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Lucie Steiner

The University of Notre Dame Australia

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PHILOSOPHY AND THE NATURE OF MORALITY:

THE ABOLITION OF MAN, C.S. LEWIS

Logos I-Philosophy

Lucie Steiner

In C.S. Lewis' "The Abolition of Man," it is proposed that objective value¹ exists in the *Tao* and, the ability of people to discover these common moral 'truths' is proof of their existence. In this essay, I will argue that Lewis' theory of moral objectivity holds more weight than moral sentimentalism, because once we object to the existence of objectivity, and morality becomes subjective, the need to seek out an ethical existence becomes self-invalidating since there is no common objective amongst humanity. I propose that David Hume's theory of moral sentimentalism assumes that ultimately, regardless of motivation, what is deemed ethical behaviour is still driven by common recognition of societal goals, or utility, which become objective values. Even if one cannot accept what Lewis calls the *Tao*, Hume is also an example of how it is also ethically more productive for society to believe in objective values because they lead to utility and virtuous action.

Several clarifications need to be made for the purposes of this essay. Firstly, ethics concerns itself with morality, and how we judge a thing to be good or bad based on the concept of living a 'good' life². Ethics is also about reflection³, and the nature of ethics denotes how we reach conclusions about moral action; it assumes we are all "rational [human] beings"⁴ that acknowledge the notion of a moral 'right' and 'wrong'⁵. Lewis proposes that only through uniting Sentiment, Emotion and Reason will 'Man' ever become ethical⁶, enabling them to live according to the *Tao*. With these descriptors, the moral realism⁷ of Lewis' 'Man' can be

¹ Several phrases in the text denote the concept of morality, e.g. moral law, values, moral truth and objective value, and will be used interchangeably in this essay.

² Raymond A. Younis, "What is ethics?" in *An Introduction to Philosophy and Theology within Catholic Liberal Education*, ed. Angus Brook (North Ryde: McGraw Hill, 2015), 114-116.

³ Younis, "What is ethics?" 114.

⁴ Younis, 111.

⁵ Whether or not these are true, or what we consider to be right and wrong is the same, is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶ The head (reason) rules the belly (emotion/appetite) though the chest (stable sentiments, or indeed the soul of a man and the seat of his morality). These three traits unite to make his moral 'Man.' See C.S Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1999), 15.

⁷ Dejan Simkovic, "Ethics, moral phenomenology and moral experience," in *An Introduction to Philosophy and Theology within Catholic Liberal Education*, ed. Angus Brook (North Ryde: McGraw Hill, 2015), 166.

contrasted with the sentimentalism⁸ and moral internalism⁹ of Hume, who posits that morality is a “product of human nature,”¹⁰ related to our experience of the world and forms a “common point of view”¹¹; we are ultimately still motivated by internal forces and not a collective consciousness of what is moral. In both views, men admit ‘Reason’ is united with a feeling-based quality¹², in order to reach a conclusion about how we perceive morality is constructed.

Lewis argues that at the core of humanity, there are identifiable, objective values in place that facilitate our knowledge of ethics¹³, and being subjective means there is no definition of moral law, therefore it cannot exist as anything other than objective. In defending Lewis, I must first try to defend the *Tao*. This “doctrine”¹⁴ outlines concepts of right and wrong throughout antiquity that are the “basic assumptions” of “moral rules”¹⁵. In reading the *Tao*, it is hard not to recognise that there are common values which still remain relevant in society today¹⁶, across different countries, religions and cultures¹⁷. What has been discovered is common to different societies in humanity, and thus the mutual recognition of these values makes them objective.

The main point I wish to highlight in Lewis’ proposal is that denial of objective value is self-contradictory, and therefore there is no room for subjectivity because you cannot construct a rejection of something within the framework of it¹⁸. If one promotes a subjective moral order, then they are also acknowledging the possibility of an objective one; if one says

⁸ “David Hume,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, last revised May 21, 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/#Mor.>; Michael Slote, “Moral Sentimentalism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7, no. 1 (March 2004): 3-14. <http://jstor.org/stable/27504292>.

⁹ See Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, “Moral Internalism and Moral Cognitivism in Hume’s Metaethics,” *Synthese* 152, no. 3 (October 2006): 353-4, <http://jstor.org/stable/27653401>; and Paul Sagar, “Mind the Gap: Bernard Williams and David Hume on Living an Ethical Life,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 11, no. 5 (2014): 615-6, 620, 624, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-4681019>.

¹⁰ “David Hume,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

¹¹ “David Hume,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

¹² Lewis refers to emotions and impulse, and Hume refers to sympathy and sentiment.

¹³ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 11-12.

¹⁴ Lewis, 11.

¹⁵ P.H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1959), 14.

¹⁶ For example, the modern definition of murder in terms of killing another human being is described as a ‘crime’ or ‘unlawful’, implying it is a ‘bad’ action. It is referenced in the first Law of General Beneficence (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 51); see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/murder>; <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/murder>.

¹⁷ Many of the laws in the *Tao* (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 51-63) also resemble tenets found in religious texts, for example the Ten Commandments of Judaism and Christianity (see http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/command.htm; <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-ten-commandments>) correspond to the Law of General Beneficence, Duties to Parents, Elders, Ancestors, and the Law of Justice (see Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 52, 56, 58).

¹⁸ “If it is rejected, all value is rejected... There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgement of value in the history of the world.” Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 27.

that values are subjective, then there would be no definition of values at all¹⁹, and ‘value’ ceases to exist²⁰. His defence of the objectivity of moral truth lies in the notion that only those that accept the *Tao* understand it, and those on the outside have no real concept of it²¹. This makes them unreasonable, and by the very nature of being a ‘Man’, you must have Reason, achieved through mediating your beliefs and emotions, in order to accept the *Tao*. It stands that being unreasonable is your only shortcoming, and the question is not about the shortcomings of the *Tao*. Lewis concludes that we must accept objective moral truth on this basis, because to question it would be akin to “creating a new sun”²²; put simply, by recognising something you are accepting its existence, and it is not the moral laws that need defending; it is your rejection of them. In essence, it would be like rejecting whether or not something is a table; we can theorise about what it might be, but in the end, the very discourse about it proves that it must exist, otherwise there would be no need to even acknowledge it.

Lewis further proposes that once we accept the *Tao*, to be ethical we must fuse Appetite and Reason into stable Sentiment, because in lacking one or two of these qualities one becomes “de-humanized” and ‘Man’ is abolished.²³ An excess of one will lead to imbalance, and if virtue is to be sought, a middle path must be followed; this is the ‘chest’ Lewis speaks of. Hume suggests that we are driven by emotion over reason, and eventually patterns and society give way to virtuous action²⁴. However, some of Hume’s premises are not dissimilar from Lewis’ view of how virtuous patterns of behaviour give rise to the recognition of general moral truths.

What Hume describes as “passion”²⁵ Lewis might relate to Appetite or Emotion, which to him need to harmonise with Reason in order to make one an ethical being. Hume describes that living ethically does not require an external basis and the only justifications for our actions are internally derived²⁶, shattering the notion that there could be a universally recognised doctrine of moral truths. Hume argues that your beliefs and desires, moulded by your experience of the world, force you to pursue what is self-approbating²⁷. However, this essay’s focus is on the existence of objective values, therefore it does not matter where moral behaviour

¹⁹ “Nothing is actually right or wrong, according to the subjectivist, if there are no people, or no personal opinions about matters of fact.” See Russ Schafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 14, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0199259755.001.0001>.

²⁰ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 32.

²¹ Lewis, 27-30, 46.

²² Lewis, 27.

²³ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 45.

²⁴ Sagar, “Mind the Gap,” 619-620.

²⁵ Those being desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair and security. See Radcliffe, “Moral Internalism,” 355.

²⁶ Sagar, “Mind the Gap,” 620-624.

²⁷ Radcliffe, “Moral Internalism,” 353-368.

comes from, because this does not preclude the existence of moral truths. Taking Hume's position, one could even argue that sentiments inevitably evolve to recognise what Lewis has delineated as the *Tao*, because once these conclusions exist they prove the objectivity of moral truths.

This subjective view of ethics is similar to the idea that we should not privilege a universal idea of morality because it would be comparing different cultures to each other²⁸, and taking a stand on which have better or worse rules about how to live a good life. To Lewis, believing in different things is not the issue, but rather how we recognise these beliefs as appropriate or inappropriate²⁹. If everything is relative and subjective, his view of ethics falls apart because it reduces the *Tao* to opinions and not 'truths'. Hume conjectures that our view of appropriate and inappropriate feelings is measured by the idea of sympathy and moral sentiments³⁰. Everything we feel as humans is good or bad, approving or disapproving, is related to our experience of the world and a "general point of view"³¹ where we use sympathy to gather collective notions of character to arrive at moral conclusions for ourselves³². His view claims that we often see moral behaviour in terms of utility³³, but virtuousness is only a product of the actions we perform for self-approval³⁴. Therefore, the moral value is discoverable by society because certain actions tend to bring utility *and* afford us individual satisfaction, and we repeat these actions because they give the best outcomes. This does not mean that moral truth is invented by convention, but recognises that there is some intuitiveness³⁵ that what is ethically best for the individual seems to also benefit society. Since society is made up of individuals, we can consider that there must be some common link between us or *a priori* knowledge of what is morally right driving us towards virtuous action, which evidences the objectivity of moral truth. Therefore, these must be self-evident, which makes them objective.³⁶

Furthermore, even if morality is self-driven, because humans are often connected to societies everything exists in relation to the self. Even if society does not play a major role in our ethical decision-making, it is still reflective of it, and eventually good and bad behaviour will define itself within this framework and recognise certain objective truths. Hume

²⁸ James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986), 16.

²⁹ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 10.

³⁰ "David Hume," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

³¹ "David Hume," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

³² "David Hume," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

³³ Sagar, "Mind the Gap," 625.

³⁴ Rachel Cohon, "Hume's Moral Sentiments as Motives," *Hume Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hms.2010.0024>.

³⁵ Schafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 248-251.

³⁶ See Schafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 248-267.

illuminates the internal aspect of ethical decision-making, but still assumes some generalised aspect of right and wrong with the perception that what is good for society is good for the individual³⁷. In this way we can see the merit in Lewis' argument, because we may be able to recognise some moral 'truths' if we look closely enough at the attitudes that have been retained in humanity. The very notion of a general point of view also strongly implies we can universalise to some degree what people consider to be virtuous, such as the notion of the *Tao* implies the universal discovery of moral truths. However, moral sentimentalism raises an interesting point about whether we can consider ourselves living ethical lives if our motivations are not virtuous. Reducing morality to motivation is not convincing enough³⁸ to say that ethics are subjective because humans are subjective beings, because it eventually gives rise to general or common notions of good in society, which is what Lewis' realises in the *Tao*.

If we pursue the idea of subjectivity, the arguments surrounding what makes an ethical life become futile because there is no agreed-upon definition of it, where nobody is invalidated but nobody is right. In recognising the relevance of the *Tao* and the self-contradictory complexity of subjectivity, C.S. Lewis' objective stance on ethics makes more sense than the moral sentimentalism of David Hume, because if we cannot ultimately agree on what constitutes moral action, there is no need for us to argue the existence of moral law.

³⁷ Sagar, "Mind the Gap," 625; and Catherine Wilson, "Moral Truth: Observational or Theoretical?" *The Aristotelian Society* 111, no. 1 (April 2011): 106, <https://doi-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/10.1111/j.1467-9264.2011.00300.x>.

³⁸ Schafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 191-214.

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