

This project draws on the work of two thinkers, C. S. Lewis and Friedrich Nietzsche, to shed light on two of the canonical works of dystopian literature, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. It does this for the most part by way of primary research: Studying philosophical texts by both thinkers, and then analyzing the novels in terms of that thought. The larger paper which is in progress contains an analysis of the philosophy involved and a discussion of the historical connection between some of the key ideas of Lewis and Nietzsche. The rest of the paper is composed of the analysis of the novels. Because the philosophical research and discussion is already complete, and because the ideas involved in it are complex, that was the aspect of the project I chose to focus on for Undergraduate Research Day. For an understanding of how the whole project fits together, however, a brief summary of the novels is appropriate before beginning.

In *Brave New World*, the global population is ruled by a single government, which conditions its citizens to think of comfort and the consumption of goods as the purpose of life. *Fahrenheit 451* depicts a society in which the government burns books and the houses of book owners, and feeds the general population a constant stream of entertainment in order to discourage thought. Both novels showcase a stunted capacity for emotional and intellectual experience in most of their characters.

C S. Lewis presents a dystopian vision of his own in his 1943 work *The Abolition of Man*. This work critiques certain trends in modern thought, particularly mistrust in the idea of morality, which Lewis believes goes hand in hand with mistrust in reason. In modern times, the philosophical idea has become widespread that our moral beliefs are no more than personal opinions, that reason and morality have nothing to do with each other. This is a break with almost all of our philosophic tradition, which has always held that it is possible for moral beliefs

to be rational. Lewis thought that moderns had not thought through the consequences of this break. One of the reasons he thinks reason cannot survive the fall of morality is that belief in the goodness of truth, like a belief in the goodness of anything else, would be made into a personal opinion. No one would pursue science or logic if they didn't believe that knowledge and truth are in and of themselves better than ignorance and lies. But if that were only a personal opinion – if there were no more intrinsic value to truth than that which individuals place on it – society could easily settle for a different opinion, and prefer ignorance to truth. Moral ideals like kindness and justice could meet the same fate.

The dystopian future Lewis discusses is one in which all moral ideas have been given this treatment. He imagines a government of genetic conditioners, which has decided to rewire human nature. In doing this the conditioners cannot rely on any notions of kindness, justice, or the good, because they don't believe in these things anymore. Lewis is not claiming that this particular dystopia will definitely happen. The point is that the philosophical trends he criticizes, if carried out to their logical conclusion, can only end in some sort of dystopia.

To make his ideas easier to follow, Lewis frames his argument as a debate between himself and the writers of an English textbook called *The Control of Language*, Alec King and Martin Ketley. In this book, Lewis finds examples of many of the trends he is concerned about. These ideas themselves, however, have a long history. For the purposes of this analysis, I traced this history as far back as Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher writing in the latter half of the 1800s. Nietzsche's philosophy is concerned with many of the same ideas as Lewis discusses in *Abolition of Man*, specifically the nature and value of morality, the relationship between morality and reason, and what happens to people when they stop having something to believe in. This last Nietzsche discusses in his famous concept of "the death of God." This is the idea that, in his

words, “the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 279). When this belief falls, and no new system can take its place, European morality and identity will collapse with it. This is what Nietzsche calls nihilism: A nihilist believes in nothing, and feels his life to have no purpose. Although Lewis does not use the same term, he discusses essentially the same thing when he imagines the death of traditional morality.

In most other respects their ideas were quite different. Unlike Lewis, Nietzsche did not believe in objectively true or reasonable moral standards. He thought that there were an endless number of moral codes, all of which might be valid, but only as long as they promoted a dignified way of life. When they stopped doing this, they should be discarded. Western moral systems, in his view, had reached that point, and should be toppled. Nihilism would follow, but he hoped for something better on the other side of nihilism: Moral codes founded on subjective individual experience rather than on false ideas of objective truth. Much of the philosophy Lewis fights against has its origins here.

It should be reiterated, though, that Nietzsche and Lewis do agree on the horror of nihilism, and perhaps because of this, they also share a fear of what Nietzsche called “the last men,” a people who are so deeply nihilist that they no longer care they are nihilists – who believe in nothing and have no notion that there is anything ugly in themselves to overcome or beautiful in themselves to develop. They think that comfort, equally distributed among all, is the only good. Huxley and Bradbury seem to have had the same fear. Their novels are full of people obsessed with entertainment, personal pleasure, and comfort. These characters are outraged by anything that tears them away from this comfort – by anyone who suggests that their society is flawed. They hate thinking and thinkers.

The theoretical lens which is crafted when Nietzsche and Lewis are put into contrast in this way is one that deals with what happens when humanity tries to redefine itself, and fails. As such, it is ideal for analyzing dystopian literature. It is especially relevant to these two novels, concerned as they are with the shrinking of mankind's intellectual and moral horizons.

#### Works Cited

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. 1882. Ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974. Print.