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C. S. Lewis The Abolition of Man Study Guide, 1972

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C. S. LEWIS THE ABOLITION OF MAN

STUDY GUIDE, 1972

Steven Alan Samson

I. MEN WITHOUT CHESTS

1. Reductionist, emotive theory of value declares: "We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings."
 - a. Critique: a statement of value does not correspond with a statement of feelings: *e.g.* sublimity → humble feelings.
2. The implication is that value statements are unimportant. To teach this to a child is not to put a theory but an unconscious assumption into his mind. It "will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all." [Lewis grants many of the assumptions of behaviorism here].
3. Debunking spirit and youthful disenchantment. "They see the world around them swamped by emotional propaganda . . . and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion. My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity." (24) It is the latter who are particularly vulnerable to the propagandist.
4. The Tao: There is a doctrine of objective value. In opposition to the emotive theory: "'Can you be righteous,' asks Traherne, 'unless you be just in rendering to things their due esteem? [Kind and degree of the response, appropriateness of the 'feeling' to the response demanded by reason and truth]. All things were made to be yours and you were made to prize them according to their value.'" (26)
5. "No emotion is, in itself, a judgment; in that sense all emotions and sentiments are alogical. But they can be reasonable or unreasonable as they conform to reason or fail to conform." (29-30) This is what the emotive theory fails to recognize. Reason is held to be altogether and different and unrelated.
6. There is no rapprochement possible between the world of facts and the world of feeling in this view. "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 "ardency." (31) [See Moritz Schick, but esp. A.J. Ayer (*i.e.* Stevenson)]. They must either debunk all sentiments or encourage some on purely social utilitarian grounds.
7. An intellectual justification of virtue will not enable a man to be virtuous, however. Trained emotions and concrete examples are needed.
8. "The Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiments—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man." "By his intellect, he is mere spirit and his appetite mere animal." (34)
9. But we demand the very qualities of virtue, enterprise and honor that we are rendering impossible.

II. THE WAY

1. The above is not necessarily a refutation of subjectivism about values as a theory, but difficulties arise as adherents address themselves to desirable ends. Lewis outlines the particular ends of the authors he is looking at. Their attitude is typical of a certain segment of the society. "Their skepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people's values. . . ." (41-2) "They claim to be cutting away the parasitic growth of emotion, religious sanction and inherited taboos, in order that "real" or "basic" values may emerge."

2. Where will an innovator find grounds for these values? To take one example, death for a good cause not based on Christian teachings:

a. It may be good for the community (utilitarian). "But of course the death of the community is not useful to the community—only the death of some of its members. What is really meant is that the death of some men is useful to other men." But on what grounds may such an act be recommended? Who should take the risk of dying that others might live, why not another sacrificial lamb?

b. The innovator might include that selfishness is not more intelligent than altruism. A refusal to sacrifice oneself then is no more rational than a consent to do so, or less so. Reason is absent. "From propositions about fact alone no practical conclusion can ever be drawn. This will preserve society cannot lead to do this except by the mediation of society ought to be preserved." (43) "The Innovator is trying to get a conclusion in the imperative mood out of premises in the indicative mood; and though he continues trying to all eternity he cannot succeed, for the thing is impossible." We must extend Reason to include Practical Reason—but the innovator won't accept this. He will look for a ground more basic than reason:

c. The preservation of society and the species are ends given by instinct. There is no need to argue the point with those who don't acknowledge these ends." Samples of justice and humanity. In fact, the Tao can be properly swept away when they conflict with our real end, the preservation of the species: *e.g.*, sexual taboos may once have served such an end, but are not anachronistic.

d. Critique: to cite instinct is to acknowledge perplexity. *Petitio principia*: instinct is here defined as an unreflective and spontaneous impulse. Instinct—if it is determined—does not account for such ethical argumentation. "Why this stream of exhortation to drive us where we cannot help going? Why such promise for those who have submitted to the inevitable?" If not inevitable, what satisfaction may we find in death? The appeal appears to be that we ought to obey instinct. [Note: critique of I. A. Richards' formula. Can we value life at the sacrifice of certain satisfactions? Is it better to live with some satisfaction or die and have no dissatisfaction? What of the nature of the satisfactions themselves? Are their grounds for preferring aesthetic over appetitive satisfactions?]

e. Again, why obey the impulse, or prefer one over another? Is a particular impulse one to be controlled or one to be indulged? "Our instincts are at war"—preferences are not a priori encouraged for us, and knowledge of which to choose cannot be instinctive—"The judge cannot be one of the parties judged." (48)

3. "We grasp at useless words: We call it the 'basic,' or 'fundamental,' or 'primal,' or 'deepest' instinct." The words either conceal a value judgment or the felt intensity of the instinct. "It is the old dilemma. Either the premises already concealed an imperative or the conclusions remain merely in the indicative." [Critique of Waddington's view that 'existence is its own justification.' In justifying evolution he cites its other properties as well, however, which means an abandonment of justifying it on the fact that it is. But what a vulgar philosophy: The worship of success. No wonder Waddington felt a need to buttress it].

4. Finally, is there such an instinct to care for posterity? There is little manifested of it in ordinary behavior." What we have by nature is an impulse to preserve our own children and grandchildren" – education is necessary to bring the idea of posterity to our minds. "As we pass from mother love to rational planning for the future we are passing away from the realm of instinct into that of choice and reflection. . . ." If instinct is the source of value, then planning for the future ought to be less obligatory than the baby language and cuddling of the fondest mother. . . ." (51). "If we are to base ourselves upon instinct, these things are the substance and care for posterity the leader. . . ." Why then do we send children off to kindergarten, *etc.*?

5. Practical principles are the premises of action. They cannot be reached as conclusions. If they are regarded as sentiments, then there can be no contrast between real or rational values and sentimental values. “. . . You must confess (on pains of abandoning every value) that all sentiment is not ‘merely’ subjective. If they are regarded as so obviously rational that no proof is necessary, then you must allow that reason can be practical. That an ought must not be dismissed because it cannot produce some is as its credential. If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proven. Similarly, if nothing is obligatory for its own sake, nothing is obligatory at all.” (53)

6. The values of the skeptic are still derived from the same source that he feels free to attack. “Only by such shreds of the Tao as he has inherited is he enabled even to attack it. The question therefore arises what title he has to select bits of it for acceptance and to reject others.” (54) Lewis contrasts practical reason with both instinct and pure reason, and appears to equate it with the Tao.

7. We make false priorities by placing some parts above others and against the whole. The parts are important, but not exclusively. No “new values” are possible. Ideologies and systems all consist of fragments “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.” (56)

8. Where moral progress is possible, is within the Tao. Taken together syncretically the many traditions of the Tao yield many contradictions and absurdities. (The author appears to call for eclecticism). “Those who understand the spirit of the Tao and who have been led by that spirit can modify it in directions which that spirit itself demands.” (59) The corrupted man, the skeptic cannot know where to begin. “He may be hostile, but he cannot be critical: he does not know what is being discussed.” Reformist spirit—seeking fundamentals and points of conflict—vs. direct frontal attack.

9. Belief that the Tao is relative; a product of the agricultural rhythm of ancient life. Why should not this last part of nature be conquered? They reject the concept of value altogether.

III. THE ABOLITION OF MAN

1. ‘Man’s conquest of Nature.’ This is not individual power over nature; it is a power possessed by some which they may allow other men to profit by- or not. Men are as much the patients or subjects of these powers as the possessors. Regarding contraceptives, future generations are the subjects of a power wielded by those already alive. “From this point of view, what we call man’s power over nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.” (69) Particular abuses are simply resultant and are not the source of the problem. Implications for political power, power in space and in time.

2. Generations: “Each generation exercises power over its successors; and each, in so far as it modifies the environment bequeathed to it and rebels against tradition, resists and limits the power of its predecessors.” (70) At some point, one generation will have more power than all others, before and after. It will effectively limit the past’s influence and control the future’s options. After that, “progress” will cease- power will stop growing. A minority of a minority will be masters. “Each new power won by man is a power over man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger.” (71) Human nature will be the final conquest.

3. Nurture and instruction have always been attempts to wield such a power by some men over others. But the situation has changed:

a) Power is enormously increased. There was considerable room for correcting errors before. But now, the “man-molders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique. . . .” (73)

b) The Tao will no longer be the motive of education, only the product. It is the function of the conditioners to control, not obey values. They may choose what kind of artificial Tao they will. At first,

they may be motivated by duty to have a do a good job. But they know that this concept of duty is the result of certain processes they can now control. "Duty itself is up for trial; it cannot also be the judge."

4. The amoral myth: They define the terms of value; these do not apply to them. If the conditioners accept their duty, they are no longer the makers of conscience but still its subjects. "Every motive they try to act on becomes at once a petition." The result is the abolition of man." The subjects become artifacts.

5. "When all that says 'it is good' has been debunked, what says 'I want' remains." Motivation by pleasure.

6. Conquest of Nature = Nature's Conquest of Man: "I am inclined to think that the conditioners will hate the conditioned: They will envy their subjects' illusions of meaningfulness in life. "Conditioned happiness" will depend on "chance." "By the logic of their position they must take their impulses as they come, from chance. And chance here means Nature." (79) "It is from heredity, digestion, the weather and the association of ideas, that the motives of the conditioners will spring. Their extreme rationalism, by 'seeing through' all 'rational' motives, leaves them creatures of wholly irrational behavior." (79) Obedience to impulse is the only course left open to them.

7. Triumph of nature. "The natural is the opposite of the Artificial, the Civil, the Human, the Spiritual, and the supernatural." "Nature seems to be the spatial and temporal, as distinct from what is less fully so or not so at all." (81) Quantity vs. quality; objects vs. consciousness; necessity vs. degree of autonomy; value-free vs. valuing and valued; efficient vs. final causes. What we dominate and understand analytically is reduced to the level of nature. Process of disenchantment: "so treated, an object loses some of its reality." Every conquest over Nature increases its dominance."

8. The Faustian bargain: We give up our souls in return for a power that enslaves us. "The pain and the shock [of initial disenchantment, e.g. one's first day in a dissecting room] are at most a warning and a symptom. The real objection is that if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite, that is, mere nature, in the person of his dehumanized conditioners." (84)

9. Either we are rational spirit obliged to obey the absolute, objective values of the Tao or mere nature to be kneaded. "A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery." (84-5)

10. Impersonal language: e.g. "liquidating unsocial elements."

11. The abstraction Man: an H.C.F. vs. the common reason of humanity. Post-humanity [cf. Roderick Seidenberg].

12. Historical links of science with magic in the sixteenth & seventeenth centuries: Divorce from true value of knowledge. Ancient wisdom teaches one how to conform to reality rather than how to subdue reality to the wishes of men. Knowledge, for moderns, is not the end but the means to power---the goal of the magician.

13. Modern science "was born in an unhealthy neighborhood and at an inauspicious hour. Its triumphs may have been too rapid and purchased at too high a price: reconsideration, and something like repentance, may be required." (89)

14. Call for a new approach. Myth of infinite unilinear progression as in numbers is foolish. "There are progressions in which the last step is *sui generis*—incommensurable with the others—and in which to go the whole way is to undo all the labour of your previous journey. To reduce the Tao to a mere natural product is a step of that kind." (91) "You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it."