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Problem of Evil: Hick's Sublimation of Plantinga

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Introduction

The problem of evil has always baffled the thinkers of every age, and it continues to be one of the most puzzling ones. Once David Hume raised the old Epicurean question: "Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty".[1] "Why thus eternal punishment for the temporary offences of so frail a creature as man? Can any one approve of Alexander's rage, who intended to exterminate a whole nation, because they had seized his favourite horse, Bucephalus"? [2] God is absolute good. Hence it is impossible for him to be the author of evil. He cannot will evil, and no shadow of evil falls on him. 'How can anything be or happen which is opposed to God and his goodness'?[3] or 'how can a just,

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1 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p. 66.

2. Ibid,p.94.

3. Klaus Hemmerle, 'Evil', *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner and co, vol.2 (Bangalore: TPI,1978), p.279.

omnipotent and an infinitely good God create evil or permit evil'? [4]

Some thinkers have abandoned the omnipotence of God in favour his goodness (J.S.Mill, William James, J.M.E.Mctaggart and E.S.Brightman); others take as mere appearance (F.H.Bradley, B. Bosanquet, Absolutists and Advaitins in India); for some others evil is partially good in so far as it is instrumental to some higher good (G.W.Leibiniz, R.A.Tsanoff); some others hold that natural and moral evils are inevitable in a morally directed world (F.R.Tennant and Mark Pontifex)[5] In this paper we make an attempt to understand the problem of evil in the perspectives of Alvin Plantinga and John Hick. John Hick's views appear to be complementing that of Plantinga.

1. Alvin Plantinga and John Hick

1.1. Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense Theory

The Free Will Defense includes the idea of being free with respect to an action. If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform an action or not to perform it. There is no antecedent condition or causal law that determines that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within one's power to perform the action or to refrain from it. Such a freedom is not to be confused with unpredictability. One might be able to predict what one will do in a given situation, even if one is free to do something else in that situation.[6]

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4. Y.Masih, *Introduction to Religious Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers,1991),p.287.
5. Ibid, 287-288.
6. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1974), pp. 29-30.

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (freely perform more good than evil action) is more valuable than a world containing no free creatures at all. It is true that God can create free beings, but he can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if God causes the creatures to do only what is right, then the creatures cannot be significantly free after all. They will not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, he must create creatures capable of moral evil. He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. The source of moral evil is the fall of the free creatures who went wrong in the exercise of their freedom. The failure of the free creatures counts neither against God's omniscience, nor against omnipotence, nor against his goodness. Hence, for the Free Will Defender *God is omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good.*[7] "The heart of the Free Will Defense is the claim that it is *possible* that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil."[8]

1.1.1. Objections

1.1.1.1. Compatibility of Causal Determinism and Freedom

God could have created free creatures who were free to do what is wrong, but nevertheless were causally determined to do only what is right. In other words, he could have created creatures who were free to do what was

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[7]. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
[8]. Ibid., p. 31.

wrong, while preventing them from performing evil, and causally determined to do only what is right.[9]

Counter Objection

This theory contradicts the Free Will Defense according to which there is inconsistency in supposing that God determines free creatures to do only what is right. For is it really possible that all of a person's actions are causally determined while some of them are free? "For suppose that all of a man's actions are causally determined and that he couldn't, on any occasion, have made any choice or performed any action different from the ones he did make and perform. It could still be true that if he had chosen to do otherwise; he would have done otherwise; but this is consistent with saying that if he had, things would have gone differently".[10]

1.1.1.2. Theory of the Best Possible World

It is possible to have a world where one does only what is right, even if one is free to do wrong. It is possible that there be a world containing free creatures who always do what is right. There is certainly no contradiction in this idea. For God is omnipotent, and hence there are no limitations in him. If so, the Free Will Defense must be mistaken in its insistence upon the possibility that God is omnipotent but unable to create a world containing moral good without permitting moral evil.[11] J.L. Mackie states this objection: "If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical

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[9]. Ibid.
[10]. Ibid., p.32.
[11]. Ibid.

impossibility in a man's freely choosing, the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong; there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good"[12]

The point of Mackie is that according to the Free Will Defense, God is both omnipotent and unable to create a world containing moral good without moral evil. For Mackie, such a view is inconsistent. For there are *possible worlds* that contain moral good without moral evil. Otherwise, God cannot be omnipotent.[13]

Counter Objection

What is the reason for supposing that there *is* such a thing as the best of all possible worlds? What is really central to the Free Will Defense is the claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just any possible world He pleased, and that the existence of God is compatible both logically and probabilistically, with the existence of evil.

"The upshot, I believe, is that there is no good a theological argument from evil. The existence of God is neither precluded nor rendered improbable by the existence of evil. Of course, suffering and misfortune may

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[12]. J.L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', in *Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Q.J. Bronstein and Schulweis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, 1960), pp. 100-101.

[13]. Pantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 33.

nevertheless, constitute a *problem* for the theist; but the problem is not that his beliefs are logically or probabilistically incompatible. The theist may find a religious problem in evil; in the presence of his own suffering or that of someone near to him he may find it difficult to maintain what he takes to be the proper attitude towards God. Faced with great personal suffering as misfortune, he may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God's face, or even to give up belief in God altogether. But this is a problem of a different dimension. Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care. The Free Will Defense, however, shows that the existence of God is compatible, both logically and probabilistically, with the existence of evil; thus it solves the main philosophical problem of evil".[14]

1.2. Hick's Alternative to Plantinga

Plantinga, according to Hick, confines his reasonings to the path of formal logic. Such a reasoning limits him to a narrow but precisely defined issue, whether there is a logical contradiction between the propositions that an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God exists and the proposition that 'evil exists.' Plantinga tries to show that the alleged logical contradictions on which it relies does not exist.[15] Plantinga apparently assumes that if a person is free, the way in which he will freely behave is unpredictable. Consequently, it is possible that every free being will at some time make a morally wrong choice. It follows that it may not be possible for God to have created a world in which there are free beings but no evil. But the

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[14]. Ibid., pp. 63-64.

[15]. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 365-366.

way in which a wholly good person will freely behave, while unpredictable as to the actual form of his behaviour, is surely predictable in one respect that he will always make morally right rather than wrong choices. In this way Plantinga has not succeeded in protecting the free-will defence against Flew's and Mackie's criticism.[16]

Hick is of the opinion that the right response to their arguments is that offered by the Irenaean approach which sees moral evil as an inevitable result of God's creation of man as an immature creature. This Irenaean approach, on the basis of a single comprehensive and coherent hypothesis, offers a theodicy in respect of natural as well as moral evil.[17]

1.2.2. The Irenaen Type of Theodicy

Irenaeus thinks of man originally as an immature being upon whom God bestows his highest gifts. It is clear from Hick's quoting of Irenaeus: 'If, however, any one say, 'what then?' Could not God have exhibited man as perfect from the beginning?' Let him know that in as much as God is indeed always the same and unbegotten as respects Himself, all things are possible to Him. But created things must be inferior to Him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But inasmuch as they are not uncreated, for this very reason do they come short of the perfect. Because, as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline. For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, [but she does not do so], as the child is not yet able to

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16. Ibid., pp. 368-369.
17. Ibid., p. 369.

receive more substantial nourishment; so also it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant'.[18]

In his work, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus pictures Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden as children. This is not a damnable revolt, but rather a calling forth of God's compassion on account of their weakness and vulnerability. Man is called to overcome this weakness and vulnerability gradually. Hence, our present life is a scene of gradual spiritual growth: 'Now it was necessary that man should in the first instance be created; and having been created, should receive growth; and having received growth, should be strengthened; and having been strengthened, should abound; and having abounded, should recover [from the disease of sin]; and having recovered, should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord.'[19]

Man is being taught by God through the contrasting experience of good and evil to value the one for himself and to shun others. For 'how, if we had no knowledge of their contrary, could he have had instruction in that which is good? ... For just as the tongue receives experience of sweet and bitter by means of tasting, and the eye discriminates between black and white by means of vision, and the ear recognises the distinctions of sounds by hearing; so also does the mind, receiving through the experience of both the knowledge of what is good, become more tenacious of its preservation, by acting in obedience to God .... But if any one does shun the knowledge of both kinds of things, and the twofold perception of knowledge, he

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[18]. Ibid. p. 212 (A.H. = Adversus Hereticorum, IV. xxxix.1.)
[19]. Ibid., p. 213. (A.H. IV. xxxviii.3)

unawares divests himself of the character of a human being'.[20]

There is in Irenaues the outline of an approach to the problem of evil which stands in contrast to the Augustinian theodicy. Instead of the Augustinian doctrine that God created man perfect, but because of his sin, he became imperfect and sinful, Irenaeus holds that God created man imperfect and immature, but would be brought to perfection through growth and development, intended for him by his Maker. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented in the Augustinian tradition, as a malignant event, completely disrupting God's plan, Irenaeus presents it as something that occurred in the childhood of the human race, an understandable lapse due to human weakness and immaturity. Instead of the Augustinian view of evil as divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees the mixture of good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards his perfection.[21]

1.2.3. Contrasts and Agreements between the Two Types of Theodicy [22]

1.2.3.1. The Contrasts

1.2.3.1.1. The Augustinian tradition relieves the Creator of the responsibility for evil by placing that responsibility on creatures; whereas the Irenaean type accepts God's ultimate omni-responsibility for it.

1.2.3.1.2. The Augustinian tradition embodies the philosophy of evil as non-being with its Neo-Platonic

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[20]. Ibid., p. 214. (A.H. IV. xxxix.1)
[21]. Ibid., pp. 214-215.
[22]. Ibid., pp. 236-239.

influence; whereas the Irenaen type is more purely theological in character.

1.2.3.1.3. The Augustinian theodicy sees God's relation to his creation in predominantly non-personal terms; whereas the Irenaen type is more personal according to which man has been created for fellowship with his Maker.

1.2.3.1.4. The Augustinian type looks to the past for an explanation of the existence of evil; whereas the Irenaen type is eschatological which finds the justification for evil in an infinite and eternal good which God is bringing out of the temporal process.

1.2.3.1.5. In the Augustinian type the doctrine of the fall plays a central role; whereas in the Irenaen type it is less important.

1.2.3.1.6. The Augustinian points to a final division of mankind into the saved and the damned; whereas the Irenaen thinkers see the doctrine of eternal hell as rendering a Christian theodicy impossible.

1.2.3.2. The Agreements

Despite the differences, there are also points of agreement between the two types of theodicy.

1.2.3.2.1. The aesthetic conception of the perfection of the universe in the Augustinian tradition has its equivalent in the Irenaen type of the eschatological perfection of the creation, i.e., each proclaims the unqualified and unlimited goodness of God's creation as a whole.

1.2.3.2.2. Both acknowledge explicitly or implicitly God's ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil. Hence, sin

and natural evil are both inevitable aspects of the creative process.

1.2.3.2.3. The 'O felix culpa' theme is common to both theodicies, quoted with approval by theologians in both traditions as they believe that the final end-product of the human story will justify the evil within that story.

1.2.3.2.4. Both acknowledge logical limitations upon divine omnipotence, though neither regards these as a real restriction upon God's power. For the inability to do the self-contradictory does not reflect an impotence in the agent but a logical incoherence.

1.2.4. Hick's Eschatological Resolution

For Hick, belief in an after-life is important for theodicy. From our human point of view evil is equivalent to the disvalued or unwelcome, but from a theological standpoint it is that which frustrates or tends to frustrate God's purpose for His creation. In other words, good is that which serves the divine purpose. The question whether sin and suffering are finally evil depends upon their eventual furtherance or prevention of the fulfilment of God's plan for his creation. If man's pain and sin are revealed in the final reckoning, as having frustrated God's purpose for His creatures, then in that ultimate perspective they have been evil. On the other hand, if they have played a part in the fulfilment of that purpose, there is the ultimate perspective they have contributed to good. However, we are not yet entitled to say that all suffering is used for good in its final issue. We have to say honestly that the incomprehensible mingling in human experience of good and evil continues in all its characteristic and baffling ambiguity throughout life and ends only with death. Hence we cannot have a Christian theodicy without seriously

taking into account the doctrine of a life beyond the grave. This is not based upon any theory of natural immortality, but upon the hope that beyond death, God will resurrect or reconstitute the human personality in both its inner and its outer aspects. Consequently, we cannot be content to look to the past, seeking an explanation of evil in its origin, but we must look towards the future, expecting a triumphant resolution in the eventual perfect fulfilment of God's good purpose. At the end, there will be no personal life that is unperfected and no suffering that has not eventually become a phase in the fulfilment of God's good purpose.[23] "The 'good eschaton' will not be a reward or a compensation proportioned to each individual's trials, but an infinite good that would render worth while any finite suffering endured in the course of attaining to it."[24] Hick concludes his work with the optimism that this life with its baffling mixture of good and evil is part of a long and slow journey towards the heavenly city. "But we believe or disbelieve, ultimately, out of our own experience and must be faithful to the witness of that experience; and, together with very many others, I find that the realities of human goodness and human happiness make it a credible possibility that this life, with its baffling mixture of good and evil, and including both its dark miseries and its shining joys, including both man's malevolence and his self-forgetting love, is indeed part of a long and slow pilgrim's progress towards the Celestial City."[25]

2. Assessment and Conclusion

Alvin Plantinga prefaces his own philosophical work with the caution that insofar as the problem of evil

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[23]. Ibid., pp. 338-340.
[24]. Ibid., p. 341.
[25]. Ibid. p. 386.

precipitates a crisis of faith, it must move out of the hands of the philosopher into that of the pastor.[26] Such a view reveals that he has only a modest ambition for what a theoretical reconciliation of God's existence with evil might accomplish. Of course, it does not bring peace to a troubled soul. Perhaps, the carpings of the non-believer against the rationality of belief in God are fended off, and the faithful might enjoy a mild illumination in knowing that God possibly has good reason for permitting evil. [27]

Secondly, Plantinga's theodicy is *minimalistic*. Issues of substantial religious import are not discussed. For a philosopher of religion, this is damning.[28] Some philosophers might find in Plantinga's minimalism a laudable division of labour between the philosopher, who has only philosophical worries to address, and the pastor, who has broader concerns with the care of souls. But it is questionable whether philosophers of religion can afford to overlook what makes religious beliefs compelling and interesting for believers, any more than pastors can ignore the intellectual content of faith. If truth is a legitimate philosophical interest, then pastors and philosophers equally share a common problem of evil, namely, the need for insight into the mystery of human iniquity and tragedy. Theodicy supplies this insight from the wisdom of religious faith.[29]

John Hick argues that the theodicist is not committed to the unseemly task of providing rationales for evil. The purpose of theodicy can be served if the theodicist restricts

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[26]. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, pp. 28-29.

[27]. James Wetzel, 'Can Theodicy be Avoided? The claim of Unredeemed Evil'', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March, 1989), pp. 2-3.

[28]. Ibid., p.6.

[29]. Ibid.

his or her attention to why a wholly good and sovereign God would permit evil to infiltrate creation.[30] Here Hick fails to explain how a justification for God's permission of evil fails to be a rationalization of evil.[31]

Secondly, Hick incorporates evil within the economy of providential history, making it to serve the end of perfecting creation in accord with God's design. Hick's scheme focuses more sharply on the eschatological redemption of creation and portrays the world with all its evils as the 'vale of soul-making,' wherein humans are afforded the occasion and opportunity to develop freely a loving communion with God.[32] Human freedom is a constitutive element of that end. For without freedom, the evolution of creatures into moral and spiritual would not be possible. Freedom contributes to the acquisition of complex goods and introduces the possibility of grievous evils, such as the variety of moral evils.[33] Hick is of the opinion that when viewed retrospectively from God's eschatological completion of creation, the legacy of evil will be seen to have served the triumphant purpose of the divine creation. Evil may be real and threatening, but it is also inevitably defeated and 'made to serve God's good purposes.'[34]

Thirdly, Hick argues that human environment must include real challenges and risks in order to evoke creativity and achievement, present significant opportunities for the development of virtue and character, and be located at a

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30. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, pp. 8-9: See also James Wetzel, *'Can Theodicy be Avoided? The Claim of Unredeemed Evil'*, p. 2.
31. James Wetzel, *'Can Theodicy be Avoided? The Claim of Unredeemed Evil'*, p. 2.
32. Ibid., p. 7.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 8.

sufficient distance [epistemic distance] from God to allow man autonomy.[35] Hick may be correct in saying that these conditions are found only in a world of genuinely gratuitous evil and of further gratuitous evil. That world is sterilized of all meaningful challenges which excludes failure and ruin. Such a world calls forth little moral effort, sympathy and other valuable human traits. Moreover, such a world filled with the presence of God would probably overwhelms human's intellect and will in such a way as to coerce them into religious belief.

Fourthly, for Hick, human freedom presupposes a certain degree of independence from God, known as epistemic distance. From this concept of epistemic distance he concludes that the fall of man was "virtually inevitable." The fall is prerequisite to coming to God in free and loving obedience : "God is overwhelmingly great that the children in His heavenly family must be prodigal children who have voluntarily come to their Father from a far country''.[36]

We need not take Hick's line of thinking to conclude that the fall is inevitable. The concept of epistemic distance can be used to accent important characteristics of our creaturely existence without adopting Hick's additional claims. However, such a concept can hardly account for the complex and frustrating admixture of good and evil in the world today when evil emerges as the dominant force.[37]

According to Plantinga a world containing creatures who are free is more valuable than a world containing no free creatures at all. God can create free creatures but He cannot

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[35] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, pp. 243-91.

[36] Ibid., p. 323.

[37] Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1982), pp. 118-121.

cause them to do only what is right. For if God does so, then the creatures cannot be free; they cannot do what is right freely. Hence to create creatures capable of moral good means to create creatures capable of moral evil. For God cannot give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. Some of the free creatures whom God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom. This is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness. For God could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.[38] For Plantinga freedom implies the capacity to choose between good and evil. God cannot cause the creatures to do only what is right. If he does so, then the creatures cannot be free. The same type of argument is implicit when Hick concludes that humans should be set at epistemic 'distance' from the Creator in order that he can come to his Creator in freedom, in an uncompelled faith and love. "We concluded that in order for man to be endowed with the freedom in relation to God that is essential if he is to come to his Creator in uncompelled faith and love, he must be initially set at an epistemic 'distance' from that Creator."[39] In this way, Hick's Comprehensive Eschatological Theodicy subsumes Plantinga's Free Will Defense Theory presupposing the latter as part of his own theodicy. Hence Hick's alternative to Plantinga's does not exclude the latter, but includes it more comprehensively and sublimatively.

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[38]Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, pp. 29-30.
[39]Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 323.