

First Place
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You Are So Beautiful . . . to Me:

Towards an Understanding of C.S. Lewis's Argument for Objective Value

In the 1970s Joe Cocker popularized the song entitled, "You Are So Beautiful." While the sentiment begins strong, even objective, after a suspenseful pause of eight beats, Cocker adds the phrase: "... to me." With these two words we discover that the song is not about a beautiful woman. Rather, it has turned into a reflection of the singer, his desires and his feelings. This sentiment is similar to what C.S. Lewis identifies as the subjective view of beauty. The value of beauty no longer rests in the object but rather reflects the feelings of the observer. In his book, *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis makes the point that all such subjective value statements have nothing important to say beyond the one making the statement.

Lewis instead makes the argument for objective value. The value of something does not rest in one's feelings or desires about the object, but in the object itself. Any object merits a true response from the observer. One of our responsibilities is to recognize the worthiness of an object and to align our feelings and emotions accordingly. Lewis points out that humans, until quite recently, agreed that objects merit particular responses from observers. The fact that the same object elicits different feelings in different people says nothing about the object and more about people's abilities to respond as they ought. Lewis agrees with Aristotle that people must be educated to like or dislike what they *ought* to like or dislike. Emotion needs to be guided in order to conform to Reason. In fact, all traditional moralities of the East and West (what Lewis calls the *Tao*) agree on this matter.

Lewis starts with an argument about objective beauty but then extends it to all objective values. The undermining of any aspect of objective value can lead to the undermining of all objective value. If the objective value of beauty is dismissed, other values such as truth, honor, and justice will follow. Humanity must then create its own moral values. According to Lewis, this would inevitably lead to the “abolition of man.”

Though Lewis’s argument for objective value does not depend upon Christian philosophy, Christianity assumes the tradition of objective value. Consider our school’s verse: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). It is important to take note of Paul’s repeated use of the word “is.” Unlike Joe Cocker’s 70’s pop song, Paul’s admonition does not qualify its statement with the phrase “to me.” Paul points to something that humanity cannot dismantle, something that humanity will never see through, and then he invites us to “think about these things.” This exemplifies the training in objective value that Lewis is promoting.