

The Problem of Pain
C.S. Lewis

Overview of the Argument

Chapter 1:

I. The Big Idea:

- A. There is Pain on the earth
 - 1. In the natural world creatures prey upon one another
 - 2. In the natural world life is sustained through the death of other things
 - 3. Man has the capacity not only to feel pain, but to anticipate pain
 - 4. Philosophical fatalism abounds
 - i. Albert Camus (1913-1960)—“the only question modern man has left to answer is the question of suicide”
- B. Yet, if there is so much pain on the earth, why did human beings ever attribute creation to a benevolent creator?
 - 1. Note that dread & awe stemming from the created order are not physical qualities, but inferred from physical qualities
 - 2. Moral goodness/guilt is not result of cause & effect
 - 3. Men stand condemned of their moral failure regardless of their religious theology/philosophy
 - 4. You thus cannot write off moral teaching of Jesus, and if you accept his moral teaching you must accept his teaching about his divine being -“Either he was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was, and is, precisely what he said. There is no middle way. If the records make the first hypothesis unacceptable, you must submit to the second.” (13)
- C. The very fact that we have a good creator as God creates the problem of pain rather than solving it—were God other than good, as he describes himself, the question would never arise.

Chapter 2: Divine Omnipotence

Initial Problem: ““If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God 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.’ This is the problem of pain in its simplest form. “(16)

- A. This assumes that “goodness”, “happiness,” and “omnipotence” are defined the same for us as for God
- B. Meaning of Omnipotence
 - 1. God does not have the power to do anything
 - 2. God has the power to do anything that is consistent with his nature
 - a. God cannot be righteous and unrighteous at the same time—that would be nonsense

- b. law of non-contradiction
- c. the impossible/contradictions are not things but non-entities as they are impossible
- 3. Freedom for the creature implies that there is a choice
 - “their freedom is simply that of making a single naked choice—of loving God more than the self or the self more than God.” (20)
- 4. The Freedom of God consists in the fact that no cause other than Himself produces His acts and no external obstacle impedes them—that His own goodness is the root from which they all grow and his own omnipotence is the air in which they flower.” (27)

Chapter 3: Divine Goodness

Big Idea: God’s definition of Goodness must include human pain.

I. Problem: “If God is wiser than we His judgment must differ from ours on many things, and not least on good and evil. What seems to us good may therefore not be good in His eyes, and what seems to us evil may not be evil. On the other hand, if God’s moral judgment differs from ours so that our black may be His white, we can mean nothing by calling Him good; for to say, ‘God is Good,’ while asserting that His goodness is wholly other than ours, is really only to say, ‘God is we know not what.’”

A. The difficulty with equivocal and univocal language

- 1. Must use analogical language
- 2. our understanding of good and evil is neither the same as God’s nor is it wholly different—our understanding is derivative
- 3. Since God is our moral compass, there must then be a degree of agreement
- 4. “When the man of inferior moral standards enters the society of those who are better and wiser than he...[then he] gradually learns to accept their standards” (29)
- 5. “His idea of ‘goodness’ differs from ours; but you need have no fear that, as you approach it, you will be asked simply to reverse your moral standards” (30)

B. Man’s Idea of God’s Goodness

- 1. Understood in terms of God’s “lovingness”
 - a. Gumball machine analogy
 - b. *The Old Man and Mr. Smith*, by Peter Ustinov
- 2. Desire not for a Father in heaven, but for a senile grandfather
- 3. Kindness is more just giving escape from suffering
 - a. Euthanasia question

C. God’s concept for kindness

- 1. “It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children,

we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness.” (32-33)

2. The Dog and master analogy
 - a. training a dog takes hard discipline at first
 - b. trained dogs enjoy benefits that wild dogs do not
3. “We may wish, indeed, that we were of so little account to God that He left us alone to follow our natural impulses—that He would give over trying to train us into something so unlike our natural selves: but once again, we are asking not for more love, but less.” (36)
4. God is conforming us into the image of His Son
 - a. that requires suffering
5. “Love may forgive all infirmities and love still in spite of them: but love cannot cease to will their removal.” (39)

D. Our Response

1. “Our highest activity must be response, not initiative. To experience the love of God in a true, and not illusory form, is therefore to experience it as our surrender to His demand, our conformity to His desire: to experience it in the opposite way is, as it were, a solecism against the grammar of being.” (44)
2. “When we want to be something other than the thing that God wants us to be, we must be wanting what, in fact, will not make us happy. Those Divine demands which sound to our natural ears most like those of a despot and least like those of a lover, in fact marshal us where we should want to go if we knew what we wanted. He demands our worship, our obedience, our prostration...God wills our good, and our good is to love Him...and to love Him we must know Him: and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces.” (46)

Chapter 4: Human Wickedness

Big Idea: We must get to the source of the problem—the source is not God, but Man

- A. Problem is that we have had “human goodness” preached to us for generations
 - a. and we are wicked, not good, by nature
- B. We see God’s hand as one meddling in our lives
- C. “When we merely say that we are bad, the ‘wrath’ of God seems a barbarous doctrine; as soon as we perceive our badness, it appears inevitable, a mere corollary from God’s goodness.” (52)
- D. Undoing false beliefs
 1. We suppose ourselves not much worse than others
 2. domestic conceptions of morality
 3. illusion that time cancels sin
 4. the idea that there is safety in numbers

- E. Fact that moral beliefs contain basic consistencies regardless of background
 - 1. Zarathustra, Jeremiah, Socrates, Gautama, Christ, Marcus Aurelius
 - 2. all agree that man has problems and needs fixing
- F. Moral perfection of God
 - 1. some theologians deny necessity of this for judging humans
 - 2. “the road to the promised land runs past Sinai” (59)
- G. Note Lewis’ misunderstanding of the doctrine of Total Depravity
- H. “I have been trying to make the reader believe that we actually 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. This I believe to be a fact: and I notice that the holier a man is, the more fully he is aware of that fact.” (62)

Chapter 5: The Fall

Big Idea: Lewis’ Commentary on Genesis 3

- I. False views
 - A. Monism
 - B. Dualism
- II. Is it better to create than not to create?
- III. For Lewis the fall is more than disobedience, but contains deeper, more mystical truths
 - A. Lewis’ view on evolution and the Imago Dei in man
 - B. Man’s sin of pride
 - C. “They wanted, as we say, to ‘call their souls their own.’ But that means to live a lie, for our souls are not, in fact, our own. They wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, “This is our business, not yours.” (75)
 - D. Man was created to love and serve God, sin is a rejection of our most basic function
 - E. “Theoretically, I suppose, we might say ‘Yes: we behave like vermin, but then that is because we are vermin. And that, at any rate, is not our fault.’ But the fact that we are vermin, so far from being felt as an excuse, is a greater shame and grief to us than any of the particular acts which it leads us to commit. (81)
- IV. Conclusion:
 - “The thesis of this chapter is simply that man, as a species, spoiled himself, and that good, to us in our present state, must therefore mean primarily remedial or corrective good.”

Chapter 6: Human Pain (part 1)

The Big Idea: The value of pain is that it shatters our illusions.

- A. Two kinds of pain
 - 1. Physical sensation
 - 2. Anything that the patient might find distasteful.
- B. Life as imitation
 - 1. Jesus models the father to man
 - 2. Christians are to model Jesus to unbelievers
 - 3. “We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are, as Newman said, rebels who must lay down our arms. The first answer, then, to the question why our cure should be painful, is that to render back the will which we have so long claimed for our own, is in itself, wherever and however it is done, a grievous pain.” (88-89)
- C. Pain Shatters the Illusion that all is well
 - 1. “We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities; and anyone who has watched gluttons shoveling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating, will admit that we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists on being attended to. ***God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.***” (90-91)
- D. Pain shatters the illusion that we have all we need
 - 1. “Let me implore the reader to try to believe, if only for a moment, that God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when he thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched.” (95)
- E. Pain shatters the illusion of human divinity
 - 1. “the movement ‘full speed astern’ by which we retrace our long journey from paradise, the untying of the old, hard knot, must be when the creature, with no desire to aid it, stripped naked to the bare willing of obedience, embraces what is contrary to its nature, and does that for which only one motive is possible.” (100)
 - 2. God requires bare obedience from his creatures even if we do not understand the outcome
 - a. Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac
 - b. Job is never given an answer for why these tests were placed on him
 - 3. Pain teaches not that we are self sufficient, but that we have the sufficiency to trust in heaven

The Big Idea: Lewis deals with 6 propositions regarding pain

- A. There is a paradox in Christian teaching on suffering
 - 1. We are told blessed are those who are poor, but for the rich to give money to them to alleviate their poverty
 - 2. We are told blessed are those who are persecuted, but we find believers leaving a city to avoid persecution
 - 3. If these things are really a blessing, should not we be striving to be poor and persecuted? (“If suffering is good, ought it not be pursued rather than avoided?”)
 - 4. Lewis argues that pain is not a virtue in itself but a means to an end (sanctification)
- B. Tribulation is necessary in redemption
 - 1. genuine tribulation is different than masochistic acts
 - 2. Tribulation will always be here until God returns to judge
 - 3. the idea of a utopia, heaven on earth, is inconsistent thinking
- C. Church Doctrine of self-surrender and obedience is a theological, not a political doctrine
 - 1. government is incapable of bringing about or thwarting genuine Christianity
 - 2. the Church grows under the harshest persecution and grows lethargic and dies when apart from it
- D. The Christian doctrine of suffering explains about the world around us
 - 1. We desire settled happiness
 - 2. we do not find it in this world
 - 3. We are only given stabs of joy here and there, but not lasting
 - 4. the Remedy is Heaven, not earth—we are on a journey to Heaven
- E. We must never overestimate pain
 - 1. toothache analogy: pain x + pain x does not equal pain $2x$, but two of us share the pain x
- F. Of all the evils, pain is a sterilized or disinfected evil
 - 1. pain is different than sin—when sin is over one must go, repent of it, and make the offense right
 - 2. Pain is done with when it is done

Chapter 8: Hell

The Big Idea: Lewis refutes objections to the doctrine of Hell

- “I am not going to try to prove the doctrine tolerable. Let us make no mistake; it is not tolerable. But I think the doctrine can be shown to be moral, by a critique of the objections ordinarily made, or felt, against it.” (121)
- A. How can pain that does not lead to repentance be beneficial?
 - 1. Hell then is positive retribution for sin
 - 2. of the confirmed wicked sinner: “Can you really desire that such a man,

remaining what he is, should be confirmed forever in his present happiness—should continue for all eternity, to be perfectly convinced that the laugh is on his side? And if you cannot regard this as tolerable, is it only your wickedness—only spite—that prevents you from doing so? Or do you find that the conflict between Justice and Mercy, which has sometimes seemed to you such an outmoded piece of theology, now actually at work in your own mind, and feeling very much as if it came to you from above, not from below?” (123)

- B. Is there not a disproportion between transitory sin and eternal damnation
 - 1. sin in part spoils the whole
 - 2. we may be given a thousand chances to do right and will reject every one
- C. Are not the frightful images of hell just that, images meant to scare, and not reflective of the reality?
 - 1. True that they are images, but there is a concrete reason these images are chosen
 - 2. They are meant to reflect that which is unspeakably horrible because Hell is.
 - 3. Hell is spoken of as a place of punishing pain, destruction (not annihilation), and privation of good—don't overstate one at the expense of the others
 - 4. Lewis' view of Hell emphasizes the privation
 - “They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.” (130)

Chapter 9: Animal Pain

The Big Idea: How do we explain animal suffering?—an odd answer by Lewis

- A. Suffering for animals contains no moral dignity
- B. What kind of pain do animals suffer?
 - 1. varies depending on the animal, some more than others
 - 2. must be careful not to attribute suffering where there is none
- C. How did disease and pain enter the animal world
 - 1. through the fall of Satan
 - 2. views fall of Satan causing pain and suffering in animals long before Adam and Eve's fall
- D. How can animal suffering be reconciled with the Justice of God?
 - 1. mosquito heaven would be hell for man
 - 2. heaven and hell as a question are irrelevant as animals cannot understand the concepts only feel when pain begins and ceases

3. Justice is applied to man, not animals

Chapter 10: Heaven

The Big Idea: Heaven is the solution to the problem of pain

- A. Many object to heaven as a ‘pie in the sky’ doctrine—but there must be a basis for it, otherwise all of Christianity is false
- B. Many think of heaven as bribe for good behavior
 - “Again, we are afraid that heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. There are rewards that do not sully motives.” (149)
- C. “Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the Divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. For it is not humanity in the abstract that is to be saved, but you—you the individual reader, John Stubbs or Janet Smith.” (152)
- D. Heaven, apart from all the glorious description found in the Bible, is living in perfect harmony, peace, unity, joy and grace and living thus for all eternity.