

The Problem of Evil

C.S. Lewis Speaks to Life's Most Difficult Questions

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Evil, pain, and suffering—three human experiences which countless authors have attempted to address throughout history. Unlike other topics, books and articles on evil, pain, and suffering produce strong reactions toward those who write about them and try to explain them. C.S. Lewis was well aware of this phenomenon:

All arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author. You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it.

Nevertheless, it is important to address this issue because some believers and many unbelievers are caused to doubt God's goodness, power, or even His existence because of particular evils they encounter in their lives. As I have talked to many people about this issue, I have found it important to distinguish between the intellectual problem of evil and the emotional responses to particular evils we face in our experience. Having the intellectual answer helps, but it does not make you immune from the emotional struggle, as we will see in Lewis's agony over the death of his wife, Joy.

The Importance of Evil

Every worldview or philosophy has to try and deal with the problem of evil. In atheism, Hinduism, and Buddhism there is no clear basis to call anything evil, and that is an immense problem, particularly because we inherently know better. G. K. Chesterton said, "People reject the idea of original sin when it is the only doctrine of Christianity that can be empirically proven." The reality of evil, then, is something we know in our experience. In many ways the reality of evil is a clue to the cosmos that excludes some worldviews and points toward reality.

Once when asked to speak at a series of seminars on C. S. Lewis, I submitted a few possible topics for the host's choice. Among the topics were "The Importance of Imagination" and "The Problem of Evil." When I received the publicity for the lecture series, my talk was titled the "Importance of Evil." While I could have just

corrected the jumbling of words, this mistake made me think. I decided to talk on the importance of evil from C. S. Lewis's perspective.

Evil is important because it can be used as an argument for God's existence as well as a clue to the nature of created reality. In C. S. Lewis's life, the problem of evil was perhaps the greatest of all obstacles to his coming to faith. He remembered the quote from the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius: "Had God designed the world, it would not be/A world so frail and faulty as we see." When Lewis met Christians, he would pose this problem to them. He felt that their attempts to provide an answer were attempts to avoid the obvious difficulty. However, it gradually dawned on him that his argument depended on the idea that there was, in fact, real evil in the world. Evil was not an illusion or just a feeling or emotive response to an unpleasing event. But, where had he gotten this idea of evil? He realized that his atheism provided no basis for it. Lewis could have said that his idea of evil was just his own private affair, but then his argument against God collapsed, too. Yet, if evil was real, then there must be an absolute standard by which it was known to be evil and an absolute good by which evil could be distinguished from good. Where could we get this infinite reference point, this fixed point above all our personal and cultural bias? Did that not demand a God as an adequate basis for absolute good? This was a first clue to the cosmos: evil was real.

As Lewis thought further, he noticed that many other worldviews had "evil" just as part of things. In atheism or naturalism (nature is all there is), "evil" is just pain in a world of pain. It is just survival of the fittest—nature red in tooth and claw. In Eastern religious perspectives, the All is One (pantheism) view held that somehow all distinctions were illusory or "maya." This principle of "non-distinction" makes even the distinction between good and evil part of the illusion. Yet, do we not feel that there are many things in this world that ought not to be that way? Is this world just pain in a world of pain, is pain an illusion, or is this a good world gone wrong?

Lewis felt that there were many clues that this was a

good world gone wrong. In one passage, he said that he could argue for the Christian worldview from two things: humor and a horror over dead bodies. I think what he meant was that both these aspects of life show that there were things that ought not to be as they are. Consider the nature of humor. One type of humor is mere surprise, like playing peek-a-boo with a baby. Some visual gags, too, might cause you to laugh just from surprise. A great deal of humor, though, is dependent on a mild unpleasantness—but only a *mild* unpleasantness, because the greater the unpleasantness and the more it is revolting, it ceases to be funny. When that fine line is crossed between mild unpleasantness and not-so-mild unpleasantness, people no longer laugh but are offended. Careers in politics and in the media have been lost by an insensitivity to this line. It was not sufficient to say, “I was just joking.”

In any case, humor points to something in life that ought not to be that way. For instance, Rodney Dangerfield has made a living predominantly from his one line, “I don’t get no respect.” We all know what it is to be taken lightly or to be disrespected, and we all know it ought not to be that way. Humor playfully exposes the difference between “is” and “ought,” between reality as it is and reality as it ought to be. The very fact that we can legitimately make this distinction points back to a good world where such indignities were not present and perhaps gives hope that a future may come where such a distinction is not necessary, where, for instance, we are treated with the respect we deserve.

The horror that we experience in the presence of dead bodies is difficult to erase. Many horror films have created fear by using images of the living dead, zombies, or people crawling out of the grave. C. S. Lewis had a particular fear of dead bodies, cemeteries, or encounters with things that have died. Why do we have a horror of the natural process of death? Could it be that it ought not to be this way? Lewis said that when his friend Charles Williams, always so fully alive, died, it forever changed his view of death. Was such a vibrant personality lost forever? It ought not be this way!

For three summers I worked in a geriatrics hospital where I had many duties: making beds, shaving patients, giving baths, and cleaning. But, the strangest duty was wrapping the body of a person who had just died, taking it to the hospital morgue, putting it onto a tray, sliding the body into the refrigerated unit, and closing the door. Some of the aides used to joke about “rigor mortis” while wrapping the body, but their humor always seemed forced. It was especially strange to be wrapping the body of someone with whom you had become close and had gotten to know well. If

death were merely part of the natural process, would it be so horrifying as it is? Is death an interloper, an intruder on God’s good creation caused by sin, or is death just the other end of life? Lewis argued that death is unnatural, and therefore its unnaturalness is the source of its horror. Death ought not to be. It is a clue that this is a good world gone wrong.

In a particularly illustrative scene in *The Silver Chair* (one of *The Chronicles of Narnia*) Puddleglum, the Marsh-wiggle, and Prince Caspian and the children are held captive by the Green Witch. She has cast an enchanting spell on them and tells them that there is no Narnia, no trees, no sun, and no Aslan. They begin to believe her, but Puddleglum sticks his paw into the fire, and the smell of burnt Marsh-wiggle fills the air. His mind is cleared, and he says to the witch:

Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that’s a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow.

People often deny that they know what they in fact know. That is part of the captivity of evil and the blindness it causes. Evil is important because it points to the existence of God and towards the idea that this is a good world gone wrong.

The Intellectual Problem

Okay, so Lewis made the existence of evil into an argument for God’s existence—but could you not turn it around and make the problem of evil into an internal contradiction within theism? In other words, some have argued that there is a contradiction in the set of ideas that Christianity believes. That would indeed be a problem; however, I believe that such attempts have failed. Even more, the philosopher Alvin Plantinga has shown that the existence of evil in theism can never again be charged to be a necessary contradiction. In summary, the argument goes as follows:

The all-powerful, all-good God created the universe.

God has permitted evil *and has a good reason for doing so*.

Therefore, there is no contradiction in theism.

There is no explicit contradiction in this set of ideas. Christianity does not say, "God is all-powerful," and "God is not all-powerful," or "God is good," and "God is not good." While some, such as John Mackie, have charged that the contradiction is implicit, Plantinga's answer to all such attempts is that if God has permitted evil and "has a good reason for doing so," then there is no necessary contradiction. If this statement is merely logically possible — and it seems that it is, because there is no necessary contradiction — then this set of ideas is forever shown to be consistent.

But, what are God's reasons for permitting evil to be present in the world? This is where we could be unwise and pretend to be God. The attempt at theodicy (justification of God's ways) might be rejected by God with a "no, no, no — that will never do." Certainly many people are unimpressed by Christians' answers on evil, as was C. S. Lewis in his unbelieving years. Plantinga advises caution in attempting to provide God's answers for permitting evil, yet because this is such a universal issue, we normally feel compelled to at least indicate some reasons. Lewis does this in his book, *The Problem of Pain*. The classic lines of defense, though by no means exhaustive, are free will, natural law, and soul making.

Free Will

Early in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis states, "that we used our free wills to become very bad is so well known that it hardly needs to be stated." Although there are widely different views about what the term "free will" means between various Christian traditions, everyone appeals to "free will." For instance, in the Westminster Confession the answer as to how sin entered the world is "man by the freedom of his will sinned." God did not create evil, but He did create within human beings the capacity to choose evil. While that capacity to choose evil is not evil itself, it nevertheless provides the possibility for evil to be chosen. God could have created a world in which evil choices could not be made, but it is possible, as many believers have argued, that such a world would not be the best world. Norman Geisler of Southern Evangelical Seminary has argued that God's way is the "best of all possible ways to the best of all possible worlds."

Natural Law

Lewis also argues that in order for our choices to have real consequences, there must be a common nature that surrounds us:

As soon as we attempt to introduce the mutual knowledge of fellow creatures, we run up against the necessity of "Nature." People often talk as if nothing were easier than for two naked minds to meet and be aware of each other. But I can see no possibility of their

doing so except in a common medium which forms their "external" world or environment.

The structure of the world provides the context for real moral decisions to be made. God could constantly intervene so that no evil consequences could follow from evil choices, but that would make the formation of character impossible. Lewis says that God could make it so that:

A wooden beam became as soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set it up in the sound waves that carry lies or insults. But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible and in which therefore, freedom of will would be void.

Another writer, Gilbert Tennant, made a similar observation:

It cannot be too strongly insisted that a world which is to be a moral order must be a physical order characterized by law and regularity. The theist is only concerned to invoke the fact that law abidingness is an essential condition of the world being a theater of moral life. Without such regularity in physical phenomenon, there could be no probability to guide us: no prediction, no prudence, no accumulation of ordered experience, no pursuit of premeditated ends, no formation of habit, no possibility of character or culture. Our intellectual faculties could not have been developed...and without rationality, morality is impossible.

God could turn wooden beams into grass, turn bullets into marshmallows, and thus eliminate evil consequences, but then what would that do to the seriousness of moral choices?

But couldn't God have created another kind of nature where things do not have the capacity to hurt us? I suppose we might conceive of such a world, but it would be hard to imagine. In this world, all good things have a potential for evil use or harm. Fire can be used for light, for cooking, for warmth, but it can also burn our bodies or possessions. Lewis points out "fire comforts that body at a certain distance, it will destroy it when the distance is reduced." Water can be used for drinking, swimming, boating, water-skiing, but it can also drown a person. Wood could be used, Lewis says, as a building beam or to hit a neighbor on the head. The same nature that can cause pain can cause pleasure. Our sexuality can bring great pleasure or cause great physical and emotional pain. Evil twists God's divinely intended uses of good creation into abuses that cause pain. Lewis writes in *The Screwtape Letters* (from a

demon's point of view):

He's [God] a hedonist at heart. . . . He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are 'pleasures forevermore.' . . . He's vulgar, Wormwood. He has a bourgeois mind. He has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long. . . . sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working. Everything has to be *twisted* before it's any use to us.

Could God create a world that had only the possibility of pleasure but not for pain? Perhaps so, but at that point we are in over our heads.

Soul Making

Paul Tournier in his book *Creative Suffering* argues that all great human leaders have had to overcome painful experiences in order to rise to their prominent leadership positions. To be without pain tends to keep your life on the surface of things. With pain you have the choice of how to face it—be overcome by it or rise above it. Pain presents an opportunity for victory or defeat. Above all, it wakes us up and makes us ask very basic questions that we might not ask otherwise. Lewis says in *The Problem of Pain*:

...pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. . . . It plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.

Pain not only gets our attention, but it shatters the illusion that whatever things we have are enough to satisfy us. It is so very easy for us to divert or distract ourselves from looking at what is most important in life.

When we experience even relatively minor pain, say of a toothache, we cannot do much else till we get it relieved. And, many types of pain are far greater than a toothache. However, when we are in over our heads, in the depths of despair we cry out to God in a way that we seldom, perhaps never, do otherwise. Lewis quotes Augustine to the effect that: "God wants to give us something but cannot because our hands are full—there's nowhere for Him to put it."

Pain and suffering provide opportunities for heroism and for great good as we saw in the events surrounding September 11, 2001. Not only policemen and firemen but also many ordinary people gave their lives or worked to alleviate the pain of those involved. But, pain can also crush someone to the point of despair. There is in suffering the possibility of real gain or real loss. Lewis maintains that in this world we live in the "vale of soul-making" where we have serious choices and consequences over how we respond to evil.

Free will, natural law, and soul making are three lines along which believers have developed reasons why God may have permitted evil to be present in this world. However, even though we may be persuaded that the problem of evil is not a contradiction within theism, and that free will, natural law, and soul making give us some glimpse into those reasons, that does not solve once and for all our struggle with evil. Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* but also later wrote *A Grief Observed* where he wrestled with the emotional pain of the loss of his wife. Having intellectual answers does not prevent pain from intruding into our lives.

We have seen, then, the importance of evil as a clue to the cosmos, and a sketch of how Lewis addressed the intellectual problem of evil. This will provide a helpful framework for dealing with the problem of evil, pain, and suffering, but can never give specific reasons about why particular evils we encounter are permitted. In the Bible, Job never does get an answer as to why he suffered, only a series of questions from God that showed Job how little he understood. There were reasons, which the reader learns in the beginning of the saga, but which are never revealed to Job. Job learns to trust in God who knows why.

Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch Christian who with her family helped Jews escape Nazi-occupied Holland in WWII, spent ten months in German prison camps. Four of the seven imprisoned family members died, including Corrie's father and sister Betsie. After her release, Corrie shared her message of Jesus' love being greater than all suffering and evil. She often used "The Weaver" poem in her messages:

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors, He worketh steadily.
Oft times he weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.*

*Not till the looms are silent and the shuttles cease to fly,
Will God unroll the canvases and explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.*

Author Unknown

In the end, all analogies fall short, because we find it impossible to think of any redeeming value of some particular evils. When we all experience pain, a little courage helps more (Lewis observes) than much knowledge, a little sympathy more than much courage, and the least amount of the love of God more than all.



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