“I know I must become, in the eyes of every hostile reader, as it were, personally responsible for all the sufferings I try to explain” (page 96).

“All arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author” (page 104-105).

“I am only trying to show that the old Christian doctrine of being made ‘perfect through suffering’ is not incredible. To prove it palatable is beyond my design” (page 105).

Erik’s note: I feel sorry for anyone who tries to defend God’s goodness in the light of suffering. Such writers, as Lewis admits, open themselves to a machinegun like barrage of complaints, questions, objections, and whiny counter arguments. I know; I have my own list of whiny counter arguments. Nevertheless, as a serious student of theodicies I’ve tried to read Lewis respectfully and intelligently without, I hope, hostility or resentment. I have inserted some of my questions throughout this summary. I apologize if you find this off putting. Is so, feel free to ignore my notes and enjoy the distilled essence of this unique book.

PREFACE: “...when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all” (page 10).

1. INTRODUCTORY

Before Lewis attempts to “solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering” (page 10) he describes the origin of religion and how it creates the problem of pain.

Lewis was an atheist in his 30s because, he says, he believed then that the universe was mostly empty space, dark, cold, and almost entirely unpopulated. The earth was lifeless for millions of years before humans showed up and will be void of life after we’re extinct. Life on earth exists by preying on one another; conscious beings cause pain to one another, and all living beings die in pain. Reasoning creatures endure mental suffering, create tools of suffering, and leave a historical legacy of crime, war, disease, and terror. Civilizations vanish, the universe is running down, and the human race is doomed.

“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” (page 15).

Such a universe left Lewis puzzling, “If the universe is so bad...how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator?” (page 15). For Lewis the problem of the origin of religion precedes the problem of pain.

It “staggered belief” (page 15) to assume that this horrific universe gave birth to belief in a good God. Where did such belief come from? The following four realities can not be inferred from the visible world:
1) the universal concept of dread (existential fear, the uncanny, the Numinous, pages 16-20).
2) the universal concept of morality (pages 21-22).
3) the linking of the two, “the Numinous Power of which they feel awe is made the guardian of the morality to which they feel obligation” (page 22).
4) Jesus claimed to be that Numinous Power (page 23).

How did humans become aware of these four experiences? They’re not self evident and it makes no sense to invent such beliefs. They come to us, Lewis says, by revelation. Because of these beliefs we now expect the world to be just, fair, and much less painful.

“In a sense, it (Christianity) 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” (page 24).

With this point established, Lewis next begins to explain his theodicy (defense of faith in light of suffering).

Erik’s note: Even if Lewis’ anthropological description of the origin of religion was air tight (which I doubt) it is true that atheists don’t have a problem of evil. Nature red in tooth and claw, war, famines, etc. are inevitable, random, purposeless, and to be expected in a universe run by chance and impersonal laws of nature.

2. DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

“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 lacks either goodness, or power, or both” (page 26).

This is the problem of pain in its simplest form. Lewis will try to solve the problem in this chapter by refining what we mean by “almighty” (and what we mean by “good” in the next).

Even though the Bible says, “with God all things are possible,” Lewis explains that God in fact can not do all things. He can not:

- do things that are “self contradictory” (page 27).
- do the “intrinsically impossible” (page 28).
- “give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it” (page 28).
- “create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and ‘inexorable’ Nature” (page 29).

This last point bears elaboration.

A “society of free selves” (immortal, disembodied self conscious spirits) needs an exterior world (matter) in order to distinguish one’s self from another, in order to have objects to think and feel about, and in order to communicate (page 30-31).

“But if matter is to serve as a neutral field it must have a fixed nature of its own” (page 31). That is, the stuff of the world—trees, chess men, wooden beams, rocks, hills—must have an independent existence, governed by laws, and sometimes impervious to human manipulation. Thus people can’t, Lewis asserts, simply will that matter succumb to our every whim. This would rob humanity of free will; if you’re changing matter according to your will then my actions will be impotent. It’s inevitable that physical bodies will experience matter in
varying ways; sometimes heat warms, sometimes it burns. And finally, it’s inevitable that your wish to manipulate matter one way will clash with my wish to manipulate matter another way.

It is impossible, therefore, for God to create a universe of free souls (“angels also must have such [an external] world or field,” page 31) without the existence of matter, and matter introduces the possibility of pain. “Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself” (page 35).

It simple terms, Lewis is saying that it would have been impossible for God to create free beings that don’t have the possibility of being hurt by nature. “Perhaps this is not the ‘best of all possible’ universes, but the only possible one” (page 35).

Erik’s note: heaven will be physical in some way and yet painless. The objector would ask, “If God can create a heaven then maybe our world isn’t the only possible one.”

Chapter 3: DIVINE GOODNESS

Even though our conception of good and evil is different from God’s, the differences are a matter of degree not substance. That is, God doesn’t ask us to believe that black is white (page 37). When we understand God’s view of goodness our idea of goodness will be improved, will get better, and will be perfected.

Nevertheless, even though popular ideas of goodness are not entirely false, they are open to criticism (page 39). The notion that God wants his creatures happy all the time is incorrect. God is concerned with us becoming good more than us becoming happy.

☐ Like an artist, God is shaping us into a “glorious … destiny” (page 43).
☐ Like a dog owner, God tames us to make us “more lovable” (page 43). “To the puppy the whole proceeding would seem, if it were a theologian, to cast grave doubts on the goodness of man: but the full-grown and full-trained dog, larger, healthier, and longer-lived than the wild dog, and admitted, as it were by Grace, to a whole world of affections, loyalties, interests, and comforts entirely beyond it’s animal destiny, would have no such doubt” (page 43-44).
☐ Like a father, God uses his authority to make his children into the beings he wants them to be.
☐ Like a husband, God wants what’s best for his bride (page 46).

God’s love is concerned for our welfare, improvement, and perfection. “His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable” (page 48). In other words, God can’t love us in our wicked condition; he’s got to improve us with suffering to make us more lovable.

Is this a selfish or egoistic love? asks Lewis. No, because God’s love is selfless; he creates and sanctifies people out of His generosity and goodness, not neediness. He loves us for our own good, not his (page 50). As he makes us better we love him more and that is good for us.

Erik’s note: I’m not so sure God doesn’t ask us to believe that our “black” is his “white.” Asking us to believe that human suffering is “good” in God’s eyes is to ask us to believe something quite radical. Also, the “soul making” (page 108) argument for suffering doesn’t fully explain why one person suffers more than another, especially since all fall short of the glory of God. Why must some people apparently need more changing than others? “The sacrifice of Christ is repeated, or re-echoed, among His followers in varying degrees, from the cruelest martyrdom down to a self-submission...The causes of this distribution I do not know” (page 104). And
finally, Lewis does not seem to believe in imputed righteousness but rather a righteousness gained via suffering. This to me could minimize the work of the cross.

Chapter 4. HUMAN WICKEDNESS

In this chapter Lewis’ defends the doctrine that humanity is “very bad” (morally flawed) and needs “alteration to become fully loveable” (page 55). In Bible times such a defense wasn’t necessary; they knew they “deserved the Divine anger” (page 55). Two things (in the 1940s) make this doctrine hard to believe: 1) the virtue of kindness has been elevated to the point of overlooking other virtues; as long as a person is “kind” they do not feel like a sinner; 2) Freudian psycho-analysis “recognizes shamelessness as the nadir of the soul” (page 57). The fear of repressed emotions has resulted in embracing the virtue of self disclosure—including cowardice, unchastity, falsehood, and envy.

Until we recover a sense of sin, says Lewis, we’ll resent God’s demands, God’s chastening, and Gods anger. When we feel real guilt “all these blasphemies vanish away” (page 58). To instill guilt Lewis reminds us we’re all prideful, selfish, unkind, intemperate, and unchaste. We ignore God, commit mean and ugly acts, and do hateful things.

To convince us this is true Lewis will offer eight proofs. “I am merely trying to get my reader (and, still more, myself) over a pons asinorum¹—to take the first step out of a fools’ paradise and utter illusion” (page 58-59).

1. We make stilted comparisons. We think we’re better than person X when in fact we know we’re not.
2. We justify individual corruption because we’re in an “iniquitous social system” (page 60).
3. We imagine wrongly that time dims the seriousness of our sins.
4. We get acclimated to low social norms, “everyone does it” (page 62).
5. We forget that what seems moral to us may seem immoral to God.
6. We focus on one good trait (IE. kindness) and ignore others (IE., courage, humility, diligence).
7. We fail to obey God’s rules and then complain that God’s rules are too moralistic.
8. We excuse our moral failures on evolutionary/biological grounds when in fact we’re just unwilling.

Least readers assume Lewis believes in total depravity (he doesn’t), or that he recommends universal gloom (he doesn’t), he concludes this chapter with some suggestions. If your sin makes you sad, repent, rejoice as much as you can, be humble, and remind yourself that you are not only a horror to God but you should become a horror to yourself.

Erik’s note: I agree with Lewis that “it is the high-minded unbeliever, desperately trying in the teeth of repeated disillusions to retain his ‘faith in human nature’ who is really sad” (page 67). Given the ubiquity of human cruelty (not to mention my own predilection to justifying, denying, and minimizing sin), it is hard to believe we are completely virtuous creatures. Despite our best efforts to deny it, we’re vile. God can’t love us while we’re in this vile state, and therefore God uses suffering to clean us up so he can love us most fully. On a logical level, therefore, this theodicy “works.” But on an emotional level I struggle. Do children with cancer really need to be altered to become more lovable to God? If a tsunami hits Indonesia killing thousands are we to conclude they needed altering more than others? Do the sins Lewis lists, “pulling wings off a fly, forever toadying, lying and lusting as a schoolboy” (page 63) really warrant the extent of human misery we experience? As I said in my opening note, I feel sad for apologists because they invite visceral reactions such as these.

¹ Pons asinorum (Latin for "bridge of asses") is the name given to Euclid's fifth proposition in his Elements of geometry, also known as the theorem on isosceles triangles...the first real test in the Elements of the intelligence of the reader and functions as a "bridge" to the harder propositions that follow. Whatever its origin, the term is also used as a metaphor for a problem or challenge which will separate the sure of mind from the simple, the fleet thinker from the slow, the determined from the dallier; to represent a critical test of ability or understanding. (Wikipedia).
Chapter 5: THE FALL OF MAN

How did humanity become vile and a horror to God? Man “made himself so by the abuse of his free will...the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and ... creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil” (page 69). Lewis refuses to speculate on whether or not it was better for God to create or not create, and he disagrees with those who argue that it is acceptable to punish individuals for the faults of their remote ancestors.

Since Lewis believed in evolution he has to admit he doesn’t know exactly when animal humanoids became fully human, how “wicked” animals were before evolving into humans, exactly how much better humans were after being granted perfect spiritual consciousness, or exactly how much worse they were than their animal ancestors after the fall.

Regardless of the timing, the fall entailed the following sin against God, “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. This sin is committed daily by young children and ignorant peasants as well as by sophisticated persons, by solitaries no less than by those who live in society: it is the fall in every individual life, and in each day of each individual life, the basic sin behind all particular sins” (page 75).

The consequences of the fall were “heinous...terrible” (page 80), “transmitted by heredity to all later generations” (page 83), and “a radical alteration of his constitution, a disturbance of the relation between his component parts, and an internal perversion of one of them” (page 84). “...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” (page 85).

The point of this chapter is to describe the origin of this spoiling and to reinforce the notion that suffering is remedial or corrective. How that happens is described in the next chapter.

Erik’s note: Lewis the rational apologist admits ignorance in this chapter more than in any other. This is understandable since he’s discussing ancient matters beyond observation and for which there is incomplete revelation. Merging evolution with Genesis isn’t easy for anyone, but good for him for trying.

Chapter 6: HUMAN PAIN

Review: “…the possibility of pain is inherent in the very existence of a world where souls can meet. When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to hurt one another” (page 89). But why doesn’t God stop man’s inhumanity to man? What about natural evils? Why is there “suffering, anguish, tribulation, adversity, or trouble?” (page 90).

Pain, Lewis asserts, is God’s tool to nudge us toward our ultimate aim in life: self surrender, putting God’s will above our own, death to self, and mortification. When we do this we’ll be happy (page 90), we’ll imitate Jesus

2 “If by saying that man rose from brutality you mean simply that man is physically descended from animals, I have no objection” (page 72). “For long centuries God perfected the animal from which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself...the creature may have existed for ages in this state before it became man” (page 77). “We do not know how many of these creatures God made, nor how long they continued in the Paradisal state” (page 79), “God raised vegetable life to become the vehicle of animality, and the chemical process to be the vehicle of vegetation” (page 83).

3 “…spiritual realities beyond our normal grasp” (page 70), “I cannot penetrate its profundities” (page 72), “What exactly happened when Man fell, we do not know” (page 76), “when we talk about what might have happened...we do not know what we are talking about” (page 85).
(page 91), and we’ll practice now what we’ll practice in heaven (page 91). “We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are, as Newman said, rebels who must lay down our arms” (page 91).

Doing this is painful because we’re all prone to resist submission to God. Suffering aids and abets this process in three ways.

1. No one surrenders him/herself to God when all is well. Pain “is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world” (page 93). It “shatters the illusion that all is well” (page 95). Observing or experiencing pain is an existential reminder that we are “up against the real universe” (page 95).

2. Suffering reminds us that we do not have the resources (apart from God) to cope with horrific evils, it shatters our self sufficiency. “We are perplexed to see misfortune falling upon decent, inoffensive, worthy people—on capable, hard-working mothers of families or diligent, thrifty little trades-people, on those who have worked so hard, and so honestly, for their modest stock of happiness and now seem to be entering on the enjoyment of it with the fullest right....God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched” (page 97). In other words, God makes them miserable, “He troubles them...He makes life less sweet” (page 97) so they’ll turn to him now before it’s too late.

3. Suffering purifies our motives for surrendering to God. “We cannot therefore know that we are acting...for God’s sake, unless the material of the action is contrary to our natural inclinations” (page 99). When surrendering to God is easy it is impure. When surrendering to God is hard, as exemplified by martyrs and Christ, (page 102) it is pure.

Given all these benefits of suffering the real question is, “not why some humble, pious, believing people suffer, but why some do not” (page 104).

**Erik’s note:** Lewis has given himself a hard task: asking me to believe that horrific evils are for my edification, my sanctification, and my mortification. God inflicts suffering, He “makes...troubles...shatters” (page 97) others so I become a better person? This seems unjust to the sufferer. Whipping boys and scapegoats are both unethical and abhorrent.

**Chapter 7: HUMAN PAIN, continued**

Six propositions complete Lewis’ account of suffering.

1. Even though suffering is good for us, it is not to be pursued. When it happens it should motivate repentance and submission to God, and compassion and acts of mercy by onlookers. Even Jesus prayed that he could escape his suffering.

2. Expect suffering to last until we get to heaven. Work for the removal of as many miseries as we can, but don’t expect heaven on earth.

3. Self surrender to God is not a model for politics, governments, or civil disobedience.

4. While suffering will not be eradicated until heaven, we can enjoy the “joy, pleasure, and merriment He has scattered broadcast” (page 115). Too much joy and we’ll not turn to God; smatterings of joy refresh.

5. Do not make the problem of pain worse by tallying up the sum total of earth miseries. A tooth ache hurts but 1000 tooth aches do not hurt any one person. “The addition of a million fellow-sufferers adds no more pain” (page 116).

6. Pain, “When it is over, it is over” (page 116).
Erik’s note: While it’s true no one person experiences the pain of a thousand tooth aches, the pain of a thousand persons is a challenge for theodicy a thousand times bigger than the pain of one person.

Chapter 8: HELL

“Some will not be redeemed. There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power...I would pay any price to be able to say, ‘All will be saved,’ ...I detest [the doctrine of hell] from the bottom of my heart” (page 118-119). Yet Lewis affirms this doctrine for four reasons. It’s taught in Scripture. It’s supported by Christ. It has always been believed by Christians. It’s supported by reason.

He adds: 1) the doctrine of hell is intended to motivate repentance, 2) some have used this doctrine in (unnamed) tragic ways, and 3) there are (unspecified) consequences to not believing it. His aim in this chapter is not to make the doctrine tolerable, “It is not tolerable” (page 120), but that it is moral. He does so by answering five objections to the doctrine.

Objection #1: Retribution is unjust. Lewis says that sinners deserve punishment and that most people believe it unjust when scoundrels and knaves go unpunished.

Objection #2: Eternal punishment doesn’t fit the temporal crime. Lewis dismisses this objection by redefining time and suggesting that our free will has spoiled us and God knows when it’s useless to give a second chance.

Objection #3: The intensity of pain in hell is not commensurate with the crime. Lewis calls hell unspeakably horrible but dismisses the images of fire as medieval. He even suggests it might not be painful, “Even if it were possible that the experience...of the lost contained no pain and much pleasure, that black pleasure would be such as to send any soul, not already damned, flying to its prayers in nightmare terror” (page 126).

Objection #4: Residents of heaven would be sad knowing others were in hell. Lewis suggests heaven and hell do not coexist but that hell is final, it is not fixed for eternity or of endless duration, and therefore to those in heaven, the knowledge of hell “fades away into non entity” (page 127).

Objection #5: God isn’t omnipotent if one person is lost. To Lewis this isn’t an objection but a reality. God is “capable of being resisted by its own handiwork” (page 127).

Erik’s note: I must confess, Lewis did not convince me that hell is moral. I find it barbaric and hard to square with a God of holiness, justice, love, and mercy.

Chapter 9: ANIMAL PAIN

Animals are incapable of sin or virtue, so why do they suffer? “It is outside our range of knowledge” (page 129). Lewis concludes, “the appearance of reckless divine cruelty in the animal kingdom is an illusion, and...our suffering turns out not to be not cruelty” (page 130).

He surmises animals are possibly not conscious and therefore do not experience pain as we do. He reminds us that Satan rebelled against God before humans which opens the door to the belief “carnivorousness, with all that it entails, is older than humanity” (page 133). And Lewis even speculates that maybe one of humanity’s functions was to tame fallen animals (page 136).

A sample of Lewis’ wit, “If the earthly lion could read the prophecy of that day when he shall eat hay like an ox, he would regard it as a description not of heaven, but of hell” (page 142).

Erik’s note: Very witty philosophy here but, in my opinion, not helpful in justifying the ways of a merciful God who allows animal suffering.
Chapter 10: HEAVEN

Quoting Paul, “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us,” Lewis concludes this book with musings about the blessedness of heaven. To warm us up to the subject he launches into his famous argument from desire (page 145).

☐ The unique things that give us partial joy on earth (books, landscapes, hobbies, friendships) indicate that there’s a yearning in our hearts that only God can completely fulfill.

☐ “Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance” (page 147).

☐ “All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness” (page 148).

☐ “The soul is but a hollow that God fills” (page 151).

☐ “The size and emptiness of the universe which frightened us at the outset of this book, should awe us still, for though they may be no more than a subjective by-product of our three-dimensional imagining, yet they symbolize great truth. As our Earth is to all the stars, so doubtless are we men and our concerns to all creation; as all the stars are to space itself, so are all creatures, all thrones and powers and mightiest of the created gods, to the abyss of the self-existing Being, who is to us Father and Redeemer and indwelling Comforter” (page 153-154).

Erik’s note: One cannot do justice to this witty and insightful chapter in brief summary. I commend it to readers as the best of the book. (I’ve not commented on the to me largely irrelevant Appendix written by a doctor on his observations of pain).

The Problem of Pain was written in 1940. After Lewis’ wife Joy died in 1960 he wrote A Grief Observed. According to Lewis biographer Alistair McGrath, in comments to me during a Q/A at Regent College on June 5, 2013, “The Problem of Pain is an over intellectualized book, helpful but lacking in existential engagement. In A Grief Observed Lewis talks about his experience of pain and offers the best description of the grieving process. In A Grief Observed he criticizes simplistic approaches to pain including some of those he used himself back in 1940. It was published anonymously to save embarrassment and some of his friends thought, ‘This is a book that will help Lewis deal with his grief.’ The later Lewis,” McGrath said, “is a much more helpful Lewis.”

Some quotes from A Grief Observed support these observations.

☐ “But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand” (page 28).

☐ “But all these blacks (as they seem to us) are really whites. It’s only our depravity that makes them look black to us” (page 37).

☐ “The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness” (page 49).

☐ “All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that” (page 81).

I mention these things to commend Lewis’ admirable honesty, to commiserate with his evolving faith/doubt, and to remind myself that the problem of pain remains a problem for even the best Christians.