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# Challenging Religious Issues

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# Challenging Religious Issues

## Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

### Issue 8 Summer 2015

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## Eternal Life as a Present Possession

Mikel Burley

*This article examines the contention, made by some Christian theologians, that 'eternal life' is best understood to mean not a life that goes on forever, but a characteristic of, or perspective upon, the finite life that each of us is now living. It includes a tentative suggestion that certain ideas in theoretical physics and the philosophy of time are comparable to this contention.*

*Specification link: WJEC RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2).  
Life, death and life after death.*

### What does 'eternal life' mean?

It is often assumed that Christians who believe in eternal life believe that, after death, everyone (or at least some people) will live again, and that this renewed life will be one that never ends; it is eternal in the sense that it goes on *forever*.

There are various ways in which one might try to conceptualise such a life. For example, someone might suppose it to be one that is lived in heaven, imagined as a place of perfect happiness and goodness separate from the earth. Someone else, meanwhile, might suppose that eternal life is what we take on once we have undergone bodily resurrection on this earth, albeit an earth that will have been dramatically transformed.

A third view is that heaven and earth are not different locations, but two

'dimensions of God's good creation' (Wright, 2007, p. 122); resurrection, eternal life, will involve an infusion of the whole universe with heavenly, or divine, qualities (Polkinghorne, 2003, p. 22).

There are also ways of interpreting 'eternal life' that do not equate it with living forever. Some Christians, including some theologians, understand eternal life to be a *present possession* – something that characterises the life one is living here and now. Believing in eternal life in this sense is not necessarily incompatible with believing that it goes on forever; it is possible to believe that, although one can indeed possess eternal life here and now, this present possession is merely a 'foretaste' of what is to come (Baillie, 1934, p. 246). However, some proponents of the idea that eternal life is (or can be) a present possession deny that one's current life

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provides merely a foretaste; they maintain that eternal life, if it is possessed at all, is wholly and exclusively a characteristic of the finite life that one is now living.

Understanding what the latter claim amounts to is a difficult task, and further explanation will be offered below. But first let us survey three of the many reasons why someone who regards himself or herself as a Christian might feel uncomfortable with the idea that 'eternal life' means living forever.

### **Problems with the idea of living forever**

#### ***Incompatibility with modern science***

One pervasive problem is that belief in life after death of any sort is widely assumed to be incompatible with the kind of scientifically-informed naturalistic worldview that prevails in many mainstream modern societies. Although Christians might aspire to reject certain aspects of that worldview or to find ways of accommodating it within a broader religious perspective, pressure to forego beliefs that seem to conflict with the theories of natural science remains strong (Badham, 2013, p. 12).

#### ***Risk of complacency***

A second problem consists in the idea that a belief that 'eternal life' means living forever could encourage complacency, in the sense of diminishing the believer's commitment to moral and political improvement. If we regard our lives as finite in duration, then our decisions and actions are imbued with 'a significance and urgency' that they would otherwise lack (Jantzen, 1994, p. 268); it becomes imperative that we do all we can to eliminate injustice and enhance the well-being of everyone in this life. But if death is not final, and we expect suffering to be

compensated for in the next life, then the motivation to act in these ways is liable to be weakened (Lash, 1979, p. 180).

#### ***Corrupting incentives***

A further problem with a belief in living forever is that it might not only encourage complacency, but also damage one's moral character by offering self-interested incentives for what would otherwise be benevolent actions.

Many people would agree, for example, that giving money to charity because one believes this to be the right thing to do is morally better than giving it because one expects to receive praise from one's friends for doing so; in the latter case, the self-interested nature of the motivation detracts from the moral quality of the action.

Similarly, behaving virtuously in the hope of being rewarded after death is likely to be seen by many as morally worse than behaving virtuously without seeking to gain anything for oneself (Main, 2013, p. 89). Indeed, some would say that the person who performs certain actions for the sake of a possible reward is not really behaving morally at all; rather, he or she is behaving merely prudentially.

Belief in a life subsequent to death may not necessarily entail such merely prudential motives, but some might think that it runs a strong risk of doing so.

### **Affirming eternal life as a present possession**

The above problems could, no doubt, be responded to in ways that seek, from a Christian perspective, to defend the credibility of belief in living forever (see, e.g., Taliaferro, 1990). Here, however, my purpose is to elaborate the response that takes the form, not of trying to

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defend belief in living forever, but rather of rejecting that particular interpretation of 'eternal life' in favour of the view that eternal life is an exclusively present possession.

Scriptural support for the latter view is often held to be derivable from the Johannine writings, especially John's Gospel, in which Jesus declares that 'whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life' (John 5:24), and John's First Letter, in which the author says, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13).

Passages such as these are indicative of a *realised eschatology*, the idea that 'Judgment has come in Christ' and that 'those who are related to him by faith' do not have to wait until after death to receive eternal life; they have it already (Hill, 1967, p. 194). Although putting it in these terms could be taken to mean that those whom Jesus and John were addressing will never die or that death is not final, some interpreters have maintained that it also opens up the possibility of understanding eternal life as something that one can have *even though death is final*.

Several well-known modern theologians have affirmed what appear to be versions of this idea, though often expressed in ambiguous terms. Theologians and philosophers who have been less equivocal include Nicholas Lash and D. Z. Phillips.

Lash, for example, argues that phrases such as 'life *after* death' ought to be understood as metaphorical ways of speaking and that eternal life consists not in a temporally extended life subsequent to the present one, but in the entirety of the present life itself, with its distinct beginning and with death as its

end. The crucial point for Lash is that this life, though finite in duration, is eternal from the perspective of God, by whom it is created and loved; one's life participates in God's eternity in the sense that 'it is ... eternally an expression of God' (Lash, 1979, p. 179).

But what, one might ask, does it mean for one's life to participate in, and hence be an expression of, the life of God? Phillips addresses this question by emphasising the *moral* transformation that Christian faith enjoins us to undergo. 'Eternity', he asserts, 'is not *more* life, but this life seen under certain moral and religious modes of thought' (Phillips, 1970, p. 49). Central among the modes of thought that Phillips has in mind is the principle of 'dying to the self' or 'self-renunciation', which involves replacing self-centred desires and motives with love for others and with the acknowledgement that everything that comes to us – including the very capacity for love and forgiveness – is a gift from God. To live a life characterised by these qualities is, according to Phillips, to participate in the life of God, and that is what it means to have eternal life.

### Some closing remarks on eternalism in the philosophy of time

There are, unsurprisingly, criticisms that could be, and have been, made of the sort of conception of eternal life envisaged by thinkers such as Lash and Phillips (see, e.g., Hebblethwaite, 1979; Haldane, 2010, pp. 160–175). Central among these criticisms is the contention that a merely 'metaphorical' interpretation of key concepts such as those of eternal life, resurrection and the life to come, is insufficient to sustain a vigorous Christian faith. In response, Lash would attempt to turn the tables,

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contending that it is precisely the assumption that such concepts must be understood ‘literally’ that leads to difficulties, for it is, Lash maintains, far from clear what could constitute a coherent ‘literal’ account (Lash, 1979, p. 167).

Before rounding off this article, however, it should be noted that assistance for a (non-metaphorical) conception at least analogous to that of Lash can be found in the unlikely domains of theoretical physics and the philosophy of time. Within these latter disciplines, one popular way of conceiving of the universe is as a ‘spacetime manifold’ comprising four dimensions: the three dimensions of space fused with the single dimension of time (Dieks, 2014).

Some philosophers have called this conception of the universe *eternalism* (Miller, 2013). They argue that, although, from our limited position in time, we tend to regard the future as not yet existing and the past as no longer existing, this is merely an appearance. When the

universe is considered in its entirety, it cannot be thought to exist *in* time, because time is one of its components; hence the universe has a timeless or eternal reality, and the objects and events that constitute it partake of that reality. Our lives, being among those constituents, have a kind of eternal reality, too (Lockwood, 2005, pp. 53–54, 69).

This vision of a four-dimensional universe is intriguingly consonant in certain respects with the common theological idea that the universe as *known by God* is indeed a unity, ‘which lacks nothing of the future and has lost nothing of the past’ (Boethius, [c. 524 AD] 1969, Book V, §6).

Surprisingly, then, a comparative study of theology, theoretical physics and the philosophy of time might yield resources for elaborating the idea that our lives possess a kind of eternity inasmuch as each of us occupies a determinate, though finite, position within the total history of the universe.

### Glossary

*Eschatology*: a system of doctrines concerning ‘last things’, including the end or goal of human life.

*Eternalism*: (in theology) the view that God exists apart from time; (in the philosophy of time) the view that ‘past’ and ‘future’ things and events are no less real than present ones.

*Johannine*: of or relating to the apostle John or to the New Testament books attributed to him.

*Naturalistic worldview*: a conception of reality that excludes anything other than natural phenomena.

*Prudential action*: an action guided by practical, and often by self-interested, concerns.

*Spacetime manifold*: the whole complex universe, including the dimension of time as well as the three dimensions of space.

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### Link

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/eternity/> Helm, P. Eternity. *Stanford Encyclopedia of*

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### Discussion points

1. Are there good reasons for rejecting the idea that 'eternal life' means a life that goes on forever? If so, what are they?
2. Can any sense be made of the claim that eternal life is (or can be) a present possession?
3. How may the idea of God's perspective on the world help us to make sense of the contention that our lives, though finite, are nevertheless eternal?

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## Kant on God and the Good: Hoping for Happiness

Christopher Insole

*Kant holds that we should be moral simply because it is the right thing to do, and not because it will bring us good consequences. At the same time, he argues that we should believe in God, as only God can bring it about that being moral leads to happiness. Is there a contradiction here? The article argues that there is not, and that when we understand what 'being good' means for Kant, the hope for happiness properly follows. Although Kant is thought not to value happiness much, the article argues that happiness is important for Kant, but only the right sort of happiness.*

*Specification links: RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2), Religious authority [in religion and ethics, philosophy of religion]; also RS 3 ETH: Studies in Religion and Ethics (A2), 2. Kant's moral theory.*

### Introduction

Kant claims that in some sense it is crucial to believe in God, in order to secure the possibility of morality. Some scholars have found the relationship between these aspects of Kant's thought, goodness and God, to be disastrous and self-contradictory. One of the anxieties can be this: the reason why Kant believes in God is that he wants to be able to hope that being moral leads to happiness. But Kant should not really want this, because he also wants it to be the case that we act morally not because of 'external incentives', but simply because it is the right thing to do. Kant crystallizes this notion of the 'purity' of morality in his text, the *Groundwork of*

*the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), where he sets out his notion of the 'categorical imperative', where moral laws are understood as those commands ('imperatives') which can be regarded as applicable to all moral agents. The suspicion can be that where God remains in Kant's thought, as the guarantor of happiness, this is an untidy loose-end, which Kant ought to have trimmed. Where Kant failed, we, at least, can finish the job of removing such 'impure' incentives from morality.

I want, first of all, to try to show that there is a way of reading Kant, whereby his account of what it is to 'strive to be good' obviously cries out for, and tips over into, some sort of belief in God.

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To facilitate this, we need to explore some aspects of what Kant means by 'striving to be good'. To do that, I need to open up some textures in ways in which we come to believe something. Kant is interested in different ways in which we can 'hold for true' a range of propositions and commitments, in relation to various aspects of rational human endeavour, not all of which can be reduced to the task of 'knowing facts'.

### Reason: theoretical and practical

I might say that 'I believe that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ', that 'murder is wrong', and that 'I am now in Wales'. We use the same word, 'believe', but quite different routes are taken in each case when assenting to these propositions: mathematical theory in the first case, a moral evaluation in the second, and a description in the third. All of these are reasonable beliefs, but my reason is being employed in different ways. Thinking about the different textures of reason will help us to grasp Kant's moral philosophy.

Fundamentally, for Kant, human reason is involved in a single and unified encounter with reality. Nonetheless, this single encounter has different aspects, along the lines just explored. Kant is interested in a distinction that he draws from an Aristotelian tradition, between reason as it is involved with knowing, and reason as it has to do with making and doing. When reason is concerned with knowing, Kant calls this reason in its theoretical (or 'speculative') capacity, or more briefly, 'theoretical reason'. When reason is concerned with what we should do or make, he calls this reason in its practical capacity, or more briefly, 'practical reason'.

I want to unpack here the use of the word 'should' in the statement above,

that practical reason informs us what we should do or make. Practical reason is a large silo of a concept, and includes all thinking towards an end. The structure of practical reasoning is simple: if you want to achieve that end, do this. If you want to make this, make it like so. If you want to be an effective burglar, become good at picking locks. If you want to be an excellent tennis player, practice every day.

The distinction between practical and theoretical reason responds to a fairly intuitive notion accessible to most of us. I could pile up lists of 'facts' in the process of describing a situation according to theoretical reason: from descriptions of brain synapses to accounts of molecular structure, atmospheric conditions, and social and political history. But no matter how high I build the fact mountain, I might not reach an evaluative and moral conclusion, one that tells me what ought to be done or avoided, for example, that 'torture is wrong'. For this, I need reason operating according to its practical aspect ('what we should do'); practical reason will attend carefully to what theoretical reason tells it about a situation, but it also has something to tell theoretical reason.

### Goodness and happiness

So, now, imagine that the end I want to achieve is not being good at tennis, but simply 'being good', to become what it is that I ought to be. Kant has a notion of the 'highest good', which involves our full flourishing in our properly ordered rational human nature. Such flourishing leads to harmony, community and happiness. Kant is centrally concerned with the strand of practical reasoning ordered to the achievement of this end. Hence practical reason is oriented to what we ought to do if we want to be

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good, and to express our fundamental rational nature.

True and proper 'happiness', Kant tells us, the sort of happiness we should hope for, is:

The state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence everything goes according to his wish and will. (CPrR, 5: 124)

The key qualification here is that happiness is the state where everything goes, not according to any old 'wish and will', but according to the 'wish and will' of a 'rational being' in relation to the 'whole' of his existence. 'He is worthy of happiness', Kant writes, whose 'actions are directed to harmony' with those actions which other rational beings would desire. When the whole is functioning properly, with everyone willing what they ought in community with everyone else, then 'from the whole', 'the happiness of each part' is guaranteed (R 7058). Repeatedly, Kant talks of the purpose of morality as a harmonious willing of universal happiness:

Morality consists in the laws of the generation of true happiness from freedom in general. (R 7199, 19: 272-273)

Morality is grounded on the idea of universal happiness from free conduct. (R 6958, 19: 213-214; 1776-1778)

Insofar as human beings really judge in accordance with moral principles. (Happiness would be the natural consequence of that.) (R 1171, 1772-1775; 15: 518).

Universal happiness is the true consequence and end of morality, where 'happiness' involves everyone always willing the good, in harmony with all other

wills. Kant's conception of the highest good encompasses both morality, and universal and harmonious happiness as a consequence of morality.

In a universe where all human beings desire and will the good, there would be a wonderful harmony between all rational beings, all willing and moving towards the same ends. There would be a community of rational beings, everyone willing ends that could be willed by everyone else. In this glorious vision, all rational beings perfectly become what they ought to be, in a harmonious community with other rational beings, and with God: this would be, for Kant, happiness. Nothing else counts as proper happiness.

### Hope and God

Is it the case that rational beings, in this picture, are striving towards happiness, in that they seek the state of happiness as their goal? Well, no, not directly. They seek to be good, by willing that which can be universally willed by everyone (the 'categorical imperative'). Happiness, though, is the sure and certain consequence of this harmonious and universal willing. Here we have an answer to the anxiety that we opened with. We asked whether Kant's hope for happiness, for which he needs God, is in violation of the 'purity' of the moral law, whereby we do the good just because it is the right thing to do. In response, Kant, on my reading, would be able to say: 'No, the incentive to be good is always just that it is the right thing to do; but happiness should be the consequence of our being good. Only God could structure the universe such that this is so, and, therefore we are right to believe in God. We can hope in happiness, and in God, therefore, without violating the

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purity of the moral law. In a parallel way, Thomas Aquinas would say that what should ultimately move us and be our 'incentive', is our desire to know and love God (this is Aquinas' equivalent to Kant's 'being moral'), but that enjoying happiness is the consequence of this. The central idea is that something can be a proper consequence of an incentive, without itself becoming an incentive: the incentive is morality in itself, but happiness is the consequence.

As things currently stand for us, the highest good is by no means realised. It is not the case that everybody strives or manages to be good, and those who do are by no means rewarded with universal and harmonious happiness. The history of the world, like the history of each institution, country and individual is a history of pride, arrogance, cruelty, self-obsession, vanity, suffering and loss. Things are not how they 'ought to be'. This tips us over into the question: 'what can I hope?'

It is important that we understand the natural and inevitable momentum towards this question from Kant's answer to the question 'what should I do?' The answer to the 'what should I do?' question is: 'I should do the good, which means to will that which can be harmoniously and universally willed by all people, such that – were all people to do this – happiness would be the inevitable consequence'. A deep need for happiness is built into Kant's answer

here. The question 'what can I hope?' arises naturally from this answer. Can I hope for the happiness that would be the inevitable consequence of all people willing only that which can be harmoniously and universally willed by all people?

Kant considers that we can and should hope for such happiness. We need then to ask 'what sort of reality would we need to posit so as to guarantee this possibility?' Kant's answer is that it must be a creative mind who is by its nature good, and by its will the origin of all that exists and the guarantor of all that will be. In other words, Kant thinks we need to believe in God.

Kant is often presented as a stern and duty-obsessed figure, who instructs us that we must do the right thing regardless of the consequences, and regardless of whether it makes us or others happy. He is presented in numerous ethics textbooks as in stark opposition to moral perspectives that seek happiness, such as utilitarianism and, on some accounts, virtue ethics. But it would be wrong to say that Kant has no interest in happiness. He is opposed to our striving for partial, selfish or incomplete forms of happiness. But Kant approves of happiness, holding out a deep hope for it, when happiness is conceived in sufficiently cosmic and universal terms, such that everyone is happy for the right reasons.

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### Glossary

*Categorical imperative:* a moral law that should be applied to all rational agents.

*Highest Good:* where the moral law is obeyed, and where, as a consequence but not an incentive, those who follow the moral law are proportionately happy.

*Practical reason:* reason concerned with doing or making things (for example, 'how to play tennis').

*Theoretical reason:* reason concerned with knowing the truth (for example, '1 + 1 = 2').

### Link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkfb0TQN4I>. A YouTube interview on Kant with the author of this article:

### Discussion points

1. 'Maybe the truth about the universe is, in the end, just sad. It would be desirable if things worked out differently, such that happiness arises from moral action; but it does not, or not always, and certainly not for ever, and we have no evidence for supposing that it ever will. Part of our moral struggle, our heroism, consists in being good anyway, and in making the best of a bad job.' What sense, if any, can be made of this claim?
2. Do you agree with Kant that we need to have a hope in happiness in order to be moral? And could belief in God provide such hope?
3. What do you think of the claim that 'something can be a proper consequence of an incentive, without itself becoming an incentive'? One example is given here: the incentive is morality in itself, but happiness is the consequence. Can you think of other examples? Consider, in particular, friendships and relationships between parents and children.
4. Does the idea that Kant is interested in happiness contradict what you have previously learnt about him? If it does, do you like Kant less or more as a result?

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## Soul-making and 'Horrors'

Ian James Kidd

*The article introduces the problem of evil before focusing on the theodicy of soul-making and the challenge of 'dysteleological evil' that it faces.*

*Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 3. Evil and sufferings.*

All of the theistic religions are obliged to offer responses to the 'problem of evil'. Many religious people experience terrible evil and suffering – painful illness, the death of loved ones, persecution and oppression – and they naturally seek some explanation of why the God whom they love and trust in allows such things to occur. Many religious thinkers have therefore offered reasons for why God would allow evil. Usually their strategy is to argue that suffering has to be a part of our life and world, if we are to enjoy a 'higher-order good' – something that is so valuable that it is worth the price of suffering. The thought is that God recognises that certain goods are only possible in a world of suffering, so we ought to trust God's judgement. To respond to the problem of evil, then, we have to find the 'higher-order goods' that evil brings with it.

This is the project of *theodicy* – trying to justify God's allowing us to experience evil, by identifying His reasons for doing so. A good theodicy does three things.

First, it shows that evil has a purpose, that it contributes something, and so isn't meaningless. A good God would not let us suffer for no reason. Second, it shows that the purpose that evil serves *justifies* that evil. It's no good to say that the purpose of evil is to entertain wicked people: that's a purpose, for sure, but it doesn't justify people's suffering. The purpose has to be *good*, either morally or spiritually. And third, a good theodicy has to show that the good that evil serves can't be achieved in any other way. If we say that evil is justified because it serves a purpose, there really must be no other way to achieve that purpose. Inflicting evil is a serious thing, and so needs very good reasons.

One of the most popular theodicies is called the 'soul-making theodicy'. It was introduced by the philosopher of religion John Hick in his 1966 book, *Evil and the God of Love*. The term 'soul-making' was taken from the poet John Keats, but the theodicy itself is much older. As Hick says, it was first developed by the

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second century 'Church Father', St Irenaeus, although it could be argued that it failed to take off until Hick revived it. Today, however, it is one of the most important and influential theodicies available today (see Hick, 2009).

### Soul-making and suffering

The general thought is that human beings are imperfect: we are, says Hick, 'still in a process of creation', and not yet in a 'finished state' (Hick, 1966, pp. 253-254). This is a good starting point because it is realistic. No one could seriously claim that they are anywhere near morally perfect, except perhaps the saints, but few of us are saints! (And even the saints had to struggle – with temptation, lust, and so on – to achieve their saintly status.) But even if we are not perfect, says Hick, we are still *perfectible*. We can choose to begin a process of ethical and spiritual self-perfection, through careful discipline – long, hard and difficult, for sure, but still wholly within our reach. God did not create us as perfect beings, because if he did, then we would be robbed of all sorts of important experiences and achievements.

What would we have missed out on if we were created perfect? Well, several things. For a start, we could not have *freely chosen* to seek to perfect ourselves. That first choice to follow the path of goodness is crucial, and we praise people for making it. Next, we could not learn to exercise the courage and discipline to confront evil and suffering, whether it is our own or other peoples. And finally, we could not know what it is like gradually to achieve ethical perfection and, in the process, enjoy the experience of coming to be closer to God. In much religious literature, we see

people starting off as wicked, selfish and cruel, but gradually becoming, through struggle and sacrifice, good, even saintly people. Hick points it very nicely when he says that our characters, or 'souls', 'cannot be perfected by divine fiat, but only through the uncompelled responses and willing co-operation of human individuals in their actions' (1966, p. 255). If we learn to be good by responding in the right ways to evil – compassionately, patiently, caringly – then there must be evil for us to respond to.

Hick concludes that experiencing and engaging with evil and suffering is essential if we are to undergo this process of moral perfecting. It is only in a world of suffering that people can freely choose to embark upon a path – and not just any path, but one that intensifies the moral demands that a person feels. It is easy not to care for or think about other people – selfishness is the easy choice – so God introduces difficulties into the world that make possible genuine moral discipline. Since God loves us, he wants what is best for us, and that is for us to be morally and spiritually mature creatures. And that, in turn, requires that we undergo a process of 'soul-making', experiencing and responding to evil and suffering – as Jesus and so many other Christians did.

The idea that suffering is 'soul-making' became very popular thanks to Hick's book. It does the three things that – as I argued earlier – a good theodicy should do. It shows that evil has a purpose or good that justifies suffering and that couldn't be achieved in any other way. If Hick is right, then deep, genuine moral discipline is only possible if there are threats and dangers and pains and suffering out there for us to encounter and triumph over.



## Soul-making and 'Horrors'

### Dysteleological evils

But here is a worry about soul-making. It's true that some people find that their encounters with evil and suffering are soul-making. Perhaps we learn compassion by caring for sick relatives, or learn courage by fighting injustice, or find that when life knocks us down, we get back up again with a new sense of patience and fortitude. Many people who write about their experiences of illness report just this experience – that living with cancer made them stronger, transforming them into 'better people'. Such people have undergone *soul-making* and, for them, the theodicy works very well.

But it is also true that many people are, in fact, crushed or demoralised or broken by their experiences of suffering. Some people suffer and are made colder – less caring, less loving. Some people are desensitised by their experiences of evil and, whether they like it or not, find that their virtues are eroded rather than built up. And some people suffer such terrible, long, intense evils that their characters are completely destroyed, as in horrible cases of illness, torture, or abuse. In these cases, evil is not soul-making, but *soul-breaking*.

Hick recognises these sorts of cases, calling them *dysteleological evils*. These are evils that are so terrible that no good comes of them – they fulfil no purpose (the term for which, in Greek, is *telos*). In rather poignant language, Hick writes that 'instead of gain there may be sheer loss' and 'affliction may crush the character and wrest from it whatever virtues it possessed' (1996, pp. 330-331). Admitting the fact of these dysteleological evils is both morally sensitive and intellectually honest. It shows that Hick is aware that some people have horrible experiences that

should be acknowledged, and it shows that he will admit big problems for his theodicy. Any philosopher who wants to argue that evil is or can be justified is, after all, treading a very dangerous path. It is easy to talk about the 'purpose of suffering' in a classroom or lecture hall, but harder when you are out there – in the slums, hospitals or war zones where horrible suffering is all around you.

### 'Horrors'

One of the most important critics of Hick's soul-making theodicy is the American philosopher of religion, Marilyn McCord Adams, who calls these special evils *horrors*. A 'horror' is an especially powerful and terrible sort of evil, for two reasons. The first is that no good comes from these horrors – they do not improve the person in any way, and in fact might damage or destroy any moral progress that already occurred. Horrors break down what moral discipline had built up. The second reason that horrors are special is that they can, says Adams, 'damage the person so much' that any future moral progress - or 'soul-making' - becomes 'virtually impossible' (Adams, 1999, p. 53). So a horror not only slows down or delays soul-making, but totally prevents it ever occurring again. Both the soul's virtues, and its capacity for repair, are destroyed.

If Adams is right, then 'horrors' are a serious problem for the soul-making theodicy. The whole point of that theodicy is that evil is, or can be, teleological – purposeful, serving some good. But if certain evils are dysteleological, then the power of Hick's theodicy is greatly weakened, for it only applies to people who suffer less frequently or less intensely than others. It might even seem that the soul-making theodicy does not apply to the people

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who suffer more frequently and intensely – precisely the people who most need a theodicy to comfort and console them (see Anderson, 2014 and Tooley, 2012, §7.3).

Adams offers her own reply to the existence of horrendous evils that focuses upon how these change a person's relationship to God. How, she asks, could He 'defeat' so terrible a thing as a horrendous evil? The answer she gives is inspired by a central claim in Christian theology: that the highest good

for a human being is to enjoy the 'beatific vision' – a direct, pure, overwhelming encounter with God himself, of a sort that many Christians mystics reportedly enjoyed. Adams, then, suggests that even a horrendous evil is outweighed by a beatific vision – and, furthermore, that God will, as an act of love, guarantee that every horrendously suffering person will enjoy it. If we suffer terribly, as Christ did, then we emulate – and in that way move closer to – God Himself.

### Glossary

*Dysteleological evil* is a type of evil that is purposeless, in the sense that no good comes from it.

*Horror* is Adam's term for *dysteleological evil*.

*Soul-making* implies the claim that it is by experiencing and responding

to evil and suffering that we can achieve moral growth.

*Theodicy* is the project of defending or justifying the existence and character of God in the face of the fact of evil and suffering.

### Links

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<http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/index.php/articles-by-john-hick/17-d-z-phillips-on-god-and-evil> Hick, J. (2009). D.Z. Phillips on God and evil.

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## Soul-making and 'Horrors'

### Discussion points

1. What is the purpose of a theodicy?
2. Why does John Hick think that genuine moral growth requires us to experience suffering?
3. What situations might be called examples of 'dysteleological evil', and why?

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## The Ethics of War: Just War Theory

Emily Pollard

*The article offers a general overview of just war theory, and explains how a war may be considered morally justified according to the 'just war' tradition.*

*Specification link: RS3 ETH: Studies in Religion and Ethics (A2), 3. The ethics of war.*

### Introduction

The just war tradition has developed over a considerable amount of time as a response to the terrifying prospect of unlimited war, as an attempt to place some limits upon the nature and scope of morally permissible or 'just' wars, by arguing that only a war which fulfils certain criteria can be counted as just.

Without such limits, there is a danger that a theory of war might drift into *realism*, a theory that argues there can be no moral boundaries on war, indeed that there is no such thing as a just or unjust war. On that view, 'war lies beyond (or beneath) moral judgement' because war is a sphere of action wholly separate from ordinary actions; it is, in Michael Walzer's words, 'a world apart, where life itself is at stake ... where self-interest and necessity prevail ... and morality and law have no place' (Walzer 1977, p. 3). It is argued that moral rules do not apply within that sphere, but rather 'every man's being and well-being is the rule of his actions' (Hobbes, 1994, p. 104). This, realists would claim, is not a moral stance, simply a statement of

fact, of how things are. The English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) summed up this argument with the phrase '*inter arma silent leges*', meaning 'in times of war the law is silent'.

However, realism about war is not a view that most people, for obvious practical reasons, would wish to become widespread, however accurate a view of reality it might claim to represent. For the very dangers of war, the possibility of large-scale loss of life, which make it so difficult to limit and to regulate, are precisely what makes it so important to try. Without such limitations, the potential loss of life would only increase exponentially, especially if the realist assertion that 'anything goes', that 'we can neither praise nor blame' someone's actions in wartime (Walzer, 1977, p. 3), is accepted.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hobbes did argue that people would naturally act 'honourably' in wartime – but he did not present this as a moral rule, but rather as a 'law of nature', meaning that such 'cruelty' would be impossible for any belligerent who does not have an unnatural 'disposition of the mind to war' (Hobbes, 1994, p.104). To the modern mind (bearing in mind the 'cruelties' committed by many seemingly ordinary people during the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), this seems rather optimistic.

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Given that total pacifism may not always be an option in a world where the need for defence is so often a reality, just war theory has over the past two thousand years evolved to fill the gap.

The most commonly accepted view of the scope and purpose of just war theory runs as follows. Traditionally, as Walzer puts it, a war is 'always judged twice, first with reference to the reasons states have for fighting, secondly with reference to the means they adopt' (1977, p. 21). The first of these 'judgements' is the judgement as to whether the decision to go to war is a just or justifiable one, and this is decided according to how far the war in question would correspond with a set of criteria 'governing the decision to go to war' (Bellamy, 2006, p. 121), known as *jus ad bellum* rules. Similarly, the second 'judgement' is made according to a set of moral conditions 'governing its conduct' (Bellamy, 2006, p.121), known as *jus in bello*. Even more recently, a third kind of 'judgement' has been developed, namely that a war may be judged by 'the ethics of the post conflict environment' (Patterson, 2012, p. 5), according to a third set of criteria: *jus post bellum*.

A war is thus considered to be just or unjust depending on whether or not it fulfils all of the *ad bellum*, *in bello* and *post bellum* criteria.

### Declaring a 'just war': Jus ad bellum

*Jus ad bellum* is most usually thought to consist of seven criteria, developed in order to determine when and if it is just, or even morally permissible, for one state to declare war on another.

#### 1 The just cause criterion

A war must have a just cause for being declared – that is, there must be a

reason why war is justified in this particular case. The two reasons that are most often cited as just causes to go to war, which are also the only reasons for which states are allowed to go to war under international law, are (a) the defence of one's own country from an uncalled-for attack by another country, and (b) the defence of another country from the same thing.

#### 2 The right intention criterion

The requirement of a right intention criterion follows on from the presumed existence of a just cause. It states that those who declare a war must declare it because, and only because, of the just cause they have for declaring it. For example, the government of a country that has been invaded, and therefore has a just cause for declaring war on the invader, must do so *with the intention* of defending their country, and *not* use the invasion as a pretext to declare war in order to fulfil their secret goal of conquering the other country.

#### 3 The legitimate authority criterion

This criterion specifies that a war must be declared publicly by the proper authorities, which in most cases would mean the government of the country that will be waging the war. This rule is designed to prevent private individuals from hiring private armies and declaring war – the idea being that a government has been elected by, or rules with, the approval of the population of its country, and has therefore the right to make such decisions on their behalf; whereas private citizens do not have the right to inflict the inevitable consequences of war upon those around them, as they have not been given the right as representatives of their people.

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### **4 The reasonable chance of success criterion**

This is the requirement that those governments that declare war must do so knowing that they have a reasonable probability of success in this war. 'Hopeless' wars cannot be justified however moral their cause, as such a war would result in loss of life with no chance of making the situation any better for those on the losing side of the conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### **5 The proportionality criterion**

This criterion requires that any government considering war must weigh the expected universal benefits of war against the expected universal costs (Orend, 2006). The addition of the term '*universal*' shows that a state must consider the benefits and costs to the states they are fighting against, as well as to themselves. It must make a consequentialist calculation as to whether the benefits of going to war will be 'proportionate' – that is, 'at least equal to and preferably greater than' the costs, and only if it is proportionate in this way will the state be justified in going to war.

### **6 The last resort criterion**

The 'last resort' rule states, quite simply, that all other, non-violent methods of resolving a conflict must have been attempted before war is declared – methods such as negotiations and appeals to third-party peacekeeping forces. In other words, one should not start a war unless one literally has no other option.

### **7 The proper declaration criterion**

Finally, this criterion requires that the declaration of war by the proper authorities be a *public* declaration, so that the other belligerent party is aware that they face war.

## **Fighting a just war: Jus in bello**

The jus in bello criteria determine the methods by which it would be moral or justifiable for a belligerent state (and its armed forces) to wage war. They number only two; but these two are weighty criteria, regulating most aspects of permissible conduct towards the enemy during conflict.

### **1 The discrimination criterion**

The discrimination rule states that those fighting a war, both the soldiers and their superiors who make the tactical decisions, must make every effort to 'discriminate' between combatants and non-combatants. Combatants are usually enemy soldiers, though the definition is often widened to include those citizens of the enemy country who are assisting their soldiers in their work – for example, those who work in the munitions industry, or in military intelligence. Non-combatants are usually defined as civilians not involved in the war – in other words, those whose occupations do not directly support it. In A. J. Coates' words, combatants may be defined as 'those who are engaged in activities that are generated by war itself and would not take place without war', and non-combatants as 'those whose activities, on which society depends for its normal functioning, war has not called forth' (1997, p. 238). The discrimination demanded by *jus in bello* takes the form of different treatment. Combatants are the legitimate targets of military action, but non-combatants may not be deliberately targeted.

<sup>2</sup> The reasonable chance of success criterion is focused particularly on the *losing* side here because if a country lacked a reasonable chance of success then it is more likely than not that it will be the loser in the potential conflict; and while the winning side would have some chance of improving the situation (at least for themselves) by achieving their military aims, a vanquished country would not even have this chance.

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### **2 The *in bello* proportionality criterion**

The second *jus in bello* rule, proportionality, is rather like the *jus ad bellum* rule of the same name, but it is more narrowly focused. It states that armies should 'deploy only proportionate force against legitimate targets'. The idea is to avoid the use of 'excessive force' in war – if the target is a munitions factory in the middle of a built-up area, then using a nuclear warhead to destroy it would be wrong because the force used is far greater than would have been necessary to destroy the factory, and because the destruction and death that resulted would be highly disproportionate to the good achieved by successfully destroying the factory. Orend frames this rule as 'do not squash a squirrel with a tank, or swat a fly with a cannon' (Orend, 2006, p. 119). In short, this rule demands that soldiers should 'use force appropriate to the target' and 'make sure ... that the destruction needed to fulfil the goal is proportional to the good of achieving it' (Orend, 2006, p. 119).

### **Ending a 'just war': *Jus post bellum***

*Jus post bellum* is a set of criteria which determine how a victorious belligerent may justly act at the ending of a conflict and beyond. As it is a more recent addition to just war theory, these criteria are not so firmly established as the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* criteria, but some *post bellum* conditions which are often used include the following.

#### **1 The victors must have 'just cause for termination' of hostilities**

Briefly, the original 'just cause' of the war must have been achieved, leaving the aggressor 'willing to accept terms of

surrender' and giving the successful country 'just cause' to cease hostilities (Orend, 2000, p. 128).

#### **2 The victor must have 'right intention'**

As with the *jus ad bellum* criterion of right intention, the victor must 'intend to carry out the process of war termination only in terms of those principles contained in the other *jus post bellum* rules' (Orend, 2000, pp. 128-129).

#### **3 Any penalties imposed on the defeated state must observe the criterion of discrimination**

In short, this requires the victors to 'differentiate between the political and military leaders, the soldiers, and the civilian population' (Orend, 2000, p. 129). Civilians are 'entitled to reasonable immunity from punitive post-war measures' (Orend, 2008, p. 41).

#### **4 The 'terms of peace' must be 'proportional to the end of reasonable rights vindication'**

This means that these terms must be 'measured and reasonable' in their efforts to achieve the war's purpose and bring it to an end, and they must not make unnecessary or excessive demands (Orend, 2000, pp. 40, 129).

Thus, according to just war theory, declaring war can only be morally justified if the situation fulfils all *jus ad bellum* criteria; the morally permissible methods of waging war are limited according to the *jus in bello* criteria; and the end stages of a war are governed by the *jus post bellum* criteria.

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### Links

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/#2> (Brian Orend, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just\\_war\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_war_theory) (*Wikipedia*)

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/justwar/> (Alexander Moseley, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

### Discussion points

1. Do you agree or disagree that a country which has just cause, legitimate authority, reasonable chance of success and so on is morally justified in declaring war? Give reasons for your views.
2. Do you think there is ever any justification for violating the *jus in bello* rules of conduct? What situations could justify this and why?
3. What actions would be most morally appropriate at the end of a war?



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