

## EDITORIALS

# A Place to Stand against the Abolition of Man

Jordan J. Ballor<sup>1</sup>, Micah Watson<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy, <sup>2</sup> Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics, Calvin University

<https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.89185>

---

Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy

---

The first annual workshop for thematic papers intended for the *Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy* (JRCD) was sponsored by the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy and hosted by the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics at Calvin University on March 23–25, 2023. The occasion for the event was the eightieth anniversary of the publication of C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, and the workshop featured paper presentations, discussions, and public plenary addresses from Carl Trueman and Michael Ward. This series of articles published in the JRCD is the fruit of that event, featuring a wide variety of perspectives and evaluations of Lewis's central argument and its salience for today.

In "The Abolition of Democracy" Susan McWilliams Barndt examines the immediate context for Lewis's lectures and subsequent publication, with special attention to his evaluation of the challenges faced by Britain and its allies after the war. Thus, argues Barndt, "Whatever else Lewis is doing in *Abolition*, I am convinced he is speaking to the questions: What do we need to prepare for next? What dangers might Britain face in the future, after the war? In doing so, Lewis provides more general reflections on the dangers facing modern, liberal democracies like that of Britain's great wartime ally, the United States." Adam J. MacLeod draws on Lewis's thought to reflect on the critically important distinction between theoretical and practical reason. In "Is, Ought, and the Limited Competence of Experts," MacLeod contends, "There is no avoiding the parallel demands of reason. To understand is one kind of act of reasoning. To deliberate and render judgment for the purpose of acting is another. Both are necessary for reasonable human action in the world. Neither is alone sufficient. And neither is reducible to the other, for human choice and action intervene between what is the case and what is to be done or not done."

Richard Turnbull's contribution, "Lewis and Liberty: Reflections on a Pandemic," considers the competency and authority of science and policy experts (who, Lewis warned, can become a class of "Conditioners") in an analysis of public health policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. "At least some of the policy outcomes and methodological approaches that we saw brought to the fore during the pandemic," writes Turnbull, "reflect several of the points of principle that Lewis articulated more than half a century earlier." In "*The Abolition of Man* and the Dismal Science," Ken Elzinga places Lewis into conversation with the mainline tradition of political economy, particularly with its first and perhaps greatest exponent, Adam Smith. As Elzinga finds in

his study, “This portfolio of thoughts by Lewis reflects an attitude congruent with what Adam Smith called the ‘obvious and simple system of natural liberty.’”

Two other contributions raise the question of what it means to be human and what a vision of humanity and humane learning ought to look like, particularly amid the challenges to objective value and transcendent truth identified by Lewis. Chris Armstrong characterizes Lewis as a Christian humanist and situates him within that long tradition of Christian thought. In “The Christian Humanism of C. S. Lewis’s *Abolition of Man*,” Armstrong writes that “we see Lewis raising the specter of the complete loss of our common humanity (which in the West was overwhelmingly defined by the tradition of Christian humanism) and suggesting that if we are to regain that humanity, then we must do as the ancients did and train the imaginations and affections of our young people, through education and culture in general.” Anne Poortenga’s article, “Three Rival Versions of Education: An Update to *The Abolition of Man*,” takes on the philosophy and practice of education directly, applying Lewis’s basic critique in *The Abolition of Man* to a course of study observed in a Christian high school today. After describing the contents of this course and its philosophical grounding, Poortenga concludes with a hopeful vision of what authentic educational and pedagogical reform might look like in Christian perspective: “Being people of the Living Word should inspire us to read with wisdom and charity and to work with a living canon that expands to include all of God’s children throughout history and around the world.”

These fresh readings of Lewis’s classic text demonstrate that he had a prescient vision of the consequences arising from a truncated vision of the human person. Technological advances have only hastened in the decades since Lewis first gave these lectures, and the kinds of conditioning and interventions that worried Lewis have truly become possible. We find ourselves on the cusp of the qualitative different step that Lewis warned about in *The Abolition of Man*: “The final stage is come when Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself” (Lewis 1947, 59). Humankind itself has become the final frontier of scientific mastery, and if we have not yet experienced the full and complete control of some people over others, we are nevertheless much, much closer to realizing that frightful vision than even a generation past.

That leaves us searching for a place to stand against the abolition of man that Lewis diagnosed so prophetically at the horizon of living memory eighty years ago. While the details of the challenge are different, and the cultural, scientific, and political opposition is powerful, we must continue to hope that a proper view of the human person—dependent upon the *Tao* rather than triumphing apart from it—can root the necessary responses to forces that seek to tyrannize and oppress. We live in a world of critical theory and

transgressive practice. The two are, as Lewis contends, closely linked, so that we must recover the truth in both its theoretical and its practical dimensions. As Lewis himself did both in *The Abolition of Man* and in *That Hideous Strength*, we must seek to recover the proper relationship and ordering between the constitutive elements of the human person: intellect, will, and passions, or the head, the heart, and the hands. Such a recovery will also require a proper understanding of the linkage between the justly constituted human person and bedrock moral reality (the *Tao*), the latter of which Lewis is at pains to ground as an inheritance of humanity broadly speaking rather than any one particular religious or philosophical tradition. *The Abolition of Man* is not so much a defense of a particular theory of natural law or moral realism but instead, as these articles illustrate, a devastating critique of rejecting the *Tao* and an ongoing recourse for contemporary application and insight. We cannot affirm the positive ways forward unless we have rejected the arbitrary schemes of Lewis's "Innovators" and the nihilism of his "Conditioners."

As Lewis concludes, "You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever." We must start and rest somewhere; skepticism, methodological doubt, and critical theory cannot be where we begin or where we end, even if we use something like them as useful tools on occasion. "To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see," warns Lewis, and if we do not ultimately depend on the truth and objective reality, we are doomed to pluck out the eyes and bid people to see, just as "we castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful" (1947, 81, 26).



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

Lewis, C.S. 1947. *The Abolition of Man*. 2nd ed. New York: HarperCollins. First published in London in 1943 by Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford.