



The Problem of Pain CS Lewis

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In *The Problem of Pain* (1940), CS Lewis attempts to tackle the timeless mystery of understanding pain in a Christian paradigm. Lewis maintains a thoughtful tone of humility, recognising the limitations of his own 'layman's' stance, whilst simultaneously fortifying his arguments with logic and Scripture. To the reader wrestling with the predicament of unjust suffering, it goes a long way towards providing clarity and refreshment for the soul.

Lewis explores the notion of how every human lives by a code of ethics (be it their own or derived from elsewhere, for example religion), and 'therefore are conscious of guilt'. This raises the issue of sin, implying that humans can discern, at least to some degree, right from wrong. Because of free will, Lewis claims, pain may be inflicted on us by others or even ourselves. God has granted us 'freedom to choose'. Lewis asks if our choices truly are ours if 'God correct[s] the results of this abuse of free-will by His creatures at every moment: so that a wooden beam [becomes] soft as grass when...used as a weapon'? Indeed, nature has 'fixed laws' which grant us the privilege of choice. This goes some way towards answering why a benevolent and omnipotent God would avoid intervening at any moment which threatened his creatures' happiness.

Why is pain a *problem*? Lewis claims that 'Christianity...creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, [compared with] this painful world, [Christians] had received... a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving'. This is perhaps why Christians who worship a benevolent God

struggle more than most with the injustices we see; the gap between the world that is, and the world God created is hard to ignore. Reverberating in the heart of every human who has ever walked this earth is the question, 'why?'. Intrinsic to human nature is an unquenchable thirst for answers.

Building on this, Lewis writes that 'unless [pain was] felt as an outrage...[an] immediately recognisable evil...we [could] rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities'. Pain is a tool. Indeed, 'God... shouts in our pains'. It is a reminder not to fall into the trap of mistaking earth for our eternity – God does not delight to see us suffer, but wants to remind us that we are not yet home. He grants us moments of happinesses, and has given us good gifts to enjoy; however, we must not rest in these good things, but in God alone.

The concluding appendix is composed by a medical doctor, who conveys his clinical observations that, somewhat paradoxically, pain often, rather than breaking the spirit, provides opportunity to 'strengthen and purify the character'. Clearly, this is not a statement that pain is intrinsically good, but rather that it can serve as a stimulus for change. I remember as a child asking my father why we felt pain. He replied with the illustration of someone stepping on a nail, and nerve endings in the foot detecting this to prevent further damage. ■