

The Problem of Pain (1940)

C. S. Lewis

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.

All through his twenties Lewis was an informed yet 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 his new faith, armed with his atheist tutor W. T. 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 “spare time” between his Oxford tutorials — fully engage modernity and, for that reason, strike a chord 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 died of cancer in the third year of their short-lived marriage. In his book though, 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 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. In Christianity, a historical component is added : an extraordinary man walking about in Palestine, claiming to be “*one with*” the Numinous. 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 wise and holy man, 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. 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 and 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 artefact, 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 man and woman”**. 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 and the effect of psychoanalysis on the public mind till today** : “*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*”.

Scientific controversy out of the way, Lewis now gives his account of **Creation and Fall** ; and an unsuspecting reader, who doubtless does not read Saint 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* 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 no longer operates on that level : **an abstract truth may feed a theologian but not the everyday man**. Ever aware of modern sensibilities, Lewis reclothes the abstraction ; he restores drama, greatness and amazement⁷ and, horror of horrors, he makes it all seem so dangerously plausible. The entire book may be worth reading if only to discover that good old original sin is alive and well : “*We are not merely imperfect creatures that need improvement : we are **rebels** ourselves.*”

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**. 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 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 a **complex good to which accepted suffering and repented sin contribute**." For instance, a merciful man who aims at his neighbour's good is consciously co-operating with a "*simple good*". A cruel man who oppresses his neighbour does "*simple evil*". But in doing such evil he is used by God, without his knowledge or consent, to produce the "**complex good**" : **The first man serves God as a son, and the second as a tool**. Both carry out God's purpose, 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 isn't inclined to surrender its self will as easily. Thus, the **function of pain** :

- On the lowest level, is to **shatter the illusion that "all is well" and 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. It is a **warning**.
- On a higher level, pain shatters yet another illusion : that we are **self-sufficient** ; that all we have is our own doing. It teaches us **humility**.
- On the highest level, pain, through trials and sacrifices, teaches **complete confidence** : 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.*"

Thus, the ordinary function of pain within the tribulation system is **to make a creature's submission to the will of God easier**. 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 disbelief in possible eternal damnation, he examines common objections to the Christian doctrine of Hell and shows that its existence is yet logical.

A Christian reflection on pain must end with a vision of Heaven, the true end and home of humanity. Citing Saint 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 : “*Self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes the more truly self. What is outside the system of self-giving is not earth, nor nature, nor ordinary life, but simply and solely Hell.*”

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 this Mystery...

End Notes :

1. C. S. Lewis : *Surprised by Joy*
2. For a Christian analysis of suffering as mystery, see **Peter Kreeft** : *Making Sense out of Suffering*
3. **G. K. Chesterton** : *The Everlasting Man*
4. 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.
5. 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*.
6. Walter Hooper : *C. S. Lewis, A Companion and Guide*
7. C. S. Lewis : *A Grief Observed*