GOD AND THE REACH OF REASON

C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell

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ONE

THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE SUFFERING OF HUMANITY

1.1 THE PROBLEM

On Sunday, December 26, 2004, an earthquake off the western coast of Indonesia's Sumatra Island triggered a massive tsunami that subsequently struck several countries, killing over 200,000 people. The hardest-hit countries included Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India. The tsunami struck with little or no warning. Entire villages were wiped from the face of the earth, and whole families were swept out to sea. The casualties were so overwhelming that little attempt was made to identify most of the corpses. Instead, they were buried as quickly as possible in mass graves.

In the aftermath of the disaster, one of the topics to which the popular media turned its attention was the problem of evil, a problem that philosophers and theologians have thought about for over two millennia. The problem of evil is often posed as a question: If there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God, then why does the world contain the assorted evils that it does? The problem may be posed more aggressively as a challenge: If there *were* an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God, then the world *wouldn't* contain the assorted evils that it does. Hence, no such God exists. A one-page article in the January 10, 2005, issue of *Newsweek* titled "Countless Souls Cry Out to God" hinted that the tsunami disaster constituted evidence that such a God does not exist, ending with these lines:

> Whole families, whole communities, countless pasts and futures have been obliterated by this tsunami's roiling force. Little wonder that

> from Sumatra to Madagascar, innumerable voices cry out to God. The miracle, if there is one, may be that so many still believe.[1]

The 2004 tsunami is not without precedent. On November 1, 1755, an earthquake struck the Portuguese city of Lisbon, one of the largest and most beautiful cities in Europe at the time. This quake, like the one off the coast of Sumatra Island, was followed by large tsunamis as well as widespread fires that burned for days. More than 100,000 people lost their lives as a result of the Lisbon earthquake.

The earthquake was featured in Voltaire's satirical 1759 work *Candide*, which recounts the misadventures of Candide and his companion Pangloss. The latter is a philosopher who consistently maintains that ours is the best of all possible worlds, despite the various horrors the two experience.[2] The fictional Pangloss represents the actual philosopher Leibniz, who really did maintain that ours is the best of all possible worlds.[3] Voltaire means to illustrate the absurdity of this proposition in *Candide*, and the Lisbon earthquake is offered as evidence in that regard. Leibniz thought that ours must be the best of all possible worlds because a perfect God must create the best of all possible worlds. So Voltaire's ridicule of the Leibnizian claim that this is the best of all possible worlds may ultimately be seen as ridicule of the idea that a perfect God exists.

Hume and Lewis both grappled with the problem of evil.[4] Lewis's first book of Christian apologetics, *The Problem of Pain*, is devoted to dealing with the problem, and Lewis's discussion there is pretty clearly a direct response to Hume's presentation of the problem in Parts X and XI of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. While it is Lewis's attempt to solve the problem of evil that is the focus of this chapter, it is helpful first to examine Hume's presentation of the problem.

1.2 HUME'S PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

Hume worked on the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* off and on over a period of almost thirty years. At the urging of his friends, many of whom read a draft of the work in the early 1750s, Hume

did not publish it during his lifetime. His friends feared that because of the controversial nature of the *Dialogues*, publication would have a detrimental effect on Hume's life and reputation. Hume had good reason to take his friends' advice seriously. The writing on religion that Hume did publish during his lifetime drew the ire of many of his religious contemporaries. As a consequence of his writing on religion he was denied the chair of logic at Glasgow University in 1752, and about five years later the Church of Scotland attempted to excommunicate him.[5] Nevertheless, Hume specified in his will that the *Dialogues* be published posthumously, and it first appeared in print in 1779, three years after his death.[6]

The *Dialogues* is an extended conversation among three characters, Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea, as reported by Cleanthes's student, Pamphilus, to Pamphilus's companion Hermippus. As the title suggests, the topic of the discussion is natural religion – religion based on human reason alone, without the aid of divine revelation or other supernatural activity. Much of the conversation focuses on what human reason alone can determine about the existence and nature of God. Each of the three main characters has a distinct view on these issues, and one of them, Philo, goes so far as to question the existence of God altogether. Presumably this is at least part of what made the work so controversial in the eyes of Hume's friends.

Ascertaining Hume's own views on the basis of the *Dialogues* is a tricky business. In particular, there has been much debate over whether any one of the three characters speaks for Hume and, if so, which one. One popular view has been that Philo is Hume's mouthpiece.[7] However, even if this is correct, more work is needed to determine just what Hume's views are, because ascertaining the views of Philo is itself a less-than-straightforward matter.

In Chapter 4 we will delve into the tricky business of ascertaining Hume's own views in the *Dialogues*, but for the moment we can safely avoid this task, for the following reasons: In Parts X and XI of the *Dialogues*, the problem of evil is raised by Demea and Philo. The challenge raised here is never satisfactorily answered in the *Dialogues* nor, indeed, in any of Hume's works. This suggests at the very least that Hume considered the problem of evil to be a serious challenge,

one to which he himself had no satisfactory answer. Furthermore, it is the discussion of the problem of evil in these two sections of the *Dialogues* that sets the stage for *The Problem of Pain*. Our interest, then, is in understanding the problem as it appears in the *Dialogues* and evaluating Lewis's response to that problem. The question of Hume's own view on the problem is one that we can safely set aside, at least for the moment.

In the parts of the *Dialogues* preceding Parts X and XI, two types of arguments for the existence of God are discussed. Cleanthes defends a type of design argument (dubbed "the argument *a posteriori*"), and Demea defends a cosmological argument (dubbed "the argument *a priori*"). Philo, playing the role of skeptic, criticizes both arguments, alternately joining forces with Demea or Cleanthes, depending on the topic. For the most part, Philo pretends to share the views of Demea. Although the fact that Philo's apparent agreement with Demea is mere pretense is made sufficiently clear both to Cleanthes and to the attentive reader, it is not recognized by Demea until Part XI.

Having seen his cosmological argument subjected to scathing criticism at the hands of Cleanthes and Philo in Part IX, Demea begins Part X with a new tack. He suggests that it is a "consciousness of [their own] imbecility and misery rather than . . . any reasoning" that drives people to believe in God.[8] This suggestion leads Philo to make the following ironic remark: "I am indeed persuaded . . . that the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a due sense of religion is by just representation of the misery and wickedness of men."[9] While Demea and Philo agree that reflection on human suffering will lead to a "due sense of religion," they disagree on just what this "due sense" is. Demea thinks that such reflection will lead to awe and submission to God, whereas Philo thinks it will lead to doubt of the existence of a good God altogether. However, Demea does not recognize the irony of Philo's remark, instead taking it as a straightforward agreement with his own view.

Philo's remark launches an extended discussion of the assorted evils of the world. Here is Demea's colorful description of human life:

> The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want stimulate the strong and courageous: fear, anxiety, terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into human life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent: weakness, impotence, distress attend each stage of that life, and it is, at last, finished in agony and horror.[10]

Of particular interest is Philo's assessment of the philosophical implications of such suffering:

> Is the world, considered in general and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, *beforehand*, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? It must be strange prejudice to assert the contrary. And from thence I conclude that, however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistency is not absolutely denied, only the inference.[11]

In this passage, Philo seems to suggest that the philosophical significance of the suffering in the world is that it provides the basis of a decisive objection to Cleanthes's design argument. Cleanthes argues that we can infer the existence of God from certain observable features of the world. But the God of traditional monotheism is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. Philo's point is that the presence of suffering in the world effectively blocks the inference from the observable universe to a morally perfect Creator. But Philo explicitly refrains from asserting that the presence of suffering is inconsistent with the existence of such a God. This might lead us to conclude that Philo's position is that we cannot infer from the suffering we observe that God does not exist. However, other passages indicate that such a conclusion would be too hasty. For instance, earlier in Part X Philo has this to say:

> His power, we allow, is infinite; whatever he wills is executed: But neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite; He is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end; But the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity: Therefore, it is not established for that

> purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?[12]

In these lines Philo suggests that an omnipotent and omniscient God would surely have sufficient power and wisdom to make us happy, if He so desired. Yet we are not happy, so God must not desire our happiness. Philo even goes so far as to remark that no human reasoning is more certain than this. He then implicitly takes a further step: A good God *would* desire our happiness. It follows that there is no God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and good. It appears that Philo is suggesting that we *can* infer the nonexistence of the traditional God of monotheism from the presence of suffering in the world.

Some remarks Philo makes later in Part XI support this interpretation. Philo introduces "*four* hypotheses . . . concerning the first causes of the universe."[13] The four hypotheses are (i) a perfectly good first cause, (ii) a perfectly evil first cause, (iii) two (joint) first causes, one perfectly good, the other perfectly evil, and (iv) a morally indifferent first cause. Only the first hypothesis is consistent with traditional monotheism; the third hypothesis corresponds to Dualism, a view declared heretical under Christianity and, as we will see, discussed at some length by Lewis.[14]

Reflecting on the mixture of good and evil in the universe, Philo rejects the first two hypotheses, suggesting that it is unlikely that pure first causes would produce such "mixed phenomena." He rejects the third hypothesis on the basis of the "uniformity and steadiness of general laws" in our universe; the idea seems to be that a cosmic struggle between good and evil first causes would produce a universe significantly less orderly than our own. By a process of elimination, Philo concludes that the fourth hypothesis "seems by far the most probable."[15]

So Philo appears to maintain both (i) that as far as we can tell, suffering is consistent with the existence of God, and (ii) that we can infer, on the basis of suffering in the world, that God does not exist. Does Philo thereby contradict himself? No; (i) and (ii) are compatible.

Sometimes it is reasonable to infer not-q from p even though p and q are logically consistent. Suppose, for instance, that p = tomorrow you will flip a fair coin exactly one hundred times (and you will flip no other coins tomorrow) and that q = tomorrow you will flip "heads" one hundred times. Even though p and q are compatible, I can reasonably infer not-q from p because p makes q very *unlikely*. And Philo's position seems to be that, while the presence of suffering in the world may be compatible with the existence of God, it makes God's existence unlikely. This is evident from his conclusion that the fourth hypothesis is "by far the *most probable*."

There is one other important wrinkle to Philo's position. In Part I of the *Dialogues*, Philo registers his misgivings about the feasibility of natural religion:

> [W]hen we carry our speculations into the two eternities, before and after the present state of things; into the creation and formation of the universe; the existence and properties of spirits; the powers and operations of one universal Spirit existing without beginning and without end, omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, infinite, and incomprehensible. We must be far removed from the smallest tendency to skepticism not to be apprehensive that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties . . . We are like foreigners in a strange country to whom everything must seem suspicious, and who are in danger every moment of transgressing against the laws and customs of the people with whom they live and converse. We know not how far we ought to trust our vulgar methods of reasoning in such a subject.[16]

These and other remarks show that Philo's discussion of human suffering in Parts X and XI is undertaken in the context of skepticism about the capacity of human reason to tell us much at all about the existence and nature of God.

To understand Philo's position in its entirety, we need to understand that his main opponent is Cleanthes. Cleanthes maintains that human reason can tell us quite a bit about the existence and nature of God, and that what it tells us is that the universe was created by a powerful, wise, and good God. Philo criticizes both aspects of Cleanthes's position, arguing that we shouldn't put much stock in the results of human reasoning when it comes to religion – but to the

extent that reason is trustworthy, it tells us that the God of monotheism does not exist.[17]

The presence and interaction of these two aspects of Philo's position are perhaps clearest in the following lines:

> Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive, except [unless] we assert that these subjects exceed all human capacity, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them; a topic which I have all along insisted on.[18]

Perhaps, then, we may state Philo's version of the problem of evil this way:

The Problem of Pain

1. If God exists, then He is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is morally perfect, then He wants there to be no suffering in the world.
3. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, then He can bring it about that there is no suffering in the world.
4. So: If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, then there is no suffering in the world (from 2 and 3).
5. But there is suffering in the world.
6. Therefore, God does not exist (from 1, 4, and 5).

The first premise follows from the traditional understanding of the God of monotheism; omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection are central attributes of that God. The fifth premise seems beyond doubt, and the fourth is entailed (more or less) by premises two and three.[19] The substantive premises, then, seem to be two and three.

Philo has little to say in support of the second premise, but he does offer a kind of argument for the third, the claim that an all-powerful, all-knowing God would be able to create a pain-free universe. In Part XI, Philo describes "*four* circumstances on which depend all or

the greatest part of the ills that molest sensible creatures." He suggests that "[n]one of them appear to human reason in the least degree necessary or unavoidable" – although, true to his two-track strategy, he cautions that "[w]e know so little beyond common life, or even of common life, that, with regard to the economy of a universe, there is no conjecture, however wild, which may not be just, nor any one, however plausible, which may not be erroneous."[20]

The four factors that Philo cautiously suggests produce all or most of the suffering in the universe and that an omnipotent, omniscient God could easily have avoided are the following: (i) pain (in addition to pleasure) functions as a motive "to excite all creatures to action"; (ii) the world is governed by general laws of nature; (iii) nature is frugal, in that each creature is endowed with just enough natural capacities to survive but not enough to avoid misery; (iv) the "inaccurate workmanship" of the world, which seems more like a rough draft than a completed project.[21] There is much to be said about each of these four circumstances, and we will return to them later, but for now it is enough to see how they are supposed to support Philo's version of the problem of pain. According to Philo, there is a workable, pain-free alternative to each of the four circumstances, an alternative that an all-powerful, all-knowing God would have known of and could have implemented. If this is correct, and the four circumstances produce all of the suffering in the world, then the third premise of the problem of pain is established.

Contemporary philosophers tend to draw a distinction between the *logical* problem of evil and the *evidential* or *probabilistic* problem of evil.[22] The logical version has it that the existence of evil is *incompatible* with the existence of the God of traditional monotheism, whereas the evidential version involves only the weaker claim that the evils of our world, while compatible with God's existence, constitute *evidence* against God's existence. Because Philo's position seems to be that suffering is compatible with but counts as evidence against God's existence, it is tempting to construe him as offering merely an evidential version of the problem of evil. However, I believe that the argument he actually gives – the argument I have just formulated – is a logical version of the problem of evil. But if this is right, why does

Philo not conclude that the suffering in the world *decisively proves* that God does not exist? The answer lies in Philo's two-track strategy. He presents a deductive proof of God's nonexistence based on the presence of suffering (the atheistic track) but declines to endorse the proof with certainty himself because he has serious doubts about the reliability of human reason in this area (the skeptical track). He seeks to put Cleanthes on the horns of a dilemma: Either admit that human reason is unreliable when applied to the existence and nature of God (and hence abandon your design argument), or admit that the presence of suffering proves that a perfect God does not exist (and hence abandon your theism).

Lewis's writing contains responses to both the skeptical aspect and the atheistic aspect of Philo's position. The first order of business is to examine Lewis's response to the aspect that consists of the problem of pain, the atheistic aspect. We will examine Lewis's response to the skeptical aspect in Chapters 2 and 3. To address the atheistic aspect, Lewis argues that once we properly understand God's omnipotence and goodness, and the real nature of human happiness, we will see that it is not at all surprising or improbable that God would permit (and even cause) human suffering. Making this case is the central project of *The Problem of Pain*, to which we now turn.

1.3 LEWIS'S ATTEMPT TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

1.3.1 Introduction

Born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898, Lewis was raised as a Christian, but shed his Christian belief during his early teens while at boarding school in England. By his own account, at school he got the impression that "religion in general, though utterly false, was a natural growth, a kind of endemic nonsense into which humanity tended to blunder."[23] At age seventeen, Lewis wrote to his close friend Arthur Greeves that "I believe in no religion" and described Christianity in particular as "one mythology among many, but the one that we happened to have been brought up in."[24] Lewis's return

to Christianity was a gradual and complex process. In both his letters and the autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis notes the influence of H. V. V. Dyson and J. R. R. Tolkien. In a 1946 letter, Lewis lists the main factors in his conversion as philosophy, increasing knowledge of medieval literature, the writers George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton, and discussion with his friend Owen Barfield.[25] In a letter written much closer in time to the event itself (1934), Lewis describes his "route" as running "from materialism to idealism, from idealism to Pantheism, from pantheism to theism, and from theism to Christianity."[26] The process culminated with a famous trip to the zoo in late September 1931, when Lewis was thirty-two years old: "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did."[27] About a month later, almost exactly fifteen years after he had written to Arthur Greeves that he was an atheist, Lewis described his new view of Christianity in another letter to Greeves: "[T]he story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*."[28]

The Problem of Pain, first published in 1940, was Lewis's first book-length work in Christian apologetics. I have suggested that the work was inspired by Parts X and XI of Hume's *Dialogues*. However, nowhere in *The Problem of Pain* does Lewis mention Hume or the *Dialogues*. What, then, is my evidence for the alleged connection between the two works?

There are two kinds of evidence. First, there is what we might call external evidence – evidence outside of the relevant works themselves. Lewis both studied and served as a tutor in philosophy at Oxford, and in fact planned to become a professor of philosophy before switching to English literature in 1925.[29] Hume's *Dialogues* has long been considered one of the great works in the philosophy of religion; that Lewis could have studied philosophy at an advanced level at Oxford without having read it is almost, if not actually, impossible. We know from Lewis's own words that he read at least *some* of Hume's works; in June 1924 he made the following entry in his diary: "I then began Hume: and greatly enjoyed the perfect clarity,

ease, humanity, and quietness of his manner. This is the proper way to write philosophy."[30] Of course, this establishes at most that Lewis probably read the *Dialogues*, but not necessarily that *The Problem of Pain* is a response to Hume's work. To establish this further claim, we must consider the works themselves. As we will see, *The Problem of Pain* contains responses to many of the specific points that arise in the *Dialogues*. Moreover, the presentations of the problem of pain itself in the two works are strikingly similar. For instance, in Part XI of the *Dialogues*, Philo says:

> Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! . . . But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children![31]

Shortly after these remarks, Philo reaches his conclusion that the hypothesis that the first causes of the universe are morally indifferent is "by far the most probable."[32]

The opening chapter of *The Problem of Pain* begins as follows: "Not many years ago when I was an atheist, if anyone had asked me, 'Why do you not believe in God?' my reply would have run something like this. . . . "[33] Note the parallels between Lewis's explanation of his past atheism and Philo's speech just quoted:

> Look at the universe we live in. . . . [W]hat is [life] like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality called consciousness which enables it to be attended by pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die. . . . If you ask me to believe that this is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.[34]

Finally, consider Lewis's own account of the problem of pain, and note its similarity to Philo's description of the problem, which I quoted in the previous section:

> 'If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God either lacks goodness, or power, or both.' This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form.[35]

Lewis observes that there are three key concepts that lie at the heart of the problem: divine omnipotence, divine goodness, and human happiness. According to Lewis, there are popular but false ways of understanding each of these three concepts as well as less popular but correct ways of understanding them. The problem of pain rests upon the popular conceptions. Since these conceptions are flawed, the problem of pain fails, and once we have an accurate understanding of the three concepts, we will see how the problem can be solved. The reason that most people find the problem of pain convincing (at least initially) is that they accept (at least implicitly) the popular but false understandings of omnipotence, goodness, and happiness. In unraveling Lewis's solution to the problem of pain, therefore, it is essential that we distinguish the true and false ways of understanding each concept. We will begin, as Lewis does, with divine omnipotence.

1.3.2 Divine Omnipotence

Most people, when asked to define omnipotence for the first time, come up with something like this: Omnipotence is the ability to do anything. This view has a scriptural basis: "[F]or God, all things are possible."[36] There is, however, a long and glorious tradition according to which this definition must be qualified somewhat, and Lewis is part of this tradition. The tradition goes back at least as far as the great thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, who maintained that "there does not fall under the scope of God's omnipotence anything that implies a contradiction."[37]

A popular example of something that lies beyond the bounds of omnipotence is the creation of a round square. Since round shapes

have exactly zero corners, and square shapes have exactly four corners, a round square would have precisely zero corners and also precisely four corners. This seems to be just plain impossible. Not even God could create such a shape. However – and this is crucial – God's inability to create such a shape does not indicate a lack of power on God's part; rather, the notion of creating a round square just doesn't make sense. Lewis classifies things like round squares as "intrinsically impossible" and puts the point about omnipotence this way:

> His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. This is no limit to His power. . . . It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities.[38]

It is important to avoid a certain kind of confusion here. Sometimes it is suggested that God could make a round square simply by changing the meanings of the terms "round" and "square." For instance, if God were to change the meaning of "round" so that it meant what the word "green" currently means, then making a round square would be a straightforward matter.

However, making the *sentence* "There is a round square" true is not quite the same as actually making a round square. When we consider whether God could make a round square, we are considering whether God could make a shape that would be round (given the actual meaning of "round") and also square (given the actual meaning of "square"). And, given the actual meanings of these terms, it seems clear that God couldn't make a round square. He could fiddle about with language in such a way as to make the sentence "There is a round square" come out true, but He would still have failed to create any round squares.[39]

Sometimes it is suggested that round squares are impossible only given the actual laws of logic, and that since God is the creator of those laws, He could alter them in such a way that round squares would be possible. My own view is that this suggestion really doesn't make sense and is rooted in the mistake of taking the expression

"laws of logic" too literally. More importantly, the proposal seems to have some practical implications that theists might find problematic. Consider, for instance, divine promise making. Theists typically think they can count on God's promises in the following sense: If God has promised that some situation p will not occur, then we can be darn sure that p will not occur. However, if God can alter the very rules of logic as He sees fit, then God's promises guarantee nothing, since He could simply change the rules of logic so that, for instance, bringing about p is perfectly consistent with keeping one's promise not to bring about p. So theists who think we can count on God to keep His promises ought to reject the view that God can modify logic as He sees fit.

Here, then, we have the first distinction between a popular but false understanding of a concept and the true understanding of that concept. The popular but false understanding of omnipotence is that omnipotence is the ability to bring about absolutely any situation, including situations that are intrinsically impossible. The correct understanding of omnipotence, according to Lewis, is that it is the ability to bring about any situation that is intrinsically possible.[40]

With this understanding of omnipotence in hand, Lewis seeks to make the case that the class of intrinsically impossible situations includes the following: that there is a society of free souls in which no soul can inflict pain on another soul. Lewis's argument for this claim can be construed as consisting of two main steps. Each of the steps is an alleged entailment or necessary connection between two situations, p and q, where p entails or necessitates q in such a way that it is intrinsically impossible for p to obtain without q also obtaining. The two necessary connections are these:

Necessary Connection 1: If there is a society of free souls, then there *must* also be a relatively independent, law-governed environment containing that society of free souls.

Necessary Connection 2: If there is a relatively independent, law-governed environment containing a society of free souls, then the free souls that belong to the society *must* be capable of inflicting pain on each other.

The two necessary connections together entail Lewis's desired conclusion:

Conclusion: If there is a society of free souls, then the free souls that belong to the society *must* be capable of inflicting pain on each other.

A society of free souls is a group of souls with certain properties. Each soul has the capacity to act freely, recognizes the distinction between itself and other souls, and is capable of interacting with other souls to some extent. A relatively independent and law-governed environment is an environment shared by the various free souls that is not under the complete control of any one of them and instead behaves according to some set of exceptionless (or nearly exceptionless) laws that cannot be modified by the souls.

Two questions arise concerning the first necessary connection: Why does a society of free souls require an *environment* at all? And why must the shared environment be independent and law-governed? Lewis's answer to the first question is that without a shared environment the souls could interact with each other only if it were possible for "naked minds to 'meet' or become aware of each other."[41] However, this is not possible, argues Lewis, because such a meeting could transpire only if one soul were to become directly aware of the thoughts of another soul. The problem is that this would leave each soul with no way of distinguishing thoughts originating in itself from thoughts originating in other souls. Each soul would find itself confronted with a host of thoughts but would have no way of knowing which ones (if any) were produced by other free agents.[42] Therefore, no soul would be in a position to know that there *were* free agents distinct from itself.

With respect to the second question, Lewis argues that the only alternative to a "neutral field" with a "fixed nature of its own" is an environment that is entirely under the control of a single free agent.[43] Under such circumstances, only the controlling agent would have the ability to act freely, because no other agent would be able to influence the environment at all. So a fixed environment is required if *all* the souls in the society are to have the capacity for free action.

In support of the second necessary connection (that free souls in a stable environment must be able to inflict pain on each other), Lewis argues that an independent, law-governed environment makes conflict between the various free souls possible, and that this in turn leads to the possibility that they will inflict pain on each other:

> If a man travelling in one direction is having a journey down a hill, a man going in the opposite direction must be going up hill. If even a pebble lies where I want it to lie, it cannot, except by a coincidence, be where you want it to lie. And this . . . leaves the way open to a great evil, that of competition and hostility. And if souls are free, they cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of courtesy. And once they have advanced to actual hostility, they can then exploit the fixed nature of matter to hurt one another. The permanent nature of wood which enables us to use it as a beam also enables us to use it for hitting our neighbour on the head.[44]

With this, we arrive at one of those advertised occasions upon which Lewis directly responds to a point from Hume's *Dialogues*. In the previous section I briefly described four circumstances that, according to Philo, account for most or all of the suffering in the world *and* that an omnipotent God could have avoided. The second of these circumstances is that the world is governed by general laws of nature. Philo claims that rather than setting up the world so that it follows general laws of nature, God might have created a world "conducted by particular volitions."[45] The suggestion here is that God might interfere in some undetectable fashion whenever He sees that events are unfolding in a way that, if unchecked, would lead to suffering. Philo says:

> A being . . . who knows the secret springs of the universe might easily, by particular volitions, turn all these accidents to the good of mankind, and render the whole world happy, without discovering himself in any operation. A fleet whose purposes were salutary to society might always meet with a fair wind: Good princes enjoy sound health and long life: Persons born to power and authority be framed with good tempers and virtuous dispositions.[46]

Lewis's response to Philo's suggestion is that if God interfered often enough to prevent *any* agent from causing another to suffer, the freedom to choose between right and wrong would vanish entirely:

> [S]uch a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void; nay, if the principle were carried out to its logical conclusion, evil thoughts would be impossible, for the cerebral matter which we use in thinking would refuse its task when we attempted to frame them. All matter in the neighborhood of a wicked man would be liable to undergo unpredictable alterations.[47]

What Lewis has offered, to this point, is a version of the free will defense, one of the most ancient and popular proposed solutions to the problem of evil.[48] A key tenet of Lewis's approach is that a society of free souls who cannot inflict pain on each other is an intrinsic impossibility. Thus, it is no more within God's power to create such a society than it is to create a round square. If God brings into being a society of free agents, He thereby makes suffering possible.

At this stage, I would like to point out two shortcomings in what Lewis has said so far as well as a question that remains to be answered. Neither of the shortcomings is fatal, and Lewis does provide an answer to the question in due course. I mention these things now so that we can see that Lewis has more work to do, at least if he wants to account for *all* of the human suffering in the world.[49]

A distinction is often drawn between *moral* and *natural* evil. As our focus is on suffering, we may distinguish between moral suffering (suffering that is the result of free human actions) and natural suffering (suffering that is not the result of such free actions; this would include suffering caused by natural disasters like the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the 2004 Indonesian tsunami). This distinction allows us to see the first shortcoming in what Lewis has said so far: He has addressed only moral suffering. He has said nothing yet that would explain why God would permit natural suffering.

The second shortcoming is that what Lewis has said so far does not seem sufficient even to account for all of the moral suffering we find in our world. To see this point, consider the recent phenomenon

of the internet chat room. A chat room is a shared, neutral environment that allows various free agents to recognize the existence of other free agents and interact with them. Agents interacting in such an environment can inflict some types of pain on each other: They can frustrate each other's desires, insult each other, induce various kinds of emotional pain in each other. But no free agent in such an environment can, for example, cause electrical shocks to be emitted from the keyboard of another user, or whirling blades to pop out of another user's screen, or another user to burst into flame. But in the actual world, free agents can (and sometimes do) electrocute, stab, and incinerate each other. The point is that it is possible for there to be a society of free souls without it being possible for them to inflict *these* kinds of suffering on each other. So these more extreme types of suffering seem to remain unaccounted for at this point.

Finally, here is a question for Lewis: If a society of free souls does require the possibility of the sort of suffering we find in our world, why would God not simply skip the society of free souls altogether? Another way of putting this question is this: What is so great about a society of free souls that makes it *worth* all the suffering?

To see how Lewis might address these various concerns, we must examine the rest of his solution to the problem of pain. Two of the three key concepts involved in the problem remain to be discussed: divine goodness and human happiness. Following the order of Lewis's presentation once again, let us turn to his analysis of divine goodness.

1.3.3 Divine Goodness and Human Happiness

Lewis's discussion of divine goodness in *The Problem of Pain* focuses on God's love for humanity. Though Lewis does not think that love is the only aspect of God's goodness, it is the one that is most relevant to the problem of pain. What makes human suffering so puzzling is that God is supposed to *love* us. To explain God's love for humanity, Lewis first draws a distinction between genuine love and mere kindness. The primary goal of kindness, as Lewis understands it, is a pleasant existence. To be kind to someone is to reduce her

suffering or increase her pleasure. The popular way of thinking of divine goodness is as kindness. This false conception of divine goodness has it that God's goodness amounts to nothing more than His wanting humans to live comfortable, pleasant earthly lives. Comfort and pleasure, then, constitute the popular but false conception of human happiness:

> We want . . . not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves' and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all'. Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms; but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds.[50]

To say that God is good is to say that He loves us, which is to say that his overriding goal for us is that we live pleasurable, comfortable earthly lives: "Kindness . . . cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering."[51]

But, says Lewis, genuine divine goodness involves love rather than kindness. To explain the nature of divine goodness, Lewis examines four kinds of love. Although none of the four kinds corresponds perfectly to God's love for humanity, the idea is that these imperfect approximations have certain features that can shed some light on the nature of God's love for humanity. The four kinds of love are (i) an artist's love for his creation, (ii) a person's love for a beast (e.g., the love of a man for his dog), (iii) a father's love for his son, and (iv) a man's love for a woman.

One element common to all four is that the lover in each case wants the object of his love to be a certain way. Specifically, the lover wants the beloved to be perfect: "Love . . . demands the perfecting of the beloved."[52] It is important to note that the love is *not* conditional upon the perfection of the beloved; instead, the love precedes the perfection of the beloved object, and the love persists even if (as is often or perhaps always the case) the beloved object never becomes perfect. A consequence of this aspect of love is that if the beloved

object is not perfect, the lover will want the beloved to approach as near to perfection as possible. Accordingly, the lover may attempt to transform the object of his love.

Two aspects of this process of transformation are worth noting. The first is that the beloved object may well fail to understand the point of the process of transformation imposed upon it. The second (and related) aspect is that the transformation may require suffering on the part of the beloved:

> [O]ver the great picture of his life – the work which he loves . . . [the artist] will take endless trouble – and would, doubtless, thereby *give* endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and recommenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumbnail sketch whose making was over in a minute.[53]

Similarly, because God loves us, He wants us to approach as near to perfection as possible. This means that each of us needs to be transformed, and, like Lewis's imagined sentient painting, we find the transformation painful. The painting example may be misleading in an important way: It might convey the impression that the transformation is entirely for the sake of the lover. After all, a great painting primarily benefits its artist; the painting itself seems to get little out of the deal! Has the happiness of the beloved dropped out of Lewis's account of love altogether?

The answer is no. Lewis writes that "when we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall in fact be happy."[54] But what does it take to become the sort of being that God can love without impediment? An important difference between us and a painting is precisely that we are capable of entering into a personal relationship with our Creator. Unlike the painting, we can love the Artist back – and I believe that Lewis's view is that it is precisely love for God that renders us worthy of God's love: "God wills our good, and our good is to love Him."[55] Loving God entails striving to become like God (in certain respects): "We are bidden to 'put on Christ', to become like God. . . . To be God – to be like God and to share His goodness

in creaturely response – to be miserable – these are the only three alternatives."[56] The final wrinkle is that we must love God *freely*. God does not want coerced love but rather freely given love. Freely loving God *is* true human happiness. The devil Screwtape explains some of these ideas to his nephew Wormwood in Lewis's fictional work *The Screwtape Letters* as follows:

> He really *does* want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself – creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. . . . But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will . . . would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo.[57]

This completes Lewis's analysis of the three key concepts involved in the problem of pain. The following chart summarizes Lewis's views on these concepts:

	False Conception	True Conception
Divine omnipotence	Ability to do absolutely anything	Ability to do anything that is intrinsically possible
Divine goodness	Desire that humans have false happiness	Desire that humans have true happiness[58]
Human happiness	Comfortable, pleasant earthly lives	Freely loving God and striving to become "Christlike"

We are now in a position to see Lewis's answer to the question that I posed at the end of the previous section: What is so great about a society of free souls that makes it *worth* all the suffering? The answer is that only *free* souls are capable of achieving genuine happiness. This is the great good that makes a society of free souls

worthwhile, even if it brings along tremendous suffering as a consequence.[59]

We are also now ready to see Lewis's explanation of natural suffering. The essence of that explanation is that natural suffering is one of the tools God uses to transform us, to nudge us toward genuine human happiness while leaving our freedom intact. Natural suffering plays a "remedial or corrective" role.[60] Lewis's discussion of the four kinds of love hints at the fact that the transformation of the beloved by the lover may be painful, but we still need to know exactly why making human beings more "Christlike" sometimes requires that they suffer. As Lewis observes: "Not all medicine tastes nasty: or if it did, that is itself one of the unpleasant facts for which we should like to know the reason."[61] The role of suffering in our transformation is the topic of the next section.

1.3.4 God's Three Uses of Pain

Lewis writes:

> When souls become wicked they will certainly . . . hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. . . . But there remains, none the less, much suffering which cannot be traced to ourselves. Even if all suffering were man-made, we should like to know the reason for the enormous permission to torture their fellows which God gives to the worst of men.[62]

In these lines, Lewis implicitly acknowledges the distinction between moral and natural suffering. To account for natural suffering, Lewis describes three ways that God might use pain to nudge us toward genuine happiness.

The first use to which God sometimes puts pain is to get us to recognize our moral shortcomings. Part of loving God is obeying the moral laws that God has laid down for humanity. But a person who doesn't realize that he is violating the rules of morality will never even attempt to obey them. Among the components of moral corruption is blindness to one's own corruption: "[E]rror and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim

suspects their existence."[63] Pain can function as a kind of wake-up call, stimulating the corrupt person to engage in self-examination, which may lead him to recognize his corruption:

> [P]ain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. A bad man, happy, is a man without the least inkling that his actions do not 'answer', that they are not in accord with the [moral] laws of the universe.[64]

The passage indicates that pain is just one of the tools in God's toolbox, but in some cases it may be the only effective one: "No doubt pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument. . . . But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment."[65]

Lewis describes a second use of pain in these lines:

> God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call 'our own life' remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make 'our own life' less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible source of false happiness?

Imagine that you have a child who loves to play video games. Your child loves video games so much that he thinks of nothing else; he is perfectly happy to play video games until, as they say, the cows come home. Suppose also that you know that your child would be happier, would lead a fuller life, if he were to put aside his video games and devote his energies elsewhere. One way to get him to do this would be to ruin video game playing for him. If you could somehow make the video games boring or unpleasant for him, this would motivate him to look elsewhere for fulfillment.

Lewis's idea is that humans are somewhat like this video-game-playing child. We tend to look for happiness and fulfillment in earthly things and do not look for happiness in God. One of the dangers of free will is that we might misuse it: "From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it."[66] God knows that our true happiness lies in Him but sees that we will never

turn to Him if we remain content with earthly things. He needs a way to nudge us away from earthly things without eliminating our free will. Lewis's idea is that God can accomplish this by using pain to spoil the earthly things for us. This frees us of the illusion that the earthly things hold real happiness and inclines us to look elsewhere. The contemporary philosopher Peter van Inwagen, who has developed this particular strand of Lewis's thought powerfully and at some length, puts the point this way:

> An essential and important component of God's plan of Atonement . . . is to make us *dissatisfied* with our state of separation from Him . . . by simply allowing us to "live with" the natural consequences of this separation, and by making it as difficult as possible for us to delude ourselves about the kind of world we live in: a hideous world.[67]

Unlike the first use of pain, this second use is not applicable only to the thoroughly corrupt: "[T]his illusion of self-sufficiency may be at its strongest in some very honest, kindly, and temperate people, and on such people, therefore, misfortune must fall."[68] If this claim is plausible, it makes Lewis's view quite powerful, because it allows Lewis to account for the suffering of those who seem least to deserve it. And this is surely one of the most problematic kinds of suffering:

> We are perplexed to see misfortune falling upon decent, inoffensive, worthy people. . . . How can I say with sufficient tenderness what here needs to be said? . . . The life to themselves and their families stands between them and the recognition of their need; He makes that life less sweet to them.[69]

This idea meshes with Jesus' warning to the rich young man that "it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . [I]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."[70] Wealth tends to produce contentedness with one's earthly life, and thus is one of the main obstacles to seeking happiness in God. As Screwtape advises Wormwood: "Prosperity knits a man to the World. He feels that he is 'finding his place in it,' while really it is finding its place in him."[71]

Lewis also suggests that understanding this function of pain may help us to understand the particular mixture of pleasure and pain that we find in this world:

> We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.[72]

The third role of pain is the most complex of the three. In explaining it, Lewis appeals to the principle that "to choose involves knowing that you choose." More precisely, Lewis's principle seems to be that a person *freely* chooses x for reason r only if she *knows* that she chooses x for reason r. Lewis applies this principle as follows:

> We cannot therefore know that we are acting at all, or primarily, for God's sake, unless the material of the action is contrary to our inclinations, or (in other words) painful, and what we cannot know that we are choosing, we cannot choose. The full acting out of the self's surrender to God therefore demands pain.[73]

The idea here is perhaps best explained by way of an example. I will use an example peculiar to my own pleasures, but I am confident that the reader can adapt the example in accordance with her own pleasures. Suppose that God commanded me to spend the day playing the X-Box video game Halo 2 while drinking Whiskey and Coke. Suppose I obey. Can I be confident that I performed the commanded act *because* it was commanded by God? (In this example, x = playing Halo 2, and r = God commanded me to play Halo 2). I suspect that Lewis would say that the answer is no, for the following reason: The thing I have been commanded to do is something I find quite pleasurable and so am inclined to do regardless of whether I think it has been commanded by God. Therefore, even if I obey, I cannot know that I did not perform the action because it was pleasurable rather than because it was commanded by God. And so it follows from Lewis's principle that it is not the case that I freely performed

the act because it was commanded by God.[74] It would therefore be misleading to describe this as a case in which I surrendered myself to God, despite the fact that I did what God commanded.

To illustrate how pain can enable us to know that we are performing an action because it is commanded by God, Lewis discusses the Old Testament account of the binding of Isaac, in which God commands Abraham to kill his only son. This is surely a command that it would bring Abraham tremendous pain and no pleasure to obey; nevertheless, he goes about obeying the command, until God stops the proceedings at the last moment.[75] In this example, Abraham can be confident that he performed the action because it was commanded by God, for there is no other plausible motive. That the action is one that is so painful to carry out therefore makes this a case in which Abraham can freely perform the action because it is commanded by God.[76]

This completes Lewis's solution to the problem of pain.[77] Accordingly, let us consider again our initial formulation of the problem:

The Problem of Pain

1. If God exists, then He is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is morally perfect, then He wants there to be no suffering in the world.
3. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, then He can bring it about that there is no suffering in the world.
4. So: If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, then there is no suffering in the world (from 2 and 3).
5. But there is suffering in the world.
6. Therefore, God does not exist (from 1, 4, and 5).

What would Lewis say about this argument? The answer to this question depends on how we construe the second premise. Specifically, we need to know whether, according to the premise, God's moral perfection entails that he desires a world devoid of suffering *more than He desires anything else*. If the premise is construed in this strong fashion, then Lewis would reject it. Lewis's position is that

there is at least one good that is more important than a pain-free world, a good that might in fact require that the world contain suffering. This great good is, of course, genuine human happiness, and we have seen why even an omnipotent God may be unable to bring about this good without also permitting human suffering. Because the good is *so* good, God will strive to bring it about even if He must use suffering as a means to attain it. Of course, Lewis can allow that God desires that there be as *little* suffering in the world as is consistent with promoting genuine human happiness. If the second premise is construed as claiming that this is all that moral perfection requires, then Lewis can accept it. However, if the premise is construed in this way, it is not strong enough to support the fourth premise. So, in Lewis's eyes, the second premise is either false or too weak to support the fourth premise; either way, the argument fails.[78]

One loose string remains: At the end of the earlier section on omnipotence, I mentioned the problem posed by the internet chat room. The problem for Lewis's view was that it seems possible for there to be a society of free souls in which the souls cannot inflict upon each other the kinds of extreme suffering that they can inflict upon each other in our world. How, then, can Lewis account for this feature of our world?[79]

Perhaps Lewis could draw upon his explanation of natural suffering to answer this question. It may be that there are cases that require extreme kinds of natural suffering. For instance, perhaps there are people who will turn to God (and hence toward genuine happiness) only if they undergo extreme pain. Let's call such people "hard cases."

We have seen why, according to Lewis, a society of free souls requires the existence of a law-governed environment. Since it is (typically) via these laws that God inflicts natural suffering, if God is to handle the hard cases adequately, the laws that govern the environment must permit the occurrence of extreme pain. But if the laws permit such pain, this opens up the possibility that some of the free agents within the environment will exploit those laws to inflict

extreme pain upon others. Here is a simple example that illustrates this point: If God can use fire to inflict pain by way of volcanic eruptions and forest fires, then humans can master the laws relating to fire and exploit those laws to burn other humans. Perhaps the existence of hard cases explains why we don't live in an environment similar to an internet chat room: Such an environment would not permit God to deal with the hard cases while also leaving the free will of the agents in that environment intact.

If Lewis's solution to the problem of pain is to be entirely successful, all human natural suffering must be explicable in terms of the three roles described in this section. Whether this is so is the main topic of the penultimate section of this chapter, in which we will consider some objections to Lewis's solution to the problem of pain. Before turning to that task, however, it will be useful to consider a literary illustration of some of Lewis's ideas. Doing this will both bring Lewis's ideas to life and help to sharpen our comprehension of the difference between how human suffering appears when viewed in light of false understandings of omnipotence, goodness, and happiness and how it appears when viewed in light of correct understandings of these concepts.