

PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIVISM IN THE WORKS OF C.S. LEWIS

A Research Paper

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INTRODUCTION

C.S. Lewis utilizes the lectures of *The Abolition of Man* and the dystopian fiction of *That Hideous Strength* in order to display the pitfalls of buying into relativism as a society and indoctrinating people with the overarching idea of subjectivism. In the first two chapters of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis addresses a relativism that attempts to debunk absolutism but conflicts with itself. Although it denies an Absolute, it still functions underneath the Moral Law—or the *Tao*. On the other hand, the relativism in *That Hideous Strength* and the last chapter of *The Abolition of Man* aims not to repudiate absolutism, but to make man the Absolute rather than a higher power. It exists outside of the Moral Law. Both works, however, address the same basic concept of relativism as the entry point to dangerous schools of thought, always ending with man as the Absolute.

RELATIVISM IN THE *TAO*

In the first two, and sections of the third, chapters of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis exposes the contradictions within the relative argument promulgated by “Gaius” and “Titius” that aims to deny absolutism. This view seeks to reject Truth motivated by emotion and focus on the rational or biographical values¹ and is held by the “half-hearted sceptics who still hope to find ‘real’ values when they have debunked the traditional ones.”² In the example of Coleridge’s waterfall, Gaius and Titius are rejecting the objective value of a waterfall being “sublime” because it is only “sublime” due to the viewer’s feelings concerning it. This idea teaches that the predicate of value within

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York City, NY: HarperOne, 2017), 712.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 717.

sentences are in congruence with the speaker's emotional condition at the time of the statement. Since the speaker is *only* saying something about his/her own feelings, the statement can be of no real value. Gaius and Titius go even further with the example of an advertisement utilizing emotional propaganda. They fight against this sort of writing as silly. This illustration on top of the previous conclusion that statements spurred from feelings have no real value displays that feelings, in themselves, are in opposition to logic and are reprehensible.³

Lewis admits that Gaius and Titius may not be formulating these ideas purposefully; however, their assertions within *The Green Book* seem to argue for a turnover of the old, traditional values and begin anew.⁴ This type of relativism that seeks to overthrow the *Tao*, or traditional values, paints all beliefs as non-rational and must, in turn, remove any and all sentiments or push for specific sentiments that do not correlate with innate moralities.⁵ The issue with the latter is that the ones pushing the “new” beliefs contradict their own position of subjectivism and anti-absolutism. The “new” beliefs, aforementioned as rational or biographical, are not new at all. These ideas come from the *Tao* and cannot exist outside of it. Humans are all subject to the Moral Law whether they claim to be or not—there is no conceivable world outside of it.⁶ Proponents of this type of relativism would like to believe there is no absolute anything and aim to debunk

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 695-6.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 698.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 702.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 712-3.

traditional thought in response to other people's values, not their own.⁷ This is where they contradict themselves. They state there can be no absolutes, yet the "new" beliefs they are proposing must be formulated from their own mind, own opinions. And since everyone is under the *Tao*, those sentiments are also birthed out of the Moral Law which they claim to be untrue because there is no Absolute Truth. This contradictory relativism is different from the relativism present in *That Hideous Strength* and parts of the third chapter of *The Abolition of Man*, however, because it still operates within the *Tao*. Proponents want to discover "real" values apart from the traditional ones or redefine them (although value does not exist outside of the *Tao*)—they do not dispose of the concept of value.⁸

RELATIVISM OUTSIDE OF THE *TAO*

In portions of the last chapter of *The Abolition of Man* and the book *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis critiques the relativism that purposefully functions to make man the Absolute rather than a higher power. These are the men who reject the *Tao* and the concept of value as a whole. They move out of the psychological idea of survival that motivates human action and focus on merely doing whatever one may please. They themselves "decide what man is to be and make him into that: not on any ground of imagined value, but because [they] want him to be such. Having mastered [their] environment, [they now] master [themselves] and choose [their] own destiny."⁹

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 706.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 717.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 717.

The exterior goal is to exert power over nature, over their environment through the progress of applied science;¹⁰ however, the true goal is not humans over nature. Professor Filostrato in *That Hideous Strength* states that: “All that talk about the power of Man over Nature—Man in the abstract—is only for the *canaglia*. You know as well as I do that Man’s power over Nature means the power of some men over other men with Nature as the instrument.”¹¹ The Head of the N.I.C.E. organization, Alcasan, is the first of the “New Men” that exists outside of natural life. Although Professors Filostrato and Straik speak of the “new race,” it seems as though they are not searching to make a new class of human, but *one* man who will be the supreme power. They tempt Mark Studdock with the idea of being present at the creation of “God,” stating that Alcasan is a blueprint of the true God to come—a manmade deity that will rule the universe.¹²

Despite the desire for the one man-god, there still exists a “new race” in the ranks of the N.I.C.E. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis describes them as the “Conditioners.” These men are the ones that step out of the *Tao* and define the “new,” and artificial, Moral Law for humanity.¹³ Values no longer shape education but are formed *from* it. With this kind of conditioning, human nature is defeated.¹⁴ The essence of innate humanity is taken away when values are erased and reshaped. It is no longer what is

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 718.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York City, NY: Scribner, 2003), 175.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 176.

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 722.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 722.

inherently *in* us but what they *produce* in us. By these actions, the Conditioners become something unlike men due to their removal from the *Tao*. They emerge within the void and their subjects are artefacts of men. Through the creation of a new Moral Law, these “Conditioners,” or the N.I.C.E., are abolishing humanity itself.¹⁵

MAN AS THE ABSOLUTE

One of these views attempts to reject absolutism while the other ascribes to it; however, upon further inspection one may find that both views buy into the philosophy of absolutism.

Due to the creation of *The Green Book*, Gaius and Titius must believe that some values are immune to subjectivity and desire to create a society that is good in their own eyes.¹⁶ The issue is that in their quest to deny absolutism, they aim to mold society after their own ideals and convictions, inadvertently creating themselves, their own minds as the Absolute. This is similar to the idea presented in *That Hideous Strength* by Lord Feverstone: “Man has got to take charge of Man. That means, remember, that some men have got to take charge of the rest.”¹⁷ Gaius and Titius may not necessarily be writing from this viewpoint, but it is the only logical end that can come from creating “new” values—values that they hold and believe others should as well. Lewis states that it is not significant what the point of *The Green Book* is, it is that it even has a point at all. If it did

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 723.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 705.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 40.

not, then it would be a fruitless writing. Gaius and Titius composed it for a purpose or there would be no reason for it. The entirety of it is to train young people so that they will agree with the writers' position. This alone debunks their subjectivism because they need not sway people to their side if all truth is relative and one's opinions of something only comes from feelings, which are inherently false.¹⁸

Furthermore, the view of Gaius and Titius has another implication for man as an individual. By placing an objective statement, such as the sublimity of a waterfall, on the grounds of the feelings of a speaker, the Absolute truth of a person's life is formed by their own feelings and beliefs. This seems to cancel out an Absolute, yet it makes an individual the superior of his/her own life through only judging the world by personal emotion. Gaius and Titius look harshly against the emotional approach, yet they acknowledge its existence. To show that it is manifested is to prove that a supreme ruler does exist in a person's life, themselves, whether they believe it or not.

In contrast, *That Hideous Strength* speaks of producing one, all-powerful manmade "God" at the throne of the universe. Professor Filostrato describes that the concept of "Man" is fictitious—that there are only "men." "Man" as a species will not be the superior, everlasting being but one man will be.¹⁹ It is a removal of any idea of the *Tao* or the God of the Bible and a replacement with a superior brain, something that was once human but can no longer be due to a lack of human nature. This being is a man

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 706.

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 175.

without a chest, which is what makes him human. Intellect alone produces a spirit and appetite alone creates an animal.²⁰

On the other hand, although members of the N.I.C.E. seek to create a new Absolute, the theme of a select few in power conditioning the rest of the world is prominent throughout *That Hideous Strength*. The N.I.C.E. itself is an example of it and many members quote something along the lines of what Lord Feverstone says about some men taking charge of the rest.²¹ They are under the supreme control of the coming Head, yet the group itself is indoctrinating and recreating people in their own images. They are working to create a new Absolute but place themselves in the supreme position in their task to do so.

RELATIVISM AS THE GATEWAY

Even though the aforementioned points are the end-goal of both ways of thought—a “reprogramming” of the traditional Moral Law in the first and a manmade God with a new race in the second—one does not merely hop into those extremes. Every belief system has an entrance point that can place one on the path of radicalism. Although these thoughts have been named as “relativism,” they cannot be attributed this way once the extremes are bought into. In other words, relativism is only the gateway. It is the entry point to creating “men without chests.” One can see, in the end, both thoughts end in some sort of absolutism with those in power controlling “value” itself. Therefore, the

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 704.

²¹ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 40.

view that “truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them”²² does not live on.

Relativism is merely the means by which those in power divert the attention of those who are not in power, making them to believe that there is no Absolute Truth and everyone’s own opinion is valuable. When in reality, the authorities are working in the background to indoctrinate easily pliable minds with their “new” values or remove the human aspect of beings once and for all. Both of these types spiral into the idea of “men without chests” because the first seeks to remove human emotion from sentiment while the second elevates the intellect above human nature. They have a similar end result and one could even say that the first devolves into the second.

In *That Hideous Strength*, Mark Studdock is a representation of a student of modern education which teaches from resources like *The Green Book*. This is obvious through the sentiment given by Mark that “men call a woman voluptuous when she arouses voluptuous feelings in them.”²³ This is identical to the teaching given by Gaius and Titius regarding the waterfall, that it is only sublime because it incites sublime feelings within the speaker.²⁴ Mark also does not believe in God,²⁵ which one could use

²² Maria Baghramian, “Relativism,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/relativism/#WhaRel>.

²³ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 44.

²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 712.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 176.

to say that he ascribes to the thought of no Absolute, found within *The Green Book* due to his education. This education centered around relativism is what originally made Mark vulnerable to the N.I.C.E. It was the gateway to him becoming entangled in the extreme that follows. His inherent need to be in the “inner circle” also made him easy to lure. That need spurs from the fact that in Gaius and Titius’ world, the select few in power are the ones that create public belief—they are the “Absolute.” Mark does not want to be another one of the people being indoctrinated. In the world of the N.I.C.E., although the men of the Institute do sway public value, the ultimate goal is the abolition of man and the rise of a “new” God—which Mark did not desire.

Moreover, the Deputy Director of the N.I.C.E, Mr. Wither, is a representation of relativism. Mark cannot pin him down, no matter how hard he tries. For example, when Mark attempts to find out the nature of the position he would be taking at the N.I.C.E., Wither talks in confusing circles and will not take a position or a stance.²⁶ Although this frustrates Mark, he continues to ask, seeking a concrete description that Wither whisks away with his subjective notions. The N.I.C.E. itself appears to be built on the idea of relativism, seen in Wither’s words that “the Institute could [not] allow anyone to remain in it who showed a disposition to stand on his rights—who grudged this or that piece of service because it fell outside some function which he had chosen to circumscribe by a rigid definition.”²⁷ The whole idea of relativism is that there is no singular truth. If the N.I.C.E. were built on such a foundation, they would have no end goal. Moreover, why would they have Hingest killed? If truth were relative, then his disagreement would be of

²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 52.

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 117.

no bother since that was his own belief. Because he did not ascribe to their opinions, he was murdered. Hingest's murder as well as Mark's desire to flee once he's been exposed to the horror of N.I.C.E.'s true mission portray how relativism lures people in. Once they see the inner workings and what it leads to, they desire to get out of it but cannot escape. This is why these thoughts cannot be attributed as "relativism" once the extremes are bought into. It ceases to be relativism and turns into something far more dangerous and much more difficult to remove oneself from.

These ideas can be applied to today's society. In the world, especially in America, society is increasingly shooting down norms and absolute truths and establishing their own "truth." Without an Absolute, the world is relinquishing the natural order into complete chaos with no concrete, objective truths about things such as gender, marriage, etc. If this continues, no woman or man may ever be who he/she was originally born to be because there is no objective standard to conform to. It hurts humanity when total relativism takes over and leaves people vulnerable to false doctrine. Furthermore, people long for an Absolute. They need something to define themselves by, which is why they foolishly create their "own" truth. This is dangerous because it makes it easy for tyrannical powers to enter and be that Absolute for them—a role that humans were never meant to fill and that can devolve them into something unlike humanity. It is a slippery slope.

ANALYSIS OF CRITIQUES

Overall, Lewis's critiques were well-crafted and quite strong. Composing *The Abolition of Man* in the genre of lecture made it far easier to understand, even though the

subject material is weighty. His true meaning was not masked behind a story line or characters but was expounded upon very clearly. The only thing that could have been done without was the example of the waterfall.²⁸ Sentiment in morality is not the same as sentiment with a waterfall. Every example eventually falls short. What does it matter if a waterfall is “pretty” or “sublime”? Who named the waterfall as objectively “sublime?” If the viewer has visited Niagara Falls and its grandeur, that viewer may find a waterfall in the woods as merely “pretty” in comparison with their own experience at Niagara. This does not make them false. Again, it goes back to the question of what Absolute calls it sublime? Words have a variety of meanings within different contexts. The disagreement here could be attributed to the difference in society and generation. In the age of Generation-Z and the constant mantra of “speak your truth,” it makes it easy to go against Lewis’s writing. Since I have been raised in this type of relative society with the infiltration of postmodernism (I myself am a postmodernist writer), his views come off as rigid and close-minded. Why should one ascribe to something merely because tradition has named it that way? I do admit there are dangers to debunking *all* tradition because that is a main facet of Christian belief. An example of something that could be removed is the saying “boys will be boys” which excuses harmful and misogynistic behaviors simply because that is how men have continually behaved. Anyway, back to the point: why does a waterfall have to be “sublime?” Why can it not be “pretty,” or “breathtaking,” or even “average?” This was the only point of disagreement I had with *The Abolition of Man*.

²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 694.

Lewis should be commended for his work within *That Hideous Strength*. He truly is a brilliant and creative man that crafts beautiful stories; however, there is no true beauty without a terrible depth. This “terrible depth” is the meaning behind *That Hideous Strength*. The book was confusing and difficult to decipher. If I had not known what it was supposed to be about, then I would have never even guessed it. Dystopian fiction for this specific set of points was a mistake. If one does not understand the subject matter, then the point is unclear and incomprehensible which weakens his argument.

CONCLUSION

C.S. Lewis was an outspoken proponent against modern education which utilized relativism within the study and subsequently created “men without chests” who are not distinguished from other men by their intellect but by the lack of emotion.²⁹ Lewis warns in both of his works *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength* against what two different types of relativism can lead to. Both are dangerous and characterize Man as the Absolute—a place which no human belongs. His warnings are profitable for the world today, where relativism runs basically unchecked and is becoming increasingly popular. Although some of his points are seemingly antiquated or are confounding, the general idea is still seen: relativism is dangerous and creates people who are not really people at all.

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 704.

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On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance in completing this assignment.

