

Hick

Evil and the God of Love (289-295, 340-345, 369-372)

PHIL101

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Section III: How do I know?

Reading III.4

John Hick (1922-2012) wrote extensively in theology and the philosophy of religion. His theodicy, based on the thought of the early Christian father, St. Irenaeus, has been influential in recent years.

Hick develops a theodicy deriving from St. Irenaeus, an early father of the Christian Church. A key to this theodicy is the proposition that we humans are not, yet, in the state that God intends for us. This state, rather, is to be achieved after a long process of moral development.

Instead of regarding man as having been created by God in a finished state, as a finitely perfect being fulfilling the divine intention for our human level of existence, and then falling disastrously away from this, [this account] sees man as still in process of creation. Irenaeus himself expressed the point in terms of the (exegetically dubious) distinction between the 'image' and the 'likeness' of God referred to in Genesis 1:26: 'Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' His view was that man as a personal and moral being already exists in the image, but has not yet been formed into the finite likeness of God. By this 'likeness' Irenaeus means something more than personal existence as such; he means a certain valuable quality of personal life which reflects finitely the divine life. This represents the perfecting of man, the fulfillment of God's purpose for humanity, the 'bringing of many sons to glory',¹ the creating of 'children of God' who are 'fellow heirs with Christ' of his glory.²

On this view, human life involves two stages. As a creature existing "in God's image," man knows right and wrong and so is capable of moral behavior and development. The mere capacity for morality, however, does not place us in the ultimate stage of "God's likeness," a stage in which we have achieved something like moral perfection.³ Rather, that status is something that can only be achieved by a process of moral development, over time.

Hick's account is intended also to reconcile certain theological views with some of what we otherwise know about the world we live in.

¹ Hebrews 2:10

² Romans 8:17

³ Compare Genesis 3:5: "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

[T]he movement from the image to the likeness is a transition from one level of existence, that of animal life (*Bios*), to another and higher level, that of eternal life (*Zoe*), which includes but transcends the first. ... At the very least we must acknowledge as two distinguishable stages the fashioning of *Homo sapiens* as a product of the long evolutionary process, and his sudden or gradual spiritualization as a child of God. But we may well extend the first stage to include the development of man as a rational and responsible person capable of personal relationship with the personal Infinite who has created him. This first stage of the creative process was, to our anthropomorphic imaginations, easy for divine omnipotence. By an exercise of creative power God caused the physical universe to exist, and in the course of countless ages to bring forth within it organic life, and finally to produce out of organic life personal life; and when man had thus emerged out of the evolution of the forms of organic life, a creature had been made who has the possibility of existing in conscious fellowship with God.

So, on this account, a certain form of life can be created by God. God can create the conditions giving rise to the human natural form, *Bios*. This form of life has the important feature of being capable of a personal relationship with God. Development of that relationship can lead to an ultimate state, *Zoe*, in which the human form is perfected or completed.

It is important to note that God *cannot* make human persons in the *Zoe* state from the outset. As a stage of moral development, Hick thinks, humans can only be placed in a condition in which progress towards *Zoe* is possible; God cannot cause or bring about that progress itself.

But the second stage of the creative process is of a different kind altogether. It cannot be performed by omnipotent power as such. For personal life is essentially free and self-directing. It cannot be perfected by divine fiat,⁴ 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. Men may eventually become the perfected persons whom the New Testament calls 'children of God', but they cannot be created ready-made as this.

This is an important point in Hick's theodicy because we otherwise face the question, why would God bother with the *Bios* to *Zoe* development, with all of its attendant evils, if God could simply create creatures in a *Zoe* state in the first place.⁵

This process of development requires the conditions under which the evils of the world are possible.

Man is in process of becoming the perfected being who God is seeking to create. However, this is not taking place – it is important to add – by a natural and inevitable evolution, but through a hazardous adventure in individual freedom.

The “hazards”, of course, are moral errors. If mankind is to develop morally, it must be possible for him to err, morally. This, then, is Hick's answer to the question why God might allow the existence of moral evil. It is a condition of the development of the important, *Zoe* state. Note, then, the implicit, key importance of this state as against the moral horrors that make it necessary.

The value-judgment that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue. In the former case, which is that of the actual moral achievements of mankind, the individual's goodness has within it the strength of temptations overcome, a stability

⁴ A “fiat” is a command or edict bringing about some state of affairs. God's creation of light in Genesis I:14-15 is an example of divine fiat.

⁵ This point is worth your pausing to consider: What is Hick's thinking, here? Why, exactly, couldn't God immediately create beings in a state of *Zoe*?

based upon an accumulation of right choices, and a positive and responsible character that comes from the investment of costly personal effort. I suggest, then, that it is an ethically reasonable judgment, even though in the nature of the case not one that is capable of demonstrative proof, that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.

Again, if God cannot make the *Zoe* outright, but can only create *Bios* and wait for its development, then the intervening “travails” must be made worth-while by the tremendous value of the *Zoe* state. Our objective, becoming “Children of God” in God’s “likeness”, is worth the cost. Hick offers two guides to our thinking, along these lines. One is the suggestion that the person of Christ represents the model of “perfected finite being” toward which human development is intended to trend. The other is a comparison of metaphors: God is to be thought of not as our keeper, but as our loving parent.

[Critics] are confusing what heaven ought to be, as an environment for perfected finite beings, with what this world ought to be, as an environment for beings who are in process of becoming perfected. For if our general conception of God's purpose is correct the world is not intended to be a paradise, but rather the scene of a history in which human personality may be formed towards the pattern of Christ. Men are not to be thought of on the analogy of animal pets, whose life is to be made as agreeable as possible, but rather on the analogy of human children, who are to grow to adulthood in an environment whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realizing of the most valuable potentialities of human personality.

If Hick thereby answers the question why God’s existence might be compatible with that of moral evils, what is his answer to the question of natural evils? Why should God allow the possibility of pain and suffering in the first place? Why not create an order in which humans can develop morally but without the attendant consequence of pain and suffering?

Part of his answer is to suggest that humans require some form of stable, objective existence if their moral decisions are to carry any significance. In order to choose whether to torture, maim, or kill, the means of torture, maiming, and killing must be available to us. That means, roughly, a world in which we can predict the consequences of our actions, where some of these consequences are “bad” – i.e., pain and suffering. In order for humans to develop morally, we must be able to know that certain actions, such as applying heat to human tissues, will result in certain effects, such as tissue damage and pain.

[T]he kind of goodness which, according to Christian faith, God desires in his creatures, could not in fact be created except through a long process of creaturely experience in response to challenges and disciplines of various kinds. If this be granted it will, I think, be further granted that a human environment designed to this end must be similar to our present world at least to the extent that it operates upon general laws and consequently involves at least occasional pains for the sentient creatures within it.

Part of the answer to the problem of natural evil, then, is that some such evil must be possible, and predictable, if human development toward the state of *Zoe* is to be possible. A further question remains, however, concerning the *amount* and *severity* of evil in the world.

However, even if the general proposition be granted that a place of soul-making must be a world of stable natural law in which sentient creatures sometimes feel pain, the further question will now be asked: in order to further a supposed purpose of soul-making, need the world contain as much pain as it does? Need the pedagogic program include the more extreme forms of torture, whether inflicted by man or by disease? As well as bearable pain, need there be unendurable agony protracted to the point of the dehumanization of the sufferer? Must there be not only salutary challenges but also utterly crushing accumulations of disasters?

Not only are there surmountable evils such as the tedium of study or the pain of a beloved's death, but some evils are positively destructive, leaving not an improved, morally renewed being, but only despair, psychosis, the loss of humanity. How are we to explain this level of evil, in Hick's terms? And note that this is not simply a problem of natural evils, but it attends also the extremity of certain moral evils, such as the atrocity of genocide which may shake our faith in the rationality of our universe.

Hick's response here is an interesting one.

Our 'solution', then, to this baffling problem of excessive and undeserved suffering is a frank appeal to the positive value of mystery. Such suffering remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive. The mystery of dysteleological suffering is a real mystery, impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind. It challenges Christian faith with its utterly baffling, alien, destructive meaninglessness. And yet at the same time, detached theological reflection can note that 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.

Why might God allow unjust suffering? Why might humans suffer out of all proportion to their vices, or live in happiness out of proportion to their virtue? Hick's suggestion is again to return to the premise of soul-making. It is possible, that is, that the apparent disconnect between fate and desert contributes to the environment in which soul-making is possible. If some suffering is undeserved, then certain qualities of fortitude and courage are made possible. If others suffer wrongly, then compassion and sympathy are possible in degrees otherwise impossible. And the extremity of human suffering and its apparent irrationality, the colossal and overwhelming nature of our worst depredations, the very incomprehensibility of a divine justice of such evidently unjust events create an order in which human faith and goodness are possible of a sort that wouldn't otherwise be possible. Not knowing why we should suffer is itself its own form of suffering which makes possible its own particular form of virtue.

Two standard objections to theodicies include questions over the need for moral evil on the one hand and natural evil on the other. Hick's responses to these objections bring to light further dimensions of his view. First is the objection that God might have avoided moral evils by choosing to create morally perfect beings. If moral decision is a necessary part of development towards the *Zoe* state, why not create beings who would take a more direct path toward that goal? Hick's response is that the notion of a morally perfect being is not the notion of a being who actually chooses moral goodness.

A different objector might raise the question of whether or not we deny God's omnipotence if we admit that he is unable to create persons who are free from the risks inherent in personal freedom. The answer that has always been given is that to create such beings is logically impossible. It is no limitation upon God's power that he cannot accomplish the logically impossible, since there is nothing here to accomplish, but only a meaningless conjunction of words – in this case "person who is not a person." God is able to create beings of any and every conceivable kind; but creatures who lack moral freedom, however superior they might be to human beings in other respects, would not be what we mean by persons. They would constitute a different form of life which God might have brought into existence instead of persons. When we ask why God did not create such beings in place of persons, the traditional answer is that only persons could, in any meaningful sense, become "children of God," capable of entering into a personal relationship with their Creator by a free and uncompelled response to his love.

The notion of God's omnipotence raises interesting logical puzzles as does the notion of a perfect person. If a person is a being capable of moral choice, what are we to say of the morally perfect person? Do we have legitimate choice if the "choice" is always for good rather than evil? Hick's view is that such a being is not a genuine moral agent: the idea of a morally perfect person is

self-contradictory, on his view. It is interesting to note, however, that Hick seems to acknowledge the moral perfection of one human being:

Following hints from St. Paul, Irenaeus taught that a man has been made as a person in the image of God but has not yet been brought as a free and responsible agent into the finite likeness of God, which is revealed in Christ.

A second objection raised against Hick's theodicy suggests that the natural evils of the world could be avoided by an all-powerful God. If God is all-powerful, why would he allow a bullet to harm a child – or anyone, for that matter? Why would God allow an avalanche to bury an innocent hiker? Why allow cancer, or mosquito bites? Hick has already suggested that we require the opportunity for "moral challenge". His response to this objection invokes that idea.

Suppose, contrary to fact, that this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded. The consequences would be very far-reaching. For example, no one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer's knife would turn to paper or his bullets to thin air; the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars, would miraculously become filled with another million dollars (without this device, on however large a scale, proving inflationary); fraud, deceit, conspiracy, and treason would somehow always leave the fabric of society undamaged. Again, no one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain-climber, steeplejack, or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster. There would be no need to work since no harm could result from avoiding work; there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there could be no real needs or dangers.

To make possible this continual series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work by "special providences" instead of running according to general laws which men must learn to respect on penalty of pain or death. The laws of nature would have to be extremely flexible: sometimes gravity would operate, sometimes not; sometimes an object would be hard and solid, sometimes soft. There could be no sciences, for there would be no enduring world structure to investigate.

If our world is to be a place of moral decision, there must be some regularity to its operation. If I am to choose whether to kill, I must be able to predict the consequences of my choice. In a world of perpetual divine intervention, however, we would be unable to make genuine such decisions, because no matter what we did, no harm would derive from our acts. Consequently, Hick judges, the world of moral choice must be a world of reliable, predictable natural law and it must be a world in which the suffering of sentient beings is entirely possible and generally predictable. Such a world is a world of natural evils, but such evils are justified, on Hick's view, owing to the role that they play in establishing a vale of soul-making.

Ask Yourself:

1. What does Hick mean by the expression, 'vale of soul-making'?
2. What are the two states, *Bios* and *Zoe*?
3. What is Hick's solution to the problem of moral evils?
4. What is Hick's solution to the problem of natural evils?
5. What does Hick say to the problem of undeserved suffering and the magnitude of human suffering?
6. Do you find Hick's theodicy effective? (explain)

With the above in mind, read the second portion of our Dostoevsky reading.