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The Soul-Making Theodicy: A Response to Dore

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The soul-making theodicy seeks to explain how belief in the existence of God is compatible with the evil, pain and suffering we experience in our world. It purports to meet the problem of evil posed by non-theists by articulating a divine plan in which the occurrence of evil is necessary for enabling the greater good of character building of free moral agents. Many philosophers of religion have levelled strong objections against this theodicy. In this essay, Leslie Allan considers the effectiveness of the counterarguments advanced by theist philosopher, Clement Dore, to two key objections to the soul-making theodicy.

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1. Soul-Making and the Problem of Evil

Perhaps the most persistent objection to theism is the problem of evil. There appears to be an incompatibility, or a *prima facie* incompatibility, between the belief that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect creator of the world, and the belief that there are instances of evil (typically, instances of suffering). In this essay, I will consider one type of attempt to solve this problem; namely, the 'soul-making' theodicy.

'Soul-making' theodicies can be characterized as centring on the claim that:

- a) moral character, in the form of dispositions to act virtuously, is intrinsically valuable, but can only be developed by free agents responding to actual instances of evil, or
- b) the virtuous responses of free agents are intrinsically valuable, but such responses can only be evoked in confrontations with actual instances of evil, or
- c) both a) and b) above.

For the 'soul-making' theodicy, the intrinsic value of the disposition or the virtuous act outweighs the disvalue of the necessary evil, and hence the occurrence of evil is morally justified. In the following sections, I will outline two of the more difficult problems for such theodicies and evaluate the adequacy of the responses given to them.

In order to do this, I want to first make clear what the problem of evil is and is not. The best way that I can characterize this problem is in the form of a set of seven statements that is mutually inconsistent, with consistency being won at the cost of the negation of at least one of the statements. The set of seven statements is as follows.

- (1) God is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect.
- (2) An omnipotent being has the power to prevent/eliminate evil.
- (3) An omniscient being knows how to prevent/eliminate evil.
- (4) A morally perfect being, as much as possible, protects/promotes good and prevents/eliminates evil to the extent that a greater good is not thereby prevented/eliminated.
- (5) God exists.
- (6) The occurrence of evil or the *a posteriori*¹ possibility of evil is neither logically nor causally consequent to the occurrence of any greater good.
- (7) Evil exists.

¹'*A posteriori* possibility' is here used in the libertarian sense of 'x is *a posteriori* possible' iff 'x is not logically consequent to the laws of nature and the initial conditions'.

Statement (1) is taken to be analytically true. I shall take it that 'x is omnipotent' iff 'There is no limit to the magnitude of the force that x can generate'. I shall take it that 'x is omniscient' iff 'x knows the epistemic status of every analytic and contingent statement'. The properties of a morally perfect being are stipulated by the most adequate normative ethical theory. Statements (2) and (3) are not analytically true, but are accepted by the theodist. Statement (4), I take it, is not analytically true. On some normative theories that I accept as logically coherent, (4) is rejected. For example, those theories that either incorporate the Principle of Double Effect or certain rights as primitive will reject the consequentialism of (4). However, theodists, in common with those critics who raise the problem of evil, are, by and large, consequentialists. Without further argument, I shall go along with theodists who accept (4) as integral to an adequate normative theory. Statement (5) is either accepted by the theodist as not analytically true, or the theodist regards the problem of evil as an argument for the thesis that there is no valid argument for (5) with purely analytic premises. Statement (6) is also not analytically true. Whether one accepts or rejects (6) will depend on one's axiology. All 'soul-making' theodicies explicitly reject (6). Statement (7) is contingently true and accepted by 'soul-making' theodists.

Statements (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6) and (7) form a logically inconsistent set of statements. However, the problem of evil is not the apparent logical inconsistency between the theist's belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being ((1), (2), (3) and (5)) and his belief in the occurrence of evil ((7)). Logical inconsistency only arises after the addition of the reputedly morally acceptable premises (4) and (6). The problem of evil is the problem of rationally reconciling the belief that an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being exists, the belief that evil occurs, and the acceptance of an adequate normative theory.

It is relevant to the appraisal of the 'soul-making' theodicy to note a weaker version of the problem of evil. The theodist may successfully reject statement (6), and hence justify the occurrence of some evil. In this case, the theodist replaces (6) with

(6') The occurrence of some evil, or the *a posteriori* possibility of some evil, is logically or causally consequent to the occurrence of some greater good.

But now the set, (1), (2), (3), (4), (5) and (6') is logically inconsistent with

(7') There are instances of evil whose occurrence, or *a posteriori* possibility of occurring, is not logically or causally consequent to the occurrence of some greater good.

So, the theodist must not only show that the existence of some evil is morally justified, but also that there are no unnecessary instances of evil. That is, he must be able to supply a morally sufficient explanation for the actual amount, distribution and types of evil in the world.

2. Our Obligation to Minimize Suffering

2.1 Dore's Utilitarian Balance Sheet

In the previous section, I set out the logical structure of the problem of evil and explained how an adequate response to the problem must encompass a convincing normative ethical theory. With that backdrop, I want to consider the first major objection to the soul-making theodicy. This objection is that free virtuous acts² are either not intrinsically valuable or are of insufficient intrinsic value to outweigh the intrinsic disvalue of an occurrence of suffering that evokes the virtuous response. The basis of this objection is that we are obligated to reduce suffering as far as we are able, but we are never obligated to cause suffering in order to evoke virtuous responses.³ Clement Dore is the philosopher who has most persistently and skilfully wrestled with this objection, so my comments below will be restricted to Dore's treatment of this topic.

In those cases in which a single virtuous act relieves an instance of suffering that was already evoking a virtuous response (such as a courageous response to suffering), Dore [1970: 120] offers the reply that net value is not diminished following the relief of suffering because the virtuous act of relieving suffering is at least as intrinsically valuable as any other virtuous act that the suffering may be evoking. Dore underestimates his case here, because all that is required for net value to be maintained is that the virtuous act of relieving suffering be at least as valuable as the suffering plus the previous response. So, for example, if the suffering in this instance has a value of -10 (on an arbitrary scale of value) and the courage evoked has a value of $+15$, resulting in a net value of $+5$, the value of the act of relieving suffering need only be greater than $+5$ for Dore's point to be made.

But even so, I think this argument of Dore's faces difficulties once the duration of the suffering and, say, the courageous response is taken into consideration. If virtuous responses to suffering are intrinsically valuable, it seems very plausible to suggest that one year of unremitting courageous bearing of suffering, say, is much more valuable than ten minutes' worth; that is, that net value is proportional to duration. But there must be some duration of courageous response-cum-suffering such that the net value accrued over this time cannot be exceeded by the value of a virtuous act of preventing that suffering. What this means is that if we accept Dore's reply, we are obligated, before relieving an instance of suffering, to consider the probable duration of that suffering if it were not relieved, in order to be sure that net value will not be reduced by our relieving that suffering. That we do not judge net utilities in this way, and that we even consider it immoral to do so, suggests that Dore's reply is seriously mistaken.

This is just one more problem that Dore could have added to his reasons for rejecting this utilitarian approach to human obligations. For Dore [1970: 121] concedes a

²This objection also applies equally to theodicies that a) claim intrinsic value for the strengthening of the virtuous dispositions brought about by actual virtuous acts, and b) claim intrinsic value for the strengthening of the disposition and the act.

³This objection is advanced by a number of writers. See, for example, McCloskey [1964: 75, 1974: 75]; Kane [1970: 16] and Penelhum [1971: 239ff].

similar problem with respect to numbers: If I know that my relieving an instance of suffering will render impossible numerous other virtuous responses that will occur if I do not relieve that suffering, then I am not obligated to relieve that suffering. This conclusion is unacceptable to the 'soul-making' theodist. Also unpalatable to Dore [1970: 122] are the inferences that if my motives are not charitable, I am not obligated to relieve suffering that is evoking a courageous response and, secondly, that I am obligated to cause another to suffer if I know that this suffering will evoke virtuous responses.

2.2 Dore's Deontological Escape

Dore [1970: 122], in the light of these problems, considers himself forced to adopt two deontological obligations:

- a) to relieve suffering that would evoke virtuous responses, and
- b) not to cause suffering that would evoke virtuous responses.

To the objection that there is no difference between human beings and God that would account for the former having these anti-utilitarian obligations and not the latter, Dore offers the reply that unlike human beings, who do not have the power to affect other than an infinitesimal change in the total number of suffering-cum-virtuous responses in the world, God does have this power, and so if God were to have such obligations, they would be *vastly* anti-utilitarian.

This reply, it seems to me, is wholly unconvincing. Not only is the moral distinction that Dore draws between God and human beings *ad hoc*, and so difficult to mount independent considerations in its favour, but also highly counterintuitive. We do not normally think that a moral agent's capacity to cause or relieve a vast amount of suffering that evokes virtuous responses diminishes or extinguishes his obligation to minimize the amount of suffering-cum-virtuous responses in the world.

Consider a possible scenario in which a certain biologist is able to manufacture a highly teratogenic substance which, if released into the atmosphere, will cause universal debilitating genetic malformations in countless future generations of human offspring, without affecting the rate of increase in world population. Considering the whole of human history, the release of such a substance would have a considerable impact on the total number of suffering-cum-virtuous responses. Dore's theory commits the 'soul-making' theodist to the view that the biologist in this example does not have the *vastly* anti-utilitarian obligation to refrain from releasing the substance into the atmosphere. Also, such a theodist is committed to the view that any biologist who discovers a safe method of neutralizing the teratogenic gas after its release into the atmosphere does not have the *vastly* anti-utilitarian obligation to reduce the immense number of suffering-cum-virtuous responses by releasing the neutralizing agent. Not only do we consider the first act and the second omission not morally allowable, we consider such an act and such an omission utterly morally abhorrent. And we consider their vileness to be in direct proportion to the amount of suffering-cum-virtuous responses brought about or not prevented.

Dore could reply here that, even so, the capacities of the biologists in my example to affect the number of suffering-cum-virtuous responses in the world are not as great as God's capacity, and so the anti-utilitarian deontological obligations still apply to these biologists. My answer to this is that it is true that the capacities of the biologists are not as great as God's, but this does not affect my point that we normally consider that the greater a moral agent's capacity, the greater is the stringency of his obligations to relieve, and not to cause, suffering that evokes virtuous responses. So, it seems, in the limit, a being with an infinite capacity has infinitely strong anti-utilitarian obligations. The capacity of a moral agent, then, is morally relevant to the obligations that he has, but the relevance is opposite to what Dore suggests.

What I have said here highlights another problem with Dore's suggestion, and that is that his normative theory contains a fundamental dissonance. We would expect that if a morally perfect being has a utilitarian obligation, then that obligation is morally paradigmatic, and so should be consistently applicable to all other moral agents, *ceteris paribus*. However, Dore has not supplied us with a morally relevant reason for not applying his utilitarianism across the board.

Things are worse still when Dore considers the objection that we do not have any anti-utilitarian obligations. His reply [1970: 123] is that 'it is far from certain' that 'utilitarianism, taken as a general theory of the nature of our moral obligations, is true'. However, this answer is self-defeating for Dore, for the objections that can be urged against the view that we have utilitarian obligations with respect to suffering-cum-virtuous responses apply equally to all moral agents, and so cast doubt also on the view that God has such utilitarian obligations. The central problem for Dore here is that this latter view is at the heart of the 'soul-making' theodicy.

2.3 Dore's Escape to Faith

In a later essay, Dore [1974: 361f] tries a completely different approach in attempting to explain the dichotomy between God's utilitarian obligations to cause and permit instances of suffering-cum-virtuous responses and our contrary obligations. Dore's argument is this.

- (1) Proposition Q is the proposition, 'The value of the ends which the theodocist claims are served by suffering is great enough to outweigh the suffering which serves those ends.'
- (2) Principle R is, 'When someone, S , holds a proposition, p , only as an item of faith, then his belief in the truth of p cannot legitimately be cited as a justification (or part of a justification) for his performing a *prima facie* immoral action.'
- (3) R is true.
- (4) Causing suffering when one can do otherwise is *prima facie* immoral.
- (5) God knows that Q is true.
- (6) The theodocist believes Q only as an item of faith.

As Dore points out, statements (1), (2), (3), (4), (5) and (6) entail 'God's knowing Q justifies his causing suffering-cum-virtuous responses. But, he concludes, the theodocist's belief in Q only as an item of faith cannot justify his causing suffering-cum-virtuous responses'.

Even though Dore [1974: 360, n. 5] regards this new reply to be more satisfactory than his previous reply, I consider it to be much less satisfactory. Although a lot could be said here against Dore's presentation of his argument, the crucial objection to it is that he has abdicated his role as a theodocist. Dore has shown that the 'soul-making' theodicy can be made internally coherent, but, as I have argued above in §1, this is insufficient for a theodicy to be acceptable. The problem of theodicy-making is not the problem of demonstrating logical consistency between the theist's beliefs that God exists and that evil exists and the acceptance of *some* normative moral theory, for any number of morally objectionable normative theories can easily satisfy this condition. Dore must demonstrate the consistency of these beliefs with an *adequate* normative theory. But here Dore declines the task, for the crucial normative premise needed to justify God's causing and permitting suffering (that is, proposition Q), Dore admits the theodocist to believe only as an item of faith. And for Dore [1974: 362], for a proposition to be believed as an item of faith, the believer must truly believe that it would be at least as rational for him not to believe it as to believe it. However, if no attempt has been made to justify rationally the belief that God, if he exists, does have a morally sufficient reason for permitting suffering, then no attempt has been made to provide a theodicy.

Dore could reply here that he has shown that the 'soul-making' theodocist can consistently believe that soul-making justifies the occurrence of suffering and accept that the theodocist himself cannot justifiably cause suffering for the sake of evoking virtuous

responses. This is true, but I must reiterate that for a theodicy to succeed, internal coherence is insufficient. The purported reason that God has for causing and permitting suffering must be *shown* to be a morally sufficient reason.

3. The Existence of Gratuitous Suffering

The second major objection to the soul-making theodicy that I wish to consider is that, granted that soul-making serves valuable ends, these ends are possible in a world in which there is no apparently useless suffering. That is, it is possible for a world to exist in which there is no suffering that in fact fails to evoke virtuous responses. Since in such a world there is not as much gratuitous suffering, this world is clearly preferable to the actual world. In this possible world (call it W_2), God prevents instances of suffering which he knows, if they were to occur, would not be dealt with virtuously. Dore replies to this objection in this explicit form, so I shall restrict myself to his discussion.

Dore [1970: 125] responds to this objection with the claim that for virtuous acts to be valuable they must be freely chosen and that this condition is not satisfied in W_2 . His argument is as follows.

. . . it is a necessary condition of a choice of mine to do X at time t being freely made by me that I have the option of choosing at t *not* to do X . But when I choose, e.g., to take pains to relieve your suffering in W_2 it is false that I could at the same time choose not to do so, since if God had known that I would make this latter choice, he would have removed the opportunity for me to make it by never having permitted your suffering to start.

Whether Dore's argument is valid depends on the correct analysis of 'I could choose not to do X at t '. I want to show that it is not valid irrespective of whether we accept a compatibilist or a libertarian analysis of 'I could choose not to do X at t '. For example, on my preferred compatibilist analysis,⁴ 'I could choose not to do X at t ' means (roughly) 'I do not believe that if I do X at t then I will certainly, or almost certainly, lose something of great value to me'.⁵ Now, Dore's demonstration that those counterfactual cases in W_2 in which I would have taken the opportunity to choose not to do X , if those opportunities had arisen, never in fact arise, does not in the least show that, in those instances in W_2 in which I do in fact choose to do X , it is not the case that I do not believe that the alternative choice will have disastrous consequences. So, on a compatibilist analysis, Dore has not shown that I could not have chosen not to do X at t . Consequently, his argument that I could not freely choose virtuous actions in W_2 fails.

The same holds on a libertarian analysis. On such an analysis, 'I could choose not to do X at t ' means (roughly) 'My act of choosing at t has no sufficient cause'. Once again, Dore's argument showing that those counterfactual cases in W_2 in which I would have taken the opportunity to choose not to do X if those opportunities had arisen, never in fact arise, goes no way to demonstrating that in those instances in which I do in fact choose to do X , my choice is completely caused and so not free.

⁴The point that I will make here will hold for other compatibilist analyses, but limitations of space do not permit me to consider these here.

⁵The rationale behind this analysis is that our inclination to judge a paradigm case of coerced choice, such as a victim's choosing to hand over his wallet at gunpoint, as coerced is because the victim recognizes that he will lose something of great value, namely, his life, if he chooses not to hand over his wallet. Perhaps we should add the further necessary condition to the statement, 'I could choose not to do X at t ', that I not be under some abnormal psychological condition, such as a hypnotic or drug induced state.

What I think we must do is reject Dore's presupposition here that if it is impossible, given the antecedent conditions (for example, the laws of nature in conjunction with the initial physical conditions, or God's omniscience and activity), for the opportunity that I would have taken to choose not to do X , if it did arise, to in fact arise, then I could not have chosen not to do X in those instances in which I did in fact choose to do X . That is, *contra* Dore, that the opportunity that I would have taken to choose not to do X , if it had arisen, never in fact arises, does not entail that in those cases in which I do in fact choose to do X , I did not have the opportunity to choose not to do X . I conclude that Dore has not shown that a world in which God prevents instances of suffering from occurring that he knows, if they were to occur, would not lead to virtuous responses is less preferable to the actual world. This objection to the 'soul-making' theodicy, then, has also survived Dore's criticism.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I considered two major criticisms of the soul-making theodicy and Dore's attempt to answer these objections. I began by looking at the objection that on a utilitarian calculus the disvalue of an instance of suffering outweighs the value of the virtuous act that it evokes. In response, Dore argued that the loss of the value of the virtuous response to suffering is more than compensated by the value of the virtuous act of relieving the suffering. I pointed out that Dore's equation fails to take into account the high value begot from long periods of courageous bearing of suffering and what this entails about our obligations to prolong them.

Thinking through the implications of high numbers of people suffering for overall utility and the uncharitable motivations of some for their obligations to help led Dore to abandon this approach for a solution based on deontological duties. I argued that the resulting bifurcation between God's obligations and human obligations based on differences in power seems contrived and leads to highly counterintuitive moral judgements. Dore's questioning of utilitarianism in his defence of his deontological obligations also runs counter to the consequentialist underpinnings of his soul-making theodicy.

Dore's later attempt to defend his theodicy based on a resort to the uncertainty of religious faith was also found wanting. Although Dore successfully showed belief in God to be logically consistent with the belief that evil exists, he had failed the theodicians' primary task of demonstrating the consistency of his beliefs within an acceptable normative framework. I argued that, in effect, Dore had abandoned the theodicians' enterprise.

The second major objection I examined in this essay was the proposal that there is a possible world in which morally virtuous characters are developed, but also in which gratuitous suffering does not exist. This world, it is argued, is more morally desirable than our own and would have been chosen by God. Dore responded that in this imagined world, human agents are not free because God removes the opportunity to cause suffering. I argued that, taken in both a compatibilist sense and a libertarian sense, Dore's analysis fails to capture the logic of free will and of the counterfactual conditional descriptions of this world. Reviewing all of Dore's responses to these two key objections, I conclude that his attempt to rescue the soul-making theodicy from serious criticism has failed.

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