

C. S. Lewis: The Problem of Pain JACEK BACZ

The existence of suffering in a world created by a good and almighty God — "the problem of pain" — is a fundamental theological dilemma, and perhaps the most serious objection to the Christian religion.

Known to his readers as a philosopher, a Christian apologist, a science fiction writer, an author of children's stories and a literary critic, C. S. Lewis has also been introduced to the general public as a romantic sufferer. In *Shadowlands*, movie audiences around the world watch a refined, upper-middle aged Oxford fellow theorize on pain, fall in late love with a witty, slightly annoying American divorcee with two children, and go through the agony of grief after her death. Whatever it takes to speculate on pain, it takes a lot more, it seems, to live it. And it takes C. S. Lewis to write competently on both.



C.S. Lewis
(1898-1963)

Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1898, of an Irish mother and a Welsh father, Clive Staples Lewis served as a Fellow and Tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford for more than thirty years. Yet, the Oxford establishment was slow to catch up with the fame of the author of "that Christian stuff", and, in 1954, Lewis accepted a Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, where he worked until his death on 22nd November 1963.

Young Clive Staples was gifted with a lucid mind, a fact not fully manifest until his adult years. Still, at the age of four he properly discerned that people had names and declared he would rather be called 'Jack'. As Jack grew older, not unnaturally, he began to lose his never-robust Christian faith, a process set in motion by an early death of his mother and completed under the influence of his tutor, W. T. Kirkpatrick, a brilliant and compelling atheist logician. All through his twenties Lewis remained an informed and committed atheist. Then, at the age of 31, as he explains in his autobiography, he converted to Christianity: "In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; that night a most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."¹ The conversion experience helped him understand not only religious indifference but also obstinacy in disbelief. "Who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape?"²

Inspired by the faith, armed with Kirkpatrick's logic and his own natural lucidity, Lewis went public with his Christianity, producing a series of masterpieces in Christian apologetics, remarkable in that normal people can understand them. *The*

Problem of Pain, The Abolition of Man, Miracles, Mere Christianity, The Screwtape Letters, The Great Divorce — written in the "spare time" between his Oxford tutorials — fully engage modernity and, for that reason, strike a cord with all those who share modernist assumptions (that is, with almost everybody). Through these works Lewis came to be known as a formidable defender of Christianity, capable of grasping with impressive clarity the meaning of modern times, that "failed promise of the Enlightenment".

The Problem of Pain, the first of a series of popular works on Christian doctrine, was written in 1940, twenty years before his beloved wife, Joy Davidman, died of cancer in the third year of their short-lived marriage. In the book Lewis considers the problem of suffering from a purely theoretical standpoint. Years later, struck with a daunting grief of a mourning husband he will write another classic on pain, a masterpiece of introspection: *A Grief Observed*. It takes courage to live through suffering; and it takes honesty to observe it. C. S. Lewis had both.



The existence of suffering in a world created by a good and almighty God — "the problem of pain" — is a fundamental theological dilemma and perhaps the most serious objection to the Christian religion. The issue is serious enough already in Theism. Christianity aggravates the problem by insisting on Love as the essence of God; then, unexpectedly, it makes a half turn and points to the Mystery of suffering — to Jesus, "the tears of God."³ Lewis does not propose to penetrate the mystery. He is content enough with approaching pain as mere problem that demands a solution; he formulates it and goes about solving it. "If God were good, He would make His creatures perfectly happy, and if He were almighty He would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."⁴ With a characteristic conciseness and clarity Lewis sets the stage for the entire book in the first paragraph of Chapter 2. "The possibility of solving [the problem] depends on showing that the terms 'good' and 'almighty', and perhaps also the term 'happy', are equivocal: for it must be admitted from the outset that if the popular meanings attached to these words are the best, or the only possible, meaning, then the argument is unanswerable". In the remaining nine chapters, Lewis will develop this basic statement through an in-depth reflection on divine omnipotence, divine goodness, human condition, human and animal pain, and last, but not least, hell and heaven.

The main argument of *The Problem of Pain* is preceded by a presentation of an atheist objection to the existence of God based on the observable futility of the universe. The book starts on a personal note: "Not many years ago when I was an atheist ... ". There follows a compelling picture of a universe filled with futility and chance, darkness and cold, misery and suffering; a spectacle of civilizations passing away, of human race scientifically condemned to a final doom and of a universe bound to die. Thus, "either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit". On the other hand, "if the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator? [...] The spectacle of the universe as revealed by experience can never have been ground for religion: it must always have been something in spite of which religion, acquired from a different source, was held". But, where should we look for the sources?

The "experience of the Numinous", a special kind of fear which excites awe, exemplified by, but not limited to, fear of the dead, yet going beyond mere dread or danger, is the first source; the other is the moral experience; and both "cannot be the result of inference from the visible universe" for nothing in the visible universe suggests them. Likewise, the identification of the Numinous with the Moral, "when the Numinous Power to which [men] feel awe is made the guardian of the morality to which they feel obligation" — a choice made by the Jews — must be viewed as utterly "unnatural" and very much unlike mere wish fulfillment, for "we desire nothing less than to see that Law whose naked authority is already insupportable armed with the incalculable claims of the Numinous". In Christianity, a historical component is added: an extraordinary man walking about in Palestine, claiming to be "one with" the Numinous and the Moral. Lewis develops a theme from Chesterton⁵, the stupefying argument for the divinity of Jesus. "Either He was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was, and is, precisely what He said". Many regard Jesus as a holy man, a wise teacher: a thoroughly good man. Yet, this is precisely what cannot be held about him: sooner a lunatic or a deceiver than a mere good man — or else God himself. *Aut Deus, aut homo malus*.⁶

After this accelerated tour from atheism to Christianity, Lewis is ready for his main argument. He starts with God Almighty. What is the meaning of God's Omnipotence? Can he do whatever he pleases? Yes, except the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to him but not nonsense: "Nonsense remains nonsense even if we talk it about God." Probing further into Divine Omnipotence, Lewis builds up a universe of his own: a universe in which free *souls*, or perhaps, as we might say today, *persons*, can communicate. In the process, he discovers that "not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and 'inexorable' Nature"; that a fixed nature of matter implies a possibility, though not a necessity, of evil and suffering, for "not all states of matter will be equally agreeable to the wishes of a given soul"; that souls, if they are free, may take advantage of the fixed laws of nature to hurt one another; that a "corrective" intervention by God in the laws of nature, which would remove the possibility — or the effect — of such abuse, while clearly imaginable, would eventually lead to a wholly meaningless universe, in which nothing important depended on man's choices. "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself". Thus, the universe as we know it might as well be a product of a wise and omnipotent Creator; it remains to be shown "how, perceiving a suffering world, and being assured, on quite different grounds, that God is good, we are to conceive that goodness and that suffering without a contradiction". An exploration of God's goodness might provide an answer.



God's idea of goodness is almost certainly unlike ours; yet, God's moral judgment must differ from ours "not as *white* from *black* but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel" — or we could mean nothing by calling him good. Thus, where God means Love, we only mean Kindness, "the desire to see others than self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy". We want "not so much a Father but a grandfather in heaven", a God "who said of anything we happened to like doing, 'What does it matter so long as they are contented?'" (Let us note in passing how much this confusion between Love and Kindness is akin to our modern thinking: it sheds light on many present controversies, from assisted suicide

to abortion to contraception.) But Love is not mere Kindness. "Kindness cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering", while Love "would rather see [the loved ones] suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes".

The goodness of God means that we are true objects of his love, not of his disinterested concern for our welfare. This aspect of God's love for man is greatly illuminated by the use of parallels from the Scripture. The reader is overwhelmed with the seducing beauty and grandeur of Lewis's imagery, as he develops the four scriptural analogies to explain the relation between the Creator and his creature: love of an artist for his artifact, love of a man for a beast, a father's love for a son, and a man's love for a woman. Every time an analogy is explored we stand in awe before the love so intense and deep; and we wonder "why any creatures, not to say creatures such as we, should have a value so prodigious in their Creator's eyes"; and we wish God loved us less. "You asked for a loving God: you have one. [...] The consuming fire that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes". We may wish for less love; but then we would dream an impossible dream. God is our only good. He gives "what he has, not what he has not; the happiness that there is, not the happiness that is not. If we will not learn to eat the only food that the universe grows — the only food that any possible universe ever can grow — then we must starve eternally."

The awareness of a distinction between Love and Kindness and the recognition of what it means to be the object of God's love make it easier to comprehend why Love is not incompatible with suffering. Because God loves us he will not rest until he sees us wholly lovable. From that perspective, the suffering of a creature in need of alteration is a mere corollary to God's goodness. Yet, the problem is that the perception of man's sinful condition, and hence of a real need for alteration — a thing obvious even to ancient pagans — has largely disappeared from the modern horizon, rendering the Christian call to repentance and conversion unintelligible. To talk to the modern man, Lewis insists, "Christianity now has to preach the diagnosis — in itself a very bad news — before it can win the hearing for the cure." He considers two modern developments that contributed to the rise of a belief in the original innocence: the reduction of all virtues to kindness ("nothing except kindness is really good"), and the effect of psychoanalysis on the public mind ("shame is dangerous and must be done away with"). "*Kindness*, he says, is a quality fatally easy to attribute to ourselves on quite inadequate grounds", for we can feel comfortably benevolent towards fellow men, as long as their good does not conflict with ours. He then considers in some detail the symptoms of man's wretchedness and brings us, step by step, to an inescapable conclusion: "We are, at present, creatures whose character must be, in some respects, a horror to God, as it is, when we really see it, a horror to ourselves." And at once we perceive a contradiction.



How could a bad creature have come from the hands of a good Creator? The Christian answer is that it did not: man, and the rest of creation, was initially good, but through the abuse of freedom, man made himself an abominable, wicked creature he now is. This doctrine, which finds no support in science — only in the Scripture, in the human heart and in newspapers — is particularly foreign to the

modern mind, which operates within a progressivist and materialistic paradigm. Lewis is aware of his reader's disposition; from the outset, he insists that "science has nothing to say for or against the doctrine of the Fall". Focusing his analysis on the meaning of the terms 'savage' and 'brute', he shows that the popular notion of a 'savage' needs correction: "The prehistoric men who made the worst pottery might have made the best poetry and we should never know it". Also, he shows, there is no reason why mere "brutality" (in the sense of "animality") of our remote ancestors should imply their moral wickedness. Thus, it is conceivable that the paradisaical man possessed goodness along with his natural 'savagery' and 'brutality'. He just may have been created good. He may have walked in God's will. And he may have chosen to walk out of it.

Scientific controversy out of the way, Lewis now gives his account of Creation and Fall; and an unsuspecting reader, who doubtless does not read St. Augustine, may be taken off-guard. For a modern mind desires nothing less than to see the "old Christian stuff", presumed dead for two hundred years, brought back to life; much less to comprehend that this is the very "stuff" that makes the whole Christian doctrine hang together. "The world is a dance in which good, descending from God, is disturbed by evil arising from the creatures, and the resulting conflict is resolved by God's own assumption of the suffering nature which evil produces. The doctrine of the Fall asserts that the evil which thus makes the fuel or raw material of the second and more complex kind of good is not God's contribution but man's". Now, in our time, the story of *Paradise Lost*, overly attacked from the outside and gradually diluted from the inside, has reached a peculiar status in the popular mind: because it is no longer meant literally, many imagine it is hardly meant at all. And no wonder; for the powerful biblical narrative that once fertilized the imagination — and thus appealed to the entire man, not only to his intellect — no longer operates on that level: an abstract truth may feed a theologian; a man in the street will starve. Ever aware of modern sensibilities, Lewis reclothes the abstraction; he gives the imagination the food it has been craving for; he restores drama, greatness and amazement;⁷ and, horror of horrors, he makes it all seem so dangerously plausible. The entire book may be worth reading if only to discover that the good old original sin is alive and well: "We are not merely imperfect creatures that need improvement: we are rebels that need lay down their arms".



At this point in the argument, pain, no longer incompatible with God's Goodness and Omnipotence, becomes to be seen as God's way of accommodating the freedom of a rebel creature. We have seen that in a stable and meaningful universe a possibility of pain is inherent; and in a universe of creatures, inclined, by virtue of their fallen nature, to move away from God, evil becomes, so to speak, endemic. Yet, God is in charge; he supervises the circulation of good and evil; and He does it in a way that satisfies his Goodness, that is, with total respect for man's freedom. Let Lewis speak. "In the fallen and partially redeemed universe we may distinguish (1) the simple good descending from God, (2) the simple evil produced by rebellious creatures, and (3) the exploitation of that evil by God for His redemptive purpose, which produces (4) the complex good to which accepted suffering and repented sin contribute. [...] A merciful man aims at his neighbour's good as so does 'God's' will, consciously co-operating with 'the simple good'. A cruel man oppresses his neighbour and so does simple evil. But in doing such evil he is used by God, without his knowledge or consent, to produce the complex good — so that the first man serves God as a son,

and the second as a tool. For you will certainly carry out God's purpose, however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you serve like Judas or like John". For Lewis, this divine design is a "tribulation system", and he explains how pain operates within it.

The proper good of a creature is to surrender to its Creator. However, the human spirit, hardened through "millennia of usurpation", will not "even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it." Thus, the function of pain, on the lowest level, is to shatter the illusion that "all is well", to plant "the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul". "We may rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities", but "pain insists on being attended to"; and, if Lewis was writing today he might add: "it cannot be deconstructed". On a higher level, pain shatters yet another illusion: that we are self-sufficient; that all we have is our own doing. This is perhaps where pain, when it afflicts "honest and decent people", seems most cruel and undeserved. But Lewis calls it a sign of "divine humility": it is "a poor thing to come to [God] as a last resort, to offer up 'our own' when it is no longer worth keeping. [...] If God were a Kantian, who would not have us till we came to Him from the purest and best motives, who could be saved?" On the highest level, pain, through trials and sacrifices, teaches true self-sufficiency: to rely on God, to act out of heavenly strength, out of a purely supernatural motive. When man acts in this way he becomes a co-creator with God: "Human will becomes truly creative and truly our own when it is wholly God's, and this is one of the many senses in which he that loses his soul shall find it."

Thus, the ordinary function of pain within the tribulation system is to make a creature's submission to the will of God easier. Lest it should seem a justification of pain, Lewis clarifies: "Pain hurts. That is what the word means. I am only trying to show that the old Christian doctrine of being made perfect through suffering is not incredible. To prove it palatable is beyond my design." Alas, pain may also lead to a refusal of God and to a final, unrepented rebellion. Lewis does not shrink from considering this dreadful possibility. Conscious of modern disgust with the idea of eternal damnation, he examines common objections to the Christian doctrine of hell and shows that it is both logical and moral.



A Christian reflection on pain must end with a vision of heaven, the true end and home of humanity. Citing St. Paul, Lewis contrasts the "suffering of the present time" with the glory of heaven; but he insists that heaven is not a bribe, for it "offers nothing that a mercenary soul could desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to"(!). Lewis makes us desire heaven; he even claims that, in our heart of hearts, we have never desired anything else. "God will look to every soul like its first love because He is its first love". And every soul is unique: "Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you alone, because you were made for it." In heaven, unique souls reflect for one another some aspect of Divinity, which each was made to contemplate. The pattern of self-giving is the essence of heaven, as it is, the very core of reality: "For in self-giving, if anywhere, we touch a rhythm [...] of all being. [...] From the highest to the lowest, self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes the more truly self. [...] This is not a heavenly law which we can escape by remaining earthly, nor an earthly law which we can escape by being saved. What is outside the system of self-giving is not earth, nor nature, nor 'ordinary life', but simply and solely hell".

In *The Problem of Pain*, published in 1940, Lewis offered the reader this overly humble confession: "You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it. You need not guess for I will tell you; I am a great coward." In a letter to his brother Warnie, written while working on the book, he claimed: "If you are writing a book about pain and then you get some actual pain [...] it does *not* either, as the cynic would expect, blow the doctrine to bits, nor, as a Christian would hope, turn into practice, but remains quite unconnected and irrelevant, just as any other bit of actual life does when you are reading or writing."⁸ Neither the confession nor the claim stood the test of time. In 1961, Lewis wrote about pain again, this time about his own. In *A Grief Observed* he satisfied, albeit inadvertently, the alleged curiosity of his readers. But he did not come across as a coward; nor did his firm grasp of "a theory of suffering" prove altogether irrelevant. True, his faith in God was challenged; he uttered blasphemies; he doubted God's existence; worst of all, he went through the very objections to God's goodness which he had refuted in *The Problem of Pain*: they all seemed valid to a disabled mind, under the sway of unbearable pain. But then, reason returned: "Why do I make room in my mind for such filth and nonsense? Do I hope that if feeling disguises itself as thought I shall feel less?"⁹

When feeling disguises itself as thought, all nonsense is possible. Nowhere is it truer than in the problem of pain. Yet, from the Christian perspective, anything that can reasonably be said about suffering is only a preamble to the Mystery of the Cross. Lewis's solution to "the problem of pain" prepares the intellect for a dive into the Mystery.



Endnotes:

1. C. S. Lewis: *Surprised by Joy*.
2. *Ibid*.
3. For a Christian analysis of suffering as mystery, see Peter Kreeft: *Making Sense out of Suffering*.
4. Unreferenced quotations are from C. S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*.
5. G. K. Chesterton: *The Everlasting Man*.
6. For a systematic development of Lewis's argument see Peter Kreeft: *Between Heaven and Hell*. The souls of C. S. Lewis, J. F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley, who all died on the same day of November 22nd 1963, argue about Jesus' divinity while awaiting judgment.
7. For a dramatization of the narrative of the Fall and an insight into the psyche of the unfallen creature see C. S. Lewis's novel *Perelandra*.
8. Walter Hooper: *C. S. Lewis, A Companion and Guide*.
9. C. S. Lewis: *A Grief Observed*.



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