

CS Lewis - THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

I. INTRODUCTORY

...To ask whether the universe as we see it looks more like the work of a wise and good Creator or the work of chance, indifference, or malevolence, is to omit from the outset all the relevant factors in the religious problem. Christianity is not the conclusion of a philosophical debate on the origins of the universe: it is a catastrophic historical event following on the long spiritual preparation of humanity which I have described. It is not a system into which we have to fit the awkward fact of pain: it is itself one of the awkward facts which have to be fitted into any system we make. In a sense, it creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.

Why this assurance seems to me good, I have more or less indicated. It does not amount to logical compulsion. At every stage of religious development man may rebel, if not without violence to his own nature, yet without absurdity. He can close his spiritual eyes against the Numinous, if he is prepared to part company with half the great poets and prophets of his race, with his own childhood, with the richness and depth of uninhibited experience. He can regard the moral law as an illusion, and so cut himself off from the common ground of humanity. He can refuse to identify the Numinous with the righteous, and remain a barbarian, worshipping sexuality, or the dead, or the life-force, or the future. But the cost is heavy. And when we come to the last step of all, the historical Incarnation, the assurance is strongest of all. The story is strangely like many myths which have haunted religion from the first, and yet it is not like them. It is not transparent to the reason: we could not have invented it ourselves. It has not the suspicious *a priori* lucidity of Pantheism or of Newtonian physics. It has the seemingly arbitrary and idiosyncratic character which modern science is slowly teaching us to put up with in this wilful universe, where energy is made up in little parcels of a quantity no one could predict, where speed is not unlimited, where irreversible entropy gives time a real direction and the cosmos, no longer static or cyclic, moves like a drama from a real beginning to a real end. If any message from the core of reality ever were to reach us, we should expect to find in it just that unexpectedness, that wilful, dramatic anfractuosity which we find in the Christian faith. It has the master touch—the rough, male taste of reality, not made by us, or, indeed, for us, but hitting us in the face.

If, on such grounds, or on better ones, we follow the course on which humanity has been led, and become Christians, we then have the “problem” of pain.

II. DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

[Intentionally Omitted]

III. DIVINE GOODNESS

[Intentionally Omitted]

IV. HUMAN WICKEDNESS

The Christian answer to the question proposed in the last chapter is contained in the doctrine of the Fall. According to that doctrine, man is now a horror to God and to himself and a creature ill-adapted to the universe not because God made him so but because he has made himself so by the abuse of his free will. To my mind this is the sole function of the doctrine. It exists to guard against two sub-Christian theories of the origin of evil—Monism, according to which God Himself, being “above good and evil”, produces impartially the effects to which we give those two names, and Dualism, according to which God produces good, while some equal and independent Power produces evil. Against both these views Christianity asserts that God is good; that He made all things good and for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil. Now this function—which is the only one I allow to the doctrine of the Fall—must be distinguished from two other functions which it is sometimes, perhaps, represented as performing, but which I reject. In the first place, I do not think the doctrine answers the question “Was it better for God to create than not to create?” That is a question I have already declined. Since I believe God to be good, I am sure that, if the question has a meaning, the answer must be Yes. But I doubt whether the question has any meaning; and even if it has, I am sure that the answer cannot be attained by the sort of value-judgements which men can significantly make. In the second place, I do not think the doctrine of the Fall can be used to show that it is “just”, in terms of retributive justice, to punish individuals for the faults of their remote ancestors. Some forms of the doctrine seem to involve this; but I question whether any of them, as understood by its exponents, really meant it. The Fathers may sometimes say that we are punished for Adam’s sin: but they much more often say that we sinned “in Adam”. It may be impossible to find out what they meant by this, or we may decide that what they meant was erroneous. But I do not think we can dismiss their way of talking as a mere “idiom”. Wisely, or foolishly, they believed that we were *really*—and not simply by legal fiction—involved in Adam’s action. The attempt to formulate this belief by saying that we were “in” Adam in a physical sense—Adam being the first vehicle of the “immortal germ plasm”—may be unacceptable: but it is, of course, a further question whether the belief itself is merely a confusion or a real insight into spiritual realities beyond our normal grasp. At the moment, however, this question does not arise; for, as I have said I have no intention of arguing that the descent to modern man of inabilities contracted by his remote ancestors is a specimen of retributive justice. For me it is rather a specimen of those things necessarily involved in the creation of a stable world which we considered in Chapter II. It would, no doubt, have been possible for God to remove by miracle the results of the first sin ever committed by a human being; but this would not have been much good unless He was prepared to remove the results of the second sin, and of the third, and so on forever. If the miracles ceased, then sooner or later we might have reached our present lamentable situation: if they did not, then a world, thus continually underpropped and corrected by Divine interference, would have been a world in which nothing important ever depended on human choice, and in which choice itself would soon cease from the certainty that one of the apparent alternatives before you would lead to no results and was therefore not really an alternative. As we saw, the chess player’s freedom to play chess depends on the rigidity of the squares and the moves.

Having isolated what I conceive to be the true import of the doctrine that Man is fallen, let us now consider the doctrine in itself. The story in Genesis is a story (full of the deepest suggestion) about a magic apple of knowledge; but in the developed doctrine the inherent magic of the apple has quite dropped out of sight, and the story is simply one of disobedience. I have the deepest respect even for Pagan myths, still more for myths in Holy Scripture. I therefore do not doubt that the version which emphasises the magic apple, and brings together the trees of life and knowledge, contains a deeper and subtler truth than the version which makes the apple simply and solely a pledge of obedience. But I assume that the Holy Spirit would not have allowed the latter to grow up in the Church and win the assent of great doctors unless it also was true and useful as far as it went. It is this version which I am going to discuss, because, though I suspect the primitive version to be far more profound, I know that I, at any rate, cannot penetrate its profundities. I am to give my readers not the best absolutely but the best I have.

...What exactly happened when Man fell, we do not know; but if it is legitimate to guess, I offer the following picture—a “myth” in the Socratic sense, a not unlikely tale.

For long centuries God perfected the animal form which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself. He gave it hands whose thumb could be applied to each of the fingers, and jaws and teeth and throat capable of articulation, and a brain sufficiently complex to execute all the material motions whereby rational thought is incarnated. The creature may have existed for ages in this state before it became man: it may even have been clever enough to make things which a modern archæologist would accept as proof of its humanity. But it was only an animal because all its physical and psychical processes were directed to purely material and natural ends. Then, in the fullness of time, God caused to descend upon this organism, both on its psychology and physiology, a new kind of consciousness which could say “I” and “me”, which could look upon itself as an object, which knew God, which could make judgements of truth, beauty, and goodness, and which was so far above time that it could perceive time flowing past. This new consciousness ruled and illuminated the whole organism, flooding every part of it with light, and was not, like ours, limited to a selection of the movements going on in one part of the organism, namely the brain. Man was then all consciousness. The modern Yogi claims—whether falsely or truly—to have under control those functions which to us are almost part of the external world, such as digestion and circulation. This power the first man had in eminence. His organic processes obeyed the law of his own will, not the law of nature. His organs sent up appetites to the judgement seat of will not because they had to, but because he chose. Sleep meant to him not the stupor which we undergo, but willed and conscious repose—he remained awake to enjoy the pleasure and duty of sleep. Since the processes of decay and repair in his tissues were similarly conscious and obedient, it may not be fanciful to suppose that the length of his life was largely at his own discretion. Wholly commanding himself, he commanded all lower lives with which he came into contact. Even now we meet rare individuals who have a mysterious power of taming beasts. This power the Paradisal man enjoyed in eminence. The old picture of the brutes sporting before Adam and fawning upon him may not be wholly symbolical. Even now more animals than you might expect are ready to adore man if they are given a reasonable opportunity: for man was made to be the priest and even, in one sense, the Christ, of the animals—the mediator through whom they apprehend so much of the Divine splendour as their irrational nature allows. And God was to such a man no slippery, inclined plane. The new consciousness had been made to repose on its Creator, and repose it did. However rich and varied man’s experience of his

fellows (or fellow) in charity and friendship and sexual love, or of the beasts, or of the surrounding world then first recognised as beautiful and awful, God came first in his love and in his thought, and that without painful effort. In perfect cyclic movement, being, power and joy descended from God to man in the form of gift and returned from man to God in the form of obedient love and ecstatic adoration: and in this sense, though not in all, man was then truly the son of God, the prototype of Christ, perfectly enacting in joy and ease of all the faculties and all the senses that filial self- surrender which Our Lord enacted in the agonies of the crucifixion.

Judged by his artefacts, or perhaps even by his language, this blessed creature was, no doubt, a savage. All that experience and practice can teach he had still to learn: if he chipped flints, he doubtless chipped them clumsily enough. He may have been utterly incapable of expressing in conceptual form his paradisal experience. All that is quite irrelevant. From our own childhood we remember that before our elders thought us capable of “understanding” anything, we already had spiritual experiences as pure and as momentous as any we have undergone since, though not, of course, as rich in factual context. From Christianity itself we learn that there is a level—in the long run the only level of importance—on which the learned and the adult have no advantage at all over the simple and the child. I do not doubt that if the Paradisal man could now appear among us, we should regard him as an utter savage, a creature to be exploited or, at best, patronised. Only one or two, and those the holiest among us, would glance a second time at the naked, shaggy-bearded, slow-spoken creature: but they, after a few minutes, would fall at his feet.

We do not know how many of these creatures God made, nor how long they continued in the Paradisal state. But sooner or later they fell. Someone or something whispered that they could become as gods—that they could cease directing their lives to their Creator and taking all their delights as uncovenanted mercies, as “accidents” (in the logical sense) which arose in the course of a life directed not to those delights but to the adoration of God. As a young man wants a regular allowance from his father which he can count on as his own, within which he makes his own plans (and rightly, for his father is after all a fellow creature) so they desired to be on their own, to take care for their own future, to plan for pleasure and for security, to have a *meum* from which, no doubt, they would pay some reasonable tribute to God in the way of time, attention, and love, but which nevertheless, was theirs not His. They wanted, as we say, to “call their souls their own”. But that means to live a lie, for our souls are not, in fact, our own. They wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, “This is our business, not yours.” But there is no such corner. They wanted to be nouns, but they were, and eternally must be, mere adjectives. We have no idea in what particular act, or series of acts, the self-contradictory, impossible wish found expression. For all I can see, it might have concerned the literal eating of a fruit, but the question is of no consequence.

This act of self-will on the part of the creature, which constitutes an utter falseness to its true creaturely position, is the only sin that can be conceived as the Fall. For the difficulty about the first sin is that it must be very heinous, or its consequences would not be so terrible, and yet it must be something which a being free from the temptations of fallen man could conceivably have committed. The turning from God to self fulfills both conditions. It is a sin possible even to Paradisal man, because the mere existence of a self—the mere fact that we call it “me”—includes, from the first, the danger of self-idolatry.

Since I am I, I must make an act of self-surrender, however small or however easy, in living to God rather than to myself. This is, if you like, the “weak spot” in the very nature of creation, the risk which God apparently thinks worth taking. But the sin was very heinous, because the self which Paradisal man had to surrender contained no natural recalcitrancy to being surrendered. His *data*, so to speak, were a psycho-physical organism wholly subject to the will and a will wholly disposed, though not compelled, to turn to God. The self-surrender which he practised before the Fall meant no struggle but only the delicious overcoming of an infinitesimal self-adherence which delighted to be overcome—of which we see a dim analogy in the rapturous mutual self-surrenders of lovers even now. He had, therefore, no *temptation* (in our sense) to choose the self—no passion or inclination obstinately inclining that way— nothing but the bare fact that the self was *himself*.

Up to that moment the human spirit had been in full control of the human organism. It doubtless expected that it would retain this control when it had ceased to obey God. But its authority over the organism was a delegated authority which it lost when it ceased to be God’s delegate. Having cut itself off, as far as it could, from the source of its being, it had cut itself off from the source of power. For when we say of created things that A rules B this must mean that God rules B through A. I doubt whether it would have been intrinsically possible for God to continue to rule the organism *through* the human spirit when the human spirit was in revolt against Him. At any rate He did not. He began to rule the organism in a more external way, not by the laws of spirit, but by those of nature. Thus the organs, no longer governed by man’s will, fell under the control of ordinary biochemical laws and suffered whatever the inter-workings of those laws might bring about in the way of pain, senility and death. And desires began to come up into the mind of man, not as his reason chose, but just as the biochemical and environmental facts happened to cause them. And the mind itself fell under the psychological laws of association and the like which God had made to rule the psychology of the higher anthropoids. And the will, caught in the tidal wave of mere nature, had no resource but to force back some of the new thoughts and desires by main strength, and these uneasy rebels became the subconscious as we now know it. The process was not, I conceive, comparable to mere deterioration as it may now occur in a human individual; it was a loss of status as a *species*. What man lost by the Fall was his original specific nature. “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” The total organism which had been taken up into his spiritual life was allowed to fall back into the merely natural condition from which, at his making, it had been raised—just as, far earlier in the story of creation, God had raised vegetable life to become the vehicle of animality, and chemical process to be the vehicle of vegetation, and physical process to be the vehicle of chemical. Thus human spirit from being the master of human nature became a mere lodger in its own house, or even a prisoner; rational consciousness became what it now is—a fitful spot-light resting on a small part of the cerebral motions. But this limitation of the spirit’s powers was a lesser evil than the corruption of the spirit itself. It had turned from God and become its own idol, so that though it could still turn back to God, it could do so only by painful effort, and its inclination was self-ward. Hence pride and ambition, the desire to be lovely in its own eyes and to depress and humiliate all rivals, envy, and restless search for more, and still more, security, were now the attitudes that came easiest to it. It was not only a weak king over its own nature, but a bad one: it sent down into the psycho-physical organism desires far worse than the organism sent up in to it. This condition was transmitted by heredity to all later generations, for it was not simply what biologists call an acquired variation; it was the emergence of a new kind of man—a new species, never made by

God, had sinned itself into existence. The change which man had undergone was not parallel to the development of a new organ or a new habit; it was a radical alteration of his constitution, a disturbance of the relation between his component parts, and an internal perversion of one of them.

God might have arrested this process by miracle: but this—to speak in somewhat irreverent metaphor— would have been to decline the problem which God had set Himself when He created the world, the problem of expressing His goodness through the total drama of a world containing free agents, in spite of, and by means of, their rebellion against Him. The symbol of a drama, a symphony, or a dance, is here useful to correct a certain absurdity which may arise if we talk too much of God planning and creating the world process for good and of that good being frustrated by the free will of the creatures. This may raise the ridiculous idea that the Fall took God by surprise and upset His plan, or else—more ridiculously still—that God planned the whole thing for conditions which, He well knew, were never going to be realised. In fact, of course, God saw the crucifixion in the act of creating the first nebula. The world is a dance in which good, descending from God, is disturbed by evil arising from the creatures, and the resulting conflict is resolved by God's own assumption of the suffering nature which evil produces. The doctrine of the free Fall asserts that the evil which thus makes the fuel or raw material for the second and more complex kind of good is not God's contribution but man's. This does not mean that if man had remained innocent God could not then have contrived an equally splendid symphonic whole—supposing that we insist on asking such questions. But it must always be remembered that when we talk of what might have happened, of contingencies outside the whole actuality, we do not really know what we are talking about. There are no times or places outside the existing universe in which all this “could happen” or “could have happened”. I think the most significant way of stating the real freedom of man is to say that if there are other rational species than man, existing in some other part of the actual universe, then it is not necessary to suppose that they also have fallen.

Our present condition, then, is explained by the fact that we are members of a spoiled species. I do not mean that our sufferings are a punishment for being what we cannot now help being nor that we are morally responsible for the rebellion of a remote ancestor. If, none the less, I call our present condition one of original Sin, and not merely one of original misfortune, that is because our actual religious experience does not allow us to regard it in any other way. Theoretically, I suppose, we might say “Yes: we behave like vermin, but then that is because we *are* vermin. And that, at any rate, is not our fault.” But the fact that we are vermin, so far from being felt as an excuse, is a greater shame and grief to us than any of the particular acts which it leads us to commit. The situation is not nearly so hard to understand as some people make out. It arises among human beings whenever a very badly brought up boy is introduced into a decent family. They rightly remind themselves that it is “not his own fault” that he is a bully, a coward, a tale-bearer and a liar. But none the less, however it came there, his present character is detestable. They not only hate it, but ought to hate it. They cannot love him for what he is, they can only try to turn him into what he is not. In the meantime, though the boy is most unfortunate in having been so brought up, you cannot quite call his character a “misfortune” as if he were one thing and his character another. It is he—he himself—who bullies and sneaks and likes doing it. And if he begins to mend he will inevitably feel shame and guilt at what he is just beginning to cease to be.

With this I have said all that can be said on the level at which alone I feel able to treat the subject of the Fall. But I warn my readers once more that this level is a shallow one. We have said nothing about the trees of life and of knowledge which doubtless conceal some great mystery: and we have said nothing about the Pauline statement that “as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive”.¹³⁶ It is this passage which lies behind the Patristic doctrine of our physical presence in Adam’s loins and Anselm’s doctrine of our inclusion, by legal fiction, in the suffering Christ. These theories may have done good in their day but they do no good to me, and I am not going to invent others. We have recently been told by the scientists that we have no right to expect that the real universe should be picturable, and that if we make mental pictures to illustrate quantum physics we are moving further away from reality, not nearer to it.¹³⁷ We have clearly even less right to demand that the highest spiritual realities should be picturable, or even explicable in terms of our abstract thought. I observe that the difficulty of the Pauline formula turns on the word *in*, and that this word, again and again in the New Testament, is used in senses we cannot fully understand. That we can die “in” Adam and live “in” Christ seems to me to imply that man, as he really is, differs a good deal from man as our categories of thought and our three dimensional imaginations represent him; that the separateness—modified only by causal relations—which we discern between individuals, is balanced, in absolute reality, by some kind of “inter-inanimation” of which we have no conception at all. It may be that the acts and sufferings of great archetypal individuals such as Adam and Christ are ours, not by legal fiction, metaphor, or causality, but in some much deeper fashion. There is no question, of course, of individuals melting down into a kind of spiritual continuum such as Pantheistic systems believe in; that is excluded by the whole tenor of our faith. But there may be a tension between individuality and some other principle. We believe that the Holy Spirit can be really present and operative in the human spirit, but we do not, like Pantheists, take this to mean that we are “parts” or “modifications” or “appearances” of God. We may have to suppose, in the long run, that something of the same kind is true, in its appropriate degree, even of created spirits, that each, though distinct, is really present in all, or in some, others—just as we may have to admit “action at a distance” into our conception of matter. Everyone will have noticed how the Old Testament seems at times to ignore our conception of the individual. When God promises Jacob that “He will go down with him into Egypt and will also surely bring him up again”,¹³⁸ this is fulfilled either by the burial of Jacob’s body in Palestine or by the exodus of Jacob’s descendants from Egypt. It is quite right to connect this notion with the social structure of early communities in which the individual is constantly overlooked in favour of the tribe or family: but we ought to express this connection by two propositions of equal importance—firstly that their social experience blinded the ancients to some truths which we perceive, and secondly that it made them sensible of some truths to which we are blind. Legal fiction, adoption, and transference or imputation of merit and guilt, could never have played the part they did play in theology if they had always been felt to be so artificial as we now feel them to be.

I have thought it right to allow this one glance at what is for me an impenetrable curtain, but, as I have said, it makes no part of my present argument. Clearly it would be futile to attempt to solve the problem of pain by producing another problem. The thesis of this chapter is simply that man, as a species, spoiled himself, and that good, to us in our present state, must therefore mean primarily remedial or corrective good. What part pain actually plays in such remedy or correction, is now to be considered.

V. THE FALL OF MAN

VI. HUMAN PAIN

.HUMAN PAIN, *continued*

.HELL

VII. ANIMAL PAIN

HEAVEN