

# Irrigating Deserts: Thinking with C. S. Lewis about Educating for Emotional Formation

By Adam C. Pelsler

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At many Christian colleges and universities the task of liberal arts education is understood to include moral and spiritual as well as intellectual formation. This educational philosophy is exemplified in the following line from Baylor University's explication of its mission statement: "Beyond the intellectual life, the University pursues the social, physical, ethical and spiritual development of each student."<sup>1</sup> Even many liberal arts universities that do not champion Christian education take it as a part of their mission to educate not for knowledge alone, but for wisdom and moral character as well. Take, for example, Wake Forest University's expressed commitment "to educate the whole person—mind, body, and spirit" and "to build not only intellect, but also character."<sup>2</sup> It is my contention here that such education of "the whole person" must involve emotional formation. For, as Aristotle recognized famously, moral virtue involves both right action (*praxis*) and right emotion (*pathé*).<sup>3</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition likewise affirms that wisdom and moral virtue essentially involve apt emotions and emotion-dispositions. The Hebrew Psalmist proclaims that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"<sup>4</sup> and in his discussion of the fruit of the Spirit the Apostle Paul emphasizes that emotions are at the heart of moral and spiritual virtue: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."<sup>5</sup> While every one of the virtues in Paul's list arguably involves emotion-dispositions of various kinds, the italicized virtues—joy, peace, and gentleness—are defined primarily in terms of, and have their namesake in, characteristic emotion-dispositions.<sup>6</sup> Despite the lasting influence on pedagogical intuitions of this traditional wisdom (that is, that wise and virtuous character essentially involves well-formed emotions), the task

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Many liberal arts colleges express a commitment to educate the whole person; yet, educating for emotional formation rarely receives explicit attention. In *The Abolition of Man* C.S. Lewis argues that proper moral education essentially involves emotional formation informed by an understanding of emotions as recognitions of objective values that function together with reason to yield moral knowledge. In this essay Adam C. Pelsler explains Lewis' view of emotions and its significance for *The Abolition of Man*, supporting and developing the view with insights drawn from philosophy and psychology. He concludes by suggesting some pedagogical applications of this view of emotions to moral education and spiritual formation in higher education. Mr. Pelsler is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the United States Air Force Academy.

of educating for emotional formation has not received the attention it deserves from modern Christian educators.<sup>7</sup> This, I suspect, is largely due to confusion surrounding the nature of emotions themselves.

Recognizing serious threats to moral education in his own day, in his trilogy of essays published as *The Abolition of Man* C. S. Lewis highlights the importance for moral education of emotional formation grounded in an accurate understanding of emotions. Lewis warned prophetically that teaching children an incorrect view of the nature of emotions would lead to emotional malformation, moral skepticism, and, ultimately, to the devolution of human society—the abolition of man. According to the reading of Lewis I offer here, proper moral education presupposes that emotions are not inherently irrational, but are, rather, perceptions of objective value that, when properly formed, function together with reason to ground moral knowledge as well as knowledge of other kinds of values.<sup>8</sup> Despite the popularity of *The Abolition of Man* among Christian educators, the importance of Lewis' view of emotions for the project of moral education he advocates is often missed, in part, no doubt, because Lewis' discussions of emotions are often subtle and even at times ambiguous. Speaking from personal experience, despite having read *The Abolition of Man* multiple times, I did not appreciate the significance of Lewis' view of emotions for his proposals concerning moral education until I taught a colloquium on the book while doing research on the philosophy of emotions. In the pages that follow, I shall thus attempt to clarify Lewis' view of the relationship between emotions and reason and explain its importance for his main argument

<sup>1</sup>"About Baylor: Mission Statement," Baylor University, <http://www.baylor.edu/about/index.php?id=88781>, accessed February 7, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>"Discover Wake Forest: Education of the Whole Person," Wake Forest University Admissions, <<http://admissions.wfu.edu/discover/wholeperson.php>>, accessed February 7, 2013. I use Wake Forest University as an example both because it is a prominent liberal arts university that does not identify itself as a Christian university, despite its Baptist heritage, and because I am very familiar with the university, having been both a graduate student and, currently, teacher-scholar there.

<sup>3</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II vi 10.

<sup>4</sup>Psalms 111:10, *English Standard Version*.

<sup>5</sup>Galatians 5:22–23, *English Standard Version* (italics mine); see also Colossians 1:9–10.

<sup>6</sup>For an insightful treatment of the central importance of emotions for Christian virtues, see Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); see also Robert C. Roberts, "Emotions in the Epistemology of Paul the Apostle" in *Passion and Passivity*, Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, eds. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Michael Rodgers (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>For some encouraging recent attempts to refocus the attention of Christian educators on the task of educating for emotional formation, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); and David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith, eds., *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>For an independent argument that all attempts at emotion education must rely implicitly on a view of emotions as perceptions of objective value, see Kristján Kristjánsson "Emotion Education without Ontological Commitment?," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (2010): 259–274.

in *The Abolition of Man*. I draw on recent work in philosophy and psychology to develop and support the view of emotions Lewis endorses and to suggest that properly formed (virtuous) emotions can help give rise not only to knowledge of value, but also to a kind of deep moral and spiritual understanding that is constitutive of wisdom. I conclude by offering some pedagogical applications of Lewis' view of emotions to moral education and spiritual formation within the context of higher education. While much of what I suggest will be applicable to all liberal arts universities that are committed to character education, I am particularly interested in the role of emotional formation in Christian colleges and universities.

### The Rationality of Emotions in "Men Without Chests"

Lewis begins his essay, "Men Without Chests," by introducing the reader to an English textbook for elementary school students, which Lewis calls *The Green Book*. In *The Green Book* the authors, whom Lewis refers to as Gaius and Titius, discuss a story in which one tourist calls a waterfall "sublime" and another tourist calls it "pretty" and Coleridge responds by endorsing the first judgment and vehemently rejecting the second.<sup>9</sup> Lewis quotes the following passage from *The Green Book*:

When the man said *This is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall... Actually... he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word 'Sublime,'* or shortly, *I have sublime feelings*... This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.<sup>10</sup>

Lewis notes, "The schoolboy who reads this passage in *The Green Book* will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and secondly, that all such statements are unimportant."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps unknowingly, Gaius and Titius were promulgating a view which Lewis identifies as ethical "subjectivism."<sup>12</sup> The subjectivism of Gaius and Titius is often confused for a closely related view called emotivism, but the two views are distinct.<sup>13</sup> Emotivism and subjectivism are agreed that moral judgments and emotions are not about objective moral values, but whereas emotivism takes value judgments such as "Murder is wrong" to be

<sup>9</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 2.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 2-3; italics in original.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>13</sup>I am grateful to Stephen Evans and Christian Miller for helpful discussion on this point. For a clear and insightful treatment of the difference between "simple subjectivism" and emotivism, see James Rachels, "Subjectivism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 432-441. Incidentally, while it is good to have this distinction before us for the sake of clarity, little hangs on the distinction for the purposes of this paper, for Lewis' critique of subjectivism focuses on its claim that moral judgments and emotions are not about objective moral values, a claim shared by emotivism.

expressions of subjective emotion (such as, "Murder... boo!"), subjectivism takes such value judgments to be reports about the subjective emotions of the speaker (such as, "I have a disapproving feeling toward murder"), which are no more about objective values than statements such as "I have an itch" or "I'm going to be sick."<sup>14</sup> In development of their subjectivism, Gaius and Titius claim that emotions are not only unimportant, but also inherently irrational—mere sentimentality. In reply, Lewis grants that Gaius and Titius are likely motivated by the good intention of protecting students against being manipulated by emotional propaganda, but he disagrees that the way to protect them is by training them to distrust, if not to quell entirely, all emotions. Lewis writes,

My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.<sup>15</sup>

The upshot of Lewis's criticism against Gaius and Titius is this: teaching students an incorrect view of the nature of emotions can lead to improper formation of potentially valuable emotion-dispositions. In short, emotional miseducation breeds emotional malformation.

Lewis' critique of *The Green Book*, which focuses primarily on Gaius and Titius' insidious philosophy of emotions, suggests that proper emotional formation relies on an implicit commitment to, if not explicit education about, an accurate understanding of emotions. Just what is the correct view of emotions, then, that Lewis takes to be tied inextricably to proper emotional formation? Lewis describes it thus:

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.<sup>16</sup>

Lewis thus endorses a view of emotions according to which emotions are more or less accurate, apt or inapt responses to objective values in the world. He explains,

Because our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order, therefore emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it). No emotion is, in itself, a judgment; in that sense all emotions and sentiments are alogical. But they can be reasonable or unreasonable as they conform to Reason or fail to conform.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 51.

<sup>15</sup>*The Abolition of Man*, 13-14.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

Lewis' view of emotions as "recognitions of objective value" bears a close affinity to perceptual accounts of emotion that have been defended in recent literature by a growing number of philosophers and psychologists.<sup>18</sup> According to such accounts emotions are perception-like experiences of objective values. On perceptual accounts, emotions, like sense perceptions, can get things right or wrong and the wise and virtuous person will not only make the appropriate moral and aesthetic judgments, she will also "see" the value in the world accurately through her emotions. In keeping with a perceptual account of emotions, Lewis not only rejects Gaius and Titius's claim that all statements of value are merely reports of the speaker's emotions and that value statements are, therefore, unimportant; he also rejects their claim that emotions are inherently irrational. Indeed, from the essay "Men Without Chests" in *The Abolition of Man* we learn that emotions can be rational responses to objective values in the world.

### Emotion, Reason, and Moral Knowledge in *The Abolition of Man*

In the remaining two essays of the book, "The Tao" and "The Abolition of Man," Lewis argues that if Western society continues to give up on the possibility of moral knowledge and, hence, rejects the foundational truths of the natural moral law (that is, "the Tao"), we will be left morally rudderless and will, in the end, become a society subject to the whims and mere biological urges of a small class of powerful individuals. Having lost all moral bearing, those in power will engage in an unbridled quest for scientific and technological progress, ultimately succeeding in "the abolition of man" through eugenics and biotechnologies that violate the dignity of human beings in service of the base and selfish desires of the few who hold power over such technologies. The obvious connection between the themes of these two essays and "Men Without Chests" is that the latter two essays reveal the danger of Gaius and Titius' subjectivism. For, if all value judgments are merely reports of irrational emotions that have nothing to do with objective values in the world, then we must give up on the idea that there is any objective value, or objective moral law, to be discovered and known. Subjectivism breeds moral skepticism.

The not so obvious connection between Lewis' treatment of emotions in "Men Without Chests" and his final two essays is that if we want to preserve moral knowledge in society, it is not enough to debunk the subjectivist's mistaken view of moral judgments and emotions; moral educators must also revive the ancient wisdom that emotions, as perception-like experiences of value, must work together with reason to give rise to knowledge of objective moral value and the

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Nico Frijda and Batja Mesquita, "Beliefs Through Emotions," in *Emotions and Beliefs: How Feelings Influence Thoughts*, eds. Nico Frijda, Antony S. R. Manstead, and Sacha Bemet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45-77; Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Linda T. Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 2.

natural moral law (that is, "the Tao").<sup>19</sup> As Lewis puts it, paraphrasing Aristotle, "When the age for reflective thought comes, the pupil who has been thus trained in 'ordinate affections' or 'just sentiments' will easily find the first principles of Ethics; but to the corrupt man they will never be visible at all and he can make no progress in that science."<sup>20</sup>

On the view Lewis here endorses emotions while not themselves judgments or beliefs, often help to form (and inform) our beliefs about moral and other values by helping us to "see" those values. In other words, our emotions present their objects to us as being valuable or disvaluable in some particular way, and we often trust our emotions by believing that things really are as our emotions present them to be. According to Lewis, trusting our emotions in this way is not always irrational or otherwise cognitively defective. In fact, when our emotions are formed properly, they enable direct awareness and, hence, knowledge of objective value.<sup>21</sup>

Lewis is not denying, nor would I, that emotions can and often do mislead us, such as when we get angry at minor offenses, when we fear things that are not dangerous, and when we admire those who are not worthy of admiration. He is certainly aware of the dangers of trusting misleading emotions, as evidenced by his concerns about emotionally manipulative propaganda. Rather than attempting to avoid such dangers by distrusting all emotions and thereby failing to attend to the difficult project of emotional formation, Lewis challenges us (especially us educators) to learn how to cultivate character traits that dispose us to have virtuous emotions—"just sentiments"—that reliably represent the objective values in the world. By "irrigating" our students' arid hearts in this way, we can make them free (in keeping with the goal of a liberal arts education) to experience or "see" the injustice of apartheid, the inhumanity of genocide, the beauty of a Beethoven symphony, the elegance of the physical laws of the universe, the dignity of human persons, our own sinfulness, and even the grace and goodness of God through well-formed emotional perceptions—through, in particular, indignation, moral horror, aesthetic awe, wonder, love, contrition, and gratitude, respectively.

Lewis' claim that properly formed emotions can function together with reason as a perceptual source of moral knowledge is often missed by casual readers of *The Abolition of Man* and Lewis scholars alike. In a recent essay on *The Abolition of Man* contributed to a collection of essays on the titular theme of *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*, Jean Bethke Elshtain briefly acknowledges that, for Lewis, emotions are not contrary to reason or rationality, but she gives no indication that emotions

<sup>19</sup>Lewis claims that this view of emotions is shared by Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine. See *The Abolition of Man*, 16-17.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>21</sup>It is important to note here that I am not claiming, nor would Lewis claim, that emotions actually create or serve as the metaphysical ground of value in the world. On my view, which I take to be shared by Lewis, emotions help us to experience and thus to know or understand objective values—that is, values that exist in the world independently of our emotions and other mental states.

might actually be helpful in coming to “see” or know the moral law or the dignity of all human persons, topics on which she has much else of value to say.<sup>22</sup> While it is certainly not incumbent on Elshtain or any other Lewis scholar to provide a discussion of the importance of emotions for moral perception and moral knowledge in every essay on *The Abolition of Man*, the lack of any such discussion in a volume on the philosophy of C. S. Lewis is indicative of the general scholarly neglect of this idea.<sup>23</sup> This is especially so given that in the same volume much attention is paid to ways in which emotions can impede reason and knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

In another essay in the same volume, Peter Kreeft goes so far as to claim that “Lewis shocks us psychologistic moderns, us feeling-fondlers, by telling us, as do all the saints, that feelings, the powers by which we become aware of and attracted to beauty, are irrelevant and unimportant for moral goodness.”<sup>25</sup> If Kreeft meant to argue that mere physiological “feelings” like a churning of the gut, racing of the heart, or tingling sensation are irrelevant to morality, then surely he is right, but that he has in mind more cognitive, perceptual “feelings” or emotions is suggested by his concession that such feelings can help us to become aware of aesthetic values. Thus, it seems that Kreeft takes Lewis’ remarks in “Men Without Chests” concerning the nature of emotions as perceptions (“recognitions”) of value to be relevant to aesthetic value alone, as opposed to the objective moral law and moral value on which Lewis focuses throughout the remainder of the book.

Although Lewis’ primary examples of emotional perceptions of value in “Men Without Chests” have to do with aesthetic value, the view of emotions he endorses in the essay naturally suggests, *pace* Kreeft, that when emotions are functioning properly they can be important sources of awareness and, therefore, knowledge of moral as well as aesthetic value. Indeed, the insight that emotions can make us aware of moral as well as aesthetic values seems to underlie the severity of Lewis’ warning that we do children a great disservice if we teach them to distrust their emotions, thereby creating generations of people devoid of well-formed emotional sensitivities—people, as Lewis puts it, “without chests.”

<sup>22</sup>Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The Abolition of Man: C. S. Lewis’ Prescience Concerning Things to Come,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, eds. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 88-89.

<sup>23</sup>To his credit, Gregory Bassham rightly emphasizes the importance of emotions for moral imagination and, hence, for moral education in his essay “Lewis and Tolkien on the Power of the Imagination,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*, 245-260, though he never explicitly draws the connection I am drawing here between emotions and perceptual knowledge of value. Similarly, in his essay “To Reign in Hell or to Serve in Heaven: C. S. Lewis on the Problem of Hell and the Enjoyment of the Good,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*, 161-163, Matthew Lee aptly notes a close connection between emotions and the spiritual perception of God in the beatific vision, but he, too, stops short of identifying emotion as a kind of perception of value.

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, Gary Habermas, “C. S. Lewis and Emotional Doubt: Insights from the Philosophy of Psychology,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*, 96-111. Of course, I do not deny that malformed emotions can and often do impede reason and knowledge.

<sup>25</sup>Peter Kreeft, “Lewis’ Philosophy of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*, 34.

Lewis' worry is not merely that students with poorly formed emotions will miss out on experiences (and knowledge) of aesthetic beauty, but also that they will fail to recognize and appreciate moral goodness and the value of truth as well. Concerning the importance of apt emotions ("just sentiments") for maintaining an appreciative awareness of the value of truth—the heart of all intellectual virtue—Lewis writes, "a persevering devotion to truth, a nice sense of intellectual honor, cannot be long maintained without the aid of a sentiment which Gaius and Titius could debunk as well as any other."<sup>26</sup> For Lewis, then, it seems that emotions help us to recognize or perceive all kinds of value, including aesthetic and moral as well as epistemic or alethic value.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it would be a bit surprising if Lewis had argued that emotions are recognitions of aesthetic value, but that they are irrelevant to perceiving moral and other kinds of value, given his emphasis throughout his fictional and non-fictional writings on the interconnectedness of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Lewis' overarching argument in the book, which he develops over the three essays, thus seems to proceed as follows: (1) Since emotions are our primary mode of experiencing or perceiving objective moral as well as other kinds of value directly, undermining young peoples' trust in their emotional perceptions of value (rendering them "Men Without Chests") leads inevitably to (2) widespread skepticism concerning the objective moral law ("The Tao"), which, in turn, leads to (3) an unbridled quest to conquer and manipulate all of nature, including our own human nature, to serve our base and selfish purposes ("The Abolition of Man"). Reading "Men Without Chests" as an essay concerning the importance of emotions as a source of cognitive access to objective moral as well as other kinds of value thus provides literary cohesion to the book as a whole.

As insinuated above, however, Lewis' discussions of the connections between emotions, reason, and moral knowledge are often subtle and sometimes ambiguous. While I contend that the interpretation of Lewis I am offering here is supported by the text, I do not claim that it is obviously so. For example, concerning the first principles of ethics, such as Jesus' "Golden Rule," Lewis explains that

You may, since they give no "reason" for themselves of a kind to silence Gaius and Titius, regard them as sentiments: but then you must give up contrasting "real" or "rational" value with sentimental value. All value will be sentimental; and you must confess (on pain of abandoning every value) that all sentiment is not "merely" subjective. You may, on the other hand, regard them as rational—nay as rationality itself—as things so obviously reasonable that they neither demand nor admit proof. But then you must allow that Reason can be practical.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>*The Abolition of Man*, 25.

<sup>27</sup>Here "epistemic value" (from the Greek *episteme*, meaning knowledge or understanding) refers to the value of our cognitive grasp of truth or reality, while "alethic value" (from the Greek *alethia*, meaning truth) refers to the special value of truth itself.

<sup>28</sup>*The Abolition of Man*, 40.



According to Lewis, knowledge of the Tao, or the natural moral law, provides the foundation for all moral knowledge. It follows that if we reject some fundamental moral judgments on the basis that they are mere sentimentality, as Gaius and Titius recommend, then we cannot consistently maintain a commitment to any moral knowledge at all. Lewis argues (in the quote above) that in order to avoid such far-reaching moral skepticism, the subjectivist must either admit that (i) all value is discovered by sentiments (emotions) and that such emotions are not merely subjective, but rather give us cognitive access to objective values—call this the objectivity of emotions thesis—or (ii) there are some foundational truths of morality that can be known by reason without argument or proof—call this the moral foundationalism thesis. This amounts to a dilemma for the subjectivist, since acceptance of either the objectivity of emotions thesis or the moral foundationalism thesis amounts to a rejection of subjectivism. So, the subjectivist must either give up her subjectivism or give up on the possibility of moral knowledge altogether.

Although Lewis' primary intent in this passage was to pose a dilemma for the subjectivist and not to explicate his own view, the question of primary interest to us here is whether the objectivity of emotions thesis or the moral foundationalism thesis best describes Lewis' view of the relationship between emotion, reason, and moral knowledge. It is clear from Lewis' discussion in the rest of the essay and from his parallel discussion in *Miracles* that he holds the moral foundationalism thesis; namely, that there are some fundamental moral truths—the Tao—that we can believe rationally and know without appeal to an argument or inference from some more basic fact. In fact, in *Miracles* Lewis argues explicitly that "Reason" is the faculty by which we perceive fundamental moral principles.<sup>29</sup>

It is thus perhaps tempting to conclude that Lewis rejects the objectivity of emotions thesis in favor of the moral foundationalism thesis. To do so, however, would be a mistake. While the two theses are distinct, they are nonetheless compatible. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that Lewis accepted the objectivity of emotions thesis as well as the moral foundationalism thesis and that, for him, the two theses were inextricably linked. As we saw above, Lewis argues in "Men Without Chests" that emotions are not "merely subjective," but, rather, that emotions can be rational experiences of objective values and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to come to recognize or know objective values without the aid of properly formed emotions. What we ought to conclude, therefore, is that there are some foundational truths of morality (for example, the Golden Rule, or that murder is unjust, or that it is noble to sacrifice one's life for one's friend, and so on) that are quite obviously true and that need no argument or proof, but that the faculty through which we grasp such truths, which Lewis refers to simply as "Reason," is essentially emotional reason, rational sentiment, or "feeling intellect."<sup>30</sup> When we combine the objectivity of emotions thesis with the moral foun-

<sup>29</sup>*Miracles*, 49.

<sup>30</sup>I have this phrase from Corbin Scott Carnell, *Bright Shadow of Reality: C. S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

dationalism thesis in this way, we see that the reason it seems obvious to us that murder is (objectively) unjust and dreadful is that we experience strong emotions of indignation and moral horror toward murderers. Put slightly differently, the experience of such rational emotions is just what it is for such moral principles to seem obviously true to us. Gilbert Meilaender puts the point just right in his articulation of Lewis' view:

Moral insight, therefore, is not a matter for reason alone; it requires trained emotions and moral habits of behavior inculcated even before we reach an age of reason. "The head rules the belly through the chest." Reason disciplines appetite only with the aid of trained emotions. It turns out, then, that moral education does more than simply enable us to "see" what virtue requires. It also enables us, at least to some extent, to *be* virtuous. For the very training of the emotions that makes insight possible will have produced in us traits of character that incline us to love the good and do it.<sup>31</sup>

### Emotional Understanding and Wisdom

The overarching argument of *The Abolition of Man*, as summarized above, relies on the premise that when emotions get things right they are an important source of information about the value in the world—information that reason unaided by emotion is often incapable of recognizing, appreciating, knowing, or, as I shall now argue, understanding in the deep way that is constitutive of wisdom.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, one who claims to understand the moral law, but does not love the moral law, does not understand the moral law in the deepest sense. One who possesses sufficient understanding of the moral law to pass the moral bar exam with flying colors, but who never experiences anger, indignation, sorrow, or contrition toward violations of the moral law, or delight in the moral law (see for example Psalm 19) and admiration toward virtuous moral exemplars, does not understand the moral law as the wise person does because, unlike the wise person, she fails to appreciate its goodness. As one of Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonyms puts it paradoxically, "to understand and to understand are two things."<sup>33</sup> One cannot truly understand in the deep way constitutive of wisdom what is good, true, and beautiful, unless one loves and thus experiences apt emotions toward that which is good, true, and beautiful, and acts accordingly. Recall Meilaender's observation that "the very training of the emotions that makes insight possible will have produced in us traits of character that incline us to love the good and do it." This is true both because properly formed emotions are constitutive of virtue

<sup>31</sup>Gilbert Meilaender, "On Moral Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124-125; italics in original.

<sup>32</sup>For an argument that wisdom is a kind of deep, life-guiding understanding, see C. Stephen Evans, "Wisdom as Conceptual Understanding," *Faith and Philosophy* 27.4 (2010): 369-381.

<sup>33</sup>Anti-Climacus (pseudonym of Søren Kierkegaard), *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 92.

and because the “insight” they provide is a kind of appreciative understanding that is essentially motivating or life-guiding (that is, wisdom).

That emotions are necessary for full understanding of at least some objective values is evidenced by the following story of the autistic scientist, Temple Grandin, recounted by Oliver Sacks. Sacks’ story, like the story of Coleridge at the waterfall, emphasizes the role of emotions in experiences of sublimity:

As we drove into the park, the landscape opened out into an immense mountain plateau, with limitless views in every direction. We pulled off the road and gazed toward the Rockies—snowcapped, outlined against the horizon, luminously clear even though they were nearly a hundred miles away. I asked Temple if she did not feel a sense of their sublimity. “They’re pretty, yes. Sublime, I don’t know.” When I pressed her, she said that she was puzzled by such words and had spent much time with a dictionary, trying to understand them. She had looked up “sublime,” “mysterious,” “numinous,” and “awe,” but they all seemed to be defined in terms of one another. “The mountains are pretty,” she repeated, “but they don’t give me a special feeling, the feeling you seem to enjoy.” After living for three and a half years in Fort Collins, she said, this was only the second time she had been to them.<sup>34</sup>

As Sacks explains, Grandin exhibits a “poverty of emotional or aesthetic response to most visual scenes: she can describe them with great accuracy but they do not seem to correspond to or evoke any strongly felt states of mind.”<sup>35</sup> Grandin’s emotional deficiency seems, by her own account, to have resulted in a conceptual deficiency, a deficiency of understanding. Not having ever directly experienced sublimity through the emotion of awe, or some related emotion, Grandin lacks an appreciative understanding of sublimity. Her understanding of sublimity is like the colorblind person’s understanding of redness.

Contrary to the subjectivism promulgated by Gaius and Titius in *The Green Book*, Grandin’s lack of emotional appreciation of the sublimity of the Rockies represents a failure to recognize an objective value that really does exist in the world independently of our (and her) emotions. The Rockies really are sublime and it is unfortunate that Grandin’s emotional deficiencies prevent her from directly experiencing their sublimity. To extend this account to cases of moral understanding, consider the way psychopathology, a condition marked by a deficiency of moral emotions, similarly prevents those who suffer from it from “seeing” the injustice and wrongness of physical abuse, theft, and even murder. Surely such acts are violations of a moral law that really exists independently of whether anyone’s emotions enable her to know and understand it.<sup>36</sup>

Emotions, so understood, are an important source of spiritual, as well as

<sup>34</sup>Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 293.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>Note that I am not arguing that no accurate understanding of morality can be had apart from accurate emotional perception. Understanding comes in degrees—a person can have a very shallow understanding that is nevertheless accurate. Surely some understanding of moral and aesthetic values is possible apart from direct emotional experience. I am simply arguing that full or ideal human understanding of value is impossible apart from emotional experience of value.

moral and aesthetic, understanding (that is, wisdom). One of the ways that we can come to understand the spiritual significance of our sin against the holy God, for example, is by listening to and trusting our emotions of guilt and contrition or, more generally, our conscience.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, one of the ways that we can come to understand God's great kindness is through our emotion of gratitude, especially when the benefit for which we are grateful is not attributable to human agency. This is because the emotion of gratitude, far from being a mere physiological feeling, "encodes" the information that something good has been given to oneself by a generous benefactor.<sup>38</sup> This is the truth behind the oft-cited quip that "the worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank."<sup>39</sup> Gratitude is a way of "seeing" or experiencing oneself as the recipient of a gift from a generous benefactor. Therefore, gratitude toward a gift only God can give, such as a miraculous healing or pregnancy, the beauty of a spring morning, or life itself, forces the thoughtful atheist to choose between rejecting her atheism or disbelieving her eyes—that is, the eyes of her heart.<sup>40</sup> It follows that emotional formation is constitutive of moral education and spiritual formation not only in the sense that developing well-formed emotion-dispositions can make one more morally and spiritually virtuous, but also in the sense that accurate emotional perceptions can inform moral and spiritual understanding, that is, wisdom. By educating for emotional formation, therefore, we educate both the head and the heart.

### Emotional Formation in Higher Education

Lewis was right, then, that to educate for moral character and moral knowledge (understanding, wisdom) is, in part, to contribute to the formation of students' emotional sensitivities, to help form and guide their passions, to strengthen their chests (not merely their heads), to irrigate their arid hearts. In light of this observation, how might educators in twenty-first-century universities proceed to educate for emotional formation?

Before answering this question, it is necessary to head off two important objections to the legitimacy of the question itself.<sup>41</sup> First, in highlighting the importance

<sup>37</sup>My claim that the faculty of conscience is an aspect of wisdom seems to be shared by Lewis. In *Miracles*, Lewis argues that if the faculty of conscience is to be valid at all, it must be "an offshoot of some absolute moral wisdom" (53).

<sup>38</sup>Roberts offers an insightful discussion and defense of this understanding of gratitude in chapter 9 of *Spiritual Emotions*.

<sup>39</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 251. This quote is popularly attributed to Chesterton himself, but in the passage cited Chesterton attributes it to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet and painter Dante Rossetti.

<sup>40</sup>The foregoing material in this paragraph is used with permission, having been modified from material that first appeared in Daniel M. Johnson and Adam C. Pelser, "Affective Apologetics: Communicating Truth through Humor, Ridicule, and Emotions," *Christian Research Journal* 35.6 (2012): 46.

<sup>41</sup>I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for pressing these objections.

of emotional formation for moral education, Lewis does not have college-age students in view; rather, he is focused on the education of young children. In fact, as we saw above, Lewis cites with apparent approbation Aristotle's view that the formation of virtuous emotion-dispositions must happen at a young age if it is to be at all successful. It might be thought, therefore, that to implement a program of emotional formation in higher education would be an exercise in futility. By the time students have reached early adulthood their emotion-dispositions, whether virtuous, vicious, or somewhere in between, are already rooted too deeply to be transformed by higher education. Secondly, it might be objected that, even if emotional formation is still possible at this late stage of moral development, any attempts by university educators to foster the emotional formation of their students would amount to inappropriate manipulation and would distract from the primary goals of higher education. Emotional formation is the job of parents, friends, clergy, and counselors, perhaps, but not university professors.

In reply to the objection that efforts at emotional formation of college-age students are likely to be futile, let me simply register my optimism, informed as it is by personal experience, that character formation in general and the formation of virtuous emotion-dispositions in particular are still live possibilities well into adulthood. In fact, residential college communities in which students share meals and share life with their classmates and professors can provide a particularly effective context for such personally formative living and learning. It is certainly the case that a good deal of moral formation happens, for good or for ill, by the end of the teen years, but while this presents a challenge to character education in colleges and universities (as well as a strong motivation to encourage proper emotional formation in the education of young children<sup>42</sup>), it does not render it impossible; nor does it show that efforts at emotional formation through higher education are not worthwhile.

As for whether it is appropriate for university educators to engage in efforts to help cultivate virtuous emotions in their students, I maintain that it is. As I have tried to show through my discussion of Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, emotional formation is a crucial element of moral education, both because properly formed emotion-dispositions are constitutive of virtue and because virtuous emotions can enhance moral and spiritual knowledge and understanding. Insofar as it is appropriate for university educators to contribute to the moral education, let alone the spiritual formation, of their students, therefore, it must be appropriate

<sup>42</sup>While I believe that much good work needs to be done by Christian educators on the question of how best to nurture emotional formation in the education of young children, I have chosen to focus here on emotional formation in higher education since that is the educational context with which I am most familiar. For some helpful reflections on the relevance of a perceptual account of emotions for early childhood moral education, see Bruce Maxwell and Roland Reichenbach, "Imitation, Imagination, and Re-appraisal: Educating the Moral Emotions," *Journal of Moral Education* 34.3 (2005): 291-307; and Maxwell and Reichenbach, "Educating Moral Emotions: A Praxiological Analysis," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26 (2007): 147-163.

for them to engage in practices aimed at the cultivation of virtuous emotions. To put the point a bit differently, in light of the central importance of emotional formation for moral (character) education, liberal arts colleges and universities should either encourage emotionally formative practices both within and outside of the classroom, or they should stop claiming to be about the education of "the whole person." For those, like me, who remain convinced of the value of educating the whole student, emotions and all, I now return to the question of pedagogy.

How might educators in twenty-first-century universities educate for emotional formation? Here the perceptual account of emotions sketched above suggests a helpful analogy with sense perceptual training. Just as we can train our sense perceptual capacities to become more adept at their various functions, so too we can train our emotional sensitivities to become more adept at perceiving the multitude of complex and often subtle evaluative properties in the world. We can learn to "see" the suffering of others through the eyes of compassion, to become angry at significant injustices (and only at significant injustices), to take pleasure in and wonder at that which is truly beautiful, to find amusing that and only that which is truly funny (as opposed to jokes that are demeaning, hateful, or disgusting), and to feel appropriately contrite for our sins.

As with sense perceptual training, one way for educators to nurture the emotional formation of their students is to provide them with virtuous emotional exemplars who invite them into a way of life characterized by virtuous emotional sensitivity to the complex values in the world. Just as the biologist can train her students to see the structural features of a cell through a microscope by drawing their attention to the various features that distinguish certain organelles from others, and just as the arborist can train her students to identify a magnolia tree, or a myrtle, perceptually, so too the emotional exemplar can help shape students' abilities to identify objective values in the world by drawing their attention to the various value-laden aspects of situations and objects and then modeling fitting emotional responses. One can introduce students to emotional exemplars through great literature, through songs and poems, and through films in which characters model fitting (or obviously unfitting) emotional reactions to the value in the world.

For example, I recently had the opportunity to teach a unit on the problem of evil in an introduction to philosophy course. After reading some representative philosophical texts on the topic we viewed together a BBC film called *God on Trial* in which a group of impassioned prisoners at Auschwitz put God on trial for the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the film, the characters display a wide variety of contrasting emotions, including intense anger and even hatred toward God for allowing this great evil to fall upon the Jewish people, immense sorrow over the horrific deaths of their loved ones, hope in God's faithfulness toward his children, and despair at the prospect of facing death without God. In preparation for our viewing and discussion of the film the students were also instructed to read se-

<sup>43</sup>I am indebted to Joshua Seachris for suggesting this activity.

lections from Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*, which contains a series of very moving and theologically rich reflections on the tragic death of Wolterstorff's son. Prior to watching the film and reading the book I encouraged my students to pay attention to their own emotions as well as to the emotions expressed in the film and the book. In our discussion I asked them to evaluate the contrasting emotional responses to suffering and death that were presented and to consider which responses seemed most appropriate and how those emotions reflected the theology (or atheism) of the sufferers. Rather than keeping our discussion of the problem of evil dry and merely academic, this exercise helped me and my students to reflect on the appropriateness of our own emotional responses to suffering and evil and to consider how our emotions and the emotions of others might be perceiving (or misperceiving) objective truths about the value (or disvalue) in the world. Throughout my discussions with my class I did not shy away from expressing my own emotions toward the evil and suffering we were considering in an effort to model emotional sensitivity to the issues.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to presenting moral exemplars through literature and film and reflecting on the appropriateness of contrasting emotional responses to vivid value-laden situations, a professor can serve as an emotional exemplar herself through engaging lectures in which she freely expresses fitting emotions toward the elegance of the laws of physics, the injustice of apartheid, the humor of a good joke, and, yes, even the sublimity of snow-capped mountains and waterfalls. Perhaps even more importantly, university educators have opportunities to serve as emotional exemplars in the one-on-one interactions that often happen before and after class, during office hours, and around campus when students let their guards down and confide in their professors about struggles at home, or ask for advice, or share a funny anecdote.

In fact, recent work in psychology suggests that educators might not be able to avoid serving as emotional models, for good or for ill. The research of Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson has, for example, highlighted the prevalence in human social interactions of a phenomenon they call "emotional contagion."<sup>45</sup> According to these psychologists, it is very common for people to "catch" the emotions of those around them. People naturally and instinctually mimic the facial expressions, posture, vocal intonations and rates, and movements of those with whom they are interacting and such mimicry, their research indicates, has a significant effect on emotional experience. This suggests that students are likely to mimic or "catch" the emotions, or at least some cognitively diminished versions of the emotions, of their professors, especially those professors whom

<sup>44</sup>For more examples of ways that Christian teacher-scholars have attempted to incorporate emotionally formative practices in their teaching, see Smith and Smith, eds., *Teaching and Christian Practices*.

<sup>45</sup>Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson, *Emotional Contagion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

they like.<sup>46</sup> If this is correct, professors, like parents and other potential role models, have an opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to model virtuous emotions for their students, training them by example when to laugh, cry, be angry, solemn, joyful, and so on. Of course, the responsibility of modeling virtuous emotions is not typically included in the job descriptions of university instructors and professors. But, if our goal is to educate for wisdom and virtuous character, perhaps it should be encouraged more explicitly than it is.

In addition to nurturing emotional formation through modeling virtuous emotions, educators can foster emotional wisdom by creating a learning space in which students feel comfortable experiencing a range of emotions. Developing virtuous emotions, like other perceptual faculties, takes practice and such practice requires the freedom to experience and express emotions. It is easy to allow oneself to experience a range of emotions in a movie theater where the lights are off and where one can remain relatively anonymous, but much harder to allow oneself to become emotionally open in this way in front of one's peers and one's professor in a classroom (especially in light of the widespread view that public expression of emotion is a sign of weakness or irrational sentimentality). I once had a student in a business ethics class approach me during a small group discussion time and explain to me, as she tried to hold back tears, that she was very upset by the way that her group was flippantly treating the value of money above the value of the people involved in the case under discussion, but that she was worried that it was somehow inappropriate for her to feel such emotions. I reassured her that her compassion for the people in the case and her frustration and disappointment with her group members seemed to reveal appropriate concerns; namely, a concern for the dignity and well-being of the people in the case and a concern that her group members respect the dignity and value of the people in the case. Without telling her that the classroom is no place for emotions, I encouraged her to let her emotions motivate her to find a respectful and winning way to address the group about her concerns. Educators can thus nurture emotional formation through the creation of safe learning spaces that allow for "trying on" new emotions as well as new ideas by modeling respect for every student and enforcing respectful treatment of the students by their peers.

There are, obviously, limitations on the extent to which it is possible and appropriate to encourage such emotional engagement with course material. Here it is important to note that one can experience an emotion without expressing it in a noticeable way. The task of emotional formation involves developing dispositions to experience appropriate emotions as well as developing the ability to perceive when and how best to express one's emotions. In a formal classroom setting often the wise and virtuous thing to do is to refrain from expressing emotion outwardly, even when having (feeling) a particular emotion is virtuous. Moreover, some

<sup>46</sup>On the connection between liking and emotional contagion see Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, *Emotional Contagion*, 169-172.



courses will lend themselves more naturally to emotionally formative activities than others. Knowing when, where, and how to model or encourage emotions in ways that are both appropriate and effective takes practical wisdom and would be aided by conversations among faculty and administrators about how best to incorporate emotional formation into the curriculum given institution-specific goals and resources.

Of course, there are many other practical obstacles to educating for emotional formation in modern universities. For one thing, Lewis' prophetic warning, unfortunately, has been fulfilled to a degree. As sociologist Christian Smith and a team of researchers recently highlight in their book *Lost In Transition*, twenty-first-century colleges and universities are full of emerging adults "without chests;" that is, emotionally malformed subjectivists who believe that morality is reducible to subjective emotions that are incapable of providing any insight into objective values. One among the many emerging adults Smith and his team interviewed put it this way: "What makes something right? I mean for me I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it, but different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else as to what's right and what's wrong."<sup>47</sup> Witness the danger of *The Green Book*. Educators in twenty-first-century universities are thus faced with the task of overcoming years of miseducation about emotions and the moral subjectivism and moral skepticism such miseducation has engendered in their students.

Posing yet another obstacle to educating for emotional formation, emotions are widely thought to be inherently irrational impulses. As a result, practices explicitly designed to enhance emotional formation in higher education are likely to be viewed with suspicion and resisted by students, faculty, and university administrators alike. Perhaps the first and most important step Christian educators can take toward fostering effective moral education and spiritual formation, next to prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit of course, is thus to re-educate our students and, indeed, our culture about the nature of emotions as perceptions of objective values.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Christian Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>48</sup>I am grateful to audiences at the 2011 Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture and the 2012 Biennial Meeting of the Baptist Association of Philosophy Teachers for helpful discussions of this material. I am especially grateful to Christian Miller, Daniel McKaughan, Ray Yeo, Adam Kadlac, and Nathan King for providing detailed comments on previous drafts. Support for this work was funded in part by the Wake Forest Philosophy Department Thomas Jack Lynch Memorial Fund and by the Character Project grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this paper are my own and do not reflect the views of the Character Project, the Templeton Foundation, the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.