“Is the Soul-Making Defense Sound?” first appeared in *Metanoia* Vol. XII, No. 1 (1980).

The problem of evil is a problem for any traditional Judeo- Christian faith, in that evil is conceded to exist, yet it is held not to be evidence for the non-existence of God. Perhaps the most common defense against the problem of evil is the "soul-making" defense, as it

is called by John Hick.[1](#bookmark151)

Those who adopt this defense argue that God's purpose for man is that he be a free agent, endowed with the opportunity for character development through the exercise of free choice. And for this purpose to be achieved, evil (both natural and moral) must exist. Natural evil is required to present us with the opportunity to exercise free will (e.g., the only way for me to have the opportunity to be charitable is for me to see the poverty of others). And moral evil is the inevitable result of man's exercise of that free will (e.g., the horror of the Holocaust was due to the immoral choices of a large number of free agents).[2](#bookmark152)

More to the point, moral evil must be permitted for a soul to be "made", since the agent learns from seeing the unpleasant consequences of his choices. Hick puts the matter thus:

Christianity, however, has never supposed that God's purpose in the creation of the world was to construct a paradise whose inhabitants would experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain...Following hints from St. Paul, Irenaeus taught that man has been made as a person in the image of God but has not yet been brought as a free and responsible agent into the finite likeness of God...Our world, with all its rough edges, is the sphere in which this second and harder stage of the creative process is taking place.[3](#bookmark153)

The soul-making defense against the problem of evil seems implausible, at least absent any proof that soul-making requires exactly the amount of natural and moral evil that exists, and no less. (After all, if soul-making could succeed—as seems likely—with one less earthquake than has occurred, then God would be immoral to have allowed it). But I will shoulder the burden of proof, attempting to outline an alternate technique for soul-making, which would require less evil (of both kinds) for the achievement of the same purpose.

Consider a possible world in which God exists, and deceives each person occasionally into thinking (erroneously) that an earthquake has occurred, or an acquaintance is gravely ill and needs a kidney transplant, or such like. Further, suppose that God allows the person to make decisions, but when evil results are about to occur from a decision, He intervenes to stop the action, creating at the same time in the agent's mind the illusion that what would have transpired (had He not intervened) actually did. God could cease maintaining the illusion after the agent has learned whatever lesson God intended the agent to learn (or demonstrated his failure to learn it), or after the agent has risen to the occasion afforded by the (in fact illusory) natural evil (or failed to rise to it). God might erase the incident from the agent's memory. Alternatively, God could allow the illusion to continue indefinitely, if He wanted to continue to give the agent the opportunity to learn or repent. I call such a possible world one in which God practices **benign deception** ("BD" for short).

1. ‘The Soul Building Argument,” by John Hick, in *Philosophy: Paradox and Discovery,* ed. by Arthur Minton (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) pp. 43-49.
2. For a refutation of this claim, see "The Irrelevance of the Free Will Defense," by Steven Boer, *Analysis* 38, 110- 112, March, 1978.
3. Hick, *op. cit.,* p. 47.

As an example of how BD might be used, consider a typical "morality play" situation in which soul-making is supposed to occur. I stand to inherit a million dollars if I kill my uncle and get away with it. I decide to do the evil deed, creep into his mansion, pull a knife and plunge it into his heart. But I am then overcome by remorse, and suddenly learn that money isn't everything. (Or alternatively, I do not feel remorse, but instead joy, thus proving my immorality.) In this case, my soul is either perfected or else shown to be irretrievably bad, but at the cost of another's life.

If, on the other hand, God had practiced BD, everything would have been the same, except that when I plunged the knife downwards, the knife would never have struck home. God would have "clouded my mind," thus making it only appear to me that I succeeded in my action. Once I had learned my lesson (or demonstrated my wickedness), God could have unclouded my mind, or unclouded my mind and erased my memory of the whole incident, or left me under the illusion.

It is clear that most, if not all, evil can be averted by the exercise of BD. Natural evil need not *actually* occur, to present people with opportunities for moral choice; creating the illusion of disasters in their minds will do. And it is not necessary for people to see the *actual* consequences of their decisions to learn or to be judged; the illusion of those consequences having come to pass, the mere appearance of what would have happened (if the action had in fact been carried out), will do.

So it appears that BD is possible, and could be used by God to achieve His soul-making purposes; and since it is not being practiced, the soul-making defense fails. Let me consider three possible replies.

First, it might be argued that if God engaged in BD, He would be a deceiver, thus immoral, which is contrary to His nature. God would never choose to be a cosmic liar. The reply here seems clear. Certainly, lying is justifiable in certain situations, especially where it minimizes pain. (Who would condemn a man for lying to his baby daughter about her chances for surviving her leukemia?) Which is morally preferable, a Cosmic Liar, or a Cosmic Crippler?

A second objection is this: we can't verify whether or not BD is in fact being practiced.

Perhaps God is practicing BD and we don't know it. My reply is that, even if this objection is true, it may be of comfort to the Christian Scientist, but certainly not to the traditional Christian. Again quoting Hick:

To say, for example (with contemporary Christian Science), that evil is an illusion of the human mind is impossible within a religion based upon the stark realism of the Bible. Its pages faithfully reflect the characteristic mixture of good and evil in human experience. They record every kind of sorrow and suffering, every mode of man's inhumanity to man.[4](#bookmark154)

4 Hick, *op. cit.,* p. 44.

A third objection might be that for it to be possible for a person to learn from his actions, it must be possible for him to observe the consequences of his actions. So if God engaged in BD, He would defeat the soul-making purpose. But this is just false: one need not really (veridically) observe the results of a choice to learn from it; one need only have the illusion.

Were God to exist, with the powers and purposes imputed to him by the traditional Christian who adopts the soul-making defense, BD would occur. It doesn't. Thus the soul-making defense fails, and the problem of evil remains a problem.

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