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## The *Tao*: A Philosophical Explanation for Mental Health? Commentary on Hu & Kirkegaard (2026)

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*No doubt those who really founded modern science were usually those whose love of truth exceeded their love of power.*

– C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1943, p. 29)

Hu & Kirkegaard (2026) present a study of ironic framing and findings. For some time, social psychology has presented conservatism and its correlates—be it personality, behavior, or motivations—as the deviation from the (left-wing) norm and requiring explanation. Examples have spanned right-wing authoritarianism (most notoriously) and disgust sensitivity to risk aversion and close-mindedness (Elad-Strenger, Proch, & Kessler, 2020; Proulx & Brandt, 2017). While some studies explain both conservatives and liberals even-handedly (e.g., Brandt et al., 2014; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), unsurprisingly, many could walk away from a review of social and political psychology with pejorative views on conservatives.

In the current target article, liberals are receive the out-group treatment, even if unintentionally so. Hu & Kirkegaard (2026) find that despite concerted efforts to control for extraneous factors (e.g., measurement bias) and by avoiding use of weaker proxies for mental health (Schaffner, 2025), mental illness predicts left-wing ideology. Here, I will suggest some reasons conservatives may be less susceptible to mental illness and then make the case for why (non-partisan, non-ideological) traditional morality or natural law—labeled as ‘the Tao,’ by C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*—may be the progenitor of psychosocial wellbeing as well. I will present what a psychology may have to gain from this seminal text. Of note, this commentary speaks to documented and hypothesized group-level differences, while recognizing that such comparisons do not characterize all conservatives or all liberals and that there may be many other reasons why liberals are less anxious and happier than conservatives too.

**Why Conservatives are Happier and Less Anxious**

### ***Personality Traits***

Liberals and conservatives differ regarding prevalence of certain well-documented personality features. These include liberals as more open to experience and conservatives as more conscientious (Carney et al, 2008). Relatedly, conservatives are more likely than liberals to possess an internal locus of control (Levenson & Miller, 1976; Sweetser, 2013), or sense of personal control over one's life circumstances. While people who take responsibility for failures may experience dysphoria—especially if they take responsibility for problems beyond their personal control—an internal locus of control is associated with mental health benefits (Farnier et al., 2021; Cramped et al., 2021; Sigurvinsdottir et al., 2020). Similarly, conscientiousness is associated with numerous positive long-term outcomes (Wilmot & Ones, 2019) including health and happiness (Jackson & Hill, 2021). Wellbeing need not be tethered to what others do or external forces but instead to what is within one's own volitional control. This focal shift promotes self-efficacy and mastery, which opens opportunities for desired changes.

### ***Parental Influence***

Sociopolitical attitudes and values (SPAVs) are influenced by family of origin (Fraley et al., 2012), and conservative values are correlated with authoritative parenting, which is defined as 'high expectation-high love' (Masud et al., 2019). The authoritative parenting style is associated with the development of confidence, responsibility, and self-regulation in children (Masud et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2007), making for psychologically healthier adults with secure interpersonal attachments in one's community and hopefully across generations. Additionally, conservatives are more likely to experience stable marriages (Wilcox & Menon, 2017), and married, stable households predict a myriad of positive long-term outcomes in children (e.g., Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). These life style choices appear to reinforce values, such that couples are more likely to become politically conservative when they have children (Kerry et al., 2022).

### ***Age (and Life Experience and Satisfaction)***

Though political attitudes tend to remain stable over time, reflecting their essentialist characteristic (Redding & Cobb, 2023), when political attitude and values do shift, they are more likely to become more conservative (Peterson, Smith, & Hibbing, 2020). And X and X ( ) found a positive association between age and conservatism. Additionally, older adults tend to report greater life satisfaction and contentment (Helliwell et al., 2024), undermining prevalent negative preconceptions about age and quality of life.

### ***Moral Foundations***

Moral foundations theory research indicates that conservatives and liberals weigh the same core values differently, with conservatives esteeming a broader set of values (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). While equality/fairness and care/harm are salient to liberals, conservatives also value purity/sanctity, authority/respect, and ingroup/loyalty to similar degrees. Thus conservatives may engage more complex perspectives to guide relationships and decision-making. Conservatives' additional values may provide greater glue within communities by inculcating depth of affinity, layered commonalities (e.g., within communities of faith), and a natural interdependence and fidelity (or duty) to one's neighbor and extended kin. Some contrary research suggests that moral foundations may better predict attitudes rather than moral convictions (Teas et al., 2024), and, at times, some moral values are shared by conservatives and

liberals similarly: harm (Schien & Gray, 2015) and loyalty (Day et al., 2014). Nonetheless, conservatism tends to be associated with ‘binding’ values and liberalism with ‘individualizing’ values (Day et al., 2014; Voelkle & Brandt, 2018).

### **Religiosity**

Conservatives are considerably more religious than liberals (Caprara et al., 2018), and religiosity is associated with numerous physical and psychological health benefits (Koenig, VanderWeele, & Peteet, 2023; Shattuck & Muehlenbein, 2020; Yaden et al., 2022). While non-specific and individual spirituality entails transcendental features and practices (e.g., meditation), religious affiliation entails involvement in cohesive communities. Involvement in religious communities tends to ensure a social infrastructure that supports members in need, and religious doctrines, functioning as a ‘north star,’ promote personal and communal faith and mastery over temporal impulses and hedonistic instincts. While modern culture recommends ‘self-expression’ and ‘finding oneself’—self-centered, fleeting, and nebulous—religion encourages members to live for a higher purpose and promote development of character and virtues that also benefit those around the individual, thus creating a positive feedback loop and wellbeing both individual and community. To be sure, there are numerous negative implications associated with religiosity (e.g., Ellis et al., 2022), but, in sum, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages considerably (Koenig et al., 2023).

### **Fundamental Philosophical Differences?**

Competing hypotheses, such as the “political group conflict hypothesis” (Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014) and “moral divide hypothesis” (Day et al., 2014), seek to explain whether fundamental differences exist or whether the political binary at least partially results from arbitrary policy positions dictated by ingroup loyalties and outgroup animosities. Yet, Hu & Kirkegaard’s (2026) study suggests marked differences between conservatives and liberals. Furthermore, there are arguments not only for temperamental differences between conservatives and liberals but also for fundamental philosophical differences whether Platonic vs. Aristotelian (Walsh 2023) or “constrained vs. unconstrained visions” (Sowell, 2007).

Many philosophies and political ideologies could be evaluated for their relevance to psychological wellbeing. Stoicism, for example, was foundational to the work of Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck and related to ‘third wave’ psychotherapy (Cavanna, 2019; Karl et al., 2022; Kelly, 2021; Taibbi, 2019). Here, I will examine such a difference and make a case for underlying values differences through the proposed framework in *The Abolition of Man* by C. S. Lewis (1943).

### **A Case for Moral Foundations: The Green Book vs. the *Tao***

C. S. Lewis’ (1943) *Abolition of Man* is a brief text (3 chapters—originally presented as lectures), beginning with an anecdote and flourishing into a philosophical treatise. Lewis presents the concept of The Green Book that he contrasts with the *Tao* as fundamentally mutually exclusive worldviews resulting in respective downstream behavioral implications. The former reflects the belief that perceptions—and therefore values—are subjective. Modern day phrases such as “my truth” and “lived experience” are examples. Whereas the *Tao* is

[...] the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are. Those

who know the *Tao* can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which demands a certain response from us whether we make it or not. (p. 6)

Lewis demonstrates how the *Tao* is derived from numerous moral principles, as presented in the appendix—a compilation of ethical writings from ancient cultures (e.g., Jewish, Christian, Babylonian, Greek, Chinese, etc.). Lewis (1943) maintains that only the *Tao* ensures a “common human law” that provides authority over a populus and its leaders alike: “A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery” (p. 28).

Lewis contends that The Green Book comprises other make-shift ideologies that ultimately fall flat in response to philosophical critique (e.g., progressivism, feminism, utilitarianism) and dehumanization due to their inability to recognize or properly define an ultimate good (e.g., ‘progress’ towards what end?). Furthermore, with The Green Book, professed mastery over ‘Nature’ is merely reflective of one group’s power wielded over others (current examples including assistive reproductive technologies and AI), even over the generations yet to come. In other words, under the Green Book’s rule, future generations are dependent upon the whims and preferences of those living subjectivists who demonstrate little concern for their progeny, particularly more than one generation removed, and simultaneous little concern for the wisdom of their ancestors.

Could it be that prototypic political conservatism (and classical liberalism), given its built-in orientation towards objective reality, natural law, and traditional values, tends to correlate with the *Tao*, whereas progressivism tends to characterize modern liberalism? Perhaps, regardless of location on the political continuum, those who accept certain truths as self-evident and recognize objective values are psychologically healthier?

### **The Problems with The Green Book Subjectivism**

The Green Book refers to the rejection of the *Tao*—a rejection of or effort to ‘debunk’ traditional values or “the parasitic growth of emotion, religious sanction, and inherited taboos, in order that ‘real’ or ‘basic’ values may emerge” (p. 11). In other words, when “‘It is good’ has been debunked, what says “I want” remains” (p. 25). For Lewis, the inability to rely on objective reality, self-evident truth, and morality—thus inconsistent regard for fundamental values—results in reliance upon ‘natural’ impulses and ultimate rejection of value altogether. Without a hierarchical value system, people are governed by competing impulses and lack clarity about which to obey at any given time. As Lewis (1943) notes:

What is absurd is to claim that your care for posterity finds its justification in instinct and then flout at every turn the only instinct on which it could be supposed to rest, tearing the child almost from the breast to creche and kindergarten in the interests of progress and the coming race. (p. 14)

In other words, a proponent of the Green Book, or moral relativism, may agree about the importance of posterity and helping the next generation(s) but will likely do so based on instinct and modern reason. For aforementioned reasons, this can result in setting aside other values that exist alongside posterity, thereby acting upon some values found in the *Tao* while ignoring

others. Lewis (1943) goes on to say,

Once more, he is in fact deriving it from the *Tao*: a duty to our own kin, because they are our own kin, is a part of traditional morality. But side by side with it in the *Tao*, and limiting it, lie the inflexible demands of justice, and the rule that, in the long run, all men are our brothers. Whence comes the Innovator's authority to pick and choose? (p. 16)

Once again, the Green Book's moral relativism (or inconsistent regard for objective morality) results in incoherence. Lewis (1943) describes the incoherence of numerous unintentional self-refutations: "[...] we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible [...] We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst" (p. 8). In another example of internal contradiction, respect and care are supposedly esteemed, but chivalry is condemned. Some virtues are valued, but others of equal importance are not. For example, mercy and care of the vulnerable might be valued but not justice or fidelity. Ultimately, all virtues are rendered impossible by the negation of their objective value.

### ***The Tao and Conservatism***

Lewis minces no words regarding the significance of the *Tao*, as a necessary foundation for morality, to the exclusion of other possibilities. The *Tao*, he states, is:

the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems of [...] 'ideologies', all consist of fragments from the *Tao* itself. [...] If my duty to my parents is a superstition, then so is my duty to posterity. If justice is a superstition, then so is my duty to my country or my race. If the pursuit of scientific knowledge is a real value, then so is conjugal fidelity. [...] The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in. (Lewis, 1943, p. 16)

The *Tao* challenges people to reach beyond mere instinct, self-preservation, and hedonism and to adopt higher order and self-evident values that contribute to social cohesion and human flourishing (e.g., family/kinship, fidelity/loyalty, freedom and responsibility, honor, justice). The *Tao* presupposes a shared reality and thus provides a shared language. Lewis claims that even values that subscribers of the Green Book use to attack the *Tao* are ultimately and inevitably rooted in the *Tao*. He also asserts that these values founded in natural law are self-evident. Lewis (1943) advises that "an ought must not be dismissed because it cannot produce some is as its credential. If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved. Similarly if nothing is obligatory for its own sake, nothing is obligatory at all" (p. 15).

### ***What the Tao Offers Mental Health***

**Self-Control (and Internal Locus of Control).** Mastery over one's impulses—a sign of emotional maturation—is only possible when one is oriented to objective truth and morality. Outside of the *Tao*, subjectivity results in reliance upon these acts governed by reasoned will, which in turn subjugates people to externalities and dehumanizes them. Lewis (1943) states, "While we speak from within the *Tao* we can speak of Man having power over himself in a sense truly analogous

to an individual's self-control" (p. 28).

**Emotional Regulation.** Reminiscent of Stoicism and Dialectical Behavioral Theory, Lewis presents the concept of 'the head' (reason or intelligence), 'the belly' (appetite or desire), and 'the chest' (properly trained emotions or will). He alleges that the Green Book leaves reason ('the head') and appetite ('the belly') poorly guided without the well-developed emotions or will ('the chest'). Thus, its value judgments suffer, reason and/or impulse prevail. The propensity to dismiss first principles as illusory, per 'the head' (e.g., honoring one's parents as mere evolutionary instinct) and to be driven by self-centered desires ('the stomach') erode without clarity of thought. Ongoing unbridled self-expression, self-focus, and rumination, have negative mental health implications (Coleman et al., 2021; Moberly & Watkins, 2008; Moon et al., 2016), reflects the motivations of 'the stomach.' In contrast, diverting attention away from excessive navel-gazing and towards higher order values and other people helps to master emotional regulation (Chen et al., 2017; Gabínio, Veras, & Kahn, 2016).

**Connection to Meaning and Virtue.** Moral relativism, because of its incoherence when drawn to logical conclusions, is disorienting and destabilizing. Moral relativism atomizes individuals and erodes a sense of common knowledge and communication—we need only imagine how ineffective doctors would be if diagnostic labels were subjectively defined. Furthermore, moral relativism undermines cultivation of inherently desired virtues that are of benefit to the person in possession of them, as well as the broader community. Whereas grounding attitudes and emotions in objective truth—from which purpose can be derived—supports psychological stability and human flourishing.

### Implications for Education and Science

#### *The Tao in Political Psychology Research?*

While group affiliation entails at least some inevitable degree of tribalism, perhaps the Green Book vs. *Tao* distinction can help psychological science elucidate differences across the political spectrum. It is speculated here that the *Tao* has connections to modern political conservatism, but even if further study reveals differences, it could help illuminate the field.

#### *A Need for 'the Chest' in Science*

The whole person requires 'the mind,' 'the chest,' and 'the stomach,' and particularly the absence or negation of 'the chest' dehumanizes people, ultimately resulting in their abolition. Yet, in speaking about educators, Lewis (1943) notes,

They probably have some vague notion [...] that valour and good faith and justice could be sufficiently commended to the pupil on what they would call 'rational' or 'biological' or 'modern' grounds, if it should even become necessary. In the meantime, they leave the matter alone and get on with the business of debunking. (p. 8)

Can science, especially in the milieu of morally relative political activism, abide by objective truth and morality and appreciate natural law (i.e., engagement of 'the chest') as a set of moral foundations that need not be falsified? Without them, there would be no need to falsify anything else because "If you see through everything [including first principles], then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is

the same as not to see” (Lewis, 1943, p. 30). Preserved assumptions of objective truth will also serve to protect the sciences from trending ideological and political movements and biases that can foster competing subjectivism.

### ***Technological Advances that Threaten to Abolish Man***

Scientists, often those who self-profess care for the marginalized and the voiceless, may be unaware that many of our modern, progressive technological advances they are advocating and/or helping to create are forms of power exerted over those these scientists seek to emancipate. Regarding such power, that allegedly frees people from tradition, Lewis (1943) states,

[I]f any one age really attains, by eugenics and scientific education, the power to make its descendants what it pleases, all men who live after it are the patients of that power. [...] And if, as is almost certain, the age which had thus attained maximum power over posterity were also the age most emancipated from tradition, it would be engaged in reducing the power of its predecessors almost as drastically as that of its successor. [...] Each new power won by man is a power over man as well (p. 23).

The inadvertent effect of such decisions is a form of oppression otherwise disdained by those who make them. In the name of freedom and self-actualization belonging to the living, the needs and welfare of those to be born hardly registers. This is most evident in but not unique to assistive reproductive technologies (i.e., creating people often alienated from their biological kin be it via donor of sperm or egg, or now entirely via stem cell). Here, the desires for parenthood of the powerful are asserted over the powerless others’ ability to acquire the most basic ingredients needed for a healthy identity formation, particularly despite known information about biological kinship (Avni et al., 2023; Debowska, Hales, & Boduszek, 2021; Richards, 2015; Sherr, Roberts, & Croome, 2017). Over 80 years ago Lewis accurately foretold, “Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man. The battle will then be won. [...] and [we will be] henceforth free to make our species whatever we wish it to be” (p. 24).

### **Conclusion: Take Away for Psychology**

Psychology has a tenuous relationship with objective truth – openly rejecting the *Tao* while adopting some but not all of its values (e.g., justice, equality, freedom, magnanimity). For example, words like “adaptive”, “healthy”, “functional”, and their iterations, are all popular in psychology by making provisional claims about what is more or less preferable or merited. Yet, many other values are wholeheartedly relativized, depleting the profession’s ability to orient to what is true and good. During a graduate program interview at a university in the Northeast well over a decade ago, a faculty member asked this author about a hypothetical client, “What would you say to someone who does not value family?” Presumably, the desired response would not convey belief in axiomatic value of family and possible moral deficiency of the client. Will psychology seek to regain its ‘chest’?

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