

“The Problem of Pain”

In his atheistic days, C. S. Lewis reasoned as follows:

Look at the universe we live in.
By far the greatest part of it consists of empty space,
completely dark and unimaginably cold.
We can't be sure if the other suns have planets revolving around them
and if they do, we don't know whether any of them sustains life.
The earth existed for millions of years without life and may exist
for millions of years when life has left her. And what is life like while it lasts?
It seems that all the forms of it can only survive by preying upon one another.
And pain, there is so much pain. The creatures cause pain by being born,
and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die. Add to physical pain,
mental anguish in the highest of these creatures. Rational beings manage to
inflict a great deal of pain upon one another.

In short, Lewis believed, as some still do, that there were too many sad anomalies for him to believe in God.

If you ask me to believe that this is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent Spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction.

The ‘problem of pain’ is actually part of the larger puzzle some have described as the ‘enigma of evil’. If God is good, and he created all that is out of nothing, how could evil ever have arisen? According to Scripture it was already in existence when humankind was created. No matter how far back its origin, its existence seems inexplicable. Here our focus is on suffering rather than the larger question of evil.

1. The Problem in a Nutshell.

The question has recurred, in different forms, down through the centuries. The Greek philosopher, Epicurus (+/-300 BC) identified the problem in clear terms.

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing?
Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing?
Whence then is evil?”

David Hume (18th century AD) raised the question of evil and suffering and regarded his argument as clear and irrefutable.

Why is there any misery in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then? Is it then from the intention of the deity? But he is

perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning. So short, so clear, so decisive . . .

In his inimitable way, C S Lewis put the problem in a nutshell:

If God were good he would wish to make his creatures 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.

One of the most effective presentations of the problem is contained in a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky, entitled *The Brothers Karamazov*. One of the Karamazov brothers is a novice monk and the other a worldly-wise atheist. Ivan, the atheist, doesn't deny God's existence but rejects God's creation largely on account of the suffering of innocent children. He gives some vivid examples - and these could be multiplied many times, and then tells his young brother that he has "returned God's ticket" and refuses to play God's game. As far as he's concerned, no grand design and no future bliss could ever justify the suffering of innocent children. Nobody is entitled to erect the glories of eternity on the tears of a traumatised child.

Of course, many have had the courage or the audacity to ask questions concerning the anomalies of our existence. Psalmists acknowledge that the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the wicked were a real problem to them. We read Habakkuk's protest to God. In effect he was saying: "God, I know you're good and you're all-powerful; why then don't you do something about evil and suffering?"

2. One of Essentially Three Approaches.

➤ An escapist approach.

You could refuse to even acknowledge that suffering constitutes a problem. *That could be annoying*, especially if you are speaking to someone who has experienced a tragedy and you yourself have not had to contend with too much suffering in your own life. And if you have experienced real heartache but seem quite stoic about it all, your attitude of simple acceptance might itself prove to be a stumbling-block. People cannot identify with something that seems unrealistic.

➤ A know-all approach.

We can trot our trite comments, feeling that we simply *have* to provide an explanation for events. In so doing we could be quite simplistic and insensitive (not unlike Job's friends). *That could be even more annoying*.

- **An intellectually honest approach.**
Such an approach seeks to come to terms with the problem, acknowledging that suffering *does* present a problem, but that it does not count decisively against faith in God.

3. Placing the Problem in Perspective.

In the first place, Lewis places his own statement of the problem under scrutiny. The more closely one looks at this cynic's chestnut, the more one realises that it is not quite as devastating a critique as some have imagined.

- **'Almighty?'**
Consider the word *almighty* (omnipotent). Many take the word to mean simply that God can do whatever he likes since he is all-powerful. But is that really what we mean by omnipotence? Can God make a square circle? Can he make a stone too heavy for him to lift and then lift it? Can he make a one-sided piece of paper or an aged infant? Can he give a creature genuine free will and, *at the same time*, withhold it from him? We shouldn't be simplistically extravagant with terms like these. Obviously we need to qualify them. Once again, Lewis goes to the heart of the matter:

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 speak it about God.

- **'Good?'**
The word *good* is also in need of a closer scrutiny. In some minds 'goodness' is equated with a rather shallow kindness. Instead of having a Heavenly Father, some want a grandfather in heaven. When they refer to love they are thinking of an indulgent and rather senile benevolence.

If we want to state the problem of pain and the deeper problem of the existence of evil in a neat and logical argument we need to be absolutely clear regarding the meaning of the concepts we use. We need to be sure that our argument is not based on faulty assumptions regarding qualities like omnipotence and goodness and of course, happiness. It doesn't help to have a logically valid argument based upon false premises.

4. The Alternatives.

It is precisely *because* we believe in a God who is both good and omnipotent that pain constitutes a philosophical problem. But look, for a moment, at the

alternatives.

➤ **Atheism**

The easiest way to eliminate the *philosophical* problem is to deny God's existence. But that doesn't eliminate the practical problem of pain. A pinched nerve is as painful in an atheist as it is in a believer. And it raises new problems and other questions.

➤ **Deism**

We could say that God created and then absconded, leaving the world to impersonal laws. Since he is not personally involved, he cannot be blamed for evil and suffering. That doesn't solve the problem; it intensifies it. Thomas Hardy ponders that possibility in his poem "Nature's Questioning."

We wonder, ever wonder,
why we find us here.
Has some Vast Imbecility
Mighty to build and blend
But impotent to tend,
Framed us in jest and left us
now to haphazardry?

Deism is blasphemous; it implies that the Creator is an irresponsible imbecile.

➤ **Dualism (Two contending gods)**

We could attempt to explain the problem of pain and evil by saying that there is a good God and a bad God and that the good God is battling to get the better of the bad God. In other words, God would do something about it if he could, but he can't on account of a cosmic struggle. This would also mean either that we're locked into an eternal stalemate or that the bad God may turn out to be the winner in the end!

➤ **Two opposite 'poles' in the nature of the one God**

Some have suggested (and you find this in 'New Age' thinking) that since we encounter 'evil' in our existence, it must have its origin in the nature of God himself. The world he created reflects the moral ambivalence of his own being. Benjamin Creme, one of the best-known advocates of 'new age' ideology, writes: "Of course, yes, the forces of evil are part of God. They are not separate from God. Everything is God."

At least Creme is consistent in his pantheism (all is God). This frightening depiction is, of course, contrary to the biblical portrayal of God, who is

good and would never will evil for its own sake.

5. Before the Discovery of Chloroform

Having stated his original case for atheism (see above), the 'believing' Lewis begins to explain how different things can look when viewed from the perspective of faith:

There was one question I had never dreamed of raising. I never noticed that the very strength and facility of the pessimists' case at once poses us a problem. 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?

After pointing out that the very fact that most people have believed in the divine is quite amazing given the facts of our existence, Lewis concludes that religion must have a source other than that of the observation of the natural order. Pain does not seem to have posed an insurmountable obstacle to belief in the goodness of God.

All the great religions were first preached, and long practised, in a world without chloroform. At all times, then, an inference from the course of events in this world to the goodness and wisdom of the Creator would have been equally preposterous; and it was never made . . . (Christianity) is not a system into which we have to fit the awkward fact of pain: it is itself one of the awkward facts which have to be fitted into any system we make. In a sense, it creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.

As a historical theologian, Alister McGrath spent many years working through most of the major works in Christian theology written between the 12th and 16th centuries. He could not recall any of them treating the reality of suffering as a serious obstacle to Christian faith. A change came about during the Enlightenment period (roughly, 17th and 18th centuries). Attempts were made to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian faith by appealing directly and exclusively to reason. So it was deemed necessary to provide an explanation for the existence of pain.

6. Two "Traditional" Explanations.

➤ The "Free Will Defence"

When God created, he actually gave us the capacity to choose. We

were not programmed like a computer or conditioned like Pavlov's dogs. He did not manipulate the circumstances so as to determine the outcome. He constituted us in such a way that there was a real possibility that we would choose what he didn't want. For freedom to be *freedom*, the element of inevitability must be eliminated.

The so-called free-will defence contends that God is *so* great that he not only gave mankind the right to exist alongside him, but also entitled us to choose in such a way that the outcome would not be a foregone conclusion. And to do this, evil, *as the opposite of good*, had to be a real possibility. This would mean that evil always existed *as a possibility* intrinsic to the nature of reality and that for God to create any genuinely free being was to take the risk of evil. It is sometimes argued that God must have known what the outcome of such freedom would have been because he is omniscient. He ought therefore to have desisted from creating if such an outcome was inevitable. But was it? Are we not imposing the limitations of time upon God, who is eternal? And are we not presuming to prescribe *to God(!)* a course of action we would have taken - a course of action which is based upon incomplete knowledge of the 'past', of the 'future' and of the nature of reality?

Peter Vardy tells a simple story to highlight the essential difference between the creation of automatons and that of free moral agents. He asks us to imagine a young and beautiful coalminer's daughter living in a remote pit village. While on a hunting trip, the king saw her and fell totally in love with her. He thought about her constantly, and wished to woo her and bring her to love him. If he approached her in his royal splendour she would be terrified. He did not wish to seduce her; he did not want to command her obedience, to intimidate her or overawe her. He loved her and he wanted her to love him. Nothing else would do. So he must go to the young girl in disguise in the hope that she will fall in love with him. If she does, her love will then be free. There are risks. She may reject him, but he cannot be satisfied with a relationship built on fear or coercion.

At a much more profound level, God's creative and his redemptive purpose is grounded in the bestowal of genuine freedom. Nothing else will do! To quote Vardy:

God's highest priority is not to bring people to obedience, but to love. Obedience is easily organised; provided the power is great enough and the sanctions heavy enough, individuals can be coerced into obedience. In fact, freedom is not even necessary for obedience. Human beings could have been created like robots so that they would always do exactly what

their creator wished. It is much easier to create robots than to create free human beings.

But God wants us to love him freely. And, in the nature of the case, that involved the risk that we might not do so. Lewis was of the same opinion:

If you choose to say 'God can give a creature free-will and at the same time withhold free-will from it', you have not succeeded in saying anything about God ... It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but non-entities.

➤ **The Bigger Picture.**

Some argue that when time has run its course, the end result will be so glorious that all of the suffering of the present will seem trivial and inconsequential. This is, of course, what Paul said in the relation to the suffering of Christians. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18). And the fact that present sufferers actually play a part in our future glory is intimated in II Cor 4 where we're told that "our light momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (II Cor 4:17). The sentiment that suffering is actually necessary to produce the final result is beautifully set forth in the anonymous, 16th century poem:

Man's life is laid in the loom of time
To a pattern he does not see,
While the weavers work and the shuttles fly
till the dawn of eternity.
Some shuttles are filled with silver threads
and some with threads of gold,
While often but the darker hues
are all that they may hold.
But the weaver watches with skilful eye
Each shuttle fly to and fro,
And sees the pattern so deftly wrought
as the loom moves sure and slow.
God surely planned the pattern
each thread the dark and fair,
is chosen by his master's skill
and placed in the web with care.
He only knows its beauty
And guides the shuttles which hold,
the threads so unattractive
As well as the threads of gold.
Not till each loom is silent

and the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God reveal the pattern
and explain the reason why
the dark threads were so needful
in the weavers skilful hand,
as the threads of gold and silver
for the pattern which he planned.

This poem certainly makes a good point. We have not solved the problem of pain but we have affirmed that such pain ought to be seen in relation to a higher purpose. We have also suggested that part of our difficulty is occasioned by our inability to see the whole picture.

But we are back to Dostoevsky's assertion. As far as he was concerned, no grand design and no future bliss could ever justify the suffering of innocent children. Nobody is entitled to erect the glories of eternity on the tears of a traumatised child. In the context of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the poignant descriptions of suffering tend to make his assertion incontestable. There is a kind of rhetorical abuse in the use heart-rending stories to discourage reasonable discussion.

How can we possibly test assertions such as this? How can anybody know that, at the end of it all, even the most awful suffering will *not* seem insignificant in comparison with the glories to come? This is not just a compensatory belief adopted by Christians to ameliorate suffering. It is right at the heart of the gospel. Referring to the sufferings of the Lord, Isaiah declares, "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied" (Isa. 53:11). The Writer to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus enduring the cross "for the joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2).

7. **Some Helpful Perspectives.**

We may well argue that God should have created a universe where there was no possibility of evil and no single instance of suffering. But we don't know what was really possible. Neither do we know whether, in the final analysis, a universe which had experienced evil and suffering is not preferable to *no universe at all* or to one in which there were no 'free' creatures. The 'problem of pain' remains, mainly because of the limited state of our knowledge. The following perspectives do not purport to be a complete explanation, but they have helped me to live with one of life's unsolved mysteries.

➤ **We know that some suffering proves to be beneficial.**

I'm not contending that all suffering is good or that any suffering is good in itself. But it is true that suffering often brings out the best in people. Some of us can testify to this. At the time a period of suffering may have seemed pointless, but later we were able to see that it actually helped us. This

does not provide an answer to the ultimate question, but it does tell us that even though suffering seems bad in itself, at least some of it can serve a higher purpose. This is repeatedly taught in Scripture. You see it in Romans 5:3-5, in James 1:2-4, in Hebrews 12:7-11 and in 1 Peter 4:12-19. Suffering sometimes brings us to our senses and is often instrumental in the development of character.

➤ **It helps if we accept that there are factors of which we are unaware.**

This is one of the great lessons of the Book of Job. We know about the interview between God and Satan that preceded Job's trial and we know about the wonderful blessing that followed it. *All that Job knew was that one day his world came crashing in.* Everything went wrong and he was plunged into the most intense physical suffering as well as mental and spiritual anguish. Even though no explanation was given to Job and no attempt was made to tackle the question of the origin of evil, **we** are able to see that there was far more to his situation of suffering than met the eye.

➤ **We need to do in this area what we have to do in every other.**

In every field of investigation we work from the known to the unknown. In every scientific discipline there are areas which are not fully understood. There are factors which challenge the best-established theories. But we don't argue that because we do not know *everything*, we cannot know *anything*.

Rather, we start with a presupposition or an axiom, something which either seems self-evident or is the best available assumption on which to build our 'theory'. We then proceed, working from the most obvious facts in the direction of the least obvious. In the process many questions seem to be conclusively answered, some are more tentatively answered and still others await an answer. They remain paradoxical to us, but we are not unreasonable in expecting that there may well be an explanation, even if it is not available to us in the present.

➤ **A universe without suffering may not be as paradisaical as some imagine.**

Under the present circumstances, suffering may be a blessing in disguise. *Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants* is a thought-provoking book by Philip Yancey and Paul Brand. On the cover is a warning: 'Life without pain could really hurt you!' Dr. Paul Brand was a highly esteemed surgeon. He lived the latter part of his life in Louisiana where he was awarded the Surgeon General's medallion for outstanding service to humanity. He tells a heart-rending story about one of his patients, which I shall abbreviate and paraphrase.

When Tanya was brought to him, she was four. She had dark, flashing eyes and curly hair. He began to remove the blood-

soiled bandages from her feet. He discovered that her left ankle rotated freely. He winced at the unnatural movement and continued gently to unwrap the bandages. When he had removed the last of the bandages, he found grossly infected ulcers on the soles of both feet. He probed through the soft tissue and could see the white gleam of bare bone. But there was no reaction from Tanya. She did not flinch or whimper; instead she just lay there and looked around the room with an expression of faint boredom.

Then her mother told Dr Brand the story. She was a high-spirited child, but otherwise seemed perfectly normal. When she was about 18 months old her mother left her in her playpen while she answered the phone. When her mother returned she found that Tanya was finger-painting red swirls on the white plastic sheet. The tip of her finger was mangled and bleeding and she was using her own blood as paint. Her mother yelled but Tanya smiled. She had streaks of blood on her teeth. She had bitten off the tip of her finger and was playing in the blood.

You guessed it. Tanya suffered from a rare genetic defect known informally as “congenital indifference to pain”. Nerves in the hands and feet transmitted messages about changes of pressure and temperature. There was a slight tingling sensation, but there was no hint of unpleasantness. She rather enjoyed the tingling sensations especially when they produced dramatic reactions in others. If she twisted an ankle she would walk on it; if she stood on a nail she would not feel it.

By the time she was 11, Tanya was living a pathetic existence in an institution. She had lost most of her fingers. Her elbows were constantly dislocated. She suffered the effects of chronic sepsis from the ulcers on her hands. She had lost both of her legs to amputation and her tongue was badly scarred from her nervous habit of chewing it.

Tanya had no built-in warning system to defend her from injury. She was an extreme example - a human metaphor, really - of life without pain.

I am citing this merely as an illustration. Physical pain is unpleasant - sometimes extremely so. But, in the scheme of things, it is necessary for our well-being, perhaps even for our survival. *In the present order*, it may be that we are better off with suffering than we would be without it. To

quote C. S. Lewis once more:

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

➤ **God has himself embraced suffering.**

There are many questions that remain unanswered for me. But there is one factor that helps me more than any other. The compassionate God of the Bible is very different from the cold "First Cause" of the philosophers. He is not a dispassionate "Unmoved Mover". He feels deeply; he can be grieved; he rejoices. He is big enough to make himself vulnerable to his creatures. His heartache is comparable to that of a faithful father whose wayward son despises his kindness and concern and plunges headlong into ruin. He makes himself as vulnerable as a deeply sensitive husband whose wife has a string of affairs. All the pain that a parent can feel and all the grief that an estranged spouse can feel, he experiences, only to a far greater degree (Isa 49:14-16; Hosea 1:4; 11:1-11).

Whatever else can or can't be said about suffering, Jesus carried the most intense suffering right into the heart of God. This is not some incidental portrayal of his ministry. He is described in Isaiah as the suffering servant (Isa 52:13-53:12). He came not to a served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). He explained to the disciples on the Emmaus Road that the Christ had to suffer (Lk 24:26). The writer to the Hebrews describes his unique position as the Son of God and celebrates his majesty. But he sees suffering as integral to the Lord's ministry: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:8).

Dorothy Sayers has put it so well:

For whatever reason God chose to make man (sic) as he is - limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death - he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever the game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and is playing fair.

We can, I believe, say even more than that. He has accepted responsibility for something that he did not cause. That is the meaning of grace. In suffering with and for his creation, God was doing more than he was obliged to do by any standard of fair play.

A man once approached the great English preacher, W. E. Sangster, and shouted at him in anguish: "Where was your God last night when they killed my son?" Sangster paused for a moment and then replied compassionately, "He was in exactly the same place last night as he was 2000 years ago when they killed his Son!"