

Objective Values in the Information Age: Preserving Humanity with C.S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*

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Abstract:

This essay examines C.S. Lewis's call for objective values in *The Abolition of Man*. It also contextualizes Lewis's argument with the technological advancements that were occurring in his time. Writing at the cusp of modern technology, Lewis was aware and concerned with the potential repercussions of where technological research was headed and what effect it was having on the world's value system. Specifically, he was concerned with the move toward subjective values and feared it would lead to humanity's ruin. If the world does not observe and agree upon objective values, then there is no standard that would prevent its dehumanization by technology. Lewis begins with the Christian premise that because humans are flawed, it cannot be left up to the individual to determine right and wrong. Instead, there must be objective values based on God's nature that guide the morals of society, and it is these values that should help society navigate decisions concerning technology. This is all the more relevant today, as technology is advancing faster than people can anticipate, and it is affecting everyday life. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly common, as people try to right past injustices and respect varying cultural traditions, for people to end up standing for nothing, claiming that there is no absolute truth, and that morality is relative. This is the crux of the issue with which society should concern itself: protecting people from losing their humanity.

Keywords: Lewis, technology, Abolition of Man, dehumanization, objective values

At the forefront of society's technological concerns today is transhumanism, what the World Transhumanist Association defines as "improving the human condition . . . by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities" (Allenby and Sarewitz 2011, 5). Yet if this path of technological advancement continues, at what point are people no longer human? According to Allenby and Sarewitz in their work *The Techno-Human Condition*, "A significant part of the ambiguity [of the word transhuman] arises from one's notions about what it means to be human. . . . This definitional ambiguity suggests to us that defining 'transhumanism' more precisely is less important than understanding the implications of that ambiguity" (Allenby and Sarewitz 2011, 5). While it may be troubling that this blend of technology and humanity has already begun, it is even more so because of the difficulty in pinpointing where the line is sometimes between what is human and inhuman. Therefore, George Annas, a bioethicist, claims, "It's not transhumanism we should worry

about; it's dehumanization" (Garreau 2004, 230). This is the crux of the issue with which society should concern itself: protecting people from losing their humanity. C.S. Lewis addresses what the key defense should be in *Abolition of Man*. Colin Duriez writes that *The Abolition of Man* "is concerned to defend the objectivity of values such as goodness and beauty against the modern view that they are merely in the mind of the beholder" (Duriez 1990, 13). It is only with objective values that humanity can protect itself against dehumanization.

When putting forth what value system the world should be upholding in *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis uses the example of the Tao. He explains, "While we speak from within the *Tao* we can speak of Man having power over himself in a sense truly analogous to an individual's self-control. But the moment we step outside and regard the *Tao* as a mere subjective product, this possibility has disappeared" (Lewis 1974, 75). To Lewis, this is key to maintaining control over oneself: objective values. If these values are not observed, he warns, "When all that says 'it is good' has been debunked, what says 'I want' remains" (Lewis 1974, 65). Because people are inherently flawed, society has to rely on a value system outside of the individual or else be subjected to personal, selfish whims. Lewis points out that not adhering to objective values signifies something deficient in the human, not in the teaching itself. He is trying desperately through his writings to prove, "The future of man cannot be left to those who are inadequate and damaged human beings themselves, people morally incomplete, their best human traits undeveloped or stunted" (Chapman 1976, 15). Therefore, he begins with the premise that because humans are flawed, it cannot be left up to the individual to determine right and wrong. In his essay, "God and Objective Moral Values, Robert Gascoigne agrees, saying, "The question 'Why be moral?' need not be oriented towards discovering non-moral reasons for moral action, but rather towards elucidating what general description of the human condition is most compatible with the fundamental character of morality" (Gascoigne 1985, 531). People should not have to make a case for morality, but it simply should be evident as part of natural law and what logically makes sense for human flourishing. Lewis knew that most people did not consciously consider what he was proposing but inherently would agree because its correctness was founded in logic. It is not a theological position to which he is trying to convert people; it was a rational conclusion he thought anyone could draw. Similarly, Peter Kreeft explains how this used to not be a question that was contested, as he says, "Before Hegel, nearly everyone agreed that Truth, could we but know it, must be unchanging--at least truths about human nature and the laws of good and evil" (Kreeft 1994). As such, Lewis finds himself arguing for a position that was to him common sense in the hopes of prioritizing society toward the good.

Writing at the beginning of modern technology, Lewis was aware and concerned with the potential repercussions of where technological research was headed and what effect it was having on the world's value system. Bloom explains, "Lewis argued that [the Tao] was no longer taken for granted, and he pointed to an increasing belief in relativist or subjective values, which he suggested, amounted to a rejection of the Tao. But if the Tao, the sole source of all value judgement, was rejected, all value would be rejected, he claimed, and the abolition of man as a moral being would

have been achieved” (Bloom 1993, 116). This movement toward relative values is what Lewis feared would lead to humanity’s ruin. Duriez continues, explaining, “Abandonment of the *Tao*, so much a characteristic of modern thought, spells disaster for the human race. Specifically human values like freedom and dignity become meaningless: the human being is merely part of nature” (Duriez 1990, 13). Rejection of objective values is a slippery slope of losing truth altogether. Instead, there must be objective values that guide the morals of society, and it is these values that should help society navigate decisions concerning technology.

Furthermore, rather than simply concur there are objective values, one must also recognize the problems that arise from the idea of subjective values, or moral relativism. One scholar, James Rachels, traces this idea back to Ancient Greece to one of Socrates’ opponents for further context, noting,

Throughout history, there have always been groups of people who, like Thrasymachus, believe that ethics is just a matter of opinion; and there have always been groups of people who, like Socrates, believe that ethics has an objective basis. But with the rise of modern science, skepticism about ethics became even more attractive. Modern science sees the world as a cold, indifferent place that cares nothing for us or our projects; the universe is a realm of facts that know nothing of right or wrong. (Rachels 2012, 140)

This certainly seems understandable; as society tries to right its bias and injustice of the past and make society more equal, it is tempting to let every individual choose what is right for him or herself, not wanting to push opinion on someone else. The difference, however, is that a value system should not be viewed as opinion, but rather as fact. Rachels explains further, “On the surface, [belief in moral relativism] seems enlightened. Tolerance is important, and many cultural tactics are nothing more than social customs—standards of dress, the details of household arrangements, the methods of greeting, and so on. But fundamental matters of justice are different” (Rachels 2012, 140-141). Rachels is pointing out that social customs are subjective: how people dress, raise their kids, what is considered polite or rude, for example. However, what is just and unjust is not up to each individual society to determine: slavery, domestic violence, and racism (Rachels 2012, 140-141) are just a few examples of practices that are unequivocally wrong, no matter the traditions of the people practicing them. If society prescribes to moral relativism, it is a downslide into chaos. If everyone’s opinion in every situation can be truth, who is to say in what way a person should or should not act? Subjectivity allows for anyone to say something is not true if it does not agree with his or her opinion. If people are unwilling to stand up for right in the face of wrong, Timothy Demy explains how Lewis believed that could be catastrophic to a society: “For Lewis . . . the acceptance of moral relativism resulted in the denigration of men and women on both an individual and corporate level. The personal dignity and worth of human beings as those who were created in the image of God were severely eroded and there was also a cumulative effect of this eradication in society and culture” (Demy 2004, 220). Therefore, with questions about technology, one must look to objective values in order to determine in what direction society should go. If not, moral relativism will assuredly lead humankind to its own dehumanization.

Moreover, when it came to technology, Lewis's main worry seemed to be about the potential abuse of power. Demy explains, "For Lewis, technology was neutral, but its use for repression, especially by governments or other groups, was a major concern for him" (Demy 2004, 214). C.S. Lewis saw several advancements in technology during his lifetime, such as the radio and airplane, and these, he knew, were not in and of themselves evil. Yet what he saw through the World Wars was enough to make him fear the misuse of technology. This concern was rooted in Lewis's Christian faith: "Lewis believed that the propensity for using technology in a destructive manner was a result of universal pride and greed in humanity. . . . He did not believe in the inevitability of progress and he feared the abuse of technology and science by small groups of individuals as well as governments" (Demy 2004, iii). For Lewis, it is much more likely that humanity would bring about its own end by concerning themselves single-mindedly with the pursuit of technology without looking outside this scope to ethical concerns. Even worse, some could intentionally take these scientific developments to use them for their own personal advancement or manipulation of the public to ensure they maintain their position. Demy continues: "Lewis detested cruelty and tyranny and believed that there was a moral perspective underlying them that failed to distinguish between goodness and power, merit and success" (Demy 2004, 237). This distinction is important because it is one of the foundational reasons Lewis called himself a Christian. To him, "God should be loved and obeyed not because He is omnipotent, but because He is loving and good. To worship power for its own sake, whether human or divine is to blur the moral distinction between good and evil" (Demy 2004, 237). Therefore, as society chooses rulers in the Information Age, it is more important than ever to keep in mind that people should choose leaders who are objectively good, and not be naive to the ambitious who could be using technology for their own selfish gain.

Therefore, objective values are also the answer when protecting against corruption of government. Lewis explains, "A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery" (Lewis 1974, 73). If people are to maintain their freedom, then unwavering conviction about good and evil is required. Demy discusses why this was part of Lewis's motivation for writing *The Abolition of Man*; he believed that educating students in the difference of good and evil was the most assured method of preserving freedom. Otherwise, Demy notes, "The alternative, according to Lewis was education that determined values based on impulse or sentiment. Such an educational process lacked reliable authority for making value judgments and left individuals open to control by the state or other groups" (Demy 2004, 245). This education based on sentiment is seen more frequently, even working its way into the foundation of the English language, as the phrase "I feel" is increasingly replacing "I think." Logic and emotion do not have to be at odds with each other, but it is also the case that emotion or sentiment should not replace rational thinking. Additionally, Francis Fukuyama maintains that morality should still be the barometer of the power of the people, claiming, "True freedom means the freedom of political communities to protect the values they hold most dear, and it is that freedom that we need to exercise with regard to the biotechnology revolution

today” (Fukuyama 2002, 218). Societies are only able to pride themselves in being free if they are all united in the same value system and standing against corruption.

Furthermore, objective values are not only key to protecting society’s freedom against a corrupt government; they are also crucial to protect the individual from technology taking over and denigrating humankind. It is by having objective values that people can ensure they maintain control over technology as a tool, rather than having tunnel vision for what technology could accomplish. Lewis warns, “We have no instinctive urge to keep promises or to respect individual life: that is why scruples of justice and humanity--in fact the *Tao*--can be properly swept away when they conflict with our real end, the preservation of the species” (Lewis 1974, 33). If the world’s only focus is ensuring its continued existence, then people will begin to disregard what veritably should be its focus, and that is its value system. Lewis does not believe that the preservation of mankind should be sought without justification (Lewis 1974, 36). In one essay, he states, “Progress, for me, means increasing goodness and happiness of individual lives” (Lewis 1970, 311). If the objective good was not increasing, then it would not matter to Lewis that humans were living longer. Lewis foresaw what could happen to a world where people are not standing firm in right and wrong: “But once our souls, that is, ourselves, have been given up, the power thus conferred will not belong to us. We shall in fact be the slaves and puppets of that to which we have given our souls” (Lewis 1974, 72). If people do not value and seek the good, then they will be that much easier to be overpowered. Without proper conviction, people will become instruments themselves. Lewis continues, “Either we are rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own ‘natural’ impulses” (Lewis 1974, 73). Therefore, honoring these values becomes of utmost importance in order to protect themselves against unintentional transhumanism.

Consequently, one of the main ways to go about this is by being intentional with one’s use of technology. Part of the responsibility of technology is the recognition that it is not permanent. Demy discusses how Lewis looked to the Middle Ages as an example:

He saw in the medieval model an approach that permitted the use of technology in a way that balanced the temporal and the eternal. As individuals used technology to assist in daily life and as societies used it to benefit larger groups of individuals or citizens, technology was always used with the understanding that any benefits derived from its use were temporary. Technology might provide a better quality of life but it was never more than a tool. (Demy 2004, 198)

Keeping its temporary nature in mind will help people maintain perspective. If society becomes wholly dependent on technology, then they stop viewing it as a tool of convenience that helps make life easier. When it is completely relied upon, that is when society becomes vulnerable. Lewis was aware of how technology was changing the world, and even today, few people are naive enough to advocate for the removal of all technology. However, it is more necessary than ever to hold objective values in mind to prevent the abuse that comes with overuse. Demy explains, “While

Lewis admitted this change, he did not approve of its pervasiveness in life. But more troubling to him than technology's presence was the psychological effect it had on individuals who placed false hope in it as a solution for personal and social problems. Lewis also saw in technology a psychological seductiveness or unhealthy desire for the next generation of technology" (Demy 2004, 188). Lewis believed no one should look to technology to answer life's problems. This has dire adverse effects that are seen through people's psychological well-being. For example, the more relationships interact online, the more it becomes evident that these are not as fulfilling as face-to-face relationships, and people are statistically unhappier the more this progresses (Gámez-Guadix 2014, 714). The best way to put values into practice is by trying one's best to live virtuously, especially when it comes to the use of technology. This means striving for wisdom as to what technology is beneficial and what is short-changing the human experience. It also means practicing self-control to moderate the amount of technology used to keep from being addicted. These objective values will keep people from unwittingly becoming enslaved to technology, thus losing their humanity.

Throughout the discussion, it is crucial to keep in mind that while objective values should temper technology, religion and technology are not at odds with one another. Peter Kreeft explains, "Astonishingly, few modern minds see the simple and obvious point that an unchanging standard, far from being the enemy of moral progress, is the necessary condition for it" (Kreeft 1994). Simply because many religious people advocate for objective values does not mean that it is solely a religious claim. Gascoigne further states, "Implying that people need religion to ascribe to an objective morality implies that someone cannot come to an understanding of objective morality logically, that there need be a divine revelation in order for someone to understand" (Gascoigne 1985, 531). The fact that several different religions hold to this standard should show this is something that precedes organized religion. C.S. Lewis, a staunch Christian, made it a point in his lectures and writings to assure people that his caution toward science did not make him anti-science. He explains, "Though I myself am a Theist, and indeed a Christian, I am not here attempting any indirect argument for Theism. I am simply arguing that if we are to have values at all we must accept the ultimate platitudes of Practical Reason as having absolute validity: that any attempt, having become sceptical about these, to reintroduce value lower down on some supposedly more 'realistic' basis, is doomed" (Lewis 1974, 49). Thus Lewis's argument is a plea of accord: that people from all backgrounds, cultures, and religions could come together and agree on a system of logical values to ensure the freedom of society.

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