

God and the Problem of Evil: Why Soul-Making Won't Suffice

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Abstract

If you believe in the existence of an infinitely good, all-knowing, and all-powerful deity ('God'), how do you explain the reality of evil – including the inexpressible suffering and death of innocents? Wouldn't God be forced to vanquish such suffering due to God's very nature? Alvin Plantinga has argued, convincingly, that if the possibility of ultimate goodness somehow necessarily required that evil be allowed to exist, God, being omnibenevolent, would have to allow it. But as John Hick has noted, the mere logical possibility of such a situation might not be enough to console the doubting theist. We need a *positive reason* to believe that evil as we know it is compatible with God's existence. So, Hick offers a 'soul-making' theodicy – or vindication – of God, suggesting that the human soul cannot fully progress to spiritual maturity (a kind of ultimate good on his account) without grappling with evil. In this short piece I argue that, *if* we accept Hick's premises about souls and soul-making, we can indeed make sense of evil to some extent. But, I suggest, his account cannot justify the *type* or *amount* of evil we see in the world, so his theodicy does not succeed

In his article, 'Evil and Soul-Making' (all references below are to pages 152–3), John Hick argues for theism by attempting to reconcile belief in the existence of God with the apparent fact of evil. That is, he tries to explain why an all-loving and all-powerful being would knowingly allow its creatures to suffer evil. Ultimately, he only partially succeeds. Although he offers a plausible explanation for the fact of evil, I will try to show that he fails to provide adequate justification for either the *amount* or *type* of evil in a world created by a supposedly loving God. To begin, let us consider the problem Hick means to resolve with his theodicy: the so-called Problem of Evil.

Anti-theistic philosophers have often employed the Problem of Evil in their arguments against the existence of God. They claim that it is logically inconsistent to believe the following five things all at once:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God is all-good.
- (3) God is all-knowing.
- (4) God is all-powerful.
- (5) Evil exists.

Of course, they mean to reject theism on the assumption that it requires (at minimum) all of those things. In other words, if you claim to be



a theist on the basis of believing (1), but you reject one or more of (2)–(5), then the anti-theist is not here concerned with you. The briefest account of the anti-theist’s reasoning is this: an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful god [(1)–(4)] would necessarily eliminate all evil, creating a state of affairs which directly contradicts (5). Therefore, says the anti-theist, the theist holds a set of beliefs that are internally inconsistent and so irrational.

A theist could respond to this accusation by pointing out that by these same premises and similar reasoning, God would have to *allow* evil to exist if it were either necessarily required for, or inextricably bound up with, some greater good – a possibility which reconciles (1)–(4) with (5). Alvin Plantinga’s Free Will Defence shows, conclusively I think, that there is at least one valid way both to conceive of such a possibility and to defeat its likely objectors – though I will not rehearse his arguments here. Thus, the anti-theist is foiled (with respect to this particular claim), since to assert logical inconsistency requires that

there is not even the *possibility* of reconciliation between the first four premises and the last.

But this is far from satisfying. Showing that it is *logically possible* to believe in God despite the existence of evil does very little (to use Milton’s words) to ‘justify the ways of God to men’. As a result, theologians such as Hick have gone further and developed a specific theodicy by which they attempt to spell out more fully God’s ‘actual’ reasons for allowing evil. They hope thereby to vindicate God’s essential goodness, knowledge, and power in the face of apparent great evil. So what is Hick’s theodicy?

Following Irenaeus, Hick rejects St Augustine’s view that humans were created in an initial state of (human) perfection, ‘fulfilling the divine intention for our human level of existence’ and then falling away from Eden via original sin. Instead, he tells this ‘inverse’ story. First, God created the physical universe (probably in the Big Bang). Then, over aeons, through the process of evolution, organic life emerged, ultimately becoming conscious and free willed – that

is, recognizably human. At this point, a ‘second stage’ of God’s creative process began, in which these biological creatures start to evolve spiritually into a state of personal likeness to God, to be fully realized in some future perfection. The idea is that through engaging with evil in the world (e.g. overcoming temptations to do great harm), humans are able to build truly moral character and progress towards spiritual maturity. Hick explains that this spiritual evolution cannot be effectuated by ‘divine fiat’, but ‘only through the uncompelled responses and willing co-operation of human individuals in their actions and reactions in the world in which God has placed them’. See how this statement elucidates some of the central components of Hick’s theodicy:

1. ‘... *uncompelled responses* ...’ Hick is, by his own admission, making a ‘value judgement’ here in which he assumes that one who has freely chosen to do good in the face of temptations to bring about evil is somehow ‘better’ or more ‘valuable’ than one who is good because she was programmed only to do right by her creator. This leads to a second main component:
2. *Moral evil exists in the world because moral good also exists.* This is how the Free Will Defence works: the existence of free moral agents is the *greater good* with which the existence of evil in the world is inextricably linked. Therefore, in order to bring about this great good, God must allow for the existence of evil. Finally:
3. ‘... *reactions in the world in which God has placed them* ...’ This indicates the source of another sort of evil (besides moral evil as a result of free choice): ‘natural’ evil. Natural evil is *not* caused by the human exercise of free will (set aside disasters due to human-caused climate change, etc.), but is simply part of the world in which God has placed God’s creatures, giving them obstacles in their environment with which they must engage to more fully effect their moral evolution. This could be taken as an implicit defence of natural evil.

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So far, Hick’s theodicy seems at least plausible and is adequately broad in scope: it offers reasons for both moral and natural evil, and it even takes into account modern cosmology and evolutionary science. The question is, what sort of world do these components imply? What type or degree of evil does his theodicy suggest should exist? Is it the same as the actual world, and the evil we do experience? Or does it fail fully to account for such evil, as I am arguing? Hick writes: ‘If God’s aim in making the world is “the bringing of many sons to glory,” that aim will naturally determine the kind of world that He has created.’ So, what kind of world should God create, given that some amount of evil or suffering is to be seen as an essential ingredient in the worthy cause of ‘bringing sons to glory’?

Hick dismisses those who think that a loving God would create a world with no evil or suffering. In Hick’s view, we should not see ourselves as helpless gerbils, expecting to be primped and pampered and given a fluffy benign world to

inhabit. Instead, we are like children and God is like a parent. Hick writes:

It is clear that a parent who loves his children, and wants them to become the best human beings that they are capable of becoming does not treat pleasure as the sole and supreme value ... we do not desire for them unalloyed pleasure at the expense of their growth in such even greater values as moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humor, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all the capacity for love.

Here I must register my first objection. It is true that a loving parent does not wish to smother a child with 'unalloyed pleasure'. However, the question is what kind of *environment* would a loving parent create for her child? If God created a world in which there were no natural evils (natural disasters, say, or deadly epidemics uncaused by human choices), why couldn't free will alone provide 'enough' evil to build character – or spiritually mature souls, for that matter? Or what about free will plus *some* natural evils or environmental risks, but not the unfathomable range and magnitude of such evils we encounter in the actual world?

Consider this analogy. I want to provide a play space for my two (hypothetical) children whom I love. Here are some choices:

1. I can make sure to cover everything with thick, cushy pads so no one gets hurt, feed them ice cream and cookies all day, and install a large TV with their favourite movies playing on repeat.
2. I can create a relatively neutral environment where perhaps there is a ball and bat among other toys – items which, if misused, could be very dangerous (for example, one of my children could get angry and start to hit the other with the bat), but which, if used responsibly, do not entail any overt threat to their safety or happiness.
3. I could arbitrarily poison their food every so often, so that one of them gets very sick or dies.

Hick is right to suggest that a world analogous to the first scenario would be hedonistic and ill-suited to moral and/or spiritual development. But then, why didn't God create a world like the second picture – one in which humans were a threat to their own safety by virtue of 'misusing equipment' in a relatively neutral physical world (where, by virtue of free social interaction, certain evils could come to pass, but also certain important goods)? What reason does Hick attribute to God's creating a world like the third, in which morally good people may suddenly be hit by lightning, or die of cancer, or be crushed by debris in an earthquake?

That is not the sort of environment a loving parent creates for her child. God could potentially have created a world which was not hedonistic but which *also* had less evil in it than this one: it isn't all or nothing. In this respect I do not think that Hick's theodicy properly accounts for natural evils which arbitrarily destroy innocent life – such evils do not seem necessary for "soul-making" and, indeed, may be soul-crushing. What is their justification?

My second objection has to do with the *degree* of evil experienced, and its uneven distribution in the world. If evil is meant to be a device to help in soul-making, it seems unreasonable that some individuals should experience evil on top of evil, leading to complete despair or suicide rather than spiritual growth, and others hardly any evil at all. One potential response to this is that perhaps it is not the individual's spiritual growth that God is concerned with but rather the spiritual perfection of the human species. On this view, the disparity between individuals would seem to 'even out' over decades or centuries as each generation learned from the moral experiments of the last. But Hick rejects this view:

Because this is a pilgrimage within the life of each individual rather than a racial evolution, the progressive fulfillment of God's purpose does not entail any corresponding progressive improvement in the moral state of the world ... it is thus probable that human life was lived on much the

same moral plane two thousand years ago or four thousand years ago as it is today.

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Since this is Hick’s position, he does not seem to account for the wildly uneven distribution of evil

in the world, or for the fact that some individuals experience evil to a humanly unbearable degree, quashing any hope for spiritual perfection. And what of the child who dies of cancer? Surely he cannot complete the ‘pilgrimage’ – but by no fault of his own. That does not seem consistent with an all-loving, all-powerful God, either.

To conclude, Hick does offer a coherent, if preliminary, answer to the question why an all-loving, all-powerful God might knowingly allow its creatures to suffer. He suggests that evil exists both as a product of human free choice and ‘naturally’ in the environment (as created by God) – in both cases to provide individuals with a morally complicated world with which to grapple for the benefit of their spiritual evolution. Unfortunately, though, Hick fails to explain why God would allow *so much* suffering, or suffering which cannot be used for soul-making due to its overwhelming the spirit, or suffering which is so unevenly distributed, or suffering due to horrific natural disasters or diseases. Hick’s theodicy offers an interesting way to think about the Problem of Evil, but does very little to resolve the tension one has who is trying to reconcile belief in God with the realities of so much evil in the world.

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