



## C.S. Lewis and the Case Against Subjectivism

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This article originally appeared in the Summer 2009 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

C.S. Lewis wrote in eleven literary genres: apologetics, autobiography, essays, fantasy, letters, literary criticism, lyric poetry, novels, narrative poetry, satire, and science fiction. Lewis's focused vision is not to be missed amidst his wide-ranging capacity for literary success. He wrote often, and without equivocation, "I am a rhetor." Every time he put his pen to paper, he sought to persuade his readers to accept some point of view. This being so, it might be asked, "What is his rhetorical point," or "To what is he calling his readers to attend?"

Like any good rhetorician, Lewis does not make it difficult for his readers to grasp his point. He wrote, "Correct thinking will not make good men out of bad ones; but a purely theoretical error may remove ordinary checks to evil and deprive good intentions of their natural support. An error of this sort is abroad at present. I am not referring to the Power philosophies of the Totalitarian states, but to something that goes deeper and spreads wider and which, indeed, has given these Power philosophies their golden opportunity. I am referring to Subjectivism." Lewis, no matter what genre he employed, seems to have been perennially concerned about subjectivism, and his rhetorical interest in warning against its abuses weaves each of his literary genres into a seamless garment.

### Subjectivism Defined

Lewis was an objectivist. He believed Reality existed independent of whatever one might think about it. Reality is objective. He did not believe that an objective person understood reality absolutely. One might believe in absolutes but still not understand anything

absolutely. An objectivist lives in recognition that one's thoughts and impressions, that is, one's subjective responses, ought to approximate objective reality. When error occurs, it can be corrected by an appeal to reality. Truth is not reality; truth is what I think about reality when I think accurately about it. That which is asserted by a false statement does not exist.

This does not mean that Lewis denied the importance of the subjective. In fact, when he wrote *The Abolition of Man*, he began that treatise about objectivity by contextualizing his discussion within a framework of "just sentiments," or what Augustine called *ordo amoris* ("ordered loves"). He quotes Thomas Traherene, who asked, "Can you be righteous unless you be just in rendering things their due esteem?" Justice is reasonable, for it seeks to render to reality accurate thought about it; it seeks to render to Natural Law moral choices in accordance with it; and it seeks to cultivate that kind of emotional life that feels in a manner that is in accordance with reality. Therefore Lewis asserts, for good reason, that "emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it)." Long before Lewis applies his rhetorical concern about objectivity of thought, he writes about objective sentiments; just sentiments, congruent with objective reality.

The point is that Lewis does not write against *subjectivity*, but *subjectivism*. And again, subjectivism is that form of subjectivity no longer tethered to reality as best



Jerry Root

it might be known at any given moment. Subjectivism projects onto reality whatever it wants. It feels no obligation to ontological imperatives. It chooses whatever it desires, and rationalizes and justifies whatever choices it makes. In this way subjectivism seeks to adjust reality to itself, rather than adjust the scoliosis of its own soul to reality.

Furthermore, reality is more complex than one's best thoughts about it. Consequently Lewis wrote, "All Reality is Iconoclastic." One may have an image of reality formed directly by observation or indirectly: by the reported observations of others from books, lectures, conversations, and the like; or by inferences; and so forth. These may be true impressions, but they must be held loosely. If one holds too tightly to what is currently known, that knowledge will begin to compete against the possibility of growth. God always kicks out walls of temples built for Him because He wants to give more of Himself. Augustine said, "Narrow is the mansion of my soul; enlarge Thou it, that Thou mayest enter in." Any truth known can always be plumbed more deeply; it can be applied more widely; and it can be seen in coherent relation with other truths. In a growing process, truths known do not have to be discarded as understanding increases any more than trees must give up interior rings just because they add new ones. Reality is not dynamic, but it is complex. A true understanding of reality, on the other hand, must be dynamic. Lewis is adamant that all images must be discarded images wherever growth in understanding is occurring. The subjectivist ceases to be responsive to the real world. Furthermore, subjectivists can be found in any intellectual camp.

Certainly the materialist who is unwilling to consider the possibility of the existence of the supernatural is a subjectivist. He cannot be open enough to consider the possibility that a supernatural explanation may best fit certain situations. The supernaturalist, on the other hand, may conclude that a natural or supernatural explanation works best to describe some events; therefore, being open to the facts wherever they lead, he can be more open-minded than the materialist.

Nevertheless, Lewis understood that those with a religious inclination could also become subjectivists. He noted that of all bad men, the worst of bad men are religious ones. The sooner one is willing to die for his faith, the sooner he may be willing to kill for his faith. Lewis was offended by those forms of religious fundamentalism that are quick to paint a "Thus saith the Lord" across any particular opinion held. Once the religious zealot has ceased to consider the possibility of

deficiency in his own interpretations, he can no longer enter into the realm of dialectically safe engagement. He has become a subjectivist, and worse for the wear; he has made his word equal with God's, and all positive engagement ceases; who can argue with someone such as this?

Subjectivism can occur in any camp. No one is free from the possibility of pushing a point beyond what is reasonably sustainable; the habit of doing so can move subjectivistic self-referencing towards evil. Lewis believed subjectivism was likely to lead to the justification of evil.

In what is perhaps the most important statement in Lewis's most overt book on objectivity, *The Abolition of Man*, he wrote, "Only the Tao ["the doctrine of objective value"] provides a common human law of action which can over-arch rulers and ruled alike. 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." He also wrote, "An accusation always implies a standard." So it is with any judgment. An architect seeking to communicate dimensions to a contractor by means of a "blueprint" assumes that the two of them will be using standards of measure common to them both. Consequently, they will be using objective standards that transcend, so to speak, the whims of feet and inches either of them might have apart from the benefit of a tape measure. Without such objectivity, the society relative to construction—not to mention law, mathematics, physics, history, and the like—would be utter chaos. One could imagine that a society arbitrary about such things would become chaotic; anarchy would prevail. On the other hand, if one anarchist achieved control, a tyranny of the most powerful would be likely to prevail.

There are rules that govern reason as there are rules that govern the game of chess; knowing the rules does not guarantee you win every time you play the game, but not knowing the rules makes the game impossible. The rules of reason make it possible to describe material objects as well as objects of thought with clarity. Humility and honesty allow one to reason in community in ways that add perspective and corporate understanding. Evil, on the other hand, is destined to manifest itself in a culture leaning in the direction of subjectivism. Once an objective standard for morality is neglected, there is no longer any means for a proper appeal to objective reality whenever disputes arise; that is, there is no longer a way to settle disputes. Harmony is lost because the culture has no common tuning fork by which that harmony might be achieved.

## Why Did Lewis Use Fiction?

A detailed study of all of Lewis's books—pre-Christian and post—reveal that he is, one way or another, addressing the matter of subjectivism rhetorically. Of course, subjectivism is not the only matter that concerns Lewis, but in all of his books a strong case can be made that he is arguing for objectivity, whether he is defining reality or warning against rationalizing and self-justification. Interestingly, this is also true of his fiction; his rhetorical interests were also served by this literary genre. Sometimes stories say best what one wants to say, argued Lewis.

Some have suggested that Lewis's interest in fiction was motivated by a failed debate with philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe at the Oxford Socratic Club on February 2, 1948. He was said to be no longer capable of keeping up with the rigors of serious philosophical debate and thus backed into writing fiction instead. There is no support for such a position. In fact, Lewis wrote thirty-six essays on Christian apologetics before the debate, and another thirty-four—nearly fifty percent of all his apologetic essays—after the debate. Furthermore, Lewis's first apologetic work was a work of fiction. It is certain Lewis *began* his career as an apologist believing that fiction could be used as an effective tool in the apologist's tool box.

After he published his first work of science fiction, Lewis wrote, "Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it." He saw that stories were a means to reach some people who were not likely to be reached by any other means.

So what rhetorical point was Lewis making in his fiction? Among other things, he was most certainly addressing the matter of subjectivism, for he cast all of his evil characters as subjectivists. He did this consistently over a period of four decades.

## Subjectivism Addressed in Lewis's Fiction

Lewis's fellow Inkling and friend, Charles Williams, wrote a cycle of poems about King Arthur and Camelot. After Williams died, Lewis wrote a book of literary criticism about this poetry. In this study, called *Arthurian Torso*, Lewis makes it explicit that characters in fiction can become subjectivists. As he writes about William's King Arthur, Lewis notes a fatal flaw in Arthur that manifests itself the moment the king wonders, "'The king made for the kingdom, or the

kingdom made for the king?' That is the question. The right answer has been given in the quotation from Dante's *De Monarchia* prefixed to the whole Taliessin volume: 'Hence it is that the proper operation does not exist for the sake of the essence, but the essence has its being for the sake of the operation.' Lovers exist for the sake of love, poets for the sake of poetry, kings for the sake of kingdoms: not vice versa. And Arthur is already wrong about this matter."

Williams believed that "function precedes essence." One's essence was brought into being because of some prior function that it was necessary to fulfill. In the Genesis account of creation, light is created before the luminaries; that is, the function of light preceded the creation of the essences sun, moon, and stars that were designed to fulfill the function of light. Arthur fails as a king the moment he speculates that the kingdom might be made for the king rather than the king for the kingdom. The subjectivist is no longer responsive to the world the way that it is; he would rather deny the reality and play the utilitarian.

So it is with virtually all of Lewis's evil characters in his fiction. Each in some way draws on the example set forth and modeled after Williams' King Arthur. And with each, Lewis is making a rhetorical point: he warns his readers about subjectivism.

Limits of time and space prevent a full analysis of all of Lewis's villains; nevertheless, the most impressive example of a subjectivist villain in Lewis's Narnian books is Jadis, Queen of Charn, who becomes the White Witch of Narnia. As a Queen in Charn, Jadis is so evil that her entire kingdom mounts up in a war against her. She has learned through magical arts how to speak "the Deplorable Word." This word gives the one who utters it the power to destroy the whole world while saving only oneself. As the war goes against her, and it is evident she is unwilling to be held accountable for her evil, Jadis uses this weapon. In that very act, she becomes anti-Aslan (or anti-Christ). She destroys others to save herself; by contrast, Aslan gives his life to save others.

The self-referential acts of Lewis's villains tend not only to destroy others but to destroy self as well. Lewis wrote, "Unity is the road to personality." I can truly know myself only in the context of relationships and the give and take that goes with them. To deny the validity of others is, in the end, to deny my own humanity and the road to maturity.

Lewis makes this point rhetorically in his science fiction through the character Weston, who comes to be called the *unman*. Similar instances abound in Lewis's

*The Great Divorce*. Those whose controlling interests have denied humanity to others become little more than nearly evaporated beings. It is all consistent rhetoric for the man whose warnings against subjectivism have their zenith in *The Abolition of Man*.

So what is the point of all of this, and what application might it have? First, Lewis saw the dangers of subjectivism. He recognized that, "In coming to understand anything we must reject the facts as they are for us in favor of the facts as they are." To fail at this point is to lose any sense of perspective; as Lewis observes, it is as if one might begin to believe the train tracks really did narrow the further they moved towards the horizon. The subjectivist becomes self-referential and utilitarian towards others; he does so in a way that can imperil the humanity of those around him as well as lead to the loss of his own humanity. The loss of objective value leads to the abolition of man, and puts the subjectivist at risk of becoming an unman.

A second point can be found in this: the self-aware are more likely to be empathetic. Empathy is an incarnation-like quality; it allows one to enter into the real world of others as Christ did—to be a giver, not a taker. Lewis wrote, "There are three images in my mind which I must continually forsake and replace by better ones: the false image of God, the false image of my neighbors, and the false image of myself." Empathy begins with the assumption that I know something of others by virtue of a shared humanity. I may disagree with them, but I will treat them the way I would want to be treated. An empathetic and objective person not only sees the world and its need, but also recognizes that all have a propensity to subjectivism and all are capable of cloaking their own evil as well as that of others.

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