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Making *The Abolition of Man* Accessible

ARENDE SMILDE

Tim Mosteller and Gayne John Anacker, eds. *Contemporary Perspectives on C. S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man: History, Philosophy, Education, and Science*. (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2017). \$75.00. 176 pages. ISBN 9781474269441.

Compared with most of C. S. Lewis's writings, *The Abolition of Man* (1943) is a rather "difficult" little book and hence one of his least popular. Perhaps it is also the one most neglected even by suitable audiences. At the same time, it seems likely that many of those readers who have read it with lasting profit or delight have, over the years, been dismayed by its comparative lack of readers. The book appears so clearly and urgently to deserve better and to bear fruit – at least, such concern has for some decades been shared by this reviewer and Tim Mosteller, who wrote the Introduction to the present volume of essays. Mosteller notes that it is perhaps the exceptional "level of difficulty" of *Abolition* which is mainly responsible for "a lacuna in the literature of C. S. Lewis scholarship" regarding this particular work; the present volume of essays therefore takes up a long-overdue task and seeks "to guide students through the text as well as to provide critical scholarship in order to advance the ideas contained in it" (1).

In this laudable program, one potential snag may at once be noted. It is the plural form, "ideas." *Abolition* is a very short book: three chapters of roughly 5,000 words each, with another 5,000 devoted to notes and an Appendix: 20,000 words in total. It is Lewis's shortest book of prose published under his name during his lifetime, excepting only his slightly earlier

Broadcast Talks. Whether or not we have read *Abolition* or feel we have mastered its difficulties, seeing that it is a short book with a powerful title we may wonder whether the present volume of essays is going to help us discern and understand some single leading idea underlying it—one truly central argument—in addition to “the ideas contained in it.” To be sure, the shortness seems partly due to its unusual degree of density. Some sorting out of strands and themes and discussion of them one by one might therefore seem useful. On the other hand, the book’s difficulty has likely consisted, for many readers, precisely in the difficulty they have found in getting beyond appreciation of one or more individual passages, in recognizing digressions as digressions, and in coming to grips with Lewis’s key concern when it seems elusive even while it somehow looms large. Many a reader of this Introduction might have been relieved to find *Abolition*’s exceptional “level of difficulty” attributed to a real or apparent lack of discursive purpose on Lewis’s part, and to be promised help overcoming this obstacle.

The rest of Mosteller’s introduction, in line with the volume’s title and subtitle, seems to confirm the expectation that we are in for an exposition of various “ideas” rather than for assistance in pinning down a single master idea. The nine contributing authors, in spite of a shared basic sympathy for Lewis’s stance, constitute a cacophony rather than a harmony, nor does any of them seem concerned with attempting a unifying view as an end in itself. The volume’s general index, barely more than one page long, is far from adequate. For a number of readers, then, the volume as a whole might increase rather than remove the chief problem with Lewis’s book.

While this is perhaps regrettable, it still remains our business to deal with the goods offered. The volume’s title suggests that the real overall intention has been to assess, from various viewpoints, the current relevance of Lewis’s book, now almost 75 years after its initial publication. The nine essays have conveniently straightforward titles featuring nine respective keywords: Philosophy, Natural Law, Education, English, Conservatism, Theology, Science, Techno-futurism, and Imagination (the last deals with *Abolition*’s relation to its avowed fictional counterpart, Lewis’s 1945 novel *That Hideous Strength*.)

The opening piece by Adam C. Pelser, on “Philosophy in *The Abolition of Man*,” highlights the book’s attack on “subjectivism” and on the resulting “moral skepticism” as a prime example of Lewis’s philosophical relevance

today. After an initial suggestion that “casual readers . . . and Lewis scholars alike” have “often missed, or underemphasized . . . the positive role emotions play in Lewis’s alternative account of moral knowledge” (6), Pelsler proceeds to argue that “the key to reading *The Abolition of Man* has to do with the emotions” (12). However, whether or not Pelsler’s points about emotions and morality are sound, they sit uneasily with Lewis’s text. There is a remarkable number of references concerning what Lewis “seems” to say. The trouble comes out clearly in footnote 5 (first emphasis added): “*On my view, which I take to be shared by Lewis, emotions help us to experience and thus to know or understand objective values*” (23). Now if Lewis shared this view, and intended such a point to be taken as “the key to reading” his book, some evidence ought to have been cited for that fact. Simply assuming agreement on supposed key ideas is a dangerous procedure, and one unhappy result of it is seen when Pelsler makes an attempt—welcome in itself—to summarize Lewis’s “overarching argument” (17). The summary, while following the sequence of Lewis’s three chapters, neatly *reverses* the historical and causal sequence from scientific and technological progress to subjectivism and moral skepticism, as envisaged by Lewis.

There is, of course, no general objection to commenters comparing their own central concerns with Lewis’s: doing so is one way to provide a contemporary perspective. But it should always be made perfectly clear which is which. Indeed, this problem possibly affects the literature on C. S. Lewis more than that on most other authors; it is not only in the opening essay that it occurs in the present book. The same goes for another sort of difference between what Lewis wrote and what has been read into it—a difference in the degree of *alarmism*. In the end, Pelsler hopes to help avert a threatening “abolition of man” by empowering man’s horror at the prospect of it and encouraging our preference for a different course. This is not Lewis’s strategy, at least from the opening passage of his second chapter onwards: “The true doctrine might be a doctrine which if we accept we die.” Alarms and anxieties are consistently inessential to the point he is making, a point perhaps best expressed by his lapidary final sentence: “To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.” There can be no use in conjuring up vistas of moral horror when moral blindness is the problem.

Perhaps, then, a good way to bring out Lewis’s true point would have been to write an essay not on “Philosophy in *The Abolition of Man*” but on

"*The Abolition of Man as Philosophy.*" In a later essay of the present volume, there is a stray reference which could have done great service here. When *Abolition* was released, Lewis gave a complimentary copy to his old philosophy tutor, Edgar Carritt, and the two men had a brief written exchange in the margins of this copy, which is now in the Wade Center (54). The Carritt connection was a relic of Lewis's earlier time as an Oxford "Greats" student. Back then, his talents and ambitions and exam results all pointed toward a career in philosophy. Walter Hooper, in his 1996 *Companion & Guide* to Lewis, opens the chapter on *Abolition* with some remarks about Lewis's lost 1922 manuscript on "the hegemony of moral values," and the connection was also noted by James Patrick in his 1985 book *The Magdalen Metaphysicals*. To all appearances, Lewis as author of *Abolition* is not just offering "philosophy" as one idea among others. Rather, he is speaking for once as the philosopher that he would have become, for good or ill, but for the vagaries of Oxford's academic job market in the early 1920s.

Taking the philosophical approach to *Abolition* as an opening move for the present volume, then, has certainly been a good idea—so good, actually, that a better execution of it might have made all the subsequent essays superfluous or marginal. In reality, we must turn to the next piece in hopes of compensation for a confounding start. Micah Watson's contribution on Natural Law in Lewis's book is well worth reading. This is in part because of his careful attempt "to characterize Lewis's project in *Abolition*" (31): some of his results deserve underlining. At the same time, Watson may be too quick in identifying *Abolition* as "a fighting book" (34) since he associates that label with an opening passage which he himself calls "odd." His ruling notion for this essay seems nevertheless correct and useful: Lewis was describing a "chasm between two radically different and incommensurable positions," regarding which "the best we can hope for on an argumentative level is laying out the two sides with as much rigor and accuracy as possible" (39, 41). To contribute his bit, Watson cites an illuminating 1971 response to *Abolition* from behaviorist philosopher B. F. Skinner.

In the first section of Watson's essay, an important line from the end of Chapter 1 of Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, on "the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in," is quoted out of context (27) so that Lewis seems to be talking simply of "the foundational building blocks of morality"; in a later essay Judith Wolfe quotes the same line with

the proper context. Possibly, we see here something of the same tendency as the one noted in the first essay – to reconfigure Lewis’s argument into one which essentially lies in the domain of the commenter’s special interest. Watson is one of the two authors of a recent book on *C. S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law*. In the last section of the present essay, *Abolition* is characterized as “Lewis’ masterwork on the natural law” (41). Perhaps this explains how Watson has come to view the book as a sequence of three attempts, “different in each chapter,” “to awaken a realization in his readers that they do, after all, believe in the natural law” (34). We learn little about the progressive thrust of Lewis’s three chapters, or why the third chapter’s title repeats that of the sequence as a whole, or indeed precisely why that title is *The Abolition of Man*.

Of Watson’s thirty-point bibliography, fifteen titles are by Lewis and one by Watson. If, on a first inspection, this ratio has any use as a sign of health in writing about Lewis, then perhaps Watson’s score must be counted among the best. The next piece, Mark A. Pike’s essay on Education, has the longest list of all. In a total of 42 titles, four are by Lewis and eleven by Pike. This is indicative of an annoying inattention by Pike when it comes to reading Lewis’s actual words. A small but telling example is his reference to “Controllers” when he means Lewis’s “Conditioners” (in Chapter 3 of *Abolition*). Lewis is quoted as castigating some modern school teachers for having “cut out his soul” (i.e. the pupil’s soul) when Lewis actually wrote, “. . . cut out from his soul, the possibility of having certain experiences” etc. (49). Pike also informs us erroneously that *Abolition* “was originally given as lectures to school teachers.” All this and much of the rest definitely won’t “guide students through the text,” as the volume’s preface promises. Most likely, it will serve to increase the confusion created by Lewis’s forceful yet essentially dispensable opening moves, by the slightly bizarre long subtitle Lewis chose for the book (as if he is mocking a mock scholarliness – an odd ruse which Owen Barfield might have been the only person in the world to properly enjoy and correctly discount at once), and by Lewis announcing the first actual step forward in his overall argument – the step from “the teaching of English” to the modern teacher’s “educational predicament” and hence to his real subject – by noting that he “must digress for a moment”!

The next essay’s title, “So How *Should* We Teach English?” suggests

that we may be going from bad to worse. Actually, though, Charlie Starr is perfectly aware that in taking *Abolition* as a starting point for exploring this theme, we “veer off” from “the book’s primary thesis,” defined as “the existence of objective values” (68). Starr’s basic motivation in writing this piece appears to be to help Christians “to be culturally relevant again” (65). His devotion to Lewis is beyond doubt (witness his bibliography) and it seems impossible to catch him misquoting Lewis or otherwise getting him wrong on any point. Whether he improves on Lewis is another question. This, surely, is a recurrent problem in all responsible writing about Lewis. Long passages quoting his own words are too often the best parts of such writing and sometimes the only inspiring parts. The point to note is that even if a way around this problem is found here, it still remains largely outside the scope of this volume—even though Lewis chose to mention “the teaching of English” in the very subtitle of his book.

Ironically, “Is *The Abolition of Man* Conservative?,” the title of the next piece, does seem a question worth addressing in this volume even though there is not a single instance of the word “conservative” or “conservatism” in *Abolition* (and only one instance of “progressive” as its opposite). The fact is that, as Francis J. Beckwith points out in his opening sentence, “conservative thinkers often cite [it] as if it were an essential text in the modern conservative canon.” What he wants to point out is that “there are certain conservatisms with which Lewis’ reasoning would not be at home” (83). Broadly, he distinguishes “the conservatism of the traditional moralist” from “market conservatism.” The latter he calls, cautiously enough, “not entirely congenial” to Lewis’s reasoning. This essay is one of the two shortest; a longer one might have profitably taken up some of such specific passages or ideas in *Abolition* as are actually cited in modern conservative discourse and explored their original meanings and contexts as compared with their meanings and contexts now.

Judith Wolfe’s equally short essay on “Theology in *The Abolition of Man*” takes up a theme that deserves attention precisely because it seems conspicuously absent from Lewis’s book. She notes the lack of “any metaphysical claims about the nature of the world” (100) as a problem, and concludes, in effect, that Lewis has not so much solved this problem as hidden it from view by merging two different senses of “objective value.” Had he properly honored the distinction, Wolfe argues, Lewis would have

been driven to a classic Christian position like that of Thomas Aquinas, or indeed like his own in his religious writings. Interesting passages from Aquinas are quoted in support of this. There are hints of over-subtlety in this critique. For example, as regards the distinction between two senses of “objective value,” many a reader on closer inspection of Lewis’s text may think there is no real problem here. Nor is it easy to recognize the “essential ambiguity” Wolfe points out between Lewis arguing both “that it is *impossible*” and that it is “*detrimental* to step outside the *Tao*” (103): what he actually declared impossible is to criticize “the *Tao* or anything else” after stepping outside it (“if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be”¹). If this essay nevertheless qualifies as one of the best in the volume, as it may well do for many readers, it is because it easily outdoes most of the others in exemplifying and thus encouraging a close interest in Lewis’s own thoughts and words. Here is how Lewis’s legacy is dealt with in a fruitful way, whether or not we agree with him or with each other. This is also the only essay that refers to “The Poison of Subjectivism,” one of *Abolition*’s two companion essays (as they might be called) of the same period; the other, “On Ethics,” has been passed over, which is regrettable.

Lewis counted *Abolition* among his best books, but Wolfe does not consider whether and how he might have denied the charge of a “lacuna” in it (101). Micah Watson, earlier in this volume, was happy to note that “We should not fault Lewis for failing to accomplish what he did not set out to do” and indeed, *pace* Wolfe, that “humanity’s ultimate purpose” is among the things for which we simply “need to go elsewhere” (41). Lewis might have defended his choice for a God-less case for objectivism about values, and maintained that the result was basically sound. Perhaps the question of a “lacuna” is decided by our readiness to recognize the author of *The Abolition of Man* as a twentieth-century philosopher rather than as a failed Aquinas or as a Christian apologist who must be half aware that he has mounted the wrong platform. If we do, then not only might the first essay in this volume have been entitled “*The Abolition of Man* as Philosophy”: also, the present essay might have asked “Is *The Abolition of Man* Theology?” and affirmed, once and for all, that it is not. There are, after all,

¹ Found about two-thirds through chapter 3, in the paragraph beginning with the words “From this point of view.” C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 72.

strong indications that Lewis is taking up here an issue he had been thinking through two decades earlier, back in his philosophical days. His own view of the book's relation to religion and Christianity, then, may have been that it was one potential stretch of the "road into Jerusalem" rather than a dubious, half-baked piece of theology.

The piece on science is by an expert in the field of genomics, David Ussery. In the last and eponymous chapter of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis's speculation on the final stage of "Man's conquest of Nature" is surely one of the most striking portions of the book. The present volume would be incomplete without an authority like Ussery stating his view of the matter. His view—modestly offered as that of one scientist, not of "Science", and "based on past experience and knowing genetics"—is that "trying to 'genetically engineer a superior race' won't work. But we can really create a big mess trying!" (125). A brief outline is given of the history of biology since 1943. For the rest, while the author notes that he is a long-time avid reader both of Lewis and of books about "science and religion," this piece seems to betray a hesitation to go very deeply into Lewis's own thoughts on science and religion. Lewis's suggestion in his third chapter that the triumphs of science "may have been too rapid" is quoted without the "may" (117) and then responded to with, "Wow, I'm sure this would offend many modern scientists!" Lewis's 1946 "Reply to Professor Haldane" is never mentioned.

Ussery's essay and the next, on "*The Abolition of Man* and British Techno-Futurism" by James A. Herrick, are the ones that most evidently fulfill the volume's promise to offer *contemporary* perspectives. Ussery, a real scientist in a highly relevant field, does not encourage us to be greatly alarmed by the current situation in that field—that is, alarmed for the reason which may seem to have motivated Lewis in 1943. Herrick is not a scientist but he does know much about mid-twentieth-century techno-futurism. He is profoundly concerned at the way Lewis's vision of a technology-driven "threat to the Christian worldview and ultimately to the survival of the human race" (136) has passed from 1940s fantasy to present-day reality: "The power to transform humanity at the genetic level is now in our hands" (150). Who is right—Herrick or Ussery? Here, as throughout this volume, it is for the reader to decide which of Lewis's ideas are ultimately being "advanced," or toned down, or perhaps neglected or misrepresented. A problem already noted above regarding the opening essay on Philosophy returns

with a vengeance in Herrick's essay. Alarmism reigns supreme, potentially blunting not only Lewis's philosophical point but the reader's sensitivity to it. Thus, quoting Lewis out of context as saying that *for scientists* "to be a friend of the World is to be an enemy of God," Herrick declares that "fierce resistance to Scientism and its agenda is not merely warranted, but morally required" (146; Lewis's point, in the "Reply to Professor Haldane," is about the meaning of "the World" and concerns an altogether different issue). The problem tabled by Lewis is, of course, that the very concept of moral requirements, in tandem with the concept of Man, has increasingly seemed to be melting into thin air. As Herrick notes, borrowing another idea from the "Reply to Professor Haldane," "The problem was 'philosophical, not scientific at all'" (145). Later in that same "Reply," he could have quoted Lewis describing the object of his attack in *Abolition*, very succinctly, as "a certain view about values." One wishes such warnings had been heeded. Of course, Lewis would presumably have shared most of the concerns expressed by Herrick, Pelser, Watson, Pike, and perhaps many other sympathetic commentators on *Abolition*. This does not mean, however, that he intended to say what they want to say.

The last essay, "Metaphors of Meaning: The Dance of Truth and Imagination in *That Hideous Strength*" by philosopher Scott B. Key, proposes to locate some specific "examples or occasions or metaphors" in Lewis's fantasy novel which unmistakably express "aspects of the argument" in *Abolition*. To this end, Key first formulates "the central argument" of *Abolition*, declaring it to be "an exercise in meta-ethical reasoning" (156). For those who have always thought of *The Abolition of Man* as a philosophy book, this is a relief at last. So, indeed, is the rest of this essay, as the reader is presented with a tightly organized and wonderfully systematic execution of Key's program under the successive headings of what he presents as the three major dichotomies of "the Enlightenment Project": Fact versus Value, Truth versus Meaning, and Reason versus Imagination. This essay is also to be commended in being the only one in the collection to cite and consider the way Lewis actually used the phrase "abolition of man." Perhaps surprisingly in view of Key's approach, even he never cites the final sentence of *Abolition*. This omission is, however, amply compensated for by his concluding quotation from *That Hideous Strength*: the revived magician Merlin's exclamation, in Latin, that, "They that have despised the word of God, from

them shall the word of man also be taken away." (172). In the stimulating context of this essay, it is as if we are suddenly hearing the Celtic prophet's paraphrase of Lewis's "To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see." In the end, Merlin's Dark-Age perspective on *The Abolition of Man* turns out to be as illuminating as any contemporary one.

On balance, it would seem hard to claim that this volume has achieved the purpose stated in the Introduction. The root of the trouble appears to be a failure to specify the "level of difficulty" that is mentioned in the Introduction as the likely cause of "a lacuna in the literature." Surely, the obvious way forward after mentioning this lacuna would have been to define the precise problem and then push ahead with a solution: that is, to describe the nature of the difficulty, and then offer a remedy. This course has not been taken. Even so, and while it is generally true that no book should be condemned for failing to be a different book, it seems useful here to venture some guesses as to what would have happened if the straightforward problem-solving course had been taken.

The volume might then have been organized around two main areas of concern: text and context. Taking context first, there is obviously the corpus of Lewis's own writings including the 3,500-odd pages of his fully indexed *Collected Letters*. Further, *Abolition* was conceived as the fifteenth series of Riddell Memorial Lectures delivered at the University of Durham: telling readers a little about this platform and the fourteen speakers who preceded Lewis on it would seem another good way to help them find the right approach to his 1943 performance. The possible relationship to his own philosophical exploits and ambitions in the early 1920s has already been noted. One essay in the present collection briefly describes the thought of "three prominent early twentieth-century British techno-futurists." This is helpful as far as it goes, but it is almost the only passage of its sort, and hardly provides an exhaustive account of "the intellectual context" of *Abolition* (135, 139ff). Given the prominent place Lewis accorded to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* for his "Illustrations of the Tao," a word on that monumental series might be in place. His choice for a textbook on English as a starting point is almost certainly explained by a remarkable episode of his "war work" which appears to have gone entirely unnoticed so far, but which has recently been discovered by this journal's general editor, Bruce R. Johnson. At the other end of *Abolition*, Lewis's speculation on "a new

Natural Philosophy” or “regenerate science” and his very cautious reference there to Goethe and “Dr. Steiner” are pointers to his long personal history of controversy with his anthroposophical friend Owen Barfield, who perhaps never praised a book by Lewis more emphatically than this one. The crucial final excursion on magic and science in the sixteenth century may invite notes on Lewis’s professional specialism and his view of the Renaissance as a period of “new learning and new ignorance” or a movement which “did not make men, in all senses, more *civilized*.”

As for the text, if students are to be guided through it, a summary might help. Also, if readers have difficulties, the possibility should always be explored that the writer is at least partly to blame: the best of writers have their off moments. In the present case, while Lewis seems to have been clear in his own mind about the nature of the climax he was building towards, he also seems to have been somehow disinclined to keep his audience on track. In terms of overall textual structuring, the first chapter is a bad start; its final paragraph leaves the reader guessing what, if anything, will follow. Yet for readers who doubt whether the book has a climax at all, the search for clues need not be very long. There are at least two of them. The most obvious clue that Lewis provided is, surely, the book’s title, being identical to the title of the climactic final chapter and fully explained when it appears almost halfway through that chapter as the last four words of the tenth paragraph (or eighth paragraph in the first edition). The other clue is the final sentence.

Surely these suggestions are not the last word on how to find a large and understanding audience for Lewis’s only work of mere philosophy. For now, that quest continues.