

john hick evil and the god of love

John Hick, Evil, and the God of Love: Reconciling Incompatibility?

Have you ever wrestled with the problem of evil? How can a loving God allow so much suffering in the world? Philosopher John Hick grappled with this question, offering a compelling, albeit controversial, response that attempts to reconcile the existence of a loving God with the undeniable reality of evil. This post delves deep into Hick's theological framework, exploring his key arguments and examining the strengths and weaknesses of his "soul-making theodicy." We'll unpack his concept of "soul-making," analyze criticisms leveled against his theory, and ultimately consider whether Hick's approach successfully bridges the perceived chasm between divine love and the pervasive presence of evil. Let's embark on this intellectual journey together.

Understanding John Hick's Irenaean Theodicy

John Hick's response to the problem of evil is rooted in what's known as the Irenaean theodicy, named after the second-century theologian Irenaeus. This theodicy posits that the world is not yet complete; it's a work in progress. God, according to this view, created a world with the potential for both good and evil, allowing humans the freedom to develop morally and spiritually. This "soul-making" process, as Hick terms it, requires the possibility of suffering and wrongdoing. Without the option of choosing evil, genuine moral development – the growth of a virtuous soul – would be impossible.

Hick argues that God's purpose isn't to prevent evil altogether, but to cultivate a world where humans can freely choose good, develop their moral character, and ultimately achieve a state of loving relationship with God. He envisions a "vale of soul-making," a testing ground where we confront challenges, overcome adversity, and refine our character through the crucible of experience. This process, though painful at times, is essential for the ultimate flourishing of humanity and its relationship with the divine.

The Role of Free Will in Hick's Theology

Central to Hick's theodicy is the concept of free will. He posits that God, being perfectly loving, would not create beings who are mere automatons incapable of independent choice. True love, according to Hick, demands freedom; it necessitates the possibility of both obedience and disobedience. This freedom, though it allows for the existence of evil, is ultimately necessary for the development of genuine love and moral responsibility. Without the ability to choose wrongly, we couldn't truly choose rightly. The capacity for evil is, paradoxically, a precondition for the possibility of authentic good.

This doesn't mean God is indifferent to suffering. Hick maintains that God empathizes with our pain and works through history to mitigate its effects. However, he believes that preventing all suffering would undermine the very purpose of human existence: to become

fully human through moral and spiritual growth within a world that allows for both good and evil choices.

Criticisms of Hick's Soul-Making Theodicy

While Hick's theodicy is influential, it's not without its critics. Some argue that his focus on soul-making downplays the sheer magnitude and gratuitous nature of much suffering in the world. Is the horrific suffering experienced by innocent victims truly necessary for the moral development of others? Many find this proposition unconvincing and morally repugnant.

Another criticism centers on the perceived inconsistency between God's omnipotence and the existence of evil. If God is all-powerful, shouldn't he be able to create a world where moral development is possible without the immense suffering we witness? Hick's response often centers on the limitations imposed by the very nature of free will, but this doesn't satisfy all critics. The question of whether God could have created a world with free will but without the possibility of such extensive suffering remains a point of contention.

Evaluating the Strength and Limitations of Hick's Argument

Hick's work offers a powerful framework for understanding the relationship between God, evil, and human development. His emphasis on free will and the process of soul-making provides a compelling response to the problem of evil for many. He provides a way to think about suffering not simply as random or meaningless, but as part of a larger, divinely ordained plan for the ultimate good.

However, the limitations are equally significant. The sheer scale of gratuitous suffering remains a persistent challenge, and the question of whether such suffering is genuinely necessary for the process of soul-making continues to fuel debate. The argument also struggles to account for natural evils, like earthquakes and diseases, which seemingly lack any direct connection to human free will.

Beyond Hick: Ongoing Theological Debates

John Hick's work has undeniably shaped contemporary theological discussions surrounding the problem of evil. While his soul-making theodicy offers a robust response, it remains a subject of ongoing debate and refinement. The conversation continues to evolve, encompassing various perspectives and attempts to reconcile the apparent incompatibility between a loving God and the reality of suffering. Future theological reflection will undoubtedly build upon Hick's contribution, seeking further clarification and nuanced understanding of this enduring theological challenge.

Conclusion

John Hick's theodicy, while not without its flaws, provides a valuable contribution to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the problem of evil. His emphasis on free will and soul-

making offers a framework for understanding suffering not as a random occurrence but as a necessary component of a larger divine plan for human moral and spiritual development. While the criticisms leveled against his work are significant, they ultimately serve to refine and enrich the ongoing conversation about the relationship between God, evil, and human existence. The question of how a loving God can permit suffering remains a profound and enduring mystery, and Hick's work offers one important – albeit controversial – attempt at providing an answer.

FAQs:

1. What is the main difference between Hick's theodicy and other theodicies? Hick's Irenaean theodicy emphasizes the importance of free will and soul-making as necessary for genuine moral development, unlike some other theodicies that focus more on God's ultimate plan or the greater good.
1. How does Hick address the problem of natural evil? Hick's response to natural evil is less developed than his response to moral evil. He suggests that natural evils are ultimately part of the same process of soul-making, providing challenges and opportunities for growth. However, this remains a weaker point in his argument.
1. What are the most common criticisms of Hick's soul-making theodicy? Common criticisms include: the disproportionate amount of suffering compared to the perceived benefits of soul-making; the difficulty in reconciling God's omnipotence with the existence of such suffering; and the lack of sufficient explanation for natural evils.
1. Does Hick believe God causes evil? No, Hick explicitly rejects the idea that God directly causes evil. He argues that God permits evil as a necessary condition for the possibility of free will and the subsequent development of human souls.
1. How does Hick's theodicy impact our understanding of God's nature? Hick's theodicy emphasizes a God who is both loving and powerful, but who respects human freedom. This understanding of God's nature requires accepting the reality of suffering as a necessary component of a greater plan for human flourishing.

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