

2011

Immanuel Kant, John Hick, and the “Soul-Making” Theodicy

Gian Martinelli
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Martinelli, Gian (2011) "Immanuel Kant, John Hick, and the “Soul-Making” Theodicy," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 2010, Article 18.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2010/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day Collections at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

Immanuel Kant, John Hick, and the "Soul-Making" Theodicy

Submitted by: Gian Martinelli

In his "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," Immanuel Kant considers and attempts to solve the problem of evil by combining many of the traditional theodicies. He focuses particularly on adherence to the moral law in order to work toward being worthy of happiness. For Kant, the fact that happiness becomes a labor toward peacefulness becomes a sort of indicator of God's goodness. This strongly resembles John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy. Hick claims that humans must deal with evil in this world in order to become stronger and more suitable for a union with God in the afterlife. In both cases, the problem of evil is apparently solved by emphasizing God's goodness in encouraging the endurance of moral choices in humans through the burdens of the world. In this paper, I will not only identify problems with the general "soul-making" theodicy, but also the inconsistency of Kant's formulation with the rest of his philosophy.

In his attempt to reconcile God with the evil in the world, Kant concentrates his defense on the primacy of morality. In fact, Kant thinks that these "considerations will settle the matter for us."^{cx1} Through an examination of our free will and morality, he thinks evil will be placed in a proper light. Kant claims that, as humans, we have the unique capability of choosing to act in accordance with the moral law. Before Kant delves entirely into his notion of working toward happiness, he emphasizes our free will, which is the foundation on which our journey toward this worthiness to be happy rests. Furthermore, Kant points out that, "among the many creatures, the human being is the only one who has to work for perfections and for the goodness of his character, producing them from within himself." He lays the groundwork for his

defense by showing that, not only are we unique in having the ability to make moral or immoral choices, but also that we are the only beings who must progress toward goodness through our free will. Indeed, Kant maintains that "in this earthly world there is only progress."^{cxii} An individual's continual procession toward goodness and happiness is entirely dependent on his adherence to the moral law. Moreover, we should strive toward goodness and happiness even though they are not "things to be possessed" in this world.^{cxiii}

In solving the problem of evil, Kant develops God's purpose in making the attainment of goodness and happiness so burdensome. Kant poses the objection that, if these things are unattainable in this world, and we still try to obtain them through the moral law, then the conclusion that God wills evil in the world is inevitable. In refuting the objection, he claims that "God wills the *elimination of evil through the all-powerful development of the germ toward perfection*. He wills that evil be removed through the *progress toward good*."^{cxiv} Here, Kant connects the purpose of laboring through the moral law and God's holiness. It is God's holy and benevolent intention that we continually labor ourselves toward happiness and goodness through our adherence to the moral law. Since our immoral actions are the source of evil, God wills that we eliminate our tendencies to disregard the moral law through a persistent development of our predisposition to the good.

In this way, Kant's notion of happiness becomes something contrary to its common definition. For Kant, happiness in this life is not mere enjoyment or pleasure. Instead, "it is labor, difficulty, effort, the prospect of

tranquility and the striving toward the achievement of this idea which is happiness and a proof already of God's benevolence."^{cxv} Even though evil is in the world, it does not conflict with the concept of God as all-good and all-powerful. God, who is also all-knowing, wills what is best for us, which turns out to be a difficult progression toward perfection. In a way, God wills the evil, or "ill," that goes into this progression as "a special arrangement *for leading the human being toward happiness*."^{cxvi} For Kant, this is ultimately a good thing. Overcoming ill not only allows humans to get closer to the best moral state, but also helps them to learn how to get to that state along the way. As Kant puts it, "ill is necessary if the human being is to have a wish and an aspiration toward a better state, and at the same time to learn how to strive to become worthy of it."^{cxvii}

While Kant's theodicy may be a genuine attempt to reconcile evil with a benevolent God, it is inconsistent with the rest of his philosophy. Throughout Kant's theodicy in the "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," Kant seems to blur his distinction between theoretical and practical reason. In the first *Critique*, Kant defines theoretical knowledge as "speculative if it concerns an object, or those concepts of an object, which cannot be reached in any experience."^{cxviii} Claims concerning God are speculative, since God is beyond our experience. Of course, Kant maintains that, in his lectures, he's basing all of his theology on practical reason, which allows him to talk of God strictly in terms of morality. Practical reason is concerned with "what *ought to be*" the case as opposed to theoretical reason's enquiry into "what *is*" the case."^{cxix}

With these definitions, I question whether Kant is relying solely on practical reason in his theodicy. Indeed, this solution seems to be quite theoretical. Granted, Kant is discussing the centrality of the practical in human beings, but he's also discussing "what is the case" for God by reconciling all of the traditional attributes of God with evil in the world. In fact, it seems that the very nature of most traditional theodicies is theoretical. These theodicies defend and clarify aspects of the concept of the greatest Object. That is to say,

they attempt to justify our epistemic and ontological claims concerning God by securing His attribute of being all-good. In a successful theodicy, we can know that God is all-good and He exists, which is what Kant is trying to accomplish. This creates a strong tension between speculative and practical reason. It thus brings up the question of whether Kant is justified in supplying such a traditional theodicy. Again, I acknowledge that he claims to be using practical reason through all of this, but he seems to blend practical reason with elements of theoretical and speculative reason.

By 1791, Kant appears to have acknowledged this tension in his theodicy in his essay entitled "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy." In this work, Kant explains how every theodicy of the past has failed, including his own formulation. He recapitulates his old argument by stating that "an arduous and sorrowful state in the present life must without exception precede that hoped-for superabundant blessedness—a state in which we are to become worthy of that future glory precisely through our struggles with adversities."^{cxx} This is no longer satisfying for Kant. He seems to be a bit more skeptical of the "soul-making" claim's value as a theodicy. He objects that this "soul-making" claim "can indeed be pretended but in no way can there be insight into it."^{cxxi} I think this is Kant's way of conceding that a theodicy of this sort cannot be given exclusively via practical reason. Kant revokes his theodicy along with the other theodicies of the past by claiming that, since they are not wholly practical, they fail. As an alternative, Kant offers that "the demonstration of [moral wisdom] must be carried out totally *a priori*, hence in no way be founded on the experience of what goes on in the world."^{cxxii} In other words, God is good based on our wholly *a priori* practical deductions from the moral law, which prevail regardless of any *a posteriori* evil in the world.

Recently, the pre-1791 Kantian defense of God's goodness has been revived in John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy. According to Hick, human souls are subjected to the evils in this world in order to become more adequate for a union with God. Like Kant, Hick thinks that

the endurance of moral beings through evil "represents the perfecting of man, the fulfillment of God's purpose for humanity."^{xxxiii} God is justified in retaining a world with so much evil because it allows for the growth of an individual's soul into something that is simultaneously glorifying to God and appropriate for a union with Him. Kant makes a similar claim when he says that ill is in the world so that humans can progress toward a sort of worthiness to be happy. As Hick puts it, the world must be viewed "as an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free insights and responses, into children of God."^{xxxiv} Kant claims that humans need ill to endure toward happiness through the moral law, but this tranquility is unattainable in the world. This seems to imply that a universal and perfect adherence to the moral law is simply not possible. Similarly, Hick claims that there is no correlation between the moral journey of an individual and a "progressive improvement in the moral state of the world."^{xxxv}

Even if we pardon the blur between speculative and practical reason in Kant's formulation, we can still identify problems with the general "soul-making" theodicy. First, there are countless situations throughout history which seem to reflect genuinely unjustifiable suffering even from Hick's perspective. The Holocaust is the most obvious case. Why was such catastrophic suffering arbitrarily placed on a group of people? Surely their souls could have been developed under less suffering. In contrast, there are large groups of immoral people who pass through life seemingly unscathed by suffering. If God uses evil to make souls better, why is the playing field not level? If there are these immoral people who pass through their lives with very little suffering, how are continents of starving children justified? This imbalance creates a tension in the conception of evil as something individuals work through for happiness or spiritual growth. Indeed, one could argue that God could have made a more adequate and less extreme environment for moral and spiritual development.

An analysis of Kant's morally-focused theodicy reflects its importance in the

philosophy of religion. In his lectures, he establishes that God wills that we endure and eliminate evil through a progression toward a perfect adherence to the moral law. Due to the apparent blur between theoretical and practical reason as well as other difficulties in his theodicy, Kant revokes this in his 1791 essay by claiming that the only real theodicy can be accomplished *a priori* through practical reason. With John Hick's adaptation of Kant's older argument, the "soul-making" theodicy appears to be clearer and more convincing. Ultimately, however, the argument is riddled with problems regardless of whether it is taken in the context of Kantian philosophy.