

## **A Comparison of Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and C.S. Lewis**

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In this paper, I will examine C.S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, which was written as a response to what Lewis perceived as a failure of modern culture to cherish the traditional values of morality and virtue. He observed that the education system was slowly eroding any idea of absolute truth, and was concerned with the implications of this. I will also look at Lewis' ideas through the lens of two prominent philosophers who came before him: Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes, and conclude with an excerpt from *That Hideous Strength*, a fictionalization of *Abolition of Man*.

So, what exactly does Lewis mean when he uses the term "abolition of man"? In this text, he discusses how the chipping away of values and the dismissal of inherent good and evil are the beginning of this abolition. Lewis says that debunking traditional values will lead to the destruction of virtue. This, he says, is the result of a concerted effort to control the human body, therefore conditioning it to every whim and fancy of the conqueror. Indeed, control over the mind is the highest accomplishment one can attain when conquering nature. Lewis asks the following regarding the idea of controlling the human mind: "Why not this? Why must our conquest of nature stop short, in stupid reverence, before this final and toughest bit of 'nature' which has hitherto been called the conscience of man? ...Having mastered our environment, let us now master

ourselves and choose our own destiny” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, p. 51). Once we have control of the mind, then we are essentially replacing God with ourselves.

However, Lewis questions whether this is truly a good thing, and a step in the right direction for humanity. Lewis says, “*human* nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man. The battle will then be won” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, p. 59).

When human beings legislate their own conscience and morality, then anything is acceptable. The *Tao*, as Lewis calls the laws of morality, is completely abandoned. Every value is thrown away, and virtue becomes a subjective ideal.

Lewis also writes of the education system of his time, and shows the logical conclusions one makes when faced with the idea of conditioning people to disregard morality as it is traditionally understood. After all, if morality is merely one person’s opinion, who is to say whether that individual is right or wrong? Lewis contrasts this viewpoint with that of the ancient philosophers, saying: “St. Augustine defines virtue as...the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind of degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, p. 16).

Lewis was concerned that modern education was doing just the opposite of what these philosophers recommended.

The end result of such an education - detachment from both the body and the *Tao* - is complete annihilation of what we call humanity. When all emotion is taken away, and indeed, all reasoning too, what is left? Plants have life, and animals feel sensations, but humans have *reason* that sets them apart. According to Lewis,

The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat...of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments...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. The operation of [modern education] ...is to produce Men without Chests” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, p. 25).

It is interesting to note the similarities between Lewis’ discussion of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle says that “there are three things in the soul that are authoritative over action and truth: sense perception, intellect, and longing” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a17-18). He also says, “sense perception is not the origin of any action, and this is clear from the fact that beasts have sense perception but do not share in action” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a19-20) When Lewis talks of the head, belly, and chest in *The Abolition of Man*, he says “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...” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, p. 24). It is not difficult to see the correlation between Lewis’ head and Aristotle’s’ reason, or intellect. Furthermore, we also can see that what Lewis calls the belly is what Aristotle calls longing. This longing is an inner sense of the *Tao* and all that it stands for. The intellect is the logic, or truth, that supports action with regards to the *Tao*. When both are considered together, we find what Lewis calls the chest. Aristotle calls it true virtue, or rather, a mean of all virtues. According to both Lewis and Aristotle, in order to find virtue and morality, one must take both longing and reasoning (emotions and logic) into consideration.

Hobbes, on the other hand, had a modern, scientific approach to the idea of morality and reason. Indeed, he thought that reason is actually quite mathematical and precise. He says that reason “...is nothing but reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and

signifying of our thoughts” (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 22-23). Hobbes carries this idea a step further, however, when he begins discussing aversions and appetites. He claims that humans are merely bundles of appetites and aversions, constantly making choices based on these feelings:

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, evil...For these words of good [and] evil...are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves, but from the person of the man... (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 28-29).

According to Hobbes, then, nothing is inherently good or evil. These are just words we use to convey how we happen to feel at the moment, or more specifically, what our appetites or aversions are. This morally relativistic philosophy is exactly what Lewis is talking about – people who say that all things are subjective, and that there can be no right or wrong – no traditional morality. Hobbes claims that there can be no highest good; rather, he says that life is all about power. He says “...I put for the general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death” (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 58). Aristotle and Lewis, however, would argue that this leads to an ultimately meaningless life. Indeed, Aristotle says:

If, therefore, there is some end of our actions that we wish for on account of itself, the rest being things we wish for on account of this end, and if we do not choose all things on account of something else – for in this way the process will go on infinitely such that longing involved is empty and pointless – clearly this would be the good, that is, the best” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a18-22).

The final, tragic end of this sort of thinking can be seen in Lewis’s fictionalization of *The Abolition of Man – That Hideous Strength*. This book takes the ideas and philosophies in *The Abolition of Man* and brings them to life in a brilliant finale of Lewis’s

sci-fi trilogy. In *That Hideous Strength* Professor Frost, a character who represents the philosophy of modern education, commits suicide when he realizes that his work is lost. Frost believed that “all which appears in the mind as motive or intention is merely a by-product of what the body is doing...increasingly, his actions had been without motive...his mind was a mere spectator” (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 354). This abstraction from the mind ultimately led to his death. He had no choice: that “tiresome illusion, his consciousness, was screaming to protest; his body, even had he wished, had no power to attend to those screams” (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 355). Even though Frost realized at the last minute that there was a possibility that he was wrong, he refused to acknowledge it and, “with one supreme effort he flung himself back into his illusion. In that attitude eternity overtook him as sunrise in old tales overtakes and turns them into unchangeable stone” (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 356). The final end of Frost’s stoic, objective, amoral philosophy is a life rendered meaningless because it was outside the *Tao*, and it was in fact a life that attempted to overthrow everything the *Tao* stood for.

The tragic, yet undeniable consequences of Frost’s and Hobbes’ philosophy is exactly what Lewis was trying to call attention to in *The Abolition of Man*. Indeed, both Aristotle and Lewis would agree that without virtue, morality, and inherent good and evil, we cannot live life to its fullest meaning.

### Works Cited

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