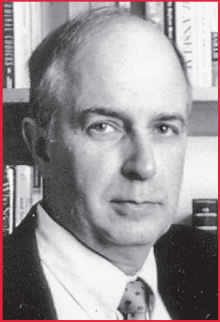


Imprimis

October 2005 • Volume 34, Number 10

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C.S. Lewis on Moral Education

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The following is adapted from a lecture delivered at Hillsdale College on September 12, 2005, at a Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on the topic, "C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and the Inklings."

When we think about C.S. Lewis' understanding of morality, we have to distinguish three elements: (1) *what* moral truths we know, (2) *how* we know them, and (3) how we *become able* to know them.

What do we know when we know moral truth? Most fundamentally, we know the maxims of what Lewis—in his book on education, *The Abolition of Man*—calls the *Tao*. These “primeval moral platitudes” (as Screwtape, in Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, once terms them) constitute the human moral inheritance. We would not be wrong to call them the basic principles of natural law: the requirements of both general and special beneficence; duties both to parents/ancestors and to children/posterity; and requirements of justice, truthfulness, mercy and magnanimity. These are the starting points for all moral reasoning, deliberation and argument; they are to morality what axioms are to mathematics. Begin from them and we may get somewhere in thinking about what we ought to do. Try to stand outside the *Tao* on some kind of morally neutral or empty ground, and we will find it impossible to generate any moral reasoning at all.

Lewis provides an illustration of the *Tao* in *That Hideous Strength*, the third and last volume in his space fantasy series. He himself subtitled the book “A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups,”



and in the short preface he wrote for the book, he says: “This is a ‘tall story’ about devilry, though it has behind it a serious ‘point’ which I have tried to make in my *Abolition of Man*.” We can follow his hint and illustrate the *Tao* by remembering the scene in *That Hideous Strength* in which the sinister Frost begins to give young professor Mark Studdock a systematic training in what Frost calls “objectivity.” This is a training designed to kill in Mark all natural human preferences.

Mark is placed into a room that is ill-proportioned; for example, the point of the arch above the door is not in the center. On the wall is a portrait of a young woman with her mouth open, and with her mouth full of hair. There is a picture of the Last Supper, distinguished especially by beetles under the table. There is a representation of a giant mantis playing a fiddle while being eaten by another mantis, and another of a man with corkscrews instead of arms. Mark himself is asked to perform various obscenities, culminating in the command to trample a crucifix.

Gradually, however, Mark finds that the room is having an effect on him, which Frost had scarcely predicted or desired. “There rose up against this background of the sour and the crooked some kind of vision of the sweet and the straight.” This was for Mark all interwoven with images of his wife Jane, fried eggs, soap, sunlight and birds singing. Mark may not have been thinking in moral terms, but at least, as the story puts it, he was “having his first deeply moral experience. He was choosing a side: the Normal.”

He had never known before what an Idea meant: he had always thought till now that they were things inside one’s head. But now, when his head was continually attacked and often completely filled with the clinging corruption of the training, this Idea towered up above him—something which obviously existed quite independently of himself and had hard rock surfaces which would not give, surfaces he could cling to.

He is experiencing the *Tao*, which is neither his creation nor anyone else’s. He does not construct these moral truths; on the contrary, they claim him. The world around us is not neutral ground; it is from the start shot through with moral value.

We can, of course, criticize one or another of these moral truths, or, at least, particular

formulations of them. But we will inevitably call on some other principle of the *Tao* when we do so. Thus, for example, we may think Aristotle’s magnanimous man insufficiently merciful and too concerned about his own nobility, using thereby one principle of the *Tao* (mercy) to refine another. In pursuit of our duties to posterity we may be willing to sacrifice the weak and vulnerable on the altar of medical research, but then we will have to ask whether we have transgressed the requirement of justice—every bit as much an element of the *Tao* as our duty to posterity. But to step—or try to step—outside the *Tao* entirely is to lose the very ground of moral reason itself.

Thus the principles of the *Tao* do not solve moral problems for us; on the contrary, they create, frame and shape those problems. They teach us to think in full and rich ways about them, as we recognize the various claims the *Tao* makes upon us.

The Need for Moral Education

If this is *what* we know, *how* do we know it? If, as I put it a moment ago, the world around us is shot through with moral value, then to recognize a moral duty—as something other than our own choice or decision—is to see a truth. Lewis thinks we just “see” those primeval moral platitudes of the *Tao*. They cannot be proven, for it is only by them that we can prove or defend any other moral conclusions we reach. It is, as Lewis puts it at the end of *The Abolition of Man*, “no use trying to ‘see through’ first principles. . . . To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.” We might say, as Lewis says for instance in *Miracles*, that these first principles of moral reasoning are “self-evident.” One can argue *from* but not *to* the maxims of the *Tao*.

This is, however, one place where we need to gloss Lewis’ discussion just a bit, for he is not entirely consistent in his writing. If we look at what I take to be Lewis’ most mature expression of his view, in *The Abolition of Man*, we will immediately see—for reasons to which I will come in just a moment—that “self-evident” cannot mean “obvious.” It cannot mean that any rational person, giving the matter some thought, will see that the maxims of the *Tao* are the moral deliverances of reason itself. Yet, consider a passage such as the following from *Mere Christianity*:

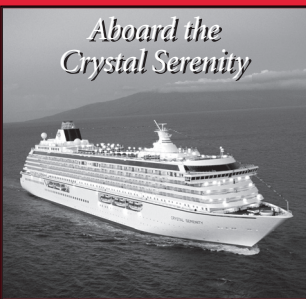
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This law was called the Law of Nature because people thought that every one knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it. They did not mean, of course, that you might not find an odd individual here and there who did not know it, just as you find a few people who are colour-blind or have no ear for a tune. But taking the race as a whole, they thought that the human idea of decent behaviour was obvious to every one.

This is a different formulation, and a less satisfactory one, than that of *Abolition of Man*. The

precepts of the *Tao* constitute a kind of natural law not because everyone knows them without being taught, but because they express fundamental truths—which we may or may not learn—about human nature. Those of us who do learn them will, to be sure, just “see” them. There will be no process of reasoning by which they are proven, but Lewis’ more developed view offers us no reason to assume that we all will or can easily discern these first principles of natural law.

Why not? Because—although Lewis does not put it this way in *Abolition of Man*, a decidedly non-theological piece of writing—human

reason and desire are disordered by sin. What Iris Murdoch once called the “fat relentless ego” constantly blinds us, so that the mere fact of opening our eyes does not guarantee that we will see truly. Indeed, if Lewis really held that the precepts of the *Tao* are “obvious,” the central theme of *Abolition of Man* could make little sense; for it is a book about our need for moral education.

Which brings us to the third element in Lewis’ understanding of morality. If we ask, *what* moral truths do we know? the answer is: the maxims of the *Tao*. If we ask, *how* do we know them? the answer is: we just “see” them as the first principles of all moral reasoning. And, now, if we ask, how do we *become able* to “just see” these maxims? the answer is: only as our character is well formed by moral education. Without such education we will never come to know the human moral inheritance. We may be very bright and very rational, but we will be what Lewis calls “trousered apes.” Lacking proper moral education, our freedom to make moral choices will be a freedom to be inhuman in any number of ways. The paradox of moral education is that all genuine human freedom—a freedom that does not turn out to be destructive—requires that we be disciplined and shaped by the principles of the *Tao*.

Our appetites and desires may readily tempt us to set aside what moral reason requires. Hence,

from childhood our emotions must be trained and habituated, so that we learn to love the good (not just what seems good for us). And only as our character is thus shaped do we become men and women who are able to “see” the truths of moral reason. Moral insight, therefore, is not a matter for reason alone; it requires trained emotions. It requires moral habits of behavior inculcated even before we reach an age of reason. “The head rules the belly through the chest,” as Lewis puts it. Reason disciplines appetite only with the aid of trained emotions. Seeing this, we will understand that moral education does more than simply enable us to “see” what virtue requires. It also enables us, at least to some extent, to *be* virtuous. For the very training of the emotions that makes insight possible has also produced in us traits of character that will incline us to love the good and do it.

Moral education, then, can never be a private matter, and Lewis follows Aristotle in holding that “only those who have been well brought up can usefully study ethics.” Hence, the process of moral education, if it is to succeed, requires support from the larger society. Ethics is, in that sense, a branch of politics. Thus, for instance, to take an example that Lewis could not precisely have anticipated, consider the problem of protecting children from internet pornography (which the U.S. Congress attempted in what

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was known as the “Child Online Protection Act,” but which the Supreme Court ruled, in *Ashcroft v. ACLU*, was in probable violation of the First Amendment’s free speech guarantees). True as it may be that this protection should be the primary responsibility of parents, they face daunting obstacles and almost inevitable failure without a supportive moral ecology in the surrounding society. Moral education, if it is to be serious, requires commitment to moral principles that go well beyond the language of freedom—principles that are more than choice and consent alone.

We should not think of this moral education as indoctrination, but as initiation. It is initiation into the human moral inheritance: “men transmitting manhood to men.” We initiate rather than indoctrinate precisely because it is not we but the *Tao* that binds those whom we teach. We have not decided what morality requires; we have discovered it. We transmit not our own views or desires but moral truth—by which we consider ourselves also to be bound. Hence, moral education is not an exercise of power over future generations. To see what happens when it becomes an exercise of power by some over others, when we attempt to stand outside the *Tao*, we can look briefly at two ways in which Lewis’ discussion of morality in *The Abolition of Man* takes shape in *That Hideous Strength*, his “tall story” of devilry.”

Man, Nature and Biotechnology

The driving force behind the plot in *That Hideous Strength* is the plan of the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments—whose acronym is NICE—to take the last step in the control and shaping of nature. (It is rather a nice irony that in Great Britain today the National Health Service has established a National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence—whose acronym is also NICE—to formulate guidelines about the use of quality of life assessments in the clinical care of patients.) Having gradually conquered the world of nature external to human beings, the goal of NICE is now to view human beings also as natural objects—in particular, to take control of birth, breeding and death. The project that Lewis fancifully imagined in his “fairy-tale for grown-ups” has made considerable progress in the decades since he wrote. Let me illustrate.

Consider the following sentences from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*:

He looked down into the water and watched the lines that went straight down into the dark of the water. He kept them straighter than anyone did, so that at each level in the darkness of the stream there would be a bait waiting exactly where he wished it to be for any fish that swam there.... I have no understanding of it and I am not sure that I believe in it. Perhaps it was a sin to kill the fish.... He urinated outside the shack and then went up the road to wake the boy. He was shivering with the morning cold.... Then he was sorry for the great fish that had nothing to eat and his determination to kill him never relaxed in his sorrow for him. How many people will he feed, he thought. But are they worthy to eat him?... That was the saddest thing I ever saw with them, the old man thought. The boy was sad too and we begged her pardon and butchered her promptly.... The boy did not go down. He had been there before and one of the fishermen was looking after the skiff for him.

Hemingway’s prose is, of course, generally regarded as clear and straightforward. And every sentence in the passage above is simple and transparent. But taken as a whole, the passage makes almost no sense at all. There’s a reason for that: The sentences in the passage are drawn from pages 29, 104-5, 22, 74, 48, and 123—in that order.

But consider now the image of the human being in the following frequently quoted passage from Thomas Eisner, a biologist from Cornell University:

As a consequence of recent advances in genetic engineering, [a biological species] must be viewed as . . . a depository of genes that are potentially transferable. A species is not merely a hard-bound volume of the library of nature. It is also a loose-leaf book, whose individual pages, the genes, might be available for selective transfer and modification of other species.

I have tried to provide a humble illustration of this by splicing together sentences from different pages of just one book, producing thereby something unintelligible. But I might also have spliced in sentences from *Anna Karenina* and

A Christmas Carol—producing thereby an artifact we could not name.

This train of thought was first suggested to me by one of the findings of the Human Genome Project, a finding that got quite a bit of attention in news articles announcing (in February, 2001) the completion of that project by two groups of researchers. We were told that the number of genes in the human genome had turned out to be surprisingly small—that human beings have, at most, perhaps twice as many genes as the humble roundworm (downsized even more with new findings in 2004, so that human beings and roundworms have about the same number of genes)—and that the degree of sequence divergence between human and chimpanzee genomes is quite small. Considering the complexity of human beings in relation to roundworms and even chimpanzees, it seemed surprising that, relatively speaking, much less complex organisms should not have far fewer genes than human beings.

Why, one might ask, should that seem surprising? It will be surprising if you assume that the complexity of a higher being is somehow built up and explained in terms of “lower” component parts (which serve as “resources”). If we explain the higher in terms of the lower, it makes a certain sense to suppose that a relatively complex being would need lots of component parts—at least by comparison with a less complex being. And, of course, one might argue that the Human Genome Project is the ultimate product of such an extreme reductionist vision of biology.

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis powerfully depicts the movement by which things came to be understood as simply parts of nature, objects that have no inherent purpose or *telos*—which objects can then become resources available for human use. Hence, the long, slow process of what we call conquering nature could more accurately be said to be reducing things to “mere nature” in that sense. “We do not,” Lewis writes,

look at trees either as Dryads or as beautiful objects while we cut them into beams: the first man who did so may have felt the price keenly, and the bleeding trees in Virgil and Spenser may be far-off echoes of that primeval sense of impiety.... Every conquest over Nature increases her domain. The stars do not become Nature till we weigh and measure them: the soul does not become Nature till we can psychoanalyze her. The wresting of

powers *from* Nature is also the surrendering of things *to* Nature. As long as this process stops short of the final stage we may well hold that the gain outweighs the loss. 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.

In that final step of this reductive process, the human being becomes an artifact, to be shaped and reshaped. One way to describe this is to say that we take control of our own destiny. But the other way to describe it is as the villainous Lord Feverstone puts it in *That Hideous Strength*: “Man has got to take charge of Man. That means, remember, that some men have got to take charge of the rest” That is what happens, Lewis thinks, when we step outside the *Tao* and regard even morality as a matter for our own choice and free creation.

From this angle, developments in biotechnology are likely to affect most our attitudes toward birth and breeding. But there remains still the fact of death, and once we take free responsibility for shaping our destiny, we can hardly be content to accept without challenge even that ultimate limit. When Mark Studdock is asked to trample on a crucifix as the final stage in his training in “objectivity,” he is—even though he is not a Christian—reluctant to obey. For it seems to him that the cross is a picture of what the Crooked does to the Straight when they meet and collide. Mark has chosen the side of what he calls simply the Normal. He has, that is, begun to take his stand within the *Tao*. But then he finds himself wondering, for the first time, about the possibility that the side he has chosen might turn out to be, in a sense, the “losing” side. “Why not,” he asks himself, “go down with the ship?”

For those who stand within the *Tao*, *how* we live counts for more than *how long*. There are things we might do to survive—or to help our species survive or advance or, even, just suffer less—which it would nonetheless be wrong or dishonorable to do. Indeed, we do not have to look very far around in our own world—no farther, for instance, than the controversies about embryonic stem cell research—to see how strongly we are tempted to regard as overriding the claims of posterity for a better and longer life. “We want,” Lewis’ Screwtape writes, “a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow’s end,



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never honest, nor kind, nor happy *now*, but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the Future every real gift which is offered them in the Present." Better to remember, as Roonwit the Centaur writes to King Tirian in *The Last Battle*—the seventh and final volume in Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia—that all worlds come to an end, and that noble death is a treasure which no one is too poor to buy.

This is at least something of what Lewis still has to teach us about the education we need to make and keep us human. In the modern world it is the task of moral education to set limits to what we will do in search of the rainbow's end—to set limits, lest that desire should lead to the abolition of man. "For the wise men of old," Lewis writes, "the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solu-

tion had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue." But when freedom becomes not initiation into our moral inheritance but the freedom to make and remake ourselves, the power of some men over others, it is imperative that we remind ourselves that moral education is not a matter of technique but, rather, of example, habituation and initiation. And, as Lewis says, quoting Plato, those who have been so educated from their earliest years, when they reach an age of reason, will hold out their hands in welcome of the good, recognizing the affinity they themselves bear to it.



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