

2022

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Love and the Winter: C. S. Lewis on Enemy Love¹

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“I have often thought to myself how it would have been if, when I served in the first world war, I and some young German had killed each other simultaneously and found ourselves together a moment after death. I cannot imagine that either of us would have felt any resentment or even any embarrassment. I think we might have laughed over it.”

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Chapter 7, “Forgiveness”

“[S]afely dead and not quite damned.”

—C. S. Lewis, letter to his brother, 18 September 1939

Abstract: In this paper I tackle two difficult questions about enemy love, with C. S. Lewis as my guide. First, how do we forgive a person who has deeply injured us? Second, can the Christian command to “love thy enemy” be reconciled with the military task of killing one’s opponent in war? After defining “love”, “enemy”, and “enemy love”, I discuss these two questions in light of the things that most endanger enemy love: resentment and violence. According to Lewis, the virtue of forgiveness and the religious habit of prayer play a crucial role in overcoming resentment. As for violence, particularly lethal violence, I disagree with perceptive Christian political ethicists – such as Nigel Biggar, Marc LiVecche, and even C. S. Lewis – insofar as they argue that the killing of one’s enemy can be “an expression of love” *towards them*. Such language obscures its moral ambiguity and is strictly speaking false. We may perhaps love our enemies despite killing them, not by killing them. Lewis’s distinction between “absolute” and “relative” love helps to untangle the knotty nature and limits of enemy love.

1. Introduction

The Shelling of Mainila is an unfounded twentieth-century conspiracy theory. In 1939, Stalin issued a series of ultimata to Finland. The Finns said “No”. So, on 26 November, a border incident was arranged near the Mainila outpost. Finnish guns, claimed Stalin, had fired shells at innocent Russian border patrol troops – an allegation believed by no one outside, or indeed inside, the Kremlin. Were it not so well documented, pesky Finland’s early success against overwhelming

¹ Acknowledgements: [TBA]. A shorter version of this paper was first delivered at the Oxford University C.S. Lewis Society on 26 May 2021.

odds would today be the stuff of legend. The so-called “Winter War” between Finland and Russia lasted only thirteen wintery weeks.²

C. S. Lewis had been delighted over Finland’s early success: he followed the campaign intently. On Christmas Eve 1939, Lewis wrote to his brother Warnie who had been pulled out of Oxford for active service: “The most cheerful thing at present (oddly enough) is the News. Russia’s attempt to do to Finland what Germany did to Poland reminds me of your father’s story of the ‘great bosthoon’ whom his athletic friend took out for the run and who tried to imitate him in jumping the flax-pond.”³ In early January, Lewis wrote again: “Did you see that the Finns, like the British at Mons, have been seeing angels?”⁴

In February, Lewis writes yet again: “He [Owen Barfield] is very much depressed having a greater faculty than you or I for feeling the miseries of the world in general – which led to a good deal of argument, how far, as a man and a Christian, one *ought* to be vividly and continuously aware of, say, what it’s like on the Mannerheim line at this moment.”⁵ By then, the Red Army had redoubled its efforts the principal Finnish defence fortifications. Even after the war Lewis kept thinking about Finland. In February 1948, he writes: “[T]he European news is worse than ever. Russia, having made a meal of the Czechs this week, is apparently about to dine off Finland next. But the situation does’nt [*sic*] bear thinking about.”⁶

Why all the fuss about Finland? Whether or not he ought to, why did Lewis, who rarely followed the news, care so vividly about Nordic miseries? We know the answer. He had what he called a “bent to ‘Northern’ things”.⁷ Lewis’s interest in Finland and love of things Finnish had long predated the war. His love of the *Kalevala*, the national epic poem of Finland, is well known.

² A good introduction in English, see William R. Trotter, *The Winter War: The Russo-Finnish War of 1939–1940* (Aurum Press, 2013).

³ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 311.

⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 337. In a note to Lewis’s letter, his editor Walter Hooper explains that Lewis was referencing the 25 January 1940 front-page story in *The Daily Mail* on entitled “Battle Weary Finns See Angels”.

⁵ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 350. Lewis is here anticipating discussion of excessive empathy, an issue in modern psychological research. “It is one of the evils of rapid diffusion of news that the sorrows of *all* the world come to us every morning. [...] I doubt it is the duty of any private person to fix his mind on ills wh. [which] he cannot help. (This may even become an *escape* from the works of charity we really *can* do to those we know).” Lewis denied that “the state of being *worried* is in itself meritorious” (Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 747–8).

⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 836. This particular letter to Edward A. Allen was typed by Lewis’s brother Warnie on his behalf; the idiomatic misspelling “does’nt” is a giveaway.

⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 171.

Much less known is his “enchantment”⁸ over the composer Jean Sibelius: “Very, very *Northern*: he makes me think of birch forests & moss and salt-marshes.”⁹

Lewis’s bias helps us to understand his sometimes-unflattering words about Russian imperialism and especially about Stalin. “The Russian, so far (whether Tsarist or pseudo-Communist makes no odds, I expect) [...] grabs things here and grabs things there when he finds them unguarded.”¹⁰ Joseph Stalin, or “Uncle Joe”¹¹ as Lewis sometimes called him, seemed particularly unlovable. Lewis confesses to his friend Arthur Greeves: “I pray every night for the people I am most tempted to hate or despise (the present list is Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Mackenzie, Austen & Opie)*” – these last three were his Oxford colleagues – “and in the effort to make this real I have had to do a good deal of thinking. [...] *N.B. I don’t mean that I’m tempted to hate them equally, of course!”¹²

We can learn from his “good deal of thinking”. Most of his thoughts about our subject – the nature and limits of enemy love – were first articulated in these wartime letters. They were later developed in talks, and finally published in essays and books. While Lewis’s thoughts are not free of occasional blind spots, they are always interesting, rarely myopic, and sometimes eclectic. Consider, for example, his description of war as “an odious necessity”¹³ or his sort of gloomy relief after the outbreak of war: “The next few years will be ghastly, but [...] I daresay for me, personally, it has come in the nick of time: I was just beginning to get too well settled in my profession, too successful, and probably self complacent [*sic*].”¹⁴ Or consider his seemingly irreverent hope that if he and a German soldier had killed each other simultaneously and met a moment after death, “I cannot imagine that either of us would have felt any resentment or even any embarrassment. I think we might have laughed over it”.¹⁵ Behind such optimism were experiences and stories of outbreaks of humanity even during war, such as “the now-famous Christmas truce of 1914”.¹⁶

⁸ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 171.

⁹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 175.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 178.

¹¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 178.

¹² Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 408.

¹³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 188.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 274.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 119.

¹⁶ Loconte, *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe and a Great War* (Thomas Nelson, 2015), x. Lewis himself did not enter the war until age nineteen in 1917.

But enemy love is much more than just military ethics. In this paper, I will ask and attempt to answer two very difficult questions about enemy love, with Lewis as my guide. First, how do we forgive a person who has deeply injured us? It sounds terribly difficult. The second has been called the dilemma of the Christian soldier: “how to reconcile the dominical injunction to ‘love your enemies’ (Matt. 5:44) with the military task of defeating, and where necessary killing, your opponent in war?”¹⁷ Can I love my enemy *and* kill him? This sounds impossible. Lewis was quite fond of the season of winter, but in his poems and especially in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, winter is a metaphor for circumstances most unfavourable: “Always winter and never Christmas; think of that!”¹⁸ Or always Winter War and never Christmas truce; think of *that*. So, how do we love in the winter? How do we love when the sky is dark and the days are short, when the forests are frozen and the marshes are martial, when our fingers and our hearts are numb?

2. The essence of enemy love

Just like it is impossible to solve the problem of evil as long as we attach superficial meanings to the key words of the problem, such as “power” and “happiness”, it is impossible to solve the problem of enemy love before we define “enemy” and “love”. And as so often happens, defining words half answers questions. Let us start with love.

The odd thing about Lewis’s most famous treatise on love, *The Four Loves*, is that it never defines love. Helpful distinctions are made, but in “dissecting” love Lewis almost “murders” it.¹⁹ Love is never patched back together. We never learn what *love itself* is, that is, what all human relationships that deserve to be called “love” share in common. But as I have argued elsewhere, a common core can be extracted from *The Four Loves* that well captures the essence of Lewis’s

¹⁷ Beach, “Can a Soldier Love His Enemy?” *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2015), Vol. 28(3), 280. Ironically symptomatic of the lack of careful attention this question has received is Beach’s own article. After asking the question “Can a soldier love his enemy?”, the author emphasises the importance of ethical training of soldiers, lists some “rules of engagement” to minimize unnecessary violence in war, before closing with his original question which is left unanswered: “Whether you rate it as love I leave to you” (286). James Kellenberger’s otherwise worthy recent study of love in religion *The Asymptote of Love: From Mundane to Religious to God’s Love* (SUNY Press: New York, 2008) completely omits any discussion of enemy love. *Modern Theology* devoted an entire volume on “Love Your Enemy” in 2020 which fares better. The articles represent two contemporary Christian approaches in political theology, the so-called “neo-Augustinian” and “neo-Anabaptist” approaches, but they also problematize these categories. The most important secondary sources for our purposes I will introduce later in this essay.

¹⁸ Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, chapter 2, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (HarperCollins: New York, 2004), 118.

¹⁹ Lewis is aware of this danger: “We murder to dissect” (*The Four Loves*, 26).

overall understanding of love. It is this. *Love is the appreciative and responsive commitment to the other's flourishing insofar as possible and permissible.*²⁰ As a virtue, love has three elements: the attitudinal (“appreciative-love”), the practical (“gift-love”), and the responsive or relational (“need-love”). It follows that any relationship can be promoted to a love-relationship when we can turn to the object of love and say: “It is good that you exist! I will involve myself in your wellbeing insofar as I can, and I welcome your love in return!” This would explain why enemy love is so difficult. Try saying this even mentally to the difficult person in your life.

If this is love, what is the opposite of love? What is anti-love? The opposite of left is right, the opposite of right is wrong, and the opposite of English is a language that makes sense. But not everything has an opposite. For example, God has no opposite: God's opposite is not Satan – Satan is the opposite of the Archangel Michael. I suggest that love, too, is one of those things that has no opposite. And this should not surprise us if God is love. Love is not a binary. More precisely: love has no *one* opposite. Rather love has many things that make it harder to love. Everything that saps our love, everything that undermines our ability to appreciatively and responsively commit to another's good, is potentially detrimental to love. These include, but are not limited to, hate, fear, and indifference, the usual suspects for love's opposite. But in fact, all human vice is inimical to love. The two things, one internal and the other external, that most threaten loving your enemy, I will propose, are resentment and violence or war.

But what is an enemy? Who is my enemy and what makes them so? A couple of distinctions will help.

In Christian parlance, everyone is your “neighbour” but some neighbours are easier to love than others. We may loosely distinguish between “easy-neighbours” and “difficult-neighbours”. Both groups are spectrums. The “difficult” spectrum is well on display in *The Four Loves* when Lewis speaks of “lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering”.²¹ Note that it is difficult to love these difficult-neighbours for very different reasons. Enemies are obviously in the “difficult” camp, but not all difficult-neighbours are enemies; not every moron is one's enemy. Why this is important for us is that where they are on this spectrum affects and can sometimes limit the way in which we can love them. How we love depends on where they are.

²⁰ (self-citation omitted)

²¹ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 146.

And so, we must make another distinction: that between “difficult-neighbour” and “enemy-neighbour”. An enemy-neighbour is a difficult-neighbour whom it is difficult to love for a *specific* reason. What is that reason? There are two, and I already mentioned them: resentment and injury. Your “enemy”, then, *is any person whom you find difficult to love because either you feel resentment towards them or they seek to injure you.*²² One way they can injure you is to threaten someone or something you care about. Both reasons do not have to apply simultaneously. You may resent a person for other reasons than injury, and you may, if you are a saint, not always feel ill will towards those who labour against you. But sometimes both reasons apply together: resentment follows hurt. Often the very reason for the resentment is a preceding or looming injury.²³ So, when Lewis says he prays for people he “dislikes”, he may or may not be thinking about enemies in this sense. That would depend on why he dislikes them, whether resentment or risk of injury has already crept in.

Often, but not always, your “enemy” is the most difficult person to love. We remember the six people Lewis was most tempted to hate or despise: three dictators and three colleagues. Lewis clarified that he was “of course” not tempted to hate them equally – and if it made us smile it was because we assumed, just like Lewis probably assumed and meant to say, that loving Stalin was more difficult than loving, say, his colleague Redvers Opie. But I suggest that in reality this may not have been true. Foreign tyrants can be mythical abstractions; the real terrorists are domestic. College “cancel culture” is a metaphorical war-zone and has been ablaze long before the term was coined. Incidentally, in his very next letter to his friend Arthur, Lewis confessed that despite the real bloody European war, his job is “in one way even nicer for some of those whom I liked least in college have gone away to work in Govt. departments and one to America”. We know that one of them was Opie.²⁴

²² As such, this definition excludes “sub-personal” entities, such as “systems of power arrangements [and] principalities and powers that undo us” (Bronson Barringer and Long, “Love Your Enemy Introduction”, *Modern Theology*, 2020, 6). These entities can, in fact, be inimical to our wellbeing (“undo us”), but it is doubtful whether there can be any moral or religious obligation to “love” them.

²³ For a distinction between “enemy” and “adversary” in political theory, see Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism”, in *Reihe Politikwissenschaft / Political Science Series 72*, December 2000, pp. 1–17. According to Mouffe, seeing your political opponents as “adversaries” not “enemies” means recognizing their right to defend the ideas which we combat. The object is not to “destroy” the other (15). “*Antagonism* is struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is struggle between adversaries” (16). I thank Filip Reyniers for drawing my attention to this discourse in political theory.

²⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 413, also n. 265.

By defining both “enemy” and “love” we have as a happy by-product discovered the essence of “enemy love” as well. *Enemy love is the appreciative and responsive commitment, insofar as possible, to the wellbeing of people you feel resentment towards and/or seek to injure you.* This is enemy love. And for Christians, it is absolutely binding. “Love your enemies,” commanded Jesus, “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–8).

Though a Christian duty, enemy love is not unique to Christianity. It was already present in Judaism. “I shall never forget my surprise,” Lewis writes in *Reflections on the Psalms*, “when I first discovered that St Paul’s ‘If thine enemy hunger, give him bread,’ etc., is a direct quotation from [Proverbs 25:21].”²⁵ The reason why he was surprised was probably because, like many Christians, he had been taught that enemy love is a Christian innovation.

We might also be surprised to learn that, according to Lewis, when we love an enemy, however sinful, we love something that is essentially good.²⁶ “It’s the old business,” he says, “about ‘loving the sinner and hating the sin’ wh. [which] becomes alive to me” in grappling with enemy love.²⁷ As with self-love, the very reason why he hated the sins was that he “loved the man”.²⁸ When Lewis was asked what a soul was, he replied: “I am. (This is the only possible answer: or expanded, ‘A soul is that which can say I am’).”²⁹ He applies this in his provisional wartime definition of love as “steadily remembering that inside the Gestapo-man there is a thing wh. [which] says I and Me just as you do, which has just the same grounds [...] as your ‘Me’ for being *distinguished from all its sins* however numerous, which, like you, was made by God for eternal happiness – remembering, and always acting for the real interests of that thing as far as you can.”³⁰ “[O]ne can love nothing but good [...] And if so, what we really love [...] must be the good in him.”³¹ Why? Because if the object of love was not good, we could not say “It is good that you exist!” which is the first thing love says. It follows that enemies must never be demonized, dehumanized, or pseudo-speciated. “I am chary,” Lewis wrote during the war, “of doing what my

²⁵ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 30. For enemy love in Judaism see, for instance, Leviticus 19:17, 23:4–5, and Proverbs 24:17, 25:21.

²⁶ (self-citation omitted)

²⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 409.

²⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 117.

²⁹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 10.

³⁰ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 409, emphasis added.

³¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 202.

emotions prompt me to do every hour; i.e. identifying the enemy with the forces of evil.”³² Only when the last spark of human existence is extinguished is love “no longer commanded”.³³

Knowing what love is *not* makes the task of loving difficult-neighbours and especially enemies easier. Loving the (good) sinner does not mean condoning or excusing their (bad) sin. Lewis devotes an entire chapter in *Reflections on the Psalms* to “faux-enemy love” or “Connivance” as the chapter is titled. Connivance is condoning the sin with the false pretext of loving the sinner. It lets evil-doers off the hook or, what is worse, appeases and flatters them. This is the wrong way to deal with bullies, whether at war or at work. “The temptation is to condone, to connive at; by our words, looks and laughter, to ‘consent’.”³⁴ The main thesis of this chapter is that *some* people actually *deserve* to be punished, “(mildly – mud, not stones) pelted in the streets”. The danger of excessive harshness is great, thinks Lewis. But so are the problems of excessive “tameness”.³⁵

You do not have to “like” your enemy either. Just like the virtue of love in general, the love which is to be practised towards enemies is not “an involuntary sentiment” or it could not be commanded.³⁶ “‘Love’ in the N.T. [New Testament] does not mean primarily, if at all, a state of emotion,” Lewis writes to his brother Warnie who is struggling with difficult-neighbours whom he had earlier called “swine”.³⁷ “[B]y an act of will, aim at your neighbour’s good in the same way as you aim at your own”: “when you dislike yourself, you still wish for your own happiness.”³⁸ Elsewhere Lewis writes that enemy love means “wishing his good, not feeling fond of him nor saying he is nice when he is not”.³⁹

3. Enemy love and resentment

In one way, the most accurate but lacklustre answer to the question “How must we love our enemies?” is to roll out the elements embedded in our very definition: You love your enemy by

³² Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 391.

³³ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 409.

³⁴ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 83.

³⁵ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 79.

³⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 408.

³⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 432, 409.

³⁸ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 408.

³⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 120.

appreciatively and responsively committing to their wellbeing insofar as possible. Enemy love means prudentially looking for opportunities to demonstrate this. Such opportunities are endless and context-dependent, and it would be tedious to go through examples.

Instead let us ask “How can we make enemy love *easier*?” Love in general is made easier by practising all of the virtues that inform and protect love; virtues that give it life. Lewis wrote approvingly in *The Allegory of Love* that “the virtues of a good lover were indistinguishable from those of a good man”.⁴⁰ Enemy love is made easier, above all, by a key virtue that tackles the first of the two peculiar challenges imposed by the enemy-relation: that of resentment.

This is what Lewis wanted to avoid by practising enemy love. He often speaks of resentment and hate interchangeably: “[W]e all know the perilous charm of a shared hatred or grievance.”⁴¹ In Judeo-Christian scriptures, “hatred” is used in two senses, the ordinary and the metaphorical sense. Lewis is aware of the metaphorical sense of “hatred” as *rejection* because that is how in *The Four Loves* he interprets Jesus’s command to “hate” everyone and everything except him (Luke 14:26).⁴² This metaphorical sense of “hate” means, most paradoxically and perhaps confusingly, to love faithfully. This is obviously not inimical to enemy love. What we “ordinarily” mean by hatred is something quite different: “to cherish resentment, to gloat over another’s misery, to delight in injuring him.”⁴³ This evil is already at work in what Lewis calls the “maledictory Psalms”.⁴⁴ He objects to the spirit of hatred that he sees there “festering, gloating, undisguised” and leading to “appalling revenges”.⁴⁵ “Almost comically the Psalmist of 139 asks, ‘Don’t I hate those who hate thee, Lord? ... Why, I hate them as if they were *my* enemies!’ (139:21, 22).”⁴⁶

What causes such hatred and resentment? Usually injury does, whether moral or physical. In fact, Lewis thinks that resentment is the “*natural* result of injuring a human being”.⁴⁷ “Such hatreds

⁴⁰ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 199.

⁴¹ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 93.

⁴² Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 140–1.

⁴³ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 140.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 27.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 26, 27.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 77. Donald T. Williams critiques Lewis for forgetting or disregarding the Old Testament metaphor of “hate” as *rejection* (Williams, “An Apologist’s Evening Prayer: Reflecting on C. S. Lewis’s *Reflections on the Psalms*”, in Bruce L. Edwards [ed.], *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, Vol. 3 [Praeger: Westport, CT, 2007], 247–8. At the outset Lewis himself had reminded his reader that the “Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles [...] which are proper to lyrical poetry” (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 3), but he does not apply this to the Psalmist’s use of “hate”. Lewis applies the metaphorical sense of “hate” in *The Four Loves*, as noted above, something which Williams does not mention.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 27.

are the kind of thing that cruelty and injustice, by a sort of natural law, produce.”⁴⁸ What is worse, the victim is not just hurt but in great peril of “[dying] spiritually because of his hatred”.⁴⁹ This makes the enemy-neighbour not just an aggressor but “the tempter”, exacerbating the offence.⁵⁰ Resentment means “to chew over and over the cud of some injury, to dwell in a kind of self-torture on every circumstance that aggravates it”.⁵¹ In this sense resentment is anti-forgiveness and, as such, an obstacle to enemy love. This is another way of saying that forgiveness is anti-resentment and, as such, the key supporting virtue of enemy love.

In Lewis’s mind, enemy love and forgiveness are almost synonymous, certainly concomitant. Forgiveness is the first thing that comes to mind when he thinks of enemy love: “It is laid down in the Christian rule, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ Because in Christian morals ‘thy neighbour’ includes ‘thy enemy’, and so we come up against this terrible duty of forgiving our enemies.”⁵² It is terrible for three reasons, the last of which is most intolerable.⁵³

First, Lewis admits that all forgiveness, but especially forgiveness of enemies, is difficult. “It sounds impossible,” in fact.⁵⁴ It is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues, even more distasteful than chastity.⁵⁵ This is why Lewis “admired” his parish priest for daring to preach about forgiveness *during the war*.⁵⁶ “It is hard work, but the attempt is not impossible”, and in many areas of life “people quite often do what seemed impossible before they did it”.⁵⁷

Forgiveness is so difficult and yet so important, he thinks, that Christians actually need to be reminded of it *every* time they go to church: in the Creed and in the Lord’s Prayer.⁵⁸ Indeed, the second reason forgiveness is terrible is that, for Christians, it is a religious duty. “Forgive us our

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 29.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 28.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 28.

⁵¹ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 27.

⁵² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 115.

⁵³ Lewis speaks of forgiveness in several sources. *Mere Christianity* devotes an entire chapter on “Forgiveness”; his three-page essay “On Forgiveness” (1947), long forgotten and thus not well known, was re-published in *Fern-seeds and Elephants* (1998); *Letters to Malcolm* (letters V and XX) and many wartime letters discuss it (e.g. *Collected Letters*, II, 391–392, 408–410).

⁵⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 408.

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 115.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 432.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 120, 101.

⁵⁸ Lewis, “On Forgiveness”, *Essay Collection & Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (HarperCollins: New York, 2000), 184.

trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12). “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31–32).

“As we forgive those who trespass against us...”; “As God in Christ forgave you...” This is perhaps the hardest pill to swallow. Not only is forgiveness a difficult duty, our own forgiveness is predicated on forgiving others. Forgiveness is conditional. So-called “vertical” forgiveness stands on “horizontal” forgiveness. This is Lewis’s view: “It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven.”⁵⁹ “We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God’s mercy for ourselves.”⁶⁰ And there are no exemptions.⁶¹ Regardless of where the initiative lies, whom forgives who first, forgiveness is a recycled commodity. “Of course the parable of the servant who wouldn’t forgive his fellow servant comes in,” he tells his brother, “You and I take a high line about Nazi cruelties. You and I, of all people. Think it over.”⁶² The upside of duty and conditionality, however terrible, is that they provide a tremendous source of motivation to overcome the difficulty.

So, how do we forgive? What does forgiveness even mean? Forgiveness, as a virtue, is a trainable habit and disposition. With all virtues it helps to begin with something small: simple addition before advanced calculus. “[T]o learn how to forgive,” then, “perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo.”⁶³

Moreover, contemporary treatments of forgiveness in philosophy of religion make a distinction between the practical and emotional aspects of forgiveness, or external and internal forgiveness, or short-term and long-term forgiveness.⁶⁴ “Turn the other cheek,” refraining from knee-jerk revenge, is just the first step. The second is committing to the long-term palliative management of your own resentment.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 116.

⁶⁰ Lewis, “On Forgiveness”, *Essay Collection*, 186. This condition is perhaps most clearly stated in Mark 11:25–26: “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions” (Mark 11:25–26).

⁶¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 408.

⁶² Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 410. Though Lewis never used the term “tough love” he sometimes exhibited it! The parable of the servant, see Matthew 18:23–35.

⁶³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 116.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Justice in Love* (Eerdmans, 2011) and “Jesus and Forgiveness”, in Paul K. Moser (ed.), *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 194–213; and Charles Griswold’s *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Both aspects – revenge and residual resentment – are implicit in Lewis’s treatments of forgiveness. “In so far you are simply an angry man who has been hurt, mortify your anger and do not hit back.”⁶⁵ Mortify your anger. Do not hit back. According to Lewis, forgiveness says: “Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology, I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.”⁶⁶ That last part sets the bar quite high and is open to misunderstandings, but the first part is basically a promise not to “get even”. Lewis clarifies that this “doesn’t mean you must necessarily believe his next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill every trace of resentment in your own heart – every wish to humiliate or hurt him or to pay him out”.⁶⁷

Long-term forgiveness, dealing with one’s residual resentment, is often much harder and sometimes almost insurmountable. And this perhaps explains why Lewis talks about it much more than about simply not “hitting back”. “[S]omething inside us, the feeling of resentment, the feeling that wants to get one’s own back, must be simply killed. I do not mean that anyone can decide this moment that he will never feel it any more. That is not how things happen. I mean that every time it bobs its head up, day after day, year after year, all our lives long, we must hit it on the head.”⁶⁸ It is hard work because after we kill our resentment it returns “blazing away”.⁶⁹

Notice that he is not talking about the difficulty of forgiving multiple offences – what he calls “the incessant provocations of daily life” of “the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son”⁷⁰ – but forgiving “the same offence again every time it recurs to the memory – there’s the real tussle”.⁷¹ The “power of raising dead sensations from their graves” is *called* memory.⁷² Our responsibility, insofar as we can, is to not aggravate resentment and to refuse to chew on the cud.

As prayer in theistic traditions is a vehicle by which God’s grace supports efforts to suppress and hopefully obliterate resentment, and as it was in the context of prayer that Lewis realized that he had finally succeeded in forgiving probably his most unforgivable difficult-neighbour, we must

⁶⁵ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 291.

⁶⁶ Lewis, “On Forgiveness”, *Essay Collection*, 185.

⁶⁷ Lewis, “On Forgiveness”, *Essay Collection*, 186.

⁶⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 120.

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 28.

⁷⁰ Lewis, “On Forgiveness”, *Essay Collection*, 186.

⁷¹ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 35–6.

⁷² Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 163.

say something about prayer. Lewis believed that prayer is an efficacious if tedious weapon of enemy love.

It, too, belongs to the Christian duty: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). We are “under orders to pray for them”.⁷³ Prayer is difficult and Lewis was not sanctimonious: “Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome... We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish.”⁷⁴ Prayer is real work, not fanciful castle-building. While the results of prayer are solely up to God,⁷⁵ it is our responsibility to (a) pray and to (b) pray sincerely. How do we do this?

Well, first, we must actually pray. This means setting aside time for it. The habit of prayer is another acquired virtue, and precisely because of its irksomeness it demands self-discipline. Marjorie Lamp Mead says that “on a daily basis, Lewis devoted considerable time to prayer”, both prayers of petition and intercession.⁷⁶ Notice that prayers for enemies fuse the two: you ask God to intercede for *them* and you petition God to help *you* forgive them. Recall that Lewis prayed “every night” for the people he was most tempted to hate. He seems to have taken it very seriously.

Recall, also, the reason why he had “had to do a good deal of thinking”: it was an effort to make his prayers “real”.⁷⁷ Elsewhere he speaks about “meaning our words”⁷⁸ when we pray and in a wartime letter to his friend Dom Bede Griffiths, Lewis asks: “The practical problem about charity (in our prayers) is very hard work, isn’t it? When you pray for Hitler & Stalin,” – them again – “how do you actually teach yourself to make the prayer real?”⁷⁹ Notice the “when” you pray, not “if” you pray. He assumes that his friend, as a good Christian, is of course naturally busy praying for mass-murderers.

Lewis then shares two things that have helped him personally. They are Christian doctrines, and serve as cognitive and motivational crutches of sorts: theology is practical. “(a) A continual

⁷³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, xvi. Marjorie Lamp Mead has noted how prayer, “in particular, was a topic that continually cropped up on Lewis’s writings” (Lamp Mead, “*Letters to Malcolm: C. S. Lewis on Prayer*”, in Bruce L. Edwards [ed.], *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, Vol. 3 [Praeger: Westport, CT, 2007], 214). In addition to sporadic mentions of prayer in almost all of his writing, four works deal specifically on prayer: *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* and three essays that predate it, “Works and Prayer” (1945), “Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer” (1953), and “The Efficacy of Prayer” (1959).

⁷⁴ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 152.

⁷⁵ Lamp Mead, “*Letters to Malcolm: C. S. Lewis on Prayer*”, 213.

⁷⁶ Lamp Mead, “*Letters to Malcolm: C. S. Lewis on Prayer*”, 222.

⁷⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 408.

⁷⁸ Lewis, “On Forgiveness”, *Essay Collection*, 186.

⁷⁹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 391.

grasp of the idea that one is only joining one's feeble little voice to the perpetual intercession of Christ, who died for those very men (b) A recollection, as firm as one can make it, of all one's own cruelty wh. [which] might have blossomed, under different conditions, into something terrible. You and I are not, at bottom, so different from these ghastly creatures."⁸⁰ In other words, (a) *imitatio Christi* and (b) theological humility informed by the anthropological reality of sin.

Christ sets the example: Christians are called imitate to Him. "We are told that God desires the salvation of all men", Lewis tells his brother.⁸¹ Your enemy is "still capable (we must assume) of being rescued. From this point of view I do not find it impossible to desire, and pray, that that rescue may occur".⁸² And in another letter: "In praying for people one dislikes I find it v. [very] helpful to remember that one is joining in *His* prayer for them."⁸³ Why is this helpful? Probably because it both lowers the bar and augments belief in prayer's efficacy. Our contribution is small: no need to pretend. But our feeble voice joins a much greater one, like turning from a by-road onto the motorway or a blood vessel merging with the main artery.

"My resource," Lewis tells Malcolm in *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, "is to look for some action of my own which is open to the same charge as the one I'm resenting."⁸⁴ He is not naïve. He recognizes the limits of introspection: "I have found (to my regret) that the degrees of shame and disgust which I actually feel at my own sins do not at all correspond to what my reason tells me about their comparative gravity."⁸⁵ And yet, even attempted humility or "remembering where we stand"⁸⁶ helps keep at bay self-righteousness that endangers charity, sincerity, and motivation. Remembering your own sins helps to forgive the sins of others. "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."⁸⁷

Surprisingly, *Letters to Malcolm* has little to say about praying for enemies though it has been called "the most developed statement of C. S. Lewis's mature faith".⁸⁸ Lewis pitched it as a

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 391.

⁸¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 410. This is a reference to 1 Timothy 2:3–4.

⁸² Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 409.

⁸³ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 82.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 36.

⁸⁵ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm, Essay Collection*, 133.

⁸⁶ Lewis, "On Forgiveness", *Essay Collection*, 186.

⁸⁷ Lewis, "On Forgiveness", *Essay Collection*, 186.

⁸⁸ Lamp Mead, "Letters to Malcolm: C. S. Lewis on Prayer", 209.

guide for beginners: perhaps enemy love was a more advanced catechism.⁸⁹ The only exception to this taciturnity is, I think, a most daring proposal dropped at the very end. “I really must digress to tell you a bit of good news,” Lewis tells Malcolm.⁹⁰ The reader’s guard is dropped: for of course this is no “digression” but almost the climax of the book: *an answered prayer* about decisively overcoming resentment and forgiving not just any moron but Lewis’s most unforgivable neighbour. We know that the story is true, for his “real” letters mention this breakthrough, too, and we know who it was. He is the “certain man” that Lewis anonymously references in *Reflections on the Psalms*: “I’ve forgiven him more times than I can count.”⁹¹

“Last week, while at prayer,” Lewis tells Malcolm, “I suddenly discovered – or felt as if I did – that I had forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years.”⁹² Astonishingly, “forgiving (that man’s cruelty) and being forgiven (my resentment) were the very same thing. ‘Forgive and you shall be forgiven’ sounds like a bargain... forgiving and being forgiven are two names for the same thing”.⁹³ Lewis came to believe that there is a near-mystical connection between forgiving and being forgiven *in the very same act*.

Peculiarly, though it had taken decades, the final breakthrough had *felt so easy*, like learning to swim, which is difficult before you do it. And like learning to float, forgiving had consisted of *stopping* something; that is, resentment had been not just an emotion or state but an act. Resentment had been *doing* something. It took over thirty years for Lewis to fully thaw his resentment, but he had finally decisively forgiven Robert Capron, “the tyrannical headmaster”⁹⁴ of the boarding school inflicted upon him in childhood.

4. Enemy love and violence

I now turn to my second main theme and question, which is about the dilemma of the Christian soldier. Just as readiness to die in battle might be seen as the ultimate test of fortitude, war or

⁸⁹ Ironically, one review published right after the book’s publication said that it “had best be read by the mature reader” (Sister Mary Williams, 15 February 1964, Best Sellers [3], 397, quoted in Lamp Mead, “*Letters to Malcolm: C. S. Lewis on Prayer*”, 224).

⁹⁰ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 143.

⁹¹ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 28.

⁹² Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 143.

⁹³ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 143.

⁹⁴ Lamp Mead, “*Letters to Malcolm: C. S. Lewis on Prayer*”, 221. Lewis talks about his experience at this boarding school in chapter two of *Surprised by Joy* ominously titled “Concentration Camp”.

violence in general is possibly the ultimate test of enemy love. Are love and violence compatible? Can a soldier love his enemy? Can killing ever be an expression of love? The best treatment of these questions viz. Lewis is, I think, Marc LiVecche's "C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character", a paper first presented at the Oxford University C. S. Lewis Society.⁹⁵ Another ethicist who tackles the questions head-on is Nigel Biggar in "In Defence of War".⁹⁶ Though both LiVecche and Biggar make several pertinent points, I can only follow them part way.

Though optimistic about posthumous encounters between enemy combatants, Lewis was anything but blasé or enthusiastic about war. Christian pacifist Stanley Hauerwas's critique of Lewis on war begins with a *four-page defence* of him against any such suspicion. As a survivor of World War I, says Hauerwas, Lewis had "no time for the sentimental glorification of battle".⁹⁷ Lewis even faults his own Christian mentor G. K. Chesterton for being "enchanted" by war: he has "no idea what a battle is like".⁹⁸ "My memories of the last war haunted my dreams for years," Lewis confessed.⁹⁹ Colin Duriez explains that of the six young men with whom Lewis trained before going to war, four died and two were wounded, Lewis badly and by "friendly fire".¹⁰⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien wrote of his experience: "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead."¹⁰¹

When another European war was imminent, the anxious Lewis wanted to "hibernate", as we noted, but it was actually worse than that: "I think death wd. [would] be much better than to live through another war" he tells Griffiths.¹⁰² He even says his goodbyes to Owen Barfield: "[O]ur whole joint world may be blown up before the end of the week... If we are separated, God bless

⁹⁵ Marc LiVecche, "C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character", in *Providence Magazine*, 26 July 2019, 1–14. See also his more general study *The Good Kill: Just War and Moral Injury* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁹⁶ Nigel Biggar, "In Defence of War", *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 96, No. 1062 (March 2015), 192–205, especially 197–199. This article a follow-up to Biggar's book *In Defence of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, esp. 61–91) where the question of love and war is discussed more generally. In addition to LiVecche and Biggar, two other sources are worth mentioning: Martin Cook's *Issues in Military Ethics* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013) is cognisant of many spiritual-ethical dilemmas involved in warfare (see especially chapters 9 and 13), and the Vietnam War veteran Karl Marlantes's autobiographical *What It Is Like To Go To War* (New York: Grove Press, 2011) is also philosophically admirably informed.

⁹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, "On Violence", in Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190.

⁹⁸ Lewis, "Talking about Bicycles", *Essay Collection*, 691, in reference to Chesterton's poem *Lepanto* (1911).

⁹⁹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 258.

¹⁰⁰ Colin Duriez, "Lewis and Military Service: War and Remembrance (1917–1918)", in Bruce L. Edwards (ed.), *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, Vol. 1 (Praeger: Westport, CT, 2007), 79, 90. Probably the most up-to-date and careful account of Lewis's wartime experiences is included in Harry Lee Poe's new biography *Becoming C. S. Lewis: A Biography of Young Jack Lewis (1898–1918)* (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 2019), 171–257.

¹⁰¹ Tolkien, "Preface" to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. On Tolkien service in World War I, see John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War* (HarperCollins, 2003).

¹⁰² Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 258.

you, and thanks for a hundred good things I owe to you, more than I can count or weigh.”¹⁰³ Lewis believed that war threatened every temporal evil. And yet, to Griffiths again, he says: “I’m not a pacifist. If its [*sic*] got to be, its [*sic*] got to be.”¹⁰⁴ Sometimes war was an odious necessity.

Lewis’s most developed views on war and pacifism are included in his two wartime essays, “Why I Am Not A Pacifist” and “The Necessity of Chivalry”. As so often for Lewis, their main points were first articulated in letters. In fact, his pre-war letter to Griffiths in 1938 is almost a synopsis of both essays. It begins with “I have always believed that it is lawful for a Christian to bear arms in war when commanded by constituted authority unless he has very good reason [...] for believing the war to be unjust” and ends with “I cannot believe the knight errant idea to be sinful”.¹⁰⁵ Lewis believed that facts, intuition, reason, and authority all supported his view. We need not rehearse it all here. I mention only two points about religious authority.

First, the commandment “thou shall not kill”, according to Lewis, is not a prohibition of all violence or even all killing. It is a prohibition of murder. “*Kill* means *murder*,” he says, and “when our Our Lord quotes this commandment he uses Gk *phoneuseis* (murder) not *apokteinein* (kill)”¹⁰⁶ not just once but “in all three accounts, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And I am told there is the same distinction in Hebrew”.¹⁰⁷ Second, Lewis takes “the dicta in the Sermon on the Mount to be prohibitions of revenge”.¹⁰⁸ When Jesus said to “turn the other cheek” he meant what he said “but with an understood reservation in favour of those obviously exceptional cases which every hearer would naturally assume to be exceptions without being told”.¹⁰⁹ “Does anyone suppose,” Lewis asks a pacifist audience, “that Our Lord’s hearers understood Him to mean that if a homicidal maniac, attempting to murder a third party, tried to knock me out of the way, I must stand aside and let him get his victim?”¹¹⁰

Lewis’s essay on pacifism was indeed first delivered as a paper to the Oxford Pacifist Society, and he felt comfortable invoking religion because he knew many of those present were religiously motivated. And he knew this because he had long been interested in conscientious

¹⁰³ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 232.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 258.

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 233, 234.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 246.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 118–9.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 234.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 291.

¹¹⁰ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 291.

objection and had recently himself heard a paper given by a former colleague “on his experiences in his present job as a member of the tribunal for investigating conscientious objections”.¹¹¹ Lewis summarizes the paper in his letter to Warnie on 11 February 1940: “I was interested and relieved to hear [that] the vast majority of the objectors are perfectly sincere, and often want to be put on dangerous non combatant [*sic*] works such as mine sweeping; and also that the communists and intellectuals are a minority – most of them are Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, etc. Often yokels, almost inarticulate.”¹¹²

Why was he relieved? Because of a certain prejudice. The “poor Adventists and Witnesses from remote Welsh pits and Northumbrian farms” are favourably contrasted with the “really contemptible figure” of the “typical intellectual Oxford communist undergraduate”.¹¹³ Legal conscientious objection, however, he reminds Warnie, belonged to “that simply fantastic side of English life which has always impressed foreigners but which *we* are apt to forget”¹¹⁴ – and, in fact, “that sort of thing is part of what we are fighting for”.¹¹⁵ This had of course not always been so. Great Britain had entered World War I without general conscription, but when this changed in 1916, Adventists and other pacifists were able to register as conscientious objectors or serve as non-combatants, but were often subjected to ridicule and harassment. “We must of course respect & tolerate Pacifists,” Lewis tells another correspondent, “but I think their view erroneous.”¹¹⁶

My issue with *Lewis’s* view on pacifism is two-fold. The first is historical. Lewis seems ignorant of early Christian pacifism or downplays it. In his letters he calls pacifism “a v. [very] recent and local variation”¹¹⁷ of Christendom and contrasts it with “the general agreement of all Christian communities except a few sects – who generally combine pacifism with other odd opinions”¹¹⁸ – a clear reference to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and other variants quite recent in Church history. But as ethicist Martin Cook notes in *Issues in Military*

¹¹¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 344. The colleague was Cyril Bailey, Fellow and Classics Tutor at Balliol College 1902–1939.

¹¹² Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 344–5. For a short reflection of the Great War from an Adventist perspective, see Denis Kaiser, “Love Your Enemy? Reflections at the Centenary of World War I”, in *Adventist World*, August 2014, 16–19. Besides more dangerous occupations like bomb disposal, Adventist non-combatants served as “medics, litter bearers, interpreters, cooks, train conductors, etc.” (19).

¹¹³ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 345.

¹¹⁴ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 344.

¹¹⁵ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 345. Lewis is here quoting Bailey’s paper in, I think, an approving spirit.

¹¹⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 247. Elsewhere Lewis puts it more strongly: “I can respect an honest pacifist, though I think he is entirely mistaken” (*Mere Christianity*, 119).

¹¹⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 247.

¹¹⁸ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 233–4.

Ethics, “the clear pacifist thrust of the New Testament’s strong streak condemning violence and counseling nonresistance to evil”¹¹⁹ has inspired Christian pacifism from the very beginning.

My second issue is with Lewis’s logic. When he says that “history is full of useful wars as well as of useless wars”¹²⁰ and “Christendom has made two efforts to deal with the evil of war – chivalry and pacifism. Neither succeed,”¹²¹ I nod approvingly. But when he doubts “whether chivalry has such an unbroken record of failure as pacifism,”¹²² I must ask: How would he know? Such evaluations sound hopelessly speculative. Besides, every just war is a response to an unjust war: sometimes both sides are wrong, never are both right. It follows, by logic, that history must be *fuller* of useless wars than useful ones. By my lights, the only way to avoid possibly unfalsifiable nonsense is either to emphasise quality over quantity or to focus on a subset of parties involved. In other words, to say that just war can prevent or mitigate *worse* injustice in war (sometimes aggressors are better resisted early¹²³) or that the wars of a *given* country can on average be more just than unjust (some countries have better track records than others).

But on the general question about love’s partial compatibility with violence and war, I tend to agree with Lewis. Can violence or killing be described as “love” in any meaningful sense? My answer will be: yes and no. War is not “fully compatible” with love, but this means that “they are *somewhat* compatible”.¹²⁴ Love “*qualifies*, but does not eradicate, war,” as LiVecche puts it.¹²⁵

Excluding actual homicide, what does “violence” mean? Here, with Lewis, I apply the traditional minimalist definition limited to physicality and leave out modern extended meanings of violence. *Violence is using physical force to deter, injure, or kill a human body.*¹²⁶ The more painful, the more violent. Lewis “doubts” whether war increases the chances of painful death.¹²⁷ Even so-called “natural death is usually preceded by suffering: and a battlefield is one of the very

¹¹⁹ Cook, *Issues in Military Ethics*, 160.

¹²⁰ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 286.

¹²¹ Lewis, “The Conditions for a Just War”, *Collected Essays*, 768.

¹²² Lewis, “The Conditions for a Just War”, *Collected Essays*, 768.

¹²³ This may have Lewis’s point. To an American correspondent, in reference to Korea, Lewis writes in 1952: “[B]oth your country and mine have twice in our lifetime tried the recipe of appeasing an aggressor and it didn’t work on either occasion: so that it seems sense to try the other way this time” (*Collected Letters*, III, 178–9).

¹²⁴ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 198.

¹²⁵ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 6.

¹²⁶ This narrow definition of violence is an example of a “simple, monolithic” conception of violence that the editors of *Modern Theology*’s special edition on enemy love encourage scholars to “revisit” (Bronson Barringer and Long, “‘Love Your Enemy’ Introduction”, *Modern Theology*, 2020, 6).

¹²⁷ Lewis, “Learning in War-time”, *Essay Collection*, 586.

few places where one has a reasonable prospect of dying with no pain at all”.¹²⁸ There are worse things than pain, or violence, or war.

“It must be remembered,” Lewis says, “that there are risks in both directions: if war is ever lawful, then peace is sometimes sinful.”¹²⁹ Why sinful? Because nonviolence can sometimes be a failure to uphold justice in a sinful world motivated by rightly ordered love. This is a strong argument: sometimes love prefers war to peace. But I agree with it. I am thinking of what Nigel Biggar calls “the evils, tragedies, ambiguities, risks, and uncertainties of peace”,¹³⁰ such things as the preventable massacres and genocides that took place in Rwanda and Srebrenica in Bosnia. As LiVecche says, “*not* to act is also a decision requiring some degree of justification”.¹³¹ We are morally responsible for our omissions as well as our commissions.

Love does not categorically reject violence. It can permit and even motivate it. Lewis rejected what Biggar has aptly called “the virus of wishful thinking”: that everybody is rational and wants good.¹³² The anthropological fact of sin and historical experience contradict this. “[S]ome people cannot be talked out of grave wrong-doing and [...] they must therefore be forced out of it.”¹³³ “Courts are not the only place where justice is done; the battlefield can be another.”¹³⁴ The fighting instinct is not bad per se, says Lewis. Sometimes it can be a duty to “encourage” it.¹³⁵

So, I agree with LiVecche, here approving paraphrasing Faramir from *The Lord of the Rings*, that “war can be an *expression* of love”.¹³⁶ But an expression of love *towards whom*? Violence can be an expression of self-love or family-love against Lewis’s “homicidal maniac”. It can be an expression of patriotic love against a homicidal nation. Above all, it can be an expression of love for the innocent victim-neighbour. Lewis writes: “I do not think punishment inflicted by lawful authorities for the right motives is revenge: still less, violent action in the defence of innocent people.”¹³⁷ “[T]o banish the knight does not alleviate the suffering of the peasant.”¹³⁸ According

¹²⁸ Lewis, “Learning in War-time”, *Essay Collection*, 586.

¹²⁹ Lewis, “The Conditions for a Just War”, in *Essay Collection*, 768.

¹³⁰ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 196.

¹³¹ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 9.

¹³² Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 193.

¹³³ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 194.

¹³⁴ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 196.

¹³⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 11.

¹³⁶ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and Christian Character”, 1.

¹³⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 234.

¹³⁸ Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century: Excluding Drama* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1954), 153.

to Biggar, indeed, in the Christian tradition the paradigm of just war is not self-defence but “the rescue of the innocent”.¹³⁹ Whether violence and war can be an expression of *enemy love* is a much more difficult question, which I will have to address later.

We have all heard the vapid maxim “all is fair in love and war”. This is doubly false. All is not fair in war. And it is precisely love that sets limits to it. Love may permit and even motivate war, but it also qualifies it. Venus qualifies Mars.¹⁴⁰

The guiding principle is the “Golden Rule” (Matt. 7:12) – treat others as you would have them treat you. The simplistic literal interpretation is of course impossible. I love my back scratched, my brother hates it: scratching his back is a declaration of war. The Golden Rule is a guiding principle not a mathematical formula. Applied to warfare it might go something like this: “Wage war against others as you would have them wage war against you.” This both limits legitimate reasons for entering war and curtails what may be done in war. Political theorists speak of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, reasons for and methods in war, respectively.

Love qualifies when we may enter war. Hauerwas summarizes Lewis’s position well: Lewis “thought it should be a last resort, declared by a lawful authority, a defensive rather than an imperialistic endeavour, that the aims of the war be limited, that there be some realistic chance of success, and that there be a willingness on the part of the combatants to take responsibility for their actions so that civilians will be properly protected.”¹⁴¹

Love also qualifies what we may do in war. Lewis explains the general principle: “lesser violence [...] is always preferable to the greater”¹⁴² – if you will, an “Occam’s razor” with a bellicose bent. Entirely forbidden methods include murdering prisoners, bombing civilians, and so on.¹⁴³ One’s own moral posture is also important, Lewis thought. “We may kill if necessary, but we must not hate and enjoy hating.”¹⁴⁴ Just war requires just soldiers or “knights”, as Lewis calls

¹³⁹ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 196.

¹⁴⁰ On Lewis’s understanding of the permanent spiritual value of these and other planetary symbols, see Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford University Press, 2008). See also LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 3–5.

¹⁴¹ Hauerwas, “On Violence”, 192. Hauerwas (192 n. 20) cites three letters (*Collected Letters*, II, 250–52, 233–34, and *Collected Letters*, III [mistakenly cited as II], 782) and two essays (“Private Bates” and “Is English Doomed?”). I would add to these Lewis’s letter to the editor of *Theology* in March 1939 which the editor of Lewis’s collected essays Lesley Malmesley titled “The Conditions for a Just War” in Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 767–68.

¹⁴² Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 286.

¹⁴³ Lewis, “The Conditions for a Just War”, *Essay Collection*, 768.

¹⁴⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 120.

them in “The Necessity of Chivalry”. The “marbling of ferocity and meekness”¹⁴⁵, as LiVecche memorably summarizes this essay, protects the victim-neighbour both against external tyrants and the potential tyrant dormant in the sinful heart of the soldier himself.¹⁴⁶

It is here, in *jus in bello* and not *jus ad bellum*, that Christian conscientious objection comes alive to Lewis: “A man is much more certain that he ought not to murder prisoners or bomb civilians than he ever can be about the justice of a war. It is perhaps here that ‘conscientious objection’ ought to begin. I feel certain that one Christian airman shot for refusing to bomb enemy civilians would be a more effective martyr [...] than a hundred Christians in jail for refusing to join the army.”¹⁴⁷

I said earlier that “all is fair in love and war” is doubly false. Love limits war, but war imposes major limits on love too. War qualifies love. Mars qualifies Venus. And this is to be expected given the qualification “insofar as possible” in our understanding of love. War seriously limits the possibilities of love. One obvious way war qualifies love is “that it separates you from all you love”.¹⁴⁸ But I am thinking of something else.

War, and all situations that call for violence, compel us to use force and sometimes even lethal force. This sounds circular and tautologous. And it is, but consider what this means. I argue that even in the best scenarios, even when the reasons and methods are just, the soldier that kills the enemy is primarily motivated by love for others, not for the enemy, if at all. This does not mean that the soldier does not love the enemy at all. It means that he loves the enemy only *insofar* as he succeeds in appreciating and responsively committing to the enemy’s wellbeing *despite* killing him. The “good kill” is the kill that *least violates absolute love*. I will try to explain.

Lewis says in *The Problem of Pain* that 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”.¹⁴⁹ But, in fact, he believed that what he called “the law of beneficence” sometimes *compels* us to use the wood for

¹⁴⁵ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 7.

¹⁴⁶ An example of contemporary declaration of this might be the British Army booklet called *Soldiering: The Military Covenant*, which lists six ethical principles. See Ministry of Defence, *Army Doctrine Publications 5: Soldiering – The Military Covenant* (February 2000). These principles are selfless commitment, courage, discipline, integrity, loyalty, and respect for others. Beach explains that soldiers need training “in these virtues or moral skills—habits of thought/feeling/action—so that they will follow the rules even under all the pressures of battle” (Beach, “Can a Soldier Love His Enemy?”, 285).

¹⁴⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 251–2.

¹⁴⁸ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 292.

¹⁴⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 24.

both purposes. The law of beneficence, written into human hearts and the order of things, is based on the *absolute* general law to do good to everyone, and to order one's loves and responsibilities so that when you apply this law in the *relative* vicissitudes of life, conflicts of interest do not prompt you to love in a disorderly way, that is, neglect higher loves and duties at the expense of lower.

"Every human being," Lewis says, "has an *absolute* claim on me for every service I can render them without neglecting other [i.e. higher] duties."¹⁵⁰ "Then come the laws that give certain people a prior claim on your beneficence."¹⁵¹ A hostile enemy's claim might be "inferior to all the other claims involved but not nonexistent".¹⁵² "You cannot do *simply* good to *simply* Man; you must do this or that good to this or that man. [T]he law of beneficence involves not doing some good to some men at some times. [...] And sooner or later it involves helping A by actually doing some degree of violence to B."¹⁵³ Why is that? Because "when B is up to mischief against A, you must either do nothing [...] or you must help one against the other".¹⁵⁴ As already established, doing nothing is doing something: by omission it allows the mischief to happen. There are risks in both directions.

The language of "higher" and "lower" reveals the hidden presupposition here that there is a hierarchy of loves. For Lewis, the right order of loves means the right order of loyalties. What is this order? And how do we choose? Lewis offers no comprehensive hierarchy, no clear-cut formula, just examples of "rules" which he thinks "have never been doubted".¹⁵⁵ These rules or obligations are based on values and intrinsic qualities like justice, patriotism, and even species. For example, special obligation is rendered to "people to whom your beneficence is pledged by a promise (Justice), or who have already benefited you (Gratitude), or who are specially weak and pitiable (Mercy) or fellow-citizens (Patriotism) or relatives (Family Affection). They are all perfectly sound, but the last two must not be allowed to over-ride the others".¹⁵⁶ The feeling of love, even when disordered, is not decisive: "Loving dogs more than children is a misfortune not

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 482, emphasis added.

¹⁵¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 699.

¹⁵² Lewis, "Why I Am not a Pacifist", *Essay Collection*, 286.

¹⁵³ Lewis, "Why I Am not a Pacifist", *Essay Collection*, 286.

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, "Why I Am not a Pacifist", *Essay Collection*, 286.

¹⁵⁵ Lewis, "Why I Am not a Pacifist", *Essay Collection*, 286.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 699. See also "Why I Am not a Pacifist", *Essay Collection*, 286: "that we should help one we have promised to help rather than another, or a benefactor rather than one who has no special claims on us, or a compatriot more than a stranger, or a kinsman rather than a mere compatriot."

a sin. *Acting* on that superior love for dogs – i.e. sacrificing the interests of the human in your household to the animals – is a sin.”¹⁵⁷

The absolute versus relative distinction, implicit in much of what has been said, is explicitly unpacked in a letter to Mary Van Deusen. To underscore its relevance to our subject of enemy love, I have simply substituted the word *pain* with *violence*:

I believe all [violence] is contrary to God’s will, absolutely but not relatively. When I am taking a thorn out of my finger (or a child’s finger) the [violence] is “absolutely” contrary to my will: i.e. if I could have chosen a situation without [violence] I would have done so. But I *do* will what caused [violence], relatively to the given situation: i.e. granted the thorn I prefer the [violence] to leaving the thorn where it is. A mother smacking a child wd. [would] be in the same position: she wd. [would] rather cause it this [violence] than let it go on pulling the cat’s tail, but she wd. [would] like it better if no situation which demands a smack had risen.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, the just soldier would like it better if no situation which demanded war would rise. If he could choose a situation without such need he would do so.

And with this, we have arrived at the last hill, which is the steepest. I have been putting off the most difficult question, but it must be faced squarely before we finish. I tried to demonstrate how love for *others* can motivate violence and in extreme cases even lethal violence. But what about love for the enemy? “How can we both love our enemy-neighbour *and* kill him?” as LiVecche puts it.¹⁵⁹ Some Christian pacifists such as Hauerwas are clear: we cannot, on the contrary, “loving enemies means not killing them”.¹⁶⁰

Lewis is more optimistic or at least not pessimistic about their compatibility. “Even in the very act of fighting,” he says, “I think charity (to the enemy) is not *more* endangered than in many necessary acts wh. [which] we all admit to be lawful.”¹⁶¹ However, since the very act of fighting is by definition the attempt to potentially injure or even kill the enemy and, as such, the opposite of assisting their immediate wellbeing, I submit that for this to make any sense Lewis must be here thinking about *some* but not *all* elements of love. Though war has qualified the practical wellbeing dimension of love, perhaps other more attitudinal and emotional aspects are still possible. In short,

¹⁵⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 788.

¹⁵⁸ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, III, 163.

¹⁵⁹ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Bronson Barringer and Long, “‘Love Your Enemy’ Introduction”, 2.

¹⁶¹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 234.

Lewis is speaking of the possibility of relative not absolute love. If you do all that is relatively possible, you have done all you can. “Even while we kill and punish,” Lewis explains, “we must try to feel about the enemy as we feel about ourselves – to wish that he were not bad, to hope that he may, in this world or another, be cured: in fact, to wish his good.”¹⁶² In cases of capital punishment, it means “being sorry that the man should have done such things [that we should have to kill them], and hoping, if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere he can be cured”.¹⁶³

But can it ever be in our enemy’s best and real interest for us to *kill* him? If we shoot him, can we imagine him turning towards us with his last dying breath and saying: “Thanks, I needed that. Thank you for contributing to my flourishing”? No. At least I cannot think of persuasive or remotely probable real-life examples. But I remain open to being corrected. In every or almost every case the answer must be “No”. If it is “good” for my enemy to die by my hand in battle rather than live another day and be united with his family, it is also “good” *for me as his enemy* to die by his hand instead of living another day and being united with my family. This conclusion seems absurd to me, so I reject the premise.

Lewis did say “sometime, somewhere” and “in this world or another”. So perhaps he meant only *eternal* good not temporal. Does lethal force jeopardize the eternal good of my enemy-neighbour? In some questions, Lewis thought, the eternal perspective makes “[a]ll the difference in the world”¹⁶⁴ because “it is immortals we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit”¹⁶⁵ – and, we must add, kill. Again, Lewis is optimistic: he says war endangers every evil “except dishonour and final perdition”.¹⁶⁶ He often speaks of death-by-hangman and death-by-war together: neither, he thinks, decreases our chances of peace with God. If anything, the prospect of dying *encourages* us to prepare for death.¹⁶⁷ As Screwtape put it: “Men are killed in places where they knew they might be killed and to which they go, if they are at all of [God’s] party,

¹⁶² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 120.

¹⁶³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 117.

¹⁶⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 119.

¹⁶⁵ Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”, *Essay Collection*, 106.

¹⁶⁶ Lewis, “Why I Am not a Pacifist”, *Essay Collection*, 292.

¹⁶⁷ E.g. Lewis, “Learning in War-time”, *Essay Collection*, 586. This is not to be confused with Lewis’s *agnosticism* about whether *capital punishment* or *life in prison* is more likely to undermine chances of repentance (see Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment”, in *Essay Collection*, 698). That is a separate question. Lewis was neither for or against abolishing capital punishment. He thinks that neither reason, scripture, nor religious authority settle it (see Lewis, “Capital Punishment and the Death Penalty”, in *Essay Collection*, 779–780).

prepared.”¹⁶⁸ However, in many cases, I think Lewis’s optimism is unfounded. Even Screwtape acknowledged the conditional “if they are”. Traditional theists would assume that many are not, and that many wrongdoers die ill-prepared to meet their Maker. What assurance does anyone have of dying and “finding yourself safely dead and not quite damned”?¹⁶⁹ The best we can say is that *perhaps sometimes* homicide does not jeopardize posthumous wellbeing. This is not saying much.

And this is where I must part ways with perceptive Christian ethicists like Biggar and LiVecche – and even C. S. Lewis insofar as LiVecche correctly reads Lewis and insofar as I correctly read LiVecche. I think they take it too far and overplay their hand. Biggar believes that “lethal violence can be motivated, not at all by hatred, but by love – even for the enemy”.¹⁷⁰ I think Biggar is wrong even according to his own definition of love as “due respect and care for persons”.¹⁷¹ LiVecche is also too optimistic and says Lewis shows “how it is possible even to love our enemies, even to love them to death”.¹⁷² It would be more correct to say that we can love *others* to our enemy’s death.

LiVecche also argues that “when restraining a *wrongdoer* by forcing him to stop, by deterring him from resuming, and ideally by provoking him to think again and change his aggressive ways, we work toward the promotion of the only possibility for his true flourishing. This belongs to his own good, *even if it should cost him his very life*. It is the only way to be happy”.¹⁷³ The key words on which much hinges are *wrongdoer* and *even if it should cost him his very life*. The wrongdoer cannot be replaced with an *enemy combatant*, for otherwise, by the logic of war, you as *his enemy* are also such a “wrongdoer” whose “true flourishing” and “only way to be happy” depends on being stopped by lethal force. Again, this seems nonsensical to me.

Moreover, it is not at all clear to me that, even in cases of *genuine* wrongdoing their death is good for them. The wrongdoing in question must be very grave indeed to justify this belief. What could it be? Please excuse a terribly morbid example, but rules are tested by extremes. Would I be willing to stop, say, a rapist in the very act of his crime by lethal force *if it were the only way to do so*? I hesitate, but I probably would. Would dying be “better” for him than to be allowed to finish

¹⁶⁸ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 23 (letter 5).

¹⁶⁹ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 278: “If one could only hibernate. More and more sleep seems to me the best thing – short of waking up and finding yourself safely dead and not quite damned.”

¹⁷⁰ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 197.

¹⁷¹ Biggar, “In Defence of War”, 197.

¹⁷² LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 1.

¹⁷³ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 9, emphasis added.

his crime and live another day? I cannot fathom it would: not for him, however immortal. I would of course hope that he could be cured in another world, but I would have no assurance of this and, most importantly, would not pretend to kill him *for his own good*. I agree with LiVecche that any “interval of hesitation”¹⁷⁴, as he movingly calls it, that might precede my act, any hope-against-hope that the aggressor would stop before I pulled the trigger, is love for him. But killing him is not. That is love for her.

Killing is precisely that part in the act that makes our enemy love “relative” not “absolute”. We do not love our enemies to death. Such language obscures its moral ambiguity and is strictly speaking false.¹⁷⁵ We love our enemies to the extent that killing them *least* violates absolute love. We may perhaps love them despite killing them, not by killing them. It is precisely their death that remains outside the expression of love for them. We say, in effect: “I will kill you, but I won’t torture you needlessly, and I wish you well thereafter.” In absolute terms, this is not saying much, even if it is the overall greatest possible good given the relative circumstances. In particularly wintry conditions Mars can qualify Venus almost beyond recognition. She is barely breathing and no longer smiling.

5. Conclusion

Enemy love is difficult but not impossible. Breakthroughs happen both in human relationships and in war. It took over 30 years for Lewis to forgive his most unforgivable enemy. But he did it. And whether just or unjust, all wars end.

Exactly three months after D-Day, Lewis wrote to his friend Sister Penelope about how difficult it was “to keep pace with the almost miraculous mercies we are receiving as a nation”. He had never dreamed that it would go “quite so well”.¹⁷⁶ American and Soviet forces met on the Elbe River on 25 April 1945. Hitler committed suicide five days later. The unconditional surrender of Germany took effect on 8 May. The war in Europe was over. Barfield was alive. Two days later,

¹⁷⁴ LiVecche, “C. S. Lewis, War, and the Christian Character”, 11.

¹⁷⁵ On the risks involved in describing war as “loving”, see Lisa Cahill, “How Should War be Related to Christian Love”, *Soundings*, 97/2 (2014), 186–95, and Biggar “In Defence of War”, 198.

¹⁷⁶ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 625.

Lewis wrote to Griffiths: “I am sometimes a little awed by the burden of our favours. Every one of us has escaped by a series of Providences, some not far short of miracles.”¹⁷⁷

Lewis of course believed in the afterlife and saw heaven as the final confirmation of “a conspiracy of love” that begins on earth. But may I respectfully suggest that if Lewis had indeed met that young German soldier, they would not have laughed. Not at first. *Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*, says the *Aeneid*. Lewis translates it: “Some day it will be pastime to recall this woe.”¹⁷⁸ Someday, but perhaps not the first day. Not before the mountains and deeper heaven. Rather, I imagine they might say something like this: “I am sorry mundane circumstances did not allow us to love each other better. I am sorry I was not permitted to not love you more. Now that the war is over, however, let us make up for lost time. Now that winter is over, let us thaw in God’s love and learn to love each other perfectly and absolutely in eternity.” And perhaps: “Have you seen Uncle Joe?”

¹⁷⁷ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 647–8.

¹⁷⁸ *Aeneid* (Book 1, line 203), Lewis, *C. S. Lewis’s Lost Aeneid: Arms and the Exile*, ed. A. T. Reyes (Yale University Press, 2011), 50–1.

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