GOD, SOUL-MAKING AND NON-MORAL EVIL

by John Hick

THE PROBLEM POSED

As a challenge to theism, the problem of evil has traditionally been posed in the form of a dilemma: if God is perfectly loving, he must wish to abolish evil; and if he is all-powerful, he must be able to. But evil exists; therefore God cannot be both all-powerful and all-loving. This dilemma, or the related Argument from Evil that God cannot exist, because a true God would not allow evil, and evil exists, arises in the face of both moral evil, death or suffering by innocent persons caused by human agents, and non-moral evil, death or suffering by innocent persons caused by nature, e.g. disease, or natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, tornadoes). How could an all good and all powerful God, if one were to exist, allow such evil to occur? This is a question that has been asked by human victims and their loved ones throughout history.

NON-MORAL EVIL AND THE SOUL-MAKING THEODICY

The traditional Christian response to the problem of moral evil is called the "free will theodicy," which I discussed in an earlier essay. In this way of thinking, an all good and all powerful God had to allow for the possibility of moral evil, if he were to create a world in which human beings enjoyed freedom of the will, and even with the suffering that has caused, such a world is better than the alternatives. Of course, many people may reject this ‘explanation’, as we watch the horrors of human on human violence and cruelty, much of it now broadcast nightly on the evening news or internet. But even if one agrees with this theodicy and its way of approaching moral evil, there is still the problem of non-moral evil. How could an all good and all loving God create a natural order that includes so much violence and suffering? How could God let so many children and other innocent victims perish in floods and fire and from the ravages of diseases like cancer and ALS?

THE IRENAEAN THEODICY

So to completely ‘understand’ and ‘accept’ the idea of God in the face of human suffering means we must also account somehow for the evil which is not due to human but to natural causes--rain and wind, heat, disease, etc. Granted that sometimes it is difficult to draw a clear line between what of human suffering that has natural causes is really due to nature and what part we share in through our greed or careless or folly, e.g. people who die of lung cancer die from "natural causes," but causes they might well have prevented by not smoking cigarettes. Still, it cannot be denied that much suffering is not due to human actions, but merely inflicted upon us. Accidents occur, and sometimes they kill and maim. This is the problem of non-moral

evil, the problem of pain and suffering. (I shall confine myself to the problem of human suffering; the problem of animal suffering is also deeply puzzling, but perhaps if it is possible to understand why God would allow human suffering, that is an important starting point.)

To understand the problem of non-moral evil, it is important to remember that the Christian does not attempt to explain every instance of such suffering, but rather seeks to make sense of the whole picture in which it occurs--and to show how that whole picture is consistent with an all-good, all-powerful Creator. For what was the purpose for which we were born? Surely not to live in a pleasure paradise, a world where everything was given to us so we would be a comfortable, satisfied human animal. Did God wish us to be his human pet? Or did he want something more for us, something bigger, if more risk-entangled? These were the kind of thoughts which led the early Christian theologian Irenaeus (130-202 AD), who lived in a human world that had to deal with much greater levels of human death and suffering than our own world (including diseases that swept mysteriously through the Roman Empire, and a high death rate in pregnancy and childbirth).

Irenaeus insisted that Christianity, as revealed in Jesus' word and in the Gospels, has always supposed that God's intention was to create the world as a place of "*soul-making*," in which free beings, grappling with the tasks and challenges of their existence in a common environment, may become "children of God," i.e. full persons, who were fit to be "heirs of eternal life." It was the Christian father Irenaeus, more than any other, who saw this point clearly. Thus, he argued, our world, with its rough, even ruthless edges, is the sphere in which the second and harder stage of the creation process is meant to take place. (This is also sometimes associated with the idea of the "fortunate fall," i.e. the idea that it is only because of mankind's leaving the garden of innocent goodness that we have become open to the possibility of true, adult life.)

And how might the 'perfect,' evil-free world exist? Would the lion's teeth not tear the flesh? Would the mountaineer's fall, after his rope broke, land on newly-soft rock? Would there be workers to plow the fields, to heal the sick--or to invent the plow and the medicine? Would nature operate on some kind of ever-adjusting principle, without laws or order, apart from the 'order' to prevent pain? Would life be nothing but a flowing dream, without the hard points of resistance to mark ourselves from the world?

Where in such a world would there be fear or suffering or temptation or cruelty or fraud or murder or death by agonizing drowning or disease? Nowhere, you well say. But where then too would there be courage or endurance or moderation or compassion or caution or justice or shipbuilding or science? The qualities of human uplift, of human personality--would they be the same, if they were ours by gift and not at least in part by effort?

It is sometimes said that without evil, we could not know good; granted that we might enjoy health without illness, but don't we enjoy it more because of the contrast. I admit—this argument may seem almost cruel in the face of terrible diseases like spinal bifida or bone cancer. And yet, even if we reject this as a 'justification' for such suffering, must it not be said that without evil, we would not be moved to seek ways to overcome it? Is not a vast amount of human knowledge and human virtue—the part we relate to 'soul-making'—formed by the effort to conquer such hardships and create a better world? If so, then the world that is meant to promote the growth in free beings of the best qualities must have much in common with our world: it must involve dangers, hardships, problems, pain, sorrow, defeat, and perhaps even death. . . a world not fit to be the pleasure-dome of self-satisfied intelligent animals, but a world that is fit indeed to be a place for "soul-making." Of course such a picture of an all-good and all-loving God, who nonetheless allows terrible evil, both moral and non-moral, to fall on innocent persons—such a picture needs a further dimension, to make it fully satisfactory. This is the dimension of an afterlife, in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished, and the unmerited sufferings they endured on earth are redeemed. But notice that even apart from the supposition of that special dimension, this picture of the world offers its own reason for why a good and all-powerful God might not want to make the world a perfect pleasure dome, might want to give it hard and even sometimes cruel edges, might want to force us, as our part in His way, to "climb his mountain."