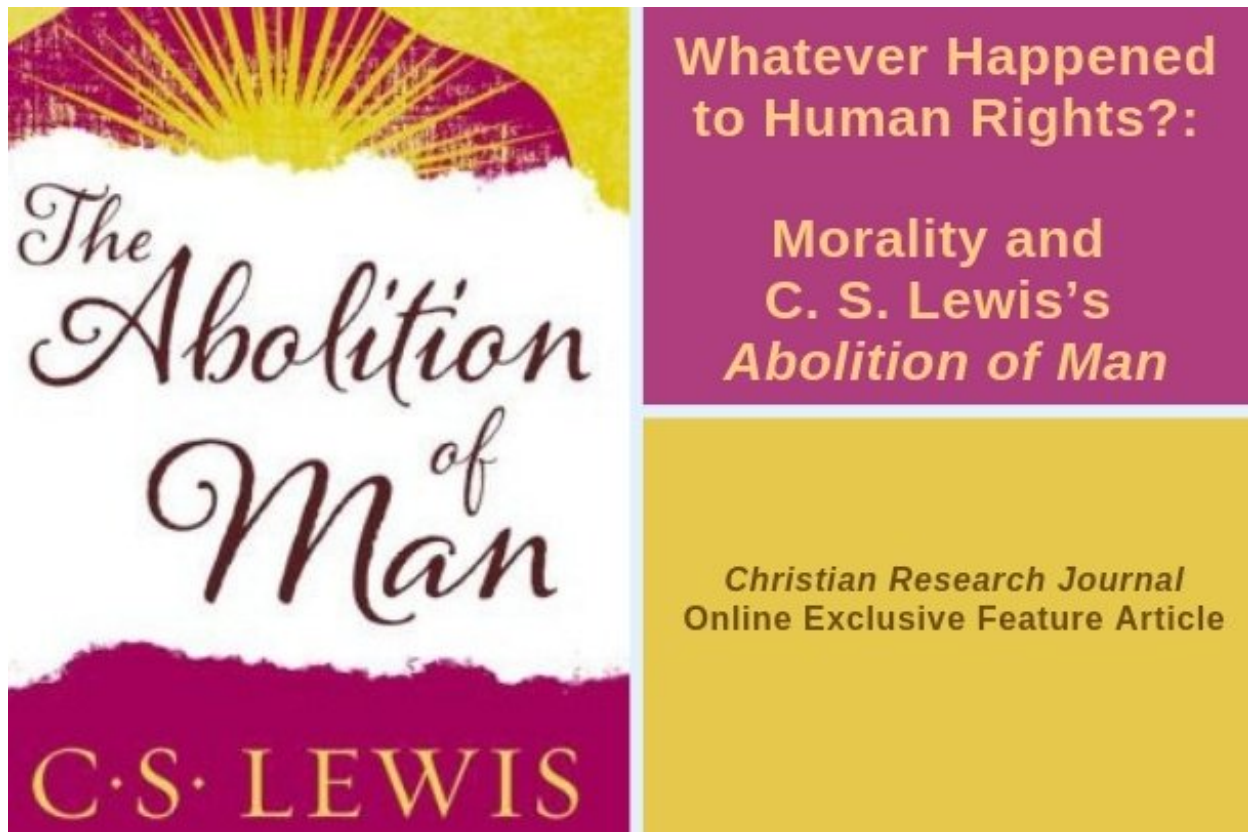


Whatever Happened to Human Rights?: Morality and C. S. Lewis's Abolition of Man

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Synopsis

In *The Abolition of Man*, as well as in *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis lays bare the moral implications of the modern secular worldview that sees humanity as simply a cosmic accident. He also notes the hypocrisy of those modern thinkers who urge moral relativism on others, while maintaining their own alternate, but sometimes disguised, forms of morality. These contradictions are apparent in the worldviews and lived experience of two prominent secular intellectuals: Bertrand Russell and Jerry Coyne. While denying the existence of any objective morality, they nonetheless inconsistently insisted that their moral vision was superior to others.

Another powerful piece of supporting evidence for the claim that secular worldviews undermine human rights comes through the recent sociological study by John Evans. In his book, *What Is a Human? What the Answers Mean for Human Rights*, Evans, who is a secularist, demonstrates that those upholding secular worldviews have less respect for human rights. Evans seems troubled by this finding and tries to rescue human rights. However, his attempt ultimately fails because he never explains how a secular worldview could provide a solid foundation for human rights and morality.

Secular thinkers often embrace some kinds of morality and human rights, even after exploding the foundations for it. We as Christian thinkers should point this out and humbly suggest that Christianity provides a superior way to view morality and human rights.

In 1945, the year that World War II ended, C. S. Lewis published *That Hideous Strength*, the third book in his science fiction trilogy. In that work Lewis depicted the dangerous consequences of embracing secular worldviews. His warning came at a time when Stalin and Hitler had committed horrific atrocities in the name of secular worldviews. Stalin, in the name of a Marxist worldview, slaughtered millions in his collectivization campaign and in the Great Purge. Marx, based on his atheistic position, had promoted environmental determinism, the view that human behavior is shaped by the environment. Marx, Lenin, and Stalin all believed that by altering the economy — specifically by eliminating private property — they could transform human nature, thus leading us into a society free from oppression, poverty, and strife.

Another corollary of the Marxist worldview was that objective morality and human rights are non-existent. Marxists believed that morality was a tool of bourgeois oppression, so they did not believe in any objective human rights. Lenin explicitly argued that the ends justify the means. Any measures necessary to reach the final communist state were justified, in his view. Because of their view of human nature and morality, Marxists saw people as things to be manipulated. Through labor camps Soviet communists hoped to re-educate prisoners to bring them into conformity to communist ways.¹

Hitler's atrocities also flowed from a dehumanizing worldview. Instead of environmental determinism, Nazism promoted biological determinism. It held that human nature and behavior are shaped by one's biological traits, especially those associated with one's race. As I have explained in my earlier books, *From Darwin to Hitler* and *Hitler's Ethic*,² Hitler believed that humans were locked in an inescapable struggle for existence that fostered evolutionary progress. The only criteria to judge human behavior, he thought, was whether or not it helped foster evolutionary progress. Because he believed in biological inequality, especially racial inequality, this meant that measures to benefit those deemed biologically superior, along with policies to eliminate those considered biologically inferior, were morally justified.

C. S. Lewis's Critique of Dehumanizing Ideologies

In *That Hideous Strength* Lewis took aim at the dehumanizing tendencies of both biological and environmental determinism, which were prominent in British, European, and American intellectual discourse (not just in the USSR and Nazi Germany). In his fictitious future society, technocratic elites establish the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments, whose acronym is N.I.C.E., but they are anything but nice. Their experiments are designed to control and manipulate humans, and they are completely unconcerned about morality or human rights. One not-so-nice N.I.C.E. official states, "If Science is really given a free hand it can now take over the human race and re-condition it: make man a really efficient animal."³

The biological component of N.I.C.E.'s program included "sterilization of the unfit, liquidation of backward races...[and] selective breeding." As shocking as these proposals may seem, leading thinkers in Britain, the US, and elsewhere were actively promoting such ideas at this time.⁴ Another way that N.I.C.E. officials hoped to get rid of those they deemed the riff-raff of humanity was by fomenting wars in such a way that the biologically inferior would perish. In addition to this program of biological elimination, N.I.C.E. would use environmental manipulation on the remaining humans. Everyone would be subject to psychological conditioning, which could include suggestion, or — for those not so pliable — threats or even torture. Persons engaging in bad behavior would not be punished, but rather reconditioned. Thus, they would not be imprisoned for fixed terms, but for indeterminate periods, indeed as long as the ruling technocrats determined necessary to "cure" them of their problematic traits. Obviously, human rights play no role in this dystopian world Lewis depicted.⁵

Two years before publishing *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis had presaged some of these themes in his brief, but powerful, work, *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis noted that many intellectuals in his day were teaching that values, such as morality or aesthetics, were purely subjective. They were expressions of the feelings of an individual without any objective basis outside humanity. However, Lewis was troubled by the hypocrisy he detected in many of those advancing this moral relativism. He stated, "Their scepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people's values: about the values current in their own set they

are not nearly sceptical enough. And this phenomenon is very usual. A great many of those who 'debunk' traditional or (as they would say) 'sentimental' values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process."⁶ Somehow moral relativism could undermine traditional morality, while progressive morality floated unscathed (and maybe unnoticed) above the fray.

Bertrand Russell's Conflicting Views on Morality

One of the most fascinating examples of this inconsistency was Bertrand Russell, one of the most famous British philosophers of the twentieth century. In an essay written in 1903, Russell divulged a rather stark view of humanity:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins — all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.⁷

Because he viewed humans as merely "accidental collocations of atoms" and thus as merely the product of random processes, Russell complained that Christianity and other religions were wrong to believe that the earth and its inhabitants have a special place in the cosmos. In 1925 he underscored this point by stating: "The philosophy of nature must not be unduly terrestrial; for it, the earth, is merely one of the smaller planets of one of the smaller stars of the Milky Way. It would be ridiculous to warp the philosophy of nature in order to bring out results that are pleasing to the tiny parasites of this insignificant planet."⁸ If you didn't catch it, those "tiny parasites" are you and I and all our fellow human beings.

In addition to denigrating humans as "tiny parasites," Russell also stripped humans of any moral significance, claiming that morality was merely an expression of subjective desires or emotions. The moral command, "Thou shalt not kill," according to Russell's philosophy, does not really mean there is anything objectively wrong with murder. Rather, anyone making such a statement really means, "I don't like killing." Moral statements are meaningless, Russell claimed, unless they are understood as merely an individual's personal emotional preference. In his philosophy, then, Russell continually undermined any notion of objective morality or inalienable human rights.⁹

However, ironically, in his personal life he was an intense and committed moralist. In his *Autobiography* he stated that his whole life was animated by three passions: love, knowledge, and pity for human suffering.¹⁰ Indeed, in the same essay that he called humans “tiny parasites” with no cosmic significance, he also uttered the words, “*The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge*” (emphasis added).¹¹ Russell’s passion for humanity also manifested itself in his opposition to nuclear arms. He even spent time in jail as a result of demonstrating for nuclear disarmament. What was going on here? Was the arch-rational philosopher letting his emotions get the best of him? Whatever the explanation for this tension between his moral philosophy and his personal life, I am not the only one to notice the contradiction. In her memoirs about her life with her father, Russell’s daughter, Katherine Tait, called him a “passionate moralist” and an “absolutist” who would have been a saint in a more religious age in the past.¹²

Interestingly, now that we have access to some of Russell’s private correspondence, we also know that Russell was troubled by these inconsistencies in his life. In a private letter to a woman he loved he poured out his soul, explaining:

I am strangely unhappy because the pattern of my life is complicated, because my nature is hopelessly complicated; a mass of contradictory impulses; and out of all this, to my intense sorrow, pain to you must grow. The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain — a curious wild pain — a searching for something beyond what the world contains, something transfigured and infinite — the beatific vision — God — I do not find it, I do not think it is to be found — but the love of it is my life — it’s like passionate love for a ghost. At times it fills me with rage, at times with wild despair, it is the source of gentleness and cruelty and work, it fills every passion that I have — it is the actual spring of life within me. I can’t explain it or make it seem anything but foolishness — but whether foolish or not, it is the source of whatever is any good in me....At most times, now, I am not conscious of it, only when I am strongly stirred, either happily or unhappily. I seek escape from it, though I don’t believe I ought to.¹³

As this letter discloses, Russell could not bring himself intellectually to believe in God, but nonetheless, he had a deep inner yearning for God.

Jerry Coyne’s Contradictory View of Morality

When it comes to solving the dilemma of morality, Jerry Coyne faces many of the same problems as Russell. Coyne is an emeritus professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Chicago and a prominent atheist. In his 2015 book, *Faith Versus Fact*, Coyne argues that morality is the product of both evolutionary and cultural processes. He vigorously denies that there is anything fixed or objective about morality. However, despite his moral relativism, later in his book Coyne inexplicably states, “Indeed, secular morality,

which is not twisted by adherence to the supposed commands of a god, is superior to most 'religious' morality."¹⁴ Apparently it escapes Coyne's grasp that for one kind of morality to be superior to another, there has to be some yardstick outside both moral systems.

When Coyne confronts specific moral precepts, he falls into the same contradiction. In a 2017 blog he argues that infanticide and assisted suicide should be permitted, and he insists that the increasing acceptance of them in our society is a sign of moral progress. He proclaims, "This change in views about euthanasia and assisted suicide [i.e., its legalization in some states and countries] are the result of a tide of increasing morality in our world."¹⁵ Now, some commentators (such as myself) would argue the exact opposite: that the increasing acceptance of euthanasia and assisted suicide is evidence of our moral decline. But laying aside whether I am right or Coyne is right on this specific moral issue, both of our moral claims — that there is moral progress or moral decline — imply that we are moving toward (or away from) some objective moral goal.

Coyne embraces the same contradiction when he discusses whether human life has value or purpose. In a YouTube video he states that evolution "says that there is no special purpose for your life, because it is a naturalistic philosophy. We have no more extrinsic purpose than a squirrel or an armadillo."¹⁶ However, Coyne's own progressive political and moral views seem to presuppose that human life does have value and purpose.

John Evans and the Relationship between Human Rights and Theism

Finally, John Evans, a sociology professor at the University of California, San Diego, has done some fascinating research on the relationship between secular and theistic worldviews, on the one hand, and human rights, on the other, in his recent book, *What Is a Human? What the Answers Mean for Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Evans is himself a secularist, and he apparently launched his sociological research on this topic in response to critics of secularism (such as myself), who argue that secular philosophies undermine human rights (he discusses my book, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* in the introduction of his book).

Evans surveyed Americans to try to determine if there was a correlation between one's worldview, especially one's view of humanity, and one's embrace of human rights. He divided people's views of humanity into three broad categories: theistic, biological, and philosophical. The theistic view of humanity is characterized by the view that humans are created in the image of God. The biological view of humanity sees humans as the product of evolutionary processes and as exclusively physical beings. The philosophical view understands humans to be defined by their having certain traits, such as consciousness, the ability to plan their future, and so forth.

What Evans discovered was that people embracing the theistic view of humans have greater respect for human rights than those espousing the two secularist views. Evans, as a secularist who nonetheless believes in human rights, is clearly uncomfortable with his discovery. He concludes his work by suggesting that secularists tweak their rhetoric a little bit to try to get fellow secularists to uphold human rights better. He does not even pose the question as to whether there might be a fundamental contradiction between secularism and human rights that contributed to these results. This is surprising because many secular thinkers have admitted that a cosmos void of God is also one without objective morality or human rights.

In conclusion, Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* suggested that there is a whopping contradiction in the ideology of secularists, who insist on moral relativism, while pushing their own (sometimes hidden) moral agenda. Indeed, I take that a step further in my book, *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life*, by showing that quite a few prominent intellectuals manifest a high regard for the value of human life — distorted though it may be — that is contrary to their bleak philosophies, which preach the meaninglessness and purposelessness of human existence. As Christians, of course, we know the solution to this problem: humans really do have value and moral significance, because we are created in the image of God. We really do have inalienable human rights that are granted to us by our Creator, to Whom be honor and blessing now and forevermore.

Richard Weikart is professor of modern European history at California State University, Stanislaus, and author of six books, including *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life*, *Hitler's Religion*, and *From Darwin to Hitler*. He has appeared in seven documentaries, including *Expelled* (with Ben Stein), as well as one he co-produced on the Reformation and revivals in Germany (available on YouTube).

Notes:

1. I discuss the relationship between Marxism and the devaluing of human life in greater depth in Richard Weikart, *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2016), 133–41.
2. Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
3. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grownups* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 39.
4. See Richard Weikart, *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2016).
5. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 40, 68, 256.
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 41.

7. Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," (published originally in 1903), in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 107.
8. Bertrand Russell, "What I Believe" (published originally in 1925), in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 55.
9. Weikart, *The Death of Humanity*, 39.
10. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-1944* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1968).
11. Russell, "What I Believe," 56.
12. Catherine Tait, *My Father Bertrand Russell* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 62, 98, 184.
13. Russell to Constance Mellon (Colette O'Neil), October 23, 1916, in Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-1944*, 96-97.
14. Jerry Coyne, *Faith versus Fact: Why Science and Religion Are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), 261.
15. Jerry Coyne, "Should One Be Allowed to Euthanize Severely Deformed or Doomed Newborns?" *Why Evolution Is True*, July 13, 2017, <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2017/07/13/should-one-be-allowed-to-euthanize-severely-deformed-or-doomed-newborns/>.
16. Jerry Coyne, on "Conspiracy Road Trip," BBC, at http://youtu.be/Oju_lpqa6Ug, accessed October 17, 2012.