

Lewis's Rejection of Nihilism: The Tao and the Problem of Moral Knowledge

cslewis.org/journal/lewiss-rejection-of-nihilism-the-tao-and-the-problem-of-moral-knowledge/

David Rozema

C. S. Lewis published *The Abolition of Man* in 1944 in the midst of World War II. We can perhaps imagine the ominous and suggestive nature of this timing. But, as readers soon discovered, the book was not at all about the War, or Hitler's eugenics, or the looming nuclear threat. Lewis's real subject is the soul and its education. According to Lewis, the real enemy—more dangerous than any nation, weapon, or science—is a philosophy: nihilism. It is perhaps a bit misleading to say that nihilism is a “post-modern” philosophy, for there have been nihilists and advocates of nihilism as long as there have been men. But it is true that this philosophy has come to be more widely preached and practiced in our time than ever before. In *The Abolition of Man* Lewis both explains and combats this modern (post-modern) development.

As Lewis shows in the first section of the book (“Men Without Chests”), the path towards nihilism begins with moral relativism—the belief that all ascriptions of moral value are merely the (collective or individual) expression of emotions, and are therefore neither true nor false in an objective sense. This is the view that is implicitly taught in *The Green Book*, the elementary textbook on English that provoked Lewis to write *The Abolition of Man*. Under the guise of teaching linguistics and grammar, the two authors of *The Green Book* (Lewis gives them the pseudonyms Gaius and Titius) say that all statements containing predicates of value are actually *nothing more* than expressions of the speaker's or writer's feelings with respect to the object, person, or event that is being evaluated. To suppose that we have said—or even *could* say—anything about the beauty or ugliness, the justice or injustice, or the moral virtue or vice of an object, event, or person is just confusion.

But Lewis says that Gaius and Titius have misunderstood the educational predicament of our time.

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt. (27-28)

Lewis goes on to show that this belief is basic to all historical cultures and religions, and its expression found in literature from Aristotle to Shelley, from Plato to Traherne, from Confucius to Coleridge, from the Hindu *Upanishads* to the Judaic Law, to the Christian Scriptures, to St. Augustine's *City of God*, Kant's *Foundations*, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*.

What is common to them all . . . is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are. (31)

It is the set of these true attitudes—these proper congruencies between objects, people, and events and our emotional responses to them—that Lewis calls the *Tao*. The traditional, pre-modern “educational predicament” consisted of “making the pupil like and dislike what he ought.” Lewis emphasizes this pedagogy’s effort towards training the emotional responses: “The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful” (29).

In contrast to this is the “educational predicament”—facing not only Gaius and Titius but all of us in this “post-modern” time—that all values are merely the expression of emotions or mere social constructions. Accordingly, Lewis says,

On this view, the world of facts, without one trace of value, and the world of feelings without one trace of truth or falsehood, justice or injustice, confront one another, and no *rapprochement* is possible. . . . Hence the educational problem is wholly different according as you stand within or without the *Tao*. For those within, the task is to train in the pupil those responses which are in themselves appropriate, whether anyone is making them or not, and in making which the very nature of man consists. Those without, if they are logical, must regard all sentiments as equally non-rational, as mere mists between us and the real objects. As a result, they must either decide to remove all sentiments, as far as possible, from the pupil’s mind: or else to encourage some sentiments for reasons that have nothing to do with their intrinsic “justness” or “ordinacy.” The latter course involves them in the questionable process of creating in others by “suggestion” or incantation a mirage which their own reason has dissipated.” (32-33)

Lewis continues to show the objective legitimacy of the *Tao*, and finally the horrifying dehumanization that inevitable follows nihilism. There is, however, a crucial prior question which, if not answered, makes all these subsequent arguments and demonstrations moot. If there is no answer to it, then some nihilists—those who still pay lip service to what is reasonable and what is not—can still claim an intellectual foothold. The question is: Who is to say what emotional or passional responses are appropriate (or inappropriate) with respect to any given object, person, or event? Who is to say that the proper emotional response to the waterfall, for example, is awe or humility or veneration, and not just mild admiration or indifference? Lewis answers: “Someone within the *Tao*.” But a clever nihilist will point out that this answer simply begs the question. He will ask, “And who *is* within the *Tao*?” And herein lies an apparent logical difficulty. For if being “within the *Tao*” is to actually *have* the appropriate responses to things like the waterfall, then only those who actually *have* those appropriate responses would know what the appropriate responses are (or ought to be). Put

like this, we have both a logical problem and a practical problem. Logically, the definition is circular: only those who know what "to be within the *Tao*" really means are those who really know what it means to be within the *Tao*. Practically, it is *impossible* for those not within the *Tao* to know who is or who is not within the *Tao*. Even if they think they know, they cannot; not even if someone within the *Tao* tells them, for they would not know whom to believe (in other words, they would be completely credulous).

Indeed this is an old and perennial problem: Socrates is confronted with it over and over again in Plato's dialogues. For example, in *Theaetetus* Socrates suggests that there is a distinction between "possessing" knowledge and "having" knowledge, just as a man might *possess* a coat without actually *having* it with him. Aristotle, too, makes the distinction between actions done *in accordance* with virtue and *virtuous action*. The former is an act that a virtuous person *would do*, but not necessarily done for the same reasons that a virtuous person would have for doing it. Knowing what it is *like* to be virtuous is not identical with *being* virtuous. Socrates points out this same distinction in his *apology* before the jury by saying that, although he knows quite well that he does not possess wisdom (i.e., knowledge of human excellence), he is wise in this sense: he does not claim to know that which he does not know.