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**The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis, edited by Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Pp. xx + 326. £18.99 (Pbk). ISBN: 978 0521 71114 2.**

**Jerry Root C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2010). Pp. xxii + 284. £22.50 (Pbk). ISBN: 978 0227 17338 1.**

Despite – or perhaps because of – the ongoing popularity of C. S. Lewis’s work, especially in the area of children’s fiction, his reputation among theologians and philosophers of religion remains mixed. As Robert MacSwain highlights in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, Lewis has suffered from a ‘general neglect within academic theology and religious studies’ (8). Indeed, due to the diversity of his output, he has tended to fall between disciplinary stools, being too didactically religious for many literary critics, yet too much the belletrist for many ‘serious’ scholars of religion. It is the hope of the respective authors of these two books that this situation should change, and I am in no doubt that these books both make valuable contributions towards the fulfilment of that hope.

These publications complement each other very well, one being an attempt to cover the full gamut of Lewis’s interests – as a literary scholar, religious thinker, and writer of poetry and fiction – and the other being an attempt to show how a particular motif, which Jerry Root calls ‘a problem of evil’ (note the indefinite rather than definite article in the phrase), weaves itself through much of Lewis’s oeuvre, enhancing its overall unity. Both books contain a far greater richness of material for religious and philosophical reflection than I can do justice to in a single review, so I shall, necessarily, have to be selective. In the case of *The Cambridge Companion*, of its twenty-one chapters, I shall focus on just a few which deal with issues

pertinent to C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil, and in the case of the latter book, I shall highlight some of its chief contentions with which one might take issue.

Beginning with Root's book: although it undoubtedly investigates a pervasive theme in Lewis's work, the designation of this theme as 'a problem of evil' may be questionable. What the author is most concerned with is Lewis's identification of two broad tendencies in human moral and epistemic life: the striving to live in accordance with objective reality (objective truth, objective values) on the one hand, and seeking to impose one's own personal will upon the world on the other. Following Lewis, Root dubs the former tendency objectivism and the latter subjectivism. Each tendency can manifest in various ways, and the conflict between them reverberates throughout the assorted modes of Lewis's writing, including his narrative fiction, letters, poems, literary criticism, as well as his more explicitly theological ventures. Coming at it from multiple angles, Root's exploration of this theme is diligent and frequently insightful, yet I fear that many readers whose appetite has been whetted by the book's title will find themselves wondering what much of it has to do with any problem of evil.

As noted above, Root speaks of 'a' rather than 'the' problem of evil, and this nuance should not be overlooked. His intention is not to concentrate exclusively, or even primarily, on Lewis's response to the problem that theodicies are typically aimed at resolving, namely the problem of explaining how the types and amount of evil that are so prevalent in the world can be compatible with the world's being the creation of an all-powerful and all-loving God. This is part of what Root is concerned with, but his foremost purpose is to inquire into how Lewis deals in his writings specifically with subjectivism, this being 'a point of view isolated from, and unresponsive to, objective reality' (xvii). It is a viewpoint which, 'left unchecked, leads to evil' (1). Built into this notion is the suggestion that a failure to perceive 'the world as it is' is intimately connected with a proclivity to commit evil, or, more precisely, a proclivity to serve one's own interests at the expense of the interests of others. The opposite

characteristic, 'objectivism', consists in one's seeking to accommodate 'one's thoughts and actions to the world as it is' (191).

I confess to remaining a little perplexed about the nature of the relationship that Root and, allegedly, Lewis claim to see between accommodating oneself to the world as it is and living a virtuous life. My perplexity is not helped by the multiplicity of phenomena that seem to be encompassed by the terms 'subjectivism' and 'objectivism'. At one place, for example, Root oppugns the habit of some literary critics of underplaying the importance of such factors as 'culture, gender, ethnicity, social status' in their literary criticism and to draw too heavily upon their own experience when interpreting works of literature (124–25); he then pronounces that 'Such projections onto texts or onto the events of one's own experience leads [sic] to that kind of subjectivism which may give birth to evil' (126). The claim here seems to be that paying inadequate attention to contextual factors when interpreting a literary work can result in an imposition of meaning that is not really present in the text; this would be an instance of subjectivism, since it involves moulding the text to one's own presuppositions as opposed to explicating what is in the text itself. But how does this lead to evil, and to what sort of evil may we expect it to lead? I just wasn't clear about this, and there were many places in the book where it appeared that the idea that types of subjectivism 'could lend support for an inclination to evil' (137) was being used rather loosely. To put the point even less charitably, it appeared that statements of this sort were being used to imply that the matter under discussion was more relevant to the overarching theme of evil than in fact it was.

I worry, therefore, that the book itself may exhibit a propensity to project onto Lewis's texts a uniformity of purpose that, given a more 'objectivist' reading, should be viewed as a constellation of variegated purposes. There is nothing wrong with Root's exposition of Lewis's criticisms of other literary scholars, or with his interpretations of several of Lewis's novels and other works; these interpretations are, in many ways, illuminating. Nor is there anything wrong with bundling these discussions together under the label of 'subjectivism'

(provided we keep in mind the heterogeneity of phenomena to which that label is attached).

My gripe is simply that, on occasions, the attempt to connect the discussion with the, or even a, problem of evil looks gerrymandered.

Let me not fail to stress the strengths of Root's book, however, among which is the comprehensive knowledge displayed, not merely of the work of Lewis himself, but also of the secondary literature that has flourished around that work. While unabashedly admiring of Lewis, Root does not refrain from critical engagement where called for, one instance of this being his discussion of Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*, which itself constitutes Lewis's most explicit response to what most philosophers and theologians would recognize by the phrase 'the problem of evil'. Having noted that Lewis's argument relies largely on the 'free will' and 'soul-making' forms of theodicy, and 'neglects to explain the origin of other kinds of evil which cannot be accounted for simply by the existence of free-will' (66), Root then usefully proposes lines of argument from John Polkinghorne, Keith Ward, and others, that could supplement those of Lewis. Turning Lewis's own vocabulary against Lewis himself, Root contends that inadequate treatment of natural evil and the suffering of animals amounts to a failure on Lewis's part to accommodate himself to objective reality (82). I wonder, however, whether Root might not be susceptible to a similar charge. The paucity in his discussion of any consideration of genuinely horrific evils – the sort that theodicians struggle to address without revealing themselves to be apologists for cruelty, torture, and agonizing distress – may indicate a preference to avoid the hard cases. Also troubling is Root's apparent endorsement of the idea that 'providence provides an explanation for the good observed by the positive development of species through a process that includes suffering and survival in nature' (81). This proposal assumes not only that there is a kind of progress in biological evolution, but also that this progress might retrospectively justify the suffering that occurs in nature. Some readers might be doubtful that such assumptions derive from an 'objective' assessment of the natural world.

More impressive is Root's consideration of later work by Lewis pertaining to evil and suffering, such as *A Grief Observed*. Although in this latter case more could have been done to bring out the significance of Lewis's poignant reflections on the loss of his wife for the problem of evil, Root does foreground the extent to which Lewis acknowledges the fragility of his own images of God, and hence the fragility of his own religious understanding. It is there that we witness Lewis struggling with his faith rather than playing the role of one who can speak on God's behalf. (We might say that Lewis becomes more like the suffering Job and less like his conceited would-be comforters.)

Turning now to *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, here too we find some thought-provoking contemplation on Lewis's engagement with suffering. Two chapters that grapple vigorously with this issue are those 'On Violence' by Stanley Hauerwas and 'On Suffering' by Michael Ward.

In the light of Lewis's vocal opposition to pacifism, Hauerwas explores the reasons behind this stance while also arguing that, given Lewis's Christian convictions, he should really have been a pacifist himself. Hauerwas's strategy is to first concede most of Lewis's points, but then to argue that Lewis has overlooked the nature of the connection between Christian faith and a rejection of violence. Hauerwas concedes, for example, that pacifists would be wrong to ground their commitments on a putative intuition that killing is always wrong, that we cannot know whether wars do more harm than good, that it is more productive to work at eradicating evils piecemeal than to try to eradicate evil tout court, and that it is not true that death and pain are the worst of all afflictions (198). What he refuses to concede is that Christian pacifism is based exclusively on a dubious reading of Christ's injunction to turn the other cheek. 'Christian non-violence', writes Hauerwas, 'does not derive from any one dominical saying but from the very character of Jesus' life, death and resurrection ... non-violence is constitutive of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus' (196). Hauerwas's chapter brings out in exemplary fashion how it is possible to argue forcefully against a viewpoint with

which one disagrees while also sympathetically summarising that viewpoint – all within the constraints of a fourteen-page chapter.

Like Hauerwas, Ward registers Lewis's own first-hand experience of war on the battlefields the First World War. Both he and Hauerwas quote Lewis's disturbing description of the 'horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting and standing corpses' (191, 203). And like Root, Ward finds certain weaknesses in Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* – 'its awkward shifts of gear, its sudden brakings, stallings and accelerations' (210) – and then proceeds to discuss some of Lewis's subsequent work, including again *A Grief Observed*. Ward, however, sees a stronger consistency than Root in Lewis's views on suffering, from the time of his conversion to Christianity in 1931 onwards. Defending Lewis against the criticism that he underestimates the pointlessness of much of the suffering in the world, Ward emphasizes how Lewis's treatment of the subject needs to be understood in the context of his frequent references to Christ's forsakenness on the cross: 'Although Lewis certainly believed that, considered in a certain light, "pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world", his more fundamental belief was that pain is Christ's agony beneath a deaf sky' (210).

Ward goes on to state, however, that 'The miracle of the resurrection is that it shows Godforsakenness to be redeemable, reinterpretable' (210), and I wonder whether it isn't precisely this point that Lewis's critics, such as Austin Farrer, were so wary of. In an endnote, Ward quotes the character George MacDonald from Lewis's *The Great Divorce* pronouncing that even the worst agonies will be turned into glory once heaven is attained. This sounds nice as a slogan, but may appear barely even intelligible to the moral sensibilities of many readers when placed beside actual instances of atrocious suffering. It is the contention that these sufferings are 'reinterpretable' as something other than genuine evils that so disturbs many opponents of theodicy.

If I were to pick one feature of Lewis's work that strikes me as enormously important for philosophy of religion, and which is brought out vividly in both of the books discussed here, it

would be his use of compelling images. Although Lewis was keen to stress the necessity of constantly discarding images – images of, for example, God, other people, and oneself (Root, 210) – he was also a master of imaginative poetry and fiction who could not restrain himself from offering us a wealth of images to be discarded. Among these are the image of the Trinity as a dance, of humans as statues waiting to be awakened into life (see Paul Fiddes' chapter 'On Theology' in *The Cambridge Companion*), and of a bee 'That booms against the window-pane for hours | Thinking that way to reach the laden flowers' and is then gently caught in a handkerchief and released into the summer air (see Ward, 212–14). As Ward observes, Lewis's use of imagery contrasts with his deployment of intellectual argument; unlike the latter mode of discourse, poetic imagery constitutes 'a vision of experience communicated by means of symbol and story' (214).

Philosophers of religion are still sometimes apt to treat religion as though it were a kind of science, making claims about the world (and about that which lies beyond the world) which can be coolly evaluated by any suitably detached rational individual. Lewis was by no means completely averse to the analogy with science; as Root frequently notes, Lewis was an 'objectivist' who maintained that the value of certain objects of core Christian faith, such as the Resurrection, depends on whether there was any such real historical event. But what Lewis also reminds us is that, since it is the task of some forms of imaginative literature to present 'a distinct view of reality' (Root, 20), so these forms can assist us in understanding spiritual truths. Lewis characterizes the difference between these two modes of understanding – that of the objective neutral observer on the one hand and that of one who is viewing things from within a particular perspective on the other – by means of yet another of his poignant images: the contrast between looking at a beam of light from outside it and looking along it towards its source (see, e.g., Root, 155; Fiddes, 77, 85).

By combining sympathetic exposition with critical appraisal, both the author of *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil* and the various contributors to *The Cambridge Companion to C.*



S. Lewis help us to look at the various symbols, stories and arguments presented in Lewis's body of work and also to step into the beam of that work and look along it, gaining an understanding of Lewis's fertile spiritual vision from the inside.

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CS Lewis definitely was an intelligent man, though as a Unitarian in the tradition of Thoreau I have some key disagreements about theology. I appreciate his temperment in regards to sexual ethics. Still fairly conservative, but he rebuked Christians who acted self-righteous. "A cold self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute." [permalink](#). [embed](#). [save](#). In fact, Lewis gives Boethius's answer to the problem of foreknowledge and free will that is so simple and accessible that we wonder why did this question ever perplexed us in the first place. Another book already mentioned is *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. To write this book, Lewis read every book written in English or translated into English in the sixteenth century. That was the century of the Reformation. This was a literary debate between Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard of Cambridge University. The controversy produces light not heat. These two men knew how to argue properly. The debate contains no informal fallacies. It is a model of civil discourse so needed in our age of impatience, angry tempers, and soaring egos. Clive Staples Lewis (29 November 1898 – 22 November 1963) was a British writer and lay theologian. He held academic positions in English literature at both Oxford University (Magdalen College, 1925–1954) and Cambridge University (Magdalene College, 1954–1963). He is best known for his works of fiction, especially *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Space Trilogy*, and for his non-fiction Christian apologetics, such as *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, and *The Problem of Pain*.