

C. S. Lewis and the Problem of Evil

By Thomas Talbott

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I. Introduction

The Problem of Pain by C. S. Lewis was the first serious piece of theological reflection I ever read. When I first encountered the book during my sophomore year in high school, I knew nothing about Lewis, except this: he was the author of one of my favorite science fiction novels, *Out of the Silent Planet*, which I had read during my freshman year. But I had learned less about Lewis from the novel than one might have expected (or hoped). What had captured my imagination at the time—and I fear that Lewis would have been impatient with this—was the thought that the story might actually be true; such a “claim” is, after all, made in the Postscript, and Maleldil did seem suspiciously similar to God. Perhaps by reason of Ransom’s trip to Mars, I speculated, Lewis had acquired some inside information.

Such was the innocent mind that first encountered *The Problem of Pain* and was exposed, for the first time, to the world of philosophical theology. Reading the book was like eating forbidden fruit; it was exhilarating but also a bit frightening. For one thing, the book actually contained arguments, even arguments about God, and more importantly the arguments seemed to make sense! At the small fundamentalist high school I attended, I had, to be sure, encountered arguments before. One of my teachers had argued that, during the last days, the stars will quite literally fall upon the earth; and when a friend of mine suggested that a single star would consume the earth long before striking it, he was severely reprimanded. But Lewis’ arguments were different; they were addressed, it seemed, to the thinking mind and seemed to have the authority of reason behind them. When I finished the book and finally set it aside, I was awakened to the world of ideas and to the adventure of philosophical discovery.

Since those days, not surprisingly, I have come to disagree with Lewis on a number of theological points, but I shall always admire his ability to make

C. S. Lewis’ writings in Christian apologetics have been and still are widely read and appreciated, yet they have been largely neglected by philosophers. Thomas Talbott argues that this neglect is unwarranted, that in spite of its engaging style and popular appeal Lewis’ work on the problem of evil is substantial enough to reward serious study. Mr. Talbott teaches philosophy at Willamette University.

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abstract philosophical arguments available to the Christian laity. Even Christian philosophers, I think, tend to underestimate his apologetic writings, in part because he sought to address a lay audience and in part because his lucid writing style sometimes conceals the rigorous character of his thought. Though *The Problem of Pain* can be read, with a degree of understanding at least, by a naive high school student, I have yet to encounter a more convincing piece of Christian philosophy written during the first half of this century; it anticipates John Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy and sets forth clearly some of the assumptions behind Alvin Plantinga’s Free Will Defense. But perhaps because it is aimed at a lay audience, few philosophers have bothered to comment upon it. An exception is Charles Hartshorne, who in a review describes the book as “vigorous, acute, and honest,” though Hartshorne also goes on to criticize Lewis for his dogged adherence to orthodoxy.¹ Another is Antony Flew, who skirmishes with Lewis in the footnotes of his paper, “Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom,” and who twice refers to Lewis in his book, *God and Philosophy*.² And others have, to be sure, commented more extensively and more favorably on the book: for example Austin Farrer³ and Richard Purtill.⁴ More recently, however, a vigorous critique of the book has appeared in a work by John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*.⁵ According to Beversluis, Lewis’ apologetic writings have little philosophical merit and his proposed solution to the problem of evil is unsuccessful. But the Beversluis critique is disappointing for two reasons: he misrepresents Lewis in ways that are simply inexcusable, and he ignores every development in recent philosophy that would support Lewis on specific points.

It seems to me, therefore, that a re-examination of Lewis’ work on the problem of evil would be appropriate at this time. The past two decades have produced an enormous body of literature on this topic and a consensus, even among nontheists, that no one could have anticipated at the time that Lewis wrote. When viewed from the perspective of that consensus, *The Problem of Pain* can be seen to have been in many ways ahead of its time.

II. Divine Omnipotence

As the title of Lewis’ book suggests, human suffering, perhaps more than any other kind of evil, is sometimes thought to pose a philosophical problem for theism, one that arises because, as traditionally conceived, God is both omni-

¹Charles Hartshorne, “Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Reflections on C. S. Lewis’ *The Problem of Pain* and *The Case for Christianity*,” *Ethics*, Vol. LIV (July, 1944), pp. 295–298.

²See Antony Flew, “Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom,” in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 144–169, and Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), pp. 47 and 55.

³Austin Farrer, “The Christian Apologist,” in Jocelyn Gibb, ed., *Light on C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1965), pp. 23–43.

⁴In his published works, Purtill often refers to Lewis; in addition, he has published two books on Lewis: *Lord of the Elves and Eldils: Fantasy and Philosophy in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), and *C. S. Lewis’ Case for the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

⁵John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

tent and perfectly loving. The problem is sometimes expressed this way: If God were truly omnipotent he would have the power to prevent all human suffering; if he were perfectly loving, he would want to exercise that power; so if he were both omnipotent and perfectly loving, there would be no suffering at all in the world. But there is suffering, as even the theist concedes. Therefore, a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly loving does not exist.

The Problem of Pain is Lewis' reply to this anti-theistic argument, and in it he discusses both the nature of divine omnipotence and the nature of divine love. Concerning divine omnipotence, the first question he asks is whether there are limits of any kind to what an omnipotent being can do, and he answers that there are. Certainly an omnipotent being would not face the kind of *non-logical* limits that created persons face, but neither can an omnipotent being do the intrinsically impossible, as Lewis calls it (p. 28), or the logically impossible, as some philosophers would call it. Not even an omnipotent being, in other words, can create square circles, or bring it about that two plus two equals five, or cause it to be the case that the Apostle Paul *freely* repents of his sin. One way, though not the only way, that a proposition might be logically impossible is for it to include an explicit contradiction; but as Lewis points out, self-contradictory propositions do not assert anything specific and therefore do not point to some obstacle in the world, or some competing power, over which God has no control.

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: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words "God can" (p. 28).⁶

Still, some theists may be uncomfortable with the idea that God cannot do the logically impossible, even as some nontheists are impatient with the idea. But such theists might be comforted to know that the nontheist is already in serious trouble at this point. For either there are logical limits to what an omnipotent being can do, or there are no such limits. If there are no such limits, then there is no problem of evil for this reason: if an omnipotent being can do the logically impossible, he can do that which is morally unjustified and remain morally justified in doing it. So clearly, the problem of evil can arise, as a philosophical problem for theism, only on the assumption that there are logical limits to what an omnipotent being can do. But then, if there are such limits, God's options in creating a world might have been quite different from what some would imagine; indeed, as we shall see, so many loopholes arise that even most atheistic philosophers are now prepared to concede this: at the very least the quantity and variety of evil in the world is *logically consistent* with the existence of God.⁷

There are perhaps two reasons why so many nontheists now make this

⁶All page references in the text are from C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

⁷See William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979).

concession. In the first place, as Lewis points out (pp. 28-29), it is not always easy to tell what is, and is not, logically impossible. That Smith should be a married bachelor clearly *is* impossible, but what about traveling backwards in time or an effect preceding its cause in time? Are these logically impossible? Many philosophers think they are, but some disagree. And so the argument continues. Logical impossibilities are not, so to speak, under our control; in many cases, we are unable to know which propositions are impossible and therefore what options were open to God in creating a world. Could God have created an independent, conscious person in the absence of all pain, frustration, and sense of separation? I doubt that any of us knows with certainty the answer to that question. According to Lewis, "a society of free souls" may in fact require "a relatively independent and 'inexorable' Nature."

There is no reason to suppose that self-consciousness, the recognition of a creature by itself as a "self," can exist except in contrast with an "other," a something which is not the self. It is against an environment, and preferably a social environment, an environment of other selves, that the awareness of Myself stands out (p. 29).

But a stronger claim also seems defensible. If I were always to get whatever I wanted as soon as I formed the wish, perhaps I would see the entire physical universe, including other persons, as a mere extension of my body and would therefore never realize myself as distinct from my environment; but if I were not always to get whatever I wanted, then I would experience at least a degree of pain and frustration.⁸ So perhaps a degree of pain and frustration is itself a necessary condition of a society of independent persons who interact with each other. Quite apart from that, moreover, Lewis suggests that an environment in which wrong choices are possible and therefore the highest moral virtues can be cultivated may require that persons be free, if they so choose, to inflict suffering upon each other and to do so without divine interference (see pp. 33-34). Lewis' point, however, is *not*, as some commentators have assumed, that we can know with certainty what the relevant necessities and impossibilities are. His point is just the opposite; because we cannot know what they are, the argument from evil fails.

As I said before, this account of the intrinsic necessities of a world is meant merely as a specimen of what they might be. What they really are, only Omniscience has the data and the wisdom to see: but they are not likely to be *less* complicated than I have suggested (p. 34).

One difficulty, then, for proponents of the argument from evil is that of knowing what kinds of worlds are, and are not, possible. A second and more serious difficulty is this: If it is not within God's power to do the logically impossible, then neither is it within his power to make actual every *possible* state of affairs that he might like to make actual. Many philosophers, following Leib-

⁸I borrow this argument from Richard Purtill, *Thinking About Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1978), p. 20.

niz, have assumed that an omnipotent being could create (or make actual⁹) any possible world, where a world is (roughly) a complete description of the way things might have been. But that assumption, appropriately dubbed by Alvin Plantinga as "Leibniz's Lapse," is clearly false.¹⁰ If my act of writing this paper is truly a free act, then it must have been possible for me not to write it; and if it *was* possible for me not to write it, then there is a possible world in which I don't write it. That world—call it *W*—might be the same as the actual world (at least in certain relevant respects) up to the time of my writing, but in that world I choose to spend my time in another way. But though *W* is truly a possible world (a way things might have been), it is a world that God was powerless to create; had he tried to create it, he would have failed. He could, of course, have *caused* me to refrain from writing, but then I would not, on Lewis' account, have refrained *freely*. In the exact circumstances that obtained, only I could bring it about that I freely refrain from writing. Since I could have chosen not to write, *W* is indeed a possible world; but since I didn't make that choice and God was powerless to bring it about that I did, he was also powerless to create *W*. If free will (of the relevant kind) is so much as possible, therefore, there are probably an infinite number of possible worlds that God was powerless to create.

It is doubtful that Lewis himself saw clearly the full implication of this point; indeed, probably no one saw it clearly before Plantinga published his important work on the Free Will Defense and made the point so clear to the philosophical community that almost everyone now accepts it.¹¹ Despite the volume of recent discussion on the point, however, we still find John Beversluis, as recently as 1985, arguing against Lewis in the following way:

The claim that not even Omnipotence can create the kind of world the skeptic has in mind depends for its plausibility on the mistaken assumption that certain [contingent] facts that are true of our world are necessarily and "inexorably" true of *any* world.¹²

But neither Lewis nor any other theist is required to make the assumption that Beversluis attributes to him. Some theists do make this claim. It is possible, they point out, that God was powerless to create a world with a more favorable balance of good over evil than exists in the actual world. There may in fact be a logically consistent world with a more favorable balance of good over evil, but it

⁹If by "world" one means a possible world and by "possible world" one means (roughly) a way things might have been, then God does not, strictly speaking, create a world; indeed a possible world is an abstract entity that has no beginning in time. Rather, God creates the physical universe and all the dependent beings in it and thereby brings it about that one of the possible worlds is the actual world. For this reason, some philosophers would say that God *actualizes* a world and does so, in part, by creating the heavens and the earth. (See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 169.) In what follows, however, I shall continue to speak as if God creates a world.

¹⁰See *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 180–184.

¹¹Christians interested in the problem of evil really should familiarize themselves with Plantinga's seminal work on the Free Will Defense. It can be found in *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), Chapter six (but also Chapter five); *The Nature of Necessity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), Chapter IX; and *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Co., 1977), pp. 7–64. Interested readers should probably begin with *God, Freedom, and Evil*.

¹²Beversluis, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

is possible that any such world belongs to the set of worlds that God was powerless to create. The genius of this claim, which is apt to seem wildly implausible when one first hears it, will become clear, perhaps, if we consider more closely some of Beversluis' own suggestions. According to Beversluis, God could have created a world in which the laws of nature are different from those in the actual world; he could have created persons with a much higher pain threshold or persons who never experience any pain at all; and he therefore could have created a world that contains "much less pain and suffering" than does the actual world.¹³ As they stand, however, such suggestions are beside the point since the following possibility remains: Any such world that God could have created would have contained a less favorable balance of good over evil than exists in the actual world. God could, of course, have eliminated *all* pain and suffering by the simple expedient of creating a universe devoid of sentient creatures, and he might have "considered" other alternatives as well: perhaps a universe in which created persons never encounter each other and therefore never harm each other, or perhaps one in which, because of a different physical body or different laws of nature, created persons are incapable of harming each other physically. Many, many changes in the structure of the physical universe could presumably be *imagined*. But why assume that any such changes would have resulted in a better world?—that any such changes would, in the end, have resulted in greater possibilities of joy and happiness, more interesting life situations, more enduring friendships, better examples of moral courage and self-giving love, or a more favorable balance of good over evil than will eventually be produced in the universe that actually exists? If God did create free agents, remember, the balance of good over evil in the actual world is determined, in part at least, by the free choices of these free agents; so how does Beversluis presume to know that God could have improved the balance of good over evil by making structural changes in the physical universe? How does he know what life would be like and what free choices would have been made in very different circumstances from those that actually exist?

Perhaps Beversluis thinks that God could have improved things immeasurably simply by eliminating cancer from the world. But how could anyone (who is not omniscient) possibly know that or even have reason to think it true? Try this thought experiment. Try to imagine what our world (with exactly the same persons in it) might have been like in the absence of all cancer. Our experiment won't be at all technically accurate, of course, and may even be incoherent, but it may also be pedagogically useful. To begin with, then, we must delete from the world (in our imagination) all the pain and suffering caused by this terrible disease as well as all the psychological torment experienced by both cancer victims and those who love such victims; then we must delete all those goods—such as the courageous endurance of pain—for which the cancer is a logically necessary condition; then we must delete all the free choices—and all the consequences of such free choices—that either would not

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 111.

have been made at all or would have been made differently if our world had been devoid of all cancer. As one can see, things quickly get complicated. If God exists and there is an afterlife, some of the choices deleted may be choices that result in eternal joy and happiness for some persons. But that is just the beginning of our experiment. To fill out our world, we must also *add in* all the options, all the free choices, and all the consequences of such free choices that would have been different. If some persons would have become more arrogant and vicious, that must be added in; and if others would have become more humane and charitable, that too must be added in. At this point our experiment breaks down completely. We cannot possibly know what free choices people would have made in a world without cancer, whether they would have become more vicious or less; nor can we know what options might have been open to God in working with these people. And that is just the point. Trying to figure what a world of free persons would be like in the absence of cancer is not like calculating where the planets would be today if they had been in certain specified positions last year. Even if we restrict our attention to physical suffering, we cannot *know* that the total quantity of such suffering would have been less had there been no cancer. If, in the absence of cancer, more people would have become more vicious, more likely to engage in warfare or to inflict suffering on others, the total quantity of suffering might have been *increased* by the elimination of cancer. God could, to be sure, have created different people or have placed those he did create in different circumstances or have given them different bodies. But how are we to know what the consequences of such moves would have been?—whether, for instance, in other bodies we would have become more loving or less loving, more bored with life or less bored with life? Unless Beversluis has a kind of knowledge that some philosophers deny even of God—knowledge of how each free person *would respond* in purely hypothetical situations that don't even exist—he cannot possibly know that a good and omnipotent God would have created things differently.

Once one begins to think through such complexities as these—which we have barely touched upon—the anti-theistic argument from evil begins to look less and less plausible. To make any case at all, a nontheist must claim to know two things that cannot, it seems, be known by us: first, what kinds of worlds (that differ in fundamental ways from the actual world) are genuinely possible, and second, which possible worlds are within God's power to create. If we cannot know these things, then the argument from evil fails.

III. Divine Goodness

Whenever Lewis addresses the topic of divine goodness, he tries to make one point as clear as he possibly can: Such character traits as loving kindness, justice, and moral perfection have essentially the same meaning when ascribed to God as they have when ascribed to human beings. God's love may be more perfect than ours and his moral requirements—for example, that we are to love our enemies as well as our friends—more exacting than we might have ex-

pected, but he does not operate from a moral framework that is essentially different from ours. I don't know how Lewis could have made his view on this matter any clearer. In *The Problem of Pain*, he tells us that

If God's moral judgment differs from ours so that our "black" may be His "white," we can mean nothing by calling Him good; for to say "God is good," while asserting that His goodness is wholly other than ours, is really only to say "God is we know not what." And an utterly unknown quality in God cannot give us moral grounds for loving or obeying Him. If He is not (in our sense) "good" we shall obey, if at all, only through fear—and should be equally ready to obey an omnipotent Fiend (p. 37).

Some philosophers are apt to wonder, however, whether Lewis understood the full import of what he was saying here. Does he really mean to say that God is good in our own sense of the term?—that God loves us, for example, in some ordinary (and unqualified) sense? In a short but widely read paper, Antony Flew suggests that many theological utterances, such as "God loves us like a father loves his children," are typically so qualified by theists that they eventually become empty; they may appear to be genuine assertions but are not. Flew's example is that of a child dying from inoperable throat cancer.

His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—God's love is 'not a merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love', perhaps—and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that 'God loves us as a father (but, of course, . . .)'. We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against?¹⁴

Though part of what Flew says here is motivated by an outmoded (and indefensible) theory of meaning, one that need not concern us at all,¹⁵ the question he raises is one that might occur to anyone: Given that God's actions (or nonactions) towards the dying child are so different from the father's, how can Lewis claim that God's love for the child is the same kind of love (albeit a more perfect form of it) as the father's?

To answer this question, we need to appreciate a point that Lewis makes immediately before the above quotation:

if God is wiser than we His judgement must differ from ours on many things, and not least on good and evil. What seems to us good may therefore not be good in His eyes, and what seems to us evil may not be evil (p. 37).

On the one hand, says Lewis, God's judgment must differ from ours because he is wiser than we are; on the other, as indicated in the previous quotation, God's good cannot be the same as our evil. Herein lies, I believe, a solution to the problem of evil.

In what ways might the moral judgments of a wiser person disagree with

¹⁴Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in Flew and Macintyre, eds., *op. cit.* pp. 98–99.

¹⁵In this paper, Flew seems to adopt a verificationist theory of meaning and to endorse a version of the Logical Positivist's Verification Principle. For a thorough (though occasionally technical) review of the difficulties with this principle, see Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, pp. 156–168.

those of one who is not so wise but who is operating from essentially the same moral framework? When considering a disagreement about the moral character of an act, one must distinguish carefully between two very different cases: one in which all of the relevant facts (such as the exact circumstances in which the act is performed, the intentions of the agent performing the act, the exact consequences of the act, the available alternatives, etc.) are known, and one in which some of the relevant facts are not known. In the former case, a disagreement about the precise nature of an act—whether it be, for instance, a good act or a bad act, a loving act or a cruel act—probably would imply a difference in fundamental moral concepts; but in the latter case (where some of the relevant facts remain unknown or are in dispute) such a disagreement would clearly not have that implication. A primitive who concludes that men in white coats bearing long needles are cruel to children need not be operating from a moral framework that differs substantially from our own; nor would it be surprising to find that a loving father in a primitive culture wants to “protect” his child from the very shot of penicillin that a missionary doctor, filled with the love of God, wants to administer. The loving father simply lacks some important information. It is only an analogy, of course, (and we should remember that primitives are often wiser than we are), but the analogy does illustrate an obvious point. That God is willing to permit a child to die from cancer, even though the child’s loving father desperately tries to save her, in no way entails that God’s “white” is the same as our “black.”

But not even such an obvious point as this prevents one of Lewis’ critics, John Beversluis, from charging that Lewis has indeed reversed our ordinary moral standards.

By the time he has finished, our “black” has become God’s “white,” and moral standards have been reversed. What we call suffering, Lewis calls having our illusions shattered. What we call happiness, Lewis calls self-indulgence. What we call a moral outrage, Lewis calls a compliment. What we call kindness, Lewis calls indifference. What we call cruelty, Lewis calls love.¹⁶

Though Beversluis offers nothing even remotely like an argument for these charges, he does allude, in a somewhat off-handed way, to two crucial passages in Lewis. The first one, however, is almost unrecognizable in the following bit of distortion:

He [Lewis] begins with a complaint. By *good*, he declares, ‘people nowadays’ mean little more than ‘lovingness,’ just as by *love* they mean only the desire to see others happy.¹⁷

Such a “paraphrase” does convey the impression of a retreat; it leaves the impression that Lewis identifies divine goodness with something *other* than perfect love and divine love with something other than a desire for true human happiness. But nothing could be farther from the truth. Here is what Lewis actually says:

¹⁶Beversluis, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–119.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 107 (emphasis on “mean little more than” added).

By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness; and in this *we may be right*. And by Love, in this context, most of us mean kindness—the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” (pp. 39–40, emphasis added).

It is unfortunate, to say the least, that Beversluis nowhere quotes this passage in full. That it in no way represents a retreat is made abundantly clear, in the very next sentence, by the example of a “senile benevolence” that likes “to see young people enjoying themselves” (p. 40). A mother who tries to pacify her young children by setting them before the television all day is not, presumably, acting out of hatred; she probably does love her children after a fashion and certainly would prefer not to see them unhappy. But her love remains a very low form, encumbered by indifference and neglect; at most it is closer to what Lewis calls *mere kindness* than it is to the love that descends from above. And the same could be said of the over-indulgent father who permits his teenage daughter to run wild without restriction. There clearly is a kind of “senile benevolence” that is, in the end, not a true form of benevolence at all, and God’s perfecting love clearly must be distinguished from the kind of “senile benevolence” illustrated by such examples as these. But in what way does that represent a retreat, as Beversluis calls it, from our ordinary moral concepts?

A second passage that Beversluis alludes to is Lewis’ remark that “with our friends, our lovers, our children, we . . . would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes” (p. 41). About this remark Beversluis says first: “It is hard to know what Lewis is driving at here. What ‘modes’ does he have in mind?”¹⁸ Then, a couple of paragraphs later, Beversluis gives his own interpretation: Lewis’ “primary contention,” he says, is “that many things we ordinarily regard as good are not good at all.”¹⁹ But why should anyone accept that interpretation, which explicitly contradicts Lewis’ own words? And why should there be any difficulty in knowing what Lewis is driving at? The racist who finds satisfaction in the suffering of minorities, the macho-male who enjoys exploiting women, the rich man who remains content with life while his neighbors starve, the intellectual who *seems* happiest only when devastating an opponent are all obvious examples of persons who remain “happy” in “contemptible and estranging modes.” But according to Lewis, God will not permit anyone to remain content forever with conditions that can only produce (over the long run) greater and greater misery in one’s own life as well as in the lives of others. On Lewis’ view, indeed, there is really nothing God could do about it anyway: those who estrange themselves from others will, given enough time, inevitably bring intolerable suffering into their own lives and would, if not checked in one way or another, turn eternity into hell. The racist may *want* to be left alone and may even *think* himself happy, but the God who sees through all illusions sees clearly the estrangement that makes such

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

racism possible and sees clearly all the ways in which such estrangement undermines the possibility of true happiness. One should not, however, restrict one's attention to such obvious evils as racism and the exploitation of women. Can anyone familiar with the snobbishness of many social clubs, the back-biting in many churches, the petty jealousies among the faculty of just about any university, or the competition for status in many corporations seriously deny that many of us do pursue happiness for ourselves at the expense of others (do pursue "estranging modes" of happiness)? Why should there be any doubt in Beversluis' mind about what Lewis is driving at here?

Now the important point about the above examples, particularly the first one concerning the mother who sets her children before the television all day, is that they tend to correct possible misunderstandings by *clarifying* the concept of love, not by *revising* it. That is why Lewis can admit that his own "conception of love needs correction" (p. 40) and, at the same time, insist that the correction is not "a mere reversal of our own ethics" (p. 48) or a *revision* of the concept of love. His point is that a proper conception of love must be purged of certain "popular meanings" that sometimes get "attached" to it (see p. 26); and his aim is to do this by drawing analogies and illustrations from the world of familiar experience. He thus compares divine love to an artist's feeling for an artifact, to a human being's love for an animal, to a father's love for a son, and finally to a man's love for a woman. In the end, he imparts a vision as powerful as any one is likely to find in literature, except perhaps in the sermons of his mentor, George MacDonald. As Austin Farrer comments:

Towards the end of the chapter on divine goodness something happens to Lewis and something happens to his readers. His writing hitherto has been argumentative, clear, sympathetic, persuasive. Now it becomes something more. It is where he has taken up the objection that the disciplinary providence of the biblical religion is a jealous lover, whereas we have now learnt to detest possessiveness in love. In answering the objection he discloses the unique transcendent claim of the love of God with a controlled and reasonable passion which is theophanic. 'Yes,' says the willing reader, 'that is God.' We think we are listening to an argument, in fact we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction.²⁰

Though Farrer does not say what "the unique transcendent claim of the love of God" is, on Lewis' view, it surely must include this: "whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want" (p. 53). It is the very nature of divine love, says Lewis, to seek the perfection of those who are beloved (p. 48) and to promote their true interest; it is not in the nature of divine love to pacify others by giving them everything they think they want. From the point of view of theism, that explains two things: first, why the problem of evil inevitably arises in the minds of men and women, and second why the attempt to formulate the problem as a philosophical objection to theism inevitably fails. The problem arises in the first place, the theist will argue, because we often make mistakes about our own interest and the interest of others, as well as mistakes about what is possible for God; for example, that I think

²⁰Gibb, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

something will make me happy (over the long run) in no way entails that it will. But if such mistakes are possible—and the relevant concepts require us to say they are—then mistakes about what a loving God would do (or permit) are also possible; and if mistakes of the latter kind are possible, then we are apt to question why a loving God would do this or permit that. When we go beyond mere questioning, however, and try to formulate a philosophical objection to theism, we inevitably run up against the limits of our own knowledge. We are simply ignorant of too many facts to make a case: facts about the after-life, facts about future goods that may be logically connected with present evils, facts about the deepest human needs and yearnings, facts about free choices that would have been made in different circumstances (if there are such facts), facts about the purposes of God and the alternatives he faces in dealing with created free persons. Given all of this ignorance, we are simply not in a position to construct a moral argument of the relevant kind; and it is not surprising, therefore, that neither deductive nor inductive versions of the argument from evil have been able to survive careful philosophical scrutiny.

IV. Soul-Making

In his discussion of divine omnipotence, Lewis argues that, because there are logical limits to what God can do and God's options may have been different from what the skeptic imagines, we cannot know (or even have reason to believe) that God could have improved the world by eliminating some of the evil in it. In his discussion of divine goodness, Lewis argues further that God's perfecting love is a recognizable (and unqualified) form of love that seeks to promote the true interest of every created person, including that of the child who suffers and dies from inoperable throat cancer. But at this point some are apt to experience misgivings. Even if the argument from evil is unsuccessful, as most attempted philosophical proofs are, the idea that it is in the interest of an innocent child to suffer and die, or that God permits this as a means to some greater good, may strike some as morally repugnant. What good could possibly justify some of the horrors that innocent children have been known to suffer?

Before we can answer this question, or even make the attempt, we must have some conception of what the greatest possible good for human beings is and what the conditions of true human happiness are. According to Lewis, God himself is "the only good of all creatures" (p. 52) and is the ultimate source of human happiness; "God gives what He has, not what He has not: He gives the happiness that there is, not the happiness that is not" (pp. 53-54). But what, exactly, is the happiness that God gives, or strives to give? It is not, first of all, the kind of pleasure that satisfies for a while and then leads to boredom. If God truly loves us, he will strive to make us happy, not for a season or for some seventy years, but for an eternity; he will strive, in other words, to make us into the kinds of persons who *can* be happy for an eternity. That is why, according to Lewis, "Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness" (p. 40); unlike the mother who sets her children before the television all day, God

always has as much regard for the conditions of our *future* happiness as he does for our present happiness. Nor is the happiness that God gives essentially a private experience of joy, something analogous to what one might experience in isolation while under the influence of some powerful drug. True happiness, the only happiness there is, requires a community of love, one in which we can be loved by others who delight in our presence even as we are able to love others and to delight in their presence; it therefore requires that we be purged of all the selfishness and arrogance and lust for power that separates us from others; and it requires that we be willing to sacrifice, even to suffer, on behalf of others, even as Jesus, who pioneered the way, suffered and died on our behalf (see p. 102).

Now suppose, for a moment, that God's purpose for each of us is to provide the kind of happiness that endures forever and to do so by bringing each of us into the required community of love. A point that has never received adequate treatment in the literature on the problem of evil is this. If love is a condition of true happiness, as the Christian religion affirms, then one person's happiness ultimately requires the happiness of others. Not even an omnipotent being, in other words, can make me happy (in the ultimate sense) without making my loved ones happy as well, and neither can such a being make those who love me happy without making me happy. If I should love my daughter as myself, for example, I simply cannot be happy knowing that she is suffering, or that she is otherwise miserable—unless, of course, I can somehow believe that, in the end, all will be well for her. Indeed, the more one is filled with love for others, the more one's own happiness is jeopardized by the unhappiness of others; in that respect love itself can sometimes be an instrumental evil. In a community of love, therefore, no one's happiness can be complete until the happiness of everyone is assured, and the conditions of happiness for one person are indirectly the conditions of happiness for everyone.

It is for this reason, I believe, that the Christian religion is predicated on the assumption that ultimately there are no real conflicts of interest. The redemption (or perfection) of others is just as much in my interest as it is in their own, and the reverse is true as well: my redemption (or perfection) is just as much in the interest of others as it is in my own. That is the context in which a Christian theology of suffering must be worked out, and the first point to make is that suffering, though bad in itself, can also be an instrumental good. Lewis identifies two goods that a person's suffering makes possible:

What is good in any painful experience is, for the sufferer, his submission to the will of God, and, for the spectators, the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads (p. 110).

Lewis' point is not, of course, that every painful experience leads automatically (and over the short run) to submission on the part of the sufferer and to acts of mercy on the part of others; his point is that every such experience provides the sufferer with an *incentive* to submit and the spectators with an *occasion* for compassion and for acts of mercy. Lewis himself tends to emphasize the effect of suffering upon the one who suffers and aims to show that "the Christian doc-

trine of being made 'perfect through suffering' is not incredible" (p. 105). In the case of rebellious persons, he argues, suffering can sometimes shatter their illusions and bring them back to God, thus restoring them to joy; in the case of saints (who may, for example, suffer on behalf of others), an acceptance of suffering will prepare them for that final union in which they come to know the Father and each other even as they have always been known by the Father (p. 102). But Lewis' own emphasis needs to be supplemented, I think, by the additional consideration suggested above. Even if one's suffering contributes nothing to one's own redemption (or perfection), it can still contribute to one's ultimate happiness by contributing to the redemption (or perfection) of others.

We have here a clue—and I offer it only as a clue—as to why innocent children and even babies are sometimes permitted to suffer. Suppose that the following were true, as I think it is: *Either* all of us²¹ will eventually come to experience the greatest possible happiness and joy, *or* none of us will. If that were true, it might then be in the interest of each of us to endure whatever is necessary in order that all of us, *including the tiny ones who suffer*, can eventually experience the greatest possible happiness and joy. Consider, by way of illustration, the young daughter of a vicious child beater, an innocent child whose deepest yearning is to be loved by her daddy. As many social workers have found to their chagrin, merely to separate such a child from her father often does more harm than good because what the child wants, even more than to escape suffering, is reconciliation and love; additional separation is precisely what she does not want. So if God were able, either in this life or the next, to use this child's suffering to effect the very reconciliation she wants, he might in fact satisfy her deepest yearnings in a way that could not be done simply by protecting her from all suffering. I offer this, however, merely as an illustration of the kind of good that may outweigh even the evil of suffering children. On the Christian view, reconciliation and love, the overcoming of separation and estrangement, is often a good that outweighs the suffering that makes such a good possible.

Now I fully appreciate, just as Lewis did, that any attempt to justify suffering, especially the suffering of children, is apt to "provoke bitter resentment against the author" (pp. 104–105). Part of the fear, I think, is that any such justification will inevitably minimize, in a calloused way, the horror of the suffering itself. But is that not just what is required if we are to have any consolation at all: a way of minimizing the horror of suffering by seeing it as a means to a greater good? The trick, as Eleonore Stump points out,²² is to see the greater good as a good *for the ones who suffer*; otherwise God might look like a tyrant who

²¹Here I gloss over a number of difficulties concerning the scope of "all." I would argue that "all of us" must, in the end, include all created persons; but even if "all" were restricted to all the members of a particular class or all the members of a particular community or all of the elect, one could presumably restate the point I am trying to make accordingly.

²²Eleonore Stump, "Suffering for Redemption: A Reply to Smith," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol 2, No 4 (October, 1985).

inflicts suffering upon some for the sake of others more fortunate than they. Now I find it easy to believe that the universe as a whole is a better place because of the suffering of children. Pictures of white racists attacking innocent black children virtually guaranteed the end of segregation in this country; pictures of mangled children in Vietnam brought home, in a way that nothing else could, the sheer horror of modern warfare; pictures of children buried in the rubble of Mexico City and of children starving in Ethiopia brought the world together in ways that some might have thought impossible. Nothing, it seems, arouses compassion and melts the hearts of the arrogant and the powerful in a way comparable to the suffering of children. It is the very weakness and helplessness and innocence of these children that has such a profound effect upon the arrogant and the powerful, which is why, perhaps, so many strive so mightily to insulate themselves from the reality of such suffering. What is more difficult to believe, however, is that such suffering will, in the end, contribute to the greater happiness of the very ones who suffer. But here our perspective really is limited, as our discussion of divine omnipotence should already have indicated. For all we know, if all physical suffering on the part of children had been eliminated from our world (and exactly the same persons had remained in it), the result would have been horrendous for everyone, including the children in question; for all we know, the result would have been more selfishness, more estrangement, more separation, and over the long run (by which I mean to include the after-life) more misery for everyone. What we need, perhaps, is a greater appreciation of how important the reconciliation of the world is to the eternal happiness of everyone, including those who suffer.

I believe that every innocent child who suffers will one day look upon that suffering as a privilege because of the joy it has made possible: the joy of knowing that one has been used by God in the redemption of others, the joy of that final union or reunion in which love's triumph is complete and all separation from others is finally overcome. I would ask but two things of those who reject such a view: first, that they resist the temptation to moralize, and second, that they consider the alternatives carefully. One who does neither is John Beversluis in the following "critique" of Lewis:

Try spending the night in the children's ward of a hospital or an afternoon among the terminally ill. Try persuading yourself that in feeling compassion for those hopeless creatures for whom life holds in store no merry meetings with their friends, no moments of happy love, landscapes, symphonies, football matches, or baths, whose lives are over—in some cases before they have even begun—try persuading yourself that in feeling compassion for them you are attaching trivial meanings to the words *good* and *love*. Finally, try convincing yourself that this tragic sea of sufferers lying there without hope, in some cases even without friends, are to be accounted for in terms of illusions that still need shattering. In such immediate contexts Lewis's abstract pontifications begin to seem not only callously inappropriate but morally repugnant.²³

Though much of what Beversluis implies here is a complete distortion of Lewis' view, that is not my present concern. My present concern is with Beversluis' evident blindness concerning the alternatives. If one looks closely at what he

²³Beversluis, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

says (and ignores his moral posturing), one finds, it seems to me, nothing but a counsel of despair. The terminally ill are described as "hopeless creatures" and are later referred to as a "tragic sea of sufferers lying there without hope." How Beversluis presumes to know that anyone's condition (even one who has already died) is hopeless, he fails to say; but he should, perhaps, follow his own advice. Let *him* visit the children's ward of a hospital or spend an afternoon among the terminally ill, and let *him* try out *his* pontifications in such immediate contexts as these. Let him tell the mother of a child dying from leukemia that her child's condition is hopeless; that the last chapter in the child's life is about to be written; that there is no after-life, no grace, no loving purpose to be fulfilled in the life of her child. Or let him try out such counsel upon the terminally ill themselves, and then let him repeat his charge that Lewis' counsel of hope—Lewis' view that even the suffering of children and the terminally ill will, in the end, contribute to the fulfillment of a loving purpose—is "callously inappropriate" and "morally repugnant." There are times, of course, when *saying* anything, however true, is callously inappropriate, as Lewis himself points out in *A Grief Observed*; but that is a point as different as it is important. The charge that Lewis has succumbed to wishful thinking is one that could at least be taken seriously at this point. But how are we even to take seriously the charge that Lewis' view is *morally repugnant*? As a matter of fact, those who actually work with suffering children and the terminally ill are typically among the most vigorous opponents of Beversluis' counsel of despair—perhaps because true compassion cannot flourish in the absence of hope. Even the idea that suffering and death bring reconciliation and that only by learning to die does one truly learn to live are ideas that receive powerful expression in the growing body of literature on the subject of death and dying. When viewed against the backdrop of this literature, Beversluis' moral posturing looks very shallow indeed.

There are, it seems, two moral posturing alternatives: hope or despair. Christianity is a religion of consolation and hope, and both the consolation and the hope are grounded in the believer's confidence in the nature of God. If God is perfectly loving, he will seek to promote the true interest of every created person; if he is infinitely wise, he will at times adopt means that baffle us, perhaps even anger us; but if he is also omnipotent, he will, in the end, bring his loving purpose to fruition and make it clear to each of us. That is the Christian hope, and it is to the credit of C. S. Lewis that he helped thousands to see just how reasonable this hope really is.