

The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis

I thought we could begin by looking at a small chunk of this book. The author thinks that Pain/Suffering is the main reason why people do not believe in God. And he goes to great lengths to prove otherwise- so much that I have to get a pencil and google out to follow along. [I encourage you to do the same, annotations and independent learning are powerful].

I've typed up the first 3 pages of the book and I've added my thoughts and prompting questions in bold. Use them to direct your own ideas and make notes.

Have a read, think, then argue with me (or someone at home).

Questions to consider:

Is Atheist C.S. Lewis onto something?

Should I drop everything and listen to him?

Can you find any flaws in what he is saying?

Can you spot any parallels to theories we have previously studied? *Cough* Epicurus *cough*.

It contains all three areas of A-Level Religious Studies: Philosophy, Ethics and Christianity. See if you can spot all three. Enjoy the read.

1. Introduction

I wonder at the hardihood with which such persons undertake to talk about God. In a treatise address to infidels they begin with a chapter proving the existence of God from the works of Nature... this only gives their reader's grounds for thinking that the proofs of our religion are very weak.... It is a remarkable fact that no canonical writer has ever used Nature to prove God. - Pascal. Pensees IV (242-243)

[The author starts his book by quoting another, questioning how we would explain the existence, nay prove His existence(God) to others and wonders why the everyday man would use Nature as proof and yet why the priests and Popes have not.

What do you think? Would you use nature to prove He exists? Is it plausible? Is there a reason why the Church might not use it?]

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: "Look at the universe we live in. By far the greatest part of it consists of empty space, completely dark and unimaginably cold. The bodies which move in this space are so few and so small in comparison with the space itself that even if every one of them were known to be crowded as full as it could hold with perfectly happy creatures, it would still be difficult to believe that life and happiness were more than a bye-product to the power that made the universe. As it is, however, the scientists think it likely that very few of the suns of space—perhaps none of them except our own--- have any planets; and in our own system it is improbable that any planet except the Earth sustains life. And Earth herself existed without life for millions of

years and may exist for millions more when life has left her. And what is it like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all 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 with pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die.

In the most complex of all creatures, Man, yet another quality appears, which we call reason, whereby he is enabled to foresee his own pain which henceforth is preceded with acute mental suffering, and to foresee his own death while keenly desiring permanence. It also enables men by a hundred ingenious contrivances to inflict a great deal more pain than they otherwise would have done on one another and on the irrational creatures. The power they have exploited to the full. Their history is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, which just sufficient happiness interposed to give them, while it lasts, an agonised apprehension of losing it, and, when it is lost, the poignant misery of remembering. Every now and then they improve their condition a little and what we call a civilisation appears. But all civilisations pass away and, even while they remain, inflict peculiar suffering of their own probably sufficient to outweigh what alleviations they may have brought to the normal pains of man. That our own civilisation has done so, no one will dispute; that it will pass away like all its predecessors is surely probable. Even if it should not, what then? The race is doomed. Every race that comes into being in any part of the universe is doomed; for the universe, they tell us, is running down, and will sometime be a uniform infinity of homogeneous matter at a low temperature. All stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter. 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." (P1-3).

[C.S Lewis begins by stating his argument as an atheist (he very adamantly wanted to be and remain an atheist, yet he says he 'reluctantly became a Christian' as it was 'irrevocably true'). He believed that Nature did the opposite. Proved there is NO God. Is that valid? True? Accurate?

**Now wait, go back and reread the last few lines from 'If you ask me to believe that....'
What does he say about this 'God'? What LABELS has CS Lewis placed on him? You see them- jot them down. They should be familiar- what is this specific way of thinking of God called? [it has a name and we've used it in lessons].**

Do we have to think of God in a certain way? Does only one way work? Hmm. Ponder and leave that thought for a moment.

Back to the beginning of his book; he opens the idea about using Nature to prove God- and it can; we've read William Paley's Design Argument (GCSE RE) and we've heard of numinous experiences (St. Bernadette being visited by Mother Mary) but does what the Atheist version of C.S Lewis say and see about the world hold any truth? Find one line that sticks out. For example, 'the process inflicts only death' or 'their history a record of crime...' they're powerful, passionate and evoking of emotion- but are they accurate and true? Is it all doom and gloom? Is pain the only part that exists? Hmmm. Ponder and leave that thought for a moment.

Note last, but not least, that the author brings up two things mankind can do beyond all other creatures. Go back up, look for the word 'Man'. Find those two things. Highlight and annotate what you know about them.

C.S. Lewis implies that mankind's very nature of consciousness and reason- lead to inner pain for oneself and that can be inflicted on another. Again, evocative and passionate- but is it accurate? Is it true? Is this the way we behave?

Pause. Count to twenty.

This is Philosophy and Ethics and Christianity A-Level. All in one short piece.

The big question about life (Philosophy); the questions about how we use our minds/actions and treat others (Ethics); the big question on God's nature (Christianity).

Go back, (maybe later today, after you've digested it) and read it all again, check your notes, add to your notes, look up words you do not know; ARGUE with C.S Lewis. Point out parts where he isn't clear, or needs more evidence or fails to convince you.

This will help us to form our own opinions about the Ethics of Mankind; the Philosophy surrounding our existence; and the nature of God. A Level will continue to explore each of these and pit different theories and scholars against one another. You'll be challenged to know what each think and how they complement and contradict one another and our society today.