

Fiction and Philosophy: The Ideas of C. S. Lewis

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It is not surprising that C. S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, would also dabble in the realm of science fiction. Lewis uses the power of narrative in the third book of his sci-fi trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, to give flesh to the philosophical ideas he writes about in his non-fiction work, *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis confirms and critiques several philosophical ideas when he writes *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength*, including those of Aristotle and Hobbes. In *That Hideous Strength*, many of the examinations of these ideas are revealed through the character Mark Studdock, in part because he is an intellectual, and in part because his character arc is perhaps the most dramatic within the narrative. For the most part, however, Lewis uses the exploratory nature of the science fiction genre to play out the potential consequences of Hobbes' ideas, while affirming his own position as espoused in *The Abolition of Man*, and that of Aristotle.

In both his *Politics* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks at length about life's purpose being the instilling and pursuit of virtue (Aristotle 77). He believes that virtue is an end in and of itself. Lewis references Aristotle's philosophy in *The Abolition of Man*, when he writes about the basic "doctrine of objective value" (Lewis 18) that provides the evaluation of truth. He summarizes many historical variations of this

doctrine under the term “Tao” (Lewis 18). After establishing a context for this way of thinking, Lewis then writes, “Whatever *Tao* there is will be the product, not the motive, of education” (Lewis *The Abolition of Man* 61).

Furthermore, in *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis says that his proposed “regenerate science” would not “do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself. When it explained, it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole” (Lewis *The Abolition of Man* 79). When Lewis elaborates on what he intends with his proposed “redefining” of science in *The Abolition of Man*, the philosophy he is countering is almost the exact philosophy espoused by the members of the scientific think tank called N.I.C.E. in *That Hideous Strength*. In the novel, one member of the N.I.C.E. says,

Why should they have their world all crawling with organisms? ... This Institute ... is for something better than housing and vaccinations and faster trains and curing the people of cancer. It is for the conquest of death: or for the conquest of organic life, if you prefer. They are the same thing (Lewis *The Abolition of Man* 177).

This scientific advancement for the purpose of transcending the organic and redefining the basic nature of mankind extends from experiments on animals to “reconditioning” prisoners, and climaxes in N.I.C.E. scientist Filistrato’s culminating achievement, *The Head*. The purpose of the “progressive” scientific endeavors of the N.I.C.E. is to allow humanity to transcend the organic, but in doing so human nature is deconstructed.

Hobbes' idea of society and education runs directly counter to the ideas of Lewis and Aristotle. According to Hobbes, "good" and "evil" are labels applied by people to things that they like or dislike—nothing more. He writes,

But whatsoever is the object of any man's Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, Evill; And of his Contempt, *Vile*, and *Inconsiderable*. ... There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves (Hobbes 120).

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis addresses a high school textbook that essentially claims that "good" and "evil" are simply projected emotional sentiments, and are therefore subjective (Lewis *The Abolition of Man* 2). In a similar fashion, he critiques this reasoning in *That Hideous Strength* during a conversation between Professor Frost, the scariest member of the N.I.C.E., and Mark Studdock, the newest member of the organization. Lewis writes, in the character of Frost,

I do not think this pseudo-scientific language really modifies the essentially subjective and instinctive basis of the ethics you are describing. ... They are mere generalizations from affectional feelings. (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 258).

This categorization of any value judgement as mere sentiment based on the pleasantness or unpleasantness of an experience follows directly from Hobbes' philosophy of good and evil. And, as Lewis demonstrates in his fictionalization of *The Abolition of Man*, this inability to discuss ethics in anything more than subjective terms has disturbing consequences.

That Hideous Strength climaxes philosophically and narratively in Nature's ultimate conquest of Man. Not only do the human sacrifices in the room with The Head show a primacy and ritualism that show applied science as its own sort of religion, but it is in an intentional, purely animalistic way that Lewis describes the characters' behavior (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 354-355). He writes, "And Straik remembered that Wither had that knife. He wrenched himself free from the rhythm with a frightful effort: claws seemed to be tearing at his chest from the inside" (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 355). When all value judgements are relegated to personal preference, eventually human nature is reduced to the naturalistic animal: whoever is strongest and fastest wins.

Lewis encapsulates this idea even more literally in the narrative: animals that the N.I.C.E. have been experimenting on break free of their cages, and kill everyone except Mark at a banquet (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 348-349). Interestingly, this happens only after the speech of every member of the N.I.C.E. is completely confused. According to Aristotle, this renders them animals and not human; he writes that "man alone among the animals has speech" (Aristotle 4). Humanity's conquest of Nature ultimately results in the destruction of human nature.

When Lewis proposes as an alternative to the philosophies and reasoning of the N.I.C.E. and Hobbes' "regenerate science," he illustrates the effects of this way of thinking in *That Hideous Strength* through Mark Studdock's character development. Mark is detained in training room filled with slightly incongruous objects, designed to instill in the trainee a sense that life is purposeless and without order. However, Mark begins to recognize and crave goodness in the absence of order. Lewis writes,

To sit in the room was the first step towards what Frost called objectivity—the process by which all specifically human reactions were killed in a man...

But after an hour or so this long, high coffin of a room began to produce in Mark an effect which his instructor had probably not anticipated. ... [T]he built and painted perversity of this room had the effect of making him aware, as he had never been aware before, of this room's opposite. ... He was choosing a side: the Normal (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 299).

When Mark rejects what Lewis terms the “purely scientific” point of view, including the notion that his recognition of pleasant things is merely instinctual, not only does his worldview shift but he gains a kind of emotional coherency (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 299). In short, he changes—notably for the better—when he begins to understand and internalize a kind of moral standard, and a love for normal human experience (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 299). This is a very Lewisian idea: Mark's restoration must be *internal* (Lewis *The Abolition of Man* 45), unlike the external encouragement Hobbes proposes in the form of Leviathan or the communitive striving for good proposed by Aristotle (Hobbes 362) (Aristotle 5).

Interestingly, Lewis continues his critique of external enforcement of morals by turning Hobbes' premise, that good and evil are based solely on appetite, completely on its head. In *That Hideous Strength*, he writes,

Everything else that Mark had ever felt—love, ambition, hunger, lust itself—appeared to have been mere milk and water, toys for children, not worth one throb of the nerves. The infinite attraction of this dark thing sucked all other

passions into itself... He could not now think of Jane except in terms of appetite: and appetite here makes no appeal (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 268).

Lewis counters Hobbes in multiple ways, first by having Mark learn to think in more than just terms of appetite: he returns to Jane, seeing her in a completely new light (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 380-381). Secondly, Lewis points out that appetite does nothing to stop death: Mark is brought back to his senses by remembering that he “would probably be killed” (Lewis *That Hideous Strength* 269). Thirdly, Lewis demonstrates that appetite or desire alone are not enough to promote or maintain good, fair, or even socially acceptable behavior. Either smaller appetites immediately lead one to do something that is wrong, the small things that used to fill those appetites are not enough and more and more dangerous fulfilment is sought, or some external pressure to do wrong overwhelms any desire to do good. In order to maintain a society, the ideals of Aristotle and Lewis must be upheld: there must be some kind of internally kept, externally recognized moral standard.

Lewis builds his conclusion slowly through *That Hideous Strength*, relying on the philosophical nature of the genre and the plot in order to carry readers through the dense conversations scattered throughout the book. In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis provides an engaging critique of Hobbesian logic in a way that *The Abolition of Man* cannot accomplish: well thought-out fiction makes philosophies easier to internalize, where they have a greater chance of influencing minds and culture.