
THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND HUMAN SOLIDARITY IN THE THINKING OF C.S. LEWIS

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Abstract

This paper presents the Christian vision of C.S. Lewis on suffering. The great question is: 'How could a good God allow pain to exist in the world?' It is not the goodness of God as interfacing with the reality of suffering that counts. Rather, the goodness of God is somehow present in all misery, fulfilling His purpose for us. There is a common morality known throughout humanity. Lewis discusses the idea that people have a standard of behaviour to which they expect other people to adhere. This standard has been called Universal Morality. The conclusion is that Christianity is the medium in which the problem of suffering finds its appropriate response.

Keywords: C.S. Lewis, God's plan, the problem of suffering, Christianity

1. Introduction

Clive Staples Lewis (November 29, 1898 - November 22, 1963) was born in an English-Irish family in Belfast, Ireland, and educated at Oxford and Cambridge. For a long period he was an atheist, but in 1929 he discovered faith. According to his own confession – recorded in one of the most spectacular *conversion diaries* – that was the moment when he was *surprised by the joy* of believing in God [1].

Author of more than fifty works, C.S. Lewis wrote medieval literature and literary criticism studies, science fiction novels, and literature for children, but also works of Christian apologetics and Ethics [2, 3]. The latter impress through their logical rigor, clear style, and precise argumentation, and through the brilliant and vivid way in which he addresses the reader. Besides this, in his lifetime Lewis became famous in Great Britain due to his radio conferences on Christianity during World War II.

Unlike other Christian traditions [4], the Orthodox theological literature has not paid him proper attention. It is regrettable, considering especially the growing authority Lewis' thinking began to have, as well as the way in which he succeeded in providing answers for mankind's essential questions, answers in which faith is supported by reason.

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An eloquent example is the problem of suffering, more precisely of its nature and purpose in people's life. This is why in the present study we will analyse the way in which the outstanding essayist C.S. Lewis tried to answer the dilemma: if God is good and almighty, how does He allow His creatures to endure pain? Lewis underscored that the answer to this question does not reduce to an intellectual solution; it implies a certain way of life, the Christian one.

2. The problem of pain

The problem of pain was the topic of an essay of C.S. Lewis, published in 1940. He could not have chosen a more suitable moment than the beginning of World War II, although the problematics is analysed at a generally valid level: "the unique purpose of the book is to elucidate the intellectual problem of suffering", confesses Lewis, presenting his essay as "the work of a layman and amateur" [5]. Actually, it is a remarkable argumentation on the paradoxical interlacing of human suffering and divine love. The starting point is the conviction that there is the universal presence of evil in the world [6].

The first aspect of 'the divine reality' which the author analyses is divine omnipotence. From this perspective, the problem of pain is rendered in the following terms: 'If God were good, He would wish all His creatures to be completely happy, and if He were almighty, He would be able to fulfill what He wishes. But the creatures are not happy. Consequently, God either lacks goodness, or power, or both.' Actually, the problem is approached in a wrong manner. In order to understand divine omnipotence, we must mention that this means "the power to do everything that is intrinsically possible, and not to do what is intrinsically impossible", which does not represent a limitation of His power [5, p. 347]. In other words, to God can be attributed miracles, but not absurd things [7].

The reality of the world we live in is one governed by rational principles and general laws, without excluding the possibility of miracles. Our world may not be "optimal among all possible worlds", but it is *the only one which is possible!* (The "possible worlds" are worlds that God could have made, but did not.) Divine omnipotence thus also means the absolute freedom of the will of the divine work. God is not conditioned by anything exterior to Him [5, p. 353-354].

The next aspect of the 'divine reality', which C.S. Lewis analyses theoretically, regards God's kindness. The difficulties in understanding the divine goodness come from the fact that, if God is infinitely superior, it follows He is wiser than we are, and His judgment must be different from ours (including as concerns the good and the evil). On the other hand, the presence of a moral conscience in ourselves, capable of identifying something *good* and *evil*, makes these notions not absolutely different from what good and evil are intrinsically. Only the postulation of a total fall of man through original sin would lead us to a contrary idea, but Lewis strongly rejected this Calvinist conception [Z. Dawes, *C.S. Lewis: Calvinist or Classical Arminian?*, online at <http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/c.s.%20lewis%20%20calvinist%20or%20classical%20arminian.pdf> (accessed 11.02.2012)].

Our vision of God's love consists especially in identifying love with kindness. With a touch of irony, C.S. Lewis describes the contemporary man's image of God not as a Father, but rather as a celestial grandfather who manifests 'a senile kindness'; He is a God Who, whenever we like something, would say: 'What does it matter as long as they are pleased?' as if His only will were 'to see the young people enjoying themselves', Whose universal plan would be such that at the end of each day He could say that 'everybody had a great time'. Such an idyllic image does not take into consideration the fact that, although there is kindness in love, the two notions are not interchangeable. On the contrary, love calls, through its very nature, for the perfection of the beloved being [5, p. 362].

Living in God's love means living according to His exigencies, as harmony of our wishes to His wish. The place of each one of us in the world is given by God in His plan, and when we achieve the purpose for which we were created – reaching resemblance with God – our nature finds its fulfillment. What happens when man chooses disobedience is described in the first book of Holy Scripture. Besides, the Book of Genesis presents a reality that comes in conflict with our usual feelings, which seem to offer us extenuating circumstances as to man's abjection. One of the tasks of Christianity is to make man acquire again the old feeling of sin. Paradoxically, as soon as we rediscover the fallen state in which we are, God's *anger* no longer appears as a *barbarian doctrine*, but as something inevitable, as "a mere corollary of His kindness" [5, p. 372-373].

Original sin meant choosing one's own self to the detriment of God. C.S. Lewis even affirms that after the fall, there appeared a new species, marked by a radical alteration of the human constitution. God's foreknowledge knew the fall before it happened, but this does not make God guilty. He is not the cause of the evil in the world.

After he shows that man, as species, is a *corrupted being*, and the good, in the present state, means first of all a good that heals or corrects, Lewis analyses human pain in detail. Just as the evil's cause is not in God, neither is the suffering, its cause being man.

Pain is experienced by man both at a physical and at a spiritual level. Its role is to make us aware that we are not mere imperfect creatures that must be accomplished, but 'rebels that must throw down arms'. But the human spirit 'will not even try to get rid of obstinacy, as long as he seems to thrive'. As a result, pain is what is demanding to be heard. "God is a whisper for us in pleasures, a voice in the conscience, but a cry in pain; pain is the loudspeaker with which He wakes a deaf world" [5, p. 399-400].

Due to its character impossible to ignore, pain can have double consequences: on the one hand, it can lead to rebellion; on the other hand, if one is aware of it and assumes it, pain can offer man repentance. Whereas each of us feels that the 'evil ones' deserve to suffer for their sins, the situation is different when we see the righteous ones suffering. It appears that God is unjust, or even sadistic. C.S. Lewis shows that this case also denotes that God Most High is merciful. It is a sort of paradoxical mercifulness, rather difficult to understand: on the one hand, "we are mused seeing how distress comes upon kind people, worthy of esteem, who are incapable of raising their voice – upon overwrought

and hardworking mothers or upon industrious and prudent merchants, upon those who toiled in an honest way for their piece of happiness....” On the other hand, the One Who made these honest people “might really be right in considering that their little welfare and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them happy: that all these will be lost one day and that if they do not learn to know Him, they will be unhappy”. This is the reason why God allows pain to enter the vineyard of the good ones, “forewarning them of a shortage they will have to face one day. The life dedicated to themselves and to their family prevents them from admitting their own need; and He makes their life less sweet”. In what sense is this God’s humility? For He accepts someone to come to Him even in this situation. “For God is not at all flattered that we choose Him as an alternative to the inferno; and He still accepts this. The illusion of the creature that he is self-sufficient must be chased, for the good of the creature; and through an affliction or the fear of affliction on earth, through the primitive fear of the eternal flames, God chases it, *without caring about the deflation of His glory.*” [5, p. 404]

The choice that man constantly has to make is not a real choice if it is made unknowingly. In the formulation of C.S. Lewis, ‘where it is impossible for us to know that we choose, we cannot choose’. Again, in an antinomic way, pain can be a decisive factor in making a good choice. Immanuel Kant rejected every choice that is made having pleasure as a mobile, raising to the rank of virtue only the deed done out of pure respect to the moral law. However, Lewis reminds one of Aristotle’s position, according to whom the more virtuous man becomes, the more he likes virtuous actions. One considers that both opinions contain a grain of truth – “we thus agree with Aristotle that what is intrinsically right can also be pleasant and that man will like it the more it is better; but we agree with Kant to say that there is only one just act – that of the denial of the self – that the fallen creature cannot wish to the highest degree unless it is unpleasant”. The eloquent example is Abraham’s trial through the order to sacrifice Isaac [5, p. 406-407].

Suffering represents an occasion to turn towards our neighbours in hard times. Any period of crisis can be a suitable context to show that we are Christians. C.S. Lewis uses here his own experience during the war, but also the daily experience of each one of us, rapt into a state of self-satisfaction out of which only pain can awake (only intermittently, however, for man can always appeal to...oblivion).

This is how *the double-edged sword* of suffering works in human life – a symbolic image, eloquent for the way in which Lewis approaches the issue of its relevance in human life. (Not only at an individual level, but also at a social one; hostile to any political vision, but especially to the Marxist one, of utopian nature, C.S. Lewis discovers a common point of the two visions, the Marxist and the Christian ones: that poverty is blessed and it still has to be eliminated.)

Wishing to complete the image of his thoughts on the cause of suffering in the world, C.S. Lewis extracts the following six assertions, definitive for the Christian vision on the issue:

- 1) In Christianity there is a *paradox* of suffering: it is not good in itself; in any experienced pain, it is good for the one who suffers to obey the divine will, and what is also good is the compassion it stirs in those who look at the suffering ones. In the fallen universe, partially saved, one can distinguish: a) the simple good that comes from God, b) the simple evil produced by the rebellious creature, c) God's exploitation of this evil in order to reach a saving aim which produces d) the complex good to which assumed suffering contributes, and which engenders repentance.
- 2) If suffering is an element necessary to salvation, then it will not cease until the divine plan concerning man is accomplished. Any political project that promises the accomplishment of *heaven on earth* is utopian. There is no call for despair here, for 'the acute feeling of the afflictions we all partake...it is an impulse at least as good towards casting away many of these, as any of the foolish hopes that people are tempted to fulfill by breaking the moral law, and which, once fulfilled, prove out to be only rack and ruin'.
- 3) The Christian doctrine of obedience, of submission to the divine will is a theological, not a political one.
- 4) Taking into account the present state of the world, God repulses our joy, our pleasure here; nevertheless, He is the source of these good things, and He sometimes gives us the occasion to delight in them (being careful not to mistake these earthly pleasures for the eternal ones).
- 5) The presence of pain in the world must not be overbid. "There is not a sum of suffering...when we reach the maximum of suffering a person can endure, we reach...something awful, but this is the whole suffering that can exist in the universe. Adding a crowd of people in pain does not add pain".
- 6) "Of all evils, only pain is a sterilised, disinfected evil." No one would like to repeat the painful experience; in the case of masochism this is still valid, because the masochist feels *pleasure* through pain. *The complex good* is explained in this way: through pain, the evil is disinfected [5, p. 418-420].

C.S. Lewis ends his reflections on the problem of pain by asserting the same convictions as Reverend Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) [8]: ultimately, the problem of pain leads to the choice between heaven and hell (*tertium non datur*). Rejecting the temptation of apocatastasis, Lewis writes: the possibility of the existence of hell intervenes "out of the true ethical exigency that, sooner or later, justice should be affirmed". It is not the case of a cynical God, but of respecting the human will, the way some wish to follow in this world already. Again, just as in the case of original sin, *salvation* through a decree, obliged, would be irrelevant. One must not confuse forgiveness and forgetting: "forgetting an evil means simply ignoring it, treating it as if it were a good thing. But forgiveness must be accepted and at the same time offered, in order to be complete: a man who admits no guilt cannot accept forgiveness." [5, p. 423] The people in hell are not those who suffer the punishment of a sadistic God, but those who willingly chose darkness, not light (John 3. 19, 12.48). They are the ones who, choosing their own self instead of God, fall from the state of humanity, considers C.S. Lewis. Contrarily, the people in heaven become human beings completely, reaching plenitude. This is the horizon in which one must regard the problem of

pleasure and pain – not as ultimate realities, but as passing states, whose importance lacks the meaning of an eternal good or evil [9].

3. Human solidarity in the Church of Christ

At the beginning of the previous work to which we referred, C.S. Lewis declares that “when pain is about to appear, a little courage helps more than a great deal of knowledge, a little human compassion more than much courage, and a drop of the balm of God’s love more than all these put together” [5, p. 333-334]. We can deduce that, if the problem of suffering is a universal one [10], then the solution to this problem is also one with a universal character. Referring to the ultimate reality, the opposite of human pain par excellence is the paradisiac state, the eternal happiness. In paradise is accomplished the perfect human communion – the communion of the saints, according to the model of the Trinitarian Persons.

It would be wrong to believe that C.S. Lewis finds the solution for pain exclusively in another world, that he proclaims an utopian solution, like the political ones. His reflections on Christianity represent the hermeneutical key of the solution to the problem of suffering. Providential is the fact that Lewis exposed his vision on Christianity on the radio – on BBC – exactly in a period when suffering was omnipresent, and hopes in the value of the human being had been seriously shattered: in 1943 [11].

The Law of Human Nature or the *law of nature* proclaims that one should do good deeds and avoid evil. It is a law inborn in man, thus universal. The various religions of humanity have this moral law as a common denominator, which can be seen by means of a thorough analysis. Behind this law there is something exterior to man, but infinitely superior to him, and that is God. One can identify *rival* conceptions of God, but the complete one is the Christian one. It is a vision that goes beyond atheism, pantheism, or dualism. C.S. Lewis does not hesitate to call it the ‘shocking alternative’. What is this? The answer has to do with the paradox: how is evil possible in a world created by a good God? Lewis formulated it in a manner characteristic to children’s literature (which does not diminish the value of his argumentation, but makes it clearer): “Any person with authority knows how one thing can in one way conform to its will and not conform in another way. A mother can very well tell her children ‘*I am not going to come every evening to oblige you to tidy your room. You will have to learn to keep it tidy on your own initiative*’. Afterwards, she goes one evening and finds the teddy bear, the ink bottle, and the French textbook in the fireplace. This state of affairs is contrary to her will. She would prefer all the children to keep things tidy. On the one hand, it is her very will that allowed the children to be messy.” The conclusion drawn is that freedom has an absolute value and that, as a consequence, a world of robots – creatures functioning as machines – was not worth being created [11, p. 70-71].

The risk God assumed when He created man free in the absolute way does not seem to have been worth the effort. Man’s fall into sin made it necessary for God Himself to descend on Earth. The redemption in and through Jesus Christ

lies at the basis of the appearance of Christianity. Just like creation, in the redemptive act, human freedom possesses maximum value. This freedom is the reason why man was not saved through a decree. Overcoming sin requested free and conscious assumption of it – man’s repentance [11, p. 83]

Even if He did not need this repentance, the Son of God became incarnate. Moreover, “Christ suffered the perfect capitulation and humiliation: perfect because He was God; capitulation and humiliation because He was human. The Christian faith is in such a way that somehow we all become partakers of Christ’s humiliation and suffering and that we will also be partakers of His final victory over death and we will receive a new life after we have died and become perfect and completely happy creatures. This means much more than our attempt to follow His teachings. [...] According to the Christian conception, [...] in Christ appeared a new type of people, and the new life which started in Him must be engrafted in us.” [11, p. 86]

The background in which all these *new people* live is the Church. In the Church there are the saving offerings brought by Jesus Christ: baptism, faith, and the Lord’s Supper (the Liturgy). The perfection of Christians, their holiness comes from Christ, not from themselves. The Christian is not a man who never makes mistakes, but is a man who can repent, rise again, and start all over after each stumble – because the life in Christ is in him, mending him forever, giving him the power to repeat (to a certain extent) the voluntary death that Christ Himself suffered. The Christian believes that any good deed he makes comes from Christ, Who is inside him.

Thus, the moral law has a more profound meaning. God, the Source of goodness, must not be regarded as ‘that kind of person who always looks around to see if someone enjoys anything and later to end that joy’. The moral rules are not caprices of a despotic Creator, eager to see His creatures suffering. These moral rules have a totally different role: they are managing lines to lead the human machinery. Next, C. S. Lewis underscores that there are two ways in which *the human machine* can go wrong. “One way is when people alienate from each other, or when they run into each other and produce harm, through deception or violence. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual – when different parts of him (his abilities and wishes, etc.) either alienate one from the other, or they interfere with each other. You can have an idea if you imagine that we are like a fleet of vessels sailing in line. [...] Or, if you want, think of people as an orchestra which plays a melody. In order to have good results, one needs two things. The instrument of each player must be tuned and he must play only at the right moment so that it may combine with the others.” [11, p. 99].

The purpose of humanity, salvation, refers not only to its eternal character, but also to the most suitable means through which it can be accomplished. Therefore, it is time for C.S. Lewis to mention the *cardinal virtues* – prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude – as well as the *theological virtues* – charity, hope, and faith [11, p. 106-109, 166-168]. A Christian behaviour adequate to its supreme ideal, Jesus Christ, takes heed of all people, of all times and all places. This can bring equity among people, which necessarily involves charity. This

does not reduce to giving to people with physical needs; in its broader sense, charity can include those who are in illness or suffering [11, p. 116].

Doing good or bad does not refer to a sort of *bargain* we do with God or not. The problem is much deeper: what we make, makes us, C.S. Lewis seems to say. And if we take life as a whole, “with its numberless choices, along life you slowly change this central thing either in a celestial, or in a diabolical one; either in a creature that is in harmony with God, with the other creatures and with oneself, or in one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, with one’s fellow creatures and with oneself. [...] Each of us advances every moment towards a state or another.” Here, there is also a problem of knowledge: “Good people know good and evil as well; evil people know neither good, nor evil” [11, p. 124].

In order to understand the way in which C.S. Lewis made the apology of Christianity – understood as human solidarity, having Christ as a model, and as a goal ‘the life in Him’ – one must refer to other two aspects: the problem of forgiveness and the significance of prayer.

The request to forgive one’s enemies is ‘a terrible duty’. For example, Lewis wonders: “How would you feel if you were a Pole or a Jew and you would be told to forgive the Gestapo?” It is a serious question that reminds us of the request in the prayer *Our Father* – “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”. This way is at the centre of the Christian teaching, for there is not the slightest indication that we might be offered forgiveness in other terms.

Loving others as yourself makes possible many gestures of forgiveness; unfortunately, in life we often forget this fundamental Christian principle. And even when we succeed in doing good deeds, the great sin, pride, is always there. It brings with it other vices; it is a state of thinking totally opposed to God. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. Therefore, “Christians are right: pride was the main cause of afflictions in any nation and family since the beginning of the world [...] Pride always means enmity – it is enmity, and not only enmity between people, but also enmity towards God.” [11, p. 159]

People’s duty is not just to forgive, but also to pray for one another. Prayer has a special power that unites a man with his fellow creatures, shows C.S. Lewis, relying on his own experience [12]. Aware that the efficiency of prayer cannot be proved through scientific, empirical proofs, Lewis underlines that this *efficiency* has nothing to do with the success of the request in the prayer addressed to God. The simple utterance of prayer words does not mean praying. The prayer has to do with a personal relation, whether it is between God and people or between a man and his neighbours. Therefore, prayer is valid not due to a magic mechanism; it means more than a request and a favourable answer to it. Praying means being ready to submit to God’s will, to accept the plan He has for you; in prayer we do not give God advice, and we do not even place ourselves in the situation of some *privileged of the court*. The mystery of prayer is that the more one advances in the way of Christian perfection, the more his prayers appear to be less answered, because obstacles and afflictions multiply. It is just like Gethsemane, where God *leaves* the apostles – but only to test their

strength, to enhance their faith. “Meanwhile,” Lewis laments, “simple people like you and me, if our prayers happen to be sometimes fulfilled, despite any hopes and probabilities, would better not jump to conclusions in our own interest. If we were stronger, we would be treated with less tenderness. If we were more courageous, we would be sent, with a little help, to defend more desperate outposts in the great battle [with Satan - Ed.]” [11, 13]

The prayer also comes as a manifestation of human life not only as *bios*, but also as *zoe* – not only at a physical, biological, but also at a spiritual level. This new life follows other rules than the biological life, many times paradoxical. Again, the reality of *zoe* is one and the same with that of Christianity; the authentic life is that revealed in Jesus Christ – and this gives Christianity its perennial value. The cohesive power of the Church is the divine power, the grace of the Holy Spirit, not something earthly. Ceasing to be ‘obstinate tin soldiers’, people will be able to fulfill the destiny for which they were created. In order to do this, it is necessary for us to give ourselves to God, which makes the Christian life very difficult and very easy at the same time [5, p. 249-250].

To follow Christ also includes bearing His cross. This is the only way leading to Resurrection, to eternal life [5, p. 252-253]. Going beyond our self-sufficiency – which involves oftentimes assuming suffering in this world – we manage to let God transform us from His creatures into His sons. Following not the way of death, but the way of life, we reach Christ – this is the mystery of Christianity.

4. Conclusions

In the introduction of this study we mentioned the growing interest in the work of C.S. Lewis. Referring to this aspect, Walter Hooper, his former secretary, wrote: “The original and perennial value of Lewis [...] consists in his capacity not only of rebutting, but also of purifying: of offering the mind an authentic vision of Faith which purifies and replaces errors, uncertainty and, especially, the arrogance of those who [...] ‘pretend to discern the germs of the fern, but cannot see an elephant which is ten metres away in broad daylight’.” [14]

Certainly, as concerns the problem of suffering, the Anglican Lewis (a layman) proves to be a subtle analyst of a complex theological problem [15-18]. He rejects solidly the arguments of some who found the source of pain in a capricious and unjust God or in the *natural* state of the world.

The value of his writings, with a pronounced apologetic Christian character, is also shown by the manner in which he places the relation between good and evil, between pain and pleasure, at the very core of Christian life. The image of the chess player is very illustrative: “In a game of chess, you can make certain arbitrary concessions to the adversary, which, in relation to the rules of the game are what miracles are to the laws of nature. You can do without a rook or you can ignore an inattentive move of the adversary. But if you allowed everything that would be an advantage for him [...] then it is no longer a game.

The same happens in the case of the life of the souls in a world: well-established laws, consequences revealed by the causal necessity, the whole natural order are limits which contain ordinary life, the only condition that makes such a life possible. *Try to exclude the possibility of suffering implied by the order of nature and of the existence of the free will, and you will see that you have excluded life itself.* “ [5, p. 352-353]

We end the present study by making reference to the desideratum that guided C.S. Lewis constantly in his writings: “Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times” [11, p. 6]. Bearing in mind the characterisation of C.S. Lewis made by Bishop Kallistos Ware, that of “an anonymous Orthodox” [19], we hope that the thinking of this subtle and at the same time profound Christian essayist will have a growing influence on Orthodox theology.

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