

# WARNING! "POST-HUMANITY" AHEAD!

A review of C.S. Lewis' *THE ABOLITION OF MAN* (Macmillan/47)

Smack in the middle of WWII, 1943, C.S. Lewis gave these three lectures at the University of Durham, England. Bewailing a trend then (& now) common in Western civilization (i.e., in Fascism, Communism, & Democracy): "Traditional values are to be 'debunked' and mankind to be cut out into some fresh shape at will," inventing "'ideologies' at pleasure, and the consequent treatment of mankind as mere  $\psi\lambda\eta$ , specimens" (46; *hyle* usually comes into Eng. as "matter"; underlining mine).

If not stopped, this trajectory of reducing man to matter would produce zombie-like humans unworthy of being called human, "a world of **post-humanity** which, some knowingly and some unknowingly, nearly all men in all nations are at present labouring to produce" (47, boldface mine).

That prophecy is now 60 years old, & its cinematic fulfillment (six years ago) was "Gattaca" (which I reviewed as #3153), preceded by almost a score of other scifi films.



1 The book's subtitle gives the societal focus, the British locus of the problem: "Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools." Early adolescents were being "formed" by the philosophy Moses (in this NATIONAL REVIEW [12.31.02] cartoon) faces--canceling the Ten Commandments. Here in America, we cannot but think of current secular efforts to use the courts to eliminate the Decalog from the public eye. M.L. King Jr.'s PhD was in the school (at Boston U.) of "Boston personalism," which grounds the objective moral order in a personal God. A major source of this "school" was German idealism, also a major source of the present Pope's PhD on personalism, which he grounds in the Aristotelian-Thomistic "natural law" (i.e., cosmic moral order).

2 I think to avoid pigeonholing him in that dominant Western "natural law" school, Lewis reached around to the other hemisphere's dominant parallel, viz. the "tao" ("way") of China (Confucianism, even moreso Taoism). Here's Lewis' **definition** of the Tao as he uses the word (28): I call the Tao what others call "Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes ...the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory....What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) 'ideologies,' all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and it alone such validity as they possess...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 image reminded me of a lecture I heard two years earlier (than these three Lewis lectures) by an American--Elton Trueblood--whose message was much like that of Lewis--"Our Cut-Flower Civilization" (which appeared in his ALTERNATIVE TO FUTILITY [H&R/48]).

3 To display this Tao, Lewis has an "Appendix: Illustrations of the Tao" (51-61): wise-sayings from around the world & through the ages, producing not a logical argument for the Tao but a cumulative effect ("the argument from common consent"). The display counters the illusion that a thinker can move from is to ought, from fact to value: "The Innovator is trying to get a conclusion in the imperative mood out of premisses in the indicative mood" without using reason (which he has debunked), & must resort to "Instinct" for the impulse to preserve society" & "work for posterity" & "respect individual life" ("sexual desire, being instinctive, is to be gratified whenever it does not conflict with the preservation of the species") (20-21). But (23) "Our instincts are at war," each one wanting to be "gratified at the expense of all the rest." Only the Tao, not Instinct, can be the judge of the "comparative dignity" of the instincts." Further (25), Instinct cannot establish that the preservation of the species & concern for posterity are instinctual.

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4 We sometimes say "That argument [or person arguing] doesn't have a leg to stand on." Imagine worse: legs to stand on, but no ground (or, a similar metaphor, "foundation" [1Cor.3.11]--my figure, here, for the Tao) to stand on. A story from a new translation of the Jewish classic PIRQUE ABOTH (by Chaim Stern, who sent it to me in manuscript): "Rabbi J. was standing on the slope of the Temple Mount when Ben Zoma came along, (who said...) 'I was gazing at the Work of Creation, and between the Upper and the Lower waters there is a width of only three fingers ... (Gn.1.2), ...and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters as a dove hovers over her young, touching yet not touching.' Rabbi J. said to his disciples: 'Ben Zoma is already outside.' Only a few days later Ben Zoma passed on." (Chagigah 15a; Tosefta Chagigah 2; underlining mine). We feel, we know, the spiritual reality of "outside" in this story. But the secular targets of Lewis' logic only *imagine* that they have an outside to the Tao, (as it were) an Archimedes' fulcrum for moving the world/reality.

5 Alongside Lewis' special use of Tao let's put the Tao bible, the TAO (life-way) TEH (fit use) CHING (book): the book about the proper use of life (my references are to Witter Bynner's translation, THE WAY OF LIFE According to Lao Tzu [Capricorn/44]). 13: "While most of us [including Lewis' "Innovator"], as we use life, try to open the universe to ourselves, Lao-tzu opens himself to the universe." Now to the text (5,000 words, 81 secs.): 30: "Can you, mating with heaven, / Serve as the female part? / Can your learned head take leaven / From the wisdom of your heart?" Creating conscience, heaven forestalls runaway instincts. 43: "Those who would take over the earth / And shape it to their will / Never, I notice, succeed." 36: "He who feels punctured / Must once have been a bubble."

6 While Lewis states himself to be a Christian (32), the lectures appeal not for Christian conversion but for public aversion to the West-wide drift toward "post-humanity." "Men without Chests" (lecture/chapter 1):

7 Lewis begins with a gradeschool teacher directing the children to say not "The waterfall is sublime" (an ontological affirmation) but "I have sublime feelings about the waterfall" (a psychological-romantic affirmation). The narcissistic-experiential shift to emotive-internality (parallel with the Enlightenment's shift to rational internality) could not be more serious: "ethics, theology and politics, are all at stake" (3). In Lewis's powerful analogic (13): "just to say that a shoe fits is to speak not only of shoes but of feet....the educational problem is wholly different according as you stand within or without the Tao." 15: "Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism." 16: "The Chest--Magnanimity--Sentiment--these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man....it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal." But because of the debunking, "We [the education establishment] castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

Lewis was thoroughly familiar with the British-romantic rebellion (Coleridge, Wordsworth)--rebellion against the Enlightenment & the Industrial Revolution. Both did indeed underhonor the human feelings as essential to human dignity. In America Jon. Edwards (& the Great Awakening) restored the "religious affections," & Horace Bushnell (d.1876)--overimpressed with Coleridge--overaccented Edward's recovery & celebration of the emotions. Liberal theology, on the Bushnell trajectory, was powerless against the animal-sexual revolution of the 1960s & the subsequent romantic anti-institutionalism, which continues to today. 31: "Outside the Tao there is no ground for criticizing either the Tao or anything else."

8 Chap.III, "The Abolition of Man," 34-50. 37: "the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means the power of some men to make other men what *they* please." 41: "those who stand outside all judgements of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their impulses to another except the emotional strength of that impulse." 43: "Man's conquest of Nature turns out to be, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man." 49: We need a "regenerate science: that will "explain without explaining away," without reducing every I/Thou to I/It. 50: If you do nothing but explaining, you'll end explaining explanation away. If you "see through" everything, all is transparent, & you see nothing.