

john hick evil and the god of love

john hick evil and the god of love presents a profound philosophical and theological challenge, one that has occupied thinkers for centuries and remains central to understanding divine attributes and human suffering. John Hick, a prominent 20th-century philosopher of religion, grappled extensively with the problem of evil, seeking to reconcile the existence of a benevolent, omnipotent God with the reality of pain, injustice, and loss in the world. This article delves into Hick's nuanced arguments, exploring his concepts of soul-making theodicy and its implications for a God characterized by love. We will examine how Hick addresses the apparent contradiction between a loving God and the presence of evil, and the role of human freedom and moral development within his framework.

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The Enduring Enigma: Understanding the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is a foundational dilemma in theology and philosophy. It questions how a God who is simultaneously omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (all-good) can permit or even create a world filled with suffering, wickedness, and natural disasters. The apparent contradiction lies in the idea that if God is all-powerful, He could prevent evil; if He is all-knowing, He is aware of evil; and if He is all-

good, He would desire to prevent it. The existence of evil, therefore, seems to imply that at least one of these divine attributes is lacking, or that God does not exist.

Throughout history, various responses have emerged, from attempts to redefine God's attributes to arguments that evil is an illusion or a privation of good. However, the visceral reality of suffering – from the smallest instance of pain to catastrophic global events – continues to challenge theological explanations and prompt deep existential reflection. It is within this complex landscape that John Hick's distinctive approach offers a compelling, albeit debated, perspective on the divine nature and the human condition.

John Hick's Philosophical Contributions to Theodicy

John Hick (1922-2012) was a British philosopher of religion who made significant contributions to the debate surrounding the problem of evil. His work is characterized by a rigorous intellectual honesty and a deep commitment to finding a coherent understanding of faith in the face of undeniable suffering. Hick moved beyond traditional, often abstract, philosophical defenses of God and instead focused on developing a theodicy that accounted for the experiential realities of human life.

His most influential work, "Evil and the God of Love," systematically outlines his arguments. Hick sought to demonstrate that the existence of evil is not incompatible with the existence of a loving God, but rather, under certain conditions, it can be seen as a necessary feature of a divinely orchestrated plan for human moral and spiritual development. This perspective radically shifted the focus from merely excusing God's allowance of evil to understanding evil as instrumental in achieving a greater good.

The Soul-Making Theodicy

The cornerstone of Hick's thought on this issue is his "soul-making" theodicy. He argued that the primary purpose of human existence in this world is not simply to experience pleasure and avoid pain, but to grow, develop, and mature spiritually and morally. This process, he contended, requires confronting challenges, overcoming difficulties, and making choices. A world devoid of suffering, hardship, and moral temptation would be a world where genuine character development would be impossible.

Hick proposed that God created the world not as a perfected paradise, but as an environment for spiritual growth. This environment must contain elements that challenge individuals and provide opportunities for them to cultivate

virtues such as courage, compassion, patience, and faith. These virtues cannot be fully developed in a vacuum; they are forged in the crucible of adversity. Therefore, the very imperfections and difficulties of the world serve a crucial, positive purpose in God's grand design.

Evil as a Necessary Component of Soul-Making

Within the soul-making framework, Hick posited that various forms of evil, both moral and natural, are not gratuitous but are, in fact, necessary for the process of spiritual maturation. Moral evil, arising from human choices, allows for the development of ethical understanding and the exercise of free will, which is essential for genuine moral growth. Without the possibility of choosing wrongly, the choice to do good would lack significance.

Natural evils, such as disease, natural disasters, and accidents, also play a role. These events can evoke empathy, courage, and resilience. They can also serve as catalysts for scientific inquiry and communal support, fostering a sense of interdependence and the development of altruistic behavior. For Hick, these adversities are not punishments but opportunities, testing grounds for the development of character and the deepening of one's relationship with God and fellow humans.

The Role of Free Will in Hick's Theodicy

A pivotal element in John Hick's theodicy is the concept of free will. He argued that for humans to be truly moral agents capable of loving God and one another, they must possess the genuine freedom to choose between good and evil. This freedom, however, inherently carries the risk of choosing evil, which leads to moral suffering. To create beings who could freely choose to love God, God had to create beings with the capacity to reject Him, thereby introducing moral evil into the world.

Hick believed that a world where humans are mere automatons, programmed to do good, would be a world devoid of genuine love and moral worth. The value of human actions, and indeed of human beings themselves, stems from the free choice to act morally and to love. This inherent possibility of transgression, and the consequent suffering, is therefore a necessary price for the creation of beings who can truly respond to God out of love and genuine volition.

Addressing Different Forms of Evil

Hick's analysis extends to various categories of evil, seeking to integrate

them into his soul-making model. He recognized the profound suffering caused by both moral and natural evils. Moral evils, such as cruelty, injustice, and betrayal, stem from the free choices of moral agents. Natural evils, like earthquakes, famines, and diseases, are often understood as consequences of the natural laws governing the physical world, which God established to create a coherent and predictable environment necessary for soul-making.

He argued that while some evils might seem disproportionate or gratuitous in the short term, their ultimate purpose within God's eschatological plan is to contribute to the formation of perfected souls. This does not mean that suffering is desirable in itself, but that it serves a vital, albeit often painful, function in the journey towards spiritual maturity and eventual union with God. The cumulative effect of facing and overcoming these trials is the development of a rich and robust moral and spiritual character.

The Nature of a God of Love

Central to Hick's argument is a specific understanding of what it means for God to be a God of love. He rejected the notion of a divine love that is merely sentimental or protective, a love that would shield creation from all harm. Instead, Hick envisioned a God of love whose love is expressed through a deep commitment to the ultimate well-being and perfection of His creation, particularly humanity.

This divine love, in Hick's view, is not about ensuring immediate comfort or happiness, but about fostering the highest possible state of being for His creatures – a state of moral and spiritual perfection, characterized by a deep, uncoerced relationship with Him. This kind of love is patient, persistent, and ultimately aimed at the profound flourishing of each individual soul, even if the path to that flourishing involves hardship and struggle.

Reconciling Divine Love and Evil

Hick's reconciliation of divine love and the existence of evil hinges on the idea that God's perfect love seeks the best for His creatures, and the best for His creatures, in the ultimate divine scheme, involves the development of their moral and spiritual character. Thus, a loving God would create a world where such development is possible, and this necessitates the presence of challenges and adversities, which we perceive as evil.

This perspective frames God not as a distant, detached observer, but as an active participant in the arduous but ultimately rewarding process of soul-making. The God of love, in this sense, is one who allows suffering not out of indifference, but out of a profound respect for human freedom and a

commitment to a greater, ultimate good that transcends immediate comfort. The suffering is not willed by God for its own sake, but is permitted as an inevitable consequence of creating beings who can freely grow into the fullness of their potential and enter into a genuine relationship of love with their Creator.

Critiques and Counterarguments

While John Hick's soul-making theodicy has been influential, it has also faced significant criticism. One major objection concerns the sheer magnitude and intensity of suffering in the world. Critics argue that the amount and severity of pain, particularly in cases of extreme cruelty, the suffering of innocent children, or devastating natural disasters, seem disproportionate to any plausible developmental benefit. Can the immense suffering of a child born with a debilitating illness truly be explained as a necessary part of soul-making?

Another common critique questions the very nature of a God who would employ such harsh means to achieve His ends. If God is omnipotent, why could He not achieve the goal of soul-making through less torturous methods? Furthermore, the theodicy is challenged by the problem of the afterlife. If the ultimate purpose is achieved in the next life, then the suffering experienced in this one, for some, seems to be a particularly cruel and inefficient method of preparation.

There are also questions about the universality of this process. Does every instance of suffering contribute to soul-making for everyone involved? What about those who are seemingly broken by suffering rather than strengthened? These questions highlight the ongoing tension between the philosophical explanations offered by theodicy and the deeply felt emotional and existential impact of suffering.

Hick's Legacy and Enduring Questions

John Hick's legacy in the philosophy of religion is undeniable. His persistent engagement with the problem of evil, and his development of the soul-making theodicy, offered a fresh and compelling perspective that continues to be debated and explored. He provided a framework for understanding suffering not as a refutation of God's existence, but as a complex element within a grand narrative of human redemption and spiritual evolution.

His work encourages a re-evaluation of God's nature and purpose, moving away from simplistic notions of divine intervention and towards a more nuanced understanding of divine love as a force that fosters growth and character

development through free agency and the trials of life. The questions he raised about the nature of good and evil, the meaning of suffering, and the ultimate purpose of existence remain profoundly relevant, inviting ongoing contemplation and theological reflection on the intricate relationship between John Hick, evil, and the God of love.

Q: How does John Hick define the "problem of evil"?

A: John Hick defines the problem of evil as the apparent contradiction between the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God and the reality of suffering and evil in the world. He grapples with how a God with these attributes can permit or cause such pain and wickedness.

Q: What is John Hick's central argument regarding evil and the God of love?

A: John Hick's central argument is his "soul-making" theodicy. He posits that evil, both moral and natural, is a necessary component for human moral and spiritual development, and that a God of love would permit these challenges to foster the growth of virtuous character, leading to a deeper relationship with the divine.

Q: What does John Hick mean by "soul-making"?

A: "Soul-making" refers to the process of developing moral and spiritual character through life experiences. Hick argues that God created the world not as a perfected paradise, but as an environment where humans can learn, grow, and mature by confronting challenges, making choices, and overcoming adversity, thereby cultivating virtues like courage, compassion, and faith.

Q: How does free will fit into John Hick's theodicy?

A: Free will is a crucial element for Hick. He contends that for humans to be capable of genuine moral agency and love, they must possess the freedom to choose between good and evil. This inherent freedom, however, carries the risk of choosing evil, which consequently leads to moral suffering, a price deemed necessary for the creation of beings who can truly love.

Q: Does John Hick believe God causes evil?

A: No, John Hick does not believe God causes evil in the sense of desiring it for its own sake. Rather, he argues that God permits evil as an inevitable consequence of creating beings with free will and establishing natural laws that govern a world conducive to soul-making. The suffering is a byproduct of a greater divine purpose.

Q: What are some common criticisms of John Hick's soul-making theodicy?

A: Common criticisms include the argument that the sheer magnitude and intensity of suffering in the world (e.g., extreme cruelty, suffering of children) seem disproportionate to any plausible developmental benefit.

Critics also question why an omnipotent God cannot achieve soul-making through less torturous means and the efficiency of such methods if an afterlife exists.

Q: How does John Hick view the nature of God's love?

A: Hick views God's love not as mere sentimentality or protective shielding, but as a profound commitment to the ultimate well-being and perfection of His creation. This love aims at fostering moral and spiritual maturity, even if the path involves hardship, ultimately leading to a deep, uncoerced relationship with the divine.

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