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The Discarded Image and the Debunked *Tao*: Objective Value in C.S. Lewis' Medieval Model and His Critique of Modernity

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Abstract: This paper considers C.S. Lewis' "doctrine of objective value" in two of his major works, *The Abolition of Man* and *The Discarded Image*. Lewis uses the Chinese name *Tao*, albeit with an incomplete understanding of its origins, for the objective worldview. The paper argues that *Tao*, as an explicit theme of *The Abolition of Man*, is also a determining undercurrent in *The Discarded Image*. In the former work, *Tao* is what Lewis wants to defend and restore against twentieth-century secular ideologies, which Lewis condemns as infected with "the poison of subjectivism". In the latter work, where Lewis presents one of the best accounts of the European medieval model of the Universe, objective value (the *Tao* in Lewis' argument) underlies both how the model has been shaped, and how Lewis, as a medievalist, accounts for and draws upon it as an intellectual and spiritual resource. The purpose of this parallel study is to show that Lewis' explication of the *Tao* in *The Abolition of Man*, which is a "built-in", implicit belief in *The Discarded Image*, provides a critique of tendencies towards the subjectivism prevalent in Lewis' lifetime. These tendencies can be traced into the moral relativism, pluralism and reductionism of the twenty-first century, giving Lewis' work the status of twentieth-century prophecy.

Keywords: C.S. Lewis; objective value; *Tao*; Medieval Model; subjectivism; modernity; critique

1. Introduction

The Discarded Image (1964) and *The Abolition of Man* (1943) are two monuments in C.S. Lewis' writing career that bear witness to the union of two of his most competent and courageous roles within the intellectual milieu of the first half of the twentieth century: the medievalist and the defender of the "doctrine of objective value".

As a medievalist, Lewis offers in *The Discarded Image* one of the best accounts of the European Medieval Model of the universe: a Christocentric, hierarchical, harmonious and spiritually meaningful model of the universe—the medieval "joyful cosmology"¹—which had long been discarded since the Copernican revolution initiated a shift of paradigm and replaced the warm, lighted medieval heavens with the cold, darkened modern space. This model of the Universe, however, is where Lewis finds himself spiritually restful and aesthetically satisfied due to its "built-in" objective values and "achieved perfection"²; hence, he avows: "I have made no serious effort to hide the fact that the old Model delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors."³ In this Model, which he delineates

¹ (Kreeft 1994, p. 165).

² (Lewis 1964, p. 204).

³ (Lewis 1964, p. 216).

with his typical engaging and “immensely learned”⁴ style, there is the implication of a determining undercurrent which contributes to the “*grande clarté*”⁵ of an age that used to be maligned as “the dark ages”. This undercurrent, I would argue, can be understood as what Lewis speaks powerfully for and prophetically about in *The Abolition of Man*, i.e., the “doctrine of objective value.”

As a combatant defender of the “doctrine of objective value”, he appropriates in *Abolition* a term from the ancient Chinese philosophy, the “*Tao*”, albeit with inadequate understanding of its origin, to refer to what he believes is a universally shared conception “in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike,”⁶ i.e., the “doctrine of objective value”. As Lewis states, it is “the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”⁷ This definition of “doctrine of objective value” is given with his acute awareness of and alertness toward the “false philosophy” of “subjectivism”, which was becoming prevalent in Lewis’ time and, to most of us, is apparently more so in the present-day world of multi-culturalism. Such philosophy debunks the traditional *Tao*, and subjectifies, relativizes, and finally, nullifies the objective reality of value judgments, but meanwhile feeds upon some “shreds” of the *Tao* for the “innovation” of another set of beliefs, a sort of “artificial *Tao*”, to serve the “pleasure” or whim of certain ideology manipulators whom Lewis called “Conditioners”. The principle upon which such “artificial *Tao*” is built is “*sic volo, sic jubeo (This I will, this I command)*.”⁸ Lewis warns, this is a doctrine which will lead to “the destruction of the society, ” and which “if we accept we die.”⁹

Although neither “objective value” nor “*Tao*” ever appears in the text of *The Discarded Image*, nor does *The Abolition of Man* make mention of the Medieval Model specifically as its reference frame for critiquing modern subjectivism, I would argue that the “doctrine of objective value”, i.e., the *Tao*, is strongly present in the Model with its belief in the idea of the divine Absolute as an objectively transcendent Other, though immanent as well, and as the source of all derivative values which partake of the objective reality of the divine Absolute. On the other hand, it is “the wise men of old”¹⁰ and the “older systems” “prescribed by the *Tao*”¹¹ in which the Medieval Model was based that Lewis ultimately draws his strength from for his attack on the debunkers of the traditional *Tao* and the innovator-conditioners of the “artificial *Tao*.”

This essay is intended, therefore, to accomplish three tasks based on the inter-textual relationship between these two major works by Lewis, *The Discarded Image* being Lewis’ last and posthumous academic publication, making a conclusion to his academic oeuvre, and *The Abolition of Man*, according to Walter Hooper, “an all but indispensable introduction to the entire Corpus of Lewisiana.”¹² The three tasks of this essay are as follows: first, based on the three layers of implication in Lewis’s definition of the doctrine of objective value, the paper will briefly sketch the core objective values implied in the Model, so that we shall see the *Tao* incarnate in the Model; second, the paper will interpret Lewis’s *Tao* in relation to other cultural expressions of ultimate values, and will critique and correct Lewis’s somewhat confused and confusing understanding of the Chinese *Tao* which he tries to appropriate in the *Abolition* to an effective intent. This section will also expose what Lewis condemns as the “poison of subjectivism”¹³ in the form of moral relativism, reductionism, nihilism in value judgments, and even the ideology of the Nazi regime and other Totalitarian approaches to reality which, if unchecked by the *Tao*, will finally lead to the abolition of humanity. The third section will turn back to the Medieval

⁴ (Bloom 2006, p. 2).

⁵ (Bennett 1992, p. 58)

⁶ (Lewis 1974, p. 18).

⁷ (Lewis 1974, p. 18).

⁸ (Lewis 1974, p. 65).

⁹ (Lewis 1974, p. 27).

¹⁰ (Lewis 1974, p. 77).

¹¹ (Lewis 1974, p. 60).

¹² Walter Hooper’s footnote to “On Ethics” 1967, p. 47.

¹³ Title of another article by Lewis in defense of the *Tao*, a condensed form of *The Abolition of Man*, first published in *Religion in Life* (vol. XII, Summer 1943).

Model and elicit relevant values in the Model as a critique of or arguable remedy for the malady of a modernity infected with poison of subjectivism.

2. C.S. Lewis' Medieval Model and the Doctrine of Objective Value

The Discarded Image presents us with what Lewis hailed as “a supreme medieval work of art,” “the central work” of the age. Based on his “immense” and thorough learning in premodern literature, Lewis tells us that this model is where most medieval and renaissance literary works “were embedded, to which they constantly referred, from which they drew a great deal of their strength.”¹⁴ The soil of embedding, the frame of reference, and the source of strength upon which these literary works feed upon are, according to Lewis’ detailed accounts in chapters IV and V of *Image*, the “old Western tradition” which had seen “no bend or break” “[i]n the whole history of the West, from Homer— . . . from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*”—to “the age of Jane Austen and Scott”.¹⁵ Charles Taylor attests to this idea by pointing out that in “all pre-modern societies” merely “a few centuries” ago, “a whole host of social practices” at “all levels of society” were “in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality.”¹⁶ The “doctrine of objective value” is at work here: there is an objective “ultimate reality” and by inference, derivative objective realities in this universe which command proper recognition, response and respect from us rational souls. We will come henceforth to examine how the Medieval Model is impregnate with objective values guided by Lewis’s definition of the “doctrine of objective value” proposed in *The Abolition of Man*.

What Lewis means by “the doctrine of objective value” can be unpacked in the following three aspects.

First, there is an objective reality and value to “the kind of thing the universe is”. This involves not only the universe as a physical entity, but also “universe” as it was first used in the 14th century, which is, according to Webster’s Dictionary, “a systematic whole held to arise by and persist through the direct intervention of divine power.” A transcendental absolute and an ultimate reality and value—the divine—is necessarily present in this philosophical definition.

Second, there is an objective reality and value to “the kind of things we are”. “We” indicates not only human beings but also all the other realities created, governed and sustained by that absolute divine reality.

Third, based on these two external aspects of reality and value, is a more internalized objective reality and value, particularly relating to human beings as “rational souls” capable of harboring “certain attitudes” which could be “really true” or “really false”, if measured by the intrinsic value of the object itself rather than determined by the individual and subjective conditions.

The Medieval Model which Lewis delineates in *The Discarded Image* formulates these aspects of the doctrine of objective value in a fascinating way.

2.1. The Objective Value of the Ultimate Reality

First, we can see that in this Medieval Model of Ptolemy’s splendid hierarchical schema, God as the Prime Mover is that objective Absolute and Ultimate Reality of this cosmic architecture: “All power, movement and efficacy descend from God to the *Primum Mobile* and cause it to rotate . . . down to the last moving sphere, that of the Moon.”¹⁷ Here, God as the first Cause in the Aristotelian sense, interacts with the universe, surprising to the moderns used to materialistic views of the universe, not with a supreme, mechanical force, but with an element most intimate to and indispensable for human life—love. God moves “as beloved,” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b) and then activates anyone who

¹⁴ (Lewis 1964, p. 12).

¹⁵ (Lewis 1969, pp. 7, 9).

¹⁶ (Taylor 2007, pp. 1–2).

¹⁷ (Lewis 1964, p. 102).

so desires.¹⁸ On the other hand, He is also the Judeo-Christian God who “is love” and Author of all good things:¹⁹ light, love, life, good and truth; the inexhaustible fountain of all beauty; the immutable foundation for all value judgments. This indicates that from the very summit of its hierarchy to its lowest point, the Medieval Model is inferred from a universe which is not merely material but contains an entire value system produced and propelled by divine love and intelligence. Writing and thinking in this background, Dante describes God’s dwelling place in the Empyrean as of “pure light, intellectual light, full of love,” (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX, 38) and Newton, the great scientist and deep believer in God’s design, held a strong sense that the universe declares the glory of God.²⁰

2.2. The Objective Value of the Lower Levels

Levels derive from this objective Absolute in a descending hierarchical order in the “Great Chain of Being”, as Robert Smith aptly observes: “[O]n a small scale,” the lower levels in the Model “faithfully reproduce the verities of the absolute itself, ... [making] possible all rational thought, all moral rightness in the world, and all beauty. Furthermore, the truth that is manifested at one level can be expected to be manifested at other levels as well, though in different garb.”²¹

Accordingly, planets and spheres beneath *Prime Mobile*, “moved by ‘intellectual love of God’”,²² are also endowed with built-in values rather than merely physical celestial bodies. The planets are “incarnate minds”, ruled by conscious “Intelligences”, and exert influences upon the events and lives on earth. It is this belief of the “planetary influence” that Gloucester’s bastard son in *King Lear* wants to challenge and scorn in order to claim legitimacy for his own sonship. (I.2.122–137) The Sun (regarded as a planet in the Model) is not only “golden fire”, as in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy (*Hamlet* II.2.290), but “the world’s eye”,²³ illuminating the complete universe, where one finds “happie climes that lie where day never shuts his eye.” (Milton, *Comus*, 978) Both in the translunar and sublunary regions, the movement of the universe operates along the objective cosmic laws and patterns that the medievals understood as “certain sympathies, antipathies, and strivings inherent in matter itself”,²⁴ the principal among which being the Triad, the Plenitude, and “the homing instinct”.²⁵ Governed by these laws, the Model’s orderly hierarchy, from celestial to earthly, promises a cosmos in the original Greek sense of κόσμος—“harmonious order”, where there is “a place for everything and everything in the right place”²⁶; hence “the whole universe [becomes] a fugue”²⁷ with no region left “void” or “limping”.²⁸ Following this cue, Boethius, the great Roman philosopher and key contributor to the Model (430–524 CE), was able to claim even when facing death that the order of the universe implies “an ethical system for mankind,”²⁹ abounding in objective values to instruct and to illuminate.

Beneath the lunar sphere, harmony is reversed. The sublunary existence “cross[es] ... from the realm of necessity to that of contingency, from the incorruptible to the corruptible,”³⁰. And yet, the crossing is not only an astronomical–physical one but charged with specific spiritual consequences. One the one hand, the sublunary region is still part of the “ordered universe arranged in a fixed system

¹⁸ (Qtd. Lewis 1964, p. 113).

¹⁹ As illustrated in the following Scripture: “God is love.” (1 John 4:8; 16) “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:3–4) “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.” (James 1:17) “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6).

²⁰ (Taylor 2007, p. 446).

²¹ (Smith 1981, p. 8).

²² (Lewis 1964, p. 115).

²³ (ibid., p. 26).

²⁴ (ibid., p. 92).

²⁵ (ibid., p. 10).

²⁶ (ibid., p. 10).

²⁷ (ibid., p. 74).

²⁸ (ibid., p. 56).

²⁹ (Boethius 2008, p. 11).

³⁰ (Lewis 1964, p. 108).

of hierarchies,” as Lewis’s colleague E. M. Tillyard notes in *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1952), but on the other hand, it is “modified by man’s sin and the hope of redemption.”³¹ With God as the ultimate Sustainer and the summit of the cosmic hierarchy, and with the fallen portion of creation “subjected to vanity ... in hope ... [to] be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:20–21)—classical and Christian values are richly interwoven in this portrayal. The “descent” from translunar to sublunary “[n]ature in the strict sense”³² characterized by death and decay is interpreted not as an exception to but a temporary violation of, cosmic harmony.

While mortality reigns in this fallen sphere, there is one, and only one, entity free and separate in and of the perishable world—the rational human soul, which is eternal. *Genesis* hints at the original soul of Adam being created by a direct act of God through the divine “breath of life” (*Genesis* 2:7), while the Preacher specifies its eternal home: “[T]he spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (*Ecclesiastes* 12:7). Plato and Neo-Platonists also hold that “[m]an, by his reason, is a divine animal; the soul is fetched from heaven, and her ascent thither is a return.”³³ The Model incorporates these divergent sources to reaffirm the great value of the rational human soul: it descends from the ultimate reality of the Divine Reason and participates in the Divine Logos.

The objective values of the Model’s Prime Mover and its derivative lower levels, as sketched above, demonstrate what Lewis concludes in *The Discarded Image*:

[T]he Model universe of our ancestors had a built-in significance. And that in two senses; as having ‘significant form’ (it is an admirable design) and as a manifestation of the wisdom and goodness that created it. There was no question of waking it into beauty or life. ... The achieved perfection was already there. The only difficulty was to make an adequate response.³⁴

As “certain responses could be more ‘just’ or ‘ordinate’ or ‘appropriate’ to it than others,” Lewis asserts that humans, because they have been endowed with Reason, should be able to select the correct responses and should “prize them according to their value.”³⁵

2.3. Proper Attitude and Response toward Objective Reality and Its Values

The Medieval Model, as Lewis perceives it, assigns to the rational human soul two crucial faculties to accomplish the task of correctly responding: *Intellectus* and *Ratio*. *Intellectus* is the higher, more fundamental faculty for an intuitive grasp of an intelligible, self-evident truth; *Ratio* is the faculty by which one proceeds step by step to prove a truth which is not self-evident. Reason, composed of *Intellectus* and *Ratio*, works together with Sentiment and Appetite; this Triadic pattern is based on the human capacity to first judge objective values, and then to direct actions accordingly.³⁶ Apparently this view of Reason is considerably different from its modern counterpart, which reduces Reason to the reasoning process of *ratio* only; the medieval Triad pattern of Reason’s functioning, however, involves the more intuitive *Intellectus* and can, therefore, serve as the organ of morality by discerning moral imperatives and grasping fundamental moral maxims,³⁷ which is the *Tao*.

Equipping human beings with such Reason, the Model posits that human beings are supposed to be, and thus are, capable of responding to the objective realities and their values as they actually are—albeit with falsity and limitation due to the likelihood of human error.³⁸ To respond to objective

³¹ (Tillyard 1952, p. 3).

³² (Lewis 1964, p. 95).

³³ (Qtd. Lewis 1964, p. 79).

³⁴ (ibid., p. 204).

³⁵ (Lewis 1974, pp. 15, 16).

³⁶ (Lewis 1964, pp. 57, 58).

³⁷ (ibid., pp. 158, 159).

³⁸ Lewis was well aware of the limitation of human knowledge and capacity, as demonstrated in “Meditation in a Toolshed,” *God in the Dock*. (Hooper 1970, p. 212).

reality in this manner is not only what the Model advocates but also how the Model is constructed. In this regard, the Model exhibits two prominent attributes, both of which Lewis argues are opposed to or at least distinct from, popular contemporary views of the Middle Ages.

The first is the “bookish” nature of the Medieval Model. According to Lewis’s study, the Model “masters” created “through and through a bookish [medieval] culture.”³⁹ They had confidence in their God-given rational soul, and a strong sense of responsibility toward objective reality, including the specific material region of their intellectual environment: a rare collection of manuscripts from antiquity. They followed, imitated, drew upon, and synthesized their “*auctores*”, authoritative predecessors and texts, in order to imbibe the knowledge and values which eventually composed the Model. That is to say, the rich values that endowed the Model with life and warmth “depended predominantly on books,”⁴⁰ an “odd collection” which, before the invention of printing, happened to come their way.⁴¹ Contrary to later centuries’ view of the Middle Ages as “dark” or “pre-logical” or savage, the Medieval Model, Lewis reminds us, had an “overwhelmingly bookish or clerkly character.”⁴² This contributes to a unique intellectual habit in the medieval academia: both readers and writers were respectful for and receptive to the textual authority as an objective other, having a “complete confidence in the intrinsic value of their matter,”⁴³ while relinquishing their ego and relishing the “pleasure” of the precious manuscripts before them.⁴⁴

Heterogeneous harmony is the Model’s second attribute. As Lewis notes, it reflects an age “not only of her (the Church’s) authority, but of authorities,” as its intellectual elements were “a very heterogeneous collection . . . : Judaic, Pagan, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoical, Primitive Christian, Patristic,”⁴⁵ among which there had to be contradictions. However, being “an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems,” and keen on having “a place for everything and everything in the right place,”⁴⁶ the temperament of medieval scholar enabled him to “touch up” the diversity among authorities—revising, interpreting or even misinterpreting them—while weaving them into the harmonious fabric which became their Model. The end result was one of “most sublime achievements”, paralleling the individual attainments of Aquinas’s *Summa* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,⁴⁷ an enormous task of concordance which, according to Lewis, was the “greatest, most complex, specimen of syncretism or harmonization which, perhaps, the world has ever known.”⁴⁸

Lewis’s account of the background belief in a harmonizing divine power serves as explanation for the “passionately systematic minds” of the medievals,⁴⁹ whose God as objective Absolute was their overarching value: “The Absolute was ‘there,’ and that ‘there’ contained the reconciliation of all contraries, the transcendence of all finitude, the hidden glory which was the only perfectly real thing there is. In fact, it had much of the quality of Heaven. . . .”⁵⁰

The Medieval Model, as can be perceived by the foregoing, is laden with objective values which proceed from the God it honors, the ultimate objective Reality which maintains the objective values of

³⁹ (Lewis 1966, p. 43).

⁴⁰ (Lewis 1964, p. 5).

⁴¹ Please see Lewis, “Imagination in the Middle Ages”, (Lewis 1966, p. 43). Here Lewis uses an apt analogy to illustrate how the Medieval Model was founded upon the surviving legacy of antiquity: “The peculiar predicament of medieval man was in fact just this: he was a literate man who had lost a great many of his books and forgotten how to read all his Greek books. He works with the rather chancy selection he has. . . . An exaggerated, but not wholly fake, model would be a party of shipwrecked people setting to work to try to build up a culture on an uninhabited island and depending on the odd collection of books which happened to be on board their ship.”

⁴² (Lewis 1964, p. 5).

⁴³ (Lewis 1964, p. 205).

⁴⁴ Lewis’s works on literary theories, relatively few and little, such as *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961) and *The Personal Heresy* (1939), can all be regarded as a tribute Lewis pays to his admired medieval predecessors. Also see (Su 2012).

⁴⁵ (ibid., pp. 5, 11).

⁴⁶ (ibid., p. 10).

⁴⁷ (ibid., p. 12).

⁴⁸ (Lewis 1966, p. 45).

⁴⁹ (Lewis 1964, p. 10).

⁵⁰ (Lewis 1955, p. 210).

lower levels through “love”. This necessarily includes how a rational soul is to respond to these real objects, amply demonstrated by how medieval authors treated their sources. This belief in objective value, or the ‘doctrine of objective value’, which Lewis relates to the *Tao*, is from where he himself draws strength when laying bare and battling against the subjectivism of his day in *The Abolition of Man*.

3. *The Abolition of Man and the Tao*

The Abolition of Man is based on Lewis’ Riddell Memorial Lectures delivered at the University of Durham in February 1943. Its major task centers on two goals. First, to defend the legitimacy of an objective value judgment about a fact or an object, and by extension, the reality and axiomatic validity of the *Tao*. Second, to expose and condemn the debunkers of the *Tao* and their subjectivist beliefs, by which he means the abandonment of objective *truth* and *reality* for whatever “practical results” or “ideologies” we happen to like.⁵¹

3.1. *Lewis’ Appropriation of the Tao as “Belief of Objective Value” and Its Chinese Description in Tao Te Ching*

The *Tao*, according to Lewis, is a Chinese word he chose to sum up his perspective that the “belief of objective value” is a universal belief at the root of each of the world’s major civilizations:

The Chinese also speak of a great thing (the greatest thing) called the *Tao*. It is the reality beyond all predicates ... It is Nature, it is the Way, the Road. It is the Way in which the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge, stilly and tranquilly, into space and time. It is also the Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression, conforming all activities to that great exemplar ... This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as “the *Tao*.”⁵²

In his later article, “The Poison of Subjectivism”, Lewis further explicates the *Tao* as

what lies beyond existence, what admits no contingency, what lends divinity to all else, what is the ground of all existence, ... not simply a law but also a begetting love, a love begotten, and the love ... imminent in all those who are caught up to share the unity of their self-caused life ... the *Tao* of the Chinese from which all realities proceed.⁵³

Lewis’s appropriation of the Chinese *Tao* here, as well as his interpretation of it, corresponds most closely to *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tze, an ancient Chinese mystic sage of the 6th century BCE. The *Tao* in *Tao Te Ching* is exactly what Lewis recounts here as “the greatest thing” which is “beyond all predicates”, just as Yang Peng, the contemporary Chinese scholar on Lao Tze avers in his most recent English translation of *Tao Te Ching* that Lao Tze’s *Tao* “refers to the original source and creator of all things, the source of the natural law of checks and balances, and the power that gives and supports life.”⁵⁴ In other words, it is the Absolute and the Transcendental, the Origin and the Creator, the immutable and the ineffable, the self-sufficient and the all-embracing (harmonizing), the greatest Exemplar, Nurturer and Protector and the Namer of all but itself defying all naming. These key ideas about the *Tao* in *Abolition* inhere throughout the entire *Tao Te Ching* and are most directly expressed in the following chapters of this mysterious and even, as supposed by some recent scholars, divinely inspired collection of 5000-word poetic aphorisms by a man who was said to have been born a white-bearded elder after his mother’s 81 years of pregnancy, and have departed from this world to nowhere when more than 200 years old.

⁵¹ (Hooper 1996, p. 591).

⁵² (Lewis 1974, p. 18).

⁵³ (Lewis 1967, p. 80).

⁵⁴ (Yang 2019, p. ii).

Chapter 1 and Chapter 25 deal with the *Tao* as the unnamable and the ultimate Origin of the universe: “The Dao that can be spoken/is not the eternal Dao./The Name that can be named/is not the eternal Name./The [Being] which cannot be named/is the origin of creation.”⁵⁵ (Ch. 1) “There is a Being undifferentiated and complete,/Born before heaven and earth./Tranquil, boundless,/ Abiding alone, changing not./Eternally revolving without fail,/Worthy to be the Mother of heaven and earth./I do not know its name/And address it as the Dao./If forced to give it a name, I call it ‘Great.’” (Ch. 25)⁵⁶

Chapter 42 particularly addresses the *Tao* as the living and generative Creator and Author of all: “The Dao gives birth to one./One gives birth to two./Two gives birth to three./Three gives birth to all things.”⁵⁷

Chapter 42 continues to speak about *Tao’s* intrinsic power to harmonize and embrace polar opposites in all things it has created: “All things carry Yin on their back and embrace Yang at their front./The breath of energy from Yin and Yang clash and compete with each other/and move toward a balance of harmony.”⁵⁸ In connection with its nurturing role for its created beings: “The Dao of Tian [Heaven] provides benefits and does not do any harm.” (Ch. 81);⁵⁹ “The Dao creates, rears, grows, fosters, stops and supervises./It is the Dao that nurses and shelters./The Dao creates but does not possess,/accomplishes but does not claim credit./The Dao grows but does not control.” (Ch. 51)⁶⁰. As the “Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression”, as is described by Lewis, Lao Tze’s *Tao* is almost an exact picture of that description by presenting itself at the highest peak of the hierarchy of models to be followed: “Man follows the earth./The Earth follows the sky./The sky follows the Dao./And the Dao follows Aseity.” (Ch. 25)⁶¹

3.2. Critiquing and Correcting of Lewis’ Appropriation of *Tao*

It is worth noting here that in *Abolition*, where Lewis gives the most detailed treatment of the *Tao*, which he claims is borrowed from the Chinese, he quotes only from Confucius’ *Analects* for the epigraph of the entire book (“The Master said, He who sets to work on a different strand destroys the whole fabric.” *Analects* II.16), the epigraph of Chapter II (“The Way”) (It is upon the Trunk that a gentleman works.” *Analects* I.2), and in the appendix, to refer to shared objective values about proper human behavior. I believe there is some misreading and a confused use of the two Chinese ancients and their ideas of the *Tao* in *Abolition*.

Chinese is my native tongue and I may understand better than Lewis (and perhaps some of the great Western translators of the Chinese classics) the cultural subtleties expressed in the ancient Chinese texts such as *Tao Te Ching* and *Analects*, which I have studied for years, both in Chinese and their various English translations. I, therefore, propose to make some necessary clarifications for Lewis in his well-intended and yet effective use of the Chinese word *Tao* for his overarching purpose in *The Abolition of Man*.

Clarification One: *Tao* vs. Way. Chapter II of *Abolition* is entitled “The Way”. It should have been entitled “The *Tao*”, because the Chinese character for this word, “道”, includes at least these two main aspects Lewis discusses in *Abolition*: the transcendental ultimate objective value such as the ineffable “One”, “Great”, and *Tao* in *Tao Te Ching*, which accords with one of Lewis’ definitions of the *Tao* as the “cosmic and supercosmic” being “beyond all predicates”. It also refers to experiential objective values such as the “way” as in the following quote from *Analects*: “It is upon the trunk that a gentleman works. When that is firmly set up, the Way grows.” (1.2) Lewis’s title “The Way” cannot fully contain

⁵⁵ (Yang 2019, p. 3). Yang Peng’s 2019 new translation of *Tao Te Ching* will be used for this article unless otherwise specified; my adaptations when necessary are in the square brackets. Yang uses the exact *Pinyin* of “道”, i.e., “Dao”, for Lewis’s “Tao”.

⁵⁶ My own translation.

⁵⁷ (Yang 2019, p. 50).

⁵⁸ (ibid., p. 50).

⁵⁹ (ibid., p. 94).

⁶⁰ (ibid., p. 59).

⁶¹ (ibid., p. 29).

the two meanings above, which are actually what Lewis intends to communicate in his Chapter II. Even though many English translations have rendered Lao Tze's "道" as the "Way", it may be regarded as inappropriate. Only a direct *Pinyin* "Dao" for this Chinese character or its slight variation "Tao" can suggest its unspeakable significance. The contemporary Chinese scholar Yang Peng argues in his newly published English translation of *Dao De Jing* that since Lao Tze himself claims that he does not really know the name of the "Tao", and could only "force" himself to call it "Great" (Chapter 25), "we should not attempt to give it an essentialist meaning: for example, the 'Way' or 'Way-making'."⁶²

Clarification Two: Lao Tze vs. Confucius. Lao Tze should not be regarded as opposed to Confucius even if their teachings of *Tao* differ from each other. In fact, the *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记, 91 BCE) record a visit Confucius paid to Lao Tze to seek instructions about the philosophy of rituals, at which Confucius was stunned by the height and depth and breadth of Lao Tze's thoughts and called him "flying dragon." However, since there are some confusions in *Abolition* concerning Lewis' use of Confucius and misuse of Lao Tze, I have used the symbol "vs." to bring out the difference. That Lewis defines *Tao* in Lao Tze's sense in several crucial parts of *Abolition*, and that he never acknowledges Lao Tze or *Tao Te Ching* in either *Abolition* or throughout his entire corpus shows that he may not have been aware of this world's greatest interpreter of the *Tao* concept, apart perhaps from the Apostle John under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁶³ However, Lewis clearly acknowledges Confucius and quotes quite extensively from *Analects*, both in the text proper and in the Appendix of *Abolition*. Two of the epigraphs are also from *Analects*, which might mislead readers into believing that Lewis' use of the Chinese word *Tao* is associated with Confucius' school of thought—it is not. As is well known, the *Tao* for Confucius, in any language, was a pragmatic concern with the well-being of government and people's everyday life and behavior, and for which the "way" or "teachings" may be more proper English equivalents. If Lao Tze's *Tao* is the ultimate Absolute, Confucius' Way is apparently derivative. The epigraph for Chapter II is a quote from the first half of a sentence in *Analects* 1.2 (君子务本，本立而道生。) in Arthur Waley's translation. Waley's translation divides this single sentence with a unified, indivisible meaning into two separate sentences: "It is upon the trunk that a gentleman works. When that is firmly set up, the Way grows." In fact, read as a whole, as the syntax of the Chinese original demands, this sentence actually serves as a fit example to show the relationship between Lao Tze's *Tao* and Confucius' Way. The "trunk" is the *Tao* and after it follows the "Way". Therefore, if Lewis had quoted the English version of the full sentence of the Chinese original, his epigraph might have been more helpful for the development of the argument in this chapter.

Clarification Three: *Tao*, a mere symbol or a conscious borrowing? Due to Lewis' somewhat unclear specification of the origin of the *Tao* in *Abolition*, critical essays which deal with this book either totally ignore the ancient Chinese tradition involved in its powerful discussion of the *Tao*, treating it only as a linguistic symbol to represent the Natural Law,⁶⁴ or claim on Lewis' behalf that he is consciously and "surprisingly" borrowing from "the Chinese mystic" Lao Tze.⁶⁵ The former is a reductive reading while the latter, an over-interpretation.

It is known among the Lewis scholars that Lewis immersed himself in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. James Hastings, Edinburgh: 1908–1926) before his Riddell Memorial Lectures, and this was also the main source of his examples for what he calls the "*Tao*" in *Abolition*.⁶⁶ It is reasonable to

⁶² (Yang 2019, pp. ii–iii).

⁶³ "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God." (John 1:1) In the late 19th and early 20th century the Western missionary translators of the Chinese Union Version of the Bible (1919) was well aware of the homogeneity of the Christian God and the Chinese *Tao* with its multiple senses, and use this word—道—for Logos. (See John 1:1 in any Chinese Union Version of the Bible.)

⁶⁴ (Greggersen 2003, pp. 120–25).

⁶⁵ The Revd. Dr. Malcolm Guite of University of Cambridge wrote in "The Abolition of Man: From Literary Criticism to Prophetic Resistance" that Lewis was "borrowing his term [*Tao*] rather surprisingly from the Chinese mystic, Lao Tsu." (Ward and Williams 2016) This is not so: Lewis did not consciously appropriate Lao Tze. But Guite's observation does support my argument that Lewis' interpretation of the *Tao* is more in line with Lao Tze than with Confucius.

⁶⁶ (Hooper 1996, p. 330).

wonder whether both the strengths and the shortcomings of *Abolition* are due to Lewis's heavy reliance on the *Encyclopaedia* only for the elaboration of the *Tao*.

This said, we can safely conclude that it is Lao Tze in *Tao Te Ching* who presents the *Tao* as an objective, absolute, transcendent entity beyond time and space, human naming and human will. This clarification provides a stronger support for the doctrine of objective value that Lewis implies in *The Discarded Image* and explicitly expounds in *The Abolition of Man*.

3.3. *Tao as the Universally Shared Objective Value Debunked in the Modern World*

Lao Tze's *Tao*, as well as Lewis's interpretation in a cross-cultural context, corresponds to Plato's Ultimate Reality, the everlasting, unchangeable "nature" in *Symposium*, designated as τὸ καλόν (the Good), τὸ κάλλος (the Beautiful), τὸ ἓν (the One), τὸ ὄν (the Being), τὸ θεῖον (the Divine),⁶⁷ "that very thing . . . always being and neither coming to be nor perishing."⁶⁸ It is in even closer harmony with the Johannine Logos (in Chinese translation, no other than the Chinese character "道"-*Tao*), which permeates the Christ-centered Medieval Model, as Fr. Hieromonk Damascene in his *Christ the Eternal Tao* remarks, "Lao Tzu . . . came even closer than [the Greek philosophers] to describing the Logos, the *Tao*, before *He was made flesh, and dwelt among us*."⁶⁹ As the transcendental, absolute unnamable, He is the "I AM" "in the beginning" and "agape" throughout, (John 18:4; John 1:1, 1 John 4:8)⁷⁰ the Creator, the Nurturer immanent in and present to this phenomenal world, who "gives to all life, and breath, and all things", in whom "we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:25; 28).

The ancient Chinese *Tao* (道), Plato's classic "idea of the good" (τὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα), and the Christian Logos (λόγος) as subsumed under the Model, are three of the most representative terms for the concept of the doctrine of objective value. This demonstrates that the greatest traditions in human history, at their root, had a certain remarkable agreement, not only in spirit but in terminology, on the origin of the universe, its nature, and how humans are to respond appropriately.

Concerning the universal and eternally active application of the *Tao* and its irrefutable and axiomatic position, Lewis makes several claims in *The Abolition of Man*. For instance, regarding the absolute singularity of the *Tao* as a self-evident source of all value judgments and ideologies, he declares that

Tao . . . is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgement of value in the history of the world . . . The rebellion of new ideologies against the *Tao* is a rebellion of the branches against the tree: if the rebels could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves.⁷¹

Lewis reminds us that "until modern times" thinkers "of the first rank" all knew this value of the *Tao*. No matter whether it was Plato, the mystic Idealist, or Aristotle, the master of common sense, or the more recent "Hooker, Butler, and Doctor Johnson," they all walked within the *Tao*, and they never doubted that "our judgments of value were rational judgments or that what they discovered was objective."⁷² In *Abolition*, he extends this knowledge of the *Tao* to the common sense shared by all pre-moderns:

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to

⁶⁷ (Smith 1981, p. 5).

⁶⁸ (Plato 2001, p. 41).

⁶⁹ (Damascene 2012, p. 44). This correspondence or "deep call[ing] unto deep" (Psalms 42:7) is given a detailed and impressive treatment in Hieromonk Damascene's *Christ the Eternal Tao* (Damascene 2012).

⁷⁰ All biblical quotes are from the *King James Version* (KJV).

⁷¹ (Lewis 1974, pp. 43–44).

⁷² (Lewis 1967, p. 73).

it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.⁷³

However, it is also true that the *Tao* debunkers' subjectivism has had a long history, although it was not popular before modern times. Originated perhaps from the first major relativist, Protagoras (c. 490–c.420 BCE) the Sophist, with his famous statement "Humans are the measure of all things," individual human beings with their varied mind and opinions have become the measure of "all things" including wisdom. While calling themselves "sophists"—men of Sophia, wise men—they themselves are beyond the measuring, and cannot be measured wise or unwise. In fact, as "measurers" of all things, humans have rejected the God as the measurer and have meanwhile stepped up upon the throne of the God themselves. This is exactly what the modern "conditioners" of the "artificial *Tao*" do after they have demolished the traditional *Tao*. Ancient forms of subjectivism met with strong oppositions from Socrates, who only claimed himself a "lover of wisdom", and later from the Stoics, the Aristotelians and the Neo-Platonists,⁷⁴ all of whom, according to Lewis, were walking within the *Tao*. It was only after "the so-called Enlightenment"⁷⁵ and since Nietzsche⁷⁶ the one who "aborted" God, subjectivism and its resultant moral relativism has gained momentum and popularity with waves after waves of modern philosophical trends—Empiricism, which replaced *reason* with *sensation* as the only trustworthy way to certainty, "emotivist theory of value" which maintains that "murder is wrong" is only an expression of the speaker's subjective feelings about murder, not a moral judgment to demonstrate the real, objective culpability of the act of murder—exactly the same sin committed by the writers of the sixth-form text-book on English writing that Lewis condemns in *Abolition* as a case study of the *Tao* debunkers. Further, Logical Positivism and Analytic Philosophy draw a radical distinction between *facts* and *values*, so that, as Lewis points out, the world of facts is "without one trace of value, and the world of [values], without one trace of truth or falsehood, justice or injustice."⁷⁷ The more recent Existentialism rejects the Absolute, hence moral universals,⁷⁸ and the postmodern Deconstructionism deconstructs the Cosmic Logos and avows that there is no objective reality, no world beyond texts.⁷⁹

A review of the history of the *Tao* debunkers with their different manifestations of "subjectivism" reveals what Lewis calls their "fatal superstition" "that men can create values, that a community can choose its 'ideology' as men choose their clothes."⁸⁰ Delivering the Riddell lectures in 1943 while the bombing of World War II was within earshot, Lewis saw the "superstition" incarnated in his era's Totalitarian states. Power philosophies with their appalling expression in a system of so-called justice suited to the Third Reich's interest, regardless of the universal *Tao*, turned the whole of Europe into a slaughter-house.⁸¹ He foresaw how the Conditioners' scenario would eventually take over nearly every domain of human life—natural and social, political and moral, educational and aesthetic, scientific and technological. In all these spheres, Lewis envisioned traditional verities and values as "debunked" and replaced by new ideologies invented to the detriment of humanity: motives relegated to impulse, conscience reduced to instinct, Nature "whacked" and conquered by "Man's power", souls turned into "mere nature" subjected to psychoanalysis, human embryos selected by eugenics and pre-natal

⁷³ (Lewis 1974, pp. 14–15).

⁷⁴ (Kreeft 1994, p. 39).

⁷⁵ (ibid., pp. 46, 49).

⁷⁶ "The Poison of Subjectivism" deals with Nietzsche's violation of the doctrine of objective value in the following statements: "The morality of Nietzsche is a mere innovation. . . . Nietzschean ethics can be accepted only if we are ready to scrap traditional morals as a mere error and then to put ourselves in a position where we can find no ground for any value judgements at all." (*Christian Reflections*, p. 77).

⁷⁷ (Lewis 1974, pp. 3, 20).

⁷⁸ (Kreeft 1994, p. 50).

⁷⁹ (ibid., p. 51).

⁸⁰ (Lewis 1967, p. 73).

⁸¹ (ibid., p. 72).

conditioning. The Conditioners of the “artificial *Tao*” are depriving themselves, as well as their fellow human beings, of their inherent share in humanity by stepping outside the *Tao* into the void.⁸²

If such a process is not checked, *Tao*-discrediting Subjectivism “will certainly end our species and . . . damn our souls.”⁸³ Herein lies the abolition of Man, and here is Lewis’ cry to return to the *Tao*, that essential spirit which is much more than the cohering structure of his analysis of the Medieval Model:

Either we are rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own ‘natural’ impulses. Only the *Tao* provides a common human law of action which can over-arch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.⁸⁴

“[A] rule which is not tyranny”, “an obedience which is not slavery”—the harmony within such a paradox can only be reached by “a dogmatic belief” in the *Tao*, so says Lewis. The Medieval Model, as a supreme synthesis of universally shared values, best captures what Lewis argues is the embracing and harmonizing and liberating capacity of the *Tao*. Though not explicitly mentioned in *The Discarded Image*, *Tao* leaves its imprints throughout his account of the Medieval Model, and serves as an antidote to the “poison of Subjectivism” targeted in *The Abolition of Man*.

4. *Tao* in *The Discarded Image* vs. “Poison of Subjectivism”

The *Tao* provides a critique of subjectivism in three aspects which correspond to the three major propositions implicit in the Model regarding “the doctrine of objective value” discussed in Section 2—belief in Ultimate Reality and Value, acceptance of reliant lower levels and values, and the reality and value of an objective reaction to both.

4.1. *Tao* vs. Empty Cosmos

Charles Taylor more recently observed that modern secularism, which is typical of the afore-mentioned subjectivism together with its resultant relativism and reductionism, produces a situation where “beliefs that have been handed down to us”, that is, “understandings . . . of God, the Good, or the Cosmos” tend to “arouse resistance”⁸⁵; instead, the majority have “come to see that scientific thinking is valid, that instrumental rationality pays off, that religious beliefs involve unwarranted leaps, that facts and values are separate.”⁸⁶ In other words, the *Tao*, the “Mother of all things”, the “Great”, (Ch. 25, *Tao Te Ching*), which Lewis equates with the foundation for the Medieval Model, is undermined; the animated universe, “lighted, warmed, and resonant with music,”⁸⁷ is darkened, chilled, emptied, silenced, a “black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness”. As an illustration of this, Lewis represented Ransom in *Out of the Silent Planet* as struggling with the training whereby the modern mindset prefers “mythology that follows the wake of science.”⁸⁸ Taylor points out that such a “shift from ancient and mediaeval ‘place’ to modern ‘space’ involves a dissociation of segments of space from what happens to be filling them”,⁸⁹ that is, the activating and interconnecting element of the Model is eliminated so that there is no divine core, no angelic messengers, spirits, or planetary Intelligences acting out their inherent rich spiritual values. With these diametrically different views of cosmic reality, moderns and medievals responded in radically different ways to the environment:

⁸² Ref. Chapter 3, “The Abolition of Man” in *Abolition*, pp. 53–81.

⁸³ (Lewis 1967, p. 73).

⁸⁴ (Lewis 1974, p. 73.)

⁸⁵ (Taylor 1995, p. 29).

⁸⁶ (ibid., p. 25).

⁸⁷ (Lewis 1964, p. 112).

⁸⁸ (Lewis 2005, p. 32).

⁸⁹ (Taylor 2007, p. 58).

when looking at the night sky, the modern mind would view a sea of stars “fad[ing] away into mist”, or a “trackless forest” going on forever, “no horizon”, arousing perhaps “terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie”; antithetically, the medieval mind would stand within and gaze at a towering structure like a huge gothic cathedral, ordered, hierarchical, unimaginably large and unambiguously finite, “in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony.”⁹⁰

On how choosing to demystify the *Tao* as a category empties the universe of its supernatural beings and spiritual values, Lewis’s most vehement denunciation of this position is to be found in his introduction to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)*:

By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe. The world was emptied, first of her indwelling spirits, then of her occult sympathies and antipathies, finally of her colors, smells and tastes . . . Man with his new powers became rich like Midas but all that he touched had gone dead and cold.⁹¹

4.2. *Tao vs. Faltering Logic*

If the Medieval Model emerged from its creators’ belief that “the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental; that our logic was participation in a cosmic Logos,”⁹² then emptying not only nullifies the cosmic Logos, but the supporting sensibleness of “our logic” is cut off from its root. Humanity and the human world have no objective, independent *Tao* category after which to model themselves (as presented in chapter 25 of *Tao Te Ching*), but must accept that meaning-making is the fluctuating subjective projection of human psyches at the individual and collective levels.

Lewis explains how the emptying of space is inseparable from the subjectification of objective realities and values in his preface to D. E. Harding’s *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth: A New Diagram of Man in the Universe* (1952), where he argues:

The advance of knowledge gradually empties this rich and genial universe: first of its gods, then of its colours, smells, sounds and tastes, finally of solidity itself as solidity was originally imagined. As these items are taken from the world, they are transferred to the subjective side of the account: classified as sensations, thoughts, images or emotions. The subjects become gorged, inflated, at the expense of the object The same method which has emptied the world now proceeds to empty ourselves.⁹³

One example of the necessity to accept that this process of emptying the universe leads inevitably to emptying ourselves, is Lewis’s illustration of the internalizing process of the meaning of an English word, *genius*, “from an attendant *daemon* into a quality of the mind.”⁹⁴

[T]he man of genius . . . today often, perhaps usually, feels himself confronted with a reality whose significance he cannot know, or a reality that has no significance; or even a reality such that the very question whether it has a meaning is itself a meaningless question. It is for him, by his own sensibility, to discover a meaning, or, out of his own subjectivity, to give a meaning—or at least a shape—to what in itself had neither.⁹⁵

With “heavens” emptied into space, and “*genius*” removed from a spirited ethereal region to the secret recess of an ego’s mind, then meaning-making becomes a narcissistic indulgence with no reference to a substantial, self-sufficient, objective “other”, no *Tao* as an overarching value standard;

⁹⁰ (Lewis 1964, pp. 98–99).

⁹¹ (Lewis 1954, pp. 3–4).

⁹² (Lewis 1955, p. 209).

⁹³ (Lewis 1986, p. 81).

⁹⁴ (Lewis 1964, p. 215).

⁹⁵ (ibid., pp. 203–4).

the debunkers invent new ideologies as they please. This practice has become such an established norm, not only in Lewis's mid-20th century but much more so in today's post-modern era, that even Nobel-Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg could make the following outright claim: "[M]oral or aesthetic statements are simply not of the sort which it is appropriate to call true or false," since we are "inventing values for ourselves as we go along."⁹⁶ His statement discredits such a concept as an objective value judgment, which, in itself, ungrounds the reasoning process; yet, such statements endow Conditioners inventing this "artificial *Tao*" with axiomatic validity.

Lewis would retort now, as he did in *The Abolition of Man*, that this process is impossible if *Tao* "debunkers" wish to retain humanity as capable of reason. "The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in."⁹⁷ His rebuttal is built upon by historian Brad S. Gregory in *The Unintended Reformation* (2012), where the logical incoherence of current versions of Subjectivism, such as that held by Weinberg, is exposed. Gregory's argument will be cited *in toto* to demonstrate how persistent the problem is, and how relevant Lewis's position remains:

From the undeniable fact of pluralism, it is frequently inferred that moral and cultural relativism is true, that there are no norms and values rightly applicable to people of all times and places. (Hence the incoherence of attempts to abandon truth as a category: its denial always involves at least this one truth claim. Consistently to abandon truth requires that one stop making assertions or arguments.)

Denials of truth and of non-subjective moral norms in the name of toleration and diversity are self-defeating and self-contradictory—unless one is prepared to go the whole way, and grant that genocide, rape, slavery, and torture are acceptable. Thankfully, only the pathological would claim as much, although why this is so is unclear if ethics lacks any objective basis.⁹⁸

Contrary to such logical incoherence as both Gregory and Lewis battle, the pattern of meaning-making which the medievalists utilized was based on their tacit understanding and communal belief in the objective value of things, and demonstrates the dispositional honesty and logical solidity of the meaning-makers. Taylor explains that for those whose pattern of thinking is reminiscent of "enchanted" societies, "meanings are not only in minds, but can reside in things, or in various kinds of extra-human but intra-cosmic subjects. ... [I]n the enchanted world, the meaning is already there in the object/agent, it is there quite independently of us; it would be there even if we didn't exist."⁹⁹ Compared to the *Tao* debunkers, the *Tao* followers propagated and perpetuated meanings and values as "received"; both they as meaning makers and others as meaning recipients "claimed no liberty to depart" from the *Tao* by which these meanings and values were prescribed.¹⁰⁰

From the above discussion, it seems that as to what a human is and what Nature is—or at least what they are not, the Medieval Model contained settled answers, as informed and instructed by what Lewis has termed the *Tao*, but philosophy since then has been characterized by unsettling answers. Human beings are "abstractions" or "material" or "the last part of Nature" subject to Conditioners' manipulation, be it mental conditioning or eugenic maneuvering, as Lewis warns in *Abolition*; they would that "[w]e shall have 'taken the thread of life out of the hand of Clotho' and be henceforth free to make our species whatever we wish it to be."¹⁰¹ The last enemy of human life, Death, and consequently, the most defining aspect of the sublunary life, mortality, would be surpassed and subdued. The perception shared by both classical and Abrahamic traditions would be overridden:

⁹⁶ (Weinberg 2001, pp. 47, 120. Qtd. Gregory 2012, pp. 18–19).

⁹⁷ (Lewis 1974, p. 44).

⁹⁸ (Gregory 2012, pp. 19, 20).

⁹⁹ (Taylor 2007, p. 33).

¹⁰⁰ (Lewis 1974, pp. 60–61).

¹⁰¹ (Lewis 1974, p. 59).

that perpetual life with sins and flaws is a curse, encapsulated in the heart-rending supplication of the decaying but undying Sybil of Cumae –: “I want to die!”¹⁰²

In his monograph on Western secularization and modernity, Gregory quotes from Simon Young’s *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (2006) to show how the self-labelled transhumanist pursues “a calculatingly eugenistic ethical agenda” in order to “hasten the evolutionary self-transcendence of *Homo sapiens*.” Such an individual has embarked on this quest by regarding human beings not as endowed with a divine, rational soul distinct from other animals, but as “simply a remarkably adaptive hominid, no different in kind from other mammalian species with which it shares so much genetic material.” In this process, the concepts of “human”, “human nature”, or “human rights” treated as “morality” have been regarded as mere constructs that can be deconstructed. Gregory arrives at the same cautionary conclusion as Lewis did fifty years previously with *Abolition*’s “essentially prophetic character”:¹⁰³ “Quite literally, the transhumanists’ aim is the deliberate self-elimination of human beings through genetic manipulation.”¹⁰⁴

Operating outside the *Tao*, naturalists and materialists deal with the rest of nature as they do with the human species: as “mere nature”, “untrammelled by values,” deaf to the “chatter of truth and mercy and beauty and happiness”¹⁰⁵ to which the creators of the Medieval Model attended. Therefore, Lewis urged his contemporaries to pause and think before resorting, for various utilitarian ends, to cutting up a live animal in a dissection room, or to chopping down trees for beams with no qualms about the “bleeding trees” with vegetable souls or Dryads dwelling within whom Virgil and Spencer revered, or to polluting the soil or, most sadly, to exiling the Dying God with the technological “advance” of chemical agriculture.¹⁰⁶

Lewis perceived the on-going process of stripping objective reality of its qualitative properties, and reducing it to merely quantitative elements, as a suicidal attempt of humanity. He pronounces his grimmest sentence on the disenchantment agenda of progress at the very end of his main argument in *The Discarded Image*: “Having eaten up everything else, he eats himself up too. And where we ‘go from that’ is a dark question.”¹⁰⁷

In order to restore the proper conceptualization of its values to objective reality, and to return meaning-making to an unflinching path, Lewis argues that one has to accept the *Tao* “without question as being to the world of action what axioms are to the world of theory.”¹⁰⁸ Otherwise, no knowledge or judgment or meaning is possible.

As Lewis’s diagnosis for “the abolition of man” has not dated, neither should his prescription. He avers in no uncertain terms that only by remaining within the *Tao* will people “find the concrete reality in which to participate is to be truly human.” Rather than being a totally conditioned construct, each person has the capacity to exercise self-control, because “the real common will and common reason of humanity” are living offspring of the *Tao*, which enables humanity to grow like a tree, “branching out, as the situation varies, into ever new beauties and dignities of application.”¹⁰⁹

4.3. *Tao’s Prescription for the Rational Soul’s Response to the Objective Reality*

Finally, in terms of an appropriate human response to objective reality and its values, Lewis affirms the old Model’s wisdom, that could discern and “conform the soul to reality”, against the still current attempt to determine and “subdue reality to the wishes of men.”¹¹⁰ The former is accomplished

¹⁰² (Eliot 1963, p. 51).

¹⁰³ (Guite 2016, p. 153).

¹⁰⁴ (Gregory 2012, p. 19).

¹⁰⁵ (Lewis 1974, pp. 67–68).

¹⁰⁶ (ibid., p. 70).

¹⁰⁷ (Lewis 1964, pp. 214–15).

¹⁰⁸ (Lewis 1974, p. 40).

¹⁰⁹ (ibid., pp. 74–75).

¹¹⁰ (ibid., p. 77).

through the proper use of Reason via the interdependent hierarchical roles of the intuitive *Intellectus* and instrumental *ratio*, while the latter is achieved via the modern principle of reducing Reason to Instinct and impulse. Acknowledging human beings as rational souls rather than as animals driven by instinct, Lewis prescribes the Medieval Triad pattern of cognitive capacity in order to recognize reality as it is, and to act accordingly:

We were told it all long ago by Plato. As the king governs by his executive, so Reason in man must rule the mere appetites by means of the 'spirited element'. The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat . . . of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man.¹¹¹

It is through the orderly function of these “officers” that reality is grasped and its values are acted out. However, for the “Innovator” of values who supersedes Reason and conscience with “instinct”, Lewis warns:

Neither in any operation with factual propositions nor in any appeal to instinct can the Innovator find the basis for a system of values. None of the principles he requires are to be found there: but they are all to be found somewhere else. 'All within the four seas are his brothers' ([*Analects*] xii. 5) says Confucius. . . . All the practical principles behind the Innovator's case for posterity, or society, or the species, are there from time immemorial in the *Tao*. But they are nowhere else.¹¹²

The Medieval Model is not only a “supreme work of art” but also a spectacular flourishing of the Trunk of the *Tao* in its nourishment of humanity as opposed to the abolishing of humanity in the modern tide of debunking the *Tao* and discarding the Medieval “image” of the universe. Being followers and imitators of the *Tao*, human beings will be able to see the value of each other and of the universe they inhabit—be it God's created universe or man-made universe as an artistic creation, as all is generated from the *Tao* and part of the cosmic Logos.

5. Conclusions

When Lewis cautioned at the end of *The Discarded Image*, “I hope no one will think that I am recommending a return to the Medieval Model,”¹¹³ he understated his case. What he meant to say was that he did not expect persons living in the twentieth century to return to a literal belief in the Model; what he did hope, however, was that the Model would be perceived as a magnificently tuned instrument for saying something significant about reality, something that people outside the *Tao* are both arrogant and ignorant about.

It is the operation of the underlining *Tao* that makes the Medieval Model worthy subject matter of this last endeavour in Lewis's long and fruitful career as an Oxbridge don. Twenty years after his Ridell lectures, as an elderly, widowed man in poor health, Lewis still felt the urge to defend the *Tao*, and he represented this central theme of both *The Abolition of Man* and the Oriental sage's cosmology and ontology through depicting the beauty and significance of the discarded image of the Medieval Model. It is in this sense that the little critical handbook for students of medieval literature has become a powerful critique of modernity, and causes his contemporaries as well as ours, to contemplate seriously how we should view the time-old belief in objective values shared by all major civilizations throughout most of human history, debunked only in the past three hundred years, and whether there is indeed an objective Reality “out there” independent of human feelings, perceptions and will, and how we shall appropriately respond to it.

¹¹¹ (Lewis 1974, pp. 24–25).

¹¹² (ibid., pp. 39–40).

¹¹³ (Lewis 1964, p. 222).

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