

BOOK REVIEW: AFTER HUMANITY

Jason Smith on Michael Ward's New Release

*After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis's The
Abolition of Man* by Michael Ward

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Initial Impressions

A review is a form of response, and if we are to respond to Michael Ward's *After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man* from within the *Tao* insofar as we are capable, the first thing we shall have to admit about this book is that its appearance is beautiful. A well-designed dust jacket featuring a spectacular waterfall image wraps a green cloth hardcover. This is a pairing suited to form and function, for "the well-known story of Coleridge at the waterfall," as related in "The Green Book" by Gaius and Titius, provided Lewis the pretext for writing *Abolition*. And the title, *After Humanity*, is perfectly evocative both of *Abolition* and of Alasdair MacIntyre's famous work *After Virtue*, a related book

to which Ward devotes several pages of discussion. Copies of *After Humanity* are bundled with a lovely paperback reprint of *The Abolition of Man* bound in a coordinating cover (fig. 1).



Figure 1

Unfortunately our acknowledgment of visual beauty must stop at the cover, due to some regrettable formatting choices in the interior. Fonts throughout are about one point too small (except for

direct quotes from *Abolition* in the “Commentary and Gloss” section, which are needlessly large). The book makes use of both endnotes (for citations) as well as footnotes (for side comments and suggestions of additional resources and comparative reading). In the main body of the book (“Commentary and Gloss”) this tripartite division is well-managed, but in the early chapters there is no readily-discernible *schema* for why some paragraphs are included in the main text *vs.* being relegated to a footnote, or why *c.f.s* and citations with very short comments could not have been pushed to the endnotes. Footnotes take up significant sections of most early pages, sometimes breaking across pages, all of which makes for a rather spaghetti reading experience.

Organization thus muddles content, rendering the subtitle not quite apt: personally, I should have preferred “A Critical Companion” to “A Guide”. For though there is guidance aplenty in these pages, thoroughly awakening the reader to Lewis’ context (historical and philosophical), references, subtleties, and so on, the organization is not so unified or singular in its flow as to justify the grammar and title of “A Guide.” More than a few fans of Michael Ward’s *Planet Narnia* will, one suspects, be surprised to find that *After Humanity* more closely resembles

a critical edition of *Abolition* than a guided expedition through a sophisticated piece of Lewisian terrain. *Abolition's* territory includes many tributaries and branchings, ideologically speaking, and Ward is keen to orient us for further exploration along them all.

So come we to the content. And O Glories, the content! Ward once confessed to me, tongue-in-cheek (but also, I think, with characteristically apt humility) that he does not in fact have the whole of Lewis's corpus in his memory. Well, you wouldn't know it, would you? Not from *After Humanity* anyway. Owen Barfield has been quoted as characterizing the peculiarity of Lewis's "presence of mind" as such that "somehow what he thought about everything was secretly present in what he thought about anything."¹ Ward has a gift for adroitly demonstrating how well Lewis' written legacy supports this assertion. Just as *Planet Narnia* provides a *tour de force* of the significance of medieval cosmology to nearly all of Lewis' major works (and not a few minor ones as well), so *After Humanity* reveals the relevance of *Abolition's* key

¹ Tennyson, G.B., *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*, quoted in Birzer, Bradley J. "Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis" (Online: *The Imaginative Conservative* 2018)
<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/07/owen-barfield-c-s-lewis-g-b-tennyson-bradley-birzer.html>

ideas to a plethora of Lewis' other books, addresses, debates, and sundry professional activities.

On top of that, Ward brings to bear content and commentary from, by my hasty estimate, roughly 200 other scholars and authors. This added depth and dimension to the study of Lewis's slim little work could easily have felt overwhelming, but Ward's able organization of his research makes this whole 240-page *Guide* (or "Critical Companion") digestible during just a few hours.

Reflections on Content

After Humanity begins with six short chapters covering, respectively, *Abolition's* reception, historical and philosophical context, overview, religious import and intent, Lewis's ideological-biographical background leading up to it, and its legacy. The bulk of the book (144 pages) is taken up with a "Commentary and Gloss," which is perhaps best absorbed side-by-side with a direct reading of *Abolition*. A 22-page Conclusion caps off the main work, in which Ward offers summative reflections following the themes of 'Prophecy', 'Poetry', 'Participation', and 'Power'. Finally, in what feels like the bookish equivalent of a post-credit scene *a la* the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the found sonnet "Imagine" by Malcolm Guite follows more typical

back matter of discussion questions, endnotes, bibliography, and index to end the book proper.

Central to *Abolition*, and therefore to *After Humanity*, is Lewis's formulation of the *Tao*. Briefly summarized, this is the axiom that things merit responses; that these merited responses originate from the things' own nature and not from within the observer or interactor; and that the responses actually enacted by free-willed beings can conform more or less perfectly to the merited response.

This axiom forms the basis of "practical reason" and is the foundation on which all human moral systems are constructed, across all cultures, religions, and philosophies. Even though these moral systems go on to differ from one another in their particulars (in accord with culture, religion, philosophy, and so on), they all start from the notion that "oughts" or obligations exist, not fundamentally because of inner compulsion, nor because of social consensus, but merely because some responses to real situations and things are a better "fit" than other responses. To be consciously within the *Tao* is simply to acknowledge that value judgments can be based on something actual. Moreover, Lewis points out, there is a common cross-cultural consensus as to what the most basic of these meritorious responses concern. And

although it is possible to disagree over the exact response best suited to a given situation, it is not possible to disagree with the basic premise that responses have value. We debate over degrees, but not kinds, of morality. There are no “other” kinds.

It was therefore with increasing frustration that I kept on reading other *Abolition* critics quoted in *After Humanity* that seemed to commit the error -- in language, not in thought -- of implying that those whom Lewis criticizes (whether relativists, subjectivists, or logical positivists) could somehow operate from outside the *Tao*. Lewis’s whole point, surely, is that it *is not possible* to be outside the *Tao*. One cannot argue, or advocate, or indeed agitate (“protest”, in MacIntyre’s terms), for *anything* without making a value judgment. That includes advancing the claim that “all value judgments are subjective” because, if valid, that claim would include itself and therefore be subjective, no more worth considering than any other claim.

I was therefore much relieved to read Ward’s discussion on ‘Participation’ in the conclusion, which clarifies this point beautifully using an analogy from physics. As in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, where measuring one property of a subatomic particle affects its other properties because the measurer is always

inextricably involved in the process, so it is in ethics. We cannot extricate ourselves from moral reality by denying its existence, because we cannot assert any reason for doing so that is not, at root, based on a value claim. When we act, it is always because we deem that action (or inaction, itself a form of action) better than the alternatives.

That is why, as Ward explains, Lewis emphasized the “practical” aspect of the *Tao*. It is “impractical,” i.e. impossible, to act any other way. And when people try, what they succeed in doing is not getting outside the *Tao*, but in consciously suppressing certain kinds of value judgments while leaving themselves open, consciously or subconsciously, to acting according to others. When the Head is engaged in these sorts of suppressive activities, the Belly -- representing the emotions and biological senses and appetites, or “animal” instincts -- steadily waxes in influence, while the Chest -- representing the human capacity to train our emotions and desires to “approve what [we] ought” -- atrophies. This gradual process is the first stage in the “abolition” of humanness.

What *Abolition* and *After Humanity* both dance around, but do not fully articulate, is the apparent challenge to the *Tao* presented by human lived experience. It feels truer to my immediate conscious

perception that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” than that people “give delighted praise to beauty” because they have been trained to recognize it.² Something, it seems, in our experience of one another’s value judgments is relative. But what?

At issue is not the question of *absolute relativity* between equally valid perspectives, but rather *relative capacity* for recognition of the absolute. Finding myself in a crowded room with no source of light, I and my companions would blunder into one another in our quest to find the door. This would not be because we are in fact invisible, but rather because we lack the capacity to perceive one another’s precise positions from afar in total darkness. If we could develop our sense capacities to include echolocation, or sight in the infrared spectrum, we would be better able to respond appropriately to our situation.

This illustration helps, I hope, to define a mistake commonly made by those who acknowledge the *Tao*: that of assuming one’s own perceptive capacity correlates nearly (or nearly enough) to reality. It is true that variances in personal preference -- “taste,” if you like -- or even moral insight do not therefore mean the *Tao* is

² Ward, *After Humanity*, 69

baseless or arbitrary. Equally *non sequitur* is the presumption that consensus of disapproval or approbation among those who share one's own views represents the nearest possible conformity to the best-befitting response. Acting as if it does is a form of pride, and further muddies the water for those who do not yet see the *Tao* for what it is. In terms of our example of the crowded unlit room, the former error is like claiming all human bodies are invisible when we are really in the dark. The latter error is like being given infrared goggles and then claiming that the natural color of all human bodies is orange and yellow. Just because a capacity is enhanced does not mean it is complete.

The “real moral advancement” that Lewis (and numerous critics cited by Ward) agree is possible “from within the *Tao*” consists of new developments in recognizant capacity. *After Humanity* follows Lewis in discussing the development from the “Silver Rule” (“Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you”) to the “Golden” (“Do as you would be done by”). Another example is the claim made by the U.S. Declaration of Independence that it is “self-evident . . . that all men are created equal.” This sweeping moral pronouncement represented a real advance relative to other claims -- for example, claims of inherent differences in value

between hereditary aristocrats and the general populace -- but it was also, at the time, effectively limited by the legal definition of “all men” to, practically speaking, male landowners of European descent. Nevertheless, its pronouncement propelled the United States onto a contentious journey to understand and to actualize this ideal -- a journey that the nation is still undertaking. Our capacity to recognize to whom “all men” ought to refer, and what equality ought to mean in fact -- and then to respond to those recognitions appropriately -- has grown and is still growing.

To pursue our full humanity, then, is not merely to acknowledge the *Tao* in principle, but also (1) to seek greater alignment in deed, in feeling, and in thought with the *Tao* inasmuch as we are capable of recognizing it; (2) to seek the expansion of our capacity to recognize those “oughts” and apt responses inherent to the mere existence of things; and (3) to act accordingly.

Another area of attention paid in *After Humanity* with which I was particularly pleased was Ward’s engagement (in the conclusion on ‘Power’ and elsewhere; see footnote 3) with the Horace quote *dulce et decorum est* -- both concerning patriotic death and concerning the broader issue to which the example points, that of death for a good cause.

Ward's treatment serves as counterpoise to certain of Malcolm Guite's remarks at the installation of the Lewis memorial in Poets' Corner, which compares Lewis's comments in *Abolition* to poet Wilfred Owen's treatment of the same line from Horace and suggests that Lewis "blunders wide-eyed" into the use of an ill-calculated example.³ Ward untangles the mismatch by rightly pointing out that where Lewis was writing favorably of the idea of "death for a good cause" in its best or idealized sense, Owen and fellow-poet Ezra Pound were writing against recent examples of its abuse by politicians seeking cannon fodder.⁴

Lastly, in his commentary on Part 3 of *Abolition*, Ward offers several reasons why this latter section - - the "techno-futurist" or transhumanist section -- is weakest of the three. His argument took me aback, simply because it is contrary to my formative experience of the book. I first read *Abolition* as a child of about 10, and found the earliest section so bewildering it was not until I read far enough into the latter sections that I was able to understand it

³ Malcolm Guite, "'The Abolition of Man: From Literary Criticism to Poetic Resistance,'" appearing in *C.S. Lewis at Poet's Corner*, ed. Michael Ward and Peter S. Williams (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2016) 161.

⁴ C.f. *After Humanity* p. 75-77, 91-93, and 193-198

retrospectively. At that age, I had no background in “the well-known story of Coleridge at the waterfall,” let alone logical positivism or practical reason or even education theory. *Abolition* begins from a point of extreme abstraction and reasons its way thence to the concrete and, ultimately, to the prophetic. Ward may well be correct that Lewis is most sure of his footing the more philosophic and theoretical his material, but as a lay reader I found it much easier to meet him on that ground by coming round the back door; *i.e.*, by way of his prophetic imagination. And, as one whose day job supports a medical device design and development firm, I’m confident that because we live in an eminently pragmatic age, this third section has accounted for and will increasingly drive *Abolition’s* ongoing relevance and popular attraction. It is highly plausible that we will be living in something akin to the *Gattaca*-future, with its attendant pressures on parents-to-be, by the 100th publication anniversary of *The Abolition of Man*.

Possible Shortcomings

To include everything that might be included in a “Critical Companion” like *After Humanity* would be impossible. Nevertheless, there were a couple of omissions surprising enough to me to mention them here.

First, Ward traces Lewis's ideas of participation and experiential-analytic categories ("Looking At" vs. "Looking Along" in the parlance of 'Meditation in a Toolshed') to Samuel Alexander's categories of Contemplation vs Enjoyment from his book *Space, Time, and Deity*, but not through Alexander to St. Augustine, in whose work *On Christian Doctrine* these categories previously appear; this despite discussing Lewis's debt to several of Augustine's other major works. Lewis's short story "The Man Born Blind" would also seem to be an obvious inclusion on this subject, yet it is left curiously unmentioned.

Similarly, although Ward mentions Chesterton, including a passage from *Orthodoxy*, he brings in neither Chesterton's discussion of "the thought that kills thought," nor his idea about tradition as a "democracy of the dead," both of which would seem plausibly influential upon various of *Abolition's* arguments.

Finally, I would have enjoyed at least a brief exploration of *Abolition's* possible debts to, and impacts upon, pop culture outside of Lewis's own fiction. I mentioned *Gattaca* above; other low-hanging fruit includes the film *The Island* and Kazuo Ishiguro's heartbreaking novel *Never Let Me Go*. Dystopian "scientifiction", as it was known in

Lewis's day, must surely have played a role in his conception of the Conditioners (Ward does mention Huxley at one point in the Gloss, but not in reference to Huxley's fiction). One presumes this exclusion was deliberately made for the sake of keeping *After Humanity's* scope manageable. Whatever the reason, room has been left for tracing the treatment of *Abolition's* themes out of and back into nonfiction contexts.

Conclusion

Quibbles over left-out things notwithstanding, *After Humanity* is such a wide-ranging book that I have only been able to flash a torch down a few of the trails it marks in this review. Awkwardnesses of formatting and organization are real impediments, yet the contents overall represent comprehensive and genuinely illuminating map-and-fieldnotes for the territory. I have been reading *Abolition* for nearer thirty years than twenty, and lucid though it is, reading *Abolition* is best served by keeping entire humanities curricula at the forefront of one's brain. But if you can't do that (God knows I can't), then keeping *After Humanity* close to hand will do instead.

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