

STUDY GUIDE to *The Abolition of Man*

By C.S. Lewis

Introduction

The *Abolition of Man* was first given as a series of lectures in 1943. The lectures dealt largely with the dangers of moral relativism – a subject that increasingly was to occupy Lewis' mind as he noted the destructive trends emerging in the modern world-view. Lewis later debated the issue of moral relativism in later, more abbreviated forms in such papers as “The Poison of Subjectivism”, “If We Have Christ's Ethics Does the Rest of the Christian Faith Matter?” and Chapter 3 of *Miracles*. His friend Owen Barfield thought *The Abolition* was the best piece of discursive argument Lewis had ever produced, stating: “It is a real triumph. There may be a piece of contemporary writing in which precision of thought, liveliness of expression and depth of meaning unite with the same felicity, but I have not come across it.”

In *The Abolition of Man* Lewis argues for a reality “beyond predicates” – that is, that the universe was such “that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it – believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, or reverence, or our contempt.” Lewis argues that there is a universal moral law, the *Tao*, and that the value of education lies in cultivating true and just sentiment towards this law. Past generations largely operated within the perimeters of this law, although they might distort or develop it. The present generation was steadily cutting away at their heritage by denying the law altogether. Lewis noticed the disturbing tendency in the underlying assumptions that modern textbooks made about values, and also in the cult of progress in domesticating nature, even human nature, so that “each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well.” He feared the power of the new thinkers to condition others.

In this work everything hangs on whether there is such a thing as the *Tao*. Lewis does not give us much discussion of the *Tao* itself, though he gives examples of the action of the *Tao* in the appendix. This includes a set of quotations from the ethical writings of many ancient traditions (Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Norse, Babylonian, Egyptian, Aboriginal, Chinese, Greek, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Redskin) illustrating several moral principles they hold in common. The *Tao*, says Lewis, is simply an expression of first principles: “I am not trying to prove its validity by the argument from common consent. Its validity cannot be deduced. For those who do not perceive its rationality, even universal consent could not prove it.”

Suggestions for facilitating discussion

The two sets of questions in this section are meant to cater to different needs. The study questions are for those who want to concentrate on the text itself, and the more generalized questions for those who would like to use the text as a launch pad to a more fluid discussion of issues raised by it. You may wish to mix and match questions from both sections, or add some of your own.

“A hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”

Intensive Study Questions

Book 1

- (1) Why, in Lewis’ view, can’t Gaius’ and Titius’ dissection of the value judgement “this is sublime” be applied to all judgements of value?
- (2) Lewis contrasts Gaius and Titius’ example of the badly worded cruise advertisement with the writings of Johnson and Wordsworth. What is the contrast designed to highlight?
- (3) “The schoolboy who reads this passage in *The Green Book* will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and, secondly, that all such statements are unimportant.” Do you think Lewis is right to be so wary of the effects a passage like this will have on the students?
- (4) “Gaius and Titius... see the world around them swayed by emotional propaganda... 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.” Do you agree with Lewis that most pupils are far more likely to suffer from a deficiency of just sentiment than an over-abundance of false sentiment?
- (5) “A good education should build some sentiments while destroying others.” Do you agree? If so, which sentiments need to be encouraged, and which discouraged?
- (6) “Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.” Would you agree with Aristotle?
- (7) Do you think Lewis is right to posit a radical shift in the “educational predicament” of past and present educators?
- (8) “I myself do not enjoy the society of small children: because I speak from within the *Tao* I recognize this as a defect in myself – just as a man may have to recognize that he is tone deaf or colour blind.” Do you agree that the *Tao* commands certain emotional responses of us? Could it be a defect not to like some things if the *Tao* prescribes us to?
- (9) “No justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous.” How then should virtue be taught?
- (10) “The Chest – Magnanimity – Sentiment – these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.” Would you agree with Lewis’ description of manhood (or personhood) here?
- (11) Do you think there are any ‘Men without Chests’ around today? Can you draw on any examples?

Book 2

- (13) “The practical result of education in the spirit of *The Green Book* must be the destruction of the society which accepts it.” Do you agree with Lewis that the consequences of such an education would be so destructive?

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- (14) What is the problem with looking for ‘basic’ values outside the *Tao*, and why won’t instinct serve as a basic or replacement source of value?
- (15) “Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends.” Lewis takes the example of dying for the good of the community to show how we can only justify this as a moral imperative by recourse to the values of the *Tao*? What other values can be thought of as ‘first principles’ in this way?
- (16) “The rebellion of new ideologies against the *Tao* is a rebellion of the branches against the tree: if the rebels could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves. The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in.” Would you agree with Lewis that values are outside us, and we can’t manufacture our own? Does this passage have any significance for post-modern ethics?
- (17) “Those who understand the spirit of the *Tao* and who have been led in that spirit can modify it in directions which that spirit itself demands.” How does developing the *Tao* from the inside differ from trying to change it from the outside?
- (18) “The morality of Nietzsche is a mere innovation.” In what way might this be true? (N.B. Nietzsche held that religious and moral values were the expression of aesthetic ideals that the Enlightenment had bankrupted, life did not hold any meaning outside of itself, and the Judaic-Christian tradition was a way of keeping people submissive to suffering and authority).
- (19) What might you say to someone who thought he or she “could get on quite comfortably” without values? Are there people like that around today?

Book 3

- (20) “Each advance [of Man over Nature] leaves him weaker as well as stronger.” In what way might our control over nature weaken us? Should there be limits on such progress?
- (21) How far can present generations be said to control future ones?
- (22) What role does Lewis see the Conditioners playing?
- (23) Why does Lewis think the old kind of men are more likely to be abolished under the present system of education than at any other time in previous history?
- (24) “If you will not obey the *Tao*, or else commit suicide, obedience to impulse (and therefore in the long run, to mere ‘nature’) is the only course left open.” What would be the consequences of attempting to follow this course (i.e. acting simply on impulse)?
- (25) “If the eugenics are efficient enough there will be no second revolt.” Do you find Lewis’ chilling vision of a conditioned society plausible?
- (26) “Outside the *Tao* there is no ground for criticizing either the *Tao* or anything else.” How does Lewis justify this?

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- (27) Did Lewis' arguments in The Abolition of Man persuade you of the benefits of orienting one's life by the standards of the *Tao* and trying to cultivate its values in education?

General Questions

- (1) Do you notice any tendencies in modern education to inculcate the kind of false assumptions Lewis draws attention to in *The Green Book*?
- (2) "The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts." Discuss.
- (3) What do you think Lewis would say about modern education if he were alive today?
- (4) "The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it." Do you think Lewis is right to say that to think rightly about an issue we must also feel rightly about it?
- (5) Would you agree that the mark of the New Man is "not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion"?
- (6) Do you believe in the *Tao*?
- (7) "The *Tao* admits development from within." What sort of thing might constitute a true development of the *Tao*?
- (8) Do you think Lewis is distrustful of science? If so, does he have a right to be?
- (9) "Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men." Do you agree that the drive towards conquering Nature is always going to be self-limiting to mankind?
- (10) Do you find Lewis' chilling vision of a conditioned society plausible?
- (11) It has now been over sixty years since Lewis delivered the Abolition of Man lectures. Have Lewis' fears for the future of education and/or society been realized in any way? Are his warnings still applicable?