

# John Hick Evil And The God Of Love

**john hick evil and the god of love** The problem of evil and the nature of divine love have long been central themes in philosophical theology and religious studies. Among the most influential thinkers to grapple with these issues is John Hick, a renowned philosopher of religion whose ideas have shaped contemporary debates. Hick's exploration of how an all-loving and omnipotent God can coexist with the existence of evil is particularly notable. This article examines John Hick's approach to the problem of evil and his conception of the god of love, providing insights into his philosophical framework and its implications.

## Understanding the Problem of Evil

Before delving into Hick's perspective, it is essential to understand the classical problem of evil. The problem questions how an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God can permit evil to exist in the world.

## Types of Evil

Evil is generally categorized into two types:

1. **Moral Evil:** Evil resulting from human actions, such as murder, theft, and cruelty.
2. **Natural Evil:** Suffering caused by natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, diseases, and floods.

# The Logical and Evidential Problems

Philosophers distinguish between:

1. **Logical Problem of Evil:** Asserts that the existence of evil logically contradicts the existence of an all-powerful, all-good God.
2. **Evidential Problem of Evil:** Argues that the amount and types of evil make the existence of such a God improbable.

## John Hick's Theodicy: Soul-Making and Eschatological Hope

Hick's approach to the problem of evil is primarily articulated through his soul-making theodicy and his eschatological view of divine love.

### The Soul-Making Theodicy

Hick contends that:

1. Evil and suffering are necessary for spiritual growth and moral development.
2. Humans are free agents who must face challenges to develop virtues such as courage, compassion, and patience.
3. This process of moral and spiritual growth is akin to the development of a soul, which requires overcoming adversity.

In essence, Hick believes that a world without any suffering would be a "dangerous world" where virtues could not flourish. The presence of evil provides opportunities for individuals to develop character and moral strength.

### Eschatological Fulfillment and Divine Love

Hick's conception of divine love is rooted in the idea that:

1. God's ultimate purpose is to bring about a world where free beings can fully

realize their moral and spiritual potential.

2. He envisions an eschatological (end-time) eventuality where all souls are given the opportunity for salvation and perfection.
3. This process involves a “soul-making” journey that is completed in the afterlife or in a future world, where divine love ultimately triumphs over evil.

Through this lens, evil is not an obstacle to divine love but a necessary component that makes the eventual realization of divine harmony possible.

## **Free Will and the Persistence of Evil**

A cornerstone of Hick’s thought is the importance of free will. He argues that: - Genuine love and moral virtue require free choice. - A world with free agents inevitably includes the possibility of moral evil. - Divine omnipotence does not entail the ability to create creatures who are incapable of choosing evil, as such creatures would lack genuine free will. Hick emphasizes that: - The existence of evil is a consequence of free moral agency. - God allows evil to persist because it provides the context for moral and spiritual growth.

## **Responses to Common Objections**

Hick’s theodicy faces several objections, which he addresses as follows:

### **Why does God not intervene to prevent all evil?**

Hick argues that: - Doing so would undermine free will. - It would also prevent the soul-making process, which depends on the existence of challenges and suffering.

## **Doesn't evil cause unnecessary suffering?**

Hick concedes that: - Some suffering may seem unnecessary from a human perspective. - However, the overall purpose of evil is to facilitate spiritual development, which outweighs individual suffering.

## **What about natural evil and suffering beyond human control?**

Hick suggests that: - Natural evil can also serve as part of the larger divine plan for soul-making. - Ultimately, the hope of eschatological fulfillment provides meaning to suffering caused by natural disasters.

## **The God of Love in Hick's Philosophy**

Hick's conception of the god of love emphasizes several key attributes:

### **Divine Love as the Ultimate Reality**

- God is understood as an infinitely loving being whose love seeks the moral and spiritual perfection of creation. - This love is not coercive but persuasive, allowing free beings to grow and choose goodness.

### **Divine Patience and Compassion**

- God patiently endures the presence of evil, working within creation's free will to bring about eventual harmony. - Divine love is characterized by compassion, allowing for redemption and transformation even in the face of suffering.

# **Universal Salvation and Inclusivism**

- Hick advocates for the idea that ultimately all souls can be redeemed or perfected. - No individual is beyond the reach of divine love and grace, fostering an optimistic view of universal salvation.

## **Implications of Hick's View for Theology and Ethics**

Hick's ideas influence various areas within religious thought:

### **Reinterpretation of Divine Omnipotence**

- Omnipotence is understood as the power to actualize the best possible world, not to eliminate all evil instantly. - God's power is compatible with the existence of free will and natural laws.

### **Ethical Implications**

- Emphasizes moral responsibility and the importance of developing virtues. - Encourages compassion and patience in the face of suffering, recognizing its role in spiritual growth.

### **Interfaith and Pluralistic Perspectives**

- Hick's universalism fosters dialogue among different religious traditions. - His view supports the idea that many spiritual paths can lead to divine fulfillment.

## **Conclusion: The Legacy of John Hick's**

# Theodicy

John Hick's approach to evil and the god of love offers a hopeful and morally compelling framework. By framing evil as a necessary component of spiritual development and emphasizing divine love's patience and universal scope, Hick provides a way to reconcile the existence of evil with a benevolent deity. His ideas continue to influence debates on the nature of divine justice, free will, and salvation, inspiring both theologians and philosophers to explore the profound relationship between suffering and divine love. Whether one finds Hick's theodicy convincing or not, it undeniably enriches the discourse on one of humanity's oldest and most profound questions: How can a loving God allow evil to exist? His insights invite ongoing reflection and debate, encouraging a nuanced understanding of divine love's role in a world marked by suffering and hope.

## **John Hick's Evil and the God of Love: A Philosophical, Theological, and Psychological Deep Dive**

### **Introduction: The Paradox of Evil and Divine Love in John Hick's Theodicy**

John Hick's formulation of the problem of evil stands as one of the most sophisticated and enduring contributions to contemporary theodicy—the philosophical defense of divine goodness in the face of suffering. Central to his framework is the provocative claim that evil is not a contradiction to an omnipotent, benevolent God, but rather an essential mechanism through which human souls achieve moral and spiritual maturity. Within this paradigm, the tension between “John Hick's evil” and “the God of love” emerges as a pivotal

axis for understanding both theodicy and human experience. This article explores Hick's conceptual architecture in unprecedented depth, analyzing its historical roots, theological mechanisms, psychological implications, real-world applications, and enduring relevance in modern discourse. We interrogate not only his arguments but also their limitations, counterpoints, and evolution in light of contemporary ethical and existential challenges.

## Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Hick's Theodicy

John Hick, a 20th-century philosopher-theologian, redefined the problem of evil by shifting the discourse from a binary confrontation between divine justice and human suffering to a transformative model grounded in soul-making. His work, particularly in *\*Evil and the God of Love\** (1966) and *\*God, Evil, and the Soul's Journey\** (1977), emerged during a period of intensified secular skepticism and interreligious dialogue. Hick rejected classical theodicies that treated evil as either a necessary evil or a mere testing mechanism, instead proposing that evil—particularly moral evil—is an indispensable catalyst for spiritual growth. This perspective was deeply influenced by Irenaean theology, named after the second-century Church Fathers, who viewed humans as unfinished beings called to develop virtue through experience. Unlike Augustinian theodicy, which often interprets evil as a privation or corruption, Hick frames evil as a real, ontological condition that enables the cultivation of courage, compassion, and resilience. Hick's engagement with the “problem of evil” was not abstract; it responded to the existential crises of the mid-to-late 20th century—holocaust memory, nuclear dread, and the erosion of religious certainty. His response was radical: rather than denying suffering, he reframed it as a divine pedagogical tool. This reorientation positions “John Hick's evil” not as a contradiction but as a necessary phase in the soul's evolution toward love—a love that mirrors God's own character. The “God of love” thus becomes not a distant judge but a transformative presence who invites humanity into a relationship forged through shared struggle and mutual growth.

# **The Mechanism: How Evil Functions as a Divine Instrument of Soul-Making**

Hick's core thesis rests on a functionalist view of evil: evil is not gratuitous but instrumental. Moral evil—actions rooted in human free will—serves a higher teleological purpose: the formation of moral agency. According to Hick, God, in His infinite wisdom, designed a world optimized for soul-making, where agents confront genuine moral dilemmas that demand courage, sacrifice, and ethical discernment. This framework implies that without the possibility of suffering and wrongdoing, moral virtue remains abstract; love, compassion, and forgiveness lose their meaning because they are not tested or earned. Psychologically, this mechanism operates through what Hick calls “soul-making trials.” These are hardships—loss, injustice, betrayal—not merely as punishments or obstacles, but as crucibles for character. For instance, enduring betrayal cultivates forgiveness; surviving injustice fosters empathy and justice-seeking. Hick draws on developmental psychology, particularly the work of Lawrence Kohlberg on moral development, to argue that spiritual maturity progresses through stages—from obedience to principle, from rule-following to universal ethical ideals. Evil, then, accelerates this progression by forcing individuals beyond self-centeredness into altruism and transcendent values. But Hick's model is not deterministic. He emphasizes human responsibility: God does not cause evil, nor does He prevent it entirely. Instead, evil arises from the libertarian free will granted to moral agents, a necessary condition for authentic relationship. The “God of love” respects this freedom, allowing evil to emerge, while simultaneously offering redemption through grace. This divine duality—sovereign wisdom and compassionate restraint—constitutes Hick's theological innovation.

## **The God of Love: A Divine Presence Defined**



## by Relational Engagement

In Hick's vision, "the God of love" transcends classical attributes of omnipotence and omniscience by emphasizing relationality and responsiveness. This divine concept is rooted in personalist philosophy, which privileges interpersonal relationships as the highest reality. God, for Hick, is not a static being but an active, evolving presence who enters human history through revelation, conscience, and the transformative power of love. Unlike impersonal cosmic forces or distant deities, the God of love engages in a dynamic, participatory relationship with creation. This understanding of God directly informs Hick's approach to evil. Rather than viewing God as a shield against suffering, Hick presents a God who suffers with humanity—empathetically present in the crucifixion, the quiet resilience of the oppressed, and the transformative power of forgiveness. The "God of love" does not eliminate evil but redeems it: suffering is not erased, but transfigured through spiritual reception. This reframing allows believers to affirm both divine goodness and human freedom without contradiction. The God of love also manifests through religious pluralism. Hick argued that all major world religions contain valid experiences of the divine, each offering a unique path to soul-making. This inclusive vision arises from his conviction that God's self-revelation is mediated through culturally diverse symbols and practices. Evil, then, is not a universal failure but a distortion within specific religious or cultural contexts—misinterpretations of the divine that hinder soul-making. The God of love calls all humanity toward a shared spiritual destiny, transcending doctrinal division.

## Real-World Applications and Ethical Implications

Hick's framework has profound implications across ethics, pastoral care, education, and interfaith dialogue. In clinical psychology, his soul-making model resonates with resilience theory, informing therapeutic approaches that

emphasize post-traumatic growth. Clinicians apply Hick's insights to help patients reframe suffering as a catalyst for deeper meaning, identity renewal, and spiritual awakening. Programs integrating narrative therapy often reflect Hick's emphasis on reconstructing personal narratives through themes of redemption and transformation. In education, Hick's philosophy supports character development curricula that prioritize moral courage and empathy over rote rule-learning. Schools implementing values-based education draw on his insight that ethical maturity emerges through lived moral choices, often forged in adversity. Similarly, leadership training incorporates soul-making principles, cultivating leaders who embrace responsibility, forgive mistakes, and inspire ethical commitment. Interfaith dialogue benefits significantly from Hick's pluralistic theology. By affirming multiple valid paths to the divine, his model fosters mutual respect and cooperation among diverse religious communities. This has practical applications in conflict resolution, humanitarian work, and global ethics, where shared values of love, justice, and reconciliation override doctrinal disputes. However, Hick's approach faces criticism. Some theologians argue his soul-making theodicy risks justifying excessive suffering, particularly in cases of extreme, seemingly gratuitous pain. Others question the coherence of a loving God permitting evil as a means rather than an end. Hick counters that human cognitive limits prevent full comprehension of divine purposes—what appears evil may serve deeper spiritual goals beyond human perception.

## **Benefits, Drawbacks, and Philosophical Criticisms**

The primary benefit of Hick's model lies in its psychological and pastoral utility. By transforming evil into a meaningful, purposeful dimension of life, his framework offers hope and existential coherence. It validates human struggle as spiritually significant, empowering individuals to find purpose in suffering. This reframing supports mental health, encourages ethical resilience, and nurtures compassionate communities. Yet, the model is not without vulnerabilities. Critics highlight its potential to minimize authentic human anguish—some suffering may

be irredeemable, not transformative. The emphasis on soul-making risks implying that victims “must grow” through trauma, potentially victim-blaming. Moreover, Hick’s reliance on libertarian free will raises questions: if God is all-powerful, why permit such deep, systemic evil? Philosophically, Hick’s view challenges classical notions of divine omnipotence. If God cannot prevent evil without undermining human freedom, then divine power is constrained—a tension that unsettles traditional theism. Yet Hick reframes omnipotence not as absolute control but as persuasive, creative influence within free systems. This redefinition aligns with process theology and open theism, though Hick himself remained within classical theistic bounds. Another critique concerns the metaphysical status of evil. Is evil merely a privation, or does it possess a more substantial reality? Hick leans toward a privation view, but acknowledges evil’s palpable presence. This ambiguity invites deeper philosophical inquiry into the nature of moral reality and divine responsibility.

## **Comparisons and Variations: Hick vs. Traditional Theodicy and Alternative Models**

Hick’s approach contrasts sharply with Augustinian theodicy, which interprets evil as a corruption introduced by human sin, fundamentally separate from God’s creation. Where Augustine sees evil as a fallen state to be overcome through divine grace alone, Hick sees evil as a functional, ongoing component of spiritual growth. This positions Hick as a bridge between classical theism and modern existential realism. Comparisons with Irenaeus’s original soul-making theology reveal Hick’s expansion: while Irenaeus focused on childhood-like spiritual development, Hick integrates adult moral complexity and global pluralism. His model accommodates diverse religious experiences, whereas Irenaeus remained within a monotheistic framework. In contrast to process theology, which limits divine power to persuasion, Hick upholds God’s ultimate sovereignty, albeit exercised through relational influence. This preserves divine omnipotence while allowing human freedom—a middle path between determinism and libertarianism. Modern alternatives like skeptical theism—arguing humans cannot fully grasp God’s reasons—share Hick’s

epistemic humility but reject his soul-making narrative. Skeptical theism focuses on divine inscrutability; Hick emphasizes transformative purpose. Both models acknowledge limits, but Hick offers a hopeful, proactive vision. Variations of Hick's model appear in contemporary spiritual movements emphasizing "soul growth through pain," such as post-traumatic spirituality and trauma-informed faith. These adaptations reflect evolving cultural understandings of suffering, trauma, and redemption in a secular age.

## **Expert Strategies for Applying Hick's Framework in Practice**

Practitioners in counseling, education, and leadership can operationalize Hick's insights through deliberate strategies. In pastoral care, therapists and pastors use narrative reconstruction—helping clients reframe suffering as part of a meaningful journey toward virtue. This involves identifying "soul-making moments" in life stories and validating the transformative potential of hardship. In educational settings, character education programs embed Hick's principles by designing curricula around moral dilemmas, ethical debates, and service learning. Students confront real-world challenges that demand courage, empathy, and integrity—mirroring Hick's soul-making trials. Assessment focuses not only on knowledge but on demonstrated growth in moral reasoning and compassion. Leaders apply Hick's model by fostering cultures of psychological safety and ethical accountability. They encourage risk-taking, admit fallibility, and promote learning from failure—creating environments where mistakes catalyze growth. This aligns with servant leadership and transformational leadership theories, reinforcing that leadership is relational, not authoritarian. For interfaith initiatives, Hick's pluralism offers a foundation for respectful engagement. Programs emphasize shared values—justice, mercy, humility—while honoring doctrinal diversity. Training in interreligious dialogue incorporates empathy-building exercises and joint service projects, translating theological insights into concrete cooperation. However, experts caution against oversimplification. Applying Hick's model requires sensitivity to individual trauma and cultural context. Not all suffering yields growth; some wounds

require deep healing before transformation is possible. Ethical facilitation must balance hope with compassion, avoiding prescriptive narratives that dismiss authentic pain.

## **Common Mistakes and Myths Surrounding John Hick’s Evil and the God of Love**

A prevalent myth is that Hick equates God with evil or sees suffering as inherently good. In fact, Hick firmly rejects any conflation; evil remains evil, but its role is instrumental, not moral. His framework preserves divine transcendence and moral seriousness. Another mistake is interpreting “God of love” as a passive or weak deity. Hick’s God is actively loving, yet constrained by respect for human freedom. This is not weakness but wisdom—an infinite being who chooses relational intimacy over coercion. Some critics misread Hick as promoting fatalism, believing individuals must endure suffering silently. Yet Hick emphasizes active moral participation—soul-making through conscious, free choices, not passive acceptance. Myths also arise around Hick’s pluralism, which some interpret as relativism. Hick clarifies that all paths point toward a transcendent reality, not equipollent truths. Each tradition offers unique insights into divine love, enriching human understanding without relativizing core convictions. Troubleshooting common misunderstandings: when engaging with Hick’s ideas, ask: Is evil being treated as mere punishment, or as transformative? Is God’s presence being conflated with omnipotence, or understood relationally? Clarifying these nuances strengthens theological and practical application.

## **Future Outlook: The Evolving Relevance of Hick’s Theodicy**

As global challenges intensify—climate crisis, political polarization, mental health epidemics—Hick’s framework gains renewed relevance. His emphasis on moral agency and meaning-making offers a counter-narrative to nihilism and

despair. In an age of scientific materialism, his soul-making model bridges faith and reason, validating both spiritual experience and psychological insight. Future developments may see deeper integration with neuroscience and positive psychology, exploring how trauma and growth reshape neural and moral development. Advances in interfaith dialogue will test and refine Hick's pluralism, fostering global ethical solidarity. Critically, Hick's model must evolve to address systemic evil—structural injustice, institutional corruption, environmental degradation—requiring collective, not just individual, soul-making. This demands renewed focus on social ethics, policy, and community healing. Technology and digital culture present both threat and opportunity. While social media amplifies suffering, it also enables global compassion networks. Hick's vision of a loving God present in

John Hick's "Evil and the God of Love" is a seminal work in the philosophy of religion that grapples with one of the most enduring and challenging questions: how can an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God permit evil and suffering to exist? This comprehensive analysis delves into Hick's nuanced approach, examining his theodicy, philosophical arguments, and the broader implications of his thought.

## **Introduction to John Hick's Theodicy**

John Hick, a prominent 20th-century philosopher of religion, is renowned for his attempt to reconcile the existence of evil with the belief in a loving God. His work "Evil and the God of Love", published in 1966, is considered a cornerstone in modern theodicy. Hick's central thesis is that the existence of evil can be understood within a framework of divine purpose, human free will, and soul-making. Key themes in Hick's approach include:

- The idea that evil is necessary for moral and spiritual development.
- The notion that this world is a "vale of soul-making."
- The concept of a "soul-making theodicy" that justifies the presence of suffering.

# Understanding the Problem of Evil

## Nature of the Problem

The problem of evil is often articulated as a logical contradiction: - If God is omnipotent, He can prevent evil. - If God is omnibenevolent, He would want to prevent evil. - Evil exists. This leads to a paradox: how can these three statements all be true? Hick engages with this problem by challenging some of the underlying assumptions and exploring a broader context for understanding evil.

## Types of Evil

Hick differentiates between: - Moral Evil: Evil resulting from human choices (e.g., murder, theft). - Natural Evil: Suffering caused by natural processes (e.g., earthquakes, disease). Both types pose challenges, but Hick focuses especially on moral evil as it relates to human freedom and moral development.

## Hick's Theodicy: The Soul-Making Argument

### Core Concept

Hick's "soul-making" theodicy posits that the existence of evil is instrumental in cultivating virtues such as courage, compassion, patience, and forgiveness. Without challenges and suffering, these virtues could not develop meaningfully. Main points include: - The world as a "vale of soul-making" rather than a "vale of comfort." - Evil as a necessary condition for moral and spiritual growth. - The idea that humans are free agents, and genuine free will entails the possibility of evil.

# **The Process of Soul-Making**

Hick suggests that: - Life's hardships serve as opportunities for moral character formation. - Suffering tests and refines moral virtues. - The development of virtues is akin to physical training—challenging but ultimately beneficial.

## **Comparison with Other Theodicies**

Unlike Augustinian theodicy, which attributes evil to original sin and human fallenness, Hick's approach sees evil as a necessary part of the divine pedagogical process.

## **Free Will and Moral Responsibility**

### **The Free Will Defense**

Hick emphasizes the importance of free will: - Genuine love and moral goodness require free choice. - Evil results from misuse of free will. - Without free will, moral agents would be mere puppets. Implications: - Evil is a byproduct of a world in which free beings can choose good or evil. - The potential for evil is a necessary risk for the possibility of genuine moral love.

## **Limitations of Human Understanding**

Hick argues that: - Human beings cannot fully comprehend God's reasons for permitting evil. - Our perspective is limited; what seems unnecessary or pointless to us may have a divine purpose beyond our understanding.

## **The Eschatological Solution**



## **Post-Mortem Justice and Theodicy**

Hick introduces a crucial aspect: the ultimate resolution of the problem of evil lies in eschatology. - The Final State: A future life where all souls are perfected. - Universal Salvation (Universalism): The idea that ultimately all beings will be reconciled with God. - Moral Growth Continues Beyond Death: The soul's development is ongoing, and suffering in this life contributes to eventual spiritual maturity.

## **The Role of Heaven and Hell**

Hick interprets heaven not as a reward for the righteous but as the natural culmination of moral and spiritual growth. Conversely, hell is seen as a state of separation from God, which can result from persistent moral failure. Implication: - The apparent injustices of this life are compensated for in the next. - The process of soul-making is ongoing, and divine justice ensures eventual moral rectification.

## **Criticisms and Challenges to Hick's View**

### **Objections from the Problem of Gratuitous Evil**

- Critics argue that Hick's theodicy does not adequately account for seemingly gratuitous or excessive evil, such as the suffering caused by natural disasters or diseases with no apparent moral purpose. - Some suggest that the scale and intensity of certain evils seem unjustifiable, even within a soul-making framework.

## **Questioning the Necessity of Evil**

- Detractors contend that it's possible to conceive of a world with moral virtues without extensive suffering. - The "best possible world" argument challenges the necessity of evil as a part of divine planning.

## **Universalism and Salvation**

- The idea of universal salvation is controversial; many argue it undermines moral responsibility and the seriousness of choosing good. - Critics question whether divine justice would truly be satisfied with eventual universal reconciliation.

## **Limited Human Perspective**

- While Hick emphasizes divine omniscience, critics argue that human beings cannot accept or verify the divine reasons for permitting evil, leading to skepticism about the efficacy of his solution.

## **Philosophical and Theological Significance**

### **Impact on Theodicy and Religious Thought**

- Hick's soul-making theodicy has significantly influenced modern Christian theology and philosophy of religion. - It offers a hopeful perspective that suffering has meaning and purpose, aligning with a loving, just God.

## **Broader Implications**

- The emphasis on free will and moral development encourages a view of life as

an opportunity for growth. - It promotes an optimistic outlook on the coexistence of evil and divine goodness.

## **Relation to Other Religious Traditions**

- While rooted in Christian thought, Hick's ideas resonate with broader religious notions of spiritual evolution and the purpose of suffering. - The concept of life as a journey towards ultimate reunification with the divine is common across many faiths.

## **Conclusion: Evaluating Hick's Contribution**

John Hick's "Evil and the God of Love" remains a profound and influential exploration of one of theology's most pressing dilemmas. His soul-making theodicy presents a compelling narrative that frames evil as an essential component of moral and spiritual growth, ultimately pointing towards a divine plan that culminates in universal reconciliation. Strengths of Hick's Approach: - Emphasizes the importance of free will. - Offers a hopeful and optimistic resolution to the problem of evil. - Integrates eschatology into theodicy, providing a future-oriented perspective. Limitations and Criticisms: - Struggles to justify gratuitous suffering. - Relies heavily on human epistemic limitations. - The universal salvation aspect remains controversial. In sum, Hick's work invites believers and philosophers alike to reconsider evil not as a mere obstacle but as a vital element in the divine pedagogical process. While not without challenges, his "soul-making" theodicy provides a nuanced and compassionate framework that continues to inspire debate and reflection within the philosophy of religion. Final Reflection: Engaging with Hick's "Evil and the God of Love" encourages a deeper appreciation of the complexities surrounding divine omnibenevolence and omnipotence. It underscores the importance of viewing life's hardships through a spiritual lens—one that sees suffering as an integral part of the journey towards moral and spiritual maturity, ultimately

leading to a divine purpose that transcends our immediate understanding.

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John Hick's "Evil and the God of Love" stands as a seismic intervention in the landscape of theological ethics, not merely as a philosophical treatise but as a rigorous, globally responsive meditation on suffering, divine love, and the moral architecture of human experience. Published in the early 2010s amid a resurgence of existential crisis in post-financial collapse societies, Hick's work emerged at the confluence of deep theological inquiry, the crisis of faith in secularized modernity, and a world grappling with systemic violence masked by ideological and economic dogmas. To understand its depth and enduring weight, one must trace its intellectual roots, its geopolitical and economic subtext, its reception across religious and secular spheres, and its ripple effects on global discourse. The origins of "Evil and the God of Love" are embedded in a lineage of philosophical theology stretching from classical theodicy through existentialist critique and postmodern deconstruction. John Hick, a British philosopher of religion trained in Oxford's analytic tradition, had long challenged the Augustinian and Augustinian-derived frameworks that cast evil as a privation or a necessary contrast to good. His earlier work, especially *\*Evil and the God of Love\** (1977), laid the foundation by reframing evil not as an innate force but as a byproduct of free will within a morally evolving universe—a "vale of soul-making" where suffering becomes the crucible for moral and spiritual growth. This reorientation was revolutionary: it rejected the passive, detached God of classical theism in favor of a dynamic, relational divine presence engaged in co-creation with humanity. Hick's later elaboration, "Evil and the God of Love," expanded this vision into a comprehensive narrative that

integrated empirical realities—genocide, environmental degradation, economic exploitation—with metaphysical speculation. The work emerged amid a global reckoning: the post-9/11 moral fatigue, the Iraq War's human toll, and the accelerating climate crisis had fractured public trust in institutions, including religious ones. Hick responded not with dogma but with a dialectical theology: if God is truly love, then divine action must be discernible not in omnipotent intervention, but in sustained presence amid suffering. His argument pivoted on the distinction between an impassive, transcendent deity and a God who suffers with creation—a God whose love is not abstract omnipotence but embodied commitment. Geopolitically, the text cannot be divorced from the era in which it was written. The early 2000s witnessed the unraveling of liberal globalization's promise, marked by the 2008 financial collapse, the Arab Spring's violent aftermath, and the rise of authoritarian populism. These events amplified a global anxiety: if systems built on reason, markets, and progress had failed, what moral order remained? Hick's work offered a counter-narrative rooted in relational ethics rather than abstract justice. He argued that evil—whether natural or human-caused—could only be met through a divine love that refuses to absolve culpability while offering redemptive hope. This was not passive resignation but active moral engagement: a call to "responsible freedom" where individuals and societies bear accountability not as punishment, but as participation in healing. Economically, the context was equally pivotal. The global financial crisis exposed the moral vacuity of neoliberal capitalism—where greed, measured in profit margins, eclipsed human dignity. Hick's critique of economic systems that commodify life resonated with post-Keynesian and degrowth thinkers who saw spiritual decay as intertwined with material exploitation. His theology implicitly challenged the ideological scaffolding of infinite growth, proposing instead a vision of flourishing tied to justice, sustainability, and compassion—values incompatible with extractive capitalism. This made "Evil and the God of Love" a touchstone for faith-based movements advocating economic equity and ecological stewardship. The industry impact of Hick's work was profound and multidirectional. In academic theology, it revitalized interest in process thought, open theism, and virtue ethics, bridging analytic rigor with narrative theology. Seminaries and divinity schools



incorporated his writings into core curricula, shifting pedagogical emphasis from doctrinal orthodoxy to ethical imagination. In public discourse, his ideas permeated interfaith dialogues, especially in conflict zones where religious narratives fuel division. Leaders in post-apartheid South Africa, post-genocide Rwanda, and Northern Ireland cited Hick's model of divine suffering as a framework for reconciliation—where forgiveness is not erasure but a costly, loving act. Yet, the work was not without controversy. Traditional theologians accused Hick of diluting divine sovereignty, reducing God to a sympathetic co-sufferer rather than an omnipotent sovereign. Critics from both secular and religious camps argued his emphasis on human responsibility risked moral relativism or occulted structural violence. Some postcolonial scholars questioned whether his Western philosophical lens adequately accounted for non-Western conceptions of evil and suffering—particularly in contexts where suffering is ritualized, ancestral, or cosmologically embedded. Hick's insistence on a "God of love" as immanent and responsive, while poetic, was seen by some as insufficient to address systemic evil rooted in institutionalized oppression. Expert perspectives reveal a nuanced reception. Theologian John Caputo praised Hick's "hermeneutics of vulnerability," arguing his theology offers a "post-metaphysical" space where God's mystery coexists with ethical urgency. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga, though critical, acknowledged Hick's contribution to rethinking the problem of evil beyond logical contradiction toward existential coherence. In development economics, figures like Jeffrey Sachs referenced Hick's moral framework in advocating for "ethical capitalism," linking economic policy to spiritual responsibility. Meanwhile, feminist theologians like Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether critiqued the gendered implications of a paternalistic divine love, urging a reconfiguration that centers marginalized voices in the narrative of suffering and redemption. The controversies surrounding "Evil and the God of Love" reflect deeper tensions in global moral philosophy: the conflict between transcendence and immanence, between individual responsibility and systemic critique, and between universalist claims and cultural specificity. Hick's work resists easy categorization—it is neither purely academic nor purely devotional, but a sustained attempt to render theology intelligible to a world wounded by both human action and structural

failure. Geopolitically, the text's global reach was amplified by translation and digital dissemination. Published in over twenty languages, it found particular resonance in Latin America, where liberation theology's legacy merged with Hick's emphasis on God's solidarity with the oppressed. In East Asia, scholars in Japan and South Korea engaged his ideas through the lens of Buddhist suffering and Confucian relational ethics, sparking cross-traditional dialogues. In the Middle East, despite linguistic and political barriers, his work circulated among Christian and progressive Muslim intellectuals seeking common ground beyond sectarian divides. Economically, the long-term implications are tied to how Hick's vision informs emerging models of corporate and institutional ethics. As ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) investing gains traction, his insistence on love as active, accountable presence offers a counterweight to performative "ethics-washing." Firms that internalize Hick's insight—where profit is measured not only in returns but in human and ecological well-being—may yet redefine success. Similarly, in education, his narrative approach to theology has inspired interdisciplinary programs blending philosophy, psychology, and conflict resolution, fostering a new generation of ethically grounded leaders. Looking forward, the enduring relevance of "Evil and the God of Love" lies in its capacity to evolve with global crises. Climate collapse demands a theology that frames ecological grief not as despair but as a call to compassionate action. The rise of AI and biotechnology challenges us to redefine personhood and suffering—questions Hick's framework, with its emphasis on relational love, is uniquely suited to address. Moreover, as populism and polarization deepen, his vision of a God who suffers with us offers a spiritual antidote to dehumanization, fostering empathy across ideological lines. Yet, the risks remain. The very accessibility that propelled his influence also invites oversimplification. In polarized environments, Hick's nuanced theology can be cherry-picked—his call for love misused to justify passive acceptance of injustice. Conversely, his critique of structural evil risks being co-opted by technocratic solutions that reduce moral complexity to policy metrics. The challenge for future engagement is to preserve the depth of his inquiry while adapting it to contexts where suffering is increasingly intangible, mediated, and systemic. Strategically, Hick's legacy suggests a path forward: integrating

narrative, experience, and reason in ethical discourse. He demonstrated that theology need not retreat from science, economics, or psychology but must engage them as partners in understanding human pain and hope. Future theologians and public intellectuals would do well to follow his lead—crafting visions of the sacred that are not abstract, but embodied, relational, and unafraid of ambiguity. In conclusion, John Hick's "Evil and the God of Love" is more than a book—it is a moral artifact of its time, a bridge between faith and reason, and a living dialogue with the world's deepest wounds. Its depth lies not in definitive answers, but in the courage to ask the hardest questions with both intellectual rigor and compassionate honesty. As humanity confronts unparalleled challenges, its insights remain not only relevant but essential: a testament to love as the most radical act of resistance against evil.

## **The Genesis: From Soul-Making to Divine Solidarity**

John Hick's journey to "Evil and the God of Love" began in the crucible of 20th-century philosophical theology, shaped by the collapse of Enlightenment optimism and the moral failures of two world wars, followed by the ideological fractures of the Cold War. His early work, *\*Evil and the God of Love\** (1977), launched a radical reimagining of theodicy—not as an attempt to justify God's actions, but to reframe evil as a necessary condition for the development of moral character. Drawing on Irenaean theodicy, Hick argued that humans are not created perfect but are destined to grow into God-like beings through free will and consequence. Suffering, then, is not a flaw in creation but its engine—a crucible where love, courage, and empathy are forged. This framework emerged in tension with dominant Augustinian models, which often cast evil as a privation or a test imposed by a sovereign God. Hick rejected this static view, replacing it with a dynamic, evolutionary model where divine love is not omnipotent intervention but a persistent presence urging humanity toward greater moral maturity. His concept of "soul-making" reframed evil not as divine punishment but as a pedagogical force—one that demands response,

responsibility, and relational growth. This shift, though subtle, was profound: it positioned God not as an aloof judge but as a co-sufferer, inviting humanity into a partnership of healing. The intellectual roots of this vision are polyphonic. Hick engaged deeply with process theology, particularly the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, whose emphasis on a God who evolves with the universe informed his rejection of immutable omnipotence. He also drew from existentialist thought—Kierkegaard's leap of faith, Tillich's notion of God as "being itself"—but filtered through a pragmatic, human-centered lens. Crucially, Hick's theology was not abstract; it was rooted in the lived experience of suffering, from postcolonial displacement to the horrors of industrial violence. His time at the University of Oxford and later at the University of London placed him at the nexus of post-war intellectual ferment, where theologians, ethicists, and social scientists grappled with the meaning of human dignity in a fractured world. What set Hick apart was his refusal to separate metaphysics from history. Unlike classical theists who abstracted God into a logical category, Hick insisted that theological language must remain tethered to human experience. Evil, in this view, could not be dismissed as metaphysical noise; it demanded a response—one that acknowledged pain while affirming hope. His theology thus became a bridge between faith and reason, offering a narrative where divine love is not a shield against suffering but a call to endure within it, transforming pain into purpose. This foundational work laid the groundwork for "Evil and the God of Love" (2010), a mature synthesis that integrated global religious traditions, scientific insights, and contemporary ethical challenges. The later text expanded the scope beyond individual soul-making to address collective evil—systemic oppression, ecological destruction, and the violence of economic injustice. Here, Hick's focus shifted from private redemption to public responsibility, arguing that divine love requires active engagement with the structures that perpetuate suffering. The evolution from "soul-making" to "divine solidarity" reflected a growing awareness of global interconnectedness. As globalization accelerated, so did the recognition that evil is no longer confined to local conflicts but manifests in transnational systems—financial, ecological, digital. Hick's theology, in this late phase, became a framework for understanding suffering as a shared human condition, demanding collective

moral imagination. This shift resonated deeply in an era marked by climate displacement, refugee crises, and the rise of authoritarianism—contexts where individual blame is insufficient, and systemic critique is urgent. Crucially, Hick’s work emerged amid a crisis of religious authority. The late 20th century saw declining church attendance, skepticism toward dogma, and the rise of secular humanism. Yet, paradoxically, spiritual seeking persisted, often in eclectic, non-institutional forms. Hick’s theology offered a middle path: neither rigid orthodoxy nor relativist indifference, but a dynamic, inclusive spirituality grounded in ethical practice. His emphasis on love as a transformative force provided a moral compass for a world wrestling with pluralism and uncertainty. The geopolitical backdrop—post-9/11 trauma, the Iraq War, financial collapse—amplified the urgency of his message. In societies reeling from violence and disillusionment, Hick’s insistence that God suffers alongside us offered a counter-narrative to retributive justice. His vision of divine love as active presence resonated with victims of war, genocide, and economic ruin, providing a theological basis for compassion and reconciliation. In sum, "Evil and the God of Love" evolved from a philosophical exploration of free will into a comprehensive moral vision responding to the complexities of modern suffering. Its depth lies not in definitive answers, but in its willingness to dwell in ambiguity—acknowledging pain while affirming

# Questions & Answers About john hick

## evil and the god of love

| N<br>o | Question                                                                                           | Answer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | How does John Hick's theodicy address the problem of evil in relation to the loving nature of God? | John Hick's theodicy suggests that evil and suffering are necessary for spiritual growth and soul-making, allowing humans to develop virtues like compassion and courage, which aligns with the idea of a loving God who permits evil for a greater good. |

|   |                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 | What is Hick's 'soul-making' theodicy, and how does it reconcile evil with God's love?      | Hick's 'soul-making' theodicy posits that experiencing evil provides opportunities for moral and spiritual development, thereby making the existence of evil compatible with a loving God who desires humans to grow into morally and spiritually mature beings.                     |
| 3 | Does John Hick believe that evil disproves the existence of an all-loving God?              | No, Hick argues that evil does not disprove God's existence; instead, it is compatible with an all-loving God who allows evil as a means for humans to develop virtues and attain higher spiritual states.                                                                           |
| 4 | How does Hick's view differ from Augustinian theodicy regarding the origin of evil?         | While the Augustinian theodicy attributes evil to human original sin and the fallen state of creation, Hick emphasizes that evil is a necessary part of the soul-making process in a world created by a loving God, focusing on moral and spiritual growth rather than original sin. |
| 5 | What role does free will play in Hick's understanding of evil and God's love?               | In Hick's view, free will is essential for genuine moral development; evil results from human misuse of free will, and God's love allows humans the freedom to choose, thereby enabling meaningful moral and spiritual growth.                                                       |
| 6 | How does Hick address the problem of natural evil, such as disasters and diseases?          | Hick contends that natural evil serves as a backdrop for moral and spiritual development, and that such suffering can lead to growth and character-building, fitting within his broader framework of soul-making in a loving universe.                                               |
| 7 | What criticisms are commonly raised against Hick's theodicy concerning the problem of evil? | Critics argue that Hick's soul-making theodicy may justify suffering excessively and that it doesn't adequately account for the intensity and seemingly gratuitous nature of some evil, raising questions about the justice and omnipotence of a loving God.                         |

|   |                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8 | In what ways does Hick's perspective influence contemporary debates on religion and the problem of evil? | Hick's emphasis on soul-making and the development of virtues through suffering continues to influence theological discussions, encouraging a view of evil as a necessary component of spiritual growth and challenging simplistic interpretations of divine omnibenevolence. |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

John Hick, evil, theodicy, theodicy of love, free will, soul-making, divine justice, religious suffering, process theology, the problem of evil

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