

† "The corpus of Lewis's work reveals that he... would be skeptical that the self-evidence and felt authority of the Tao vindicates a secular worldview. He's not currently arguing that the Tao can be easily accounted for in an atheistic world, or even that it can be explained equally well in an atheistic world as it can in a theistic world. He's arguing instead for the reality of the moral law itself" (David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning*, 252).

‡ Nuttall is of the view that although Lewis broadens his readership by eschewing questions of theism and Christianity, he weakens his case. "One suspects that in all this God or Supernature is a missing factor. Lewis's argument swings between ethical naturalism (either 'Do this because it is your nature to do it' or 'Do this because it is what people usually do') and non-naturalism ('This is what you ought to do, and no reason can ever be given'). As it is, it is a classic example of the subtle mutual interpenetration of descriptive and prescriptive argument which has always dogged ethical philosophy. Yet Christianity proclaims that *what*

The Abolition of Man, then, is not in the ordinary sense of the word a ‘religious’ work, which is surprising, given that the Riddell Memorial Lectures were established to address “a subject concerning the relation between religion and contemporary development of thought.” Where does religion feature in the argument Lewis presents?

In one obvious way, it features in the appendix. Many of the traditions that Lewis cites there are theistic religions. Insofar as these religions are being undermined by the contemporary development of thought in a subjectivist direction, Lewis’s lectures satisfy the conditions of the Riddell Memorial Lectures well enough.

In a less obvious but possibly more important way, Lewis may have felt he could fulfil the conditions of the lecture series by taking the word ‘religion’ in its strict etymological sense. *Religion* comes from a Latin root meaning “to bind,” referring to the bond of obedience that characterizes the life of a member of a religious order. By extension, *religion* can be thought of as a bond of unity, as a process that “re-ligaments” or “re-ligatures,” tying disparate things back together into one, integrating diverse viewpoints. In these senses of the word, *Abolition* could fairly be characterized as a profoundly religious argument, for behind the diversity of the moral traditions that he cites lies a strong, central, unifying principle – namely, objective value, a universally recognised moral code, which requires obedience from all human beings. It is this recognition of objective value that *precedes* what we ordinarily call “religion” (Paganism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc.). Recognition of objective value is a kind of *ur-religion* underlying them all, and indeed all traditional philosophies and coherently logical systems of thought whatsoever.

One can only be a religious human being, Lewis implies, if one is first a human being, and it is this acceptance of the absolute validity of “the ultimate platitudes of Practical Reason” that makes us distinctively human. Long before we are Christian or Stoic or Native American* or Aristotelian or Platonist or Animist or Humanist, we are human by dint of this belief. This belief binds together the various perspectives that each tradition adopts and also binds together people from different traditions who believe that reality can be objectively known and intelligently spoken about. It doesn’t

ought to be (seen from a human point of view) actually *is* (*sub specie aeternitatis*). Here, perhaps, is a non-subjective guarantor of another kind, more fitted to the task in hand. But Lewis was anxious to reach the sceptic by reason alone, and therefore fought the fight with one hand tied behind his back” (A.D. Nuttall, “Jack the Giant-Killer,” 283–284). Lewis would undoubtedly accept the validity of Nuttall’s critique, which is why he was a Christian and not just an adherent of the philosophy he commends in *Abolition*. Indeed, Lewis frankly acknowledges that “morality, apart from religion, cannot explain its own claims clearly. (Try any philosophical system of ethics).” See his marginal comments in the Wade Annotated Edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 30; and compare the running header, “As soon as [John] attempts seriously to live by Philosophy, it turns into Religion,” 144. But though mere philosophy may be less sufficient than theology, that is no reason not to go as far as possible under purely philosophical steam. The best must not be made an enemy of the good. For more on the Tao and its relationship with Christianity, see Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 244–269.

* Lewis does not use the term “Native American” but the now politically incorrect “Redskin.” This and his frequent use of the word “man,” where linguistic fashion today requires “human being” or “person,” are examples of how the work has dated with regards to its style.

resolve every difficulty within or between such traditions. In a manner of speaking, it creates those difficulties. As Lewis writes in “On Ethics” (1943?): “It is moral codes that create problems of casuistry [moral adjudication], just as the rules of chess create chess problems.”* Nonetheless, only by recognizing objective value does one have grounds for hoping that a resolution of moral differences can be obtained through reasonable and peaceful means. Without such a shared premise as a bedrock, we cannot dispute matters rationally with one another, but only assert our particular subjective preferences and try to shout down those whose preferences conflict with our own. To deny this core principle is to deny what makes us human: it leads to a situation that is so ethically immature it does not even rise to the level of Paganism.

Lewis had a sincere respect for Paganism. In 1946, he published an article entitled “A Christmas Sermon for Pagans,” which echoes many of the central points and even some of the phrasings of *Abolition*. He writes that Pagans “believed in what we now call an ‘Objective’ Right or Wrong.” That is, they considered the distinction between pious and impious behaviour to be independent of human preferences; it was something “which Man had not invented but had found to be true.” He goes on to say that it appears “as though we shall have to set about becoming true Pagans if only as a preliminary to becoming Christians.”² This remark perhaps indicates most clearly the religious motive latent within his purely philosophical purpose in *Abolition*.† He was attempting to haul a subjectivist culture back not only to honest humanism, but even, if need be, to pious Paganism, for both of these standpoints had a moral substance that was superior to the vacuity of post-Christian subjectivism. Such a journey would be a long way round, but it might well turn out to be the shortest way home.

* “On Ethics” (1943?), 79. Probably the best example of Lewis practising detailed casuistry on a particular question is his “Why I Am Not a Pacifist” (1940).

† “What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects – with their Christianity *latent*.” “Christian Apologetics,” 150.