



# Soul-making and social progress

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## Abstract

I argue that John Hick's soul-making theodicy is committed to opposing social progress. By focusing on justifying the current amount and distribution of suffering and evil, Hick's theodicy ends up having to condemn even positive change as undesirable. First, I give a brief outline of Hick's theodicy, with a particular emphasis on the role of *earned* virtue in justifying the existence of evil. Then I consider two understandings of social progress: progress as the elimination of suffering and evil; and progress as the promotion of earned virtue. I further distinguish the earned virtue understanding of social progress into two kinds, in which the relationship between social structures and moral growth either: (1) allows members of a more advanced society to *start* closer to perfection; or (2) allows members of a more advanced society to progress more quickly (and presumably further). I argue that no matter which approach we take, Hick's theodicy struggles with the idea of social progress. Hick is either straightforwardly committed to opposing social progress, or he can support it only at the expense of being unable to justify status quo of suffering and evil.

**Keywords** Soul-making · Virtue · Divine likeness · Hick · Social progress

## Introduction

In this paper I argue that John Hick's soul-making theodicy is committed to opposing social progress, which I understand here as increasingly just social structures, just institutions, the reduction of unjustified social hierarchies, and so on. By focusing on justifying the current amount and distribution of suffering and evil, Hick's theodicy ends up having to condemn even positive change such as these as undesirable.

First, I give a brief outline of Hick's theodicy, with a particular emphasis on the role of *earned* virtue in justifying the existence of evil. Then I consider two

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understandings of social progress: progress as the elimination of suffering and evil; and progress as the promotion of earned virtue.

I argue that, since Hick requires suffering and evil to bring about the intrinsically more valuable kind of virtue—earned virtue—then he must oppose the first kind of social progress; at least, beyond a certain point.

When it comes to social progress as the promotion of earned virtue, the relationship between social structures and individual moral growth can be understood in two ways: (1) as allowing members of a more advanced society to *start* closer to perfection; or (2) as allowing members of a more advanced society to progress more quickly (and presumably further). If (1), then either starting closer to perfection reduces the intrinsic value of a individual's earned virtue, in which case Hick ought to oppose this kind of social progress; or it does not, in which case it is difficult to explain why we do not live in a society that allows us to start our moral development merely one step from perfection. If (2), then the more just and purposeful distribution of suffering and evil in such a society that is the mechanism for this faster progress either undermines soul-making by removing the incentive to oppose evil, in which case Hick ought not to support this kind of social progress; or, if it permissible that the lack of unnecessary evil is a result of human social arrangements, but not if due to God's action, Hick has difficulty explaining why we are not already living in a perfect society.

In short, then, I suggest that Hick's theodicy struggles with the idea of social progress. Hick is either straightforwardly committed to opposing social progress, or he can support it only at the expense of being unable to justify status quo of suffering and evil.

## Soul-making and virtue

Hick's soul-making theodicy rests on a "two-stage conception of the creation of humankind" (Hick 2016, 265). The first stage is the creation of human beings as specifically *ethical* and *religious* creatures. This is the idea of human beings as being in the "image" of God. Human beings, says Hick, are "ethical—that is, a gregarious as well as an intelligent animal, able to realize and respond to the complex demands of social life" (Hick 2016, 265). In addition, human beings are naturally religious, with "an innate tendency to experience the world in terms of the presence and activity of supernatural beings and powers" (Hick 2016, 265).

However, the creation of beings in the *image* of God—this *first* stage of creation—is not about the full realization of God in human beings, but rather the *potential* for it. As Hick puts it, "people were created as spiritually and morally immature creatures, at the beginning of a long process of further growth and development" (Hick 2016, 265). The culmination of this process of growth and development constitutes the second stage of creation: human beings, through free decisions, come to possess a divine *likeness* (Hick 2016). In other words, the first stage of creation involves fashioning ethically and spiritually immature beings—*homo sapiens*—who are made in the *image* of God, i.e. have the potential to become ethically and spiritually mature. The second stage involves the

actualization of this potential through human beings' free choices, bringing them to the *likeness* of God.

The obvious objection to this schema, however, is that there does not seem to be any clear reason why God should create human beings as initially imperfect, rather than creating them as perfect from the start. If being perfect is better than being imperfect, and if a lack of perfection leads to moral evil and suffering, then it would surely be better to skip over the process of developing from imperfection to perfection. Since a perfect God would not choose a world with more evil in it than less, all things being equal, then a perfect God would create human beings as morally perfect.

Hick's response to this criticism is to raise two considerations that justify a perfect God in creating human beings as developing creatures, each of which corresponds to a different aspect of our nature as being made in the "image" of God. The first relates to our *spiritual* natures: that is, if we were created directly in God's presence, then we would be "automatically conscious of God, the limitless divine reality and power, goodness and love, knowledge and wisdom, towering above one's self" (Hick 2016, 266–7). If this were the case, Hick thinks, we would not be able to come to know and love God *freely*; we would be overwhelmed by our immediate knowledge of God's infinite power and goodness, and would be *compelled* into a relationship with Him. As such, we would end up not as a free, independent being in a relationship with God, but rather as nothing but an extension of God's will. Hence, Hick thinks that we need to be created at an "epistemic distance" from God. In other words, we need to be created spiritually immature, in the sense that we do not know God, and can come to know him on our own, of our own free will.

But even if spiritual immaturity is required in order to have a relationship with God as an independent being, this does not explain why human beings should be created *morally* immature. As Hick puts it, why should humans not have "been created at this epistemic distance from God, and yet at the same time as morally perfect beings?" (Hick 2016, 268). Hick agrees that this is a concern, and he does not think it is a problem that can be pushed aside, as the proponents of the free-will defense do, by claiming that a perfectly good being would lack freedom. For Hick, a perfectly good being could be formally free to sin but would simply never do so in fact. Hence, they would be both free *and* sinless. Hick describes this in the following way:

If we imagine such a being in a morally frictionless environment, involving no stresses or temptation, then we must assume that one would exemplify the ethical equivalent of Newton's first law of motion, which states that a moving body will continue in uniform motion until interfered with by some outside force. By analogy, a perfectly good being would continue in the same moral course forever, there being nothing in the environment to throw one off it (Hick 2016, 268).

Even if such a perfect being exists in a world with temptations and challenges, however, "in virtue of moral perfection, one will always overcome those

temptations—as in the case, according to orthodox Christian belief, of Jesus Christ” (Hick 2016, 268). This does not mean, of course, that a free being is prevented in some strong sense from doing so. But since free beings act in accordance with their nature, rather than randomly, “a free being whose nature is wholly and unqualifiedly good will accordingly never in fact sin” (Hick 2016, 268).

If this is right, then we need to ask again *why* human beings should be made as morally imperfect, even if it is necessary that they are made *spiritually* so. If they were made morally perfect, but spiritually undeveloped, then we could have free relationships with God as independent beings, while at the same time living in a world with no moral evil.

The justification, for Hick, is that the virtues that constitute a morally perfect being—that is, the aspects of their character that make it such that they always do what is morally right, and that prevent moral evil from existing—come in two varieties. The first, lesser, variety are virtues that we simply *have*; we are created with them and do nothing to earn them. The second variety is virtues that “have been formed within the agent as a hard-won deposit of his own right decisions in situations of challenge and temptation” (Hick 2016, 268). In other words, virtues that grow as a response to opposing and overcoming evils. According to Hick, these second kind of virtues are “intrinsically more valuable than virtues created within him ready made and without any effort on his own part” (Hick 2016, 269).

As a response to the problem of evil, then, Hick argues that since “moral goodness which has been built up through the agent’s own responsible choices through time in the face of alternative possibilities” is intrinsically more valuable than “moral goodness which exists as the agent’s initial given nature” (Hick 2016, 269); and since it is logically impossible for such moral goodness to exist without the existence of evil (because it can only come about as a response to evil); and further since (Hick assumes), this moral goodness is “sufficiently valuable to outweigh the disvalue of the suffering which makes [it] possible” (Dore 1970, 119), then the existence of evil can be explained. A perfect God is obliged to make a world in which suffering and evil exists, since *only* such a world would contain the more intrinsically valuable moral goodness that comes as a free response to such suffering and evil, and which outweighs that suffering and evil.

To put things simply, if God desires to bring about the best possible world, and the best possible world must contain the more intrinsically valuable kind of moral goodness (earned virtue); and if this earned virtue logically requires the existence of suffering and evil; and if God’s inability to do what is logically inconsistent does not constitute a restriction on God’s omnipotence; then God ought to create a world with suffering and evil rather than one without. God *could not* have made a world without suffering and evil, since it would be less than the best possible world (Dore 1970). In short, “soul-making theodiscists hold that, all other things being equal, a world in which there is suffering and free virtuous responses to it is better than a world in which neither suffering nor free virtuous responses to it exists” (Dore 1970, 119), and that God must therefore create a world with at least *some* suffering and evil.

Clearly, then, if God wants to create the best possible world—a world that contains “finite persons embodying the most valuable kind of moral goodness” (Hick

2016, 269) —then it is not possible to create humans as already perfect beings. Instead, He has to create us as “imperfect creatures who can then attain to the more valuable kind of goodness through their own free choices” (Hick 2016, 269). Hence, human beings need to be created both spiritually and morally immature.

Hick does not provide any justification for his claim that earned virtue is intrinsically more valuable than found virtue, and it is certainly a debatable point. For Hick, the idea that “the intrinsic value of human virtue and goodness forged in the fire of trial and temptation outweighs the intrinsic value of “ready-made virtues” that require no effort (Scott 2010),

expresses a basic value-judgment, which cannot be established by argument but which one can only present, in the hope that it will be as morally plausible, and indeed compelling, to others as to oneself (Hick 2016, 269).

However, I am willing to credit this claim and to assume, for the sake of argument, that earned virtues are intrinsically more valuable than found ones, since it is this idea that has unwelcome implications when it comes to the role of social progress in Hick’s soul-making theodicy.

Specifically, Hick argues that human beings can morally develop over their lives (and presumably beyond), but he also discusses the way that *society* develops. Mark M. Scott talks about the way Hick’s two-stage concept of the creation of humankind “coheres with the evolutionary growth of *Homo sapiens* from lower to higher states of cognition, moral awareness, and spiritual consciousness” (Scott 2010, 316–7). Hick sometimes speaks of the moral development of individual human beings, and at others the moral development of humanity. But, of course, these are not at all the same thing.

Presumably when Hick discusses the moral progress of humankind, his ultimate concern is the moral progress of individuals. As society advances, the individual human beings who constitute that society are also able to progress. However, we ought not to conflate the two: the moral progress of society may involve the moral progress of individuals, but this does not mean that the two cannot come apart. Or, to put it another way, the fact that there is social progress does not entail that the members of that society are better off *vis-à-vis* the more *intrinsically valuable* kind of moral goodness. Morally advanced societies may have more moral goodness *overall*, but this does not entail that they have more *earned* virtue than less advanced ones.

## Progress as the elimination of suffering and evil

Whether or not advanced societies involve more earned virtue depends, perhaps, on what we mean by “advanced”. The two obvious ways to cash out this idea are: (1) a society is more advanced if its members experience less suffering and evil; and (2) a society is more advanced if its members possess more virtuous characters. In the first case, then, a healthier, happier and safer society would be a more advanced one. In the second case, a society in which more people make morally correct choices for

the right reasons would be a more advanced one. These two things might go hand-in-hand, but they also might not.

If we understand social progress in the first way, this is potentially a problem for Hick, since suffering and evil are required in order to develop earned virtue. As G. Stanley Kane describes Hick's view,

Patience, perseverance, fortitude, diligence, sympathy, sacrificial love (among others) are all qualities that belong to a fully developed moral character. They are also all qualities which cannot be developed most fully unless one is faced with some kind of opposition or adversity. The evil in the world is simply that which provides such opposition and adversity (Kane 1975, 26).

It is quite possible, then, that less suffering and evil will lead to less intrinsic value, since members of that society will have fewer opportunities to develop the kind of moral character that constitutes the more intrinsically valuable kind of virtue.

Hick might respond here by pointing out that no possible society would remove *all* opposition or adversity. Even in the best healthcare system, people become sick and die; accidents happen, no matter how safe a society is; and there is no reason to think that interpersonal conflicts, which cause suffering, opposition and adversity, would disappear. In fact, it is quite possible that everyday interpersonal conflicts would increase in societies in which members had to spend less time worrying about where their next meal is coming from, or whether they might be sick and unable to pay for the treatment, or whether they might be mugged or assaulted.

However, there are two problems with this response. First, it suggests that this kind of social progress is only desirable up to a point. If we require adversity—such as sickness—to develop the more intrinsically valuable earned virtues, then we actually *ought not* try to eliminate it entirely. A utopia in which we have virtually eliminated crime and disease, for instance, may be undesirable from Hick's point of view, because we will restrict the opportunities for moral growth. But this seems highly counter-intuitive: it may not ever be a practical possibility to eliminate crime and disease, but to suggest that *if* it were, we nevertheless ought not to do so is at least odd. To say that society should only progress up to a certain point, and no further, is at the very least an unwelcome implication of Hick's view, and if Hick were committed to it, as I think he is, it should at least count as a mark against his theodicy.

In addition, if social progress *is* possible—if we can have a society with less suffering and evil, though not *no* suffering and evil, while still allowing for earned virtue—then why are we not there already? In fact, why did we not *start* in such a society? If some future society can have the same level of earned virtue, with less suffering and evil, then a perfectly good God should not allow us to live in the society we are currently in. After all, if it is *individual* moral progress that matters, then while God cannot interfere with our moral development without putting earned virtue at risk, the same is not true of *social* moral progress. Nothing about interfering with the kind of society that we inhabit, in principle, prevents us from developing morally on our own, as individuals.

Even if it were to turn out that our current society is the ideal one in terms of earned virtue, in that it has just the right amount of suffering and evil to best promote our moral development,<sup>1</sup> we still have to explain why other, less ideal societies were (or are) permitted to exist. Even though it seems implausible, if modern society *did* happen to be the *best possible* society in terms of suffering and evil, while still allowing for the development of earned virtue, then the suffering of all of those who lived in the past seems unjustified. By shortcutting human social development to our current social arrangements, God could have brought about the same earned virtue, at less cost in terms of suffering and evil.

## Progress in earned virtue

Alternatively, we could think about “social progress” as a matter of increasing the amount of *virtue* in society, rather than as a reduction of suffering and evil. A more advanced society would therefore be one in which the individuals, on average, have a higher level of virtue; their characters are closer to moral maturity.

However, this understanding of social progress also has its problems. We need to ask, for one thing, exactly how this higher level of virtue comes about. If we have two societies, and one has a higher average level of virtue than the other, then this is a fact that needs to be accounted for. *How*, precisely, did the individuals in the more progressive society *become* more virtuous *as individuals*? This is an issue that failing to distinguish between social moral progress and individual moral progress elides. If both individual and social moral progress are seen to be two ways of describing the same thing, then the specific relationship between the *social structures* in a more advanced society, and the *individual virtue* of its members, is hidden from view. But that relationship is an important one, with implications for the plausibility of Hick’s soul-making theodicy.

It seems to me there are two obvious ways we could understand the relationship between the social structures in a more advanced society, and the individual virtue of its members: first, being raised in a more advanced society provides conditions that allow its members to *start* in a more advanced state. So, for instance, if we imagine a scale of zero to one hundred, where zero is absolute moral immaturity and 100 is moral perfection, then “social progress” consists in social structures that allow individuals to start their lives at 10 rather than 0, or 20 rather than 10. As a result of starting closer to moral perfection, the average individual in a more advanced society can progress farther in the same amount of time than in a less advanced one, hence the average level of virtue in that society is higher.

The second possibility is that individuals in more advanced society simply *progress faster* through the process of moral maturation. So, if every individual starts at 0, no matter the society in which they are born, then in more advanced societies we would expect the average person to reach, say, 30 at age 5, rather than at age 10.

<sup>1</sup> Though this seems unlikely, given that a lot of suffering and evil seems to work against moral growth, rather than for it.

The more advanced the society, the more conducive its social structures to helping members morally mature at a faster rate. Presumably as a result of this faster moral maturation, the average member of a more advanced society would end up more virtuous than the average member of a less advanced society, hence the average level of virtue in that society would be higher.

Here I will consider each of these possibilities in turn.

### A better start

If more advanced societies allow their members to *start* from a position closer to moral perfection, then one possible problem with this is that it reduces the ultimate intrinsic value of an individual's virtue. After all, one major part of the justification for the existence of evil, for Hick, is that the development from moral immaturity to moral maturity gives rise to a kind of virtue that is intrinsically more valuable than the virtue one would have had, had one been created that way. In more advanced societies, societies that provide their members with a better start, however, individuals are getting that start "for free", as it were; they are getting, for instance, the progression from 0 to 10 *without* having to earn it through struggle.

If individuals in more advanced societies have a shorter "distance" to cover, since they do not start their moral growth at the "bottom", then we need to question whether the resulting moral perfection—their virtue—is as intrinsically valuable as the virtue of those who do not start with such an advantage. After all, if what makes earned virtue more intrinsically valuable than created virtue is that it is the result of moral growth, it is not unreasonable to wonder if the *degree* of intrinsic value also corresponds to the *amount* of growth. Completely created virtue, then, has a certain base value (since, after all, created virtue is still intrinsically valuable, simply not *as* intrinsically valuable), and earned virtue increases in intrinsic value to the extent that it *is* earned, i.e. by the amount of growth that has actually taken place. If an individual starts with an advantage, then, they have less space for growth, and therefore their earned virtue cannot be *as* intrinsically valuable as the earned virtue of someone whose growth covered the full spectrum of completely morally immature to morally perfect, even if, in terms of their character, their virtue is at the same level.

If it is true that starting in a better position reduces the ultimate intrinsic value of our earned virtue—and since, for Hick, we all end up at the same place anyway; moral perfection is moral perfection—then a world with this kind of social progress is a world with less intrinsic value in it. If so, then Hick's argument against God creating human beings morally perfect can be run against the desire for social progress. Social progress of this sort *reduces* the amount of intrinsic value in the world, and therefore should be opposed in the same way we would oppose the complete elimination of evil.

However, it is not *necessarily* the case that a better start causes an individual's earned virtue to be less intrinsically valuable. It may be instead that all earned virtue is equally intrinsically valuable: so long as it *is* earned, then it counts the same. Under this view, the distinction would be between created virtue and



earned virtue—the latter being more intrinsically valuable than the former—and so long as one’s virtue falls into the latter category, no further distinctions can be made. Under this view, the fact that an individual starts at 20, and who therefore has an upper limit in terms of the *degree* of moral growth of 80, has at the stage of moral perfection earned virtue that is as equally as intrinsically valuable as an individual who started at 0, and who therefore earned all 100 degrees of her growth.

This interpretation seems somewhat implausible, however, since the idea that something is *earned*; the focus in Hick’s work on overcoming challenges; and the focus on the *process* of *becoming* virtuous rather than where individuals end up, at least *suggests* that distinctions can be made in terms of that process. If what really matters is how one comes upon one’s virtue—which is the problem, presumably, with created virtue—then it seems strange to deny that someone who starts in a better position, and who therefore comes upon one’s virtue more easily, is in a different position to someone who earns every part of their virtue through struggle. We might argue that earned virtue is qualitatively different from found virtue. But it is difficult to see, if so, why an omnipotent, omniscient God would not be able to create human beings already possessed of earned virtue. Hence, the intrinsic value of earned virtue must be in the process, not in the result.

This problem is especially apparent when we take the matter to the extreme. If there is a sharp distinction between created virtue and earned virtue, rather than it being a matter of degree, then presumably someone who starts at 99 and only earns that final 1 degree of perfection possesses virtue as intrinsically valuable as someone who starts at 0 and earns all 100 degrees of moral growth. If so, then this seems to make the “earned” status more like a mere technicality and makes a mockery of Hick’s emphasis on earned virtue being the result of struggle against evil and the overcoming of challenges.

Perhaps the border between earned virtue and created virtue is somewhere else; perhaps an individual has created virtue if their starting point is, say, 51 or above, and earned virtue if their starting point is 50 or lower. But, of course, it is hard to provide a principled reason why this should be the case, and this problem arises no matter where the border is drawn.

However, even if supporters of the soul-making theodicy are willing to bite the bullet on this issue and accept that even someone who starts merely a fraction away from perfection possesses virtue as intrinsically valuable as someone who starts at the beginning, there is a further issue: if all we need to achieve the more valuable kind of virtue is to overcome one final hurdle, and if it is possible to start one’s development with only that hurdle remaining, then why did God not create the world that way? If He had created the world such that we lived in a near-perfect society with social structures that allow its members to start our moral journey at 99, while leaving that one last step up to us, then we could have what is intrinsically valuable—earned virtue—without most of the pain and struggle that we would otherwise need to go through to get there. If this were true, then the evil we experience in our current lives seems entirely pointless and unjustifiable.

## Faster progress

However, it may not be true that social progress entails that members of more advanced societies start their lives at a more advanced level individually. Perhaps instead the social structures of more advanced societies simply allow its members to progress through moral maturation at a faster rate. There is certainly something to be said for this account of social progress, since as a matter of fact we all start as helpless babies who presumably have no concern but filling our own needs. On the face of it, then, it is much more plausible that we all start in the same place, and the differences between us in terms of moral maturity later in life depend on our experiences, and how quickly we have progressed. If so, then we do not need to worry about the issue of some earned virtue being more intrinsically valuable than other earned virtue, since the earned virtue of every human beings, no matter their society, covers the same range: 0 to 100. As Hick puts it,

one is an animal as well as a potential child of God, and... one's moral goodness is won from a struggle with one's own innate selfishness, [which is] inevitable given one's continuity with the other forms of animal life... The human does not, in one's own degree of freedom and responsibility, choose one's origin, but rather one's destiny (Hick 2016, 270).

Again, however, we need to ask *how* a more advanced society enables its members to morally progress more quickly than a less advanced one. One possibility could be because such a society contains more struggle. With more evil to overcome, individual moral development is faster. Of course, this would put this sense of “social progress” in conflict with the earlier sense involving a reduction in evil and suffering. It would mean that a more “advanced” society could well contain more evil and suffering than a less advanced one. This would be a strange outcome, especially since, I think, the common conception of “social progress” contains an element of moral advancement *and* of the reduction of evil and suffering. We might wonder at a view that puts these two senses of social progress at odds, to the point of sacrificing one—social progress in terms of a reduction in evil and suffering—for the sake of the other—social progress in terms of moral advancement.

However, there is reason to think that Hick would be perfectly comfortable sacrificing the first sense of social progress for the second. As Kane describes it, Hick

sharply criticizes the notion that pleasure is the highest value, and he accordingly repudiates the notion that God should be expected to create a hedonistic paradise for men. He believes that the error of many critics of theism is that they think that God's relation to men should be modelled on men's relation to their pets. People try to make life as pleasant and as free of disagreeable elements as possible for their animal pets, but this, according to Hick, is because our pets are incapable of anything higher and better. God's relation to men, however, should instead be conceived on the model on men's relation to their children. Parents desire more for their children than merely pleasure, because life has higher values to offer than mere pleasure, and children as growing human beings are capable of attaining these higher values. Accordingly, par-

ents who are loving and conscientious take care to instill into their children the traits of courage, compassion, unselfishness and the like, and are faithful in doing so even when occasions arise which make it necessary for them to require their children to sacrifice certain pleasures. And such a program involves exposing children to pains, agonies, and frustrations that are common in the world (Kane 1975, 11).

In other words, if it *does* come down to a choice between moral advancement and pleasure, moral advancement wins out. If so, then even if these two senses of social progress *are* at odds, this does not necessarily undermine Hick's theodicy.

### Striking the right balance

However, *more* struggle is not always desirable. That is, there comes a point where the evils we face are overwhelming, and our moral development is hindered rather than helped. As such, perhaps a better way to think about social progress in the second sense is as a movement towards the right *balance* of evils, distributed in the most efficient way. A society could be considered more morally advanced if the amount and kind of evil that each individual faces is exactly that amount that will best promote their moral growth. The most advanced society, then, would be set up in such a way as to eliminate all suffering that does not contribute to moral growth. As William Rowe puts it,

The plain fact, as Hick recognizes, is that evil occurs in such massive amounts in our world that it often as not defeats the development of moral and spiritual growth... If the excessive amounts of evil were to fall on those humans who are particularly recalcitrant to moral and spiritual development, we might reason that God allows it to fall on them to enable them to become more sensitive to their need for such development. But incredible amounts of pain and suffering fall equally on the innocent and the guilty. Moreover, evil falls so unrelentingly on some people (whether saints or sinners) that it can only be seen by us as destructive of the soul-making enterprise. And, when we look at particular evils, it seems ludicrous to suppose that, had God prevented any one of these evils, someone's moral and spiritual development would thereby have been prevented or in some way frustrated (Rowe 1991, 117-8).

A perfectly advanced society would therefore be one in which the amounts and distribution of evil occurs in such a way as to *always* promote and *never* defeat the members' moral development. The closer the society is to this ideal, the more advanced we might consider it. Hick acknowledges, then, that "a world in which [pain and suffering] exist in at least a moderate degree may well be a better environment for the development of moral personalities than would be a sphere that was sterilized of all challenges." In a less-than-perfectly advanced society, however "instead of serving a constructive purpose pain and misery seem to be distributed in random and meaningless ways, with the result that suffering is often undeserved and often falls upon men in amounts exceeding anything that could

be rationally intended” (Hick 1977, 333), with, presumably, no benefit in terms of moral development.

When considering *God’s* role in the existence of these evils, Hick has a response to offer. We are, he thinks, *better off* living in a world in which evil is distributed in at least a somewhat random and undeserved way, and in which not all evil contributes to moral development. Rowe describes Hick’s response in the following way:

Hick asks us to consider a world in which no evil occurs in an amount beyond what is needed to play a role in significant soul-making. Moreover, he asks us to suppose that we all know that this is so. He then argues that the result would be that we would make no significant efforts to overcome evil. But it is precisely such efforts (or the need for them) that lead to significant moral growth and development. A similar line of argument is developed for the haphazard distribution of evil among the just and unjust. In a world in which suffering by a person is permitted only if it is merited or needed for soulmaking, then, if we further suppose that we all know this to be so, no one would make efforts to relieve the suffering of others. Paradoxically, then, soul-making would be considerably limited in a world in which we all knew or rationally believed that suffering is permitted only as it is required for soul-making (Rowe 1991, 119).

This kind of response is (arguably) fine if what we are considering is *God’s* hand in the existence of this evil. That is, if what we are trying to do is to explain why the world is the way it is, then Hick’s response provides a plausible-sounding account (though, of course, it is not without its problems).

However, when we consider social progress, we are considering not how things *are*, but how they *could be*, and this is where Hick’s response is troubling. If it is not desirable for *God* to bring about a world in which evil and suffering is distributed in a just and efficient way, and if the reason for this is that it will undermine the ability of future generations to engage in soul-making, then presumably it is not desirable for *us* to do so either, since the consequences are the same regardless of how the situation is brought about. If this is so, then beyond a certain point, we *ought not* try to bring about a more just world.

It is one thing for Hick to argue that a world without suffering and evil is worse than a world *with* suffering and evil, and that we should therefore not aim at such a world when we consider the kinds of social change we ought to promote. But if the above is correct, then at the same time, we *also* ought not to aim at a world in which suffering and evil is distributed justly and only in the quantities that people can handle. If Hick’s soul-making theodicy requires that we oppose *that*, however, then surely it must oppose any real kind of progressive social change. In other words, Hick’s theodicy commits us to opposing social progress.

Of course, we might have a degree of uncertainty about whether the changes we make to society will contribute or detract from earned virtue. But if we *were* confident that our actions to bring about a just world would undermine soul-making, then we ought not to do it. But it is odd if the more confident we are about making the world just, the less we ought to favour it.

We might also think that we would inevitably fall short of perfection, and that therefore we can happily *try* to make the world more just without eliminating

soul-making (since we will not succeed). But if Hick's view is only able to approve of social progress just so long as we *fail* at it, his soul-making theodicy can hardly be said to be truly *compatible* with soul-making.

### Hick's responses

It seems to me that there are three possible responses that Hick could raise against this criticism. The first is that it is acceptable to be in a world with no excess, undeserved evil if that world is a result of human activity, but not if it were a result of God's actions. If human civilization has developed to this point on its own, then there is no reason to be concerned. In other words, it matters to our assessment of the world *who* has brought about such a state of affairs: if it is God, this is a problem; if human beings, then this is fine.

However, what seems to *matter* about God's distributing evil in a just and efficient way is the consequences, not that it is God who is doing it. If the consequences are the same—that members of that society have no incentive to try to overcome evil—then it does not seem to matter much whether the situation is a result of God's actions or ours. That is, it is difficult to see why the actor should matter much to our assessment of such a world.

Of course, if *we* bring about such a world, it would be as a result of struggle and the long, slow evolution of human civilization. But "human civilization" does not have any intrinsic value one way or the other, for Hick. A more advanced civilization is not more intrinsically valuable than a less advanced one, since what matters is the virtue of its members. The state of a civilization is therefore only extrinsically valuable. Since Hick seems committed to the view that social progress in terms of justice and the distribution of suffering and evil makes a society, beyond a certain point, *less* extrinsically valuable—in that its members are worse off in terms of their intrinsically valuable moral growth—then presumably he ought to oppose this kind of social progress. In other words, the fact that the world without undeserved, unnecessary evil is a result of human activity rather than God's does not seem to change its undesirability.

The second response Hick could raise is that *even if* such a society is ultimately undesirable, we nevertheless ought to act to bring it about, since moral growth consists precisely in our trying to eliminate the evil and suffering of others. What we ought to do is to try to bring about a more just world; it is simply unfortunate that the eventual consequence of our actions leads to a world in which people are unable to develop morally themselves.

However, this surely cannot be right either: we cannot possibly remove expected consequences from our moral decision-making entirely. If we think that the world we are trying to make will actually be worse in important respects than the current one, then surely trying to bring about such a world cannot promote our own moral development: it would not be a moral act.

In fact, we might consider ourselves in the same position to future generations as God is to us vis-à-vis moral development. If God sees us as children rather than as pets, and acts to bring about a world in which we can flourish *as* his children, *we*

might extend that to our relationship to future generations. After all, *we*—in large part—decide on the world that they will inherit. *We* can choose to treat them as children, i.e. as beings with moral potential; or are pets, i.e. beings without moral potential. If what we care about is trying to become in the *likeness* of God, then when the situation is relevantly similar to one He would face, surely we should try to emulate Him. In which case, we ought to oppose social progress. Hick states, for instance, that, “the essence of moral evil is selfishness, the sacrificing of others to one’s own interests. It consists, in Kantian terminology, in treating others, not as ends in themselves, but as means to one’s own ends” (Hick 2016, 270). Sacrificing future generations’ ability to morally progress for our own moral progress in the present is surely not consistent with a morality of selflessness.

Finally, perhaps Hick might say that social progress is perfectly acceptable, since *natural* evil is enough, and is randomly distributed enough, to leave us with a world with real opportunities for moral development. Hick points out that.

in addition to moral evil there is another source of pain and suffering in the structure of the physical world which produces storms, earthquakes, and floods and which afflicts the human body with diseases— cholera, epilepsy, cancer, malaria, arthritis, rickets, meningitis, etc.—as well as with broken bones and other outcomes of physical accident (Hick 2016, 271).

If so, perhaps we can rely wholly on this natural evil for our soul-making.

However, this response runs into the earlier problem that if unnecessary and purposeless moral evil has been eliminated as a source of moral growth—if natural evil is all that is left—then we ought not to try to eliminate that natural evil as well. So, for instance, attempts to eliminate disease—surely one of the largest sources of random natural evil—should be opposed.

In addition, if natural evil is enough to accomplish soul-making, then what is the purpose of a long, slow progression to the point of social perfection? Why has humankind spent 200,000 years living in less-than-perfect societies, with however many more thousands of years ahead of us before we reach our ideal end state? If injustice from social institutions and an unhelpful distribution of moral evil is completely unnecessary for our moral development, surely a perfectly good God would have created us in such a perfect society to begin with. After all, since the development of human civilization has no *intrinsic* value, it should not matter whether that civilization is the result of our own efforts or God’s. If we grow up in a society that best promotes our individual moral growth, then it should not matter whether that society was the result of human activity rather than being a creation of God: all that matters is our individual moral growth.

The obvious response Hick could make here is, of course, that moral development is only one aspect of soul-making. The other—spiritual development, i.e. entering into a personal relationship with God—requires epistemic distance. That is, it requires that we start our existence without direct knowledge of God, so that we can, through our own free choices, come to know Him. Epistemic distance, then, requires that we be unsure about whether or not God exists, and human civilization starting in an ideal society—rather than slowly evolving to that point through its own efforts—will surely show God’s hand. In other words, we need to exist “within

and as part of a world which functions as an autonomous system and from within which God is not overwhelmingly evident” (Hick 2016, 267), we need to live in a world that is “religiously ambiguous, capable both of being seen as a purely natural phenomenon and of being seen as God’s creation and experienced as mediating his presence” (Hick 2016, 267). Only in such a world can we “exist as a person over against the Creator,” since we have the “freedom to open or close [ourselves] to the dawning awareness of God which is experienced naturally by a religious animal” (Hick 2016, 267). A world in which humankind *starts* in a perfect society does not obviously fit this bill.

However, this does not seem to me to be an insurmountable problem for an omniscient and omnipotent God. Epistemic distance requires that there be equally plausible explanations for the universe and its contents that both involve and do not involve a deity. In other words, we need to be able to explain how things got to where they were using only natural laws, rather than by invoking God, if we are to have genuine ambiguity as to His existence. But an omniscient and omnipotent God could surely bring about a perfect society—or at least shortcut its creation—using only natural laws, especially since God presumably decides on the natural laws in the first place. God could intervene in human society through coincidence miracles—miracles that are perfectly consistent with natural laws but allow God to assert His will on the world—thereby making sure that society progresses as quickly as possible to its ultimate state without giving away His own existence.

God might even engage in a Boltzman’s Brain-type scenario, in which the universe is created in one instant, fully formed, with human society already perfected, but with an apparent history that points to its development through natural laws. After all, since the development of human civilization and our evolution from single-celled organisms to homo sapiens is only *extrinsically* valuable, then so long as the result is the same—so long as we end up with the same intrinsically valuable moral growth—it should not matter whether this development and evolution ever *really* took place, or whether it only appears that it did.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Hick’s soul-making theodicy is committed to opposing social progress, no matter how we understand that term. If social progress involves the elimination of suffering and evil, then this removes the possibility of moral progress, and we therefore ought to oppose it. If it consists in social structures that promote earned virtue, then there are a number of possibilities: first, either this social progress allows us to skip parts of our moral development, meaning that our earned virtue is less intrinsically valuable, meaning that we ought to oppose this kind of social progress; or it cannot explain why we are not already living in a society in which we are born on the cusp of perfection. Second, if social progress consists in social structures that promote *faster* moral development for a society’s members by making certain that suffering and evil is justly and purposefully distributed, then this ultimately undermines soul-making. In such a society, if we knew that suffering and evil existed only in the amount and in the distribution that best

accomplishes soul-making, we would have no incentive to oppose evil, and our own soul-making would be stunted. Hence, we ought to oppose this kind of social progress as well.

Since Hick's soul-making theodicy exists to justify the amount and distribution of suffering of evil we actually find in the world, and it does so by explaining why the suffering could not be either more nor less than it in fact is, then it has a hard time allowing that any alternative arrangements could be acceptable. Since social progress always involves alternative arrangements, then Hick's theodicy strongly resists the idea that social progress can ever be desirable. The only way to avoid this conclusion is for Hick to deny that the status quo distribution of suffering and evil is justified. But if Hick were to do that, then the entire purpose of his theodicy would be nullified.

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