

C. S. LEWIS: THE *ABOLITION OF MAN* (1943)

A Summary, followed by a Brief Summary

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I

There is a widespread modern assumption that value judgments do not reflect any objective reality. For example, the authors of a textbook on English “for the upper forms of schools” tell their pupils that language as we use it involves continual “confusion” because, as they say, we often “appear to be saying something very important about something: and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.” On this view, someone calling a waterfall “sublime” or calling his horse a “willing servant” is saying nothing about the waterfall or the horse, but “only” about his own emotions. One objection to this is that the authors fail to do what they might be expected to do – teaching English by discussing the difference between good ways and bad ways to express emotions. What is worse is that they invariably approach feelings as being “*only* feelings”, thus breeding in their pupils a general contempt or suspicion toward sentiment. This may not be their intention: they “may be perfectly ready to admit that a good education should build some sentiments while destroying others.” However, “it is the ‘debunking’ side of their work, and this side alone, which will really tell.” Any success on the positive side is precluded by the modern “educational predicament”.

The predicament results from the modern assumption about value judgments. This assumption is now indeed widespread, but it is in fact a novelty in human history. Until quite recently, humans believed that their emotional responses to outside realities could be either true or false (“congruous” or “incongruous”) to those realities. “True” emotions were reflections of objective value. Emotions did not supplant reason but they could conform to it and needed to be trained to do so. Educating children included training them to have the right emotional responses and get rid of wrong ones – so that they would not, as adults, have to rely only on Reason in their pursuit of goodness, beauty and truth; for Reason by itself moves nothing.

The new outlook, in contrast, fails to recognize that human sentiment could ever be congruent or incongruent to outside realities; sentiment cannot be reasonable or even unreasonable. The role of emotions is that of mere fogs between us and the world of objective facts, “a world without one trace of value”.

Modern educators are thus faced with a choice between two evils. They must either try to remove all sentiments from the pupil’s mind, or else “encourage some sentiments for reasons that have nothing to do with their intrinsic ‘justness’.” The latter procedure would be cynical propaganda, which perhaps many will abhor. Abhorrence is a sentiment and therefore, on the current view, invalid. Nevertheless it often prevails. What then remains is the other evil: wholesale debunking of all sentiment. This, however, is not less disastrous: it amounts to a kind of “atrophy of the chest”, or amputation of the “heart”. “Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.” Even supposing that “the harder virtues could really be theoretically justified with no appeal to objective value (...) it still remains true that no justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous.”

II

Using the Chinese word *Tao* (“the Way”) for the realm of objective value as the basis for traditional morality, we can say that modern humanity, in adopting “subjectivism about values”, has assumed a position “outside the *Tao*”. The position entails, as we saw, a choice between two evils (cynical propaganda and wholesale debunking); and one or the other evil is our fate if we believe that the *Tao* does not exist. But quite apart from such practical considerations, there are theoretical difficulties to this position.

The wish to abandon traditional morality is often linked with what is supposed to be a new, “realistic” or “rational” or “basic” set of values. The new values usually boil down to the preservation of society or humanity. This is, however, not a new value; it is as old as any other value and a part of the *Tao*. And it is hard to see where else any values could be found than in the *Tao*, i.e. how they could, in the last resort, be other than objective. The reasoning that serves to debunk traditional morality is the sort of reasoning that will never reach practical conclusions. It can only produce statements of fact, such as “This will preserve

society”; it will never attain to the insight that “Society ought to be preserved”. Nor will it be helped by any appeal to “Instinct”. To have spontaneous urges can never by itself mean that we ought to follow them. What is more, the urge to ensure a long and happy future for “humanity”, if that urge exists at all, is just one among many competing instincts, most of them very much stronger, such as the urge to preserve one’s own individual life or immediate offspring. Some guideline from outside the realm of instinct is indispensable for deciding which instinct is to be obeyed to which extent.

Thus practical principles cannot be reached as conclusions: they are premisses. On the other hand, when one premiss is recognized, the validity of the *Tao* is implicitly recognized; which is to say that all the other premisses must then also be valid. If there is, for example, a duty to posterity, then it is impossible to see why there should not be an equally binding duty to parents. Any attempt to discard the *Tao* and introduce new values must be based on “fragments from the *Tao* itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the *Tao* and to it alone such validity as they possess.” – “The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in.”

The *Tao* is not “an unchanging code given once for all”; it does admit development from within through self-criticism, or “internal criticism”. *External* criticism – a demand that any traditional value should “produce its credentials, as though the burden of proof lay on it” – is beside the point because criticism from outside the *Tao* removes itself from any basis on which it can assert values, even its own value as criticism.

Even so, modern people are unlikely to see the *Tao* as something to be obeyed “in stupid reverence”; they will rather view it as a “psychological survival” from all previous human history and prehistory. Values are, on this view, just another piece of Nature to be conquered sooner or later by applied science. When this happens, we humans will no longer be in the grip of obscure “ideas of what we *ought* to do” since these very ideas will be in our grip. We will then produce and change such ideas at our own convenience. – There are no theoretical difficulties here like those of the Innovator’s position, since this rejection of value does not itself depend on value. Here is a real rejection of the whole concept of value. It remains to consider what must happen if this particular triumph of applied science comes about.

III

The power of humans to do what they like seems to be growing all the time through humanity's so-called "conquest of Nature" – the progress of applied science. However, "each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well." We can throw bombs from airplanes but can also be bombed ourselves; a race of birth-controllers is a race whose own birth has been controlled. So it is worth asking exactly whose power grows as Nature is being conquered. It is, in fact, the power of that very small minority of people who are in actual control of the forces of Nature. The great majority of mankind becomes more and more powerless against this minority; and "if any one age really attains, by eugenics and scientific education, the power to make its descendants what it pleases, all men who live after it are the patients of that power." As the Conqueror of Nature, the human race is not only "the general who triumphs" but "also the prisoner who follows the triumphal car."

The final stage will have come when "humanity" has obtained full control over itself. "*Human* nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man." The ruling minority will have become a caste of Conditioners, people "who really can cut out posterity in what shape they please." From this moment onward, the human conscience will work the way humans *want* it to work – that is, the way wanted by the Conditioners. What are the Conditioners going to want in conditioning our consciences, and, indeed, how are they going to want anything? Human ideas about good and evil, duty and taboo, are among the things for them to decide about and therefore cannot serve as a ground for their decision. All motives for human action have become objects of choice and manipulation by Conditioners; so the Conditioners themselves are left without any motives. Unless they stop moving and acting at all, they must become prey to any force that just *happens* to put them in motion – in other words, to irrational, natural impulses. And since their power is perfectly effective, the human race will for the rest of its existence be subjected to such forces of nature as happen to have acted upon the Conditioners. Man's conquest of Nature will have brought about Nature's conquest of Man: the Abolition of Man.

Man's conquest of Nature has in one sense been a surrender to Nature ever since the birth of modern science. For whatever is conquered, or even deemed to be conquerable, is reckoned to belong in the realm of Nature – and thus in a way surrendered to it. The surrender may require some "repression of elements in what would otherwise be

our total reaction” to what we are conquering; perhaps most conspicuously so in the case of vivisection. This price always can, and usually is, argued to be worth paying. – “But as soon as we take the final step of reducing our own species to the level of mere Nature, the whole process is stultified, for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same.”

To call the final stage a “magician’s bargain” (give up your soul in return for power) is not just one possible metaphor: it is a welcome reminder of the common impulse from which both science and magic sprang in early modern times. Magic failed and science succeeded; but they were engaged in the same enterprise, namely “to extend Man’s power to the performance of all things possible.” A genuine and disinterested love of knowledge no doubt played a vital part in the success of science; “in every mixed movement the efficacy comes from the good elements not from the bad. But the presence of the bad elements is not irrelevant to the direction the efficacy takes.” The “chief trumpeter of the modern era”, Francis Bacon, was strikingly close to Marlowe’s Dr Faustus in regarding wealth and power as the true goal of knowledge.

Meanwhile the scientists themselves may well be willing to avoid a final stage of applied science which would be the undoing of all previous stages. In reducing humanity and human conscience to manipulable Nature, they would be scrapping the value of knowledge along with all other values. But “perhaps, in the nature of things, analytical understanding must always be a basilisk which kills what it sees and only sees by killing”; and “if the scientists themselves cannot arrest this process before it reaches the common Reason and kills that too, then someone else must arrest it.” – “You cannot go on ‘seeing through’ things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. (...) To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.”

A Brief Summary of *The Abolition of Man*

I – By regarding all value judgments as subjective, modern humans are faced with a choice between two evils. Either you hope that other people will still believe at least some value judgments to be objective; or you hope they will not. The first alternative must involve cynical propaganda. This may in practice be often rejected for moral reasons, although on the subjectivist assumption this comes from a confusion of thought. The second alternative means a debunking of all our sense of value. The resulting apathy is felt to be highly inconvenient, and found to be incurable.

II – The attempt to debunk traditional values is often based on a set of values which is considered to be new, but which in fact is a small selection from traditional morality. The innovator will be unable, in the end, to explain why this selection is retained while the rest is rejected. Thus on a closer view he will have confirmed the “given” nature of all moral principles and the need to reject either all or nothing of traditional morality. Modern people who admit this are then likely not to accept all, but to reject all, since they believe that morality is human; that humanity is nature; and that nature is a thing to rule, not to be ruled by.

III – “Man’s conquest of Nature” will be completed when *human* nature is conquered. Values will then be a thing for humans to produce and to modify at will, not a thing to be guided by. The only force left to motivate us will be the force of natural impulses. Man’s conquest of nature will thus have ended in man’s total surrender to nature. On the assumption of a perfect genetic science perfectly applied, we may expect this surrender to be irreversible. Our wish to “see through” the mainspring of specifically human action is a magician’s bargain: “to ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.”