

THE THEODICY OF C. S. LEWIS

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BIOGRAPHY

A popular author during his lifetime, C. S. Lewis has become even more well-known posthumously. He is best known for his fantasy writings, especially the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, but he also made a name for himself as a writer of Christian apologetics and theology.

C. S. Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1898. As a young boy he read extensively, finding comfort and, being a rather introspective individual, companionship in the books he read. He and his brother drew pictures and wrote stories of a well-developed fantasy world they came to call “Boxen.”¹ From a young age, he felt an attraction to what he called “Joy,” a feeling of otherworldliness captured in certain events throughout his childhood.² His mother died when he was young, and he turned to writing as a means of comfort. Lewis describes his father as a very emotional man. The prospect of raising two sons by himself must have been too much for him, because in the moment when young Lewis needed his father the most, his father betrayed that trust by sending him to a failing boarding school in England where he was taught by a brutal old man until the school was shut down due to the headmaster being declared insane.³ His brother was already enrolled in a boarding school, also in England, though not the same school. He moved through a succession of schools, hating three out of four of them, until his father hired the services of a personal tutor. This tutor taught Lewis the Socratic method which he employed in his teaching and writing for the rest of his life. He was accepted to Oxford, but Britain entered World War I before his studies began in earnest. Lewis was drafted, and although he tried to avoid being sent abroad to fight, he ended up in the Killing Fields of

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 75–78.

² *Ibid.*, 13–16.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life* (Colorado Springs: Tyndale House, 2013), 27.

France where he survived the horrors of trench warfare. He created what he called a “treaty with reality” to deal with the prospect of the war, and he seems to have shut out the experience from the rest of his life.⁴ In fact, he claims that his time on the battlefield had no effect on his development as a human.⁵

Upon his return from the war, Lewis finished his studies at Oxford, majoring in classic literature. His goal was to teach at Oxford after graduating, but there was no foreseeable opening in the instruction of the classics. His mentors recommended he study English literature, a field that was growing in popularity. He followed their advice, completing another three-year degree in one year, and obtained a job teaching English literature at Oxford’s Magdalen College. He taught there for years.

During his time in school, Lewis abandoned the nominal faith of his parents to embrace atheism. However, while teaching at Oxford, he came across several people who he admired and were Christians, all of whom were authors. Tolkien was a good friend of Lewis and influenced him heavily in the direction of theism. After moving from atheism to theism, Lewis eventually acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and the only way to God.

In the following years Lewis gained popularity for his ability to communicate deep thought about the Christian faith in a manner that the average person could understand and benefit from. His skill as a writer, teacher, and radio speaker spread his fame across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States, where his books caught the attention of one Joy Davidman. Also a convert from atheism, she sought his wisdom on matters of faith, going so far as to travel to England to meet him in person. After she returned, her husband divorced her, and she moved to London with her two sons. In a move questioned by many of his friends, Lewis married

⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

Davidman in order to grant her permanent residence status in England. However, when Davidman was diagnosed with cancer, Lewis fell in love with her, writing to a friend that “a rival often turns a friend into a lover,” and death was the greatest rival.⁶ Her cancer went into remission, and the two spent the next three years as a married couple before she finally succumbed to the disease in 1960. Lewis suffered from failing kidneys and heart problems and died in 1963. A surge of reinterest in C. S. Lewis’ writings began in the 1970s, especially among American evangelicals.⁷ Lewis is now considered a literary landmark, not only as a Christian author, but as an author.⁸

⁶ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 334.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 376.

SUMMARY OF LEWIS' THEODICY

Although Lewis was not a trained theologian, and professed his inadequacy in that area, many of his writings deal with theology, not only in apologetic works such as *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem of Pain*, but also in his fiction, most notably his *Space Trilogy* and *Chronicles of Narnia*. One area of particular interest is Lewis' theodicy. Theodicy, from the Greek theo (God) and dik (just), is a term coined by Gottfried Leibniz referring to attempts to explain the existence of pain and suffering in the world. Theodicy deals with the problem of evil, which can be summed up with the following assumptions:

- 1.) God is good.
- 2.) A good God would not permit suffering or evil.
- 3.) Yet suffering and evil are observed in the world.
- 4.) Therefore a good God does not exist.⁹

Because this argument is valid, disproving it must come in the form of proving one of the assumptions to be false.¹⁰ The problem of evil is often cited as proof for atheism (no God), or at the very least deism (a hands-off God). Lewis takes this challenge (among other topics) head-on in his book *The Problem of Pain*. Published in 1940, *The Problem of Pain* is one of Lewis' first books, and in it he addresses the problem of evil in a comprehensive manner. However, his treatment of the subject is not limited to this book. He also touches on the problem in other apologetic works such as *Mere Christianity*, works of introspection including *Surprised by Joy* and *A Grief Observed* (possibly his more important work on suffering¹¹), and fiction, such as the *Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Space Trilogy*, as well as essays (compiled in *God in the Dock*). It

⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 223.

¹⁰ Philip Tallon, "Pro: The Problem of Pain Defended," *Value Inquiry Book Series* 286 (2015): 212.

¹¹ Robert W. Wall, "The Problem of Observed Pain: A Study of C. S. Lewis on Suffering," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 4 (December 1983): 448.

is his broad treatment of the subject, along with his popularity and influence among Christians, that makes C. S. Lewis worth studying.

In the Preface of *Pain*, Lewis writes that he originally wished to publish the book anonymously; due to what he considered his relatively easy life, he thought readers would not believe him when he talked about pain. However, he clarifies, this book is not a how-to manual on dealing with pain, but an attempt to solve the intellectual conundrum presented by the classic argument.¹² Although *The Problem of Pain* was one of Lewis' early works, in which he admitted his interaction with the topic was provisional, and he continued to deal with the problem throughout his writings, he never strayed far from that early treatment. The foundation he lays here continues to guide his interaction with the subject, and while his later works reveal greater detail and nuance, at no point does he change course and come to a different conclusion than his first book on the matter.¹³

Having turned from atheism himself, Lewis is intimately familiar with the objection brought up by the problem of evil. In a universe so cruel, how could humanity assume a good God exists? Life is defined by pain. Humans cause pain in birth, suffer pain throughout life, and die in pain.¹⁴ In his early life, Lewis believed nearly everything real was bad, and the only good existed in his imagination.¹⁵ The answer comes from redefining God's omnipotence and goodness. Lewis asserts that there are some things which God simply cannot do. This is not to detract from God's power in any way, nor does Lewis argue that God is less than omnipotent. It is impossible for God to do the impossible, or that which implies contradiction.¹⁶ The classic

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), xi.

¹³ Eamon McGraw, "Peace, Child; You Don't Understand: Theodicy in the Writings of C. S. Lewis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 80, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 56.

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 2.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, 164.

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 17–18.

question posed by stubbornly lost people to annoy evangelists, “Can God create a rock he cannot lift?” would disintegrate under Lewis’ explanation of omnipotence. Normal use of the word “impossible” implies a condition, for example: “It is impossible for me to lift this rock, unless I had help.” In that sense, all things are possible with God. There is no conditional statement attached to God’s power. There is another sense of the word impossible, however: that which implies nonsense. Lewis writes that there are some questions posed to God that are impossible to answer, not because he does not know the answer, but because the question is nonsense.¹⁷ Likewise, there are some actions God cannot take because they contain within themselves a contradiction. Can God give humans free will, while at the same time withholding free will from them? It is a logical contradiction.¹⁸

God has created an ordered universe. For things to be orderly, they must be consistent and able to be relied upon.¹⁹ If fire is hot, able to be used for cooking and warmth, it must always be hot. If it became cool the moment it touched human flesh, in order to prevent human suffering, it could not be relied upon. Even if this could take place, Lewis suggests that it would be impossible for the universe to be arranged in a way to please every individual equally. If two men meet on the side of a hill heading in opposite directions, one must be heading down hill and the other up. One man finds the journey easy, the other suffers with the strain.²⁰ Therefore, God has chosen to create a world of stability and humans with free will; he cannot also control every human action and allow matter to change depending on its use. Apparently, God considers a stable, free universe better than an unstable universe or one in which he controls every action.²¹

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 69.

¹⁸ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 52.

Lewis likens this to a chess game. If one player controls both sides, or can change the rules on a whim, it is not much of a game.²²

Lewis is not content to redefine God's omnipotence: he also dismantles the common understanding of goodness. Pain, he argues, is not inherently bad. Pain is a sensation that informs the one sensing it that something is wrong. If a fire is burning one's hand, the pain makes him remove his hand to avoid further damage. Without the pain, the hand would have been destroyed. Because of the pain, the hand is saved. Pain, then, is a *good* thing: evidence of an ordered universe.²³

Lewis believes a misunderstanding of God's goodness has led to the problem of evil seeming insurmountable. When people say that God is good, they are mostly referring to his love, states Lewis, and by love they mean kindness, that is, making sure everyone is happy. As he so cleverly puts it, "We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves', and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be said at the end of the day, 'a good time was had by all.'"²⁴

Although Lewis admits he would prefer if that were the case but concludes that God's goodness is much deeper than mere kindness. Love involves kindness but is not solely kindness. While kindness seeks to prevent suffering, love has a bigger picture in mind. We show kindness to strangers because we do not care about them, but those we love we would rather suffer than atrophy. This seems shocking and far-fetched at first, but he uses the example of disciplining children.²⁵ Parents inflict suffering on their children (punishment of some kind) to train them to

²² Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

become better people. God loves his creatures so much that he is willing that they should suffer in order to become more like him. In fact, Lewis believes so strongly that God's goodness is compatible with causing pain in humans for their good, he speculates that pain may not cease even in heaven.²⁶

So far, most of Lewis' theodicy is based on existing theories, such as what he calls, quoting Keats, "the vale of soul making," the idea that pain and suffering in the world are part of the sanctification process. When it comes to animal suffering, he begins to break new ground.²⁷ He was fond of animals, having grown up with a dog whom he considered a friend,²⁸ and was a vocal opponent of the practice of vivisection, dissecting a live animal, which was becoming popular in his day.²⁹ He has two main thoughts on animal pain: that animals do not understand pain the way that humans do, due to a lack of sapience³⁰, and that animals may find their fulfillment in their relationships to humans, just as humans do with God.³¹ In the end he professes agnosticism regarding animal suffering, as humans lack information, having not experienced it personally.³²

²⁶ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 27.

²⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, xii.

²⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, 156–157.

²⁹ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 224–228.

³⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 135–136.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 143–144.

³² Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 169.

CRITIQUE

Although C. S. Lewis is not a theologian, his defense of God in the face of suffering is especially interesting because he wrote so much about it. Lewis never published a scholarly treatise on the problem of evil, but instead dealt with the problem both directly in his non-fiction and indirectly in his fiction, leading to a more complete grasp of his understanding of evil, suffering, and the problems that arise from them.

Lewis himself offers some of the strongest criticisms of his own theodicy.³³ One major deficiency in Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* is the complete lack of any pastoral application. Lewis himself does acknowledge that fact, as previously mentioned, but just because an author mentions that he has left out half of a subject does not make it acceptable. In fact, by ignoring that aspect of suffering, he may even make the situation worse. If one were to attempt to comfort a grieving person with the theories laid out in *Pain*, one would likely cause additional suffering by the impersonal, intellectual nature of the argument.³⁴ For example, he suggests that God might bereave a mother of her son to help her learn to love more truly.³⁵ Offering that tidbit to a grieving mother would do nothing to bring her comfort.

Lewis himself proves this point for us. After his wife's death, C. S. Lewis, a man of reason and logic, had finally met his match. Not in a cleverly constructed response to his well-laid-out arguments, but in *feelings*. The man was in pain, and he found out that pain was, in fact, a problem. His grief attacked his surety of God's goodness within human suffering, leaving his argument exposed. Although he had warned his readers of such in *Pain*, that did little to ease his

³³ David L O'Hara, "Con: C. S. Lewis on Evil: At Best a Likely Story," *Value Inquiry Book Series* Vol. 286 (2015): 228.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 92–93.

own pain. He in wrote in *A Grief Observed* that when you need God the most you find “A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”³⁶ In spite of his confidence that he had succeeded in his goal to “solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering,”³⁷ that did him no good when the time of suffering arrived. While a criticism of his earlier book on the subject, this is also a strength of his overall theodicy. The raw emotion of *Grief* modifies the cold, calculated *Pain* to provide a more complete picture.³⁸

An obvious downside to studying C. S. Lewis’ theology is that he is not a trained theologian. He admits as much in the preface to *Pain*.³⁹ This may cast doubt on his conclusions as the mere thoughts of a layman. However, with degrees in classic and English literature, and a voracious appetite for reading anything he could get his hands on,⁴⁰ Lewis likely had a lot of exposure to theological ideas. Also, due to his education, he had a philosopher’s mindset, which transferred easily enough to a theologian’s. Still, it appears that Lewis was not familiar with some common theological viewpoints. For example, Lewis’ argument takes for granted the free will of mankind; his entire theodicy hangs on that point.⁴¹ Lewis assumes that libertarian free will is the greatest good.⁴² If man does not have free will, his argument is moot. In *Mere Christianity* he explains his reasoning behind believing why God created free will: humans are able to make choices that harm others, therefore the reason evil exists must be because men have free will.⁴³ This sounds reasonable enough the way he explains it but is rather circular. Furthermore, he seems to think that libertarian free will is the accepted belief of orthodox

³⁶ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 6.

³⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, xii.

³⁸ Wall, “The Problem of Observed Pain: A Study of C. S. Lewis on Suffering,” 444.

³⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, xii.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, 141–142.

⁴¹ Tallon, “Pro: The Problem of Pain Defended,” 214.

⁴² McGraw, “Peace, Child; You Don’t Understand: Theodicy in the Writings of C. S. Lewis,” 59.

⁴³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 52.

Christianity,⁴⁴ but whole schools of Christian thought deny the free will of mankind and have spent a great deal of thought explaining why that is.⁴⁵ It is likely many in that area will find Lewis' theodicy convincing. In fact, Lewis' re-definition of the concept omnipotence seems brought on the incompatibility between the traditional idea of omnipotence and the concept of libertarian free will.⁴⁶ Lewis' assertion that some things are impossible for God is questionable. Although the Bible does imply that God cannot sin (Jas. 1:13), the idea that God cannot perform any action that is contradictory or nonsensical may go too far in redefining God's omnipotence. Lewis claims that most of his ideas are not original,⁴⁷ and this is not a view unique to him. Augustine of Hippo's own defense of God relied on a similar argument regarding humanity's free will.⁴⁸ Even so, it can be seen as weakening the power of God. However, although it may lack biblical evidence, it makes sense logically. If God can do no wrong, are there other things he cannot do? Can logical contradictions and absolute nonsense be considered part of the wrong which God cannot do? Lewis makes a strong argument for it, but some may see it as a liberal interpretation of the Bible.

As an author, rather than a theologian, Lewis is more concerned with making his writing interesting and readable than theologically precise. While he excels at clever turns of phrase and perfect wording, his lack of definition can be frustrating from a theological standpoint. Case in point, he suggests that the idea of the entire sum of human suffering is a false concept. Lewis' stance is that the maximum amount of pain that can exist in the world is equal to the maximum amount of pain felt by one person. He explains with a toothache analogy: If one person has a

⁴⁴ McGraw, "Peace, Child; You Don't Understand: Theodicy in the Writings of C. S. Lewis," 64.

⁴⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 326.

⁴⁶ McGraw, "Peace, Child; You Don't Understand: Theodicy in the Writings of C. S. Lewis," 63.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, xii.

⁴⁸ McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 225.

toothache, and the person next to them also has a toothache, it could be said that the amount of pain in the room is that of two toothaches. But in no one's consciousness does that double-toothache exist. Even the pain felt on behalf of another is one's own pain. Therefore, as horrible as it would be for one person to suffer the maximum amount possible, that would be most suffering that could exist.⁴⁹ When anti-theists appeal to the sum of all suffering to disprove God, they are invoking an amount of suffering that no one suffers, according to Lewis. While his point that the total amount of suffering in the world is not additive is plausible, the further suggestion that one person's pain is the maximum that exists is hard to believe.⁵⁰ Yet he makes this point with little in the way of explication.⁵¹ For a general audience the lack of further definition is understandable. Although Lewis' approach to arriving at the total amount of pain has flaws, it is enough to prove that the additive approach is not valid.⁵² This is common in his work and is likely one of the reasons he was and continues to be such a popular author among Christians. However, for a student of theology, it leaves something to be desired.

Lewis' writings are engaging, both in his writing style and his ability to spark the imagination. His classical education and immersion in works of great literature developed a mind that thought more deeply about things, and that was reflected in his theology. While exposure to a broader range of theologians may have helped hone his own theology, his books are useful for the edification of the body of Christ, spurring his readers to thinking deeply about their faith and equipping them with tools to do so.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 116–117.

⁵⁰ Joshua Searchris and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, "Weighing Evils: The C.S. Lewis Approach," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62, no. 2 (October 2007): 83.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 87.

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