

GOD THE GREAT

ICONOCLAST: C.S. LEWIS'S

PERSONAL THEODICY

Edward A.W. Stengel on Addressing the
Problem of Pain

In his *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas recognized that the problem of evil was perhaps the most potent objection one could make to the goodness or even the existence of God.¹ C.S. Lewis called this “the problem of pain” and explained it to the layman like this:

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

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 10.

happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.²

The Problem of Pain would be Lewis's first formal expedition into the dim forest of theodicy, a journey he would continue to document, in one way or another, for the rest of his life. His fascination with the topic led him to write many essays, poems, and books about the subject, with *The Last Battle* looking at it through the lens of fantasy and *A Grief Observed* being a candid journal that found Lewis writing from within the very storm of tragedy itself. What makes these works stand out on the shelf of theodicies which mankind has been building for millennia is that they were written for the benefit of the layman and the academic alike. In his preface to *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis writes, “[i]f any real theologian reads these pages he will very easily see that they are the work of a layman and an amateur.”³ It is precisely this layman treatment of theodicy that has made these works so important, for their apologetic use is more vast and accessible than many lofty theological and philosophical works. *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed* stand out as the most

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, in *Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Kindle Edition, 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

widely useful of the group; with *The Problem of Pain* allowing the reader to directly look at the concept of pain like a beam of light in a dark toolshed and *A Grief Observed* pushing the reader to look along pain, inviting them to see the world through it as one sees the outside world by looking along that same beam of light.⁴

Lewis first invited his readers to look at theodicy from the viewpoint of the lay-philosopher in his apologetic book, *The Problem of Pain*, which was first released in 1940.⁵ In this work, Lewis explores two major aspects within the problem of pain: the first being the part mankind plays within their suffering and the second being the necessity of pain for humanity to experience full communion with God. The first aspect contains the base for what would later be known as the “free will answer to the problem of evil,” which essentially argues that if one is to be truly loved, they must be allowed complete freedom to love in return or reject that

4 Referencing Lewis’s imagery in “Meditation in a Toolshed” where one can either look at a beam of light in a dark shed or one can look along it and allow the world to be illuminated through it. Lewis, C.S. “Meditations in a Toolshed,” *God in the Dock*. (New York: HarperOne, 2014). 213.

5 Bacz Jacek. “C.S. Lewis: The Problem of Pain”. [Catholiceducation.org](http://www.catholiceducation.org). Accessed March 2017. <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/c-s-lewis-the-problem-of-pain.html>.

love; thus, the freedom given mankind to choose love could also be misused, which ultimately resulted in our current state of pain.⁶ Lewis points out the inaccuracy of certain claims made by skeptics like atheist scholar Bart Ehrman, who claims that “the problem of evil is God’s problem, not ours.”⁷ Lewis responds to such claims by making it abundantly clear that evil is indeed our problem:

When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork.⁸

Lewis looks at the fall of man through the lens of myth and sees a story where mankind was in full control of himself only so long as he was in full

⁶ Kreeft, Peter. “The Problem of Evil.” PeterKreeft.com. Accessed March 2017. <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/evil.htm>.

⁷ Ehrman, Bart. *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question--Why We Suffer*. Reprint Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). 14.

⁸ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 87.

submission to God.⁹ He supposes that pain came about only when “[t]hey 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,” with mankind’s autonomy from God merely making them slaves to their newly revealed nature.¹⁰ This is apologetically useful because it does not allow the reader to turn a blind eye to their own part in the world’s misery, be it by their own actions or inactions.

The second aspect of theodicy that Lewis talks about in *Problem of Pain* is the possibility that the pain God allows is His most effective tool in reminding man that something is wrong and needs to be made right:

And pain is not only immediately recognisable evil, but evil impossible to ignore. We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities; . . . we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon 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.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 76.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 90.

This idea builds upon his prior explanation, that although one-fifth of the world's pain may not be brought about by mankind's own doing, such pain might still exist in necessity because of the vices that the other four-fifths have instilled within him. Lewis steers the reader away from concepts like total depravity (which might lead one to think that the evil one sees is actually just goodness misunderstood), claiming instead that "[t]he Divine "goodness" differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different: it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel." He claims essentially that mankind indeed has an inward understanding of good and evil, but it is cloudy and underdeveloped, and though this causes them to see problems in the world with incomplete understanding, it is still a real understanding nonetheless.¹²

He also answers the skeptic who asks why God in his omnipotence does not simply fix everything in an instant. Lewis explains, "that God can and does, on occasions, modify the behavior of matter and produce what we call miracles, is part of Christian faith; but the very conception of a

¹² Ibid., 26.

common, and therefore stable, world, demands that these occasions should be extremely rare.”¹³ Lewis further points out that if miracles were done all the time, they would simply cease to be miracles and (becoming a normal part of everyday life) would lose their potency in bringing man to repentance. Lewis is clear in his belief that all of God’s actions are dedicated to returning man to communion with Himself, as opposed to simply bringing about a comfortable kindness to mankind. Finally, Lewis wonders if some of our questions about the goodness of God are simply illogical, perhaps alluding to such questions as “whether God can make a mountain so large he cannot move it.” He says:

His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense . . . It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

Ultimately, all aspects of Lewis's theodicy push the reader to look at pain as objectively as they can, goading them to consider their own suffering in a completely different way than they might have otherwise.

While *The Problem of Pain* pushes the reader to look at pain in a more objective way, *A Grief Observed* looks along pain and asks the reader to walk with Lewis through the very trenches of tragedy as he mourns his wife's illness and death. The reader who has already read *The Problem of Pain* might see a dramatic irony when Lewis writes in *A Grief Observed* about how what he often thinks is a strong house of faith is really a flimsy "house of cards" ready to be blown down at any minute.¹⁵ Though Lewis was no stranger to tragedy, having lost his mother when he was young as well as his closest friend during WW1, he experienced a true collapse when Joy, his wife, entered into remission from cancer only to suddenly take a turn for the worse and pass away soon after.¹⁶ Lewis found himself no longer looking at pain like a beam of light in a dark room. Instead, having his eye forced into the beam of piercing light, he had to enter into

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁶ Bacz Jacek, "C.S. Lewis: The Problem of Pain."

a fury and fear of raw pain that put his prior beliefs to the ultimate test. He explains the difference of *A Grief Observed* frankly:

This book is a man emotionally naked in his own Gethsemane. It tells of the agony and the emptiness of a grief such as few of us have to bear, for the greater the love the greater the grief, and the stronger the faith the more savagely will Satan storm its fortress.¹⁷

This work, as an experiential piece, serves the apologetic purpose of putting the ideas from *Problem of Pain* into practical action and reveals how very difficult it is for one to truly be prepared for loss.

In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis focuses most on the conclusions and questions to which losing Joy brought him, with the clearest being a reiteration from *Problem of Pain*: God is indeed the great iconoclast. He first shares his empathy with all who have experienced God's silence in their moment of great need, relaying his own journey piece by piece. Lewis felt that in his greatest moment of need, when he was crying out for God, the "door slammed in [his] face, and [he heard] a sound of bolting and

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), Kindle Edition, 14.

double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”¹⁸ Lewis then writes about how he began to question whether there ever was anyone behind that door, and how, at that moment, God seemed just as unreal as He had once seemed real.

Contrary to what many might assume, it is a great boon for such a public apologist to admit that they too have experienced God’s seeming nonexistence in times of trial. It humanizes the Christian in the eyes of the non-believer and assures the believer that their own experience of doubt is not one of apostasy. Lewis later goes on to question whether his “banging like a mad man” on God’s door might inform him as to the reason for the silence, or perhaps there was only an illusion of silence, and his loud shouting had drowned out the very answer he was demanding.¹⁹ He returns to the second idea from *The Problem of Pain* after much thought, realizing that perhaps he, just like Abraham, did not know the state of his own faith until it was challenged:

And I must surely admit . . . that, if my house was a house of cards, the sooner it was knocked down the better. And only

¹⁸ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

suffering could do it. But then the Cosmic Sadist and Eternal Vivisector becomes an unnecessary hypothesis.²⁰

In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis consistently returns to the idea of God as the great iconoclast, the one who reveals our idols to us by crushing them. He recognizes that this crushing of idols, this collapsing of the houses of cards, is ultimately in our best interest, both inwardly and outwardly, but he never shies away from how incredibly awful it feels to experience it. He also reiterates something he had first brought up in *Problem of Pain* – how irrational our questions must often seem to God and how silence may indeed be the most loving answer He could give. When man can truly see what he is asking, as opposed to what he thinks he is asking, he might find his questions less profound and more akin to “How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round?”²¹ Silence seems to be the only good answer to those sorts of questions.

Appealing to mystery or human ignorance is easy to do when one is looking at pain from afar and speaking hypothetically. It is much more difficult to continue to do when pain is bearing

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ Ibid., 82.

down on you like an invading enemy army. Lewis's conclusion is perhaps both comforting and terrifying: God the great iconoclast is indeed good and always has been, and it is we who are not nearly so good as we might assume. It is only when our idols are crushed and we react in fury that we realize just how much more we have loved our idols than our God. The real problem of pain is perhaps the fact that it is needed to wake us up from our sinful stupor. Yet we cannot just wait until the pain leaves us so we might return to our usual life, thus making it necessary once again.

The *Problem of Pain* allows the reader to directly look at the concept of pain, while *A Grief Observed* pushes the reader to look from within the experience of pain. *The Problem of Pain* focuses on two aspects of theodicy: mankind's part in their own misery and the idea that pain might be necessary for mankind to repent. *A Grief Observed* puts these ideas to practice, focusing on God's role as the great iconoclast who must smash one's idols. It might seem to the reader that *The Problem of Pain* is the hypothesis and *A Grief Observed* is the lab report from an experiment that Lewis never desired to take part in, but it should encourage the reader to find that Lewis's hypotheses, for the most part, withstood the test. However, Lewis also brings to

light just how terrible pain can be in the moment. He knew that this pain was only bearable and purposeful when seen from the lens of final eternity:

All pains and pleasures we have known on earth are early initiations in the movements of that dance: but the dance itself is strictly incomparable with the sufferings of this present time. As we draw nearer to its uncreated rhythm, pain and pleasure sink almost out of sight. There is joy in the dance, but it does not exist for the sake of joy. It does not even exist for the sake of good, or of love. It is Love Himself, and Good Himself, and therefore happy.²²

Hence, he could end the story of his grief over Joy's death with "*Poi si tornò all' eterna fontana,*" "Then unto the eternal fountain she turned."²³

²² Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 159.

²³ Referencing Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 84.

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