Hick's Soul-Making Theodicy

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An important argument for atheism is the evidential argument from evil. From the premises that (1) the world probably contains evils that are not necessary to achieve a greater good and (2) God would not allow such evils to exist, the argument concludes that God probably does not exist. One means by which a theist can attempt to defend against this argument is a theodicy, which attempts to show that the first premise is false by showing that there is some greater good which the evil in the world might serve. Rowe discusses one such theodicy – John Hick's proposal that the world's evil is necessary for us to develop ourselves morally and spiritually. Although I believe Rowe's analysis of the idea has some weaknesses, I agree with him that it is ultimately unsuccessful.

Hick's theodicy seems to be based on the idea that our development as persons is based on the free choices we make. The theodicy's key observation is that if this is so, then we can only have the opportunity to develop morally and spiritually if we are presented with morally relevant choices. According to Hick's proposal, the evil in the world is necessary to present people with these choices, and the moral and spiritual development of humans is a sufficiently worthwhile good to justify the allowance of that evil.

In considering whether the purpose of evil could be to enable the moral development of humans, it first should be noted that both the quantity and the seriousness of choices that people are presented with are significant. The quantity is important for two reasons: first, the more morally relevant choices people are presented with, the more serious thought they are forced to give to moral character, since it applies to a large part of life rather than a few isolated incidents; second, having a large quantity of choices gives people an opportunity to reflect upon those choices and choose whether to solidify themselves in their character or to choose to “repent” and

behave differently. The seriousness of the choices – the amount of suffering which hangs in the balance – is also important: a person guilty of stealing an ice cream cone is not likely to be affected by their crime nearly as significantly as a person guilty of committing genocide.

There are two basic ways in which evil is necessary for there to be morally relevant choices. First, a morally relevant choice can result in otherwise pointless evil if the person making the choice chooses to do wrong. In these cases, it would seem that God must generally allow the evil to exist if He does not wish to impede the person's development, since the person can hardly be expected to take choices seriously if he or she knows that God will intervene to prevent harm from being caused. Second, some morally relevant choices cannot exist unless certain evils exist already. For example, consider the choice to sacrifice one's own welfare for that of others: this is considered a noble thing to do, but it cannot be done unless there is already a real threat to the welfare of others. Before considering objections to the idea that all evil in the world could be necessary for one of these two reasons, an argument by Hick needs to be discussed which shows that many more evils than one would expect might fall under the second category.

Hick suggests that the world needs to appear unjust. He points out two consequences that would occur if we perceived that suffering always occurred justly: essentially, that we would do right not because it is right but because doing wrong would lead to punishment, and that we would cease to attempt to alleviate the suffering of others because we would know that the suffering was for their own good. Both of these effects would inhibit our moral and spiritual development: the former would prevent us from ever really choosing between good and evil, instead having us choose between safety and pain; the latter would prevent any opportunity for

self-sacrifice.[i] Thus, in order to achieve the good of our development, the world may need to contain some evil which exists solely to assure us that our choices really do have moral significance. It should be noted that Hick is suggesting not just that the world's suffering would need to seem to occur undeserved, but that it would need to appear completely pointless. Rowe explains that "it is important, as Hick stresses, that it not be apparent to us that all the instances of suffering that occur are required for and result in the good of moral and spiritual growth. For then we would cease to strive to eliminate these evils and thereby diminish the very human struggles that so often bring about moral and spiritual development."[ii]

Rowe objects to Hick's theodicy by means of two hypothetical (but very plausible) situations: "a person tortur[ing] and kill[ing] and innocent child"[iii] and "a fawn's being horribly burned in a fire caused by lightning, and suffering terribly for five days before death ends its life."[iv] These two situations will make good starting points for discussing potential problems with Hick's proposal.

Rowe seems to think that, if the theodicy is successful, the child's suffering will need to be explained in terms of the criminal's moral and spiritual development, and he concludes both that the child's suffering is not necessary for the criminal's development and that God would still not be justified in allowing the act even if it were. I think Rowe overlooks the fact that anyone who learns of the crime will also be affected; I will first attempt to answer Rowe's objections without appeal to this fact, but ultimately Hick's theodicy will be more plausible when it is acknowledged.

If a person has the inclination to torture and kill a child, it seems quite plausible that he or she will develop quite differently depending on whether opportunity is given to indulge that

inclination. For example, if the opportunity is denied, the person will not be forced to evaluate his or her own nature in the same way as if the opportunity were granted. Although Rowe may be correct that the person's development would not "have been permanently frustrated"[v] if God stopped that particular evil, it seems that some similar evil would have to be permitted at some point if the person were to develop in the same way. Thus, if the person's moral and spiritual development is valuable enough, God could well be justified in permitting this atrocity.

Although it at first seems absurd to think that the development of some person is worth the suffering and the life of a child, I think it seems more reasonable if some idea of eternal life (common among theists) is factored in. The child's suffering, although horrible, is only temporary – it will be followed by a happy eternity. The criminal's moral and spiritual development will also last for eternity. It seems that an infinite good – the criminal's being more morally and spiritually developed for an infinite period of time – would be worth even the most terrible of finite evils. I see three possible problems with this response. First, most theistic belief systems do not hold that everyone is destined for a blissful afterlife; on the contrary, it is commonly held that many people will experience an eternity of suffering after they die. If it is difficult to imagine that the child faces this fate, then imagine an adult who does not meet whatever requirements one's religion sets out for salvation. How could the murder of this adult, when it will lead to an infinite amount of suffering for that person, possibly be justified by being necessary for someone's moral and spiritual development? I do not think this problem is serious, however: many (perhaps most) varieties of theism already claim that a person cannot be damned on the basis of the actions of others, but rather their eternal destiny will be decided either by God or by their own choice. The second problem is a little more serious, but still surmountable: since

according to Hick's proposal moral and spiritual development cannot occur except in an environment which includes evil, and a blissful afterlife would be free of evil, being murdered at a young age (before much moral and spiritual development can occur) means that the child will have to go through eternity morally and spiritually immature. The solution to this is to recognize that the child is not in a bad state for eternity – the child is still happy – but is merely in a state that is not as good as the one he or she could have otherwise been in. If the criminal's eternal state is sufficiently superior to the eternal state he or she would have been in had the crime been prevented, the permission of the evil is still justified. Here, however, is the serious problem: it is difficult to imagine that all cases of moral evil lead to a better eternal state of the perpetrator. It seems that frequently those who commit horrible crimes continue to do so – possibly even worsening – until their death. The evils they commit seem to have served only to ensure that they enter eternity hardened in their wickedness. So, how could the creation of a determinedly evil person be worth handicapping the child for eternity? It is not likely that it could be. Possibly, upon entering eternal life the person will see his or her past evils in a new light and will develop positively based on his or her memories, but this is incompatible with most theistic belief systems. The most plausible way to explain these cases through Hick's system is to say that the true purpose of the evil lies in its effects on others rather than its effects on the perpetrator.

One way in which the crime against the child might affect others is simply by bolstering their belief in the world's unjustness; the problems of this explanation are discussed below, where it is offered as justification for the fawn's suffering. The other explanation is that the crime could present others with morally relevant choices they would not otherwise have, such as choices to help bring the perpetrator to justice or to give of their time and money to help prevent similar

crimes. The biggest objection I can see to this explanation is that it seems likely that there are cases of extreme moral evil of which no one ever learns. However, if Hick's hypothesis that the world must appear unjust is correct, then this fact is understandable: the world's evil would surely seem less random if it were clear that these sorts of evils never happened without being brought to light.

Based on the above arguments, I think that moral evil can be plausibly explained by Hick's theodicy. The fawn's situation will cause greater difficulty. The animal's suffering and death does not seem to result from human choices, nor does it seem to directly present humans with morally relevant choices. The most likely place for it to fit into Hick's theodicy, then, is as evil necessary to bring about the appearance of unjustness in the world. As Rowe points out, however, it seems that we would still be just as convinced that the world is unjust even if the fawn were to suffer a little less, and the excess suffering constitutes a pointless evil, meaning the theodicy fails.

One response might be to question the assumption that the fawn's suffering is not the result of human choices. For instance, one traditional Christian viewpoint is that all suffering is a result of Adam's choice to eat the forbidden fruit, and we all share in the guilt of this action (since we all likewise do evil). The fawn's suffering could exist as a necessary part of showing humans the consequences of their evil. But this explanation of the fawn's suffering appears implausible for essentially the same reason it appears implausible to say that the fawn's suffering exists to convince us that the world is unjust: it seems that we would be no less affected by the fawn's suffering if the suffering itself were a little less.

A more direct way to attempt to overcome this objection would be to appeal to the

complexity of, and our limited understanding of, the world and specifically the human mind. I do not know of any means by which we could determine with certainty what conclusions we would reach about the world were we faced with slightly different data (i.e., a fawn that suffered for ten seconds less). It is at least possible that our view of the world would be significantly affected if even the tiniest bit of suffering were removed; therefore, Hick's theodicy cannot be declared with certainty to fail on the grounds of natural evil. However, it seems more probable that the world really could contain less evil without causing a different response in us - I, at least, doubt that I would form a different opinion of the justness of the world based on such a slight reduction in evil as the marginal shortening of the fawn's suffering, and I see no reason to think that anyone else is different in this regard. Thus, this response does not prevent the objection from severely weakening the theodicy.

If the worth of moral and spiritual development is granted (I have not discussed in this paper whether it should be), Hick's theodicy provides an explanation of the world's evil that is beyond our ability to prove false. Nevertheless, for many instances of evil, primarily certain evils which humanity cannot prevent, this explanation seems highly unlikely to apply. Thus, I do not think that the theodicy manages to defeat the evidential argument from evil.

i Based on quotes of Hick in William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion,* 4th ed. (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), p. 126.
ii Rowe, p. 126.
iii Ibid., p. 125.
iv Ibid., p. 120.
v Ibid., p. 127.