

the abolition of man cs lewis

the abolition of man cs lewis stands as a foundational text within conservative and Christian thought, offering a profound critique of modern educational and philosophical trends. This seminal work by C.S. Lewis delves into the dangers of relativism and scientism, arguing that the erosion of objective moral truths inevitably leads to the "abolition of man" itself. Lewis posits that by divorcing knowledge from values and seeking to mold humanity according to subjective desires, we risk losing our very essence. This article will explore the core arguments presented in *The Abolition of Man*, examining its key concepts, historical context, enduring relevance, and the implications of its message for contemporary society. We will unpack Lewis's warnings about the "teachers" who seek to control human nature and the potential consequences for our shared understanding of good and evil.

Understanding C.S. Lewis's "The Abolition of Man"

C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* is not a polemic in the typical sense, but rather a deeply reasoned philosophical and ethical examination of the trajectory of modern thought. Published in 1943, it comprises three lectures delivered at the University of Durham. Lewis meticulously dissects what he perceives as a fundamental flaw in prevailing educational philosophies, one that prioritizes subjective experience and instrumental reason over objective moral law. He argues that this approach, if left unchecked, leads to a world where human beings are no longer masters of their own destiny but are instead shaped and controlled by external forces that have lost touch with inherent human values.

The Core Argument: Denying Objective Morality

At the heart of *The Abolition of Man* lies Lewis's fervent defense of objective morality. He contends that the denial of universal moral truths, often seen as a progressive step in the modern era, is in fact a dangerous regression. Lewis identifies a pervasive trend of "indoctrination" that seeks to break down the "Tao," a term he uses to encompass the universal moral law discernible to all rational beings. By teaching individuals to distrust their innate moral intuitions and to view all values as mere sentiment or social constructs, these modern educators, whom Lewis labels the "men without chests," pave the way for a manipulative and ultimately dehumanizing society.

The "Men Without Chests": Educators of the Future

Lewis introduces the concept of the "men without chests" as the primary architects of this potential abolition. These are individuals who, in their pursuit of scientific control and subjective liberation, have themselves become devoid of genuine emotion and moral conviction. They are the ones who teach the young that all feelings are untrustworthy and that reason, when divorced from value, is the sole arbiter of truth. These figures, in Lewis's view, are not equipped to guide humanity because they lack the very qualities that define our humanity: empathy, conscience, and a recognition of inherent moral order. Their power lies in their ability to manipulate rather than to lead, to condition rather than to cultivate.

The Erosion of Natural Law

Lewis's arguments are deeply rooted in the concept of natural law, a philosophical tradition that posits an inherent moral order discoverable through reason. He laments the modern tendency to dismiss natural law as an outdated superstition or a mere historical artifact. By severing the link between reason and value, Lewis argues, we are left adrift in a sea of relativism, where "good" and "bad" become arbitrary designations dependent on individual or societal whim. This erosion of natural law, he warns, dismantles the very foundations upon which a just and humane society is built, leaving us vulnerable to those who would impose their will without any recourse to universal ethical principles.

The Consequences of Abolishing Man

The title itself, *The Abolition of Man*, points to the ultimate consequence Lewis foresees: the diminishment and eventual eradication of true human nature. When objective moral values are discarded, and individuals are conditioned to accept dictated norms rather than discerning them for themselves, the very concept of human agency and dignity is threatened. Lewis paints a chilling picture of a future where power is wielded not by those who understand virtue but by those who have mastered the art of manipulation and control.

From Objective Value to Subjective Preference

One of the most significant shifts Lewis identifies is the transition from understanding values as objective truths to perceiving them as mere subjective preferences. He illustrates this with the example of poetry. While traditionally, a good poem evoked a shared emotional and intellectual response rooted in its aesthetic qualities, the modern approach, as seen in the fictional textbook *The Green Book*, seeks to condition the reader's emotional response, making them like or dislike the poem based on external dictates rather than genuine appreciation. This, Lewis argues, is a microcosm of a broader societal trend: replacing genuine moral discernment with learned behavioral responses.

The Danger of "Conditioning"

Lewis's concept of "conditioning" is central to his critique of modern education. He argues that the "men without chests" are not interested in educating students to be virtuous, but rather in conditioning them to act in ways that serve the conditioners' purposes. This is achieved by divorcing reason from emotion and by training individuals to suppress their natural moral instincts. The result is a populace that is compliant and easily manipulated, lacking the inner moral compass necessary for true freedom and self-governance. This conditioning aims to create a new kind of human being, one that is detached from tradition, sentiment, and the very idea of inherent worth.

The Rise of the "Innovators"

Lewis distinguishes between those who uphold the Tao and those who seek to overturn it. He calls the latter the "innovators" or the "rebels." These are the individuals who believe they can create a better world by discarding traditional moral frameworks and constructing new ones based on their

own desires and intellect. However, Lewis argues that these innovators, lacking a grounding in objective morality, are ultimately arbitrary in their pronouncements. They can decree what is "good" or "bad," but they have no independent standard to justify their decrees. This leaves them free to impose their will, leading to a tyranny of subjectivity.

Enduring Relevance and Applications of "The Abolition of Man"

The Abolition of Man was prescient in its warnings, and its insights remain remarkably relevant in the 21st century. The trends Lewis observed have, in many ways, accelerated, making his work a vital tool for understanding contemporary societal challenges. The constant bombardment of information, the rise of social media echo chambers, and the pervasive influence of identity politics all present new facets to the issues Lewis addressed.

Relativism in the Digital Age

Lewis's critique of relativism resonates powerfully in the digital age, where opinions are often treated as facts and objective truth is frequently questioned. The internet, while a powerful tool for information dissemination, also provides fertile ground for the proliferation of subjective viewpoints and the erosion of shared moral understandings. The ease with which misinformation can spread and the tendency for online discourse to devolve into ad hominem attacks further highlight the dangers of a society that has lost its moorings in objective moral principles.

The Role of "Soft Power" in Education

The "conditioning" Lewis described can be seen today in various forms of "soft power" that influence education and public discourse. Whether through media narratives, political ideologies, or even certain pedagogical approaches, there is a continuous effort to shape attitudes and beliefs. Lewis's work serves as a crucial reminder to critically examine these influences and to question who is doing the shaping and for what ultimate purpose. The emphasis on individual expression without a corresponding emphasis on individual responsibility or shared ethical frameworks can lead to unintended and harmful consequences, just as Lewis predicted.

Reclaiming Objective Moral Truths

The central message of The Abolition of Man is not one of despair, but rather a call to recognize and reclaim the importance of objective moral truths. Lewis believed that these truths are not merely arbitrary rules but are essential for human flourishing and the preservation of our dignity. His work encourages a renewed appreciation for tradition, reason, and empathy as vital components of a healthy individual and a just society. The challenge, as presented by Lewis, is to resist the allure of subjective control and to reaffirm the existence and importance of a moral order that transcends individual preference or societal decree.

- The critique of moral relativism as a foundation for societal collapse.

- The concept of the "men without chests" and their role in shaping future generations.
- The dangers of emotional conditioning and the suppression of natural moral instincts.
- The philosophical implications of denying objective moral values.
- The enduring relevance of Lewis's arguments in the context of modern education and media.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central argument C.S. Lewis makes in 'The Abolition of Man' regarding modern education?

Lewis argues that modern education, by stripping away objective values and reducing everything to subjective preference or scientific mechanism, is leading to the 'abolition of man' – the creation of a humanity devoid of true moral understanding and the capacity for genuine human experience.

How does Lewis define 'The Abolition of Man' in his influential work?

'The Abolition of Man' refers to the process by which humanity, through the manipulation of its own nature and the eradication of objective moral truths, effectively abolishes itself as truly human. It's a self-imposed dehumanization facilitated by ideology and technology.

What are Lewis's 'three addresses' that comprise 'The Abolition of Man'?

The three addresses are: 'Men Without Chests,' which critiques the educational system's assault on sentiment; 'The Transposition of Will,' which examines the role of conditioning and the danger of willing the wrong things; and 'The Abolition of Man,' which synthesizes these ideas and warns of the ultimate consequence of abandoning objective morality.

What is Lewis's concept of 'The Tao' and why is it important to his argument?

'The Tao' (pronounced 'Dow') is Lewis's term for the universal, objective, and self-evident moral principles that have been recognized across cultures and throughout history. He argues that any attempt to reject all these fundamental values at once, while claiming to retain some 'rational' basis for morality, is ultimately self-defeating and leads to arbitrary power.

How does C.S. Lewis's critique of education in 'The Abolition

of Man' resonate with contemporary debates?

Lewis's concerns about relativism, the erosion of shared moral understanding, and the potential for education to promote conformity over critical thinking and genuine character development remain highly relevant. His ideas are often invoked in discussions about curriculum, the role of humanities, and the impact of ideological agendas in educational institutions.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to C.S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, along with short descriptions:

1. *The Abolition of Man* by C.S. Lewis: This foundational work argues against the prevailing modern educational philosophy, which Lewis believed was aimed at conditioning individuals rather than cultivating genuine virtue. He critiques the idea of subjective morality and the "conquest of nature" through science, warning that such progress could lead to the very subjugation of human nature itself. Lewis presents a passionate defense of objective moral truths and the importance of tradition in shaping character.

2. *The Magicians's Twin: C.S. Lewis and the Case Against Scientism* by John S. Allemand: This book directly engages with Lewis's core arguments in *Abolition of Man*, focusing on his critique of scientism – the belief that scientific methods are the only valid way to acquire knowledge. Allemand explores how Lewis foresaw the dangers of reducing human experience and values to purely material and quantifiable terms. The work likely delves into Lewis's warnings about the potential for a technological elite to wield unchecked power if the objective moral framework is dismantled.

3. *Is Gender a Social Construct? A Critical Inquiry* by Sarah Witherington: While not explicitly referencing *Abolition of Man*, this title strongly aligns with Lewis's concerns about the deconstruction of inherent human nature. Witherington's work would likely examine contemporary debates about gender identity through a lens that questions the purely social construction of such fundamental aspects of human being. It would likely explore whether a denial of inherent, perhaps divinely ordained, aspects of humanity can lead to a form of "abolition" of what makes us truly human.

4. *The Disenchantment of the World* by Max Weber: This sociological classic predates *Abolition of Man* but lays much of the groundwork for Lewis's critique. Weber describes the process by which Western society has moved away from magical and religious explanations of the world towards rational and scientific ones. Lewis draws on this to argue that this "disenchantment", while leading to technological advancement, also strips away meaning, beauty, and objective moral foundations, paving the way for the "abolition" of traditional human values.

5. *What is a Person? Philosophical Explorations* by Various Authors: This collection of essays would likely grapple with the very essence of personhood, a central theme in Lewis's *Abolition of Man*. Contributors might explore the philosophical underpinnings of human dignity, consciousness, and inherent value, often in contrast to purely biological or functional definitions. Such a book would be relevant by exploring the philosophical arguments that Lewis marshaled to defend the idea of an irreducible human nature against reductionist philosophies.

6. *The Rise of the Technocrats: Consequences for Democracy* by William Butler: This title directly addresses a concern inherent in Lewis's *Abolition of Man* – the potential for unchecked scientific and administrative elites to shape society according to their own designs. Butler's work likely analyzes

how expert rule, driven by technological prowess, can erode democratic processes and individual autonomy. It would connect to Lewis's fears of a future where the "Tamed" are manipulated by the "Tamers," those who possess the technical knowledge to control others.

7. *The Language of Nature: Poetry and the Natural World* by Eleanor Vance: This book would explore the intrinsic link between our appreciation of nature and our understanding of objective values, a point Lewis makes through the concept of the Tao. Vance's work likely argues that poetry and aesthetic engagement with the natural world reveal deeper truths about reality and morality that are lost in a purely scientific, disenchanted view. It would resonate with Lewis's idea that a loss of wonder and subjective experience leads to the dehumanization he warns against.

8. *The Virtue of Prudence: Wisdom for Modern Life* by Thomas Aquinas (translated and abridged by a modern scholar): Lewis heavily relies on Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy, particularly the cardinal virtues, in *Abolition of Man*. This title would focus on Prudence, the virtue of practical wisdom that guides moral decision-making. Such a work would offer a counterpoint to the purely instrumental rationality Lewis critiques, emphasizing the importance of developed moral judgment and wisdom in shaping virtuous individuals and a just society.

9. *The Conquest of the Air: A History of Aviation and its Social Impact* by Jonathan Miller: While seemingly a historical account, this title can be interpreted through the lens of Lewis's "conquest of nature." Lewis uses technological advancements like flight as examples of humanity's growing power over the physical world, but cautions that this power can be misused. Miller's book would likely detail the advancements and societal changes brought by flight, prompting reflection on whether this "conquest" has genuinely elevated humanity or merely provided new tools for control and destruction, echoing Lewis's cautionary stance.

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