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## Weighing evils: the C. S. Lewis approach

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**Abstract** It is often argued that the great quantity of evil in our world makes God’s existence less likely than a lesser quantity would, and this, presumably, because the probability that some evils are gratuitous increases as the overall quantity of evil increases. Often, an additive approach to quantifying evil is employed in such arguments. In this paper, we examine C. S. Lewis’ objection to the additive approach, arguing that although he is correct to reject this approach, there is a sense in which he underestimates the quantity of pain. However, the quantity of pain in that sense does not significantly increase the probability that some pain is gratuitous. Therefore, the quantitative argument likely fails.

**Keywords** Adding pain · C. S. Lewis · Evil · Gratuitous pain · Quantitative argument · Suffering

### Introduction

The intuition that the vast amount of evil in our world counts against traditional theism in a way that lesser quantities do not is prevalent both in lay circles and in philosophical treatments of the problem of evil. For example, Hume says in the mouth of Demea: “Were a stranger to drop, on a sudden, into this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strewn with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine or pestilence.”<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov echoes Demea’s intuition. Following depictions of horrendous evils involving small children, Ivan remarks, “Listen to me: I took

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<sup>1</sup> See Hume (1990), p. 106.

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children only so as to make it more obvious. About all the other human tears that have *soaked the whole earth through*, from crust to core, I don't say a word . . ." [emphasis added].<sup>2</sup> Both Demea and Ivan imply that a large quantity of evil is a greater threat to the existence of God than significantly fewer evils would be. Indeed, contemporary philosophers often take it for granted that the problem of evil is worse due to the great quantity of evil in our world. For example, William Rowe says, "In light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief."<sup>3</sup> And Daniel Howard-Snyder endorses the position that the quantity of evil magnifies the problem of evil: ". . . even if there is a reason that would justify God in permitting *some* evil, even a great deal of it, there may be no reason at all that would justify his permitting *so much* . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Why would a greater quantity of evil make the existence of God less likely than a lesser quantity? Presumably any quantity of evil is a problem for the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity, but contemporary objectors usually admit that some evils (or, at least, some apparent evils) might be such that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being would have a morally sufficient reason to permit them. That is to say, they might not be gratuitous.<sup>5</sup> However, the greater the quantity of evil, the more likely it is that at least some of those evils are gratuitous, and hence, the less likely it is that the God of traditional theism exists.

It is hard to know how to evaluate this argument without at least a rough way to determine the total quantity of evil in a world. Often evil is quantified on the model of the hedonic calculus, the way in which pain is quantified in classical utilitarianism. On this method, there are at least three scales of measure: the severity of the pain, the duration of the pain, and the number of instances of pain. According to this calculus, each scale is commensurate with the others, so the total quantity of pain in the world can be summed up. For example, one person may have a pain twice as severe but equal in duration to the pain of two others, in which case the first person's pain would be  $2n$ , and the other two persons' pain would be  $1n + 1n$ , resulting in the same total amount of pain. We will call this approach to quantifying evil the additive approach (AA). Possibly evils other than pains can be quantified by AA, but we will focus on the problem of pain because it has the best chance of being quantifiable in this way.<sup>6</sup> We will return to the problem of separating the problem of pain from other evils and countervailing goods at the end of this paper.

Using AA as the method for measuring quantity of pain, the quantitative argument from pain would go roughly as follows:

<sup>2</sup> See Dostoevsky (Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 243.

<sup>3</sup> See Rowe (1990), p. 131; first published in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–341.

<sup>4</sup> See Howard-Snyder (1999), p. 101. Howard-Snyder then delineates the argument from amount as follows: *Premise [1]*: There is no reason that would justify God in permitting so much evil rather than a lot less. *Premise [2]*: If God exists, then there must be such a reason. *Conclusion*: So, God does not exist, p. 102. After stating the argument, he concedes that "It [argument from amount] is . . . the argument that I have found most troubling" (pp. 102–103).

<sup>5</sup> Rowe himself concedes this: "Intense human or animal suffering is in itself bad, an evil, even though it may sometimes be justified by virtue of being a part of, or leading to, some good which is unobtainable without it. . . . While remaining an evil in itself, [it] is, nevertheless, an evil which someone might be morally justified in permitting" (p. 127).

<sup>6</sup> Using this approach to sum moral evils is much more difficult. Does it make sense to say that one act of injustice or betrayal or deception is twice as bad or forty times as bad as another? Is there a scale of duration for an act of injustice or betrayal, or does that scale apply only to the pain and suffering of its effects?

### Quantitative argument from evil

- (1) The quantity of pain in the world should be measured by AA, and on that measure the quantity is enormous.
- (2) The greater the total quantity of pain, the more likely it is that some of the pain is gratuitous.
- (3) The more likely it is that there is gratuitous pain, the less likely it is that the God of traditional theism exists.
- (4) Therefore, it is unlikely that God exists.

In this paper we will examine C. S. Lewis' objection to (1) and will argue that Lewis is right to reject AA, yet there is also a sense in which Lewis underestimates the quantity of pain. But the quantity of pain in that sense does not significantly increase the probability that some pain is gratuitous, so premise (2) of the argument above is false in that case. Lewis is therefore right in his implied rejection of the quantitative argument from evil.

### Undermining AA: a Cue from Clive

In a collection of his posthumous writings, Wittgenstein says, "The Christian religion is only for the man who needs infinite help, solely, that is, for the man who experiences infinite torment. The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a *single* soul."<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis also takes the position that the total amount of pain in the world cannot be greater than that experienced by one person, but he offers a different reason:

We must never make the problem of pain worse than it is by vague talk about the "unimaginable sum of human misery." Suppose that I have a toothache of intensity  $x$ : and suppose that you, who are seated beside me, also begin to have a toothache of intensity  $x$ . You may, if you choose, say that the total amount of pain in the room is now  $2x$ : search all time and all space and you will not find that composite pain in anyone's consciousness. There is no such thing as a sum of suffering, for no one suffers it. When we have reached the maximum that a single person can suffer, we have, no doubt, reached something very horrible, but we have reached all the suffering there ever can be in the universe. *The addition of a million fellow-sufferers adds no more pain.* [emphasis added]<sup>8</sup>

Here Lewis seeks to demonstrate the illegitimacy of referring to the "unimaginable sum of human misery," and appealing to such a sum with anti-theistic motives—that this incomprehensible sum jeopardizes God's existence in a way that a much smaller sum does not. The argument is grounded in a claim about the relationship between quantity and the limitations of the conscious experience of pain. Summation of pain makes sense only within the consciousness of a single being, argues Lewis, but no one conscious being can experience the summation of all the pain in the world. In fact, no one being can experience the pain of more than one conscious being. We cannot peer into anyone's consciousness and there discover

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein (1998), p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis (1996), p. 103. Lewis's comments here are fascinating, but we find them in embryonic form. He leaves them without further explication, explication that might have strengthened his case against AA. It is helpful to remember that Lewis's aim was not to write a technical piece of philosophy, but to address a general audience.

the aggregate of pain of even two persons, much less all the pain in the universe.<sup>9</sup> In speaking of the “unimaginable sum” of suffering, objectors attempt to refer to an experiential evil that no one actually experiences.

If pain can only be summed within the consciousness of a single individual, Lewis has an argument that there is a maximum amount of pain in the world, and that is the maximum pain a single conscious being can suffer. It does seem reasonable that given the neurological systems of creatures, there is some amount of pain that is the most such a being can suffer at any one time, and given the finitude of life, there is some amount of pain that is the most such a being can suffer during an entire lifetime. It is less plausible to claim that this amount is the maximum amount of pain in the world, and it is also implausible to think that there is *no* sense in which the pain of many creatures is worse than the pain of one. Nonetheless, we think there is something right in Lewis’ argument.

Let’s look at how Lewis’ approach to quantifying pain (LA) contrasts with AA. For convenience, we will call a unit of pain a turp.<sup>10</sup> Suppose *A* and *B* each suffer one turp of pain in some situation *s*. According to AA, we can consider the experiences of *A* and *B* jointly and conclude that

- (a) *s* is characterized by two turps—the summation of *A*’s and *B*’s pain. And we might conclude from (a) that
- (b) *s* makes the existence of God less likely than a situation in which *A* suffers one turp and *B* does not suffer.

LA, in contrast, sums the pain in *s* as one turp, contra (a), and concludes that *s* is less threatening to the existence of God than the defender of AA acknowledges. Notice that Lewis uses the rejection of the way pain in *s* is quantified by AA as a reason to reject (b).

We think both AA and LA are partly right, but to see the problems of each approach, we need to compare a number of worlds. Assume that the maximum amount of pain a single conscious being can experience is 10,000 turps.

Let  $W_1$  be a world containing one person suffering one turp of pain.

$W_2$  consists of ten thousand persons each suffering one turp.

$W_3$  consists of a single person suffering ten thousand turps.

$W_4$  consists of a billion people each suffering one turp.

$W_5$  consists of a single person suffering one billion turps.

According to AA, the amount of pain in  $W_2$  equals the amount of pain in  $W_3$ , and the pain in  $W_4$  equals the pain in  $W_5$ .  $W_2$  and  $W_3$  have ten thousand times as much pain as  $W_1$ , and  $W_4$  and  $W_5$  have a billion times as much pain as  $W_1$ . According to LA, in contrast, the pain in  $W_1$ ,  $W_2$ , and  $W_4$  are equal, and the pain in  $W_3$  is the worst possible. World  $W_5$  is an impossible world.

We agree with Lewis that  $W_3$  is worse than  $W_2$ , and  $W_5$  is impossible, given the assumption that the maximum amount of pain a single individual can experience is well below a billion turps.<sup>11</sup> We think that the position that  $W_3$  is worse than  $W_2$  is *prima facie* justified,

<sup>9</sup> Of course, one person *A* can feel empathetic pain for the pain of *B*, but *A*’s empathetic pain is *A*’s pain, not *B*’s.

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga uses “turp” (turpitude = an instance of baseness, vileness, or depravity) to designate one unit of evil, whereas we are using it to designate one unit of pain. Clearly, there are objections to the idea that there are units of pain that have application to different sentient beings, and Lewis at least hints that he is sympathetic with those objections, but we are granting the idea for the sake of argument.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, we are merely stipulating the numerical value of the maximum amount of pain a single conscious being can experience, but if there is a maximum amount, there will be some number *n* which is such that it is impossible that there is a world containing an individual experiencing pain greater than *n*.

but even if they are equal in quantity of pain, as AA maintains,  $W_3$  needs a greater justifying reason for its existence than  $W_2$ . This is evident if God's properties include the desire to have a relationship with his creatures, or at least, with each creature capable of having a relationship. Surely in that case God would need a much more serious reason to permit a world in which one of his creatures suffers the greatest amount of pain of which that being is capable rather than a world in which the same number of turps of pain is distributed over ten thousand creatures. So we think that (i)  $W_2$  and  $W_3$  are not equal in total quantity of pain, but (ii) even if they are equal,  $W_3$  needs a greater justifying reason than  $W_2$ . Whether  $W_2$  and  $W_3$  are compared by LA or by AA, Lewis is right in his implied conclusion that  $W_3$  is more threatening to the existence of God than  $W_2$ .

But LA leads to counterintuitive results also. Surely, worlds  $W_1$ ,  $W_2$ , and  $W_4$  are not actually equal in total amount of pain, or at least, the pain in  $W_2$ , is greater *in some sense* than the pain in  $W_1$ , and the pain in  $W_4$  is greater still. That is implied by the fact that we believe it is praiseworthy for a person to choose to have her hand burned to spare ninety-nine others from such pain. Presumably we think that her pain prevents pain that is *greater* in some sense. Her act is admirable, not only because it is done for others, but because it prevents a greater degree of pain from happening.

This must be the case even on Lewis' assumption that pain can only be summed within the consciousness of a single individual. If the total pain in one person's consciousness is a bad thing, then the total pain in the consciousness of each of a thousand or a billion individuals is each a bad thing, and God needs a reason to permit each of those bad things, even if the consciousness of each individual is taken individually and the aggregate cannot be summed. Another way to put this point is that *there are as many problems of pain as there are sentient beings*.  $W_2$  has ten thousand problems of pain and  $W_4$  has a billion, whereas  $W_1$  has only one. This is the sense in which  $W_1$ ,  $W_2$ , and  $W_4$  are not equal in the problem of pain even if they are equal in total quantity of pain, as Lewis maintains. The suffering in  $W_2$  and  $W_4$  brings with it an increased burden on God to rectify or justify the suffering. Indeed, he needs ten thousand reasons in  $W_2$  and a billion reasons in  $W_4$ .

### The many problems of pain

How does the fact that there are many problems of pain affect the probability that pain is gratuitous, premise (2) of the quantitative argument from evil as we have stated it? Let's compare  $W_1$ ,  $W_2$ , and  $W_3$ . We suggested above that it is more difficult to see how God could have a reason to permit  $W_3$  than to permit  $W_2$  even if the sum of pain is the same in the two worlds. The inference that the pain in  $W_3$  is gratuitous is stronger than the parallel inference for  $W_2$ . We want to argue now that  $W_2$  may be no more difficult to justify than  $W_1$ , or at any rate, not significantly harder to justify, given relevantly similar conditions for the individuals in  $W_2$ . The inference to the probable gratuitousness of the pain in  $W_2$  is comparable to the inference to the probable gratuitousness of the pain in  $W_1$ .

To see this, consider what we normally say about sufficient justifying reasons that are repeatable in similar situations. If one person has a reason to swallow her bitter-tasting medicine to cure her infection, any person has a reason to take the medicine, given relevantly similar conditions. If one person has a reason to have a cancerous tumor removed despite the pain it will cause, so do ten thousand or a million people with cancerous tumors in similar circumstances. If one person has a reason to ask forgiveness of a person she loves whom she has harmed, so does anybody else in the same situation.

This point is generalizable. Any time a person *A* has a sufficient justifying reason to permit *p* in situation *s*, anybody has a sufficient reason to permit something relevantly similar to *p* in situations relevantly similar to *s*. What counts as relevantly similar is disputable, of course, but the principle is both fair and widely accepted. In fact, it is probably universally accepted. In any case, the principle need not be embraced in its full generality for it to be applicable to God's permission of evil. We are appealing to the following more limited principle, which we can call the Principle of Repeatable Reasons (PRR):

If person *A* has a sufficient justifying reason to permit *p* in situation *s*, then *A* has a sufficient justifying reason to permit states of affairs relevantly similar to *p* in situations relevantly similar to *s*.

We can see the expectation of PRR in the following example. If a worker comes down with the flu, this is a legitimate reason for him to stay home from work. And if sickness is a legitimate reason to stay home from work on this occasion, then it retains its legitimacy on other occasions. If he stays home from work a year later because of sickness, his boss cannot rightly say, "You need a *new* reason this time." If sickness is a legitimate reason on one occasion, it is on another occasion, assuming that the conditions are relevantly similar.

The relevance of PRR to God's permission of  $W_2$  or even  $W_4$  rather than  $W_1$  should be clear. If God's reasons to permit one person's pain are relevantly similar to his reasons for permitting another person's pain,  $W_2$  and  $W_4$  are as justifiable as  $W_1$ , assuming that the pains of the individuals in  $W_2$  and  $W_4$  are relevantly similar to those in  $W_1$  in relevantly similar circumstances. God does not have to have a collective reason for permitting the pains in  $W_2$  or  $W_4$ . It is sufficient if God has repeatable reasons for permitting the pain of each individual.

PRR will need to be qualified. Sometimes the justifying reason for some state of affairs is not repeatable within a certain range because the reason is a good end that only requires a single instance of a state of affairs of a certain type. For example, suppose a shop owner is losing money and will need to lay off one of her sales workers. Although she has a reason to permit one of her employees to lose his job, it does not follow that she has a reason to permit another to lose his job at the same time. But she would have a reason to permit another employee to lose his job at a later time if she was losing money again at that time, and according to the more general form of PRR, other shop owners in similar circumstances would have a reason to lay off an employee. We do not claim, then, that PRR holds without qualification. But we think its range of application is wide enough to show that premise (2) is significantly flawed.

### Adding pains with countervailing goods

On the view that pain is additive, premise (2) of the quantitative argument from evil above has another problem. The probability that a given quantity of pain is gratuitous cannot be separated from other factors that provide the context in which the pain occurs and through which the pain must be understood. To see this, consider a number of worlds in which individuals suffer the pain of a needle prick. Assume that one turp = the pain of one needle prick.

Let  $W_6$  be a world in which a single person suffers one hundred turps and is successfully inoculated against a fatal but painless disease.

$W_7$  consists of a single person who suffers one hundred turps and is not successfully inoculated against the fatal but painless disease.



$W_8$  consists of one thousand persons each suffering one turp and each is successfully inoculated against the fatal but painless disease.

$W_9$  consists of one thousand persons each suffering one turp and each is not successfully inoculated against the fatal but painless disease.

According to AA,  $W_6$  and  $W_7$  contain the same amount of pain, as do  $W_8$  and  $W_9$ , and the latter pair are ten times as bad as the former pair. But surely the problem of pain is not equal in  $W_6$  and  $W_7$ , nor is it equal in  $W_8$  and  $W_9$ . Other things being equal,  $W_7$  is worse than  $W_6$  and  $W_9$  is worse than  $W_8$ .  $W_7$  needs a greater justifying reason than  $W_6$  and  $W_9$  needs a greater justifying reason than  $W_8$ . Furthermore, the pain in  $W_8$  is less likely to be gratuitous than the pain in  $W_7$  even though the former is considerably worse on the additive approach. And if we were right in the preceding section,  $W_8$  may be no harder to justify than  $W_6$ .

### Conclusion

We have argued that Lewis' point that the pains of multiple individuals is not additive is plausible, and for that reason  $W_3$  is worse than  $W_2$ . But there is still a sense in which a greater number of individuals suffering pain increases the quantity of evil. That is because even on Lewis' assumption that pain is only additive within the consciousness of each individual, there are as many problems of pain as there are suffering individuals. However, a world with multiple individuals suffering pain has a different relation to the probability that the pains are gratuitous than a world with the same total quantity of pain, but where the pain is suffered by a single individual. The pain suffered by a single person needs a justifying reason that can explain the quantity of pain suffered by that individual. Pain suffered by multiple individuals in the same circumstances can often be justified by a reason that explains any one of them. The probability that the pain in  $W_2$  or  $W_4$  is gratuitous may be no greater than the probability that the pain in  $W_1$  is gratuitous, and is far less than the probability that the pain in  $W_3$  is gratuitous.  $W_5$  cannot have gratuitous pain since it is not a possible world. Furthermore, the probability that a given quantity of pain is gratuitous cannot be calculated apart from the connection between the pain and countervailing goods that are not additive, such as protection from a fatal but painless disease. We conclude that both premises (1) and (2) of the quantitative argument from evil are probably false.

We are not suggesting that the problem of pain is not severe. It follows from our reasoning that a world containing creatures that suffer the maximum amount of pain of which those creatures are capable has problems of pain that threaten the existence of God. There may well be creatures in our world who suffer the maximum amount of pain for some period of their lives, and there needs to be an explanation for their suffering. We may think of Rowe's suffering fawn in the raging forest fire, twelve year old Ashley Jones, brutally beaten, raped, and murdered, and the cement truck driver who accidentally ran over his three year old daughter while she played in the front yard. These are appalling cases of suffering and evil that bring us almost unbearable emotional angst and cry out for explanation, but we do not think that adding more suffering creatures to the world significantly reduces the probability that there is a God if the suffering is in similar situations. Given PRR, we think that the reason for one can be applied to others. We therefore need not embrace the claim of Hume, Dostoyevsky, Rowe, Howard-Snyder, and many other philosophers that the quantity of evil suffered by many different individuals makes the problem of evil significantly worse.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> We are grateful for helpful comments from members of the audience at the Midwest Regional meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Dubuque, Iowa, March 2007.



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