

A Polanyian Rescue of *The Abolition of Man*

Some philosophers deny that any historical story could vindicate (or fail to vindicate) our values. They see any such idea as an instance of the 'genetic fallacy': it is reasons or justifications that count, not origins. But this overlooks the possibility that the value in question may understand itself and present itself and claim authority for itself in terms which the genealogical story can undermine.¹

Many readers will be perplexed by the title of this essay: "'Rescue'? Why, I had no idea that C. S. Lewis's well-known book was in any jeopardy. What's up?" What's up is that Lewis's position as outlined in this Great Work in the making is a ripe target for the historicist-based skepticism and resulting cynicism that took root in the nineteenth century and reached full blossom in the central decades of the twentieth, a particularly interesting fact given that *The Abolition of Man* was conceived in 1943.

In what follows, the argument of *Abolition*, seldom well understood by its many readers, will be laid out in detail. Then, with the target clearly delineated, the essay will reveal the susceptibility of Lewis's reasoning to the onslaught of the historicist critique by granting Friedrich Nietzsche, via abundant reference to *Beyond Good and Evil*, free rein.² Finally, constituting the heart of the inquiry, the essay will employ key characteristics of Michael Polanyi's mature thought (his "fiduciary" philosophy) to show that Lewis's position, properly appreciated, survives Nietzsche's ruthless piercing assault. As a consequence, we will more fully perceive the purport of Lewis's timely and imperative book. This in turn will provide an inkling of the profound insight of his analysis while fostering the suspicion that he has joined the distinguished fraternity of esoteric writers. Equally significant, the rescue of Lewis demonstrates the vital contribution of Polanyi to modern intellectual history by illustrating his importance to persons of integrity struggling with the deepest questions of human existence.

Abolition Redux

As will become clearer as the discussion proceeds, *The Abolition of Man* is among the most important writings of our time. Let us begin, quite appropriately for this striking book, with a number of blunt statements. The slim volume shows that we are engaged in a struggle involving the highest stakes possible. There is a master game, and it is essential that we

understand it. Resident here is a terrifying prospect. There is also an equally terrifying realization, one having to do with our individual responsibility. On the brighter side, the book indicates that the terror can be overcome, and illuminates wondrous possibilities. But how the tale will unfold depends on what we understand and what each of us does. It is often noted that Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* is a fictional playing out of the issues raised by *The Abolition of Man*. Let us instead highlight the converse, starting with the novel rather than the essay. *The Abolition of Man* constitutes a stark and disturbing reminder, namely, that that which we would like to believe is simply a fantasy (the strange *That Hideous Strength*) is in fact a reality, one in which we are deeply embedded—indeed, that this is a reality well advanced in its unfolding, being much further along today than it was even in February 1943 when the lectures that constitute this book were first delivered. Lewis is forthright. All that we treasure is in jeopardy. He leaves the reader with the ominous question, “What will you do?”

Many of the richest contributions of this little book are not explicitly stated. Among the central claims of the present study is that Lewis wrote for multiple audiences, and for each of these audiences he had different expectations. In all cases, however, he presumed that the reader would reflect deeply on what he has written, in the process discerning implicit vital principles. In appreciation of these principles there arises both a call to action, and a plan for action (one that is eminently educational in nature). Before illuminating these matters, let us lay out the fundamental argument of the book, an argument at the center of which is an appeal to “objective value.” Following an exegesis of *Abolition*, we will reflect on what Nietzsche would say about Lewis's appeal to “objective value,” and how, in turn, Lewis, relieved by Polanyi, could respond. Continually in the background will be an additional question: what happens if we pay no mind to Lewis, do nothing, and allow things to continue as they are?

Logically, the central argument of *The Abolition of Man* is a *reductio ad absurdum* which, in turn, is an application of *modus tollens*:

If A then B
Not B
Therefore, Not A

Rendered less formally, we might say:

If A then B (in other words, A entails B)
But, B is unacceptable

Therefore, A too is unacceptable

As displayed in *Abolition*, the reductio proceeds as follows. Imagine that the deepest aspirations of representatives of the modern reformist mind (whom Lewis calls the “Conditioners”) were to come true. That is, man through science and the unfettered development of technique conquers all of nature, including man himself (which involves inter alia the creation of “values,” which is to say determination of the very meaning of right and wrong, good and bad).³ This is our “A.” But such control (total conquering) of man and his “values” entails the loss (abolition) of man as well as the loss of any reason to conquer and control. This is our “B.” Therefore, the modern reformist mind’s deepest aspirations are unacceptable, yielding “Not A.”

Essentially, then, *Abolition* is a thought experiment. Lewis is asking, “What if this grand plan, this hubristic enterprise, were in fact to succeed?” The result of the experiment is a vivid and dramatic warning with images as powerful as any found in his popular stories. Alarm bells are ringing. We best be on guard!

Lewis’s reductio depends on a disarming irony and a debilitating contradiction. As just noted, Lewis is asking, “What if this were in fact true—that man has reached the point where he can control the genesis of ‘values,’ that is, control the determination of good and bad, right and wrong?” The point that Lewis wants to make is that such reductionist “naturalization” of morals in effect strips us of morals. That is, by reducing morality (“values”)—all the things we stand for and esteem (i.e., that in light of which we strive and may be said to have succeeded or prevailed)—to something visible to (the Conditioners’ understanding of) the domain of science and explainable in its terms, we have conceded the vital territory. This effort has divested man of what makes him human: The one thing that makes man different from, say, mold or a cockroach is now reduced to the processes that define mold or a cockroach (or, indeed, that define inanimate matter, since, after all, even mold or the cockroach is stripped of something essential by explanation of it in terms of chemistry or physics alone). Hence, we have the “abolition of man.”⁴ So, where are the disarming irony and debilitating contradiction? The irony is that the attempt to make man all-powerful in fact makes him non-existent (that is, the very thing that distinguishes man—that which makes him what he is—is lost). The debilitating contradiction is that pursuing the logic of using science to gain total control of nature (including man) results in the destruction of any reason to pursue (that is, justification for, or value in,

pursuing) that logic: All that remains is the “itch,” or what is our pleasure at the moment—and this is no *reason* at all. In Lewis’s words,

Yet the Conditioners will act. When I said...that all motives fail them, I should have said all motives except one. All motives that claim any validity other than that of their felt emotional weight at a given moment have failed them. Everything except the *sic volo, sic jubeo* [“this I want; this I decree”] has been explained away...When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked [via naturalistic reduction], what says ‘I want’ remains. It cannot be exploded or ‘seen through’ because it never had any pretensions. The Conditioners, therefore, must come to be motivated simply by their own pleasure...My point is that those who stand outside all judgements of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except the emotional strength of that impulse. (65-66)

Lewis’s argument raises the vital question of what he means by “man.” So, *why* are the products of the reductionist reductio no longer men? In response, let us begin with some key phrases from *Abolition* which, while easily overlooked, uniquely clarify the nucleus of Lewis’s enterprise:

...the task is to train in the pupil those responses [to actions or to objects in the world] which are in themselves appropriate, whether anyone is making them or not, and *in making which the very nature of man consists*. (21; emphasis added)

In the *Tao* itself, as long as we remain in it, we find *the concrete reality in which to participate is to be truly human*...While we speak from within the *Tao* we can speak of Man having power over himself in a sense truly analogous to an individual’s self-control. But the moment we step outside and regard the *Tao* as a mere subjective product, this possibility has disappeared. (74-75; emphasis added)⁵

It may even be said that it is by this middle element [i.e., rule of oneself by the bearer of appropriate sentiment, called by Lewis “the chest”] *that man is man*. (25, emphasis added)⁶

Illuminated by these phrases is the central concept of Lewis’s book. “Man” is the creature that responds appropriately to (i.e., is willing and able to act out of obligation to) principle or ideal.⁷ To borrow a term from Polanyi, this is the “operational principle” of what, on Lewis’s account, counts as the genuinely human. An object that once told the time, but no longer does, is not

strictly speaking a clock but instead a collection of metal and plastic. Similarly, for Lewis the biped that is unable or unwilling to act out of obligation to principle or ideal is no longer “man.”⁸ It is the threatened loss of that esteemed creature that so much concerns Lewis and is the occasion for his book.

Note that in order for there to be “man” in this sense, three requirements must be met:

- 1) Principle or ideal must in fact exist—objectively (that is, there must be “objective value,” a real normativity which weighs on us and to which we can respond);
- 2) This creature, “man,” must be capable of seeing that objective value (that is, since we are evidently not born with this capacity, “man” must be *enabled to see*); and
- 3) That creature must be willing to live under its authority (that is, “man” must have come to possess character of a certain sort).

Examination of these requirements leads us into the depths of Lewis’s position.

In the interest of greater clarity, let us examine several questions: what it means to see objective value; what makes such seeing possible; and what stands in the way of that seeing. First, what is “objective value”? To begin with, this term is not equivalent to the nearly identical phrase, “objective *values*.” Indeed, it has quite the opposite meaning. In Chapter 1 of *Abolition*, when he first broaches these matters, Lewis refers to “objective value,” not “objective values.” Specifically, he outlines “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” (18). So, when Lewis later speaks of a sentiment being appropriate or inappropriate, he is referring to an *act* that is appropriate or inappropriate—an *act of valuing*. Ideally, “our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order” (19). Recognizing and responding are actions. In the context described by Lewis, these are acts of valuing. They do not represent *the holding of* a view (as in “having a ‘value’”) but instead denote the execution of an action occasioned by something external to us. Lewis then calls for “sentiment being reasonable” and states that “It can be reasonable or unreasonable only if it conforms or fails to conform to something else” (19-20).

It is essential to an accurate grasp of Lewis’s vision to understand that it is imagination that provides us with this “something else.” It is then up to reason to assess the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of our response to it. A profoundly important question, one that we will dwell on shortly, is, “How does imagination come to possess the ‘something else’?”

In his reference to value Lewis is standing in opposition to our time by refusing to concede to a change in vocabulary (viz., a surrender to “values” talk) whose origins are in Nietzsche (if not in Hegelian, and thereby Marxist, historicism before him). That is, he is referring to objective value in the universe and to what we may call “objective valuing” as the proper response to that objective value. Technically, however, Lewis does not go even this far. There is no reference in *Abolition* to “valuing” on the part of the individual, but only to “recognizing” and “responding.” On the many pages of the book where Lewis refers to “values,” he is employing the common language of his audience (and its, and our, time), but this reference is to a phantom—and, on page 73 (where he later refers to “objective value”), he probably should have said “absolute value” instead of “absolute values” (of the *Tao*). No one actually “holds” these “values.” To the extent we believe that they are held, we are in the grips of a mirage.

Illustrating the critical importance of the *Tao*, Lewis asserts that without an objective realm of value in light of which to judge and act responsibly, there cannot *be* anything of moral substance. Reminding us of the “turning” described by Plato in the “Allegory of the Cave,” Lewis is pointing here toward something which is good, true, and real. It is that for the sake of which we act, strive, or sacrifice, and perhaps that in the name of which we die. It is something intrinsically desirable. According to Lewis, it constitutes an imperative—a force that presses on us—an “oughtness.” Lewis would have no objection to referring to such a thing as “an objective good.”

Second, how is it possible to see objective value? This is an extremely important matter that we can here only briefly treat. A fertile starting point in understanding how such insight becomes possible is Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103-1104, where the philosopher emphasizes the indispensable role played by habit in the formation of character.⁹ Lewis brings Aristotle’s wisdom down to Earth. In *The Magician’s Nephew* he states, “what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also *depends on what sort of person you are.*”¹⁰ Very much in the tradition of Aristotle, Lewis in *Abolition* is saying that it is necessary *to learn to see* objective value. This is a process of enablement.¹¹ Typically (though by no means always), that has everything to do with what happens early in life. This enabling, if we might be somewhat ironic, is a sort of “deformation” (a thought clarified by Maben Poirier’s reference to Polanyi’s fruit of apprenticeship as “*déformation professionnelle*”).¹² We might less

controversially refer to this as a “reformation” in which the individual is “no longer the person he or she was prior to his having undergone his or her apprenticeship.”¹³ Why? The answer is that the individual is now able “to make contact with what is real and what is true.”¹⁴ This is because one is now *open* in a way he or she was not in the past. It is significant that during the process of enablement, what is going on, and why, is not apparent to the beneficiary of this activity. As Lewis states, the student labors “in the hope of a future good which he cannot at present imagine or desire.”¹⁵ Elsewhere he comments that “...human beings must be trained in obedience to the moral intuitions almost before they have them, and years before they are rational enough to discuss them, or they will be corrupted before the time for discussion arrives.”¹⁶ (Note that this is a modification of the will, in conjunction with a type of insight.) In the first of these essays, “The Weight of Glory,” Lewis adds, “But it is just in so far as he approaches the reward that he becomes able to desire it for its own sake; *indeed, the power of so desiring it is itself a preliminary reward.*”¹⁷ What we find here in Lewis was earlier noted by St. Augustine. In commenting on the Good, he says, “This is the wisdom which every rational soul does indeed consult, but it reveals itself to each according to his capacity to grasp it by reason of the good or evil dispositions of his will.”¹⁸ In other words, character is either a barrier or a portal. As noted by Lewis, what one discerns “depends on what sort of person you are.”¹⁹

Practically speaking, and with marked relevance to Lewis, who was the author of numerous popular children’s tales, it is of paramount importance to recognize that the enablement or training mentioned by these authors is best accomplished through literature (which, for the young, consists of stories). Vigen Guroian aptly observes, “fairy tales remind us of moral truths whose ultimate claims to normativity and permanence we would not think of questioning.”²⁰ Stories evoke responses on the part of the reader, and these register in us at a deep level so as to shape our view of the world and thereby affect how we act.²¹ The effect of carefully selected literature, and of the arts generally, is impressively captured by Harry Broudy when he states, “art would seem to be the source for images of life that may serve as seduction to commitment.”²² Broudy observes that this is “shaping of feeling by the arts” by means of aesthetic education. What we read or hear, then, in large measure determines how we see. To use a term prominent in writers from Edmund Burke to Russell Kirk, this is establishment and refinement of “the moral imagination.” As a result of this process, we come to view the world in terms of the learned principle and ideal. The world in the process is transformed, and thereby so

are we. The process issues in a distinctive character where, as Broudy indicates, character is the product of a commitment made incumbent by the aesthetic appeal of images presented in what has been read or otherwise experienced through art.²³ Such character is the principal rationale for liberal education (and certainly for anything properly called “moral education”).

Understanding what this is and how the formation responsible for it works explains why Lewis devoted so much time to writing fiction (especially for children, but, generally, for anyone whose imagination remains young).²⁴

Our third clarifying question is what stands in the way of recognizing objective value. Let us begin by noting that if the path to genuine humanity comes through seeing the good and then electing to act in obligation to it, then the villain, so to speak, would be any process or influence which impeded that end. Since to be fully human for Lewis involves being both able and willing to live in light of principle or ideal, there are two types of impediment, namely, 1) whatever obstructs seeing the good (i.e., witnessing objective value), and 2) whatever warps our character such that we would opt not to live in light of principle or ideal even though we had some sense of it. *The Green Book* (an English text for “the upper forms of schools”), with reference to which Lewis begins *Abolition*, is guilty on both counts. How so?

To live in light of objective value, one must first affirm that it exists. But the reductionism of *The Green Book*, as well as that of scientism, asserts that any sense of normativity that we might experience is *merely* epiphenomenal, that is, it is a mere subjective experience fully understandable in terms of, and caused by, an underlying natural or material process. As such, *The Green Book* is representative of a perverse pedagogy that is more properly labelled “*miseducation*.” To put this differently, Lewis is at war with both materialism and naturalism.²⁵ The point is that if reductionism is true, then so-called “objective value” is stripped of the status required for it to properly command our allegiance: it is merely a function of our bourgeois class existence (Marxism) or of our toilet training and other early-life events within which play out the dynamic principles of our mental life (psychoanalysis)—or of the biochemistry of the brain (contemporary neuroscience). In short, what *The Green Book* teaches is a debunking of principle and ideal that in turn erodes belief (or makes such belief impossible to begin with). The higher thing is blithely (as well as irresponsibly and dangerously) explained away (falsely, says Lewis). It is a potent dose of skepticism under whose influence that which might otherwise inspire us is inaccessible. Skepticism, feeding a habitual doubt that is an end in

itself: *That* is the adversary!²⁶ There is for Lewis no surer sign of moral collapse than deep seated and habitual cynicism. Under its reign, Lewis's "man" becomes an impossibility.²⁷

If all of this is true, then preservation of that which is higher, and the creature ("man") that is made possible through service to it, depend on establishing and preserving the reality of objective value, and on sustaining the will to act in obedience to it. In the place of a cynical reductionism we are to instill inspiration and establish love of the ideal. This is a sort of service, an allegiance, to that which is higher. The skeptical and ignorant observer might view this as confinement or imprisonment (captured by a seldom used word derived from old French: *durance*). In fact, however, it is the necessary condition for a form of freedom under which one becomes what he ought to be.

Nietzsche's Challenge

The voice of a scepticism that is both psychological and historically situated is above all that of Nietzsche.²⁸

If the above account of *The Abolition of Man* is accurate, then at the heart of Lewis is an appeal to objective value and a call to place it not only at the center of our individual lives but also to employ it as the beacon in whose light we are to educate the young. In Nietzsche we have the zealous—not to mention angry and disgusted—rejection of the alleged "objective" reality of any such thing.

Many readers will be sensitive to what appears to be a fundamental self-contradiction in Nietzsche between a) the corrosive crusader who brilliantly, even madly, aims to demonstrate the historicity and situated character of each and every claim to moral truth, and b) the outline of a positive program centered on emergence of the Overman who establishes and embodies genuine value. As we will later briefly note, these two sides of Nietzsche are linked by their common reference to *will to power*. But, in an effort to remain focused, let us ignore the seeming contradiction, and instead dwell on Nietzsche's potent critique of all known claims to knowledge of good and evil, especially his analysis of what he sees as proud yet stupid attempts to establish what he terms "*rational foundation for morality*" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 186). Like *The Green Book*, Nietzsche claims to see through such pretenses. What he discerns behind them is the operation of interest purposely obscured by a veil of purported objectivity. In all life, there is will to power (and nothing else). Will to power can be understood as the urge to survive,

taking the form of an instinct or drive for life, for assertion, for growth, for enhancement, for free exercise of one's energies. In all of this, we witness the influence of the Darwinian analysis: the forceful expression of *life* which, in the case of humanity, plays out in intelligent beings. Thus, for human beings, assertion and the field of battle extend beyond the physical to encompass, as well, the intellectual (and hence the moral). In addition to tooth and claw, humans have in this incessant conflict recourse to ideas (doctrines, beliefs, convictions, etc.) as well as to the mechanisms through which they are purveyed and preserved. These include: religions and the corresponding institutions; myths, rituals, and traditions; and educational practices, including schooling.

Arms and armies, then, are not the only tools of assertion and conquest, and not even the most effective of them. In illustration of this fact, Nietzsche cites the success of Christianity ("slave morality") in overcoming imperial Rome.²⁹ For Nietzsche, history shows that moralities always exist *for a purpose* and they are used to serve that purpose. Truly to understand the morality in question, we must recognize its intended use. This use is always a function of the time and place, the needs and interests, of he who creates that morality. Claims to the objective truth of a morality are simply a predictable device employed to establish the legitimacy, and hence increase the effectiveness, of that morality in its intended use.

Given the practical origin and function of moralities, it is unsurprising to learn that for Nietzsche the currently regnant morality—one that he calls a "herd animal morality" (*BGE*, Section 202)—is simply one type of human morality (in the service of one type of instinct—that of the herd). This existing herd morality has up to now been sustained by Christian religion and, in our time, increasingly gains support from appeals to democratic sentiment. Nietzsche points to alternative moralities that existed in the past. He also speaks of an alternative morality that is possible for the future, and that we ought to aspire to. This is a "higher" morality.

Nietzsche highlights the great practical value of moralities. They constitute an occasion under which we can collect our powers and organize our energies. *They provide meaning!* And since meaning sustains action, moralities are in that sense authorized by nature. Thus, there is a form of vindication present even in Nietzsche's reductionist account. Such intellectual and ideological agents of will to power are at their most effective where education has been most effectual, that is, when their (alleged) truth becomes a presupposition.³⁰

Nietzsche, however, has now arrived on the scene with an unprecedented acuity to show what is *really* going on (and has always been going on).³¹ In Nietzsche's commentary we are reminded of Marx, who claims to possess an equally penetrating analysis that reveals the truth behind the powerful illusion. Nothing is in fact as it appears, and as we think it is. A monumental "con" has occurred, a deceit that is most remarkable (and in some sense admirable) in connection with the most ambitious claims. We are invited to think of Moses, Socrates, and Jesus.

Under this analysis Lewis's "objective value" is simply a latter-day residue of such forms of deceit that only a shrinking number of gullible fools still fall for and participate in.³² The truth according to Nietzsche is that there is no meaning to existence except that which through will to power we manage to create (and impose on others). Hence, any appeal to a pre-existing realm of principles or ideals is nonsense. As an objective reality, Lewis's "*Tao*" is a fantasy. Bernard Williams describes this perspective clearly: "there is no such order of things... what [persons such as Lewis] would have us yearn for is not there"; instead, there is "a modern blank where the Cosmic Thing used to be."³³ Lewis's *Tao* is, moreover, a particularly infantile construction, only of appeal to, and effective with, markedly immature intellects.

In summary, the objective value Lewis would have us discover and then make central to our lives, thereby giving rise to "man" and a corresponding principled life, is for Nietzsche mere illusion. What Lewis says in this regard is bunk. For Nietzsche, Lewis certainly does not grasp the big picture, which is that, under the heading of (conflicting) values, various intrinsically historical (and unavoidably "relative") claims to truth vie for supremacy. We are in our time witnessing the death throes of at least two of these, Platonic idealism and Christian morality. And in the resulting growing vacuum, something else, quite predictably, is struggling to take their place.³⁴

Nietzsche thus poses his challenge: Would you affiliate with delusion and deceit? Grow up. Have the courage to face the world honestly. Rather than hide, embrace your fate!³⁵ Submission is for fools. If you truly understand, assert yourself while triumphantly welcoming the clear light of the frigid heights.³⁶

A Polanyian Response

We need a theory of knowledge which shows up the fallacy of a positivist scepticism and authorises our knowledge of entities governed by higher principles.³⁷

So, how would Lewis respond? To begin with, Lewis might point out that in his call for us to be truthful and honest, Nietzsche is exercising Christian virtue. But we earlier resolved not to dwell on potential self-contradiction in Nietzsche. Moreover, Nietzsche, who points out that European Christianity self-destructed precisely because of its commitment to truth, surely recognizes such commitment on his own part, and presumably would not find the parallel in this regard with Christianity to be disabling.³⁸ Indeed, he may well represent the view Leo Strauss labels “radical historicism,” a position which is seemingly immune to the standard critique of historicist thinking.³⁹

Instead, drawing on the central insights of Polanyi, let us attribute to Lewis a more positive and more creative response. *What if Lewis’s reference to objective value is not the sort of thing that Nietzsche imagines it to be?* At the heart of Nietzsche’s criticism of claims to moral truth, making that criticism both effective and appealing, is the failure of those claims to establish for themselves an intellectually compelling foundation for their alleged universality and objectivity. If under critical scrutiny all such candidates for our allegiance prove fatally deficient, then it is a simple matter to conclude that, in this sense at least, they are equally inadequate, and in every instance pretentious. Our choice, then, appears to be between comparably foundationless candidates on the one hand, and Nietzsche’s affiliation with will to power on the other.

Given how common it is for peoples, cultures, nations, and movements nevertheless to adhere tenaciously to their claims to moral truth, it is understandable how Nietzsche would conclude that something other than honesty, perspicuity, and an unsullied love of truth is operating here. In other words, in the face of the evident fact that the enterprise of arriving rationally at objective universal truth regarding the good has in every instance proven futile, Nietzsche opts out and (in his mind at least) undertakes a very different sort of enterprise. This is an enterprise where the quest for indubitable foundations is abandoned. Nothing like those foundations exists, or can exist. Instead, there is only will to power!

But there is another way in which to surmount this appetite and move ahead. Let us concede at the outset the finitude, fallibility, and ongoing corrigibility of human understanding. Arriving at objective (indubitable) foundations regarding the good is an unrealistic expectation. The appetite for such is a sign of an immaturity that is to be overcome, and it is overcome not by argument but instead by accustoming oneself to turn one's back and carrying on (thereby subduing a temptation that is never fully extinguished). "Moving on" consists of surrendering to the prospect of a transcendent good (in this instance, Lewis's "objective value").⁴⁰ Note the underlying comparatively modest epistemological claim: one posits the existence of objective value but does not for a moment suggest that it can be shown indubitably to exist. One affirms it to be *real*, but pays no mind to whether it can be established as *actual*.⁴¹ Such reality is prepared to disclose itself—but only to someone "prepared to receive it."⁴² Bringing to mind Lewis's emphasis on the educational prerequisites for genuine human existence, objective value awaits knowledge of itself on the part of "the skilled reader" (*ibid.*). This is done without the expectation of certainty and in full recognition that the existence of objective value is subject to doubt. *But the unavoidable fact of doubt does not disable belief!* One does not argue with the skeptic, for that would in effect restore the authority of the expectation that we had resolved to eschew. Instead, we invite the interlocutor to join in the discovery and appreciation of objective value. As Lewis observes in regard to promoting good reading, "The real way of mending a man's taste is not to denigrate his present favourites but to teach him how to enjoy something better."⁴³ Indeed, by doing this jointly or as part of a larger community, the reality of objective value grows. In the process the legitimacy of the surrender is affirmed. This is because the discoveries of our fellows reinforce our own confidence in the discovery process. Growing confidence creates the condition for yet further discovery and confirmation.

This activity, if pursued consistently, defines a person as well as a way of life. It begins with belief and is sustained by faith.⁴⁴ This is a manner of living that does not yield to the temptation to dispute Nietzsche's allegations. Yet, it is a stance that is appreciative of Nietzsche's efforts, since his discoveries offer an insight that both corrects our understanding of what is our proper course (or "calling"⁴⁵) and strengthens that course by clarifying the nature of what must be overcome (doubt, skepticism, and cynicism, all of which, after all, are a predictable response to customary imperious claims regarding moral truth). Stated positively, it is a recognition that "[t]he most important things we must believe in cannot be proved at all."⁴⁶

Significantly, “There is nothing definite to which we can hold fast in such an act. It is a free commitment.”⁴⁷ In a characteristic act of generosity and fairness, Polanyi asks, “What then is our answer to those who would doubt that man made of matter, man driven by appetites and subject to social commands, can sustain purely mental purposes?” His simple response represents a profundity that leaves Nietzsche’s bitterness and anger behind: “The answer is that he can. He can do this under his own responsibility, precisely by submitting to restrictive and stultifying circumstances which lie beyond his responsibility. These circumstances offer us opportunities for pure thought—limited opportunities and full of pitfalls—but all the same, they *are* opportunities, and they are ours; *we* are responsible for using or neglecting them.”⁴⁸ It is difficult to imagine a recommendation more in accordance with *The Abolition of Man*.⁴⁹

Even among sympathetic readers of Polanyi there are occasions when his stress on the important role of commitment is, mistakenly though perhaps understandably, viewed as an instance of existentialism.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Polanyian defense of Lewis outlined above might be understood as Nietzsche’s willfulness in alternate guise. But this, too, is a misunderstanding. There is an “as-if” regarding the reality of the transcendent and objectively good operating for Polanyi⁵¹ (as well as, we are suggesting, for Lewis) that has in the name of a perverse claim to integrity been banished by Nietzsche. Indeed, in their attitude toward this “as-if,” which is at heart a manifestation of faith that is itself a necessary waystation on the path to the “is,” we have the fundamental distinction between Nietzsche and Lewis and the visions of man and the universe they offer.

The important contribution of *The Abolition of Man* is thus preserved. What in the process do we learn about the significance of Polanyi? To begin with, the rescue of Lewis is a reminder of the vital role his perspective may play. Properly understood and employed, Polanyi’s penetrating insight is capable of reframing and thereby rehabilitating possibly indispensable belief systems, now widely discredited, that until recent times were secure, thereby arresting the decay of the civilization whose preservation is the focus of Polanyi’s “calling.” More directly, the Polanyian rescue of *The Abolition of Man* illustrates the profundity of his thought while reliably establishing his stature as a major contributor both to political philosophy and to the study of philosophical anthropology and philosophy of education upon which it necessarily depends.

One final matter remains, and it may be the most important thing. Given what Lewis has said about objective value, and how he could, via recourse to Polanyi's fiduciary philosophy, respond to Nietzsche, what follows for each of us? Or, to put the challenge somewhat differently, if one believes in objective value, or if one cares about what belief in objective value makes possible, what is he or she obligated to do?⁵² In answer, let us note that Polanyi's illumination of the role of the fiduciary casts critical light on the essential part played for Lewis by early-life education. This in turn explains not only Lewis's preoccupation with children's literature but also the easily overlooked, but in fact critical, subtitle of *The Abolition of Man*.⁵³

Our rescue of *Abolition* from Nietzsche's historicist assault suggests that Lewis's well-known book is a product of the very insight that is responsible for Polanyi's understanding of the human condition.⁵⁴ That the straightforwardly theistic associations of objective value offered by Lewis in his popular Christian apologetic works are seemingly so different from the evolutionarily emergent account outlined by Polanyi (most notably in *Personal Knowledge*), and are considerably more congenial to traditional belief, suggests that Lewis (quite correctly) understood himself to possess an audience strikingly different from the one envisioned by Polanyi. Given, however, Lewis's brilliant mind as well as his remarkable erudition, it strains credulity to suggest that his analysis of genuine humanity, especially the grasp of its pedagogical prerequisites, lacks the deep understanding so much on display in Polanyi.

June 24, 2018

¹ Bernard Williams, *Essays and Reviews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 410.

² An ineradicable yet seemingly salutary sense of hygiene compels a definition. We find such, courtesy of Thomas Pangle, in the introduction to a collection of essays by Leo Strauss. "Historicism," Pangle writes, "is the embracing term for the various and diverse doctrines which have in common the teaching that humanity lacks a fixed nature and hence any universal or permanent norms. According to historicism, mankind, in the most important respects and in regard to its deepest needs and highest norms, changes and differs fundamentally from one historical epoch or culture to another...[E]very thinker, even the greatest, is a child of his times." This is an excerpt from an insightful analysis found on pages xxviii-xxix of *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, edited by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³ It will later prove significant to note Polanyi's strikingly similar observation (from 1949): "Such was the final measure of liberation: man was to be recognized henceforth as maker and master, and no longer servant, of what before had been his ideals." See "The Authority of the Free Society" in *The Nineteenth Century and After*, Vol. 146 (December 1949), 352.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 64. This phrase is not only the title of the book but also the title of Chapter 3 (of three chapters). These words appear on page 64 as the culmination of the powerful argument, beginning on page 59, which constitutes the central thesis of the book. *Abolition* will not be understood until those pages are carefully read and mastered.

⁵ "The *Tao*" is the term employed by Lewis to refer to "practical principles known to all men by Reason" (32). As we shall see, the *Tao* is the name for the realm of what Lewis calls "objective value."

⁶ See, too, 64, where, in conjunction with the phrase, “the abolition of man,” Lewis twice states, “They are not men at all.”

⁷ The integrity of Lewis’s thought, both over time and across subjects, is shown by the following passage from one of his late works: “In the good reading of a good book... words do something for which ‘pointing’ is far too coarse a name. They are exquisitely detailed compulsions on a mind willing and able to be compelled.” This observation comes from *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 89.

⁸ One suspects that Lewis is well acquainted with Irving Babbitt who, in *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2004 [originally published in 1919]), states, “The very heart of the classical message... is that one should aim first of all not to be original, but to be human, and that to be human one needs to look up to a sound model and imitate it” (64).

⁹ What Aristotle here has to say is remarkably clarified by Joe Sachs in his penetrating analysis of Aristotle’s call for habituation that is included in the introduction to his translation of the *Ethics*.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 136. (Emphasis added.)

¹¹ To avoid an unnecessary yet potentially grievous misunderstanding, note that that this is an instance of being *enabled* (shaped or trained) to *see* (or understand) something that exists as opposed to being *conditioned* to *believe* in something that does not.

¹² Maben Poirier, “The Polanyi-Kuhn Issue” in *Tradition & Discovery*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2006-2007), 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 27. Cf. Polanyi: “The future scientist is attracted by popular scientific literature or by schoolwork in science long before he can form any true idea of the nature of scientific research” (*Science, Faith and Society*, 44). Aptly, Polanyi refers to this as “training in science,” a training in which the premises of science are communicated to the novice, who makes them his own. Polanyi adds that through this process the novice or apprentice *acquires a faith in science*.

¹⁶ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist” in *The Weight of Glory*, 8.

¹⁷ Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” 28 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Augustine, *The Teacher*, 11.38. Given Polanyi’s appreciation for St. Augustine, it is unsurprising to find him stating that “[w]hat we see and hear depends in a thousand ways on the preparedness of our own mind...” The similarity to Lewis’s observation is striking. Polanyi goes on to add, “and on our intelligent participation in making out what it is that we see and hear.” See Polanyi, “On the Modern Mind” in *Encounter*, Vol. XXIV (May 1965), 16.

¹⁹ Casting additional light on the nature of this formation, while illuminating the connections between Lewis and Aristotle, is an especially revealing phrase from one of Lewis’s literary studies: “historians, even in dealing with contemporary events, will pick out those elements *which the habitual bent of their imagination has conditioned them to notice*.” See *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 182. (Emphasis added.) While the term “conditioned” has unfortunate and unwanted connotations, the phrase taken as a whole is a reminder that the enablement mentioned by Lewis, and the literature that makes it possible, establish a proclivity that gives rise to sight (as well as to a corresponding detachment from that which is lesser). It is the human condition to notice some things and not others (and to act accordingly). One way to understand character formation (and education generally) is as a deliberate intervention in this process—deliberate as opposed to leaving the matter to chance.

²⁰ Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child’s Moral Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38.

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre is strikingly perceptive on this matter. In *After Virtue*, after stating that “We live our lives... in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future” he observes, “man is in his actions and practice... essentially a story-telling animal... I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” He adds, “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words... Mythology... *is at the heart of things*” (emphasis added). See *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 [originally published in 1981]), 215-216.

²² Harry Broudy, “Unfinishable Business,” in *Mid-Twentieth Century American Philosophy: Personal Statements*, edited by Peter A. Bertocci (New York: Humanities Press, 1974), 102.

²³ Broudy, the most prominent philosopher of education during the late mid-twentieth century, is in this regard confirming the insight regarding the role of the aesthetic dimension that is found in the writings of careful students of human formation as disparate as Plato, Aristotle, and C. S. Peirce. See Plato’s *Republic*, Book III (esp. 395c and

401d-402a) and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b (esp. 24-31) as well as Peirce's "The Three Normative Sciences" and "An Outline Classification of the Sciences" (both in C. S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998], 201 and 260, respectively). Peirce in the former states, "an ultimate end of action *deliberately* adopted—that is to say, *reasonably* adopted—must be a state of things that *reasonably recommends itself in itself* aside from any ulterior consideration. It must be an *admirable ideal*, having the only kind of goodness that such an ideal *can* have, namely, esthetic goodness. From this point of view the morally good appears as a particular species of the esthetically good." Interestingly, in the latter essay Peirce observes that logic is subordinate to ethics and ethics, in turn, is subordinate to aesthetics.

²⁴ *Abolition* is itself a story. Reminding us of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, there is a self-referential character to the book: it practices what it preaches. Specifically, it is a story that tells us about the importance of stories. The reader of *Abolition* is well advised to pay close attention to the manner in which the book is affecting him.

²⁵ It will pay dividends to speak more specifically. A prominent dictionary defines naturalism as "a theory denying that an event or object has a supernatural significance; specifically: the doctrine that scientific laws are adequate to account for all phenomena." This latter claim—that "scientific laws are adequate to account for all phenomena"—is certainly a primary target of Lewis's criticism in *Abolition*. (The former claim denying significance to the supernatural is the focus of criticism in Lewis's *Miracles*, especially, the re-written Chapter III that was the product of an intense encounter with Elizabeth Anscombe at a meeting of the Oxford Socratic Society in 1948.) *Miracles* is a more traditionally philosophical treatise than is *Abolition*. For an extended analysis of the argument from reason that Lewis offers in *Miracles*, see Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

The same dictionary defines materialism as "a theory that physical matter is the only or fundamental reality and that all being and processes are phenomena that can be explained as manifestations or results of matter." The dictionary goes on to add that "materialists deny the existence of spirit, and they look for physical explanations of all phenomena." It is certainly the case that Lewis in *Abolition* argues against the proposition that "physical matter is the only or fundamental reality" and objects to the suggestion that there is a comprehensive physical explanation "of all phenomena." We would expect, however, that Lewis would in addition object to a doctrine *not* restricted to physical explanation that denied the reality of spirit.

²⁶ Compare this warning from Lewis, the profound student and great teacher of literature: "Especially poisonous is the kind of teaching which encourages [pupils] to approach every literary work with suspicion" (*Experiment in Criticism*, 93).

²⁷ Polanyi expresses a similar concern: "A man looking at the world with complete scepticism can see no grounds for moral authority or transcendent moral obligations..." But this is for Polanyi only the beginning of the story. See "On the Modern Mind," 18-20.

²⁸ Bernard Williams, *Essays and Reviews*, 317.

²⁹ That this matter is more complex than one is apt to conclude from Nietzsche is suggested by Lewis in one of his telling but less well known *literary* studies. In speaking of "the transitional period" between "Pagan antiquity" and "the final triumph of the Church" (roughly 205-390 AD), he observes, "A world-renouncing, ascetic, and mystical character then marked the most eminent Pagans no less than their Christian opponents. It was the spirit of the age. Everywhere, on both sides, men were turning away from the civic virtues and the sensual pleasures to seek an inner purgation and a supernatural goal." See *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, 47. Interestingly, the first edition of this book was published in 1964, which is subsequent to Lewis's death in November, 1963. This serves as a reminder that Lewis's stature as a scholar of the first rank in regard to English literature and letters (including their historical origins) was undiminished to the end despite many years of renown as a Christian apologist and author of extremely popular children's stories.

³⁰ Presupposition grounds conviction, about which Nietzsche states, "Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies" (*Human, All Too Human*, paragraph 483).

³¹ The most relevant section of *Beyond Good and Evil* is titled "Natural History of Morals." See too *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

³² Leo Strauss captures Nietzsche's sentiment nicely: Authentic existence includes "despising sham certainties (and all objective certainties are sham)." See "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, edited by Thomas L. Pangle, 36.

³³ Williams, 144-145.

³⁴ What, we wonder, might that be?

³⁵ Nietzsche passionately cries, “*amor fati!*” Embracing the world as it is represents the path to human greatness. Strauss offers a masterful paraphrase of Nietzsche’s perspective: “We cannot help raising the question as to the value of the values of our society. To accept the values of one’s society because they are the values of one’s society means simply to shirk one’s responsibility; it means not facing the situation, i.e., the fact that everyone has to make his own choice; it means running away from one’s self. To find the solution to our problem in the acceptance of the values of our society because they are the values of our society means to make philistinism a duty and to make oneself oblivious to the difference between true individuals and whited sepulchers” (“An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” 35)

³⁶ Interestingly, Nietzsche has his own story of the abolition of man. See *BGE*, Section 203: “the type ‘man’” is in jeopardy; “this animalization of man into the dwarf animal of rights and claims, is *possible*.” For Nietzsche, it is his task, as it is for those of us who understand these things and are thus concerned and outraged, to prevent this from happening by identifying and making real a new type of man that represents a fundamental reevaluation which consists of an inversion of the values of the currently reigning morality. This revolution will require new “leaders,” new types of “commanders.” They will revise the “degeneration and diminution of man”—a degeneration and diminution that is precisely captured in Lewis’s “*Tao*”.

³⁷ Polanyi, “On the Modern Mind,” 20.

³⁸ Insofar as the late twentieth century and its aftermath find the very existence of truth under assault, the self-destruction noted by Nietzsche ranges well beyond the comparatively narrow domain of Christianity.

³⁹ Strauss first uses the term in regard to Nietzsche but, he believes, Nietzsche’s insight reaches full blossom in Heidegger. See Strauss, “‘Relativism’” and “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*. The standard critique purports to establish the incoherence of historicism by reminding us that the view that all understanding is situated is itself an understanding that must, *ex hypothesi*, be situated (and thereby incapable of sustaining its universal claim).

Incidentally, Polanyi also refers to historicism, calling it “one of three types of historical fallacies.” On his view, “historicism has transformed our conception of history by striving to judge past actions by the standards of their own time. This method, when taken to its limit, would sanction absolute conformity and render thereby any criticism of the standards of a time meaningless. It fosters an extreme, altogether fallacious, relativism.” See *The Study of Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 87-88.

⁴⁰ The rationale for the necessity of surrender is straightforwardly expressed by Lewis in his analysis of good reading: “We must risk being taken in, if we are to get anything” (*An Experiment in Criticism*, 94). Later, he states, “We must empty our minds and lay ourselves open” (116).

⁴¹ The distinction between real and actual is a vital component of C. S. Peirce’s rejection of nominalism. See Peirce, “Fraser’s *The Works of George Berkeley*” in Houser and Kloesel, eds., *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Peirce’s distinction is developed in detail and given contemporary application in Jon Fennell, “Jaffa, Nominalism, and the Fate of the Common Noun” in *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 2006), 37-46. Polanyi elects to emphasize the distinction between the real and the tangible as well as reality and “tangible fact.” See “On the Modern Mind,” 15. His entire enterprise, grounded in a revolutionary epistemology, can be understood as an attempt “to gain recognition for the reality of intangible things...” This is “a metaphysical reality, irreducible to material elements...” (20).

⁴² Maben Poirier, “Michael Polanyi and the Question of ‘Objective’ Knowledge” in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter 1988), 326 (note 18).

⁴³ *An Experiment in Criticism*, 112.

⁴⁴ We can also say that it embraces commitment as well as submission, as, coincidental with growing maturity and insight, the former gives way to the latter. See Jon Fennell, “‘Balance of Mind’: Polanyi’s Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament” in *Tradition & Discovery*, Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (July 2018), 56.

⁴⁵ This is the term Polanyi employs for his or any comparable project. See, for example, *The Study of Man*, Chapter 2, especially 60 ff., as well as 87, 97 and 98; and *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974 [first published in 1958]), 321-324.

⁴⁶ Polanyi, “The Authority of the Free Society.” 358.

⁴⁷ “On the Modern Mind,” 20.

⁴⁸ *The Study of Man*, 68-69.

⁴⁹ In a statement that carries us to the very heart of Lewis’s enterprise, Polanyi adds, “a supreme trust is placed in us by the whole creation, and it is sacrilege then even to contemplate actions which may lead to the extinction of humanity” (*ibid.*, 69).

⁵⁰ For a response to this assessment, see Jon Fennell, “A Polanyian Perspective on C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*” in *Journal of Inklings Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (April 2014), 103-104.

⁵¹ See Jon Fennell, “Polanyi’s Arguments against a Non-Judgmental Political Science” in *Tradition & Discovery*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1 (2010-2011), 9-10.

⁵² These are of course two very different questions. But they do not need to be. (Whether or not they are depends on whether we join Lewis in his commitment.)

⁵³ It is a credit to the perspicuity of the publisher that, on the copyright page of the book, its primary subject matter is listed as “Education—Philosophy.”

⁵⁴ This is a suspicion that is significantly strengthened (if not, indeed, a conclusion rendered unavoidable) by the epilogue to *The Discarded Image*.