

Learning to Use Language with C. S. Lewis: A Response to Haley’s “The Re-enchantment of Education”

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Gabriel Haley’s reading of C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* in light of Rudolf Otto’s notion of the holy¹ offers several important insights, especially in relation to Lewis’s conceptions of the shape of appropriate forms of education and study. *The Abolition of Man* criticizes forms of education and study that end up delegitimizing both the objects of study as well as those who are involved in processes of learning. In this response, I offer two cautions from *The Abolition of Man* that illustrate and expand on Haley’s reading of Lewis. The first is Lewis’s caution against imagining that one’s claims about something are neatly divisible into two sorts: claims about the object of knowing and others that are about the subject who knows. Lewis’s second caution is against forms of “critical thinking” that turn the object of one’s analysis into something to be dominated, mastered, and controlled. This caution is particularly pertinent when the objects of analysis are human beings. Lewis argues that the most pernicious consequence of this particular treatment of human beings is, effectively, the “abolition of man.” I will conclude by briefly discussing how Haley’s employment of Otto to read Lewis, as the latter tries to rescue education from the clutches of “conditioners” and “innovators,” is comparable to the way Robert Orsi reads Otto and the “theorists of the more.”

Lewis begins *The Abolition of Man* with a complaint against the authors of an English textbook who are teaching “upper level” or high school students that, when they utter a sentence such as “This waterfall is sublime,” they are uttering nothing whatsoever about the waterfall. The authors of the textbook lament that language users, unwittingly, make this particular mistake as a matter of course: language users imagine they are making important claims about things in the world, but what they are actually doing is producing (rather unimportant) statements about their subjectivity and their feelings.² By implication, for the authors of this textbook, the process of being educated into responsible language use entails acquiring the ability to distinguish claims that are about the world from claims whose only referent is some feeling, desire, or attitude of the claimant.

Lewis notes that the educators who have written this textbook are not making a trivial linguistic point. Their reflections on how predicates such as “sublime” work nudge their students towards particular conceptions of the human person as well as the world. In effect, these educators are teaching their students that predicates such as sublime, lovely, despicable, or more generally, a “predicate of value”³ only communicates “the emotional state of the speaker”⁴ and nothing substantial about the world. There are, presumably, other predicates such as “large” or

¹ Gabriel Haley, “The Re-Enchantment of Education: C.S. Lewis’s Idea of the Holy,” *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 17, no. 1 (August 2018).

² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 2–5.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

“blue” that communicate “something important” about the object (such as a waterfall) and not about the subject that predicates blueness or largeness to a waterfall.

Lewis reflects on the serious and significant epistemic and personal consequences of such a theory of predication. It teaches students to imagine that it is advisable to divide one’s descriptions and predications of the world into two sets. One set of predicates and descriptions has the capacity to apply to the world. Another set of predicates—of which predicates of value are a prototype—are a little suspicious. They masquerade as the first set of predicates and may be grammatically indistinguishable from the first set, but, rather than being about the world, they are claims about the claimant. If this division of predicates were taken to be strict and non-overlapping, it would mean that predicates that apply to the world refer only to the world and communicate nothing relevant about the claimant; successful acts of attributing something to the world “bracket out” the claimant. Similarly, the (more suspect) set of predicates that express something about a claimant communicate nothing relevant about the world; successful acts of attributing something to a claimant “bracket out” the world. Stated more sharply, the claims you make are *either* (merely) about you or they are about the world. We are either able to transcend the limitations and obstacles of our subjectivity, and thereby able to say something about the world, or we “*appear* to be saying something very important’ when in reality we are ‘*only* saying something about our own feelings.’”⁵

In another textbook where the author is similarly educating students into responsible language use, Lewis finds something quite parallel at play. The author of this textbook reads a tract that describes horses as “the ‘willing servants’ of the early colonists in Australia.”⁶ He proceeds to tell his students that horses are not the kinds of beings who are invested in the projects that animate and interest human beings and, therefore, could not have served as “willing servants” in such enterprises. To predicate servitude or willingness to horses is not to make a significant claim about horses but to make a claim about one’s feelings, desires, and attitudes towards them. Other predicates such as “old-fashioned means of transport”⁷ or four-legged-mammal or herbivore reveal something about horses and do not burden us with the subjectivity of the claimant. Lewis notes that in teaching his students how to speak responsibly about horses, the author of the textbook is dubiously silent on “the problems of animal psychology”⁸ or “the weeping horses of Achilles”⁹ or the “warhorse in the Book of Job”¹⁰ or what “semi-anthropomorphic treatment of beasts has meant in human history and of the literature where it finds noble or piquant expression.”¹¹

In contrast with the educators discussed above, Lewis argues and implies that predication of any kind is an activity in which the subject that predicates and the object about which something is predicated are mutually implicated. What distinguishes different kinds of predicates

⁵ Ibid., 5. Emphasis in the original.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

—for example, the predicate “lovely” from the predicate “weighs 6 pounds,” or the predicate “sublime” from the predicate “herbivorous”—is the manner in which subjects and objects become mutually implicated in the process of predication. To borrow a locution from Nicholas Adams, in the process of predication, the predicator and the predicated act as “pairs.”¹² Now, the way the predicate “herbivore” relates horses, humans, and the world they share and the way that the predicate “loyal” relates horses, humans, and the world may be distinguished quite meaningfully and significantly. But it is not as if “herbivore” is simply a claim about horses, without reference to human beings and the way they classify and interact with horses. Nor is “loyalty” simply a claim about human beings without any reference to horses and how they interact with human beings. Haley insightfully points out that predicates such as “holy” and “reverence” are predicates that refuse to be cordoned off as either subject or object referring.

Lewis’s second, related caution, is against forms of analysis and critical thinking that imagine that the only mode of cognition available to the subjects of knowledge is conquest and control over the objects of knowledge. Lewis makes this point through several avenues. He argues that what is usually understood to be humanity’s “conquest of nature” effectively amounts to “a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.”¹³ In an epistemic and social environment, where to know something is to be able to shape and direct it according to the autonomy of the investigator, it is particular configurations of institutions and human beings who exert power and control over objects of knowing—and not “humanity in general”—that executes such power over “nature in general.” The critical or analytic gaze is exercised not in the abstract, but by specifiable institutions and persons.¹⁴ Lewis’s case becomes more poignant when both that which knows and that which is known is the human subject. His criticism of the reduction of human beings into “raw material,”¹⁵ into “mere objects” in epistemic processes, resonates with more contemporary critiques of colonial modes of knowledge production.¹⁶ Lewis is quick to point out that he is not arguing for the complete “abandonment” of a “critical” or “analytic” epistemic stance. His claim is that this mode of

¹² See Nicholas Adams, *Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

¹³ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 55.

¹⁴ Lewis puts this with alarm and piquancy: “Man’s conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. There neither is nor can be any simple increase of power on Man’s side. Each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows the triumphal car” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 58). Elsewhere, he notes: “The man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please” (Ibid., 60).

¹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Purdue University Press, 1993), 88–119; David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Peter Ochs, “Revised: Comparative Religious Traditions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 483–94.

cognition should be imagined as something that can be refined, critiqued, and corrected. Lewis hopes for a “repentant,” “reconsidered,” and “regenerate” form of critical knowing:

The regenerate science which I have in mind would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself. When it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole. While studying the *I* it would not lose what Martin Buber calls the *Thou*-situation.¹⁷

This is a “science” that does not simply privilege the autonomy of the subject of knowing over and against the heteronomy of the object. It does not uncritically accept mastery and control as the only measures of critical engagement with objects of knowing. As Haley’s reading of Lewis and Lewis’s own evocation of Buber indicates, Lewis imagines that reverence and humbleness, too, are modes of relation through which knower and known may come into contact with each other.¹⁸ As Haley notes, Lewis revitalizes awe, reverence, and, more generally, “feeling-responses” as elements of epistemic engagement with the world and not traps and obstacles in the process of making claims about the world. Haley’s reading of Lewis also shows us that, for Lewis, it is unhelpful to imagine that certain modes of engagement, such as awe and reverence, are only referential with respect to the subject of knowing and communicate nothing about the object.

I would like to conclude by drawing a brief parallel between the way Haley uses Otto to read Lewis with the way Robert Orsi draws on Otto and what he calls thinkers working in the “tradition of the more.”¹⁹ Orsi notes that a fair few scholars of religion—though they appreciate psychological and sociological investigations of religion—are wary of the “simple sufficiency”²⁰ of such modes of explanation. They have “witnessed something in their fieldwork or historical study”²¹ that cannot be adequately “accounted by totaling up psychological and sociological factors.”²² Such scholars have sought vocabularies suitable to events, processes, and environments in which it is unhelpful to distinguish sharply between the subject who knows or experiences and that which is known or experienced. Orsi points to the vocabularies of scholars from a wide variety of fields of analysis including D. W. Winnicott’s notion of transitional phenomena, Jean-Luc Marion’s conception of saturated phenomena, and Stanley Tambiah’s notion of participation as examples.²³ Haley teaches us that Lewis’s reflections on learning and teaching quite rightly belong to this universe of concerns.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 79.

¹⁸ Cf. Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13–38.

¹⁹ Robert A. Orsi, “The Problem of the Holy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 99–104.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²² *Ibid.*, 100.

²³ *Ibid.*