

C.S. Lewis on Absolutes

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

The most important issue for the culture and the church in the 21st century is the issue of truth. There has been a widespread abandoning of the idea of universal or absolute truth from numerous segments of the culture. Secular relativists, New Age, neo-pagan, and postmodern thinkers all assault by argument or accusation those who claim any certainty about truth. The number of people in the United States who believe in the existence of God, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ is staggering. Yet, they do not believe in the same way they used to believe. Although more than ninety percent believe in God, the great majority of people refuse to believe in absolutes. Within the church there is an erosion of truth as well, with about half of those who describe themselves as born again believing there are no absolutes. Among people under thirty (in the church or out), even the mention of truth or absolutes often produces a negative reaction. It's not so much that they refuse to believe that what they hold to is "true," but they can only, with great difficulty, call another religious or ethical opinion "false."

C.S. Lewis can help us to speak to our own age. He confronted relativism in his own day. In fact, he felt that it was the issue that needed to be addressed prior to preaching the gospel. He says in his *Letters to Calabria*:

For my part, I believe that we ought to work not only at spreading the gospel (that certainly) but also at a certain preparation for the gospel. It is necessary to recall many to the Law of Nature before we talk about God. Christ promises forgiveness of sins, but what is that to those who since they do not know the Law of Nature do not know that they have sinned? Who will take the medicine unless he is in the grip of disease? Moral relativity is the enemy we have to overcome before we tackle atheism.



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If this was the case in Lewis's time, it is even more so in our own time. This issue of relativism and how we address it will profoundly influence our evangelism and discipleship. If we are to see any revival or reformation, we have to "tackle this enemy" as a precondition for proclaiming the gospel or living our lives for Christ.

In a way, C.S. Lewis approached this issue of moral absolutes through the back door. For many years prior to believing, Lewis had maintained that the problem of evil prevented him from listening to the claims of Christ. "If a good God made the world, why has it gone wrong?" he would ask. He refused to listen to believers' replies, feeling that any such arguments were an attempt to avoid the obvious. Was not the universe cruel and unjust? Lucretius had stated the problem well: "Had God designed the world, it would not be a world so frail and faulty as we see." Lewis calls this the "Argument from Undesign."

However, gradually Lewis realized that his atheism had no basis for the idea of good or evil, justice or injustice. He says in *Mere Christianity*:

But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense.

So if evil exists, there must be a fixed, absolute, transcendent standard by which we can know it to be evil. If there is real evil, then we must have a fixed standard of good by which we judge it to be evil. This absolute standard points toward a God as a being who has this absolute standard in Himself.

Further, nowhere does there appear to be a totally different morality where in every case “good” is “evil” and “evil” is “good.” Lewis documents this in the appendix of *The Abolition of Man* using illustrations from ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans. What would a totally different morality mean? Lewis says:

Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to—whether it was your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked.

In Lewis’s essay in *Christian Reflections*, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” he argues along similar lines. He maintains that the view that cultures differ so widely that there is no common moral ground is false. He says:

...this belief is a good resounding lie. If a man will go into a library and spend a few days with the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, he will soon discover the massive unanimity of the practical reason in man.

After providing a number of illustrations (as in the appendix of *The Abolition of Man*) he concludes:

...the pretence that we are presented with a mere chaos—though no outline of universally accepted value shows through—is simply false and should be contradicted in season and out of season wherever it is met.

Values Reduced to Sentiment

In light of what we have heard Lewis say so far, it is not surprising that he regarded *The Abolition of Man* as his most important book. He begins chapter one (Men without Chests) with an example taken from a sample textbook he had received. The authors of the textbook

used an illustration in which they asserted that the statement, “the waterfall is sublime,” may “appear to be saying something very important” when in reality we are “only saying something about our own feelings.” Lewis points out that the textbook authors had reduced this value judgment to mere sentiment. The consequence of this kind of thinking, Lewis warns, may not bear fruit in the student’s mind until years later. He says:

It is not a theory they put into his mind, but an assumption, which ten years hence, its origin forgotten and its presence unconscious, will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all.

Such Statements Are Unimportant

Even more, this assumption (i.e., that values only seem to be saying something important but are merely about feelings) tends to trivialize emotion and desires. This is a problem because true education is not only one of the mind but also of the affections. Lewis says:

For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments.

Education of Loves and Hates

Aristotle held that the aim of education was to make the pupil like and dislike what he or she ought. For Plato (*Republic*) the student is to be encouraged to hate the ugly and give praise to beauty. For Plato and Alanus the head is to rule the belly through the chest (spirited element or sentiment).

Men without Chests

Modern culture produces, in Lewis’s words, “men without chests.” They lack the depth of passion for truth, goodness, and beauty that ought to drive their actions and reactions. The absence of this educated passion results in a dire consequence:

In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

Inconsistency

In the second chapter of *The Abolition of Man* (“The Way”), Lewis argues that the authors of the textbook, contrary to their assertions, do in fact have values.

They reveal the presence of their values, among other ways, in the act of writing books on education in which they approve and disapprove of certain approaches, trying to communicate that which is good for society. While they may not use overt terms such as “good” or “evil” and make no claim that their values are absolute or universal, they nevertheless implicitly contradict themselves.

To abstain from calling it ‘good’ and to use, instead, such predicates as ‘necessary’ or ‘progressive’ or ‘efficient,’ would be a subterfuge. They could be forced by argument to answer the questions, ‘necessary for what?’, ‘progressing towards what?’, ‘effecting what?’; in the last resort they would have to admit that some state of affairs was in their opinion good for its own sake.... Their scepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people’s values: about the values current in their own set they are not nearly sceptical enough. And this phenomenon is very usual. A great many of those who ‘debunk’ traditional or (as they would say) ‘sentimental’ values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process.

A particularly egregious example of this position is demonstrated in the writing of postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, who wants to deconstruct texts to show the implicit contradictions in them. However, he says that the only thing that cannot be deconstructed is deconstruction itself, because: “Deconstruction is Justice.” Why is deconstruction immune from being deconstructed? He just says that it is. What is justice? He has already denied that there is any “transcendental signified” that might provide a fixed standard for justice. Where do you get a standard for justice? Again, he doesn’t say.

Cannot Get “Ought” from “Is”

People sometimes try to construct an ethic based upon that which they believe is good for society. Perhaps, some suggest, we can get a sufficient number of people to agree to a “categorical imperative” (Kant); that is, an agreement to only do that which we would will to become a universal standard. Others suggest we make it our goal to be impartial, to stand behind a “veil of ignorance” (Rawls) so that our biases do not distract us, then we can construct a basis for social ethics.

The reason that such attempts can never work is the principle of “ought” and “is.” *You cannot get “ought” out of “is.” You cannot get the imperative out of the indicative.* Take murder, for example. You might argue that outlawing murder would be in the interest of preserving society. This is undoubtedly true: outlawing murder

will preserve society. However, some might question whether a particular society ought to be preserved. Is, then, the prohibition of murder in place only because of the pragmatic intent to preserve society? Is murder not intrinsically wrong?

We could certainly get a large group, a majority, to make a law prohibiting murder, but what do we say to those (like terrorists or others) who might question this law? We could respond, “We are the majority. We say murder is wrong. If you murder, we will arrest you.” In other words, might makes right. In this view, murder is wrong only because the majority says so. C.S. Lewis argues:

From propositions about fact alone no practical conclusion can ever be drawn. ‘This will preserve’ society cannot lead to ‘do this’ except by the mediation of ‘society ought to be preserved.’ ‘This will cost you your life’ cannot lead directly to ‘do not do this:’ it can lead to it only through a felt desire or an acknowledged duty of self-preservation. The Innovator is trying to get a conclusion in the imperative mood out of premises in the indicative mood: and though he continues trying to all eternity he cannot succeed, for the thing is impossible.

The only ultimate answer the “Innovator” can give to the question, “Why ought society be preserved?” is, “Says us.” To which you might respond, “Who are you (majority) to impose your morality on me?”

There Is No Evil

In the final chapter (*The Abolition of Man*) Lewis says that this relativistic view that there is no duty or no ultimate good allows those in the society he calls the “conditioners” to create the conscience. We have had an awful lesson in the consequences of this nihilistic Nietzschean philosophy in Nazism where, in a speech given in Nuremburg to the Nazi youth, Hitler stated, “I desire to create a generation without conscience, imperious, relentless, and cruel.” Not that all relativists would want to create such a society, but what would prevent such a society from being created? Lewis points out that the fruits of history are already clear:

I am very doubtful whether history shows us one example of a man who, having stepped outside traditional morality and attained power, has used that power benevolently.

If you want to document this assertion, read the massive volume by Paul Johnson, *Modern Times*, wherein he time and again points out the consequences of relativism in the world’s cultures.

Two Choices

When it comes down to it, there are only two choices: to conform desire to truth or truth to desire, to conform our soul to reality or conform reality to our wishes:

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the 'wisdom' of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique...

Truth or a technique for altering reality—that is the choice.

Danger of "Seeing Through Things"

In this postmodern era, everything is being (to use Lewis's term) "debunked." Everything is "explained away." Everything is "seen through." The problem is:

...you cannot go on 'explaining away' forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to 'see through' first

principles. If you see through everything then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see.

Do relativists really want to see through everything? Perhaps in some cases they do, but most selectively choose their own absolutes. They are absolutists in disguise. For example, many postmodernists want to fight metanarratives that oppress. Do they think oppression is wrong or "evil?" I think they do. In some cases, they hope that their relativism will create a utopian world. As we have seen, however, the "fruits of history" are woefully clear. When the end justifies the means, there is no way to stop the worst atrocities from happening. Relativism is a slippery slope—a toboggan without brakes. We need to recover a defense of absolutes combined with the demonstration of the demeanor of Christ if we are going to regain effectiveness in the public arena. Standing on C.S. Lewis's shoulders can enable us to see further and more clearly what needs to be done. As Lewis says in *The Magician's Nephew*, "...what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are."

Note: For further reading, start with Book I of Mere Christianity and The Abolition of Man. A secondary work that might be helpful is one by Michael Aeschelmann, The Restitution of Man. Dr. Lindsley is currently working on a book for InterVarsity Press on the topic of "True Truth: Absolutes without Absolutism."

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