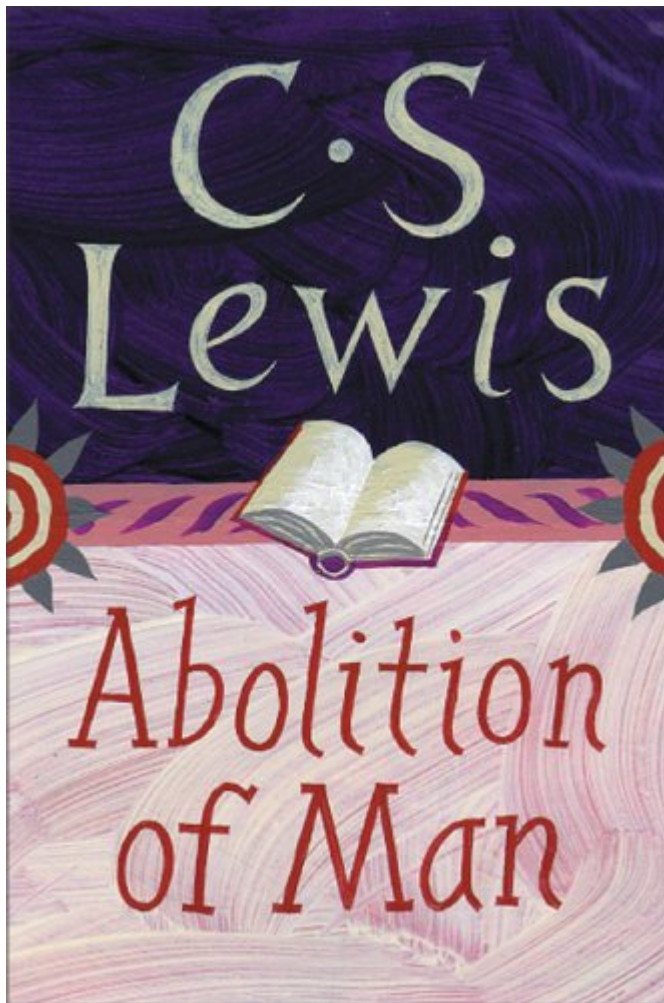


“The Abolition of Man” by C.S. Lewis: a Prophecy and a Challenge (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



Evidence for C.S. Lewis’ status as a prophet could be argued from two of his works, one of which is *The Abolition of Man*, written as a pamphlet in 1943. (The other work is a short essay entitled, “Priestesses in the Church?”, written in 1948, well before his Anglican Communion began ordaining women to the priesthood in the 1970’s). Lewis would, of course, utterly dismiss any suggestion that he was a prophet, and I use the term here very loosely. What is beyond dispute is that much of what Lewis (who died in 1963) predicted and feared has come to pass. In this brief essay I look a little more closely at the slim volume *The Abolition of Man*, for the book appears more timely today than ever before, and it calls many of us to

united action who have seldom united before.

Its timely relevance for today seems at first sight unlikely, given its original and full title: *"The Abolition of Man: Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools"*. (One sees the wisdom of the marketing editor in abbreviating the title.) Lewis was moved to offer these thoughts after reading the book *The Control of Language*, by two schoolmasters, Alec King and Martin Ketley. Lewis perceived that the approach to life, ethics and values enshrined in the book constituted a major departure not just from Christianity, but from all previous approaches to life. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, ancient pagans—all shared a view of life in which there were objective truths and values, and ethics which reflected those objective truths. This common approach to objective truth Lewis summarized as belief in "the Tao" (meaning "the way"). The authors of *The Control of Language* offered a new and rival approach to the Tao. For them, all human responses and values were merely subjective (patriotism, for example, is debunked as feelings "about nothing in particular"; a mother's appeal to her child to be brave is denounced as "nonsense" [1]).

Lewis instantly recognized that such an approach to education cut at the heart of what education meant throughout the ages. Formerly, in all cultures, education meant not simply passing on data (like the alphabet and the ability to read), but also transmitting the values in one's culture. It meant an older generation handing on its received values and virtues to the younger generation. In Lewis's words (all quotations in this essay are from Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, unless cited otherwise) the older one "initiated the young neophyte into the mystery of humanity which over-arched him and them alike. It was but old birds teaching young birds to fly." But in the new approach to education proffered by *The Control of Language* (which Lewis called "the Green Book" to shield its well-meaning authors), education no longer meant transmitting objective truths and values, for its authors denounced such things as mere sentimentalism and meaningless emotion.

Lewis responded to "the Green Book" by dealing with the whole issue when he was invited to give three lectures at the University of Durham. (No doubt this academic setting accounts for the longer title.) These three lectures became three chapters in a single book once the lectures were published as a pamphlet under the title *The Abolition of Man* in 1943.

In the first chapter, entitled "Men Without Chests", Lewis introduces his theme, and the challenge presented by "the Green Book". He allows that the authors of the Green Book are well-intentioned. He suggests that they "see the world around

them swayed by emotional propaganda” (remember this was the early 1940’s and Germany was then in the grip of just such propaganda), and that “they learned from tradition that youth is sentimental and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion.” This they accomplish by debunking emotion as irrational—and by implicitly dismissing the concept of objective truth.

Herein lies the first problem. For, Lewis explains, emotion is an indispensable part of the human being. “As the king governs by his executive, so Reason in man must rule the mere appetites by means of the ‘spirited element.’ The head rules the belly through the chest...the Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man...the operation of *The Green Book* and its kind is to produce what may be called Men without Chests.” Thus, to give but one example, “in battle it is not syllogisms that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of the bombardment. The crudest sentimentalism about a flag or a country or a regiment will be of more use.” And love of flag or country will be one of those objective truths transmitted to the younger generation as part of their education—assuming that education is informed by the Tao. Fathers will teach their sons to love their country, and the emotion of patriotism (i.e. “the Chest”) will carry the day when the chaos of battle urges one to take flight.



C.S. Lewis

In Chapter Two, entitled, “The Way”, Lewis strives to show that real ethics are only possible when one accepts the Tao. One cannot rely on Instinct to provide ethical guidance, since man has many self-contradictory instincts, and because (for example) there is no instinctive urge to keep promises or to respect individual life. Other rival ideologies or systems of ethics are not truly alternatives to the Tao, since they are in fact reductions of it: “what purport to be new systems” (for

example the philosophy of Nietzsche) “all consist of fragments of the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation.”

But the men who would create their own ethical systems are undeterred. For them, the Tao is just one more casualty in Man’s relentless Progress, his quest to come of age and overcome the shackles of the past. He says, in effect, “Let us regard all ideas of what we *ought* to do simply as an interesting psychological survival: let us step right out of all that and start doing what we like. Let us decide for ourselves what man is to be and make him into that: not on any ground of imagined value, but because we want him to be such. Having mastered our environment, let us now master ourselves and choose our own destiny.” The result of such a quest is not, for Lewis, Man’s true coming of age. It is the abolition of Man himself, the destruction of his authentic humanity.

Thus the third and final chapter is entitled, “The Abolition of Man”. In it he examines the concept of human progress and concludes that “each new power (over nature) won *by* man is a power *over* man as well.” For the conquest of Nature “means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men”...the final conquest of Nature “is come when Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself. ..the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means the power of some men to make other men what *they* please.” *Gattaca*, anyone? Lewis, I suggest, would’ve appreciated the movie *Gattaca*: he wrote “I am very doubtful whether history shows us one example of a man who, having stepped outside traditional morality and attained power, has used that power benevolently.”

So, what does all this mean to us? I suggest it should mean a great deal. Our politicians and law-makers in Canada no longer function as people within the Tao. Our national willingness to redefine marriage (to take but one recent example) as the union of two men or two women and not just the union of a man and a woman reveal that we have long since ceased to allow the Tao to inform our thinking and our national debate. The fact that insistence on conformity to the Tao is described as “the religious point of view” (and therefore as but one alternative to other more secular points of view) shows how far we have strayed. The true alternatives are not “religious” versus “secular”, but rather “objective, timeless and universal morality” versus “whatever we decide we want to do”. And any aspiring Canadian politician who publicly takes his stand on this issue as from within the Tao is instantly unelectable by any party. Accordingly, the laws we enact are no longer grounded upon the Tao, or natural law, or timeless universal custom. They are

grounded upon contemporary whim and desire.

Here, I suggest, is an opportunity for all who still stand within the Tao to come together and to speak up. Different religions have lots to debate, and these debates are not unimportant. But nationally, there is much we can agree upon too. Man and ancient standards of what constitute true and authentic humanity are being abolished and eroded before our eyes. The final chapter in Lewis' book opened with an epigraph from Bunyan: "It came burning hot into my mind, whatever he said and however he flattered, when he got me to his house, he would sell me for a slave." All of us who value our freedom need to speak up, lest we lose it.

[1] The Green Book, pp. 77, 62

By Fr. Lawrence Farley

This article was first posted on Fr. Farley's blog, [Straight from the Heart](#), on October 7, 2011 and was posted here with permission. Many more of Fr. Farley's articles and thoughts can be found on his blog, [Straight from the Heart](#).