

THE ABOLITION OF STUDENTS

Rebekah Valerius on the Consequences of
Naturalism on Campus

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.¹ Proverbs 4:7

One has only to look at recent student protests on college campuses across the nation to realize that something has gone terribly wrong with our young people. Students are condemning their universities' faculty and administrative bodies for improperly handling the students' emotional needs. They are demanding that anything deemed as potentially offensive or upsetting be either labeled with "trigger warnings" or completely removed from the campuses. Righteous indignation and zeal fuel the charges of insensitivity coming from these students. They feel disenfranchised and the faculty and

¹ Proverbs 4:7 (NIV).

administration are beyond perplexed at the fragile sensibilities of these kids, worrying that academic freedom will be lost at the expense of keeping them happy. Communication has become virtually impossible as a breakdown in language between these older and younger generations becomes more apparent. The atmosphere is oppressive and filled with confusion and a sense of urgency. Rumors of war can be heard.

It is war indeed, but I contend that it is not primarily between the students and their faculty. At least, it is not directly between them. The core of the battle comes from deep within these young people's hearts. Their "instincts are at war."² Their demands for sensitivity do not originate from emotions that have been harmonized with respect to some external, objective value system. Instead, they originate from the only option left when such externals are removed and all statements of value are relegated to the subjective obscurity of their instincts. These demands for security and comfort arise from a cacophony of disordered emotions. Christian scholar and apologist C.S. Lewis would tell us that the cries emanate from a host of untrained emotions that are screaming for validation in a

² C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1955), 91.

world stripped of transcendence and dominated by naturalistic assumptions about reality.

Lewis predicted this instability in 1943 as he delivered a series of talks for the Riddell Memorial Lectures. These lectures would later be compiled as one of his most prescient works, *The Abolition of Man*. This short book provides needed insight into the chaos on the college campuses of today. If Christians wish to reach these young people with the truth of our Lord, they should pay heed to the diagnosis Lewis gives in this book. In explaining the route we have taken into this mess, Lewis also shows us a way out.

Though “naturalism” is never mentioned directly, Lewis deftly leads the reader to an understanding of the limiting and destructive effects that metaphysical naturalism has on society and human nature. This philosophy was prominent in the writing of his book and it dominates today, permeating almost every aspect of our modern world, especially our education system. Lewis shows that naturalism not only subjectivizes morality by insisting on a material account of its origins, but it reduces our apprehension of good and evil to mere animal instincts, stripping them of any objective value beyond that of the atoms that constitute our universe. In practice, naturalism might have enabled us to gain more control over

certain aspects of Nature, but when morality and human reason are forced into its reductionist box, Nature wins a disabling and permanent upper hand. Through such a philosophy we pass from molecules to man and back to molecules by necessity. Lewis writes, “as soon as we take the final step of reducing our own species to the level of mere Nature, the whole process is stultified, for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same.”³

Since the time of his writing, the conquest and sacrifice have advanced considerably. Lewis notes that this approach to understanding morality is unprecedented in human history. Before now, the recognition of a transcendent, objective morality (which he refers to as the *Tao*), has always formed the basis of ordering human societies. In particular, he argues, education has hitherto been approached as training the young to “feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which [objectively] really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful.”⁴ In other words, education for the young involved training them to use their reasoning faculty to align their emotions with an objective truth. Lewis calls this process the development of

³ Ibid., 83.

⁴ Ibid., 27.

what he labels the “chest”, “the indispensable liaison officer” between Man’s intellect and his animal appetites. Lewis asserts that it is by this very “chest” or “middle element that man is man.”⁵

Admittedly, societies thus grounded have not been ideal, but the failure is on mankind’s side, Lewis contends, through his misunderstanding and misapplication of this complex moral reality. He writes that these discrepancies can be accounted for by advancement or variations on a theme, but the spirit and heart of this *Tao* remain unchanged and consistent across cultures and time. In fact, it is by this very *Tao* that the adaptation process is guided.

Today, however, with the destruction of such transcendence and the ascendancy of naturalism, the young are no longer taught to look beyond this world to order either their reasoning faculty or emotions. This “chest” by which we are raised above our animal instincts is no longer developed, as a result. Lewis shows the reader that when external reference points are removed, all judgments of value must ultimately refer back to one’s own subjective feelings. And, the measure of their validity necessarily resides no longer in the “chests” from of old, but in the emotions themselves. The relative frequency and intensity of these sensibilities are the

⁵ Ibid., 34.

only means by which they can be both judged and validated. What this teaches students is that they must “take their impulses as they come”, leaving everyone as “creatures of wholly irrational behavior.”⁶

In addition to removing this external reference point, a society that rejects a transcendent *Tao* is no longer able to make the kind of advancements in its application that it has in the past. Though, as Lewis points out, “the human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary color,”⁷ that does not stop us from trying, at least for now. The *Imago Dei* with which we have been endowed is difficult to suppress, and the *Tao* still exerts its influence. This results in society attempting to build a value system from outside of the letter and heart of the *Tao*, not being raised and nurtured from within. Lacking a respect for its unity, they will grab at whatever of its virtues seem convenient at the moment. These fragments dominate the untrained emotions left in the void where a moderating “chest” once existed. The chasm between intellect and emotion is widened further by their unchecked force. This utilitarian approach to building a value system leads to a host of

⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁷ Ibid., 56-57.

contradictions and unhealthy emphases. Lewis asserts, “From within the *Tao* itself comes the only authority to modify the *Tao*.”⁸ More light begins to shine on the chaos on our college campuses.

Generations later, this reductive understanding of reality and approach to virtue is now entrenched in our education system. Its effects can be especially detected in the areas of education that surround value, ethics, morality, the social sciences, and the arts. Indeed, the university itself seems to be split along what Lewis calls “the world of facts, without one trace of value, and the world of feelings without one trace of truth”,⁹ since for generations it has been divided between the utilitarian and value-stripped pursuits in the sciences and business schools on the one hand, and the ideology-laden conditioning centers of the humanities on the other. In the end, these two areas of the modern university “confront one another, and no *rapprochement* is possible.”¹⁰

This idea of the “world of facts” and the “world of feelings”¹¹ being in complete discord and unable to communicate is perfectly illustrated by the clash between academic freedom and a perceived freedom

⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹ Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 30-31.

to not be offended or made to feel uncomfortable. Lewis could not have asked for a better example of his thesis that removing external reference points and subjectivizing morality creates a void between the “cerebral man” and the “visceral man,” human intellect and human appetite, and in this case, the virtue of truth-seeking and extreme feelings of discomfort. He would tell us that communication between the two has broken down because their interpreter has been excised. These students “without chests” are not able to moderate their feelings of discomfort when disquieting truths or subjects are discussed in the name of academic freedom in these institutions of higher learning.

And when the untrained emotion of discomfort and academic freedom clash, the emotion will win every time. Indeed, “without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism,” Lewis wrote.¹² Without “chests,” the students are bullying their universities into limiting a vital component in the pursuit of truth, the freedom to explore all ideas, even those that may make one uncomfortable. That the search for truth, a value necessary for society’s advancement, could ever be impeded by fears of discomfort seems like the last thing that could have happened in an

¹² *Ibid.*, 33-34.

academic culture that once prized the freedom to question everything. In fact, it seems as if many in the academic realm are still in shock that things have come to this. That students would be willing to place their irrational feelings over the search for reasonable truth, that they would not be able to cope with the discomfort some truths or discussions may produce, seems to have taken their professors by surprise. That they would demand that classic works of literature and learning, even course syllabi contain “trigger warning” labels for containing potentially stress-inducing material seems ludicrous. Why can’t these kids just simply cope? Why must they compare the stress they feel to the post-traumatic stress of combat veterans? Why can’t they simply control these emotions and appreciate the greater good of pursuing truth?

The Abolition of Man would provide answers for the older generations if they would stop and listen. These students behave this way because the facility for ordering such goods as truth, tolerance, compassion, and comfort has not been developed. The older generations did not pass on their “chests” for they were too busy paying lip-service to debunking them, all the while hypocritically retaining their own. For these kids, all that is left to do the ordering are their instincts and emotions. And deeper still, they have been trained to

view these emotions as subjective and, in an ultimate sense, valueless. This belief alone produces its own particular form of angst that accompanies the feelings of discomfort. The felt intensity of these untrained faculties drowns out any wisdom their reason might try to contribute to the process. They are like toddlers who have not been taught how to control their emotions.

Lewis would not have been shocked at this turn of events though, for he predicted this infantilizing of students decades ago. These split campuses will only be reunited when these students are given “chests” and taught to moderate their desires for security and validation with the virtue of truth. Only then can the naturalistic assumptions that are the root cause be de-throned. The debunking process must end. Who will do this for them? The process of giving them “chests” to begin with will both secure and validate them in the solid “belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things [they] are.”¹³ There is a truth beyond the world of the science lab and five senses, and in that truth, a stability is to be found.

This inability to cope with discomfoting speech is not only a threat to higher education but at a more

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

fundamental level, it threatens the openness to any truth. Therefore, by logical extension, and this is something every Christian apologist needs to understand, it can seriously inhibit one's ability to pursue Him Who is Truth embodied.¹⁴ Also, I submit that understanding this is not the only requirement for those engaged in cultural apologetics. Understanding must be coupled with compassion or else any truth an apologist might try to impart will not be heard over the din of uncontrolled emotional reactions. We cannot expect people to have "ears to hear"¹⁵ without a "chest" to interpret and moderate.

Christianity contains both comforting and highly disquieting truths (like salvation and sin) and a proper understanding and acceptance of its tenets require one to come to terms with both of these aspects of the Gospel. It is these disconcerting truths that will challenge the untrained sensibilities of this young generation. Yet, the basis of our faith rests on an acknowledgment and acceptance of these.

Given these potential roadblocks to evangelism, how do Christian apologists proceed in such a hyper-sensitive environment? Oddly enough, I believe that the best approach to take is one that will not only

¹⁴ John 14:6 (NIV).

¹⁵ Mark 4:23 (NIV).

give these students the vital “chests” they need to cope with the angst that is left when their world is stripped of objective value, but it will provide apologists with the opportunity to fine-tune their own sensibilities with respect to God’s moral law (after all this law is supremely personal and relational as it is grounded in His Person). Indeed, given the latter, I suspect that the best apologetic is one that is undergirded by a harmony of properly ordered virtues, with the virtue of compassionate gentleness to soothe the untrained emotions leading the way. Timely wisdom can be found for us in the Proverb that “a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”¹⁶

Also, I contend that our own Christian sensibilities have been more affected by the naturalistic cultural milieu than we like to admit. This is evidenced by some of the approaches to apologetics that can be seen today. We have a tendency to value truth above all other virtues and our delivery is often devoid of pity and gentleness. It is difficult not to be repulsed by these student’s demands for validation regardless of truth, especially when we know Truth Himself. Yet, we have to resist this reaction, for it often leads us to excise compassion from our delivery. Such lack of

¹⁶ Proverbs 15:1 (NIV).

grace will only ensure that walls will be built and ears will be shut because security and comfort feel threatened. Our “chests” must be fully functioning, as well.

Therefore, a holistic approach to apologetics is required, one where all the virtues of the Spirit can be heard (and felt) in their melodious splendor. Truth aligned with “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”¹⁷ is the powerful antidote to these students' inability to cope with their feelings when the painful realities of the Gospel are disclosed. They need to be gently led from their “safe-spaces” and “trigger warnings” with a compassion that shows respect and validation in accordance with the *Imago Dei* that their naturalism-derived education has stolen from them. In seeking this ideal, we will be able to both model and inculcate an operating “chest” (or conscience) for these kids. We must become the living embodiment of what Lewis refers to as the old way of educating where “the old initiated . . . and dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV).

¹⁸ Lewis, 32-33.

I strongly suspect that this apprentice-style approach will stand out, as well, from that of these students' college administrators and professors who are caving in to demands like indulgent parents. My hope is that they will perceive that such an approach speaks to the validation they are yearning for. It will stand in stark contrast to the patronizing appeasements of their universities. Ours must be an approach that appeals to the glorifying *Imago Dei* in all of us that raises us above the beast of the field.¹⁹

And, as image bearers, we can tap into the influence that the *Tao* still has on the instrument of their conscience. We can simultaneously validate the isolated and swollen virtues that wreak havoc on their hearts and teach them to place them within their proper and moderating context of the *Tao*. Only then can we begin to use apologetics to fully disentangle the web of deceit and obfuscation created by naturalism. Helping these students reunite intellects and appetites will indeed raise them up, once again, above its dehumanizing forces, and prepare the way for the Gospel to be heard.

One final note, I believe that God has given apologists some wise “grown birds”²⁰ to learn from, as well, in this delicate “chest” transplant

¹⁹ Genesis 2:15 (NIV).

²⁰ Lewis, 32.

operation. In fact, *The Abolition of Man* itself is written in such a way that is very instructive for us in this area. Lewis's audience was comprised of this older generation of "chest" debunkers and hyper-skeptics. Although more moderated with the remnants of consciences they had been given from older generations, they too had their own "triggers." Lewis knew full well that certain words would send his hearers into shut-down mode. He tailored his message and terms such that any potential stumbling blocks, like the mention of the Bible or Christianity or Christ, were carefully avoided. For example, instead of using the term Moral Law, Lewis called it the *Tao*, a term more acceptable to the sensitivities of these Western skeptics. Of course, this approach is much more difficult, for it requires a kind of skilled maneuvering that avoids compromise. Yet, I believe Lewis was successful. We young birds can indeed learn from this old bird's gentle and civilized, back door take-down of naturalism.

The wisest man wrote, "Meaningless! Meaningless . . . Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."²¹ I believe that this is the unconscious cry coming from these college students' hearts. And, they are correct if the naturalism that has been

²¹ Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV).

handed down to them by their teachers is true. Unlike older generations, they cannot hide behind a hypocritical borrowing from objective morality, thus they cannot bury the anxiety this lack of meaning produces. Perhaps their cries will serve as a wake-up call. We can hope for as much.

Christians have a unique opportunity to answer their cry and demonstrate the inadequacy of the naturalistic worldview that produced it. But first, let us get our own “chests” in order, for it will take all the fruit of the Spirit to engage these wild and untrained hearts. There is a way to cloak the truth in compassion in our words without compromising it. That is a skill that requires much work and wisdom (and prayer!). That is a skill that will become increasingly necessary as our culture becomes more fraught with untrained emotions. Yet, committing to the struggle of balancing the two, as hard as it is, is the essence of grace.

And what other option do we have, being the recipients of such grace ourselves?

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