

A FEW NOTES ON C.S. LEWIS'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE TAO

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Abstract

In his series of three lectures delivered at King's College, Newcastle, part of the University of Durham, in February 1943 and published the following year under the title *The Abolition of Man; or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*, C.S. Lewis passionately argues for the preservation or reinstatement of "the sole source of all value judgements", represented, in his opinion, by "traditional values", that he calls "for convenience the *Tao*, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes." This article looks a little closer at the specific meaning of the *Tao* selected (and then adapted) by C.S. Lewis from a rather complex and fluid philosophical paradigm informed by two contrasting (Taoist and Confucian, respectively) schools of thought.

Keywords: *The Abolition of Man, Tao, Taoists, Confucians.*

The Abolition of Man (translated for the first time in Romanian by Professor Rodica Albu¹) is a polemical essay, conveying Lewis's strong reaction to an English teaching book seemingly announcing a very detrimental new educational platform: "Where the old [education] initiated, the new merely 'conditions'. The old dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly: the new deals with them more as the poultry-keeper deals with young birds – making them thus or thus for purposes of which the birds know nothing." (p. 14) What irritates and even angers C.S. Lewis in this otherwise insignificant publication is the ignorant, irresponsible approach of its two authors concerning pupils' feelings. Monumental negligence, in Lewis's

¹ „Abolirea omului sau Reflecții asupra educației, cu referire specială la predarea englezei în clasele superioare ale școlilor”. Rodica Albu, ed., *Inklings. Litera și spiritul*. Iași: Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2004. 85-135

opinion, since “the head rules the belly through the chest—the seat [...] of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments”, which are “the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.” (p.15)

Firmly convinced that one has to stand against the obvious efforts “to produce what may be called Men without Chests” (p.15), Lewis deems (and denounces) as nefarious any educational or social project like the one that he extensively criticizes here. He believes that intentionally and methodically doing away with people’s feelings is not only wrong – it is *a wrong* done to them and a great sin. It is hubris, since it aims at essentially altering the original design of Nature or Divine Presence. Emotion is not just a luxury for humans, it is a vital mediator between their thought and their primary drives. What Lewis indignantly calls “men without chests” are rather people with *atrophied*, *emptied*, no longer functioning chests. Although still normal-looking, although apparently / physically unaffected, such people are hopelessly damaged inside. Turned into pathetic monsters (i.e., into *deformed* beings), robbed of their potential wholeness, they are almost reduced to the condition of expendable, easily replaceable batteries, having for poles a unilaterally developed, extremely specialized intellect and, respectively, rampant, exacerbated instincts. Such “consumables” are to be produced on a large scale, because, of course, they are in high demand, they are required in a society increasingly dependent on technology, increasingly oblivious to the dangers of neglecting deep and true connection in a misleadingly called “communication era”.

The imminent dissolution of humanity (not necessarily triggering, or being accompanied by, the extinction of our species) is the gloomy prospect about which C.S. Lewis sets to warn his contemporaries. Sadly, 75 years later, things do not seem to have changed for the better. It only looks like the spectre glimpsed by him at the horizon has drawn closer. It is difficult to say what chances there are to effectively stop this tragic countdown. It is also difficult to appreciate whether humankind really cares about it anymore. But *The Abolition of Man* tends to offer one or two solutions to those (be they few or many) still willing to overcome such dire straits.

C.S. Lewis believes that one should always strive to rise above one’s biological status. Sense *and* sensibility are to be cultivated in order to shape a well-rounded personality. Removing “all sentiments, as far as possible, from [one]’s mind” does not increase or strengthen or sharpen brainpower: in C.S. Lewis’s words, “a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head” (p.10). Moreover, “without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism” (p.14). All traditions (not only those mentioned by Lewis in his essay), each according to its own cultural circumstances and practices, have (implicitly or explicitly) conceived a prototype of the ideal

human being, whose intellect and emotions are in perfect harmony, whose well-developed, well-trained mind, producing a well-structured and well-balanced reasoning, is matched by a good soul and a kind heart, by a caring, understanding, *gentle* nature. Such an accomplished individual lives in total accord with the Wisdom from Above *and* in untroubled peace with the surrounding nature and with the fellow humans.

No doubt, the complex code according to which a specific ideal version of humanity takes shape is culturally conditioned. As C.S. Lewis readily admits, bringing together and comparing various such projections might result in finding “many contradictions and some absurdities” (p. 24). “Lump[ing] together [...] the traditional moralities of East and West, the Christian, the Pagan, and the Jew” (p. 24), he says, might seem an odd assortment. “But what is common to them all is something we cannot neglect. It is the doctrine of objective value, 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.” (p. 12) “This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as ‘the *Tao*’”. (p. 24)

Composed of 𠃑/*chuò* (“brisk walking”) and 首/*shǒu* (“head”; “first”; “start”, “beginning”; “side”, “direction”; “to face [a direction]”) and having a multitude of meanings (among which: “direction”; “way”, “path”, “road”; “the Way”; “method”, “principle”; “reason”, “truth”, “morality”²), 道/*Tao* (or *Dao*) is a fundamental concept in ancient Chinese philosophy, which has been variously understood, in succession or at the same time, even by local sages and schools of thought. In spite of attributing the *Tao* to “the Chinese” (in general), Lewis obviously takes into consideration its Confucian interpretation, heavily (and exclusively) quoting from the *Analects* (論語/*Lunyu*), while never mentioning or alluding to Laozi or Taoism/Daoism (道教/*Dàojiāo*)³. No doubt, it would be mean (and utterly unfair) to say that for C.S. Lewis “all Chinese are the same”. More probably, as he declares himself not to be “a professional historian” (p. 42), he avoids extending the discussion over things not exactly familiar to him—known only superficially, through only *one* English translation of *one* (small) set of relevant texts put together, repeatedly copied and rearranged over the

² Tao “means ‘path, way, method, or mode of doing a thing,’ then also, the mode of expressing a thing, or ‘word’; and thus finally it acquires its main meaning, which is ‘reason.’ As a verb, it means ‘to walk, or to tread; to speak or to declare; to argue or to reason.’ Considering the religious reverence in which the term is held, the expression Tao, meaning ‘word’ and ‘logical thought’ at the same time, presents a close analogy to the Neo-Platonic term *λόγος*. The Buddhists use the word Tao as a synonym of 明 (*ming*), enlightenment, to translate the Sanskrit बोधि (*bōdhi*), and the Christians employ it in the version of the New Testament for the term *λόγος*, ‘word.’” (Carus pp. 9-10)

³ 教/*jiāo* means “to tell”; “to teach”, “to instruct”; “teaching”, “religion”.

centuries, in different varieties of an “exotic” analytical language permitting multiple (sometimes very different or even divergent) readings, due to its tendency of letting the context (and the recipient’s flair) to decide what exact lexical and/or grammatical meanings are to be selected from fairly large and intricate series.

Obviously, Lewis’s understanding of the *Tao* (and, consequently, his entire argumentation in *The Abolition of Man*) rests on Waley’s translation (1938) of the Confucian *Analects*. “It is upon the Trunk that a gentleman works” (Waley, p. 83), the motto chosen by C.S. Lewis for the second part (“The Way”) of his essay, is in fact a sentence extracted from Master Yu⁴’s attempt to obtain advice from Confucius. The disciple’s tentative (= inquisitive) intervention continues⁵: “When that [the trunk] is firmly set up, the Way grows. And surely proper behaviour to parents and elder brothers is the trunk of Goodness?” (p. 83) Waley explains the *trunk* (his English rendition for the Chinese 本) in a footnote: “i.e. what is fundamental, as opposed to ‘the twigs’, i.e. small arts and accomplishments, which the gentleman leaves to his inferiors” (p. 83). But other translations do not equate 本 with “trunk”, which basically nullifies one major line of reasoning followed by C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*: the phrase “Men without Chests” ceases to function as an analogy resting on the polysemy of the word *trunk* (“bole”, “woody stem”; “torso”; “large strong box”). Having in mind the same idea of stability and dependability, most translators into English opt for using “root” as an equivalent for 本 in this particular context (*Analects* 1:2), a choice which also brings to the fore concepts and values (essential for Confucians) such as devotion to origins, respect for foundations and traditions:

The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission! – are they not the root of all benevolent actions? (Legge, p. 2)

The gentleman devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the Way will grow therefrom. Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man’s character. (Lau, p. 59)

⁴ Philosopher Yew (Legge) or You Tzu (Lau) or Master Yu (Waley)/You (Watson; Eno) or “You Ruo (有若) was a disciple. For a brief time after Confucius’s death, he took on the Master’s role for the group of disciples.” (Eno)

⁵ C.S. Lewis includes the paragraph (*Analects* 1:2) in the “Appendix. Illustrations of the Tao” (43-4), but (inadvertently, perhaps) he drops the (quite important) question mark from the very end.

The gentleman operates on the root. When the root is firm, then the Way may proceed. Filial and brotherly conduct—these are the root of humaneness, are they not? (Watson, p. 16)

The gentleman applies himself to the roots. Only when the roots are well planted will the Way grow. Filial piety and brotherly obedience are perhaps the roots of humanity, are they not? (Huang, p. 49)

The *junzi*⁶ works on the root – once the root is planted, the *dao* is born. Filiality and respect for elders, are these not the roots of *ren*⁷? (Eno)

Ironically, although it cancels his wordplay on *trunk – chest*, the 本-“root” is much more coherent (than 本-“trunk”) with C.S. Lewis’s leaning towards the Confucian “version” of the *Tao* – a practical approach, functioning as a code of moral conduct and proposing a recognizable way of self improving (see, for instance, “*Chiin-tzu, the gentleman or cuor gentil*”, 21). This understanding of the *Tao* really suits Lewis’s arguments—which can hardly be said about Laozi’s or Zhuangzi’s (respective) *Tao(s)*. From *Tao Te Ching* one learns, for instance, that *Tao* (sometimes translated as “Way” or “Reason”) is “the Whole”, something literally indefinable, since words, in charge of marking the boundary between what a thing is and what it is not, have absolutely no boundary to signal here, because beside “the Whole” there can be nothing else:

The Tào that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tào./ The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Legge, p. 47)

The reason that cannot be reasoned is not the eternal Reason./ The name that cannot be named is not the eternal Name. (Carus, p. 97)

The Tao that can be understood cannot be the primal, or cosmic, Tao, just as an idea that can be expressed in words cannot be the infinite idea. (Goddard, p. 11)

The way that can be spoken of/ Is not the constant way;/ The name that can be named/ Is not the constant name. (Lau, p. 5)

⁶ “*Junzi* 君子: Originally ‘a prince’; used by the *Analects* to denote an ideal moral actor. The term is sometimes rendered ‘gentleman’, but has a more emphatic moral sense, and is left untranslated here. At times it merely denotes a ruler.” (Eno)

⁷ “*Ren* 仁: The key moral term in the *Analects*. Rendered as ‘humanity,’ ‘goodness,’ etc., its rich meaning is a mystery to many in the text, and defies translation.” (Eno)

The ways that can be walked are not the eternal Way;/ The names that can be named are not the eternal name. (Mair, p. 59)

In Laozi's philosophy, Tao is not to be actively pursued; "virtue is simply 無為 (*wu-wei*) or 'not acting, not making, not doing'" (*yin* versus *yang*), which "cannot mean inactivity, for it is with Lao Tze a principle of action" (Carus, p. 18); it is "not forcing the nature of things", it is "the surrender of attachment to self and the utter omission of 人道 (*jhren tao*), i.e., of man's Tao, the peculiar and particular Tao of oneself and following the course prescribed by the eternal Tao, 常道 (*ch'ang tao*); "it is, briefly, not 'non-action,' but 'non-assertion'" (Carus, p. 19).

As one of Laozi's disciples, Zhuangzi also distinguishes between "the *Tao*, or Way, of Man" and "the *Tao*, or Way, of Heaven", noting that they are "far apart", if not antithetical: "Doing nothing and yet attracting all honour is the Way of Heaven; Doing and being embarrassed thereby is the Way of Man." (Legge, Book XI, 306) "To rest in inaction, and command respect—this is the Way of Heaven. To engage in action and become entangled in it—this is the way of man." (Watson 125) Treading the way of man is, in fact, erring from the Way of Heaven. Thinking that one has found the Way, one has thoroughly lost it, without even realizing one's error. The Way is—and should be accepted as—a total mystery; seizing it is impossible for human mind and senses:

The Tào cannot be heard; what can be heard is not It. The Tào cannot be seen; what can be seen is not It. The Tào cannot be expressed in words; what can be expressed in words is not It. [...] the Tào does not admit of being named. [...] If one ask about the Tào and another answer him, neither of them knows it. Even the former who asks has never learned anything about the Tào. He asks what does not admit of being asked, and the latter answers where answer is impossible. (Legge, Book XXII, p. 69)

The Way [Tao] cannot be heard; heard, it is not the Way. The Way cannot be seen; seen, it is not the Way. The Way cannot be described; described, it is not the Way. [...] There is no name that fits the Way. [...] He who, when asked about the Way, gives an answer does not understand the Way; and he who asked about the Way has not really heard the Way explained. The Way is not to be asked about, and even if it is asked about, there can be no answer. (Watson, pp. 243-4)

In strong contrast with Taoists (but resembling other—more familiar to C.S. Lewis—lines of thought and beliefs), the paternalist and practical Confucian view of Tao indicates reassuring connections between Heaven and Earth. Instead of discouraging action and the imitation impulse, it states that a Supreme Power residing high above rules the entire universe as an omnipotent and omniscient

righteousness and continually guides the willing humans in their efforts of mirroring (more or less precisely) the celestial state of things. In this vein, C.S. Lewis mentions in *The Abolition of Man* the Sanskrit *ṛta* (ऋत) and *satyá* (सत्य) from Vedic and post-Vedic texts:

In early Hinduism that conduct in men which can be called good consists in conformity to, or almost participation in, the *Ṛta* — that great ritual or pattern of nature and supernature which is revealed alike in the cosmic order, the moral virtues, and the ceremonial of the temple. Righteousness, correctness, order, the *Ṛta* is constantly identified with *satyá* or truth, correspondence to reality. [...] the Indian masters say that the gods themselves are born of the *Ṛta* and obey it. (p. 11)

Immediately after briefly explaining the two Hindu concepts, Lewis remarks: “The ancient Jews likewise praise the Law as being ‘true’” and details (in an endnote) the meaning of the Hebrew concept of *ěmeth* (אמת), “truth”: “Where the *satya* of the Indian sources emphasizes truth as ‘correspondence’, *ěmeth* (connected with a verb that means ‘to be firm’) emphasizes rather the reliability or trustworthiness of truth.” (11) One could add that *ěmeth* is related to the verb *aman* (אמן), meaning “to support”, “to confirm” and to the interjection *amen* (אמן), “surely”, “in truth”, “so be it”. Since in the “Appendix” he extensively cites from the 42 Divine Principles of Maat, listed in the Confession of the Righteous Soul, to be found in *The Papyrus of Ani* (or the *Book of Coming Forth By Day* or *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*)⁸, Lewis could surely have mentioned on an equal footing the *maat/ma’at* of the Ancient Egyptians, meaning “truth”, “justice”, “fairness”, “right action”, “righteousness”, “right order (in the cosmos/state)”, a noun belonging to the same lexical family as the verb *maa*, signifying “to direct”, “to guide”, “to be true”, “to be just”.

But *ṛta* and *satyá*, *ěmeth* or *maat* are abstract notions, while *Tao*, especially in its Confucian version, beside “the Way in which the universe goes on” (p. 11), also designates a material *road*, which helps projecting “the Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression” (p. 12).

Last, but not least, maybe C.S. Lewis chooses the Confucian *Tao* because it is an appropriate metaphor for what he has in mind when he sets his heart on figuring a “vaccine” against the fast approaching “disease” that is a huge threat to individuals and society alike. He feels it is all about control when he warns against “Man’s [deceptive] conquest of Nature”, “an expression often used to describe the progress of applied science” (p. 28). In order to get the

⁸ “I have not slain men [or women].” “I have not been grasping.” “I have not stolen.” “I have not spoken falsehood.” And so on – see Lewis 42-8.

power over things or people, one needs to understand how they function—for which purpose it could be worth considering simplifying them as much as possible. This is why the so-called (by Lewis) Conditioners aim to produce “men without chests”. “It is not that they are bad men. They are not men at all. Stepping outside the *Tao*, they have stepped into the void. Nor are their subjects necessarily unhappy men. They are not men at all: they are artefacts” (p. 33), “slaves and puppets of that to which [they] have given [their] souls” (p. 37). How can such a dismal prospect be avoided? C.S. Lewis suggests it would be helpful to remember that life may be transient, but humans are able to decide how they want to follow their paths: “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.” (p. 37)

Following the stars in the sky above him and abiding by the moral law within him, man can experience the freedom of redefining himself through his meaningful journey from birth to death. The *Tao* can teach him how to plan his journey, what destination(s) to choose, how to continually readjust his goals and desires, how to put things in perspective—how to harmonize the Way and his way.

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