

# A Comparative Study of Christian and Confucian Thought: C.S. Lewis and Zhou Dunyi

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**Abstract.** By analyzing and comparing C.S. Lewis's concept of "perfect through suffering" in *The Problem of Pain* and Zhou Dunyi's view of "seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan" [Kong Yan Le Chu] in *Tai Ji Tu Shuo* and *Tong Shu*, two commonalities between the two can be found. The first one lies in their shared depiction of situations in which individuals are deprived of material resources, compelling them to seek solutions that transcend their suffering. This relief may be achieved either by abandoning one's ego and placing trust in God, or by concentrating on the realization of the unity with the Tao of Cheng. In both cases, the resulting spiritual happiness is detached from material concerns. Furthermore, they both acknowledge that the material dimensions of existence can foster a sense of happiness. Humans also have the right to pursue and enjoy this happiness. However, for humans to achieve the pinnacle of happiness, it is essential to pursue a state of unity with the highest Good.

**Keywords:** C.S. Lewis; Zhou Dunyi; suffering; Kong Yan Le Chu.

## 1. Introduction

This paper primarily analyzes C.S. Lewis's concept of "perfect through suffering" and Zhou Dunyi's view of "seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan" [Kong Yan Le Chu]. It then examines the similarities between these two perspectives. In the fourth year of the Northern Song dynasty's Qingli (AD 1044), Zhou Dunyi, at the age of twenty-eight, was promoted from magistrate of Fenning County in Hongzhou to the role of criminal and prison officer of the Nan'an military region, in recognition of his outstanding political performance and excellent official reputation. In Nan'an, he encountered Cheng Xiang. Despite Zhou Dunyi being a relatively low-ranking official, Cheng Xiang held him in high regard, recognizing his virtuous demeanor and exceptional abilities. Following the formation of their friendship, Cheng Xiang directed his two sons, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, who were fourteen and fifteen years old, to study under Zhou Dunyi. In remembrance of the period of instruction, Cheng Hao stated, "when I was tutored by Zhou Maoshu [Author: "Maoshu" is Zhou Dunyi's style name], he often asked me to seek the pleasure of Confucius and Yan Yuan and find out what they were happy about" [1]. From that point onward, the "seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan" became a prominent theme in Neo-Confucianism from the Song to Ming periods. In addition to Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, Cao Duan, Xue Xuan, Wang Yangming, and numerous other scholars have all engaged with this topic.

Theodicy is a topic of persistent interest within Christianity, yet no perfect answer has been forthcoming. Theodicy posits that God is the Creator and Sovereign of the world and He is omnipotent and benevolent. Hence, it is natural for people to wonder why they experience pain and suffering and why God does not eliminate all suffering in the world. In 1931, at the age of thirty-three, Lewis converted to Christianity and subsequently became a renowned theological scholar, writer, and orator. In 1940, he published *The Problem of Pain*, in which he developed a systematic view of the problem of pain by addressing the themes of God's omnipotence, God's goodness, the fall of human, and human pain [2]. In this book, he responds to the issue of theodicy by proposing that one can achieve "perfect through suffering (Hebrews 2:10)".

Chronologically, there is a nearly nine-century discrepancy between Lewis' view of "perfect through suffering" and Zhou Dunyi's perspective on "seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan".

Moreover, the former is rooted in Christianity, while the latter is grounded in Confucianism. Each emphasizes distinct concepts, namely “suffering” and “pleasure”, respectively. Considering these factors, it initially appears to present an inevitable barrier to communication. However, upon deeper examination, it becomes evident that despite their differences, both perspectives share a common concern: the potential pathways for human beings to break free from the constraints of suffering.

There is much academic research on both “perfect through suffering” and “seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan”. In mainland China, scholars at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century primarily focused on identifying the essence of the pleasure of Confucius and Yan Yuan [3, 4], as well as the means of attaining it [5, 6]. Over the past five years, scholars have delved into the academic history of the Song and Ming periods to examine the concept’s status and influence [7, 8]. They have also explored the consistency of this notion in Song and Ming periods [9, 10].

Many foreign scholars have published articles examining Lewis’s perspectives on evil and suffering. This topic is one of the main themes of Inklings studies [11]. Christine Seaward’s work has received notable attention in the academic world as a master’s thesis [12]. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a giant of American analytic philosophy and epistemology, has also written about Lewis’s theodicy, generating much discussion in the academy [13, 14]. These works have primarily examined Lewis’s view of suffering as reflected in *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed*, with occasional comparisons between these two books and other literary narratives on the theme of suffering.

However, no existing research compares Zhou Dunyi’s “seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan” with Lewis’ “perfect through suffering”. This paper employs Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain* and Zhou Dunyi’s *Tai Ji Tu Shuo* and *Tong Shu* as its principal sources, complemented by other pertinent canonical treatises. It employs a textual analysis and comparative reading method to investigate the similarities between Lewis’ and Zhou Dunyi’s interpretation.

## 2. The Only Way Out of a Difficult Situation

In Lewis’ view, humanity is inclined to pride and the exercise of free will. This leads to the neglect of divine authority in one’s life. Consequently, God allows even the seemingly virtuous to endure suffering, with the aim of dismantling their illusions of self-sufficiency: do not boast of one’s abilities, or think that one is perfectly good, but if someone does not know God and centers his/her life around Him, sooner or later, this person will fall into destitution [2]. Lewis compares suffering to God’s loudspeakers because it serves as a means of alerting humanity to the presence of evil [2]. It is human nature to attempt to exclude God from one’s life and to seek benefits outside of God. However, when one is in distress and unable to find a solution, regardless of the methods employed, there is a tendency to focus solely on alleviating the pain. With this overwhelming desire, the desperate man ultimately returns to God and acknowledges his own deficiencies. Thus, Lewis’ view that “perfect through suffering” indicates that God is the only way of alleviating humanity’s afflictions.

Although Zhou Dunyi proposed the idea of “seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan” to Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, he did not provide a clear definition or a detailed elaboration of this concept. Instead, he offered only a brief commentary in the *Tong Shu*. Zhou Dunyi asserted that individuals in exceedingly adverse circumstances typically experience distress; however, Yan Yuan demonstrated little concern and remained cheerful [15]. This can be attributed to Yan Yuan’s perception that materialistic pursuits, such as wealth and status, hold minimal significance. Instead, he placed greater value on the “most precious and cherished thing in the world”, the pinnacle of all existences [15].

In the *Tai Ji Tu Shuo*, Zhou Dunyi posits Tai Ji as the source of the creation of all things [16]. He held the conviction that human beings are the most spiritual of all existences, and that the most crucial objective for which people should strive, as well as the pinnacle of all existence, is to become a sage [15]. Furthermore, the Tao of the Sage entails aligning with the Tao of Heaven. In the *Tong Shu*, he refers to both the source of creation and the essence of the sage as “Cheng” [15]. In this manner, Zhou Dunyi established a system of “Tai Ji - Cheng”, wherein the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of Humanity

are unified in the Tao of Cheng [17]. Consequently, Yan Yuan's pursuit of "the most precious and cherished thing in the world" was to become a sage and unite with the Tao of Cheng.

Similarly, Confucius and Yan Yuan's realization of pleasure through union with the Tao of Cheng is also a discovery made in the context of hardship. Although the phrase "seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan" is based on the word "pleasure", the word "seeking" suggests that this pleasure is of a special nature. If it were a kind of obvious pleasure, there would be no need to search for it. In other words, if one were in the same situation as Confucius and Yan Yuan, one would not be happy in general.

When Confucius asked his disciples to talk about their respective ambitions, Zi Lu said that he would like to share carts and horses and fancy clothes with his friends, and that he had no regrets even if they were damaged [18]. Zi Lu's answer is reflective of a prevalent societal perception of an ideal life; wherein material prosperity serves as a primary source of fulfillment. While there are numerous forms of happiness, the pursuit of material abundance stands as a dominant aspect within this imagined better life. There is nothing inherently problematic about Zi Lu's ambition. Indeed, it could even be considered noble, as although he pursued a life of abundance, he was willing to offer these material things selflessly to his friends in the face of their needs.

Among Confucius's disciples, Zi Lu and Ran You are renowned for their political proficiency, having served as household retainers of the Ji clan. Zi Gong, in addition to political expertise, which was evidenced by his role as prime minister of Lu and Wei, also exhibited remarkable business abilities, accumulating a considerable fortune. These accomplishments were sufficiently admirable. However, Zhou Dunyi did not instruct Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi to explore the pleasure associated with Zi Lu, Ran You, and Zi Gong. Instead, he encouraged them to seek the pleasure of Confucius and Yan Yuan.

Yan Yuan was a disciple who was highly praised by Confucius for his learning and noble behavior. Unfortunately, he died prematurely and experienced financial adversity throughout his life. Despite Confucius's previous role as the minister of justice of the state of Lu, he was compelled to leave Lu with his disciples due to the influence of the three Branch Lineages of Duke Huan. This resulted in him embarking on a period of extensive travel across numerous countries. However, the journey proved to be fraught with challenges. The group was pursued and killed, and they endured food crises. After fourteen years, Confucius had not yet encountered a ruler willing to confer on him significant responsibilities. Ultimately, he was compelled to return to Lu, where his long-held political aspirations remained unfulfilled until his demise. From the perspective of the public, the lives of Confucius and Yan Yuan were marked by hardship and adversity. There seemed to be little cause for pleasure in their circumstances. However, Zhou Dunyi's intention was for the Cheng brothers to investigate whether Confucius and Yan Yuan had captured a sort of unknown, yet invaluable pleasure in this seemingly impossible situation.

Thus, the pursuit of Confucius and Yan Yuan's pleasure inherently entails the possibility of making life profound. As Zhou Dunyi states, Yan Yuan was able to "face riches and poverty with the same attitude" [15]. It is not the case that a life of wealth and prosperity precludes the possibility of attaining the pleasure of unity with the Tao of Cheng as achieved by Confucius and Yan Yuan. Rather, a life of wealth and prosperity presents a multitude of options, leading individuals to pursue a range of pleasures, including wealth, official position, fame, and so forth. When suffering comes, individuals are deprived of material happiness by external forces, prompting them to seek spiritual fulfillment that transcends the material realm. This mental process is consistent with Lewis' assertion that God was able to have him for forty-eight hours because He took everything in his life except Him [2]. Suffering can be conceptualized as a form of deprivation or compulsion that commands individuals to confront the duality of the surface and the depth, as well as the transient and the permanent.

The expression "perfect through suffering" reflects the pursuit of joy from God, whereas the phrase "seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan" represents the pursuit of the pleasure of unity with the Tao of Cheng. It is not the intention of these teachings to advocate the complete rejection of material

possessions. However, they do serve as a reminder that material abundance can act as a form of shelter, leading to a false sense of security and complacency, while failing to address the deeper, more fundamental spiritual needs.

### 3. Highest Joy: Unity with the Highest Good

Lewis points out that suffering emerges when humans exercise their free will in opposition to the divine will of God [2]. This entails the logical conclusion that joy arises when human will aligns with God's will. Lewis posits that prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden did not have to distinguish whether their actions were driven by God's will or their own desire [2]. All their choices naturally aligned with God's will, and there was no dichotomy between divine will and self-will, leading to a state of happiness. The unity of God and humanity, Lewis argues, represents the highest form of joy [2].

It is crucial to highlight that, according to Lewis, while humans can derive pleasure from various earthly activities, such as watching a game, socializing with friends, listening to a symphony, experiencing romantic love, these pleasures, though without negative consequences, are not meant to provide ultimate fulfillment [2]. God does not allow humans to find lasting fulfillment in these pleasures alone. He desires that humanity pursue only the joy that comes from unity with Him. This implies that although humans can experience a vast array of material and emotional delights, they must refrain from excessive indulgence and must not allow their pursuit of worldly pleasures to distract them from their spiritual connection with God. This is because God has prepared these earthly pleasures solely out of consideration for human's inherent weakness and limitations. It is not His intention that man should make these pleasures his permanent and true home. Rather, God allows human's mind to rest in them for a short period of time [2].

Lewis further asserts that God bestows the pleasure that stems from Him and nothing else and human has no right to refuse God in this matter [2]. Specifically, regardless of whether human approves or not, God provides human with what he truly requires, not with what he believes he requires. In the face of this respect and bestowal from God, human experiences discomfort. However, this is because God's love for humanity is too much, not too little [2]. Out of His love for human, God does not just require reverence, but desires for humanity to embody His holiness.

Similarly, Zhou Dunyi, like Lewis, posits that material and emotional gratification contribute to happiness. "Affluence and social status are what people love" [15], and this materialistic pursuit is undeniable. Zhou Dunyi holds Confucius in high esteem, believing that "the only person who has high morals and infinite education, and who actually corresponds with heaven and earth and the four seasons, is Confucius" [15]. To understand Confucius' attitude towards material pursuits, one must turn to the *Analects of Confucius*, which offers insight into this aspect of life.

Confucius states that "If wealth is morally justifiable, then I will seek it, even if it is a lowly job like taking a whip and emptying the streets of pedestrians, I am willing to do so. If it is not morally right to seek it, then I will choose what I like" [18], meaning that it is acceptable for people to seek wealth. What he opposes is seeking wealth and status through improper means: "Wealth and status, that is what everyone wants; if it is not obtained in accordance with righteousness, a noble man will not accept it. Poverty and lowliness, everyone detests them; if they are not discarded according to morality and righteousness, a noble man will not get rid of them." [18] Confucius concludes, "Wealth and position obtained by improper means are like floating clouds to me" [18]. Confucius was very particular about his clothing and food, and there are many references to this in the *Analects of Confucius* – Xiang Dang. For example, "When you fast and bathe, you must have a bathrobe made of cloth. When you fast, you must change your usual diet, and you must change your residence, [not to live with your wife and concubines]" [18].

Another example is, "Grain is not pounded too finely, and fish and meat are not cut too finely. ... If food has an ugly color, do not eat it. If it smells bad, do not eat it. If it is not cooked properly, do not eat it. ... If the food is not cut properly, do not eat it. ... Wine and dried meat bought in the market,

do not eat. After eating, ginger is not removed, but not much is eaten.” [18] Although the starting point for Confucius’ many taboos on clothing and food was the observance of “rites”, this at least shows that Confucius was not opposed to people’s material needs.

From this, we can ascertain that both Confucius and Zhou Dunyi acknowledged the legitimacy of the pursuit of material happiness. However, they also recognized that material things are not the paramount objective in life and that the happiness derived from them is not the pinnacle of human experience. “A noble man is concerned with the Tao, but not with poverty.” [18] If, as Zhou Dunyi suggests, Yan Yuan “seeing the significant and forgetting the insignificant” [15], then it could be argued that the world of the wealthy can be considered “seeing the insignificant and forgetting the significant”. This is because they are obsessed with material pleasures, not realizing that above such pleasures there is the joy of unity with the Tao of Cheng.

If Lewis advocates the joy of unity between God and humans, then in Zhou Dunyi’s thinking, the joy of unity with the Tao of Cheng—which humans should regard as the highest joy—can be called the joy of unity between Heaven and humans because the Tao of Heaven is also the Tao of Cheng. In the context of human beings, the concepts of “unity between God and humans” and “unity between Heaven and humans” refer to different objects to be unified. In essence, there is an unbridgeable gap between these two concepts. However, in terms of the ultimate spiritual realm that humanity strives to achieve, both “God” and “Heaven” serve as standards for humanity, representing the highest Good of their respective realms.

#### 4. Conclusion

The commonality between “perfect through suffering” and “seeking the pleasure of Confucius and Yan” lies in their shared depiction of situations in which individuals are deprived of material resources, compelling them to seek solutions that transcend their suffering. This relief may be achieved either by abandoning one’s ego and placing trust in God, or by concentrating on the realization of the unity with the Tao of Cheng. In both cases, the resulting spiritual happiness is detached from material concerns.

Furthermore, they both acknowledge that the material dimensions of existence can foster a sense of happiness. Humans also have the right to pursue and enjoy this happiness. However, for humans to achieve the pinnacle of happiness, it is essential to pursue a state of unity with the highest Good.

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