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THE ABOLITION OF MAN TODAY

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SYNOPSIS

C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* is one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. In it, Lewis prophetically envisioned that the growing acceptance of moral subjectivism and the moral skepticism it breeds would lead to a pernicious moral and eugenic manipulation of mankind. Nearly seventy-five years after the publication of *The Abolition of Man*, mankind has not been abolished in the way Lewis foresaw, at least not yet. Nevertheless, the book's prophetic warning is no less important and applicable today than it was in Lewis's own day, especially in light of the current tenuousness of moral knowledge and recent developments in biotechnology. If we are to forestall the abolition of man that Lewis envisioned, we must reject moral subjectivism and learn to speak and feel the truth of the natural moral law in love.

C. S. Lewis's book *The Abolition of Man* is widely considered to be his most prophetic and perhaps even his most important nonfiction work. Its significance is marked by the fact that *National Review* selected it as seventh on their list of "The 100 Best Nonfiction Books of the [Twentieth] Century," ahead of many other influential books, including Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (twentieth), Albert Einstein's *Relativity* (twenty-third), and Lewis's own masterpiece of Christian apologetics *Mere Christianity* (twenty-sixth).¹ Despite its short length and Lewis's characteristically clear prose, *The Abolition of Man* presents a complex philosophical argument that can be difficult to understand. The primary purpose of this essay is not to provide a detailed explanation or evaluation of the book's main argument (that I have done elsewhere²) but rather to consider whether and how our world might still be heading down the path toward the abolition of man and what, if anything, can be done to forestall the fulfillment of Lewis's ominous

prophecy. If we are to understand the significance of *The Abolition of Man* for the twenty-first century, however, a brief summary of its main argument will be helpful.

A RECIPE FOR THE ABOLITION OF MAN

The Abolition of Man is composed of three somewhat independent essays, but the unifying thesis of the book is that moral subjectivism is both philosophically problematic and frighteningly pernicious.³ Subjectivism is the view that value claims such as “The snowcapped Rocky Mountains are sublime” and “Murder is wrong,” which seem to be objective, actually are about the subjective emotions of the speaker (“I have a feeling of awe toward the Rockies” or “I have a disapproving feeling toward murder”).⁴

Subjectivism is not strictly a view about the existence of objective value or about our ability to know whether things have objective value. If subjectivism is true, it might be that objective goods such as justice, human well-being, truth, and beauty really exist and that some objects really possess and exhibit these values; we just can’t *say* that they do. If subjectivism is true, we can express that an action or institution makes us feel angry or indignant by saying it is unjust, but we cannot express that it is *objectively* unjust; we can express that a work of art or music or a natural landscape gives us a feeling of aesthetic awe by saying it is beautiful or sublime, but our words cannot communicate that it is *objectively* beautiful or sublime.

Silencing Moral Knowledge

Lewis insightfully recognized, however, that subjectivism is no sooner accepted as a philosophical view about moral and other value-attributing language than it gives rise to the epistemological view that we can never really know whether a thing has objective value even if it does. Not only does subjectivism teach us that value claims are not really about objective values; it also teaches us to view emotions as irrational impulses that we must subdue if we are to be ideally rational.

Lewis argues in the first essay of *The Abolition of Man*, “Men without Chests,” that subjectivism thus hinders us from developing the rational emotions or “just sentiments” that are our primary mode of directly experiencing, recognizing, or “seeing” the value in the world. Emotions are, in Lewis’s terminology, “recognitions of objective value.”⁵ They are “the eyes of our hearts.”⁶ By teaching us that all value claims are simply claims about the emotions of the speaker and that our emotions are mere

irrational impulses, subjectivism cuts off our heads from knowledge of objective moral value by muting our mouths and hardening our hearts. What was conceived in an ivory tower as moral subjectivism is born in popular thinking as moral skepticism. For what cannot be said or experienced cannot be thought. And what cannot be thought will not be believed.

The Conditioners

The second and third essays of *The Abolition of Man* draw out the logical and frightening practical conclusions of moral subjectivism and the moral skepticism it breeds. The central thesis of “The Way” is that it is at best inconsistent and at worst viciously manipulative to reject knowledge of the “traditional” and cross-cultural values at the heart of the natural moral law (“the Tao”) on the basis of moral subjectivism while promoting belief in other values. And the central thesis of “The Abolition of Man” is that if our society continues to reject the possibility of moral knowledge, we will be left morally rudderless and immanently impressionable, for “a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”⁷ Blind to the life-giving light of the moral law, mankind will, in the end, be led to its death by the base, animalistic appetites of a small class of powerful individuals — “the Conditioners.”

Lewis argues that the Conditioners, having lost all moral bearing, will engage in an unbridled quest for scientific and technological progress for which they will garner popular support through a manipulative program of moral miseducation (emotional “conditioning”). He warns that unless our society resists the pseudoscientific appeal of subjectivism and opposes the moral miseducation of the Conditioners, they ultimately will succeed in “the abolition of man” through eugenics and biotechnologies that violate the dignity of human beings. The recipe for the abolition of man that Lewis prophetically envisioned can be summed up as follows: (1) silence moral language, (2) subdue moral emotions, and (3) subject humanity to moral and eugenic conditioning. This is a recipe for disaster — a recipe for death.

THE TENUOUSNESS OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE TODAY

Nearly seventy-five years removed from the publication of *The Abolition of Man*, some might be tempted to think that the book is little more than an overly pessimistic “doom and gloom” prognostication. After all, we’re still here, aren’t we? Despite the widespread acceptance today of moral subjectivism and its close cousin moral relativism — the view that the truth value of all moral claims is relative to the beliefs

and values of the speaker or her culture — mankind does not seem to have been abolished in anything like the way Lewis predicted. We have not been altered biologically in irreversible ways through eugenic programs, and many people still believe and try to live according to the natural moral law.

To claim that Lewis got it wrong, however, would be a bit premature. For one thing, Lewis predicted that some knowledge of natural moral law would be kept alive perhaps for many centuries due to the influence of communal tradition.⁸ So, it is no indictment of Lewis's prescience that many people in our society still accept certain aspects of the natural moral law such as The Golden Rule or the truths that all people are created equal and have inherent rights to life and liberty. Those truths have been "written on their hearts" by God (Rom. 2:14–15) and ingrained in them through the instruction of their parents, churches, and the founding documents of our political society.

Yet, as Lewis expected, the ties that bind us to the natural moral law are increasingly tenuous. The vast majority of the students I have taught in universities across the United States *believe* that murder, genocide, rape, and other violent and harmful acts are wrong, but many of them are very hesitant to say with any confidence that they *know* that such horrific acts are wrong. A lifetime of moral miseducation has taught them to be "tolerant," noncommittal moral subjectivists, relativists, or skeptics (or, more commonly, an amorphous blend of all three). Dallas Willard explains, "If we can just treat religion and morals as areas in which there is no knowledge, the proposal is, we will have pulled the rug out from under dogmatism, intolerance, and persecution."⁹

Ethics without Morality?

Even many professional ethicists today distinguish "ethics" from "morality" in an effort to distance what they consider to be publicly acceptable professional codes of ethics from private, personal moral values, especially those informed by religious worldviews. At some of the premier institutions of higher learning in our society, "morality" has become a bad word — "the M word." And in elementary schools across the country, children are being taught to view value claims as mere "opinions" rather than "facts."¹⁰

As a result, while many people still accept certain core tenets of the natural moral law and try to live accordingly, they increasingly are hesitant to claim that they know them to be true. Surely some hesitancy and humility is appropriate. Many people today rightfully trust their own moral sensibilities enough to recognize that the traditional moral values of society and their own moral emotions can get morality wrong. Rather than working to improve society's values or their own moral-emotional perceptions of

value, however, they give in to the influence of moral subjectivism and give up on the possibility of moral knowledge. If our society was so wrong (at least from our current culturally informed perspective) with respect to racial equality, perhaps they were wrong about the value of marriage, too. If irrational fear, anxiety, anger, and envy often cloud our moral reasoning, better never to trust our emotions at all. So goes the thinking of a culture ripe for moral manipulation by skilled rhetoricians and aspiring dictators.

EUGENICS BEFORE AND AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

The short path from moral subjectivism and skepticism to the moral and eugenic conditioning of the human race by a charismatic dictator was put in stark relief by the Holocaust. Yet, as for Lewis's warning that human nature would itself become the product of human experimentation and irreversible manipulation through eugenics, fortunately we have not seen this come to fruition on a global scale.

Lest anyone be inclined to accuse Lewis of being a sensationalistic and overly pessimistic prognosticator, however, it is important to note that Lewis first delivered the lectures that would become *The Abolition of Man* in 1943, two years before Germany surrendered to the Allied Powers in World War II. Had the Nazis been victorious (as powerfully depicted in the popular Amazon TV series *The Man in the High Castle*), the second half of the twentieth century likely would have been marked by the global implementation of eugenics programs aimed at ridding the world once and for all of whatever classes of people were deemed "undesirable" or "unfit" by the ruling political and scientific powers. The Holocaust would have been just the beginning. And Germany wouldn't have been the only culprit. Hitler and the Nazis were not the only practitioners of eugenics in the twentieth century. In fact, the Nazis were inspired in their programs of forced sterilization and genocide by the legally sanctioned eugenics programs that were already being implemented across the United States well prior to WWII.

The Horrific History and Frightening Future of American Eugenics

In 1924, for example, the state of Virginia passed a law that gave the state the authority forcibly to sterilize those with hereditary mental diseases or disabilities. Then, in 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled eight to one in favor of the Virginia statute and in favor of its application in the case of the forced sterilization of eighteen-year-old Carrie Buck. In the majority opinion from that case, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes described Buck as

“a feeble minded white woman...the daughter of a feeble minded woman...and the mother of an illegitimate feeble minded child.” Holmes went on to write, “It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes....Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”¹¹

As terrible as such eugenic programs of forced sterilization were, had the Holocaust not revealed to the world the genocidal undercurrent of eugenics, the United States and other world powers likely would have ramped up their efforts over the ensuing decades. In fact, even in spite of the widespread moral horror evoked by the Holocaust, various U.S. institutions and laws continued for decades to support the forced sterilization of incarcerated criminals, minorities, and the mentally disabled. In one egregious example, Indian Health Services sterilized over 3,400 Native American women without their permission between the years of 1973 and 1976.¹²

Since that time, we have seen the development of such biomedical technologies as (1) *preimplantation genetic diagnosis*, which currently is used to help guide the selection of embryos conceived through in vitro fertilization in order to prevent the passing on of genetic disorders, and (2) *somatic cell nuclear transfer*, which is currently used to clone human embryos for use in stem-cell research.

In the absence of culturally pervasive and confident moral knowledge of the equal human dignity of all people, it is not hard to imagine a future in which those who wield the scientific and political power over such technologies forcibly use them on a massive global scale to rid the human race of whatever features those in power deem undesirable. While a kind of irreversible eugenic alteration of humanity is already taking place on a small scale through genetic selection and experimentation on embryos, we ought to shudder to think of how much more violence would have been done, and would be continuing today, in the name of human progress had the Holocaust not opened the eyes of our hearts to the evils of eugenics.

SPEAKING AND FEELING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Indeed, one of the unintended benefits to the human race of the horrendous evils of genocide, terrorism, rape, and murder is that they pierce our hard hearts, awaken our moral sensibilities, and help us to hear the voice of the natural moral law in our hearts. “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹³ It is easy enough to sound enlightened and rational when one espouses moral subjectivism and skepticism in the context of

abstract debates in introduction to ethics courses, coffee shops, and on social media forums. It is much harder to sound enlightened and rational, or even human, when one espouses moral subjectivism and skepticism while standing among the dilapidated barracks of Auschwitz or at Ground Zero in New York. It may be, in fact, that the tragic recurrence of such violent, brutal, and inhumane acts is all that has kept moral knowledge alive in the decades since Lewis penned the prophetic words of *The Abolition of Man*.

Should we, then, commit or encourage such atrocities so that moral knowledge may abound? “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1). We must never commit or encourage evil, or even applaud it in our secret hearts, but we can and should draw attention to the presence of real evil in the world in order to help others emotionally perceive — *feel* — the truth of the natural moral law and the costs of rejecting it. And we must remove the gag of subjectivism from our own mouths and from the mouths of others, giving each other permission to condemn objective evil wherever we see it, though in a spirit of humility, forgiveness, and love.

Humbly Confident Moral Knowledge

By unapologetically condemning evil in a spirit of love, Christians can model for the world a commitment to moral knowledge that is not arrogant, intolerant, or bigoted. Many people are drawn to moral subjectivism and skepticism on account of its allure of intellectual humility and kindness. They have come to believe that anyone who purports to have moral knowledge is an arrogant, judgmental bigot.

Of course, our society’s strong condemnation of arrogance, judgmentalism, and bigotry is itself grounded in implicit knowledge of the natural moral law. It really is *objectively* bad to be arrogant! Pointing this out to subjectivists in an antagonistic spirit of intellectual superiority, however, is not likely to encourage them to repent from their subjectivism. A logically sound defense of objective moral knowledge presented in an unloving and arrogant manner is likely to strengthen the subjectivist’s rejection of moral knowledge, not save them from it.

There is perhaps no better way to forestall the abolition of man today than through confident defense of the equal dignity and inherent rights of all people, informed by love and forgiveness even of our worst enemies. We must “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). As followers of Christ, we must confidently condemn evils such as the Holocaust and radical Islamic terrorism, while loving and standing ready to forgive the Nazi and the Muslim terrorist. We also must condemn evils committed in the name of Christ, as well as those perpetrated by members of our broader society, such as America’s dishonorable history of forced sterilization and shameful treatment of Native

Americans, other ethnic minorities, and women. And, lest we attend to the speck in our brother's eye before addressing the log in our own (Matt. 7:3), we, the church, must acknowledge our own moral faults and our own intellectual fallibility, asking for forgiveness from those we have wronged and holding our moral knowledge confidently yet humbly.

Only by exemplifying the paradoxical Christian attitudes of *humble confidence* in moral knowledge and *loving condemnation* of evil will we help people to see, feel, and know the objective horrors of violating the natural moral law and the objective goodness and beauty of living by it. By living in this radically countercultural way and by rejecting subjectivism and encouraging instead the cultivation of rational emotional perceptions of objective value, we might, with God's help, continue to forestall the abolition of man. If we do, we will not make Lewis a false prophet. Rather, his ominous prophecy of the abolition of man, like Jonah's prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh, might just help to prevent its own fulfillment by leading us to repentance and by preventing subjectivism from erasing the knowledge of the moral law that is written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15).¹⁴

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NOTES

1. The Editors, "The 100 Best Nonfiction Books of the Century," *National Review*, May 3, 1999, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/215718/non-fiction-100>.
2. See Adam C. Pelsler, "Philosophy in *The Abolition of Man*," in *Contemporary Perspectives on C. S. Lewis' The Abolition of Man: History, Philosophy, Education, and Science*, ed. Timothy M. Mosteller and Gayne John Anacker (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 5–24.
3. Some material in this section is adapted with permission from Adam C. Pelsler, "Irrigating Deserts: Thinking with C. S. Lewis about Educating for Emotional Formation," *Christian Scholar's Review* 44, 1 (2014): 27–43.
4. These are Lewis's own examples from *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 51.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 19.
6. Cf., Adam C. Pelsler, "Reasons of the Heart: Emotions in Apologetics," *Christian Research Journal* 38, 1 (2015): 32–39.
7. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 14.
8. *Ibid.*, 59.
9. Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 26.

10. Justin P. McBrayer, "Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts," *The Stone*, The New York Times, Co., http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/whyour-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/?_r=0.
11. *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, published online by the Legal Information Institute, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/274/200#writing-USSC_CR_0274_0200_ZO.
12. "1976: Government Admits Forced Sterilization of Women," published online by the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/543.html>.
13. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 91.
14. The writing of this article was supported in part by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust via The Beacon Project. The opinions expressed in it are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust; nor do they necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.