

john hick life after death

john hick life after death is a subject that has fascinated philosophers, theologians, and individuals contemplating mortality for centuries. John Hick, a prominent 20th-century philosopher of religion, made significant contributions to this discourse through his extensive writings on eschatology and the nature of the afterlife. His theories, particularly his concept of the "irresistible grace" and the ultimate universal salvation, offer a unique perspective on what might await us beyond physical existence. This article will delve deeply into John Hick's views on life after death, exploring his arguments, the implications of his philosophy, and the scholarly reception of his ideas, providing a comprehensive overview for those interested in this profound existential question.

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John Hick's Philosophical Foundation

John Hick's exploration of life after death is deeply rooted in his broader philosophical project, which sought to reconcile religious belief with rational inquiry. He was particularly concerned with the problem of evil and suffering, arguing that a meaningful existence often necessitates such challenges. This understanding directly informs his eschatological views, as he believed that the challenges and injustices of this life are not the final word. Hick's philosophical foundation is characterized by a profound respect for religious experience and a commitment to finding common ground between diverse religious traditions. He aimed to articulate a universalist perspective that could resonate across different faiths, emphasizing the shared human yearning for meaning and transcendence.

Central to Hick's approach is his epistemology, which acknowledges the limits of empirical verification when it comes to metaphysical claims. However, he doesn't dismiss such claims outright. Instead, he argues for the rationality of belief in an afterlife based on the coherence and explanatory power of such beliefs in making sense of human existence and the moral order of the universe. His work often engages with logical positivism and analytical philosophy, seeking to refine and defend religious language from accusations of meaninglessness. This rigorous intellectual framework provides a solid basis for his arguments about what happens after we die.

The Nature of the Soul and Immortality

Hick's understanding of the soul and immortality is crucial to his conception of life after death. He rejected traditional dualistic notions of a soul as a separate, incorporeal substance that inhabits the body. Instead, he proposed a form of "reformed subject-dualism" or "psychosomatic unity," where the soul is understood as the enduring person, the center of consciousness and identity, rather than an

independent entity. This perspective suggests that the continuity of the person is maintained even after the disintegration of the physical body.

He posited that the concept of immortality should not be understood as the soul's inherent indestructibility, but rather as a divine possibility. In other words, the continuation of personal existence after death is not a given property of the soul itself, but a gift or act of God. This allows Hick to address the scientific understanding of human beings as complex biological organisms without denying the possibility of an afterlife. The resurrection, in his view, is not the reanimation of a decayed corpse, but the creation of a new, non-physical body for the continuation of the person's existence in a different realm.

The Resurrection and Personal Continuity

Hick grappled extensively with the concept of resurrection, which is a cornerstone of many religious traditions concerning life after death. He argued that personal identity is not solely dependent on the continuity of a specific physical body. Instead, he proposed the idea of "reparative resurrection," where God creates a new body for the deceased individual that is experientially continuous with their former self. This new body, while not a physical replica, would allow for the same consciousness, memories, and personality to persist, thereby ensuring personal continuity beyond death.

This perspective allows Hick to bridge the gap between his understanding of human beings as embodied creatures and the possibility of existence after physical death. He suggests that the resurrected body would be psychically as well as physically similar to the original, enabling the individual to recognize themselves and be recognized by others. The emphasis is on the preservation of the person, the locus of consciousness and selfhood, rather than a literal reassembly of physical matter. This interpretation makes the concept of resurrection more palatable to modern philosophical and scientific sensibilities.

Universal Salvation: A Core Tenet

Perhaps the most distinctive and controversial aspect of John Hick's philosophy of life after death is his advocacy for universal salvation, also known as universalism. This doctrine posits that, ultimately, all sentient beings will be brought to salvation, regardless of their religious beliefs or actions in this life. Hick believed that the concept of eternal damnation is incompatible with the character of a loving and just God. He argued that a finite offense, no matter how grave, should not warrant an infinite punishment.

Hick's universalism is not a passive hope but an active theological commitment. He argued that the divine love is not merely persuasive but "irresistible." This means that God's ultimate purpose for humanity, which includes the development of moral and spiritual maturity, will inevitably be realized for everyone. The afterlife, in this view, becomes a continuing process of spiritual growth and purification, where individuals are gradually brought to a state of perfect love and knowledge of God.

The Problem of Evil and Divine Justice

Hick's views on universal salvation are intimately linked to his attempts to resolve the problem of evil. If God is all-powerful and all-good, why does evil and suffering exist? Hick argued that this world is a "vale of soul-making," a place designed to foster moral and spiritual development through challenges and trials. However, he also believed that this process cannot be thwarted by the finality of death. The injustices and unfulfilled potential of this life must have a sequel where genuine moral and spiritual growth can be completed.

For Hick, eternal punishment would represent a failure of divine justice and love, leaving many individuals in a state of irreversible suffering. Instead, he proposed that the afterlife offers opportunities for remedial suffering and eventual redemption. This perspective emphasizes God's ultimate triumph over evil and the eventual reconciliation of all creation. The notion of irreversible damnation, in Hick's estimation, maligns the character of God and fails to account for the full scope of divine mercy and power.

The Process of Purification and Growth

In Hick's universalist framework, the afterlife is not a static state of bliss or torment, but a dynamic process of purification and spiritual growth. He suggested that the "hell" some might experience is not a punitive, eternal state but a temporary, purgatorial process designed to cleanse individuals of their spiritual impurities and bring them to a state of readiness for union with God. This process would be tailored to the individual's needs, allowing for the eventual overcoming of sin and spiritual immaturity.

This continuous development ensures that the moral and spiritual progress initiated in earthly life can be completed. It aligns with the idea that God's love is actively at work, guiding all beings towards their ultimate destiny. The concept of "irresistible grace" implies that this process, though it may involve suffering and struggle, is ultimately effective for everyone. The goal is not to punish, but to perfect, to bring about a state of true spiritual maturity and blissful communion with the divine.

Critiques and Counterarguments

John Hick's philosophy of life after death, particularly his universalism, has not been without its critics. Many theologians and philosophers have raised objections, primarily concerning the implications for human freedom, the nature of justice, and the motivation for moral behavior. A significant critique centers on the idea of "irresistible grace." If salvation is guaranteed for all, does this diminish the importance of human choice and responsibility in this life? Some argue that the possibility of eternal damnation serves as a crucial deterrent against sin and an impetus for righteous living.

Furthermore, the concept of remedial suffering in the afterlife, while intended to be merciful, can be seen by some as a form of divine coercion. If individuals are ultimately forced into salvation, their freedom is arguably compromised. This raises questions about the authenticity of love and obedience if they are not freely chosen but ultimately inevitable. These criticisms highlight the complex

theological and ethical challenges inherent in reconciling divine attributes with human agency and the problem of suffering.

The Challenge to Moral Responsibility

A common critique of universalism is that it undermines the motivation for moral behavior. If everyone is ultimately saved, regardless of their actions in this life, what incentive do people have to strive for righteousness, practice compassion, or avoid sin? Critics argue that the belief in potential eternal consequences serves as a vital safeguard for morality, providing a strong personal reason to adhere to ethical principles. Without this threat, they contend, moral relativism and hedonism could flourish.

Hick, however, would likely counter that true motivation for good comes from an apprehension of God's love and the inherent joy of living a virtuous life, not from fear of punishment. He might also suggest that the "purification" process in the afterlife would be experienced by individuals as a consequence of their unredeemed state, thus maintaining a link between actions and their spiritual outcomes, albeit not in the form of eternal retribution.

The Nature of Divine Justice

Another significant point of contention revolves around the nature of divine justice. Critics argue that Hick's universalism redefines justice in a way that is inconsistent with traditional understandings. They believe that true justice demands that wrongs be met with appropriate consequences, and that eternal punishment, for those who reject God's grace persistently, is a just response to unforgivable sin. To forgive everyone, regardless of their persistent opposition to good, could be seen as a form of divine injustice, where the distinction between the righteous and the wicked is blurred.

Hick's perspective, on the other hand, views divine justice as ultimately redemptive. He sees God's justice not as retributive, but as restorative. The ultimate purpose of divine action is to bring about the well-being of all creation. Therefore, what might appear as a lenient or unjust system from a human perspective is, in Hick's view, a manifestation of a more profound and all-encompassing divine love and salvific plan that transcends human limitations and retributive notions of justice.

The Role of Experience in Life After Death

John Hick placed a significant emphasis on the role of experience in understanding religious claims, including those about life after death. He believed that our present experiences, while limited, can offer clues and insights into the nature of the reality that lies beyond physical existence. The desire for justice, the yearning for meaning, and the experience of love and consciousness are all, in his view, indicative of a reality that transcends the purely material.

He argued that eschatological beliefs are not merely abstract propositions but are deeply intertwined with our existential hopes and fears. The very coherence and comprehensiveness of a belief system

that includes a meaningful afterlife can, for Hick, lend it a degree of rationality. He was particularly interested in how religious experiences, both individual and collective, can shape our understanding of what happens after death, suggesting that these experiences are not arbitrary but point towards a genuine, albeit veiled, reality.

Experiential Evidence and Religious Belief

Hick suggested that religious experiences, such as encounters with the divine, mystical insights, and near-death experiences, can serve as experiential evidence for the possibility of life after death. While he was cautious not to overstate the evidential value of such experiences, he believed they provided significant intuitive support for religious claims. These experiences, when interpreted within a coherent theological framework, can make the concept of an afterlife more than just a theoretical possibility; they can render it a lived reality for the believer.

He posited that the human capacity for such profound spiritual experiences is itself an argument for a reality that extends beyond the physical. The fact that humans can experience transcendence, love, and awe suggests that there is something in the universe that corresponds to these experiences. For Hick, this correspondence is a strong indicator of a divine reality and a potential for continued existence after death, where these experiences can be further developed and understood.

Scholarly Reception of Hick's Views

John Hick's contributions to the philosophy of religion, particularly his work on life after death and universal salvation, have garnered considerable attention and debate within academic circles. His nuanced approach, which sought to engage with both traditional theological doctrines and modern philosophical challenges, has made his work a focal point for discussion. While his universalism has been both praised for its inclusiveness and criticized for its theological implications, there is general agreement on the intellectual rigor and profound ethical concerns that underpin his arguments.

Scholars have engaged with his ideas on personal identity, the nature of the soul, and the problem of evil, finding in his work a fertile ground for further exploration and critique. His efforts to reformulate traditional doctrines in a way that is comprehensible and defensible in contemporary discourse have been widely acknowledged. The enduring relevance of his work lies in its capacity to provoke thought and stimulate dialogue on some of the most fundamental questions of human existence.

Impact on Contemporary Theology

Hick's writings have had a significant impact on contemporary theology, particularly within Protestant and liberal Christian traditions. His universalist stance has resonated with many who find the traditional doctrine of eternal hell to be incompatible with the concept of a loving God. His arguments have provided a philosophical and theological framework for those who seek to articulate a more inclusive vision of salvation. His emphasis on the "vale of soul-making" has also influenced discussions on the purpose of suffering and the development of character.

His work has inspired a generation of scholars to re-examine core doctrines and to consider how religious beliefs can be articulated in ways that are both faithful to tradition and responsive to the intellectual currents of the modern world. The ongoing scholarly engagement with his ideas underscores the enduring significance of his contributions to theological discourse and the philosophy of religion.

Interfaith Dialogue and Universalism

John Hick's philosophy of life after death, with its strong emphasis on universal salvation, has also been instrumental in fostering interfaith dialogue. His work suggests that the core aspirations and truths found in various religious traditions can converge on a shared understanding of ultimate reality and destiny. By advocating for a universalist outlook, Hick provided a framework for seeing common ground between different faiths, moving beyond exclusive claims of salvation and focusing on the universal reach of divine love and purpose.

His ideas have been embraced by those seeking to promote understanding and cooperation between religious communities. The concept of universal salvation, in its Hickian interpretation, offers a vision of hope that transcends denominational boundaries and speaks to a shared human longing for reconciliation and peace. This interfaith dimension of his work highlights its broader ethical and societal implications, extending beyond purely academic or theological concerns.

FAQ

Q: What is John Hick's central argument for life after death?

A: John Hick's central argument for life after death is multifaceted, but a core element involves the idea that the present life is a "vale of soul-making," a period of development and moral growth. He argues that this process of character formation would be incomplete and unjust if it were to end with physical death without a sequel. Furthermore, he suggests that personal identity is not solely tied to a specific physical body, allowing for the possibility of a resurrected or transformed existence.

Q: Did John Hick believe in a literal resurrection?

A: John Hick did not believe in the literal reanimation of a decaying corpse. Instead, he proposed a concept of "reparative resurrection," where God creates a new body for the deceased individual that is experientially continuous with their former self. This new body would allow for the same consciousness, memories, and personality to persist, ensuring personal continuity beyond death.

Q: What is universal salvation according to John Hick?

A: Universal salvation, or universalism, as proposed by John Hick, is the belief that ultimately, all sentient beings will be brought to salvation, regardless of their specific religious beliefs or actions in this life. He argued that eternal damnation is incompatible with a loving and just God, and that divine love is ultimately irresistible, ensuring the completion of spiritual growth for everyone.

Q: How did John Hick address the problem of evil in relation to life after death?

A: John Hick viewed the existence of evil and suffering in this world as integral to the process of "soul-making" – the development of moral and spiritual character. However, he argued that this process could not be rendered futile by death. He believed that a sequel life is necessary for the completion of this growth and for the ultimate triumph of divine justice and love over evil.

Q: What were some of the main criticisms of John Hick's views on life after death?

A: Major criticisms of John Hick's views include concerns that universal salvation undermines human freedom and moral responsibility, as the possibility of eternal damnation is removed. Critics also question whether "irresistible grace" truly respects individual autonomy and whether remedial suffering in the afterlife is compatible with a just God.

Q: Did John Hick believe in reincarnation?

A: While John Hick was open to exploring various possibilities for continuity of consciousness and personal identity, his primary focus was on resurrection as understood in the Abrahamic traditions, reformed to be philosophically coherent. He did not extensively promote or develop theories of reincarnation as a central tenet of his eschatology.

Q: How does John Hick's concept of the soul differ from traditional dualism?

A: John Hick proposed a form of "reformed subject-dualism" or "psychosomatic unity." This differs from traditional dualism by viewing the soul not as a separate, incorporeal substance, but as the enduring person, the center of consciousness and identity, intricately linked with the physical being. Immortality, for Hick, is a divine possibility for this person, rather than an inherent property of a disembodied soul.

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