

ARTICLES

The Abolition of Man and the Dismal Science

Kenneth G. Elzinga¹

¹ University of Virginia

Keywords: C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man, Economics, division of labor

<https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.89183>

Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy

This article examines C. S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man* from the perspective of economics. One of the principles of economics first taught by Adam Smith was that of specialization and division of labor. The overlap between the discipline of economics and the teaching of Lewis can be described as an application of this principle. Economics is a scholarly discipline that studies how choices are made. The division of labor that Lewis offers is the recognition that freedom of choice is not an end in itself.

Introduction¹

A generation ago, George Stigler quipped that when the petroleum company Texaco sponsored the broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera, many college and university professors could be found watching episodes of *I Love Lucy* instead. Truth be told, many Christians, given the opportunity to read their Bibles, often can be found reading C. S. Lewis instead. Let me confess there was a time when I too was reading Lewis more than I was reading the Bible.

While in graduate school, Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* played an important role in my own commitment to the Christian faith. My encounter with Lewis led me to visit his rooms at Oxford, the pub where the Inklings met, and Lewis's home, The Kilns. I have spent time at Wheaton College's Wade Collection reading about Lewis. My personal library has a whole shelf of books by Lewis and about Lewis. I am not alone among adults of my generation who found and continue to find the writings of Lewis to be influential and consequential. In addition, there are thousands upon thousands of children who found and continue to find *The Chronicles of Narnia* to be stories that grab and hold their attention.

Given the number of books and articles about C. S. Lewis, is there any gap in Lewis scholarship that has not been filled? By what economists call revealed preference, apparently there is. The writings of Lewis continue to stimulate interest and further exploration. In the continuing cascade of Lewisiana, this article examines Lewis's 1944 book *The Abolition of Man* (2nd ed., 1947) from the perspective of economics. What can we understand about this text by examining it through the lens of economics?

¹ For research and editing assistance, the author thanks Mary Allison Anderson and Braden Sarin. The usual disclaimer applies.

Two Prefatory Questions

As a preface, let me address two questions. The first is descriptive: What do I mean by economics? The second is a matter of costs and benefits: Should the writings of a humanist like Lewis be put through the analytical grid of a social science like economics?

The subject of economics has been defined in a number of ways. Thomas Carlyle called economics “the dismal science.” Apparently, Carlyle could restrain his enthusiasm for the subject. Edmund Burke wrote, “But the age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded” (Burke 1790, 113). Burke did not think this was an improvement. Adam Smith, the founder of the modern discipline of economics, never defined the term formally.

Alfred Marshall’s *Principles of Economics*, first published in 1890, was a go-to book for a generation of economists a century after Adam Smith. Marshall called economics the “study of mankind in the ordinary business of life” (Marshall 1961, 1). I provide my students with the shortest definition of the subject: “Economics is the science of choice.” Lest my students think this means economics is inherently difficult, I tell them it is commonly acknowledged that Robert Lucas, a Nobel Prize recipient in economics, defined economics as “organized common sense.”

Is it worth the candle to mix Lewis with economics? At first glance, the answer would be no. It is no more worth it than if we might look for a connection between Lewis’s writing and topology or chemical engineering. In his education, Lewis was not exposed to the subject of economics. As far as we know, he never read Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. That said, Lewis held views on economic policy—in particular, the welfare state in England. More importantly, Lewis held views on the nature of humanity. And so does the discipline of economics. Thus, there is new value to be found—or, rather, rediscovered—in Lewis by studying his work through an economic lens.

By examining *The Abolition of Man* in this way, we shall discover a connection between Lewis and economics. While the economic view of humanity is positive, the Lewisian view of humanity is normative. Lewis’s view led him to have perspectives on morality. It also led him to have perspectives on economic policy with which the founder of economics, Adam Smith, would agree. The foundation for this agreement would lie in the fact that Adam Smith was as concerned with moral science as he was with economic science. While he is best known for his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), serious readers of Smith also value his earlier (but lesser known) book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which supplied the ethical foundation for Smith’s later publications.

The Abolition of Man: A Summary

If one thinks of C. S. Lewis's famous book *Mere Christianity* as an undergraduate course in Lewis's thought, *The Abolition of Man* is in the graduate school curriculum. Through a series of three essays, Lewis builds an argument for universal values. The first essay, "Men without Chests," focuses on children's education. It offers a reflection on the near-apocalyptic implications of the philosophy behind the education of children in his day. The first essay is concerned with the oft unperceived relativism in children's education and the lack of character it will produce in them as adults.

The second essay, "The Way," focuses on defining "the *Tao*." The *Tao* means "conformity to, or almost participation in . . . that great ritual or pattern of nature and supernature which is revealed alike in the cosmic order." Lewis argues there is a set of universal values based on the assumption that to be human means to be in alignment with the way that the universe is—even the way that we exist. To Lewis, there is a rightness to a "Way" of living that is in this flow of the universe—"the Way in which things everlastingly emerge" and the road on which "every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression" (Lewis 1947, 17, 18).

Lewis's case for the *Tao* is not the same as a case for God. Rather, Lewis argues for the existence of a universal system of values, which presumably may be based upon that fixed End of the progression, that great exemplar to which we should conform. Though Lewis does not use this term in *Mere Christianity*, the idea is there as the "Law of Nature," or "Law of Human Nature, or of Moral Law, or as a Rule of Decent Behavior" (Lewis 1952, 5, 9). The *Tao* is the starting point from which begins his case for Christianity.

In the third essay, "The Abolition of Man," Lewis takes the ideas he introduced in the first two and fleshes them out in a dystopian fashion. He examines the assertion that "the true object is to extend Man's power to the performance of all things possible" (Lewis 1947, 78). In this regard, "The Abolition of Man" is about Science. What Lewis means by Science is not the academic disciplines like biology or chemistry as they would be taught at Oxford or Cambridge. What Lewis means is the application of Science, what today we would call Technology or, in the vernacular *du jour*, Big Tech. In this regard Lewis was prescient.²

The assumption Lewis challenges is this: that humans should conquer more and more of nature through this Science. Lewis is concerned that Science "might be used badly" and against others (Lewis 1947, 55). That, to Lewis and to others, was obvious. Every Englishman of Lewis's generation knew the evil

² See Wu (2018), Hawley (2021), and Klobuchar (2021).

that mustard gas inflicted upon soldiers in the trenches of World War I. Lewis took the next step: Technology threatens to alter and destroy the nature of human beings.³

Ultimately, the essays that comprise *The Abolition of Man* are about “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.” Lewis explains the outcome of a world without objective value by examining the question “In what sense is Man the possessor of increasing power over Nature?” (Lewis 1947, 18, 54). He dares to ask whether these Scientific and Technological advances actually help humans conquer nature, or whether they enable human nature to conquer itself.

The Nature of Humanity: In Lewis and Economics

Economics is the science of choice, and the decision calculus that economists ascribe to the act of choice is that of the rational actor model: human agents maximize their individual utility functions by weighing the costs versus the benefits of every step they take. Thorstein Veblen’s description of *homo economicus* bears repeating if only because of its brilliance:

The hedonistic conception of man is that of a lightning calculator of pleasures and pains, who oscillates like a homogeneous globule of desire of happiness under the impulse of stimuli that shift him about the area, but leave him intact. He has neither antecedent nor consequent. He is an isolated, definitive human datum, in stable equilibrium except for the buffets of the impinging forces that displace him in one direction or another. Self-poised in elemental space, he spins symmetrically about his own spiritual axis until the parallelogram of forces bears down upon him, whereupon he follows the line of the resultant. When the force of the impact is spent, he comes to rest, a self-contained globule of desire as before. (Veblen 1898, 389)

Brilliant as this is as parody, it does not reflect the mundane concept of rationality in economics. In economics, rational self-interest simply means taking an action if the expected gain exceeds the expected cost.⁴ For example, a consumer buys a blouse only if the satisfaction of owning the blouse exceeds the cost of the blouse (the cost being the highest valued opportunity forgone). To buy a blouse if the opportunity forgone was greater than the expected benefits would be irrational. Economists push this way of thinking into many endeavors beyond making an everyday purchase.

³ As Lewis put it, “*Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man*” (Lewis 1947, 59, emphasis in original).

⁴ Economists take a lot of flak for their emphasis on rational self-interest. The theory and application of the rational actor model is the primary division that separates economists from the rest of the academic world. Critics argue that the rational actor model as a theory of human behavior either is wrong (people don’t behave that way) or it is a tautology (people do what they do).

If someone is considering doing something more dramatic than buying a blouse, such as robbing a bank, the rational actor model will also push that decision through a cost-benefit grid. The prospective bank robber weighs the benefits of the money he expects to misappropriate if he is successful against the costs to his life and liberty if he is caught.

There is not much humor in the dismal science, but one joke that only economists find funny is a very short one: An economist and a friend are walking down a street, and the friend, pointing, says, “I’d really like to own a car like that.” The economist replies, “No, you wouldn’t.” That’s it. That’s the whole joke, because to an economist, if “that” is what you truly want, “that” is what you would do. But having tallied both the costs and the benefits, some alternative must be preferable. Economists like the cliché “Actions speak louder than words.”

What Lewis’s thought has in common with economic analysis is that choices count, not feelings or words. For Lewis, making decisions—at least the right ones—is what makes a man have a chest. Like an economist, Lewis understood the importance of the choices individuals make. These choices, though they may seem unimportant or, at the very least, marginal, reveal what individuals value. Choices expose what people are willing to give up in order to obtain something they believe is more important. In the joke, the friend was not willing to give up enough to have that particular kind of car.

Lewis perceived in these choices something of great consequence: they are part of a process that changes us over time. *The Abolition of Man* warns about the end of humanity, but the choices made by individuals are the taproot of his dystopian essay. Economics, as the science of choice, is at the heart of *The Abolition of Man*. It is also central to *Mere Christianity*. As if wearing an economist’s hat, Lewis writes,

I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy, peace, knowledge, and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other. (Lewis 1952, 92)

Lewis and the *Tao*

For Lewis, the normative component of choice is deciding whether or not to live within the *Tao*. Lewis contends that freedom is actualized in the ability to choose the *Tao*, to play one's part in the grand cosmic progression toward that True End. Freedom is not "choos[ing] our own destiny" in the sense of "decid[ing] for ourselves what man is to be and mak[ing] him into that . . . because we want him to be such" (Lewis 1947, 51). Lewis worried that humans, if not corrected in their upbringing, will make decisions based on their instinct versus making decisions based on the principles of the *Tao*.

Lewis never equates instinct with the rational actor model of economics. Rather, he refers to the "extreme rationalism" of those he calls "Conditioners" (or "man-moulders") that displaces "all 'rational' motives, leav[ing] them creatures of wholly irrational behaviour" (Lewis 1947, 67). He describes these Conditioners in his final essay, where he envisions a future where certain human beings not only have power over others, but also have power to make humans in their own image. Lewis's fear is that humans who live according to "what kind of artificial *Tao* they will" become like "men who have sacrificed their own share in traditional humanity in order to devote themselves to the task of deciding what 'Humanity' shall henceforth mean. 'Good' and 'bad,' applied to them, are words without content: for it is from them that the content of these words is henceforward to be derived." Furthermore, their new power over nature will prove to be "the power of some men to make other men what *they* please" (Lewis 1947, 61, 63, 59, emphasis original).

The Abolition of Man is a literary brief for a fixed universal value system. Lewis presents readers with a depiction of humanity without such a value system. Apart from the guidance of the *Tao*, the choices we make—those studied by the science of choice—eventually will lead to our destruction. In warning about valueless choices, Lewis's concern is with certain groups of people having power over others by means of Scientific and Technological development uninhibited by the norms of the *Tao*. He understands that this problem is not fixed by the "right people" being in charge. Indeed, as we shall see, Lewis was wary of structures which might go unchecked from the lack of an objective moral compass and ultimately be for humanity a deadly cocktail. Science, or Technology, is one phenomenon he feared, but he also expressed disdain for the idea of a small group of people having great power over others.

The Danger of the State: In Lewis and Economics

Lewis also feared that the state was an institution that would give some people power over others and produce "men without chests." In *The Abolition of Man*, he wrote that the "man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique" (Lewis 1947, 60). We also see this in Lewis's views on democracy and government planning.

Most people associate Lewis with *The Chronicles of Narnia* or with his contributions to scholarship on English literature and Christian apologetics. But Lewis had opinions about what was, in his day, often called political economy. Lewis did not make explicit use of the terms *market* or *market systems*, but his views on the importance of economic independence, the limited role of the state, and, indeed, the place of private education, clearly locate him within the market tradition. He clearly could restrain his enthusiasm for democracy and the welfare state. Here are Lewis's words on democracy:

I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason. A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people like Rousseau, who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. The danger of defending democracy on those grounds is that they're not true. . . . I find that they're not true without looking further than myself. I don't deserve a share in governing a hen-roost, much less a nation. Nor do most people. . . . The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters. (Lewis 1986, 7)

Lewis's point is that in a fallen world, democracy is our best option for governing, not only because human beings should not be servants, but also because no one is fit to be a master. Lewis's reflections on government and authority echo Lord Acton's observation in his 1887 letter to Mandell Creighton: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Acton 1986, 383).

Perhaps this view led Lewis to a distaste of political parties altogether. When he was approached by men with political ambitions for him, Lewis proposed—with tongue in cheek—the creation of an entirely new political party. He wrote, "Could one start a Stagnation Party—which at General Elections would boast that during its term of office no event of the least importance had taken place?" (Lewis 1966, 179). Lewis's views on the fallen nature of human beings left him uncomfortable when people were given control over the lives and property of others. He viewed government as a necessary evil. Lewis was quick to point out that for the human condition, government was medicine, not food.

While Lewis never used the word *libertarian*, note the strain of libertarianism in this quote from *God in the Dock*:

Of all the tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busy bodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. . . . To be "cured" against one's will and cured of states which we may not regard as disease is to be put on a level of those who have not yet reached the age of reason or those who never will; to be classed with infants, imbeciles, and domestic animals. (Lewis 1970, 292)

Readers of *The Abolition of Man* may wonder if Lewis would have supported a state (or a ruling class) that might aim to shape humanity into a Christian mold. Elsewhere Lewis makes clear that his Christian convictions placed him in opposition to theocracy—that is, men using God's name or "divine right" as grounds for central control over others. Lewis writes, "I believe in God, but I detest theocracy. For every Government consists of mere men and is, strictly viewed, a makeshift; if it adds to its commands 'Thus saith the Lord,' it lies, and lies dangerously" (Lewis 1970, 315).

Many governments, to Lewis, were less of a solution to the problems of society than they were contributors to those problems. The "mere men" into whose hands were granted undue amounts of power were more likely to oppress their citizens than they were to serve their interests—or leave them alone. In less formal terms, Lewis's personal correspondence reaffirms his distrust of organizations. In a 1951 letter, he wrote, "Mind you, I'm in considerable doubt about the whole thing. My mind tends to move in a world of individuals not of societies." In an earlier letter from 1940, he expressed this sobering view of political psychology: "Some people are too fond of ruling and others too fond of obeying: sooner or later each of them may be a duty for everyone" (Lewis 2008, 167, 64).

In writing about the welfare state, Lewis was as blunt as any contemporary free-market conservative or libertarian and expressed views that are the opposite of a politician on the progressive Left:

The question has become whether we can discover any way of submitting to the worldwide paternalism of a technocracy without losing all personal privacy and independence. Is there any possibility of getting the . . . Welfare State's honey and avoiding the sting? Let us make no mistake about the sting. . . . To live his life in his own way, to call his house his castle, to enjoy the fruits of his own labour, to educate his children as his conscience directs, to save for their prosperity after his death—these are wishes deeply ingrained in civilized man. (Lewis 1970, 316)

Lewis was *not* writing here of the benefits of a free society for the elites—the students he taught at Oxford and Cambridge—or about the benefits of a free society for his illustrious literary friends like J. R. R. Tolkien and Dorothy Sayers. Lewis was writing about ordinary Englishmen *for* ordinary Englishmen, who would not be studying at Oxford or Cambridge or be engaged in the writing of books.

As a Christian, as one who viewed all human beings as created in God's image and therefore of great value, Lewis wanted, for ordinary people, a world in which their home was their castle; where the fruits of their labor, however modest, would not be taxed away; where their children were seen as theirs to raise, in accord with their conscience, and not the state's; and where inheritances were seen as property to be protected by the state, not confiscated by the state. While Lewis, to my knowledge, did not use terms like *libertarian* or *conservative* to describe his worldview, he did use the term "freeborn" in description of his personal beliefs. "I believe a man is happier, and happy in a richer way, if he had 'the freeborn mind.' But I doubt whether he can have this without economic independence. . . . For economic independence allows an education not controlled by Government; and in adult life it is the man who needs, and asks, nothing of Government who can criticize its acts and snap his fingers at its ideology" (Lewis 1970, 314).

Lewis's views on central planning were congruent with what Friedrich Hayek later called the "fatal conceit" (Hayek 1988). But Lewis came to this from a different angle than Hayek. Centering his observation on the book of Genesis and the Reformation doctrine of the fallen nature of humanity, Lewis wrote these words: "All that can really happen [under socialism] is that some men will take charge of the destiny of the others. They will be simply men; none perfect, some greedy, cruel and dishonest. The more completely we are planned the more powerful they will be. Have we discovered some new reason why, this time, power should not corrupt as it had done before?" (Lewis 1970, 315–16).

This portfolio of thoughts by Lewis reflects an attitude congruent with what Adam Smith called the "obvious and simple system of natural liberty" (Smith [1776] 1981, 687). In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis suggests that Science and Technology might lead to governments with too much power. Even with "public ownership of raw materials and factories and public control of scientific research . . . this will still mean the power of one nation over others. And even within the world state or the nation it will mean (in principle) the power of majorities over minorities, and (in the concrete) of a government over the people. And all long-term exercises of power . . . must mean the power of earlier generations over later ones" (Lewis 1947, 56).

Daniel Klein offers a unique explanation of Lewis's skepticism of the state as an instrument of benevolent control.⁵ Klein makes three connections that define Jesus's relationship with the state. First, contrary to other leaders and prominent figures in history, Jesus was not a political leader: he was a carpenter (and, I would add, an itinerant preacher). Second, Jesus "never wielded a sword"—the iconic tool of violence and coercion at the time (and, I would add, Jesus condemned the use of a sword to defend him; see John 18:10–11). Third, and most revealing, Jesus was executed by a political power. Klein asks, "What better way to launch a government-skeptical outlook than to have the messiah fall victim to government and its initiation of coercion?" (Klein 2023b).

The Abolition of Man as Prophecy

What were shadows when Lewis wrote these essays have skin and bones today. Lewis gave two reasons why humanity's attempt to conquer nature will have predictable and unfortunate consequences. First, the "man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique" (Lewis 1947, 60).

Science in Lewis's time was a world apart from what it is in our age, but his words are no less important. If Lewis were alive today, one can predict his assessment of social media: he would be able to restrain his enthusiasm, if only because social media crowds out books worthy of reading. The widespread access to (and even reliance upon) technology, including the internet and social media, is foreshadowed in Lewis's fateful words:

Each generation exercises power over its successors: and each, in so far as it modifies the environment bequeathed to it and rebels against tradition, resists and limits the power of its predecessors. This modifies the picture which is sometimes painted of a progressive emancipation from tradition and a progressive control of natural processes resulting in a continual increase of human power. In reality, of course, if any one age really attains, by eugenics and scientific education, the power to make its descendants what it pleases, all men who live after it are the patients of that power. They are weaker, not stronger: for though we may have put wonderful machines in their hands we have pre-ordained how they are to use them. And if, as is almost certain, the age which had thus attained maximum power over posterity were also the age most emancipated from tradition, it would be engaged in reducing the power of its predecessors almost as drastically as that of its successors. (Lewis 1947, 56–57)

⁵ See Klein (2023b, 5). Klein also connects Adam Smith to Lewis's concept of the *Tao* in explaining Smith's contempt for slavery. See "The *Tao* Exposes Slavery to Contempt," in Klein (2023b, ch. 8). Smith speaks of those who would "control people, take their stuff, restrict their liberty, rather than leaving them to act peaceably of their own accord, [and] to pursue their own interests their own way. But [they] shall not escape the contempt that [their] levity, brutality and baseness so richly earn [them]" (Klein 2023a, 72).

Each generation is born with increased technology, more advanced devices, and more extensive access to information. Lewis argues that we are at the mercy of these things—and at the hands of those who designed them—more than we realize and understand.

Second, the man-moulders control the education of the young. Education that purports to be without values (that steps outside the *Tao*) will have this consequence: “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains. . . . [T]hose who stand outside all judgements of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except the emotional strength of that impulse” (Lewis 1947, 65–66).

Rationality Revisited

Thomas Jefferson’s vision for America was a land where “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” were granted not by the state but by the Creator. That is why the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right. It is a short step from this language in the Declaration of Independence to the concept of utility maximizing on the part of a rational economic agent.

One can examine the rational self-interest principle from a positive perspective and ask, Do people behave in accord with their self-interest in a predictable fashion? That is, do people act only when the benefits exceed the costs? One also can look at rational self-interest from a normative perspective and ask the question, Should people behave in accord with their self-interest? Lewis deals with the normative question.

Contrary to what many outside the discipline of economics think, utility maximizing is different from unfettered greed; it is not the same as wealth maximization. *Utility* was an unfortunate word choice for the dismal science to make. Utility maximization does not deny that one can be happier by serving others, by being kind to a friend, and by caring for family members. One can enhance one’s utility by such actions.

To an economist, those areas of life where utility maximizing is more likely to square with narrow self-interest are in the world of commercial transactions. All other things being equal, a utility maximizing (happiness pursuing) consumer generally would rather pay a lower price than a higher price for any good or service. A utility maximizing (happiness pursuing) worker generally would rather receive a higher wage than a lower wage. A utility maximizing (happiness pursuing) seller generally would rather receive a higher price than a lower price.

Because of the ubiquity of this principle of economics, economists would be surprised to observe a buyer of groceries who insists on paying more at the checkout line. Economists would be puzzled to observe a worker turning down a pay raise. Economists would be curious as to why a homeowner turned down a higher offer on a house that he or she placed on the market.

Where economics does not go is to the ultimate purpose of humans who have “liberty” for “the pursuit of happiness”—whether that pursuit is in the consumption of goods and services, the pursuit of education, or a subversion of the *Tao*. Here economics, as a discipline, is silent. Lewis is not.

Consider the concept of liberty in economic life to have the following short list of characteristics: First, the individual—the rational economic agent—is the source of creativity and the fountainhead of human progress. The state should be constrained to the protection of life, liberty, and property, and to the enforcement of contracts, and it should not engage in central planning. Second, individuals who have liberty to do what they like with their lives and property are free to use their resources for whatever form of consumption they choose, so long as the transaction is voluntary for both buyer and seller (and does not involve the theft of the resources of another).

There is nothing on this short list to which economics—*qua* economics—can take issue. While this short list squares with the concept of a minimal state, which Lewis favored, *The Abolition of Man* reveals Lewis’s concern about such a list: it leaves out the *Tao*. Nothing on the list describes the Creator cited in the Declaration of Independence as anything but an endower of rights to liberty. No mention is made of reciprocity. No mention is made of worship of the Creator. No mention is made of the principles (also known as commandments) the Creator expects to be followed by his creation (Vander Elst 2017, 14).⁶ While economic theory is largely agnostic with regard to personal morality, Lewis is anything but.

Jefferson envisioned a political system different from those in the rest of the world—one in which citizens do not belong to the state. This meant that totalitarian governments—whether those of royalty, theocracy, bureaucracy, or military—were immoral. Lewis clearly was sympathetic to this. But Lewis understood the immorality that still existed in the human heart. And he recognized that without an understanding of the *Tao*—or, in his case, a Christian view of morality—a democracy would descend into disorder and rapacity. Philip Vander Elst offers this description of American society:

A society whose members are too absorbed in the pursuit of pleasure to develop high standards of personal behaviour [i.e., Lewis’s *Tao*], tends to have little respect for moral and intellectual excellence, especially if its cultural leaders preach the subjectivity of all values and treat all choices of “lifestyle” as a matter of personal taste. . . . This, in turn, produces a truculent and egalitarian mindset which dislikes hierarchy and authority within

⁶ The reciprocal obligations of the Creator’s endowment are part of the reason many libertarians are hostile to Christianity. As Philip Vander Elst (2017, 9) put it, “To many Libertarians, the possibility that there is a Creator to whom they owe their existence, and to whom they are ultimately accountable for the use they make of their lives, is extremely unwelcome. It . . . poses an unacceptable threat to their sense of personal pride and autonomy.”

social institutions like the family . . . and non-governmental bodies. The end result is a social vacuum of growing confusion, division and lawlessness, which is filled by an increasingly intrusive and authoritarian State. (Vander Elst 2017, 22)

Note Vander Elst's connecting of moral and intellectual excellence, hierarchy and authority, and how the absence of moral fiber leads to greater power vested in the state. All this is Lewisian in its dystopia.

Consider, for example, the parable of the good Samaritan, the remarkable story told by Jesus of a man who reflected the *Tao*. The parable tells of a noble deed, but not the nobility ascribed to family status, military rank, or social prominence. Quite the contrary, the hero of the story is a Samaritan—the *Tao* personified in a person of low status.

The parable of the good Samaritan is robust in economic content. A commercial transaction is involved, but the rational self-interest of the Samaritan illustrates the happiness of being kind (in this story, exceedingly kind). However, a lesson about personal wealth is embedded in the parable as well. The Good Samaritan could not execute his act of mercy if he did not have personal wealth to draw upon. What is absent in the parable? The role of the state taxing the Samaritan to fund the caring of the injured man. Lewis understood that for an action to be charitable, it involved empathy on the part of the Samaritan rather than a dispassionate that's-not-my-responsibility reaction.

Conclusion

One of the principles of economics first taught by Adam Smith is that of division of labor and specialization. The overlap between the discipline of economics and the teaching of C. S. Lewis can be described as an application of this principle. The discipline of economics is a scholarly discipline that studies how choices are made. That is the specialty of the dismal science. The division of labor that Lewis brings to the table—indeed, that the Christian faith brings to the table—is the recognition that freedom of choice is not an end in itself. Lewis—and the Christian faith—informs us what we are to do with that freedom, what the Jeffersonian “pursuit of happiness” should entail.

Left to our own devices, we think we are conquering nature when we obey our own desires. But Lewis shows us the truth: we will be conquered by our own desires if we are not first conquered by the lordship of Jesus Christ. Though he does not explicitly argue this in *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis argues in his other works that Christianity is the singular hope for humanity, which seems to be chaotic, inward, and lost to conquering itself into oblivion. But in Jesus there is hope—hope to be ultimately glorified. But until then Lewis leaves us with works such as *The Abolition of Man*—works that do not shy away from the brutality of our nature and the power of the tools we possess to oppress others.

With all the books and articles that have been written on C. S. Lewis, I know of no study that connects Lewis with Edmund Burke. Burke earlier recognized what would take place in a society without the moral fiber that Lewis saw in the *Tao*, and Lewis witnessed this in his time. Burke wrote, “Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without” (Burke 1791, 69).

Lewis understood the human heart. He was well-acquainted with the assertion of Jeremiah 17:9 that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Lewis’s argument here for the *Tao*—not even for God, but simply for acceptance of universal values—reveals that he observed a deep need for this within himself and all humanity. Lewis does not give a paranoid, desperate warning against some outward corrupting force. He does not villainize one great state or leader as the enemy. Instead, Lewis recognized the immense and blinding power of each individual self. To live from a vantage point where self is the only true, fixed thing was to him the beginning of the abolition of man. To live in this way, disconnected from any semblance of the “Law of Nature,” is to be “men without chests” (Lewis 1952, 13; 1947, 26).

Submitted: May 18, 2023 EST, Accepted: September 14, 2023 EST



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-NC-ND-4.0). View this license’s legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Acton, John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton. 1986. "Acton-Creighton Correspondence." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton*, Vol 2, *Essays in the Study and Writing of History*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 378–91. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Burke, Edmund. 1790. *Reflections on the Revolution in France: And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event*. London: J. Dodsley. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004900709.0001.000>.
- . 1791. *A Letter from Mr. Burke, to a Member of the National Assembly: In Answer to Some Objections to His Book on French Affairs*. London: J. Dodsley. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004804929.0001.000>.
- Hawley, Josh. 2021. *The Tyranny of Big Tech*. Washington, DC: Regnery.
- Hayek, F. A. 1988. *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*. Edited by W. W. Bartley III. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226321158.001.0001>.
- Klein, Daniel. 2023a. *Smithian Morals*. Vancouver: CL Press.
- . 2023b. "Adam Smith's Liberal Path." Brownstone Institute Articles. February 8, 2023. <https://brownstone.org/articles/adam-smiths-liberal-path/>.
- Klobuchar, Amy. 2021. *Antitrust: Taking on Monopoly Power from the Gilded Age to the Digital Age*. New York: Knopf.
- Lewis, C. S. 1947. *The Abolition of Man*. 2nd ed. New York: HarperCollins.
- . 1952. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperOne.
- . 1966. *Letters of C. S. Lewis*. Edited by W. H. Lewis and Walter Hooper. New York: HarperOne.
- . 1970. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- . 1986. "Equality." In *Present Concerns*, by C. S. Lewis, edited by Walter Hooper, 7–12. New York: HarperOne.
- Lewis, C.S. 2008. *Yours, Jack: The Inspirational Letters of C.S. Lewis*. Edited by Paul F. Ford. New York: HarperOne.
- Marshall, Alfred. 1961. *Principles of Economics*. Edited by C. W. Guillebaud. 9th ed. New York: MacMillan.
- Smith, Adam. (1776) 1981. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Edited by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner. Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 2. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Vander Elst, Philip. 2017. *Libertarianism: A Christian Critique*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: The Christian Institute. <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/libertarianism-2015.pdf>.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 1898. "Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 12 (4): 373–97. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882952>.
- Wu, Tim. 2018. *The Curse of Bigness: Antitrust in the New Gilded Age*. New York: Columbia Global Reports. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fx4h9c>.