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After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man by Michael Ward

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Additional Keywords

Michael Ward, Abolition of Man, C.S. Lewis

AFTER HUMANITY: A GUIDE TO C.S. LEWIS'S *THE ABOLITION OF MAN*. By Michael Ward. Word on Fire Books, 2021. ISBN 9781943243778. \$24.95

THE WORLD OF C.S. LEWIS STUDIES IS BY NOW WELL FAMILIAR with the work of Michael Ward, whose magisterial and game-changing book, *Planet Narnia*, has altered the landscape of how we read and interpret the Narniad. Now, Ward has turned his careful scholarship and attention to the background of another of Lewis's works in a new volume, *After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man*. This book is an essential addition to the library of any serious student of Lewis's life and work but is not without its shortcomings—especially for the casual reader.

In *After Humanity*, Ward engages in a multilayered project. The heart of the book is what he calls the “commentary and gloss”—a 140-page, line-by-line explanation of difficult terms and arguments from *The Abolition of Man*. Open to almost any page in this section and you'll see a clear sampling of the kinds of material within it. A page reference to *Abolition* is offered, along with a selected sentence from the book. This is followed by inset boxes defining unfamiliar words and terms (e.g., Lewis uses the phrase, *secundum literarum*, and Ward helpfully explains for the uninitiated that this is “Latin for ‘according to the letter, literally’” (62). Occasionally, the quote from *Abolition* will be followed by a selection of one or more quotes from other scholars who have read and engaged with the book (e.g., Malcolm Guite, Gilbert Mielaender, Peter Kreeft, et al). Often, the selected quote will be followed by some commentary from Ward himself. This commentary draws from Ward's expansive knowledge of Lewis's life and work to illuminate parallels and similarities in the corpus of Lewisania. This section, the bulk of the book, while informative and valuable, is also at times almost unreadable. And what I mean is that it is not the kind of book one reads through all at once—it is, rather, a kind of reference text.

Without a doubt, the source-tracing and illumination of historical situations are the most rewarding aspects of *After Humanity*. For example, chasing up precisely *where* Coleridge describes the waterfall is immensely helpful, but more than this is the footnoted comment which shows how Coleridge was himself responding to Edmund Burke's reflections on the beautiful and the sublime (51). Another interesting tidbit is when Ward argues, I think compellingly, from the perspective of a survey of Lewis's work, that Lewis likely had no knowledge of Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum est* (76-7). Also, learning about the interrelationship between Lewis's Broadcast Talks and the production of *Abolition* was an insightful study (95). In this respect, Ward's book is full of gems and literary rabbit trails to be followed (making it a singularly terrible book for your pocketbook!).

But Ward's stated purpose for the volume is that it is an attempt to explain Lewis's (complex) argument for a modern audience, "to make Lewis's admittedly sometimes challenging work more easily accessible" (1). While this was the shortest part of the volume, it was also, in my estimation, the weakest, and this is because rather than illuminate Lewis's argument, I felt that occasionally Ward's interpretation and criticisms were imposed upon it. I will give an example of each.

As an example of an interpretive imposition, I want to highlight a somewhat belabored metaphor in *After Humanity*. Ward argues repeatedly that Lewis is operating in a 'prophetic' mode throughout *Abolition* (cf. 43-4, 87, 187-90). A couple of things are perhaps odd about this argument. The first is that no real definition of what constitutes "the prophetic" is offered. Does Ward have in mind a role like Elijah or John the Baptist? A voice thundering in the wilderness? Or (I doubt this) has he adopted something of American Evangelicalism's penchant for describing anything critical of the modern world as "prophetic"? The point is this: without definition, the word is rendered plastic in the reader's mind. The second is that the argument that Lewis is acting as a prophet appears to come at the expense of Lewis as an educator. In some curious passages near the beginning, Ward explicitly distances himself from Lewis's chosen subtitle—"some thoughts on education." What struck me as missing was an appreciation of how *The Abolition of Man* is most definitely a product of Lewis the Oxford tutor. In other words, while I agree that *Abolition* certainly hovers more on "moral philosophy" than on "schoolroom pedagogy" (11), the argument for Lewis as "prophet" seems to come at the expense of Lewis the professional educator.

An example of an intrusive criticism can be found in the issue Ward takes with Lewis's arguments from the final chapter of *Abolition*, where Lewis appeals to contraception as an illustration of his argument. Ward claims that "this final chapter as a whole is, in my view, the least successful part of the book" (151), but it becomes clear quite quickly that his primary concern is with the way that Lewis treats contraception, lengthily describing the subsection as "problematic" (155). This makes a kind of sense when we recall that Ward is a Catholic Priest, but I fear that these convictions as a Catholic may have overridden his convictions as a Lewis scholar.

These are relatively minor issues. What is most valuable about *After Humanity* is this business of chasing up Lewis's sources and expanding on the background—cultural, historical, and philosophical—which gave rise to the argument of *The Abolition of Man*. Irrespective of whether or not you agree with Ward's arguments about the significance and meaning of *Abolition of Man*, *After Humanity* offers a wealth of valuable information that will doubtless enrich the serious reader of Lewis's works.

—Jeremy M. Rios