

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A NEW STUDY

John Hick, lecturer in the philosophy of religion at Cambridge University, has written one of the most serious and important studies of the problem of evil to appear in English for a long time.<sup>1</sup> It is a work both of historical interpretation and of systematic construction. While it is, under both aspects, not wholly invulnerable (what effort at reconciling evil and God ever is?), it is argued with such unusual persuasiveness and verve that it will force any serious reader to examine more critically his own theodicy touching the problem of evil.

Prof. Hick suggests that the efforts of Christian thinkers to deal with the problem of evil and its origin can be categorized generically as Augustinian or Irenaean. He examines the former view in three main streams of tradition: (1) the Catholic one, as exemplified in Augustine himself, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, and in a modern Thomist, Charles Journet; (2) the Calvinist tradition (Calvin and Karl Barth); (3) eighteenth-century optimism (Archbishop William King and Leibniz).

Characteristic of this first effort to reconcile the existence of evil with an infinitely good God are the following points: the goodness of creation as the work of God; the privative character of evil; the origin of sin and other evils in the free choice of angels and men constituted in an initial condition of innocence and perfection; the permission of evil by God with a view to effecting greater good; the principle of plenitude and the aesthetic conception of the perfection of the universe; a final dichotomy between the saved and the damned.

Hick sees several valid insights in this Augustinian view and incorporates them into his own synthesis. This is essentially a development of the Irenaean insight, whose most prominent modern representative is Schleiermacher. Its primary features, as they finally appear in Hick's own solution, may be set forth, somewhat baldly, as follows: (1) There was no original state of innocence and perfection; rather man was created as fallen, that is, in a situation of relative autonomy and "epistemic distance" from his Creator such that sin was virtually inevitable. (2) God is ultimately responsible for sin in the sense that "His decision to create the universe was the primary and necessary precondition for the occurrence of evil, all other conditions being contingent upon this, and He took His decision in awareness of all that would flow from it" (p. 326). (3) Evil finds its explanation not in a mythical pri-

<sup>1</sup> *EVIL AND THE GOD OF LOVE*. By John Hick. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. Pp. xii + 404. \$6.95. Numbers in parentheses in the text are page references to the work under discussion.

meval fall but teleologically, in the part that it is made to play in the divine purpose. The universe was made by God as an instrument of "soul-making"; it is the place where man, in the hard school of suffering, comes to full stature. "The good that outshines all ill is not a paradise long since lost but a kingdom which is yet to come in its full glory and permanence" (p. 297). Here lies the Irenaean contribution (pp. 220-21):

Man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented, as in the Augustinian tradition, as an utterly malignant and catastrophic event, completely disrupting God's plan, Irenaeus pictures it as something that occurred in the childhood of the race, an understandable lapse due to weakness and immaturity rather than an adult crime full of malice and pregnant with perpetual guilt. And instead of the Augustinian view of life's trials as a divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God's good purpose for him.

(4) The existence of an eternal hell being incompatible with the infinite goodness of God, and in contradiction to the divine plan to draw good out of all evil, God will ultimately bring it about that, in this life and by progressive sanctification after death, all men will eventually enjoy His presence.

This brief summary is far too inadequate to suggest the riches of content and expression found in Hick's work. There is, for example, an excellent chapter on pain which makes use of recent biological views of pleasure and pain, in addition to Hick's own more philosophical reflections. A wide range of authors, including Teilhard de Chardin, come in for appraisal. The work as a whole is strongly articulated, the analyses are thorough and penetrating, and there is a clarity of style and expression which rarely fails to tell the reader just where the author is.

In a work as stimulating as this, and touching on the most sensitive of human and religious questions, it is inevitable that many statements will evoke critical reflections in the reader. Leaving aside the many points of full or partial agreement, it may be helpful to raise here some questions about several particular passages or arguments where either historical interpretation or reflective analysis seems to suffer from lack of clarity, completeness, or cogency.

First, there is Hick's critique of Augustine's (and, more broadly, traditional) explanation of the origin of evil as the result of the sin of angelic and human creatures initially constituted in a state of innocence and perfection. Hick considers this view radically incoherent (pp. 68-69):

This great traditional picture, together with the theodicy implicit within it, has persisted through the centuries—not, however, because it is an inherently satisfying response to the mystery of evil but because the Christian mind was for so long content to refrain from examining it critically. But whenever it has been freely probed by Christian thinkers in its relation to the problem of evil—as it was, for example, by Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century—its radical incoherence has become all too evident. The basic and inevitable criticism is that the idea of an unqualifiedly good creature committing sin is self-contradictory and unintelligible. If the angels are finitely perfect, then even though they are in some important sense free to sin they will never in fact do so. If they do sin we can only infer that they were not flawless—in which case their Maker must share the responsibility for their fall, and the intended theodicy fails.

It may be granted that the possibility of sin in the angels and in man constituted in a state of innocence and free from the concupiscence, ignorance, and mortality resulting from sin has in it an element of mystery and escapes direct verification from our own human experience. It may well be also, as contemporary Catholic theologians are now suggesting, that the preternatural endowments of the original state of man may, without detriment to conciliar teaching and sound theology, be conceived to have been present only virtually, as adornments of a state to which man, had he not sinned, would eventually have arrived. But unless “finitely perfect,” “flawless,” and “unqualifiedly good” are given the sense of “impeccable,” which, of course, they have never had in Christian tradition, Hick’s strong assertion is merely that, and not proof. He might at least have alluded to some of the interesting attempts in the Scholastic tradition to explain the sin of the angels and Adam’s sin, especially the view which would seek an explanation in the elevation of angels and men to a supernatural economy. The Scholastic discussion on the natural impeccability of the angelic nature is well known. Less attention than it deserves, however, has been paid to St. Thomas’ understanding of Satan’s and Adam’s sin as precisely the preference of an autonomous, natural human existence to an economy of grace, and to his conception of the contemplative faith of Paradise as a mid-state between the immediate vision of God had by the blessed in heaven and our troubled Christian faith, which is a quest for the absent God (*Deus absens*).<sup>2</sup> A consideration especially of this latter distinction might have saved the author from a too-ready either-or approach to the primitive state: *either* Adam was morally flawed by his situation of epistemic distance from God and hence his sin was virtually inevitable, *or* he was created morally flawless, in which case his sin becomes unintelligible, self-creation of evil.

<sup>2</sup> See *Sum. theol.* 2-2, 163, 2; 1, 63, 3; 2-2, 5, 1.

It is in discussing the sin of the angels that Hick interprets Augustine's position on their original state in an incomplete and perhaps misleading fashion. On the basis of passages in Books 11 and 12 of the *City of God*, he attributes to Augustine the views that the good and bad angels were not originally constituted in the same condition, that the blessedness of the loyal angels was always complete, that there was a divine preordination of Satan's fall, and that "God withheld His assisting grace from some, and thus selected them for a different destiny from those whom He enabled to remain steadfast" (pp. 69-70).<sup>3</sup>

This would appear to be at least an oversimplification of Augustine's position, and while it is not essential to Hick's main argument, it is a point of some importance, systematic as well as historical, and he returns to it with insistence later (p. 286). It should be said, first of all, that Augustine leaves open more than one possibility on the comparative status of the good and bad angels in their creation. "Either they were unequal or, if they were equal, after the fall of some, the others received a certain knowledge of their eternal happiness."<sup>4</sup> In the latter hypothesis, the initial condition for both would have been that of imperfect happiness, and neither would have had a certain knowledge of their future. Satan's fall may be said to be, for Augustine, preordained, only in the sense of being permitted in view of a divine end.<sup>5</sup> And he does not speak of God withholding His assisting grace from the angels who fell, but of bestowing it more abundantly on those who did not. Finally, it might be mentioned that Augustine, who frequently returned to the problem of angelic beatitude, and hesitated on what view to embrace, came later to choose more firmly the view that in the beginning all the angels were happy, though not perfectly so.<sup>6</sup>

The very crucial double question of the inevitability of sin in man as God's creature and of the responsibility of God for sin finds the author very honestly coming to grips with the dilemma facing anyone who rejects the traditional aetiology of man's universal sinfulness. He must, on the one hand, maintain the goodness of God and of His creation, as well as human responsibility in the act of sin. Yet, short of some such explanation as the Adamic sin in a paradisiacal state, it is difficult to account for the massive, universal presence of suffering and sin in the good creation of the good God.

<sup>3</sup> See St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 11, 11; 11, 13; 11, 20; 12, 9 (PL 41, 477-78, 479-80, 488, 524-25).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 11, 13 (PL 41, 480).

<sup>5</sup> "Tenebrae autem angelicae, etsi fuerant ordinandae, non tamen fuerant adprobandae" (*ibid.* 11, 20 [PL 41, 488]). Hick's translation is inexact: "The angelic darkness *though it had been ordained*, was yet not approved" (p. 70; italics are H.'s).

<sup>6</sup> See *De correptione et gratia* 10, 27 (PL 44, 932-33); *De civitate Dei* 22, 1 (PL 41, 553-54).

Hick is, rightly I think, critical of the view which would hold for the inevitability of sin in a multiplicity of contingent and fragile creatures (p. 102).

His own version of the inevitability of sin is quite different, and intriguing. Man, evolving from lower forms of life, is initially absorbed in mastering a hostile environment. He lives in relation to the world rather than to God. "Man's spiritual location at an epistemic distance from God makes it virtually inevitable that he will organize his life apart from God and in self-centered competitiveness with his fellows. How can he be expected to center his life upon a Creator who is as yet unknown to him?" (p. 322) Man thus stands in a relative autonomy and freedom over against his Creator. It is in the very turning to himself as life-center, however, that the presence of the previously unseen God begins to be felt as a moral pressure. So for Hick, it would seem, man's attaining to self-consciousness at an epistemic distance from God makes possible both his (virtually inevitable) sin and his free acceptance of God's gracious invitation to turn to Him from sin.

The absolute goodness of the Creator is such that there can be no neutrality in relation to Him. Those who are not for Him are against Him; and the paradox of creaturely freedom is that only those who are initially against Him can of their own free volition choose to be for Him. Man can be truly *for* God only if he is morally independent of Him, and he can be thus independent of Him only by being first *against* Him! And because sin consists in self-centered alienation from God, only God can save us from it, thereby making us free for Himself. Thus man must come to heaven by the path of redemption from sin. (p. 323)

In this virtual identification of man's fall with his creaturely status, Hick acknowledges that he is in a stream of Protestant tradition which includes Temple, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Tillich. His view has the advantage of meeting the difficulties drawn from science against paradisiacal man. But it also has some difficulties against it. Hick could probably clarify and expand his view so as to escape the objection that he has man sinning prior to his knowledge of the God against whom he is sinning. Some clarification may also be needed on the point of whether the necessity of sinning is merely virtual only in the sense that sin does not follow in abstract logical necessity from creaturehood or at least from human creaturehood in an evolutionary economy, or also in the sense that some outside possibility of man's not sinning remains. Most of Hick's statements on the matter exclude the latter alternative, which would, in fact, make his theory much weaker. He would also undoubtedly be able to say much regarding the objection that his theory makes God responsible for sin, not only in the sense that He has knowingly posited the necessary *conditio sine qua non* of sin, but in the sense that He

has, prior to any moral deficiency on the part of man, by the very fact of situating him in an evolutionary world at an epistemic distance from his Creator, made his sin (for which, presumably, He will punish him, though not eternally) inevitable.

But there are more serious objections against this crucial point of Hick's system. One is that it depends on a conception of human freedom and autonomy over against God as an *independence* in the strict sense of *non-dependence* on God of the act of freedom in its very exercise. Only such a conception could permit the remarkable statement, "Man can be truly *for* God only if he is morally independent of Him, and he can be thus independent only by being first *against* Him" (p. 323; italics H.'s). If we leave aside for the moment the gratuitous character of the second part of this sentence, the first part expresses a basic conception of human freedom which hardly squares, it would seem, with a sound philosophical understanding of human creaturehood. Hick is not alone in this conception, and some would maintain that the fatal flaw of the Molinist tradition is its concern for some last fine point of human freedom where it is freedom-from-God in the sense of freedom *away from* God, instead of, as in the Thomistic tradition, freedom-from-God in the sense of freedom which is totally participation in and derivative from divine freedom. It would be unfair to ask Hick, in his rather comprehensive coverage of the history of the problem of evil, which, under one aspect, necessarily involves the matter of *de auxiliis*, to have entered into the vagaries of this intramural Catholic quarrel. But one regrets that the eminent Thomist A. D. Sertillanges, O.P., whose work on the problem of evil enters frequently into Hick's discussion, was not drawn on also for his metaphysics of creation and human freedom, where, in common with more recent Thomists like Lonergan and de Finance, the freedom-as-non-dependence view emerges as an anthropomorphic refusal of the austere but metaphysically satisfying negative theology and theodicy.

Another serious objection to Hick's view of the virtual inevitability of sin is its inconsistency with the impeccability of Christ, which he fully accepts. Curiously enough, though he portrays the sinless Christ in terms of glowing beauty (pp. 298-99), it apparently never occurs to him to ask why this particular man should be a unique exception to the law that "man can be truly *for* God only if he is morally independent of Him, and he can be thus independent only by being first *against* Him." If sin is not virtually inevitable in this one man, is there any reason why it must be virtually inevitable in any other single man, or in the race as a whole? Perhaps there is. But this obvious difficulty needs some response.

There is, further, the matter of the author's universalism, exposed at

length in the final chapter, "The Kingdom of God and the Will of God." He fully appreciates, as a believing Christian, that

The expectation of a life after death thus constitutes an important crux between naturalism (whether secular or religious) and historic Christianity. In an age dominated by naturalistic presuppositions it stands out as a stubborn pocket of belief in the supernatural, decisively distinguishing a faith directed to an eternal and transcendent God from one that terminates in man himself as an intelligent animal, uniquely valuable in his own eyes but nevertheless destined to perish with the beasts and plants. (p. 374)

Hick also sees, quite rightly, that "if there is any eventual resolution of the interplay between good and evil, any decisive bringing of good out of evil, it must lie beyond this world and beyond the enigma of death" (p. 375). But he goes further and says:

No other acceptable possibility of Christian theodicy offers itself than that in the human creature's joyous participation in the completed creation his sufferings, struggles, and failures will be seen to be justified by their outcome. We must thus affirm in faith that there will in the final account be no personal life that is unperfected and no suffering that has not eventually become a phase in the fulfillment of God's good purpose. Only so, I suggest, is it possible to believe both in the perfect goodness of God and in His unlimited capacity to perform His will. For if there are finally wasted lives and finally unredeemed sufferings, either God is not perfect in love or He is not sovereign in rule over His creation. (p. 376)

Hick goes on to question the validity of belief in hell in the traditional sense of eternal suffering inflicted by God upon those of His creatures who have sinfully rejected Him. God *can*, he feels, eventually do for the free creatures whom He has created what He *wants* to do for them. While in abstract logic it is possible, Hick thinks, for some men in their freedom to reject God eternally, theodicy compels the conclusion that it is morally impossible "that the infinite resourcefulness of infinite love working in unlimited time should be eternally frustrated, and the creature reject its own good, presented to it in an endless range of ways" (p. 380). There are sufferings beyond the grave, but they are redemptive in purpose and temporal in duration. God gradually breaks through man's self-centeredness—an idea not far, Hick thinks, from the Roman Catholic notion of purgatory. He concludes that "to assert that the sufferings caused by earthly wrongdoing are eternal is . . . to go beyond anything warranted by either revelation or reason, and to fall into a serious perversion of the Christian Gospel" (p. 385).

Much could be said regarding this conception in both its negative (the rejection of eternal hell) and positive (the continuation of soul-making after

death) aspects. With regard to the former aspect, Hick is quite right in criticizing that presentation of the meaningfulness of eternal punishment which envisions the blessed rejoicing in the manifestation of divine vindictive justice in the sufferings of the damned. And however banal it may sound, it must be said that the mystery of hell as a state of never-ending and anguished alienation of God's image from God baffles even the firm believer, and may be termed a mystery in the full sense that human reason, even enlightened by faith, is unable positively to demonstrate its possibility. Yet I do not think that Hick demonstrates its impossibility. His twofold argument, in brief, is that (1) "a combination of sin and suffering that is endless is, by definition, an evil that is never turned to good, but remains for ever a blot upon God's creation" (p. 95); and (2) if one accepts the hypothesis that God can effectively save whom He will, then His not saving even one person is hardly compatible with a perfectly good and loving God (p. 119). A God at once infinitely good and infinitely powerful cannot tolerate an eternal hell for even one of His creatures.

These classic difficulties are powerful, to be sure, and it is impossible to deal with them adequately in a brief space. Yet, with regard to the first, it may be said that the eternal presence of an eternal blot (hell) on God's creation is no more intrinsically repugnant than the presence of a temporary blot (sin in this life), provided the blot eternally serves the divine purpose. The terrible evil of eternal impenitence is not God's doing, though there is a genuine sense in which He permits it. Given its permitted existence, He does order it to serve His good purpose; for it remains a manifestation, however different in kind from that had in the blessed, that He is a God of love, justice, and mercy, and that He takes man seriously, as His image capable of radical self-destruction, and not as a mere puppet. The second reason offered for the impossibility of hell is an old one, and can receive no new answer here, except to say that the mere statement of the dilemma, "If hell exists, then God is either not infinitely good or not infinitely powerful," is not equivalent to demonstration, and that demonstration would have to reckon with such traditional arguments as that based on the nonparallelism of good and evil.

Regarding the possibility of continued "soul-making" after death, Hick is aware of the usual contrary arguments. Once again, a certain anthropomorphism (and hence some suggestion of the mythological conception of man's relationship to God which he elsewhere repudiates) creeps into his treatment. God, who presumably was not able in this life and throughout the life of at least some men to keep them from sin or convert their hearts to Himself, will in the life after death eventually succeed. "However long an individual

may reject his Maker, salvation will remain an open possibility to which God is ever trying to draw him" (p. 379). God will keep trying and, though it remains theoretically possible that He will fail, it is practically certain that He will succeed.

But is this image of an ingenious, undiscouraged, striving God having for an indeterminate time after man's death to entice him to the virtuous response which he should have made during his time of pilgrimage on earth, faithful to the Christian conception of divine omnipotence? If God knows infinitely well the secrets of the human heart, why was it not possible within the limits of the present life for Him so to bait the hook that His quarry would seize it? No cogent reason is advanced by Hick why God will be any more successful after death than He has been before. The theories of final option and self-reprobation do not enter into his discussion.

It is in the intrusion of anthropomorphism into the discussion of hell and into the previous discussion of human freedom that one senses a really substantial point of difference between Hick and the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition in theodicy. Several times he alludes to the impasse encountered by a theodicy which works with impersonal categories. "We see exemplified in Calvinism," he writes, "no less than in Augustinianism, that failure to think of God and of His attitudes to mankind in fully personal and agapeistic terms, which is the basic defect of [Augustinian] theodicies" (p. 132). "A Christian theodicy must be centered upon moral personality rather than upon nature as a whole, and its governing principle must be ethical rather than aesthetic" (p. 204). One can agree fully with these statements, and yet find the particular version of personalistic theodicy employed by an author unsatisfactory because the analysis of person and of personal relationships lacks the very dimensions of universality, necessity, and objectivity which were the strength of as well as the weakness of classic Scholasticism. If God is just a very good person univocal with the good persons we encounter in our lives, then it may be valid to argue that since no good person would let a man drown when he could save him, the very good person who is the all-powerful God could not, for example, permit anyone to suffer eternally in hell. And if God's influence on man's free decisions differs only in degree and not in kind from the influence of one human person on another's free decisions, then it is legitimate and even necessary to conclude that He has no way, at least in this life, of assuring man's free positive response to His grace without detriment to man's freedom. But if God escapes such categorization, then such conclusions hardly impose themselves. The need, it seems to me, is for a metaphysics or theodicy cast, as the author desires, in personal categories, but also capable of going beyond univocity and anthropomor-

phism, and of reckoning with divine mystery. Until we have such a tool, we may have to live with the equally unsatisfying alternatives of a cold, impersonal intellectualism or an emotionally pleasing but intellectually rootless view of God's love for man.

A number of other smaller points might also call for discussion. The very project of describing two typologies lends itself to some oversimplification, and one wonders at times if the aetiological and teleological explanations of evil are really so mutually exclusive as they would appear. Historically, this would lead to greater attention to the presence in Augustine's theology of history of the ages-of-maturing-mankind motif, and in Irenaeus of some at least of the elements of the paradisiacal "myth." While Hick differentiates Augustine and Calvin, particularly in that the latter's conception of reprobation is a positive one, sometimes the description of Augustine's views seems to move him closer to Calvin than he actually was. Perhaps Augustine's driving eudaimonism is not given full justice when it is said (p. 59) that his basic standpoint (in considering the goodness of creatures) is aesthetic rather than ethical. Though one may not be asked, each time he writes a book, to state formally what are his norms for judging a particular doctrine Christian or not, the lack of clarity on this point has the effect of making Hick's use of Scripture and tradition appear at times to be eclectic. There are a few exaggerations, such as the statement (p. 131) that theologians holding hell have almost invariably assumed that they themselves are among the saved. Of the scores I have met, not one seemed to think he "had it made." I would think that, on the contrary, the theologian who is perfectly assured that no one is eternally lost works out his salvation with considerably less fear and trembling than the one who believes in hell.

This lengthy series of questions raised about *Evil and the God of Love* does not, of course, weaken in any way what was said at the beginning. This is a book of high competence and great importance, and should be read by any Christian philosopher or theologian who feels the need of testing his own assumptions and arguments on the subject of God and evil.

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