

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *The Abolition of Man*

by

C. S. Lewis

### INTRODUCTION

*The Abolition of Man* was first given as a series of lectures in 1943. The lectures dealt largely with the dangers of moral relativism—a subject that increasingly was to occupy Lewis’s mind as he noted the destructive trends emerging in the modern worldview. Lewis later debated the issue of moral relativism in more abbreviated form in such papers as “The Poison of Subjectivism,” “If We Have Christ’s Ethics Does the Rest of the Christian Faith Matter?,” and chapter 3 of *Miracles*. His friend Owen Barfield thought *The Abolition of Man* was the best piece of discursive argument Lewis had ever produced, stating, “It is a real triumph. There may be a piece of contemporary writing in which precision of thought, liveliness of expression and depth of meaning unite with the same felicity, but I have not come across it.”

In *The Abolition of Man* Lewis argues for a reality “beyond predicates”—that is, that the universe was such “that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—[all people] believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt” (pp. 14–15). Lewis argues that there is a universal moral law, the *Tao*, and that the value of education lies in cultivating true and just sentiment toward this law. Past generations largely operated within the perimeters of this law, although they might distort or develop it. The present generation was steadily cutting away at their heritage by denying the law altogether. Lewis noticed the disturbing tendency in the underlying assumptions that modern textbooks made about values, and also in the cult of progress in domesticating nature, even human nature, so that “each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well” (p. 58). He feared the power of the new thinkers to condition others.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you notice any tendencies in modern education to inculcate the kind of false assumptions Lewis draws attention to in *The Green Book*?
2. “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts” (pp. 13–14). Discuss.
3. What do you think Lewis would say about modern education if he were alive today?
4. “The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it” (p. 19). Do you think Lewis is right

to say that to think rightly about an issue we must also feel rightly about it?

5. Would you agree that the mark of the New Man is “not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion” (p. 25)?
6. Do you believe in the *Tao*?
7. “The *Tao* admits development from within” (p. 45). What sort of thing might constitute a true development of the *Tao*?
8. Do you think Lewis is distrustful of science? If so, does he have a right to be?
9. “Man’s conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men” (p. 58). Do you agree that the drive toward conquering nature is always going to be self-limiting to mankind?
10. Do you find Lewis’s chilling vision of a conditioned society plausible?
11. It has now been over sixty years since Lewis delivered the *Abolition of Man* lectures. Have Lewis’s fears for the future of education and/or society been realized in any way? Are his warnings still applicable?

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