
40 Evil and the Infinite
 Future Good

John Hick

... WE CANNOT HOPE TO STATE a Christian theodicy without taking seriously the doctrine of a life beyond the grave. This doctrine is not, of course, based upon any theory of natural immortality, but upon the hope that beyond death God will resurrect or re-create or reconstitute the human personality in both its inner and its outer aspects. The Christian claim is that the ultimate life of man—after what further scenes of “soul-making” we do not know—lies in that Kingdom of God which is depicted in the teaching of Jesus as a state of exultant and blissful happiness, symbolized as a joyous banquet in which all and sundry, having accepted God’s gracious invitation, rejoice together. And Christian theodicy must point forward to that final blessedness, and claim that this infinite future good will render worth while all the pain and travail and wickedness that has occurred on the way to it. Theodicy cannot be content to look to the past, seeking an explanation of evil in its origins, but must look towards the future, expecting a triumphant resolution in the eventual perfect fulfilment of God’s good purpose. We cannot, of course, concretely picture to ourselves the nature of this fulfilment; we can only say that it represents the best gift of God’s infinite love for His children.

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But 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.¹ We must thus affirm in faith that there will in the final accounting 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. 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.

It is perhaps worth pointing out here the difference between this position and another to which it is in some ways similar, namely the view that the promised joys of heaven are to be related to man's earthly travails as a compensation or reward. This suggests a divine arrangement equitably proportioning compensation to injury, so that the more an individual has suffered beyond his desert the more intense or the more prolonged will be the heavenly bliss that he experiences. Thus those who have suffered most will subsequently have cause to rejoice most; and presumably, if the just proportion is to be preserved, none will enjoy an endless or infinite bliss, since none will have suffered an unending or unlimited injury. As distinct from such a book-keeping view, what is being suggested here, so far as men's sufferings are concerned, is that these sufferings—which for some people are immense and for others relatively slight—will in the end lead to the enjoyment of a common good which will be unending and therefore unlimited, and which will be seen by its participants as justifying all that has been endured on the way to it. 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. . . .

Christian theodicy claims, then, that the end to which God is leading us is a good so great as to justify all the failures and suffering and sorrow that will have been endured on the way to it. The life of the Kingdom of God will be an infinite, because eternal, good, outweighing all temporal and therefore finite evils. We cannot visualize the life of the redeemed and perfected creation, for all our imagery is necessarily drawn from our present "fallen" world. We can think only in very general terms of the opening up before us of new dimensions of reality "which eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor the heart of man conceived";² a new intensity and vividness of experience; of expanded capacities for fulfilment in personal relationships, artistic and other forms of creativity, knowledge, wonder, the enjoyment of beauty, and yet other goods and kinds of goods at present beyond our ken.

But, having said this, questions and difficulties at once arise. Could

1. Cf. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), p. 454.

2. I Corinthians ii. 9.

even an endless heavenly joy ever heal the scars of deep human suffering? It has been said (by Leon Bloy) that "*Souffrir passe; avoir souffert ne passe jamais.*"* Physical pain is quickly forgotten; but the memory and the effects of mental and emotional anguish can remain with us throughout our lives and presumably beyond this life so long as there is continuity of personal identity. Would not, then, the recollection of past miseries, shames, crimes, injustices, hatreds, and agonies—including the recollection of witnessing the sufferings of others—destroy the happiness of heaven?³

It is very difficult to resolve such a question; for we do not know what is possible, let alone what is probable, in realms of being so far beyond our present experience. We can think only in terms of what Plato called "likely tales." It may be that the personal scars and memories of evil remain forever, but are transfigured in the light of the universal mutual forgiveness and reconciliation on which the life of heaven is based. Or it may be that the journey to the heavenly Kingdom is so long, and traverses such varied spheres of existence, involving so many new and transforming experiences, that in the end memory of our earthly life is dimmed to the point of extinction. There is no evident ground or need to decide between such possibilities, and I mention them only to suggest that the puzzle that was raised, although not at present soluble, is also not such as to overthrow the theodicy that we have been developing.

* "Suffering passes, but the fact that one has suffered remains forever."

3. For a powerful underlining of this question, see Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, pt. II, bk. v, chap. 4. (See Selection 38 above)