Religious Studies **36**, 95–102. Printed in the United Kingdom © 2000 Cambridge University Press

Interfering with divinely imposed suffering

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Abstract: In the course of presenting his celebrated 'vale of soul-making' theodicy, John Hick claims that in a world where all human suffering is either justly deserved divine punishment or imposed by God for the spiritual growth of the sufferer, people would lack opportunity to be involved in genuine acts of deep compassion. I argue that the relief of divinely imposed suffering can be a morally valuable and spiritually beneficial activity, and mention ideas from the Jewish tradition which suggest that it is right for people to ameliorate suffering even when that suffering constitutes a just punishment from God.

In the course of presenting his celebrated 'vale of soul-making' theodicy, John Hick invites his readers to consider what consequences would have followed had God chosen to govern the world in a way which would make His justice completely intelligible to human beings. I will refer to the possible world which God governs in this way as 'Justland'. Hick's explanation of why God would not find such a world to be worthy of creation is partially based on certain assumptions about people's reactions to just, divinely imposed suffering. Careful scrutiny of these assumptions shows them to be faulty. In order to be fair to Hick, I shall begin my discussion by quoting his description of Justland at length:

> **... try to imagine a world which, although not entirely free from pain and suffering, nevertheless contained no unjust and undeserved or excessive and apparently dysteleological misery. Although there would be sufficient hardships and dangers and problems to give spice to life, there would be no utterly destructive and apparently vindictive evil. On the contrary, men's sufferings would always be seen either to be justly deserved punishments or else to serve a constructive purpose of moral training.**
>
> **In such a world human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is *bad* for the sufferer. We do not acknowledge a moral call to sacrificial measures to save a criminal from receiving his just punishment or a patient from receiving the painful treatment that is to cure him. But men and women often act in true compassion and massive generosity and self-giving in the face of unmerited suffering, especially when it comes in such dramatic forms as an earthquake or a**

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412599005107 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> **mining disaster. It seems, then, that in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience.**[1]

Hick's description of Justland involves a number of different predicates. Several of these refer to *objective* moral realities: suffering in Justland is:

(1) not unjust;
(2) not undeserved;
(3) not excessive, and
(4) not utterly destructive.

Since Hick is concerned with how conditions in Justland affect the souls of its inhabitants, it is not surprising that he also mentions several predicates which describe how Justlanders *perceive* suffering. Suffering does not *appear* to be:

(5) dysteleological, or
(6) vindictive; and will always be seen as
(7) either justly deserved punishment or else to serve a constructive purpose of moral training.

In parallel to these objective and perceptual predicates, we might say that Hick is concerned with two different viewpoints on divine responsibility for evil. At the *objective* level, Hick tells his readers exactly what God is actually up to in his proposed world. At the *subjective* level, Hick describes the opinions which the Justlanders form regarding the role of suffering in human life.

Even if Hick's readers know that he is describing a world in which suffering is always deserved, this alone does not guarantee that the inhabitants of such a world will be similarly convinced. Here we are faced with both epistemological as well as psychological issues. The epistemologist might point out that only an omniscient busybody could possibly know enough about his neighbours' comings and goings to be rationally convinced that all of their sufferings are justified. Although Justland is free of many of the terrible tragedies which challenge the faithful of our world, it will require much extra divine tampering to ensure that it lacks convincing instances of *apparently* undeserved suffering. In Justland, God must be careful either to hide the sufferings of evildoers from the public eye, or to make sure that the sins of those who suffer become a matter of public knowledge.

Even if Justland were so fashioned as to demonstrate God's love and justice to nonomniscient yet rational human observers, such *unbiased* observers are not to be found. The objectively deserved sufferings of charming scoundrels might evoke crises of faith, while the wellbeing of uncharming saints would be attributed to blind luck. In fact, considering people's factual ignorance and proneness to self-delusion, it becomes quite difficult to imagine a world in which divinely ordained punishment could both *actually be* and *appear to be* completely justified. Perhaps it would require that human inhabitants be replaced with creatures enjoying a

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different cognitive endowment. These difficulties alone may be serious enough to explain why it is that a just God would not (or perhaps logically could not) create our world after the fashion of Justland. Let us drop these considerations and now examine why Hick himself thinks that God did not deem Justland worthy of realization.

One of Hick's problems with Justland (the other being that Justland's regime of reward and punishment would eliminate the possibility of people doing good for its own sake) is based on a certain assumption regarding the human response to divinely ordained suffering, i.e. that human suffering in such a world would not evoke a compassionate response. Opportunities to feel compassion or come to the aid of others are essential for a person's proper spiritual development. If God had created Justland, it would have remained a home to shallow, stagnant, and unloving souls.

Once more, we must differentiate between the objective side and the psychological side of Hick's assumption. Objectively, Hick is saying that there would be no moral point to helping sufferers in such a world. After all, 'We do not acknowledge a moral call to sacrificial measures to save a criminal from receiving his just punishment.' Furthermore, Hick offers a psychological hypothesis, i.e., that 'In such a world human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service.'

There is room to argue both with Hick's psychology and with his ethics. Even if everyone accepts the philosophical thesis that a scoundrel should not be spared his deserved punishment, it is not at all clear that the sufferings of a particularly beloved scoundrel will not evoke an outpouring of heartfelt sympathy. Here we must recall Hick's description of suffering in his proposed world as neither 'excessive' nor 'utterly destructive'. If Hick was merely stipulating that no-one ever suffers very much in Justland, then it is hardly surprising that its inhabitants lack opportunities to grieve for each other and make dramatic contributions to each other's wellbeing. Profound sympathy can usually only follow upon profound suffering. Hick does argue that the reality of suffering makes possible important spiritual goods such as love and courage, but this occurs in an earlier section of his book.[2] Justland is explicitly introduced in order to address the different issue of whether *deserved* suffering may evoke deep sympathy or impressive acts of kindness. In any event, it is far from clear that Justlanders never deserve to suffer profoundly. Human beings have a long history of perpetrating terrible crimes, crimes for which 'utter destruction' (i.e. capital punishment) has very often been viewed as not constituting an 'excessive' punishment. Imagine if the celebrated outlaws Bonnie and Clyde were Justlanders. God would, no doubt, arrange for them to undergo serious punitive sufferings. If they achieved the same folk-hero status in Justland as they did in our world, Bonnie and Clyde's well-deserved sufferings would no doubt evoke widespread sympathy and even, perhaps, displays of sacrificial help.

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Hick need not be too troubled by the mere psychological possibility of heartfelt sympathy in Justland. He might argue that misplaced sympathy for criminals is of no value for genuine soul-making. If Hick is correct in assuming that there is no ethical value to the relief of justly deserved punishment, Justlanders will indeed lack any possible opportunity to experience ethically valuable sympathy.

The truth of Hick's ethical assumption is far from obvious. In the context of his argument, there is something confusing about Hick's mentioning that, 'We do not acknowledge a moral call to sacrificial measures to save a criminal from receiving his just punishment.' I think we must distinguish between the case of a *criminal*, who, having been justly tried by a human court, is sentenced to punishment at the hands of his fellow humans, and the case of a *sinner* whose misdeeds are known to God and who suffers divine punishment. When people interfere with the just punishment of criminals by the legitimate human authorities, they may dangerously undermine governmental functions which are necessary for the preservation of civil society. Such considerations cannot enter into our judgment of those who would mitigate divinely imposed punishments; the functioning of an omnipotent God is not endangered by human meddling, nor is it dependent on human cooperation. I would go so far as to say that while as members of civil society we are required not to interfere with the human punishment of criminals, the enforcement of divine punishment (unless, of course, it is specifically *commanded* of human beings by God) is *solely God's own business*. All things being equal, the fact that someone's suffering is an instance of divinely ordained punishment need not nullify our prima facie duty to come to the aid of the sufferer *qua* fellow human being.

I seek to drive a wedge between divine justice and human duty. Although this idea may appear surprising at first blush, I think that further reflection proves it to be quite intuitive and represented in the established theistic religions. Allow me to ground this claim in two examples from the Jewish tradition.

Deuteronomy 22.8 relates the safety regulation requiring (apparently flat) roofs to be enclosed by a railing or parapet: 'When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.'[3] A stylistic anomaly of the original Hebrew is lost in translation. The phrase 'if anyone should fall from it' (*ki yipol hanofel mimenu*) could be rendered literally as 'if he who falls should fall from it'. Who is this 'he who falls'? The great medieval exegete Rashi explains: 'This man deserved to fall to his death (on account of some crime he had committed), nevertheless his death should not be occasioned by your agency, for meritorious things are brought about through the agency of good men and bad things only through the agency of evil men.'[4] According to Rashi, the potential victim of falling deserves to die, and such is, no doubt, God's will. Nonetheless, the righteous are expected to take steps to prevent the sinner's death. If the sinner must suffer, let it be at the hands of the wicked!

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My second example touches directly on the issue of our duty to relieve the sufferings of those who have been justly punished by God. An old Talmudic tradition has it that the inhabitants of Gehenna are freed from their sufferings for the duration of the Sabbath. This creates an interesting possibility. The Sabbath ends with the (Saturday) evening prayer service, which is usually held just after nightfall. However, an individual or community may choose to extend the Sabbath by delaying or extending the evening service. Established custom has it that the concluding verses of the service should be 'sung in a pleasant voice, so that they [i.e. the time required for their recitation] should be somewhat lengthened, and [thus] delay the return of the wicked to Gehenna'.[5] In other words, this custom is specifically intended to interfere with the execution of justified divine punishment; worshippers help sinners escape (if only for a few fleeting moments) the fires of hell!

These two examples may demonstrate how the detachment of human duty from divine justice operates within a living religious tradition, but we may still ask how such detachment could possibly be justified or rational. How could I be duty bound to foil the plans of a just and omnipotent God? And if I were, *par impossible*, somehow to succeed in interfering with divine justice, would I not have caused the world to be a less just, less valuable place?

These two questions are intimately connected. If I am in fact duty bound to interfere with God's plan, then my compassion towards sinners is not misplaced. The experience of genuine compassion contributes greatly to my soul's development, perhaps outbalancing any loss incurred to the world's worthiness through the disruption of divine punitive justice. Assuming that God desires the best possible world, this suggests that God may deliberately allow for (even *welcome*) the disruption of His plan to execute punishment.

Consider the following scenario: Jack is Justland's arsonist. His fires have hurt many people and destroyed much property (leaving aside the problem of how the Justlanders remain free to hurt each other). Jill is a shy adolescent who has yet to realize her hidden potential for moral heroism. One morning, Jack awakes in a fit of coughing to discover that his own home is engulfed in smoke and flames. God, no doubt, has arranged for Jack to suffer the burns he has inflicted on others. Jill happens to pass by and, hearing cries for help, selflessly races into the inferno and pulls Jack out to safety. Jill is transfigured by her experience. The insecure girl has become a young woman of rare courage and moral seriousness.

We might imagine God's plan subsuming two possible options:

(a) Jack receives his well-deserved punishment and is seriously burned, making the world a more just and therefore a better place than it would be otherwise.

(b) *If* Jill chooses to save Jack, she will be allowed to succeed in her efforts in order that she undergo spiritual growth, making the

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world a better place than it would be otherwise (even sustaining the loss of justice).

Thus we have a ranking of possible worlds: the best, where Jill saves Jack, next best, Jack suffers for his sins; worst, Jack is in no danger of punishment.

Again we are left wondering: how could helping Jack avoid his well-deserved punishment constitute a valuable (rather than misdirected and confused) act of compassion? I think that the answer to this will depend on how one views the thorny issue of divine punishment. Does such punishment come to serve some independent ideal of abstract justice? Or has Jack merely forfeited his right to protection from punishment, while the value of the punishment itself is purely educational, i.e. it serves as a warning to others and perhaps to the sinner himself? As for the first possibility, I shall merely point out that anyone who praises God's reported tendency to mercifully relieve sinners of their deserved divine punishments must equally value human efforts to do the same. On to the second possibility, i.e. that punishment is educational. Here the problem with Jill's helping Jack is not that she is trying to disrupt some sort of moral fabric of the universe, but rather that Jill is interfering with an important educational exercise. In that case, one might argue that if the spiritual benefit gained by all involved from witnessing an instance of merciful human intervention (plus the immediate advantage to Jack of being spared suffering!) is greater than the spiritual benefits gained from witnessing an instance of divine punishment, then Jill's attempt to intervene is genuinely valuable. Furthermore, although Jack in his wickedness may have forfeited his right not to suffer at *God's* hands, this does not drain Jill's intervention of value as a (at least!) supererogatory moral act. We must also consider the great spiritual disutility of Jill's not helping Jack. By standing idly by as Jack burns, Jill not only misses an opportunity for soul-making; she also undergoes a profoundly *soul-coarsening* experience.

How can Jill be sure that in Jack's particular case, interference with divine punishment is justified? Practically speaking, Jill faces no true dilemma; she must always *try* to help Jack. All that Jill can be sure of is that suffering is itself an evil. She lacks the ability, the leisure and the *need* to evaluate the ultimate costs and benefits of her rescue attempt for the spiritual development of everyone involved. After all, if God values Jack's justified punishment over Jill's *successful* act of kindness, He will have no problem at all ensuring that Jill will fail to spare Jack his suffering. (Again we encounter the destabilizing force of free will for the whole notion of Justland. Perhaps God especially values a world in which people such as Jill are able to interact with His plans, whether for better or for worse. After all, Jack already changed the just distribution of suffering through *his* criminal acts. Then again, perhaps the fair distribution of suffering in Justland only applies to suffering of non-human origin. Since in his book Hick did not develop this aspect of Justland, I will avoid such speculation.)

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So far I have dealt only with suffering resulting from divine punishment; what about suffering divinely imposed to 'serve a constructive purpose of moral training'? (The difference between punishment in my second theory and suffering as 'moral training' being that moral training must be sufficiently valuable to the sufferers themselves to compensate them for the harm implicit to suffering.) Hick argues against the moral value of ameliorating such suffering from the presumed ethical fact that, 'We do not acknowledge a moral call to sacrificial measures to save … a patient from receiving the painful treatment that is to cure him.' Once more, it is not clear what bearing the example of a painful medical cure has on the problem of suffering as an element in moral training. Here we can rehearse all of the arguments justifying human interference with divine punishment, except that in the case of suffering as moral training we shall be spared confusing speculations regarding the point of the suffering involved. It is certainly plausible that, in many instances, being the object of a 'sacrificial measure' of kindness may be no less spiritually therapeutic than undergoing a chastening bout of suffering. Let us return to the saga of Jack and Jill. God, let us say, has arranged for Jack to suffer the burns he has inflicted on others in order that he finally appreciate the consequences of his actions. However, Jack's realization that Jill risked life and limb to save him from the very suffering which he has caused others may be just as powerfully transforming for Jack as would have been the experience of suffering itself. Then again, perhaps Jack will remained untouched by Jill's heroism; only physical misery can move him to repent. How can Jill know whether God would prefer that Jack suffer rather than that she heroically prevent that suffering? Once again, Jill can only try to help Jack, and leave it in God's hands to resolve the situation for the best.

Hick says that when all suffering is attributable to the activity of a just providence, no room is left for genuine human compassion. Since Justlanders know that their neighbours' suffering is deserved, there is no point to the relief of that suffering. I have argued that such knowledge is not sufficient to drain the relief of suffering of its moral value. Such a disvaluation of kindness could only be possible in a much more heartless world than Justland, i.e., in a world whose inhabitants knew that acts of compassion would never bring about ultimately positive consequences. If I have succeeded in demonstrating that it is morally valuable for people to interfere with divinely imposed suffering, then even Justland's sufferers are legitimate objects of merciful human intervention. Despite Justland's other paradoxes and incoherencies, its inhabitants would not lack opportunity to be moved by authentic sympathy for the afflictions of others.[6]

Notes

1. John Hick *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 334. Quoted with the kind permission of the author.
2. *Ibid.*, 324–327.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412599005107 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. All biblical quotations are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia PA and New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988).
4. From M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silberman (transl.) *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary* (Jerusalem: Silbermann/Routledge & Kegan Paul/Shapiro Valentine, 1973), Deuteronomy, 109.
5. My translation of Rabbi Israel Meir ha-Kohen *Mishnah Breura on Shulkhan Arukh Orakh Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Machon Da'at Yosef, 1994), 295.
6. My thanks to Jerome Gellman and to an anonymous reviewer for commenting on an earlier version of this paper and to William Rowe for corresponding with me in connection with some issues discussed in it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412599005107 Published online by Cambridge University Press