

The *Tao* and the Art of Feminine Beauty
by Tia Zirkle

I first encountered Elizabeth Elliot's work somewhere between my Junior and Senior years of High School. Her timeless classic *Passion and Purity* shaped my opinions of relationships, femininity, and above all, pursuing holiness. My personal copy of this book sits on my shelf, dog-eared and underlined, with scribbled notes throughout. Time and again, it has been a source of wisdom in my life. Recently, when I was attempting to consider the application side of ethical theory, I saw a link between her thoughts and those of C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis' natural law theory, which he calls the *Tao*, provides an objective system of values, which in turn gives intrinsic worth to the art of feminine beauty.

Lewis' *Tao* comes out of a response to subjectivism about ethics in our modern era. He opens *Abolition* by addressing Gaius and Titius, two authors of a children's schoolbook. They claim that statements about the splendor of nature do not reflect reality, but merely our feelings in response to nature (1947, pp.14-15). Lewis concedes that the authors might have only intended their statement as a lesson in language, but it has pressing ethical implications. Following through on this idea would imply that "all emotions . . . are in themselves contrary to reason and contemptible" (p. 19). He points out that this compartmentalization of facts and feelings leads to subjectivism. When reducing all value judgments to mere emotions and nothing more, everyone's opinion holds equal weight, no matter how atrocious it may seem to be.

Lewis responds by appealing to natural law, or the *Tao*. He defines the *Tao* as "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others are really false" (p. 29). He admits that emotions may defy logic, but they can still align or fail to align with reason. The *Tao* applies universally and transcends cultures; Lewis points to its existence in

Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Judeo-Christian religions, and Oriental culture (pp. 27-28). It is to emphasize this that he uses the Chinese term, the *Tao*.

At times, our instincts on a particular issue may war with one another, but when this occurs, the *Tao* provides an objective standard from which we can make a right judgment (Edwards, 2007). The *Tao* gives us convictions, a bridge between our head or intellect and our heart of passion (Lewis, 1947, pp. 33-35). Subjectivism severs this bridge. By “debunking” our emotions, it holds them hostage, trapped at the level of our heart and unable to guide the intellect.

In *Abolition*, Lewis focuses on the *Tao*'s purpose in education and in defining personhood. From the first mention of the *Tao*, he states, “the task is to train in the pupil those responses which in themselves are appropriate” (p.31). Older generations pass on the standards to younger ones, developing their convictions so that when ethical and moral issues arise, they have sentiments congruent with true reality. Today, Louis Markos points out that while current education claims to have broken free from the absolute standards of the *Tao*, they have really taken and inflated three of its values: tolerance, egalitarianism, and environmentalism (2010, p. 104). I agree with Markos, and have seen how the current culture embraces “tolerance” as its mantra. In regards to personhood, when subjectivism erases the definitions of right and wrong, one loses touch with reality and cannot direct the intellect properly. Lewis points out how “I want” becomes the motivator; we blindly follow our impulses, and (in his words) our stomach, the beastly part of our nature (pp.78-79). This destroys a part of our humanity. The *Tao* curbs the selfish impulse, channeling the “I want” statements into “I should instead do this, because it is right.” Beyond that, without the absolute values of the *Tao*, one must devise one's own standards

of humanity. In a fallen world, this arbitrary definition cannot take into account the intrinsic value of human life.

Having established the importance of the *Tao* to our very existence, I would like to look at its impact in one particular arena: femininity. Biologically and in their fundamental roles, a distinct difference exists between males and females. Traditionally, the role of females includes creating beauty, order, and grace. Beauty has objective value within the *Tao*, as it accurately reflects our perception of genuine reality (Tallon, 2008, p.199). When one steps outside the *Tao*, “lest any voices or forms of self-expression be stifled, all traditional standards of beauty are debunked; in order that those lacking imagination not be made to feel any lesser, such emotions as wonder, awe and reverence are consistently deflated” (Markos, 2010, p.104). The feminist movement in modern society rejects the *Tao*, and inadvertently has degraded the definition of feminine beauty that once inspired and nurtured women.

The *Tao* gives values to a woman’s work of creating a beautiful, well-ordered home and possessing a gentle and quite spirit. Historically the culture has often denied this outright, by withholding women’s autonomy and reducing them to the mere property of men. But in recent years, a more subtle usurpation of *Tao* has dominated the feminist movement. While feminists grant women the status of independent humans, they deny any difference between the genders, and thus deny the value of a woman’s intrinsic role in creating beauty and grace around her. Instead, this movement beckons women to leave the confines of the kitchen and the shackles of the home, and to go forth with a roar and conquer the world. They scream to women, “Take control of *your* destiny, empower *yourself*, and live the life *you* want to.”

The modern feminist movement finds its basis in “I want,” the very same base impulse that the *Tao* seeks to rise above. Then it finds the audacity to scoff at women who live within the *Tao*, who choose not to become power moguls, who choose to bring warmth and life to others, who choose not to eke out a mean little existence, selfishly living for the “I want.” The *Tao* gives value to women who choose to pour themselves into the lives of others with serenity and grace.

Please note: I do not claim that a women’s value in life comes from only her home, her husband, and her children. The objective values of beauty, grace, and serenity (ideally) ought to flow out of a lady wherever life takes her. Dr. Joy Fagan exemplifies this. A university professor and activist volunteer, she lives outside the conventional roles of wife and mother, and embraces her feminine role as defined by the *Tao*.

This struck me as I walked around Safe Harbor house. The ministry, which will open soon, will serve women who need a safe place, support, and time to reshape their broken lives. Dr. Fagan does not stop at just building a house so these women can have “a good roof over their heads.” Instead, she fills it with little touches that transform a mere building into a beautiful home. This serene backdrop provides a warm and beautiful environment; it tells hurting women that they have intrinsic beauty and value. In this way, it helps the process of healing.

Elizabeth Elliot has said that “The way we live and behave ought to have some congruence with the fundamental order of the universe . . . it has, until very recently, seemed incongruous for women to lead and men to follow” (1984, p. 109). She, like Lewis, adheres to natural law, the idea that the universe has set certain rules in motion and people generally follow them. I love that they both use the same language, the thought of our lives holding “congruency” with the created order, or *Tao*. In this discussion, I have attempted to look at just one facet of the

Tao. It gives value to the specific roles of both men and women in society. The present pressure of subjectivism tries to dismiss these roles, and it incarnates itself in the extreme feminist movement. While we must understand and embrace the other virtues in the *Tao* (those of honor, fidelity, benevolence, etc.), we must also recognize that there are certain God-given abilities specific to our gender.

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