

The Abolition of Mad Men

JUSTIN DYER

How refreshing: C. S. Lewis's prescription of natural law and objective values.

Ayn Rand, the Russian-born libertarian novelist and playwright, had no love for C. S. Lewis, whom she described in the margins of her copy of *The Abolition of Man* (1943) as "abysmal scum" and a "cheap, awful, touchy, social-metaphysical mediocrity." In *Abolition*, ranked seventh on National Review's list of the greatest non-fiction books of the 20th century, Lewis defended the objective reality and practical importance of such metaphysical concepts as beauty and goodness.

Lewis saw clearly that without metaphysics we have only physics, by which mere power rules the day. Instead of a natural moral law "overarching rulers and ruled alike," we are left with a moral subjectivism in which each is a law unto himself. Yet the very concepts of moral or political freedom, Lewis insisted, make no sense without natural law. This is high theory, perhaps, but theoretical ideas have real-world consequences, and Lewis touched on something enduringly important.

Consider Lewis's prescience about the consequences of denying natural law: If there is no objective standard of morality, then the universe is simply a vast empty wasteland. It does not determine what our values ought to be; rather, we project our values onto it. These values would then not be derived from Nature or Nature's God. Instead, they would originate with us. But exactly which part of us would tell us what to value? Not reason, since reason (on this account) does not apprehend anything objectively good in the world. No, it would simply be our base wants and desires, which are arbitrarily shaped by our environment. Ethics would be a hopelessly subjective enterprise, driven ultimately by emotion rather than reason.

This kind of moral subjectivism often appears, on the surface, to be every bit as dogmatic as the old moralism, but it has a crucial difference: Subjective moral norms are impenetrable to rational scrutiny or argumentation. In a culture that has imbibed this philosophy, public shaming is a more powerful tool than debate, and it is more powerful still to combine shaming with a harsh curtailment of free speech. In many ways, we are seeing this logic play out in our culture in real time.

Long before anyone had heard of the various totalitarian ideologies that convulsed the 20th century and have come back to haunt us today, the 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw, and embraced, many of the consequences that flow from these ideas. Thoughts in our heads, he wrote, "are to the desires as scouts and spies, to range abroad and find the way to the things desired." We calculate and scheme to get what we want or avoid what we fear, according to Hobbes, but it is senseless to ask whether we should want or fear this or that thing. Wants and fears are the brute facts of life, he insisted, and all our talk about values or goodness or justice is really a highfalutin way to mask our arbitrary appetites and aversions.

Lewis saw clearly that without metaphysics we have only physics, by which mere power rules the day.

If Hobbes were indeed correct, the results would be far-reaching. There could no longer be any meaningful distinction between education and propaganda, or between legitimate rule and tyranny. Those who wield the real power in society would be those who shape our desires and preferences — the marketers of *Mad Men*, and our entertainers and educators — and there would be no transcendent pattern of goodness or justice to tell them how we ought to be shaped.

What practical difference does any of this make? Quite a lot, according to Lewis. One of his main contentions in *Abolition* is that moral subjectivism ultimately undermines the key concepts at the base of all of our political institutions. Natural rights, the value of the individual, the common good, human dignity, and social justice are meaningful only in light of what Lewis called the "human tradition of value" — and the entire human tradition of value is really what is at stake in this otherwise academic debate. Without that tradition, all of our talk of justice is just groping in the dark, or worse.

In his own time, Lewis offered both a dire prognosis and a simple remedy for our moral illness. "Unless we return to the crude and nursery-like belief in objective values," he insisted, "we perish." And one advantage of returning to the objective view, Lewis noted, is that we just might start demanding of our elected officials such rare qualities as "virtue, knowledge, diligence, and skill" — a refreshingly quaint and simple notion in this season of our political life.

Acknowledgement

Justin Dyer. "The Abolition of Mad Men." *National Review* (October 6, 2017).

Reprinted with permission of *National Review*. The original article is [here](#).

The Author

Justin Dyer is an associate professor of political science and the director of the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy at the University of Missouri. He is the co-author of [*C. S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law*](#).

Copyright © 2017 [National Review](#)
