
John Hick's Theodicy

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Theodicy is concerned with justifying the ways of God to Man (*theos*=God; *dikaioo*=justify). Anyone seeking to engage in this activity would need to believe in God, as understood by theists, and to believe that God is just. Just as justification is a forensic term so too the theodicy can be seen as a counsel for the defence whose basic premise is the "innocence" of his client.

In the case of John Hick's "Vale of Soul-Making" theodicy,¹ the writer is concerned to give a rational and Christian explanation for the presence of evil and suffering in the world, particularly as it impinges on the human race. Hick asks, quite rightly:

Can a world in which sadistic cruelty often has its way, in which selfish lovelessness is so rife, in which there are debilitating diseases, crippling accidents, bodily and mental decay, insanity and all manner of natural disasters be regarded as the expression of infinite creative goodness? Certainly all this could never by itself lead anyone to believe in the existence of a limitlessly powerful God.²

After this very powerful statement of the case against the "innocence" of his client, Hick seeks to show that although God has deliberately built this painful element into the world, it is for a good and benevolent purpose, i.e., that of "soul-making". Hick sees man being "initially set at an epistemic distance" from his Creator.³ This is an assertion that man's estrangement from God is a deliberate pre-condition of "soul-making" – it is an "initial" placement of man by God in that position. He then says:

... this very irrationality and this lack of ethical meaning contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur and in which loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice can take place.⁴

Stated in these terms, theodicy becomes a gigantic task. Hick recognises the presence of moral and natural evil and the consequent terrible suffering and anguish which follows but considers that in the final analysis it is worth it. He admits that it is God who has initiated all this pain but asserts that it was necessarily introduced by God into a Creation which might otherwise be bland and painless. But because a "bland and painless" Creation would lack the "soul-making" ingredient of pain, this evil had to be brought in. Hick recognises that on the surface this seems a rather far-fetched explanation. In the quotation given above he admits that "by itself" this situation would never "lead anyone to believe in the existence of a limitlessly powerful God."⁵

If Hick could achieve his object in justifying this "soul-making" theory it would certainly be a great achievement. As he admits, all the evidence seems to be piled up against him. He has conceded that God has chosen to work through a fantastically long and painful process of evolution in his plan of creation and he admits that the evil and cruelty seen in man and beast were built into the process (evolution means to "unfold" what is already there). He says of early man:

... the life of this being must have been a constant struggle against a hostile environment, and capable of savage violence against one's fellow human-being.⁶

This is not the traditional, classic picture of man's origin as presented by earlier Christian thinkers. Hick refers to Augustine⁷ as the pioneer of the "fall" explanation of evil but this is, of course, a biblical concept and was only adopted by Augustine, his predecessors and successors because it was in the Bible. Hick concedes that this view is "not logically impossible"⁸ but he says "I am in fact doubtful whether their argument is sound". He believes along with "most educated inhabitants of the modern world" that the account of the Fall is "myth" whereas the theory that "humanity evolved out of lower forms of life, emerging in a morally, spiritually and culturally primitive state" is the currently accepted view. Atheists tend to be amused by this accommodation of Christianity to include evolution because for them the great attraction of the evolutionary theory was that it dispensed with the need for a Creator. There is for them a blind, purposeless process at work, governed by time and chance, which has produced philosophers, theologians and scientists (and animals) without any directing intelligence or design behind it. If later adherents to this Victorian "ætiological legend" tended to deify the process, this could only be seen as an aberration rather than a true evolutionary insight. The fact that many Christians feel they can reconcile evolution and creation does not remove the challenge raised by the problem of evil. On this reading of history, the blame for evil has to be placed squarely on the Creator as the one who started the process of "nature, red in tooth and claw". Any improvement on original bestiality can only be attributed to man's self-achieved progress – what Bronowski has called "The Ascent of Man". As Hick expresses it:

... human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort [which have] a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.⁹

Taking this slow build-up of human goodness as the result of human effort and the presence of natural and moral evil as part of God's design for his creation we see a reversal of traditional Christian theodicy. God is seen as the author of evil (for the best possible reasons) and man as the architect of good, who by his achievement wins the approval of his Creator. This reflects the rabbinic view of creation (Kidd 30b) which sees man as subject to two inclinations, the good (*YETZER HATOV*, and the evil (*YETZER HARA*). When God "saw everything he had made and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31), the rabbis say that this pronouncement also included "the evil inclination" which was also seen as "very good". A Jewish legend on this theme tells of a time when the evil inclination was taken out of the world for a day. On that day the hens did not lay any eggs, nobody built any houses and no business deals were done. The obvious message here is that evil is a "necessary evil", like yeast in the dough which is an essential part of the bread-making process. There is even a Jewish saying which is used to excuse the peccadilloes of great men which asserts "The greater the Man, the greater the Yetzer" (*HARA*, evil inclination). This approach, like so much of rabbinic teaching, is man-centred, in that it finds the answer to all problems in human wisdom.

In his presentation, Hick, like the rabbis, makes a virtue of necessity and having decided the outcome of the problem of evil on the basis of what appears to be the case, he works back, in a *posteriori* fashion to an original situation in which God includes evil in his creation "mix" in order to achieve the best outcome. Perhaps an illustration

will provide a parallel. An importer of expensive tropical fish found that the journey, by air, left the fish in a weak and sluggish condition on arrival, with several dead. He hit on the idea of including a “cannibal” fish with each consignment and found that the continual activity this caused kept the fish alert and lively until their arrival, even though some succumbed to the “cannibal”. The importer felt, like Dr Pangloss, that “all was for the best” in the end.

Samuel Johnson, in his interesting book *Rasselas, prince of Abissinia* (sic), approaches what might be called “the problem of innocence” (which underlies Hick’s approach) in a different way from Hick. He raises the issue of untried innocence which never attains to virtue and his hero Rasselas and his sister Nekayah and their mentor, the philosopher Imlac have to dig their way out of their home in the “Happy Valley”, where “every prospect pleases” and not even “man is vile”, to quote the old hymn. They escape in order to experience “the real world”. Johnson here joins Hick in affirming that a painless world is an incomplete world and that sheer unalloyed pleasantness is cloying dull and enervating. Although Johnson is not presenting a theodicy he is saying what Hick is saying, that misfortune and pain constitute the “spice” which gives zest and flavour to the dish of life. A similar thought is expressed by those who say, half-jokingly, that the world would be a dull place without “a few rogues”. By extension, this judgement would apply even more strongly to the “fellowship of saints above” which would be of course similarly deficient of “rogues”. Of course Dr Johnson knew better than this but his presentation could be used by Hick in support of his argument for “beneficent evil” as a necessary ingredient in a wisely constructed creation. But whereas Hick asserts that the Creator was too wise to omit the necessary spice of evil in his creation, Dr Johnson seems to envisage a condition which, because of the omission of evil, leaves the inhabitants of Happy Valley either as mere children at aimless play or dissatisfied seekers after unattainable adventure and meaningful challenge.

All this presupposes that God did not intend that the innocence of his human creatures should be tested so that innocence could develop into virtue by victory in testing. Hick, in rejecting the Eden account, cuts himself off from an elegant and satisfying presentation, even if it were viewed as a myth (which is his position). Far from imposing natural and moral evil upon the human race as a “medicine”, a necessary training device which goes disastrously wrong, Genesis sets a scene which is presided over by a loving, benevolent and communicating Creator. The scene is one of perfect felicity with plants and animals and scenery perfectly suited to the human being placed there. One thing is lacking and that is a mate for Adam. He is shown that none of the animals is suitable to be his mate and as “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18) a mate is envisaged for Adam. The Amplified Version of Genesis 2:18 is very suggestive. It reads “It is not good (sufficient, satisfactory) that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper meet (suitable, adapted, completing) for him”. This indicates the wise foresight of the Creator in making provision for the man’s need of companionship. The need of useful, interesting occupation is also provided in that the man is given the task of “dressing” the garden and exercising dominion over the animals. This is in contrast to the situation in Johnson’s Happy Valley described in *Rasselas* where the inhabitants are idle and bored, with all their wants supplied without effort on their part.

The element of discipline is also present in Eden, whereas it is missing in the Happy Valley. In Eden a prohibition is placed on the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This is a defining feature of Adam's life which fixes the servant and master relationship between the man and his Creator. Adam has a place, a defined role in the scheme of things and he knows where he stands. His covenant relationship with God gives him a status and also fixes a limit beyond which he must not go. This is what every child looks for and for which every child pines when he is met with parental indifference. As Johnson and Hick both realise, this Edenic innocence is not enough for full human development and innocence has to be tested. It was not God's intention that man should be "tested to destruction" like some prototype car which could be easily replaced. Adam was a "one-off" model at that stage and his experiences would have age-long consequences. Satan/Diabolos had a role here to "confront man with an alternative to what is known to be right", which could serve as a definition of temptation. In order for man to freely choose what is right and thus show his love and allegiance to the author of righteousness, the possibility of an alternative had to be presented to him. This was the case even in Christ's temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) and the agent of this temptation was also Satan and the response made by Christ was also available to Adam – the use of the Word of God (in Adam's case, the prohibition). Adam and Eve, although exposed to the power and wiles of Satan, were not without defence. God had spoken, saying,

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Genesis 2:16-17).

This was a clear prohibition with a dread sanction attached to it and it provided both Adam and Eve with an answer to Satan in the event of any enticement to disobey. Satan's approach to Eve was aimed at misrepresenting God's word, saying "Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (Genesis 3:1) Eve's reply should have been a faithful quoting of God's word but she gave an "unfaithful" quotation saying:

We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said "Ye shall not eat of it, *neither shall ye touch it*, lest ye die". (Genesis 3:2,3)

The words "... neither shall ye touch it" are not recorded as coming from God, so it seems that Eve took it on herself to embellish God's statement, thus undermining the authority of the Divine command. Satan's reply is an outright denial of God's statement, saying "*Ye shall not* surely die" (Genesis 3:4). This should have drawn from Eve a strong reproof to Satan as she knew this was a lie, on the authority of God's pronouncement. But Satan then went on to entice Eve with the promise of God-like powers and this enticement, together with the attractive appearance of the forbidden fruit, moved her to rebel against God by eating it. She compounded her sin by giving some to Adam, her husband, who also ate. This moment in human history is very important for any understanding of the origin of evil. It was in God's will that Adam and Eve should be tempted because if they had resisted they would have emerged stronger, moving from innocence to virtue, joining with God in the stand against evil and preserving the creation against the depredations of the Satanic onslaught. As it

transpired, this personal fall by the representatives of the human race, brought about the fall of the whole human race. As Paul puts it, ... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (Romans 5:19) and not only mankind was brought into subjection to sin and consequent evil, but also:

... the creation was made subject to vanity ... the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. (Romans 8: 20-22)

Surely this account of the origin and entry of evil into the world ought to figure in any *Christian* theodicy, especially as it clears God of any initiating responsibility for pain and evil and places the blame squarely on Satan as saboteur and Man as collaborator in the ruin of God's good creation.

Hick's theodicy shows man as the "victim" of evil for which he bears no responsibility and his rise from an imagined bestial past is seen as an achievement for which he deserves the credit and for which God is supposed to be grateful and pleased. This is indeed "God in the dock", with very little help from his professed counsel for the defence. Hick's scenario is very little different from Voltaire's approach in *Candide*. Whereas Hick is restrained and dignified in his treatment of the suffering and evil in the world, "glossing" over the anomalies and injustices everywhere present with his "Vale of Soul-making" rationalisation of suffering, Voltaire makes merry over suffering. Doctor Pangloss who, like Hick, believes there is a benevolent purpose in all that happens and that "all is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds" as Leibnitz taught, is made a figure of fun. Pangloss is made to suffer any amount of unjust suffering, even seeming to die and then coming back from the dead to suffer again, but his disciple Candide is able at last to say "... everything is not too bad".¹⁰

Voltaire's lampoon is unfair and does nothing to throw light on the tragic problem of evil. But what it does do is to expose the vulnerability of Hick's theodicy and any other like it and it shows that it does not do what a theodicy is supposed to do, that is to "declare God righteous". Voltaire and other critics of the "Panglossian" school are able to show that the theory of a divinely sabotaged creation which is continually spoiled and hindered by its Creator raises more problems than it solves. The humble believer does not presume to explain the inexplicable and he follows Wittgenstein's dictum which affirms that where nothing can be said, silence is appropriate. This is not to say that theodicy should not be attempted but rather that it should begin from defensible premises. In a court of law, in Britain at least, the accused is presumed innocent until proved guilty. It is certainly not for the defending counsel to start from the premise of Divine guilt. Unfortunately for Hick and other advocates of theistic evolution, their position forces them to see evil embedded in the scheme of things from the very beginning. Once this concession is made, the argument is inexorably drawn into a process which can only seek to justify God's involvement with evil, rather than justify his righteousness, which is the declared aim of theodicy.

In conclusion, it has to be said that Hick's presentation of "The Vale of Soul-making" theodicy fails to convince because of the fallacious premise on which it is built. Once the presence of evil is attributed to God, the road is taken to an inevitable fastening of blame for evil on the Creator who is said to have implanted it into the universe. Hick is turning his back on the Biblical account which "For most educated inhabitants of the modern world ... must be regarded as myth rather than as history ...

they see all this as part of a pre-scientific world-view". He sees this Biblical view "... even if logically possible ... radically implausible" so he feels he must look elsewhere for light on the problem of evil".¹¹ After considering Hick's theodicy it would seem that, for those who reject the Biblical explanation, the search must go on.

References

- ¹ John Hick, "Soul-making and Suffering" in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (eds) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 168-188; John Hick "An Irenaean Theodicy" in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Stephen T Davis (ed.) pp. 39-52 (Westminster John Knox Press, 1981).
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ³ *Problem*, p. 177.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ⁵ *Encountering Evil*, p. 4.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Problem*, p. 169.
- ¹⁰ Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 163, (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1997).
- ¹¹ *Encountering Evil*, p. 41.

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The book of Job is one of the most remarkable in the Old Testament. Apart from its inspiration, and considered simply as a literary production, it bears the stamp of uncommon genius. It is occupied with a profound and difficult theme, the mystery of divine providence in the sufferings of good men. This is not treated in the abstract, in simple prose or in a plain didactic method. But an actual case is set vividly before the reader, in which the difficulty appears in its most aggravated form. By an extraordinary accumulation of disasters a man of unexampled piety is suddenly cast down from his prosperity, and reduced to the most pitiable and distressed condition. There is then delineated in the most masterly manner the impression made on others by the spectacle of these calamities, as well as the inward conflict stirred in the sufferer himself, his bewilderment and sore distress, his alternations of despair and hope, his piteous entreaties for a sympathy which is denied him and his irritation under the unjust suspicions and censures which are cast upon him, his wild and almost passionate complaints against the Providence which crushes him, intermingled with expressions of strong confidence in God which he cannot abandon. This wild tumult in his soul is graphically depicted in its successive stages, until we are brought to the final solution of the whole, and the vindication at once of the providence of God and of his suffering servant.

WH Green, *Conflict and Triumph: The Argument of the Book of Job Unfolded*
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