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The Concept of Evil in Judaism

1 Introduction

The problem of evil is prominent in Jewish thought from its very origins. Psalmists cry out to God: Why does He tolerate wrongdoing? They seek comfort in the thought that when "the wicked spring up like grass and evildoers flourish, it is only to be destroyed forever" (92:7). The triumph of the wicked is brief and presages their destruction. But that's a subtle thought, and the turnabout is readily missed: "The dull just can't see it; the shallow fail to take it in" (92:6). Flagrant evil is hard to miss, but one might readily fail to see how evil undermines itself. Yet goodness is the root of reality, and evil is self-destructive — "Scattered are all evildoers" (92:9). Their viciousness undermines their cohesiveness socially, and their vices debilitate and dissolve even the individuals among them — a point Plato made less compactly when he argued that it is only through its modicum of virtue that a gang of thieves is effective and that the tyrannical personality, like the tyrannical state, is riven by internal conflict, the tyrannical man at war with himself as well as with his world (*Republic* 351a–354c; 576a–580b).

Yet the question remains: Why does God tolerate evil at all? And, beyond moral evil, what can one say about natural evils — the earthquakes and tsunamis, forest fires, plagues, and pandemics so indiscriminate in their victims?

2 *Tanakh* — The Hebrew Bible

The *Book of Job* might seem the most natural lens through which to examine the problem of evil from a Jewish standpoint. But *Genesis* affords a far earlier vantage point and a broader vista. Christians may take the role of Satan in corrupting Adam and Eve as touching on the birth of moral evil. Indeed, some biblical inerrantists take God's cursing the earth (2:17) in the wake of the first couple's disobedience as the cause of entropy and thus, the argument goes, of the impossibility of biological evolution as well as mankind's inability to redeem itself.[1] But the

1 Morris, Henry, *Scientific Creationism*, El Cajon, CA: Master Books, 1985, 211–12: "Augustine, the great adversary of Pelagianism, held all mankind to be in thrall to sin since the Fall – unavoidably disposed to evil by the dominance of desire, even before making any choice. Thomas Aquinas agreed. Duns Scotus qualified the view, holding that the Fall meant only a loss of original

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111586441-001

idea of inherited sin does not sit well with the prominence of personal responsibility in the Hebrew Bible, and Jewish thinkers do not find a core truth in the idea that humanity lives in a fallen state. We Jews do not accept the idea of inherited guilt or its counterpart, vicarious salvation. In *Deuteronomy* (24:16), we read: "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children for their fathers. Everyone shall be put to death for his own sin". The idea that the sins of earlier generations are visited on their offspring (*Exodus* 20:6, 34:7; *Deuteronomy* 5:9–10) is thus read as a caution: Communal responsibility brings communal accountability. But punishment, the Rabbis argue, falls on offspring only insofar as they persist in the wrongdoing of their forebears (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 7a). Wrongdoing can be contagious, but guilt is not. Accordingly, Ezekiel proclaims that Israelites will no longer have any use for the saying that "the fathers ate sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:3). Personal responsibility prevails.

Salvation is not the goal in Judaism: The mission of humanity, and of Israel as a people, is not to escape this world, but to mend it and sanctify life within it. The world is not a vale of tears but God's creation; and the first words of the Torah, which credit God with creating the world, lead on to the first value judgment in that ancient text, reporting that when God saw what He had made, He saw that it was good — and, on its completion, very good (*Genesis* 1:31).

That first value judgment in the Torah, as I am fond of pointing out, is not a moral but an aesthetic thought.[2] So much for the cliché that classes Hebrew sensibilities as moral and Hellenic sensibilities as aesthetic. God saw that light is good (1:3) — and that before it had any use or function: Light is good in and of itself. That kind of axiological primacy is the hallmark of the aesthetic. Light will have many good uses and will come to symbolize many more. But its first goodness is in being what it is. This idea of value, modeled in God's first biblical value judgment, illuminates all the rest: Value is intrinsic in the being of things, not just in their uses, whereas goods may be relative and partial or potentially in conflict or competition with one another. Biblically, light is good, but so is nature's order, announced in the division of light from darkness, and land from water (1:9–10).

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righteousness. But Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers held sin to be no mere lack and returned to the Augustinian view. Orthodox Christian theologians softened Augustine's view or held that it was distorted in the West." But no less a thinker than Kant sought to make sense of the view in *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone.*

2 Plotinus, for one, saw the power of beauty in answering complaints against life's ills; see Enneads 1.6. For a powerful contemporary treatment, please refer to Taliaferro, Charles, "Beauty and the Problem of Evil," in: Charles Meister/Paul K. Moser (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 27–44, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Beyond that, we see the good of fecundity, when seed-bearing plants yield flowers and fruits and perpetuate their kind (1:11–12); the teeming diversity of nature, with its birds, reptiles, sea creatures, beasts and insects, and humanity itself (1:20–21). All these are good, and the world itself is good. These things are good just because they are, in all their myriad ways.

The celebratory appraisal of life and the world in *Genesis*, resonant in *Psalm* 104, gives us a subtle reason for the Midrashic assignment of the *Book of Job* to Moses: Evils must be weighed against the goods they presuppose. A plainer reason for that midrashic attribution of the book's authorship: Job counterbalances *Leviticus* 26 and *Deuteronomy* 28, with their promises of worldly success and condign warnings of disaster in consequence of keeping or flouting God's law (*Deuteronomy* 11:26–28). Fusing those two reasons for the rabbis' fanciful attribution of Job to Mosaic authorship, the ancient Sages make *Genesis* a countercase to the Orphic notion, mooted by Plato (*Cratylus,* 400c), that our bodies are sepulchers or prisons.[3] Being, biblically, is good; life and procreation are blessings (1:22); humanity, male and female, is created in God's image (1:27).

Nature may be God's work, but it does seem to move by laws of its own. Abraham will come to challenge God Himself on the matter: The angels have departed who brought him the news of the favor awaiting his offspring for following in his virtuous footsteps. But God has also revealed to him the contrasting fate in store for Sodom and Gomorrah. Humbly but insistently (18:22), Abraham raises a question: "Wilt Thou indeed destroy the innocent with the guilty [. . .] Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked and let the innocent and guilty fare alike! Far be it! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:23–25).

Leaning on his intimacy with God (*Isaiah* 41:8), Abraham pleads for the doomed cities. He will pay the asking price for Sarah's gravesite in Hebron, but he is not too proud to haggle with God to save human lives. And subtler than his bargaining over whether a city should be spared for the sake of 50, 45, 40, 35, 30, 20, or even 10 innocents who may live there [and his ploy, in saying "[w]ilt Thou destroy all the city for lack of five?" (*Genesis* 18:28)], he shifts from a plea for justice (that the innocent not be slain with the guilty) to a plea for mercy: let the guilty be spared for the sake of the innocent. God accedes to the plea: He would spare the place for the sake of ten (18:32) — although even those were not to be found.

But how have Abraham's moral expectations been answered in later epochs? Jeremiah's eye is no less keen when he pleads: "Thou art just, LORD, when I set my

3 See: Cornford, F. M., "Plato and Orpheus," *Classical Quarterly* 17 (1903), 433–45, 436.

case before Thee. But I would speak with Thee of justice. Why doth the way of the wicked prosper? Why do the treacherous thrive? [. . .] How long must the land lie parched; a whole field wither and the beasts and birds perish by the evil of those settled there?" (12:1,4). Habakkuk will raise the same question, still assuming God's supernal justice:

> Too pure of eyes to look on evil, Thou canst not abide iniquity. Why dost Thou see the perfidious and hold Thy peace as the wicked devour those more right than they? Didst Thou make man like fish in the sea, like creeping creatures with no ruler to protect them, all to be dragged up with a hook, netted, and gathered eagerly [. . .] (1:13–15).

Habakkuk awaits God's answer, and what he hears is that judgment will not fail — but in due course: "[T]here is a vision for time to come, telling of an end surely to come. It does not lie. And though it tarry, wait for it, it will not be late" (2:3). Yet does justice delayed improve on justice denied?

The grave indictment voiced by Habakkuk and Jeremiah and in many an outcry in the *Psalms* speaks thunderously. With the Cities of the Plain, Abraham's terms were met, but justice was done in the end: due punishment was meted out. Likewise with Noah's generation:

> The LORD saw how evil men had grown on earth, and the bent of every thought in human hearts was always bad. He regretted He had made man on earth, grieved to the heart. So the LORD said, 'I shall blot out man from the earth, whom I created' [. . .] The earth was corrupted in God's sight, filled with violence. And seeing how corrupt the earth had grown, with all flesh on earth turned vicious, God said to Noah, the time has come for Me to put an end to all flesh. The earth is filled with their lawlessness. I shall destroy them, and the earth. (*Genesis* 6:5–13)

The flood waters are loosed on moral grounds, a far cry from Mesopotamian myths where sleepless gods bring on the flood in mere displeasure. But biblically, in a striking reversal, God relents and promises no further such destruction, predicating His promise on the same premise that first warranted the flood: "[T]he bent of man's heart is bad from his youth" (8:21). Human evil is still bad. But God now seems prepared to recognize human weaknesses — as if the Creator had not known of them before.

Here, the climax of the narrative comes not in the flood but in the pact, God's promise to preserve life on earth, "seedtime and harvest" (8:22), demanding only that the shedding of human blood must be requited (9:4). The covenant, binding on all Noah's offspring — all humanity — turns theodicy inside out: God has determined *not* to overturn nature on account of human evil. He will stand down and let nature, including corruptible human nature, take its course. Here, the realism in the narrative lies not in the tale of the deluge itself nor even in Noah's

saving the animals, but in God's discovery of the human penchant for evil and the ensuing reflections as to why He does not intervene against even the most horrendous outcomes: It's part of the grace of creation that God empowers natural beings, including human beings, to act without interference. But that leaves unanswered our all too human complaints as to the suffering of innocents and the triumphs, large and small, of the wicked.

2.1 The Psalms

Protests on that score persist in the *Psalms*:

> Why, Lord, dost Thou stand far off, unseen in times of trouble?
> Arrogantly the wicked man pursues the poor and traps him in his schemes.
> He crows about his selfish lust, curses the LORD and scorns Him.
> Supercilious and evil, unthinking, sure there is no God [. . .]
>
> (10:1–4)

Horrified to see helpless victims tangled in the schemes of those who profit from their wrongs, the Psalmist calls on God to act: The wrongdoer "thinks God has forgotten, hides His face and never looks. Rise up, LORD, raise up Your hand! Do not forget the helpless. Why should the wicked revile God, and think there is no accounting!" (10:11–14). Help will come, the poet trusts. But it has not come yet and is slow in coming.

Likewise in *Psalm* 37:

> Be not downhearted about wrongdoers and incensed by their evil.
> Like grass they wither soon, and like an herb, they wilt.
> Count on the LORD, and keep doing good.
> Stand your ground, and nurture trust.
> Delight in the LORD; He will grant your heart's desire.
> Leave it to the LORD. Only trust Him; He will act,
> And make your rightness shine like a light, vindicated bright as noon! [. . .]
> The wrongdoers will be expunged, and those who look to the LORD will inherit the earth!
> Just a bit longer and the wicked will be gone. You'll look and see that he is vanished! [. . .]
> He may scheme and gnash his teeth at the innocent.
> But the LORD just laughs, for He sees that his day will come.
> The wicked draw their swords and bend their bows
> To bring down the poor and the helpless, and to slaughter the upright.
> But their swords pierce their own hearts; their bows shall be broken [. . .]
> I was young and have grown old and have not seen a good man abandoned,
> His offspring begging bread [. . .]
>
> (*Psalms* 37:1–25)

Here again, a promissory note.

In *Psalm* 73, the poet finds the hope he was seeking by coming to God's house:

> Yes, God is good to Israel – to the pure of heart.
> But I, my feet were slipping, I had all but lost my footing,
> Envying the wanton when I saw the wicked prosper,
> Unafraid of death, hale and hardy,
> Free of human anguish, unafflicted as others are,
> Wearing their pride like a necklace, robed in lawlessness.
> Peeping out through folds of fat,
> Their hearts run riot.
> Scoffing and speaking malice
> They plot evil from their lofty perches.
> Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues strut the earth!
> So their people flock to them and drink it in.
> 'How would God know?' they say, 'Is there knowledge up there?'
> That's what evil men are like – free of care, amassing wealth.
> Have I kept my heart pure for nothing, hands clean for no good reason?
> Every day another injury,
> Every morning more affliction!
> To say so would let down the youngsters.
> I tried to understand.
> But the task seemed quite beyond me –
> Until I entered God's sanctum,
> And finally grasped their end,
> How You set them on slippery ground and let them fall to ruination.
> How suddenly they fall, disaster unexpected,
> Vanished, like a dream, on waking!
>
> (*Psalms* 73:1–20)

Evil self-destructs, the Psalmist has come to see, as if in an epiphany. But the comeuppance of evil takes time. Why did God permit it to begin?

Without the dramatic confessional that opens and the prudential refuge-taking that ends the Seventy-third *Psalm*, the theme recurs and the problem persists in *Psalm* 92:

> How glad You make me by your acts, LORD!
> I sing for joy at what You have done.
> Great deeds, LORD; deep designs!
> The dull just cannot see it;
> The callow cannot take it in:
> When the wicked spring up like grass
> And all sorts of evildoers flourish,
> It is only to be utterly destroyed,

While you, LORD, remain exalted!
For see, LORD, Your enemies, Your enemies perish,
Scattered all Your foes!
But You have raised my horn high as the horn of an oryx,
I am anointed with fragrant oil.
I can see my enemies' downfall,
And hear the rout of those who rise up against me.
The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree
And grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
Planted in the house of the LORD,
They flourish in the courts of our God.
Fruitful even in old age, verdant and fresh,
To proclaim that the LORD is just,
My Rock with no wrongdoing in Him.

(*Psalms* 92:5–16)

Again the witness of experience: God is good. Evil self-destructs. And again, the question: Swiftly? Suddenly? How swiftly? How completely? And why not permanently? Why does the class of evildoers persist long enough even to have a name?

The questions come to a head in the *Book of Job*, with an immediacy that presses beyond a prophet's "How long?" (*Habakkuk* 2:6). As Job says, "Though my skin be wasted, still would I see God, while still in my own flesh, see Him for myself, with my own eyes" (19:26–27). The delay seems unconscionable — and another life, as unhelpful as substituting a whipping boy to suffer vicarious punishment, or a new self to be requited for horrors suffered in a different world or a different life. For every present moment is unique and irreplaceable, and the past has a permanence that cannot be undone. It is this life and this world that must be justified, if there is to be a theodicy at all.

2.2 The *Book of Job*

Job's sufferings are presented biblically as a test. His innocence is the premise of an inhuman experiment, his torments and losses are predicated on his human goodness, and, in the manner of a fable, presented as if they resulted from an inhuman wager between God and the "adversary", who challenges God's boast, "Have you considered My servant Job. For there is no one on earth quite like him, a perfect and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil." (1:8). The fable-like language and the fictive personifications set the stage to frame the drama of the dialogue between its prologue and the epilogue that will follow, written in archaizing prose and devised to sound naïve by contrast to the eloquence of the book's human

speakers and the climax that caps their exchanges in the words of God's speech from the storm wind.

We know the work is fiction, not just from its framing, but from its premise: Narratives of fact cannot just stipulate the guilt or innocence of their protagonists. But if the minor premise in the *Book of Job* is stipulative, Job's innocence portends a truth all too familiar, the major premise of the book: Innocents do suffer. And Job, like the Psalmists, can truthfully add its counterpart: Wrongdoers can flourish. "Plunderers safe in their tents" (*Job* 12:6), as Job puts it starkly. Resolving the fabular conceit of God's acceptance of Satan's challenge, Job and the book named for him follow the biblical trope of ascribing all events to God. There are always proximate causes, but God is the ultimate Cause. So Job rightly lays his torments at God's feet:

> Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds in the sky will tell you.
> Talk to the earth. It will teach you. The fish in the sea can inform you.
> Which of them all does not know that the LORD's hand did all this –
> In whose hand is the spirit of all that live and the breath of every man alive . [. . .]
> What He rases does not rise; whom He confines cannot escape.
> He holds back the waters, and drought strikes,
> Releases them, and the earth goes under.
> His are the power and sway,
> Over deceivers, and the deceived,
> So counselors are stripped bare, and judges turn fools [. . .]
>
> (12:7–17)

Job's life and sanity were spared (1:12), lest the experiment be void. Yet innocents do perish, and wisdom is all too easily lost. Who does not know of children wasted by disease, starvation, or abuse? What, then, can be said to the claim that life is absurd and all human struggles a cruel joke?

The answers are not unlimited. Most popular, perhaps, among modern readers, whether or not they are persons of faith, is to say that there is no answer. Bertrand Russell's stance is typical even among religious leaders, urging that the God given voice in our text, has no answer for Job:

> Some, though they feel the demands of the ideal, will still consciously reject them, still urging that naked Power is worthy of worship. Such is the attitude inculcated in God's answer to Job out of the whirlwind: the divine power and knowledge are paraded, but of the divine goodness there is no hint.[4]

Russell's appraisal, all too characteristic of atheistic polemics, is the inference that there is no God. But the caricature of God as sheer uncaring Power expects moral

4 Russell, Bertrand, *A Free Man's Worship*, Portland, Maine: Mosher, 1923.

blame meant to rub off on those foolish enough to hold fast to their piety: God is at once non-existent, evil and uncaring. Worship is a discredit morally as well as intellectually to the faithful.

Yet, in fact, there's more than a hint of divine goodness in God's speech from the storm wind: God set the earth's foundations, kept the sea within bounds, and wreathed it in clouds (38:4–11). He causes day to break, brings rain, sets the stars' courses that mark or even govern the seasons (38:12, 26). He gives minds understanding, provides prey for the lion and its young (38:36, 39–41), and oversees the parturition of mountain goats (39:1–4), where no husbandman is there to help. The freedom of the wild ass and wild ox are His gift (39:5–9), and He looks after the ostrich eggs that even the birds that laid them will neglect. The horse's strength and spirit and the eagle's flight stand out among His gifts (39:13–29).

There's a craven eagerness, widespread among theologians today, to confess that Job's complaints have no answer, lest one appear complacent or uncaring. The effort can make the intended piety seem oxymoronic. Those who keep the faith but admit to having no answer to the problem of evil do not, of course, worship sheer power. But they frequently fall into a rhetoric that links reason to hubris and take refuge in a theology of feeling. Once faith attains its divorce from reason, its motto readily becomes a willful *credo quia absurdum*. Exponents may remain committed (perhaps selectively) to the practices of their faith, but more to its insignia and institutions, as they acknowledge, not humbly but proudly, that they have no answer to the problem of evil.

Modern Bible critics often fall into line, calling God's answer to Job ineffectual, if not irrelevant, still wielding their familiar tools to dismantle the biblical text. So, Elihu's speech is resected, or the framing fable-like narrative is cut away from the body of Job's dialogue with his would-be comforters – ironically, since that setting of the scene is the one part that casual readers find familiar and the favored target of secular polemicists with little patience for philosophical poetry or the intensity and elevation of the body text of the Book. God's speech from the storm wind, too, is amputated, dismissed as a pious but empty addendum inconsequentially stitched on to an otherwise trenchant critique of God and human life — as if the critique mattered but the responses to it, human and divine, did not, leaving the *Book of Job,* in that case no more content than any cry of human pain.

The choices facing us in answering Job's complaints are pretty straightforward: We can deny the major complaint and claim that the innocent never really suffer. But that gambit flies in the face of experience. We can deny the minor premise and claim, as Job's friends do, that he was not really innocent. But that misses the mark. For the issue is not Job's guilt or innocence, but how to understand sufferings undeserved and prosperity unmerited. (Thus the Talmudic sage Resh Lakish denied that Job existed. But the issue is not the historicity but the

The heart of biblical[83] metaphysics (rarely set in abstract terms) lies in God's first appraisal of His work — light and life in particular: "God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:12, 18; cf. 1:4). God made this true appraisal before we humans existed to draw our own, typically interested, judgments. And once the world was complete and housed the paradigmatic first human pair: "lo it was very good" (1:31). Biblically, being is good. Light and life are goods — life, intrinsically; light, intrinsically but also functionally and emblematically, symbolizing knowing and understanding. Light and life raise being to higher powers. God is the giver, able and willing to impart such gifts:

> Your love, LORD, reaches the heavens,
> Your faithfulness, beyond the clouds –
> Your justice, like mighty mountains,
> Judgments true as the vast deep,
> Preserving man and beast, LORD.
> How precious, God, is Your love!
> Adam's children nestle in the shade of Your wings,
> Sated by the bounty of Your house,
> Their thirst slaked by Your river of delights.
> For with You is the fountain of life.
> By Your light do we see light.
>
> (Psalms 36:6–10)

Being, I repeat, is a good. Life is the stage on which being stakes its highest claims. Evil is what violates such goods. Life must be respected: So fruit trees must not be destroyed, even in wartime (*Deuteronomy* 20:19), the newly married are exempt from calls to battle (*Deuteronomy* 24:5), man and beast enjoy the Sabbath (*Exodus* 23:12), and even the land must have its rest (*Leviticus* 25:1–7). Strangers and the helpless must be cared for (*Deuteronomy* 10:19, 24:19–21, *Leviticus* 19:9–10, 34, 23:22),[84] and lost goods must be returned (*Deuteronomy* 22:1–3), hazards must be prevented (*Deuteronomy* 22:8),[85] an ox and an ass may not be yoked together (Deuteronomy 22;10), creditors may not enter debtors' homes (*Deuteronomy* 24:10–11), day workers must be paid before dark (Deuteronomy 24:14–15). A widow's cloak (*Deuteronomy* 24:17; cf. *Exodus* 22:25–26) and a millstone may not be taken in pledge (*Deuteronomy* 24:6), lying

83 What follows is again based on my essay, "Judaism and the Problem of Evil," 205 ff.

84 The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 59b) counts in the Pentateuch thirty-six special provisions protecting the rights and deserts of the stranger, a concern more often mentioned than love of God or keeping the Sabbath.

85 For Talmudic generalization of the principle found here and in Exodus 21:28–36, 22:4–5, see *Bava Kamma* 21b, 52ab, 55b, 99b, etc.

and fraud are forbidden (*Exodus* 23:7, *Leviticus* 19:11),[86] murder and kidnapping are capital crimes (*Genesis* 9:6, *Exodus* 21:12–16, *Leviticus* 24:17), and charity (*Deuteronomy* 15:7–8) and love of others (*Leviticus* 18:19) are divine mandates. The entire fabric of biblical law is spun from recognition of the good of being. Not to suggest that these laws can be deduced from that identity, for laws and norms require a specificity that only matter can make possible. But the worth of being shines clearly all through the Torah's legislative and moral program, speaking to God's justice, truth, and grace.

It is being's goodness that disarms all claim to the primacy of evil. The question for theodicy is not the dominance of evil, since that very claim is self-refuting. The real question is whether the light is worth the candle: Is the prospect of suffering warranted by the gift of life? In the human case, that question receives a rabbinic answer vested in the opportunity that life gives us for the exercise of kindness (*ḥesed*), by which we human beings can emulate God's holiness.

So, when the Torah urges all who hear its message, "walk in the Lord's ways, revere Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, and worship Him alone" (*Deuteronomy* 13:5), the Talmudic Sage Hama ben Hanina (3rd century) asks how mere flesh and blood can be told to "walk in God's ways". He answers by citing acts of kindness: As God clothed the naked, so should we clothe the naked; as He visited the sick, so should we visit the sick; as He comforted the bereaved, so should we comfort the bereaved; as He buried the dead, so should we bury the dead.[87] In the artful Talmudic manner, R. Hama found prooftexts for each of these exemplary acts: God clothed Eve and Adam when they were expelled from Eden (*Genesis* 3:21), visited Abraham as he recovered from his circumcision (*Genesis* 18:1), blessed Isaac after Abraham's death (*Genesis* 25:11), and buried Moses (*Deuteronomy* 34:6). *Imitatio Dei* begins in acts of kindness.[88]

But emulation of God's grace does not suffice as our means of pursuing the holiness that can make life worthwhile. For the biblical commandments include

86 The biblical prooftexts for the prohibition of lying: "thou shalt not steal or commit fraud, or lie to one another" (Leviticus 19:11) and "keep far from falsehood" (Exodus 23:7). The latter may seem, in context, to refer to false charges, especially in a capital case. Maimonides, in the book of his legal code devoted to the Ethical Laws, characteristically generalizes, treating truth telling as the moral demand, not remote but manageable, and calling for the exercise of good judgment and tact: "A disciple of the wise [. . .] in speaking will not deviate from the truth, neither adding nor omitting anything, unless to make peace." *Mishneh Torah*, Ethical Laws 5.7. Moses' brother Aaron was a legendary peace maker, telling each of two people who had quarreled that the other was regretful.

87 *B. Sotah* 14a; cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 8.13, *Sifre* to Deuteronomy 11:22, *Piska* 49.

88 See Zev Harvey, Warren, "Grace or Loving-Kindness," in: A. A. Cohen/Paul Mendes-Flohr (eds.), *Twentieth Century Jewish Religious Thought*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 299–302.

spiritual *mitzvot* like the imperative to love God, ritual *mitzvot* that express and intensify that devotion, and hybrid *mitzvot* like keeping and celebrating Sabbaths, where moral, social, economic, and physical concerns fuse and constructively interact with spiritual and intellectual interests. Thus, *Deuteronomy* (10:12–13) links the admonition to walk in God's ways with the command to revere and serve God with all our hearts. So, Maimonides supplements the Talmudic Sages' ethical account of *imitatio Dei* by underscoring the opportunity life opens to the possibility of knowing God.[89] This, too, as both Plato and Aristotle argued,[90] is a way of emulating God, realizing our affinity to the divine on an intellectual or spiritual plane.[91]

There are problems, of course, in both the moral and the intellectual pursuit of God's perfection. On the moral side, God's infinite goodness seems to set emulation out of reach. No less difficult is the challenge of seeking to know an infinitely transcendent being. But the moral problem is allayed in Maimonidean terms by way of Plato's stipulation that we are to pursue Godlikeness as human beings and insofar as humanly possible — and by the rabbinic recognition, rooted in the Torah, that human and humane benevolence and grace mark our pathway to God. The perfection we are called to emulate is not God's boundlessness but the goodness known to us in the overflowing grace of creation. We emulate God's perfection not by pursuing infinitude — or even immortality! Our task is not to become gods but to pursue perfection by seeking to perfect humanity in ourselves.

Intellectually, too, our task is scaled to our skills: Even Moses, by the very fact of his human finitude, was denied a vision of God's face (*Exodus* 33:20). But he was shown God's "back parts", by which Maimonides understands all that follows, as it were, in God's wake: Nature shows us God's ways of governance. For Moses faced a crisis in his leadership when, soon after the epiphany of the Decalogue the people were hailing the golden calf as the god that had saved them from Egypt (32:1–6). What Moses most critically needed to know at that juncture, was how God governs the world — so that he could model his leadership on the pattern of God's rule. It was for that reason, Maimonides shows us, that it was the panoply of nature that God showed Moses. That is what was meant by the refer-

89 Maimonides, *Guide* I, 54, ad fin.; cf. III 33, 47.

90 Aristotle, at *Nicomachean Ethics* X, judges knowledge to be the freest, most self-sufficient, and thus the most divine mode of action, as well as the most distinctively human; cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176b: For the first *Alcibiades* argues that we realize a likeness to God by knowing God.

91 Maimonides, characteristically, merges Plato's prescription of *homoiosis theoi* with the biblical command (Leviticus 19:2) to emulate God's holiness. See also: Goodman, "Happiness: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives," in: Robert Pasnau (ed.), *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, 457–71, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

ence to God's "back," i.e., what came forth from God as the mode of His expression: For God's work reveals His attributes — with mercy and grace foremost among them, when the themes of that epiphany are committed to words (34:6–7).

Like the Muslim theologian al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), Maimonides argues that monotheism reaches its peak when one sees God in all things. For him, that means more than a gateway to mystical monism. It is an invitation to close study of nature, in which God's grace and wisdom are manifest to human understanding.

That last proposal sets a particular challenge for our contemporaries, who often see science pitted as a rival to spiritual sensibilities and are encouraged to take scientific explanations as precluding spiritual understanding. It will refresh the scientific enterprise and give heart to those who have imagined that religion must dwell in the cloud of unknowing, a realm of feeling devoid of insight or of faith stripped bare of logic, to realize that the constancy and intelligibility presumed in the work of scientists, and confirmed by their discoveries, are hallmarks of God's handiwork in nature.

The trend in the natural sciences, with some notable exceptions in the modern era, has been reductive, often in search of ever more elemental foundations within nature and ever more basic explanatory terms. But the love of analysis and abstraction, which are great strengths in science, should not blind us to the fact that synthesis is inseparable from analysis, and that explanation often needs to study wholes and complexes, not just their parts and elements to make sense of natural phenomena, to find the insight that science, as such, presumes we can discover.

Reason and order, as Genesis proposes, are deep themes in nature's construction. And they are not the only themes of moment. Beauty goes hand in hand with order in the cosmos, as Einstein and Newton before him clearly saw. And grace is the great theme most visible, silent in the flow of light that leaves the psalmist awestruck (19:4), but ever more explicit as creatures advance to the shores of life (to echo Lucretius), affirming and taking charge of their own purposes, as autonomy makes itself a theme, allowing the rise of persons.

To see God's hand in nature is a blessing made possible by the emergence of intelligence, a vision open to the scientist who can curb the hubris that discovery and invention may prompt or tempt – to the scientist, that is, who succeeds in "subduing his inclination." (For, as we learn from *Mishnah Avot*, the true hero is one who masters his bent, that is, his inclination). Here, we can see the enduring intellectual relevance of the quest for moral perfection, which, in Maimonides' view, is the goal intended by the practices the Torah prescribes, as the steppingstone to spiritual and intellectual perfection. Our intellectual quest is ungrounded and unguided without the moral virtues of calm and discipline, and the hybrid virtues of intellectual honesty and moral courage to keep us clear of self-deception, open to

the beauties of nature and able to dispel the fashionable, often cynical, illusion that science must be value free and indeed must squint to avoid seeing the values embedded in nature and palpable in the striving or conatus that is the dynamic essence of all things. Alongside human kindness, serving God through love and regard for all His creatures, natural science in its intellectual engagement with the world, and even mathematics in its abstract purity, pursuing truths that owe no debt to circumstance, can aid us in opening pathways to knowing and emulating God. Science and discovery can help us in that way to see the primacy of goodness and beauty that withstand the ravages to which the finitude of our being exposes us.

8 Conclusion

Jewish moral realism and the attendant ideas of personal and communal responsibility stand in tension with the indiscriminate impact of natural evils including illnesses and disabilities, the ravages of natural disasters including the horrors of earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, wildfires, floods, droughts, famines, pestilence, and plagues.

The biblical story of Noah frames the mythology of a worldwide flood in moral, rather than fanciful, terms. It resolves the moral issue which that analysis may seem to leave open by pronouncing a pledge by God, dual covenants with nature and with humanity, marked by the rainbow: God will never again inundate the world but will sustain the cycles of the seasons on which life depends. He charges humanity, for our part, to replenish and populate the earth. But He will recognize the human penchant for evil and not again interfere with nature's stability (*Genesis* 8:21–9:17). He asks only for observance of the minimal demands of civilized life, forbidding murder, theft, and sexual crimes. He demands respect for divinity (including *anyone's gods*) and the establishment of courts of law. Animal food is now permitted, but no one may consume living tissue, preserving a minimal respect for life by setting a sharp red line between humanity and bestiality.

The moral critique underlying Jewish theodicy emerges vividly when Abraham bargains with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Far be it from You [. . .] to slay the righteous with the wicked and let the innocent and the guilty fare alike! Far be it! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:23–25). God accepts Abraham's reasoning, although the minimal number are lacking that might have saved the Cities of the Plain.

It is in the Book of Job that the issues of theodicy are most squarely confronted: Job, an innocent and indeed a pious man, has lost his children, his prop-

erty, and even his bodily health, sparing only his life and his sanity, allowing him to confront his would-be comforters, refusing to accept their claims that he must be guilty of some unseen sin to have suffered as he has, refusing to relinquish his claims to moral integrity or to abandon his conviction that God is just. He will not accept his wife's despondent admonition, to curse God and die, but continues to bless God, in gratitude for the blessings he has enjoyed in the parts of his life that were undeniably good: "[N]aked came I from my mother's womb, and naked will I return" (1:21).

Some of the rabbinic Sages propose a doctrine of recompense, arguing even that God will bring undeserved sufferings on those He loves, to justify enhancing their reward in the hereafter. Saadiah Gaon elicits that view from Elihu's speeches in our text But Maimonides rejects it as untrue and unbiblical since it is inconsistent with God's justice (*Deuteronomy* 32:4). For God and His justice, Maimonides argues, are inseparable.[92] Maimonides is more drawn by the thought that he, like Saadiah, finds in God's speech from the storm wind, that general providence governs nature and may often override particular deserts – and, of course, by the centrality of human freedom, which leaves room for wrong choices, although it cannot justify them. Human freedom is critical both to the theodicy and to the broader theology of both Maimonides and Saadiah — so much so that Maimonides finds God (in *Deuteronomy* 5:26) wishing that humanity had a heart ever to revere Him and keep all His commandments — a wish that underlies his "major principle" that although God has the power to fix obedience and reverence in human nature, He has never chosen to use that power over humankind, and never will (*Guide* III, 32, 71b).

Philo, the great Jewish philosopher of the Hellenistic age, rings the changes on all of the classic arguments of theodicy and anticipates Maimonides in detecting the Epicurean roots of the Epicurean dilemma: Pleasure and pain are not the true coin of value. Like Antigonos of Socho (and like the Stoics), Philo sees integrity as its own best reward. As for Maimonides himself, part of the take-home message we can draw from his turn toward general providence is a better recognition of our situatedness in nature. And part of the wisdom we might glean from the Book of Job is recognition that the natural condition that is our own is a gift that does not come without conditions and costs.

Maimonides quotes from Galen, the founder of the medical tradition in which he and other scientific physicians of his milieu did their medical work: "Do not delude yourself with the vain hope that from semen and menstrual blood an animal could come that will not die or suffer pain, that will move perpetually, or

92 Maimonides, *Guide* 3.35a.

shine like the sun" (*De Usu Partium* III 10, quoted in *Guide* III 12). We know, with some help from our grasp of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that there can be no perpetual motion machine and that all energy comes at a cost. Our lives are not like God's life: Our bodies survive and thrive through their metabolism. We take in what we need and do our best to expel what we don't need and to exclude what is hostile or indifferent to our interests. But part of what is most relevant to questions of theodicy, although too readily neglected, is that we do have interests.

It's on that key point that this essay should end: Despite our human penchant to take for granted what we have, when we step onto the turf of theodicy, we need to recognize that any evil we know is evil only insofar as it poaches or encroaches on some good. In a world where interests may compete and where wisdom urges us to seek their complementarity and integration, we need to bear in mind that attributions of good and evil are perspectival. This is not to deny the reality of evils. For some interests are critical to preserve: We do not, in the sheer hubris of relativism, set the interests of the infant and the virus on a par. But the very notion of evil presupposes that of the good. And the idea of evil is itself parasitic on the idea of goodness, just as evils themselves are parasitic on the goods they sap or attack.

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Bruce Little

The Concept of Evil in Christianity

1 Introduction

Recorded human history details the ubiquitous nature of evil as a universal part of the human experience. The world questions why God allows so much objective moral and natural evil. The following response to that question is written from a Christian perspective. The question, however, is not, how evil entered the world, as that is disclosed in the Bible (*Rom* 5:12). Furthermore, the Christian Scriptures teach that Christ defeated evil by his death, burial, and resurrection and will one day remove all evil from God's creation. This will be when God's Kingdom is established on this earth (*Rev* 20–22). When the reality of evil is juxtaposed with the theological claim that the eternal triune creator God is omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient, and just, it seems the matter is enlarged. In fact, it is precisely because of God's nature, that evil raises the challenge. Vladimir Lossky noted, "Evil as a problem thus stems necessarily from Christianity."[1] C. S. Lewis pointed out that the claim that the God of the Bible exists "creates rather than solves the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving."[2] Lewis succinctly frames the challenge facing the Christian. As Stephen Davis writes,

> The problem is this: if God is omnipotent (as described above) he must be *able* to prevent evil (the state of affairs of there existing no evil seems precisely the sort of state of affairs an omnipotent being can bring about). And if God is perfectly good, he must be *willing* to prevent evil. But if God is both able and willing to prevent evil, why does evil exist?[3]

This describes the task for the Christian in answering the challenge from evil. The question before philosophers and theologians is: why God continues to allow evil, much of which is horrific? In plain terms, the question can be framed as: On what grounds is God morally justified in allowing evil to continue in his creation?

1 Lossky, Vladimir, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction,* trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978, 79.

2 Lewis, C. S., *The Problem of Pain,* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998, 12–13.

3 Davis, Stephen T., "Introduction," in: Stephen T. Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theology*, Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1981, 3.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111586441-002

The answer to this question is called a theodicy.[4] The term seems to appear for the first time as the title of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' (1646–1716) book *Theodicy* (1710).

The reality of evil is clearly affirmed by Christ as knowledge in the Lord's Prayer (*Matt* 6:9–13) but does not appear as a contradiction to the existence of God. This prayer is given as a model for his followers to pray and it says, in part, "deliver us from the evil one." The implication is that if evil comes from God, then the prayer would entail a plea to be delivered from God. That would be illogical in every way since the prayer is offered to God. Furthermore, consider Jesus as he stands outside the tomb of Lazarus weeping over the power of death. If God is the agent of death (evil), then the account is meaningless. In fact, it would be worse than meaningless as Jesus would be giving merely a show of grief because his Father would be the one who caused it. Another curious matter about God and evil surfaces in a reading of the Old Testament. The Old Testament records certain evils of which present day readers are only aware because it is written into the Scriptures that are a testimony of God's reality. These evils are frequently pointed to by critics of Christianity as evidence for their claim that God is a moral monster. However, if it truly were evidence against God, it would be difficult to explain why God had it written into the record of his reality.

Considering the weight of the question of evil, neither denying the reality of evil nor redefining God is a possible solution for the Christian. To deny the reality of evil would be grossly naïve and to redefine God would deal a fatal blow to Christianity. In addition, denying the reality of evil would make a mockery of suffering and pain and put the historical veracity of the Bible in question. Therefore, however Christians seek to address the challenge of the existence of evil, they must not contradict the realities of life, nor ignore the theological foundations of the Christian faith.

The following pages examine Christianity's traditional (historic) answer that affirms the existence of evil, while also affirming that God is good and that this is his creation. This is not intended as a defense of Christianity, nor as a complete account of Christian beliefs. That would be a worthy task, but not at this instance. This examination assumes that the early ecumenical Church documents reflect a consensus of foundational truths of Christianity. This study is organized in the following manner: first, a consideration of the basic terminology associated with the discussion of God and evil; second, an examination of the theological and phil-

4 Adams, Robert, "Theodicy," in: *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 794. Adams notes that the term "theodicy" is "from the Greek *theos,* 'God' and *dike,* 'justice.'" Peterson, Michael, *God and Evil*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998, 85, notes that it is as "John Milton says, an attempt to 'justify the ways of God to man.'"

osophical principles of the concept in Christianity; third, the historical development of responses to the challenge of evil. In this section representatives of prominent positions will be presented with consideration given to dialogical elements between Islam and Judaism; four, the current state of the concept of evil and subsequent research; five, a suggested practical application of answers to present and future challenges posed by the existence of evil.

2 The Basic Terminology and the Sources of the Concept in the Bible

Christian theism signals a basic Trinitarian theology as set forth in the first and second of the seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787 CE). The First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and the First Council of Constantinople (381 CE) dealt mostly with Trinitarian matters and Christology in particular. The two councils inform the content of the Christian creed known as the Nicaean-Constantinople Creed. This Creed, among other things, affirms God the Father as creator of all that is, both seen and unseen, Christ as true man and very God of very God, as is the Holy Spirit, and that Christ is coming again to set up his Kingdom on earth. This Creed contains the ontological content for the phrase Christian theism. The early Church began with divine ontology, by which it addressed the actuality of evil in God's creation. Paul L. Gavrilyuk notes that while the early Church did not have one official theodicy "binding upon the church as a whole," there was a general degree of agreement "in part, by holding to theistic ontology."[5] This means that God's essence frames what Christians can and cannot say about any theological matter, including the existence of evil.

Christian theism's divine ontological affirmation declares the eternal, creator, Trinitarian God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and just. Theologically, this is known as classical theism and was developed further by the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). According to Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), God's attributes/properties are held in maximal perfection. This is often referred to as *most perfect being theology*. If God is, as classical theism affirms, why should evil be found in his creation?

5 Gavrilyuk, Paul L., "An Overview of Patristic Theodicies," in: Nonna Verna Harrison/David G. Hunter (eds.), *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016, 3.

Theologically, Christianity includes more than *Christian Theism.* Christianity is a term that circumscribes definitionally "the *Faith* once for all delivered unto the saints" (*Jude* 3). It embraces concepts such as, but not limited to, soteriology and eschatology. Soteriology entails such ideas as redemption of humanity, reconciliation, sanctification, and glorification. Eschatology refers to how human history ending with God's Kingdom was established on this earth. For the most part these doctrines only tangentially inform Christianity's response to the question of evil. They are, however, usually playing in the background, influencing how Christianity answers the problem of evil. The most notable doctrine would be the Cross event where Christ defeats death, evil, and Satan, assuring that in the eschaton the presence of evil will be removed completely in his Kingdom forever.

Evil, as a word, appears in the Bible over 600 times with a wide range of meanings, but always refers to thoughts, acts, or a character actively malignant and in opposition to the will of God. The word can refer to moral and natural evil. In the Bible, it is used as an adjective, noun, and verb. While evil is presented as being actual, it does not have an essence of its own. Hence, philosophically it is a non-being, which is to affirm evil is not a creation of God. According to Paul Gavrilyuk, patristic theologians denied evil had an essence although evil is "real, powerful, and all-pervasive."[6] Louis Berkhof observes, "Augustine does not regard sin [evil] as something positive, but as a negation or privation. It is not a substantial evil added to man, but a *privatio boni*, a privation of the good."[7] In the literature, precise definitions of evil are extremely sparse as it is assumed people know intuitively what evil is.

Regarding the particular Christian understanding of the word, Carol A. Newsom notes most Christians associate the concept of evil with

> two things: first, the narrative of Adam and Eve as an account of the origin of moral evil, that is, the Fall; second, the dualistic view of apocalyptic literation in which a cosmic force of evil (sometimes personified as Satan) engages in conflict with God that lasts until a final victory of the forces of good over the forces of evil.[8]

Swinburne agreeably writes,

> The other strand central to many but by no means all theodicies has been the 'Fall' of the first human being, Adam; and (less prominently) the Fall, before Adam, of angels, rational

6 Gavrilyuk, "An Overview," 4.

7 Berkhof, Louis, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975, 134.

8 Newsom, Carol A., "Evil in the Hebrew Bible: A Case of the Wisdom Literature," in: Andrew P. Chignell (ed.), *Evil: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 60.

> beings created by God with great powers, some of whom (their leader often being called Satan or the Devil) chose the bad.[9]

The Genesis report of the Fall (*Gen* 3:1–19) details the consequence of disobedience: moral evil (disobeying God's command), suffering (pain in childbirth), and a change in nature (thorns and thistles; snake goes on his belly). Therefore, when considering evil, it is necessary to include a discussion of natural evil as well as moral evil.

Theologically, the word most often associated with "evil" is "sin".[10] In fact, sin (disobeying God) is the door through which evil and suffering[11] entered the human experience. This claim is justified by considering God's summary statement of all he had made was that it was "very good" (*Gen* 1:31). A straightforward reading of the text reveals that creation as it came from the mind of God was morally, functionally, and aesthetically good. Matters take a turn for the worse when Adam and Eve disobey God's command (*Gen* 3:1–7) not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil given in *Genesis* 2:17. The Bible is a story of what followed especially as it related to the human experience and God's work of redemption of man by sending his Son as the savior of the world.

Satan is portrayed as a real person who incites and personifies evil. Newsom points out that for Christians, evil is associated with an actual being called Satan. The *Book of Job* names Satan as a real being in an adversarial relationship with God and God's servant Job (*Job* 1:6). The accusation laid against God is that Job's obedience to God is predicated on the fact God has bought Job off, so to speak, by giving him good things. In *2 Corinthians* 4, verse 4, Satan is referred to as the "god of this age" who seeks to blind the eyes of those not yet believing. In the high priestly prayer Jesus prays that the Father would keep believers "from the evil one" (*John* 17:15), another term for Satan. In *Genesis* 3:1, the Tempter is named "the serpent" and in *Revelation* 20:2, the serpent is identified as the devil and Satan. In *2 Corinthians* 12:7, Paul claims that it was Satan who was responsible for a specific form of suffering in his body. This is not to say, however, that all suffering is caused by Satan. In *Matthew* 12:22, when Jesus healed the demon-oppressed man, the Pharisees called Jesus "Beelzebub, prince of the demons" (v. 24). In Jesus' response, he called Beelzebub, Satan (vv. 26–27). Furthermore, the Gospel record gives various encounters between Jesus and demons who were credited

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9 Swinburne, Richard, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1998, 35–36.

10 Sin is an act of transgressing the law of God or missing the mark. It is the act of disobeying God's Word.

11 In general, suffering is whatever causes pain, grief, discomfort, or harm of any sort. In the literature, suffering is more often simply understood intuitively and not defined.

with causing physical pain and suffering. The biblical text associates demons with doing the work of Satan. In *Ephesians* 6:11–12, the apostle Paul warns Christians that their struggles are not ultimately against flesh and blood, but "against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Such powers, the apostle notes, are the results of the "schemes of the devil" (v. 11). Later, the apostle refers to the devil as the "evil one" (v. 16).

The patristic theologians strenuously affirmed that evil had no essence of its own but is somehow related to Satan (the devil). If everything God created was good (*Gen* 1:31), then some explanation of the existence of Satan should be attempted. Although the Serpent (the devil) is crucial to the story of the Fall, nothing is said of his ancestry in the creation narrative (*Gen* 1–2). The *Genesis* 3 narrative simply introduces Satan into the story without any explanation as to his origin. His appearance leads to a reasonable conclusion that Satan existed apart from the *Genesis* creation story. Although there is no one scripture that tells directly the genealogy of Satan, helpful texts shed light on this matter. *Ezekiel* 28:1–18 may be helpful in finding an answer, but there is not a consensus on this text. Verse 1 speaks of a prophecy against the prince of Tyre. Later, in Verse 11, it continues as a lament over the king of Tyre. Given the language of the text, a number of theologians interpret this as the prophet speaking to the king of Tyre as well as of another, who, at that time, was operating through the king of Tyre.[12] In Verse 14, he is referred to as the "anointed guardian cherub" who was "in the Garden of Eden, the garden of God" (v. 13). Certainly, this was not the king of Tyre and yet, the description of Satan in the Garden of Eden differs considerably with what is said here. The implication drawn is that the "garden of God" refers to some space prior to the Genesis account of creation.

What follows in Ezekiel's prophecy (28:11–19) speaks of a being who seems clearly beyond any reasonable reference to the king of Tyre. The extravagant description seems to point to a terrestrial being, especially when it is said to be "an anointed guardian cherub on the holy mountain of God" (v. 14). According to Verse 17, his "heart was proud because of his beauty." As a result, he was judged by God and "cast down to the ground" (v. 17). *1 Timothy* 3:6, in writing about choosing proper persons for church leadership, the apostle Paul tells Timothy to avoid a placing a recent convert in church leadership as he might "become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." The prophet Isaiah speaks of another event placed in heaven (14:12–14). The text begins with "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of the Dawn." In the following two

12 Feinberg, Charles Lee, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of The Lord,* Chicago: Moody, 1969, 162–63.

verses, an explanation is given for the fall. In a word, the being claimed he would "make himself like the Most High" (v. 14). This text considered in light of the *Ezekiel* text seems to be two commentaries on the same event. The language associated with the being who falls from heaven seems most appropriate as language fitting to a terrestrial being one who was created good but became corrupted because of pride — an act of the will. So, in a sense, Lucifer (Satan) has his own fall.

Free will occupies a place of prominence in early and present theodicies. Concerning the source of evil in humanity, Augustine argues that evil results from an inappropriate act of the human will. God had not given the will for that purpose; however, the will — which was good — made wrong choices a possibility. The will was free to choose, which meant that God bore no responsibility for the resulting evil, as the will itself was good. As Augustine explains, just "because sin occurs through free will, we must not suppose that God gave man free will for the purpose of sinning. It is a sufficient reason why it ought to be given, that man cannot live rightly without it."[13]

Christian theologians agree that human persons have free will, but the debate is regarding the true nature of free will. Is it in the *libertarian* sense or the *compatibilist* sense? Furthermore, did it exist pre-Fall and post-Fall environment? Libertarians believe human persons are not determined in their choices and they have circumstantial and metaphysical freedom. Their choices are made without being determined by God or other agents. In this way, humans are responsible for their moral choices, concluding that determinism and libertarianism (free will) are incompatible. The compatibilist claims that determinism and free will are compatible, that is to say, a person's choice can be determined yet free. By this, it is meant that a person has the ability to do what he wants or desires. Because he is a fallen being and is totally depraved, his desires are always in the wrong direction, but freely so. What compatibilists deny is that a person has the ability to choose between contraries, which is in contradistinction to the libertarian view. Most compatibilists believe Adam had free will pre-Fall, but not post-Fall. Now that man is fallen, he cannot choose to do any good thing as his complete being is totally corrupt. The question remaining concerns God's sovereignty or the idea that God is in control. If God controls all things, is he responsible for evil?

Sovereignty, as indicated above, plays a major role in the Christian response to the challenge of evil in God's creation. The Christian understanding of God's sovereignty places God's will as supreme. This means God is not controlled by an-

13 Augustine, "The Problem of Free Choice," in: Joseph Plume/Johannes Quasten (eds.), *Ancient Christian Writers*, trans. Dom Mark Pontifex, Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1955, 2.1.3. All quotes are cited from this source unless otherwise stated.

other; he alone is sovereign. In general terms, this is expressed to mean that God is in control. The order of the universe is within his sole prerogative. There is none other above him, as the prophet Isaiah records:

> Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying my counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose (*Isa* 46:8–10).

Some theists interpret this as a statement of determinism — that is, God has planned everything, and all things will be as he has planned, including the choices of man. This leads to the idea that everything that happens on this planet has a purpose, including evil and suffering. It has a purpose because God planned it to be that way. If God has planned all things, then the charge that follows is that God must be responsible for evil. That would be one view of sovereignty but not the only view among Christian theologians. However, those who adhere to a strong view of sovereignty still maintain that God is not responsible for evil. Furthermore, there is a difference between sovereignty and providence.

Providence relates to God's governance of creation in a personal and daily way. When God delivered the Israelites from Egypt through the crossing of the Red Sea, that was God's providential work. It is God doing something that otherwise would not have happened if the course of nature was left untouched. It is not always clear when God intervenes providentially, although it is clear he can and does. God's providence works within the moral and physical structure but never contrary to it. Death is not part of the original order of the universe; it is the consequence of sin (*Rom* 5:12). The moral and physical order are the expression of the regular modus operandi of creation working, but it is always subject to the One who constantly holds it together (*Col* 1; *Heb* 1). Providence respects the core moral and coherent ordering of creation. Providence cannot intervene and make a circle square without it ceasing to be a circle. *Meticulous Providence* speaks more directly to the idea of God's providentially ordering everything for his glory, including evil/suffering.

3 Theological and Philosophical Principles in Christianity

The early chapters of Genesis present a vision of reality (ontology) within which the remainder of the Bible is to be interpreted. *Genesis* 1 begins with God as the self-existent one or the necessary being who brings all contingent reality into ex-

making God the cause (either directly or indirectly) of evil. This has been true until of late in the West when a small number of reformed theologians began claiming God ordains all evil but is not morally responsible for the evil. These are theologians who stand in orthodox Christian tradition regarding creation, fall, redemption, and final restoration but are committed to a strong view of determinism. The debate here is whether this view can be defended against the charge of inconsistency.

4.1 The Practical Application

From a Christian perspective, all creation is in a fallen or corrupted state since the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden (*Gen* 3). This means that creation including humanity is out of joint, so to speak. This means that evil/suffering is a part of everyday life until the dawn of God's Kingdom on earth (*Re* 22). This truth of reality is that within which theodicies are framed. It is the truth of this world and the age to come. The fact that sin is part of this life until the day of restoration means that neither man nor his environment is perfectible by science. Therefore, it appears the Christian response to evil/suffering will continue until then. This is the task of a theodicy.

There are four important practical consequences for a theodicy. The first is the philosophical/theological question of whether the existence of evil in God's good creation negates the claim that God exists. The practical importance here is the "truth question": Does God exist or not? If God does not exist, then the entire message of Christianity collapses and the entire European civilization was constructed on a lie. So, in this way, a theodicy is of extreme importance because it deals with the truth question and answers the atheist's objection to God's existence via the argument from evil. It also has very practical implications for the issue of culture. The second practical importance of a proper theodicy concerns the nature of the reality in which we live. The question here is: Are we alone in the universe or not? This question was put in high relieve on September 11, 2001, when the Trade Towers in the United States were struck by an act of terrorism. For the next several days television was devoted exclusively to asking this question: If God is there, then why did he allow such a loss of innocent lives? If he is not there, we are alone in the universe and how do we answer this sense of terrible vulnerability? In this case, a theodicy's function is to answer the question of the true nature of reality. Here, the task of a theodicy is not to bring men to a relationship with God, but only to affirm we are not alone in the universe and that there is meaning in life. A proper theodicy affirms the evil experienced and yet does not take this to mean that there is no meaning in life.

The third practical application of a theodicy is for the individual who experiences pain and suffering in their lives. This is the practical importance of a theodicy in counseling. When people are hurting physically or emotionally, they are looking for answers that will help them cope. Consider when a patient with cancer goes to an oncologist: The purpose of the visit is not to get a lecture on the pathology of cancer but to learn of a treatment plan that will increase life expectancy. It is the same thing when a person who goes to a Christian counselor/pastor for help when suffering. They do not want a full-blown explanation of the counselor's theodicy, but they do expect the counselor understands the pathology of evil. Without a theodicy, shaping what should and should not be said will limit the efficacy of the counsel. Reporting that the concept of God and Suffering is just a mystery is not very helpful to the person who has just had her five-year daughter molested and killed by a pedophile. This is the important practical application of a theodicy.

The fourth way a theodicy functions in a practical way, although it is more philosophical, is its role in apologetics. There is a rather wide gap theologically in the way evil is treated by different monotheistic world religions due to a difference in views of God, however, a discussion of these theological differences is beyond the purpose here. By looking at evil and the respective explanations, it is possible to test each of the three religions against reality. That is, are the respective explanations of evil consistent with what is seen in reality, which would include nature and humanity? It would be a way to test the different monotheistic religions in terms of the truth values of their claims about God and evil. One test for truth is what is known as the correspondence theory which asks, does the claim correspond to the way reality is experienced? The other test for truth is the coherence test for truth, which seeks to determine whether the explanation is consistent with other claims made by the religion. As we know, reality is a great truth tester.

I suggest these are at least four ways in which theodicy has practical implications for answering not only important theological and philosophical questions but existential questions as well. This is the world in which we live until His Kingdom comes and until then we must seek to make sense of the realities of this life. Maybe the most troubling reality is the universal experience of evil and suffering. Fail to find answers to this actuality, and not only is the existence of God challenged, but humanity itself is left without hope.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is suggested that the most pressing issue for Christianity concerning the subject of evil is a critique of the answers (theodicies) given in response to the objection by atheists that evil is a defeater to the claim that the omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists. Since the time of St. Augustine, many, if not most, Christian theologians have offered some form of the Greater-Good theodicy which claims that God allows only that evil from which he can bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil. In response, the atheist replies that it seems there exist certain instances of suffering (evil) that the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being could have prevented without losing some greater good or allowing some worse evil. This requires the theist to identify the particular good that was obtained from some instance of suffering (evil) as a justification for God allowing the evil. This would include moral, natural, or physical evil. By using the Greater-Good theodicy, the burden of proof falls to the theist. In this case, the burden of proof is not to prove theism but to prove the Greater-Good theodicy that is intended to defend theism. However, while many theists have attempted to demonstrate that some good is obtained from all instances of evil, they have never been very convincing to atheists as well as some theists. What has made the Greater-Good theodicy so difficult to defend is its denial of gratuitous evil meaning that every evil must always serve some divine purpose which is understood in terms of some greater good. Of course, to make such a claim requires epistemic powers which seem beyond that which human beings possess. However, it is also true the atheist cannot prove the good did not obtain. In theory, this leads to a stalemate, but existentially, it seems that evidence from history, based on the Principle of Credulity, tends to support the atheist's claim, namely that it seems more likely that God does not exist than that he does. Considering this, it appears the Greater-Good theodicy has committed the theist to a position almost impossible to defend on evidentiary grounds, but the theists have made it an evidentiary argument. The theist must, for each evil, identify some corresponding observable good obtained because of the evil. In addition, that good must be necessary to the plan of God if the Greater-Good theodicy is to be defended. If the good is not necessary to the plan of God, then it would be gratuitous evil which defenders of the Greater-Good theodicy deny. Furthermore, if the good from the evil is necessary, then it follows that the evil is also necessary. Such difficulties with the Greater-Good theodicy, however, do not leave the theist without sufficient answers to the atheist's objection. Theists do have other grounds on which to defend the existence of God against the objection from evil, it is only that present theodicies seem easily contested. As a suggestion, it seems possible that theists could accept the possibility of gratuitous evil but demonstrate if it did exist, it would not count against the moral perfections of God. It appears that

this line of investigation might provide the theist with a more promising paradigm for developing a theodicy. If successful, it would tip the scales in favor of the theist in this debate.

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Nasrin Rouzati

The Concept of Evil in Islam

1 Introduction

The "Problem of Evil" or, as it is more often referred to, the cause of human suffering is perhaps one of the most debated questions in the history of the philosophy of religion.[1] Although the issue makes itself known to humankind in general, it gains particular attention in the context of monotheistic religions as it brings into question the main pillar of such religions, namely, the existence of a powerful and merciful God. In light of the enormous amount of evil in the world, especially in the case of undeserved suffering, the challenge becomes even more acute and begs for answers. According to Hick, pondering about the volume of afflictions and adversities that mankind is faced with, "we do indeed have to ask ourselves whether it is possible to think of this world as the work of an omnipotent creator who is motivated by limitless love [. . .] this is indeed the most serious challenge that there is to theistic faith."[2]

This paper aims to shed light on the treatment of the "Problem of Evil" and human suffering from an Islamic perspective.[3] I will begin by providing a linguistic overview of the term "evil" in the Qurʾān to highlight its multidimensional meaning and attempt to demonstrate the overall portrait of this notion as it is presented in the Islamic revelation through the narrative of the story of the prophet Job. Having established a Qurʾānic framework, I will then provide a brief historical overview of the formation of theological debates surrounding "good" and "bad/evil", and the origination of Muslim theodicean thought. This will lead us to Ghazālian theodicy and the famous dictum of the *best of all possible worlds*, by one of the most influential scholars of Islamic thought, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī

1 The "Problem of Evil" in the context of Western scholarship is generally divided into two main categories: theoretical and existential with the theoretical being further divided into logical and evidential; the distinction between moral evil and natural evil is also underscored. For more on this Cf. Peterson, Michael L., *The Problem of Evil. Selected Readings*, Indiana, USA: University of Notre Dame, 2011. Plantinga, A., *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Cambridge, UK: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1974 and Hick, John, *Evil and the God of Love*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

2 Hick, J., *An Interpretation of Religion*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004, 118.

3 The first version of this paper was published in *Journal of Religions* 9 (2018), 47; doi:10.3390/rel9020047 (accessed on 03.04.2024). This current version has been substantially extended and includes new discussions as well as some content that was first published in my book, Rouzati, Nasrin, *Trial and Tribulation in the Qur'an: A Mystical Theodicy*, Berlin, Germany: Gerlach, 2015, and is used here with permission from the publisher.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111586441-003

(1056–1111/448–505). The final sections will explore the Sufi/mystical tradition of Islam through the teachings of one of the most distinguished mystics of Islam, Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī (1207–1273/604–672), as well as ideas for future development. The conclusion of the paper will attempt to bring about a new understanding of how the so-called "Problem of Evil" is not presented in Islam as a problem, but rather as an instrument in the actualization of God's plan that is intertwined with the human experience in this world — an experience that is necessary for man's spiritual development. Finally, the paper will conclude by presenting recommendations for further studies.

2 Evil and Suffering in the Qurʾān: An Overview

For more than fourteen hundred years, the Qurʾān has served as the foundation stone of the religion of Islam and continues to play a dynamic role in shaping and influencing the lives of its followers regardless of their diverse cultural backgrounds. The Qurʾān is also considered to be the highest source of Islamic scholarship and functions as the point of departure for a major portion of scholarly works. Therefore, to understand the treatment of evil and suffering in Muslim thought, the journey must begin with a study of the Qurʾānic narratives where this concept is introduced.

A cursory review of studies on theodicy reveals that the meaning of "evil", for the most part, is assumed to be fixed and not negotiable — personal loss, illness, violence, natural disaster, etc. Although the term appears abundantly in popular as well as scholarly works, there seems to be a conceptual ambiguity surrounding it: What exactly is evil? Furthermore, does human understanding of evil concur with the divine message?

A key term in Arabic that is translated as evil is *sharr* and occurs in more than twenty-nine occasions in both Meccan and Medinan phases of the Islamic revelation.[4] Even though some scholars have defined evil (*sharr*) to mean different forms of disaster or misfortune (natural evil), the context of the majority of the verses seems to illustrate that evil (*sharr*) is mostly defined as humankind's transgression and misbehavior — that which is not in accord with God's overall plan for humanity. The overall portrayal of evil (*sharr*) in the Qurʾān is presented in two distinct categories which will be discussed below. The first category includes verses that fall into the semantic field of *sharr* and appear amongst the

4 For information on the chronology of the Qurʾān, Cf. Robinson, Neal, *Discovering The Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2003.

moral concepts of the Qur'ān, while the other group includes those verses that fall outside of the semantic field and constitute other variations of the term evil.

2.1 Semantic Field of Evil (*Sharr*)

In an effort to provide a clear understanding of the meanings of the term evil (*sharr*), we will utilize the methodology of semantic analysis and contextual interpretation discussed by Toshihiko Izutsu in his book *Ethico Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*.[5] According to Izutsu, any Qur'ānic term needs to be understood within the whole of the semantic framework of the verses in which it appears and those surrounding it. Hence, the best method for analyzing the Qur'ānic terms is to bring together, compare, and put in relation all the narratives in which the term under study appears, so that the semantic value and the context of the narratives are examined.

The Qur'ān utilizes a number of terms that shed light on the notion of evil (*sharr)*. Some of the concepts that fall into the semantic field of *sharr* include: *ḍalla* (going astray), *kufr* (disbelief), *bukhl* (stinginess), *shirk* (idolatry), *ẓulm* (unjust), and *sayyi'a* (bad deed), as well as many others. What follows is a brief elucidation of a few Qur'ānic verses where a particular conduct or behavior is identified as evil (*sharr*).

2.1.1 *Bukhl* (Stinginess/Miserliness) as *Sharr*

That the Qur'ān underscores the importance of charity is abundantly clear from the numerous occasions where this concept is revealed, hence, presenting it as a major theme in the overall spiritual climate of the Islamic religion.

> And let not those who are miserly with what God has given them from His bounty suppose that it is good (*khayr*) for them; rather it is evil (*sharr*) for them. On the day of Resurrection, they will be collared by that with which they were miserly. And unto God belongs the inheritance of the heavens and the earth, and God is aware of whatsoever you do.[6]

The above narrative is interpreted to signify that the accumulating of material wealth and failing to share it with those who are in need is considered *sharr*, and

5 Cf. Izutsu, Toshihiko, *Ethico-Religious Concepts In The Qur'an*, Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, 24–41.
6 The Qur'ān, 3:180.

its impact will become a permanent component of a person's irreversible character. It has been reported that prophet Muhammad provided a commentary on this verse by articulating that a person's hoard of wealth will follow him on the Day of Judgment as a serpent, slowly consuming him or wrapping itself around him, and the serpent will say, "I am your wealth; I am your treasure."[7] Furthermore, the verse illuminates an overarching theme of the Qurʾān, namely, that humankind lacks an accurate understanding of what constitutes good and bad from the divine perspective, therefore, man becomes the victim of his own ignorance.

2.1.2 Disbelief (*Kufr)* and Going Astray (*Ḍalla)* as *Sharr*

The notion of belief and unbelief, *imān* and *kufr*, is perhaps one of the most elaborated themes of the Qurʾān and is treated in various contexts of the Islamic revelation. Therefore, dis/unbelief (*kufr*), as well as other closely related concepts such as deviating from the straight path (*ḍalla)* and associating partners with God (*shirk*), are frequently discussed in the Qurʾān and are identified as ways by which humankind creates evil (*sharr*) conditions for himself. Take, for example, the following verses:

> The worst (*sharra*) creatures in the sight of God are those who reject Him and will not believe.[8]

> Truly the disbelievers (*alladhīna kafarū*) among the people of the book and the idolaters are in the fire of hell, abiding therein; it is they who are the worst of creatures (*sharru l-barīya*).[9]

> For those who are gathered upon their faces to hell, their place is worse (*sharrun makānan*), and they are further astray from the way (*aḍallu*).[10]

> [Prophet], you can see the hostility on the faces of the disbelievers (*kafarū*) when our clear messages are recited clearly to them: it is almost as if they are going to attack those who recite Our messages to them. Say, 'shall I tell you what is far worse (*bi-sharri*) than what you feel now? The fire that God has promised the disbelievers (*kafarū*)! What an evil journey's end.[11]

7 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (ed.), *The Study Qur'an*, New York: HarperCollins, 2015, 181.
8 The Qurʾān, 8:55.
9 The Qurʾān, 98:6.
10 The Qurʾān, 25:34.
11 The Qurʾān, 22:72.

In analyzing the aforementioned narratives as well as other similar verses of the Qurʾān where the term *kufr* is utilized, attention should be drawn to its literal meaning, "covering", as well as the element of "thanklessness" in it. Viewed from the Qurʾānic perspective, every human being must recognize and acknowledge that his very existence and all of his subsistence is dependent on God and His inexhaustible compassion. An unbeliever (*kāfir)* is, therefore, someone who deliberately "covers" and ignores all that he has received from God which, in fact, results in his ungratefulness.[12] Thus, while *kufr* is often used in contrast to *imān*, the hidden element of ingratitude that is presented in some of the other Qurʾānic verses, contributes greatly to our understanding of *sharr* in the Qurʾān.[13] As was briefly discussed above with regard to the Qurʾānic treatment of miserliness (3:180), the Islamic revelation repeatedly reminds humankind of the eschatological aspect of creation to inform them of the consequences and the retribution that awaits them in the hereafter. Therefore, *sharr* in hell (*Jahannam*)[14] is inevitable for those who choose to deviate from the path by becoming part of certain groups, such as: the ungrateful or unbelievers (*kafarū*), the liars (*mukaththibūn*), the wrong-doers or the unjust (*ẓālim*), the proud and arrogant (*mutakabbir*), the transgressors (*ṭāghīn*), those who act viciously (*fājir*), those who mock at the revelation (*mustahzi'*), those who rebel against God and His apostle (*'āṣī*), and those who, though outwardly pious believers, are in reality most stubborn disbelievers (*munāfiq*).[15]

It may be concluded, then, that applying an intra-textual contextualization method whereby the Qurʾān functions as its own interpreter, the resulting interpretation seems to suggest that the most prominent meaning for the term *sharr* in this group of narratives is the situation that man creates for himself.[16] It is clearly stated in the Qurʾān that when humankind, through his own volition, acts in certain ways and adopts forms of behavior that are not in accordance with the divine plan, it situates itself in a condition that is referred to as *sharr* by the Qurʾān. Furthermore, the Islamic revelation noticeably upholds that the creation

12 For more on the meaning of *kufr*, Cf. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts In The Qur'an*, 119–24.

13 For instance, Cf. the Qurʾān 2:153, and its commentary by Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muhammad Hussain, *al-Mīzān*, trans. Seyed M. Bagher Musavi-Hamedani, Qum, Iran: Daftar Intisharat Islami, 1367.

14 *They fulfill their vows and fear a day of widespread 'sharr'* (76:8).

15 Cf. for example the Qurʾān, 67:6; 56:51; 37:62; 40:60; 78:21; 82:13; 18:106; 72:23; 66:9. For a more comprehensive list of the companions of hell in the Qurʾān, Cf. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts In The Qur'an,* 111–16.

16 Other examples of the Qurʾānic terms that maybe grouped in this category of *sharr* include: aversion (*a'raḍa*), slander (*'ifk*), transgression (*fisq*), hypocrisy (*nifāq*), etc. For more on this, Cf. Ozkan, Tunbar Yesilhark, *A Muslim Response to Evil. Said Nursi on Theodicy*, London, UK: Ashgate, 2015, 19–28.

of humankind is purposeful, i.e., to actualize his inner potentials and serve humanity as God's vicegerent on earth.[17] Humankind, therefore, must make a serious effort to live according to God's cosmic plan. By neglecting the purpose of his creation and the accountabilities that it entails, it creates an undesirable living condition for itself, i.e., *sharr*. The purposefulness of man's creation and his responsibility as it pertains to suffering will be discussed later in the article.

2.2 Other Contexts of Evil (*Sharr)* in the Qurʾān

Although the majority of the Qurʾānic verses on evil (*sharr)* correlate to humankind's opting to diverge from the straight path of monotheism, evil is, nonetheless, discussed in a few other frameworks that need some attention. One important aspect of *sharr* seems to appear in the final two Chapters (*sura*) of the Qur'an, namely, Chapter 113 *al-Falaq* (The Daybreak) and 114 *an-Nās* (Mankind). While both of these narratives instruct the Prophet — and by extension, all Muslims — to seek refuge in God from various forms of evil that appear in the world, *Chapter 113* is what interests us here.

> Say, "I seek refuge in the Lord of daybreak. From the evil (*sharr*) of what He has created. From the evil (*sharr*) of darkness when it enshrouds, from the veil of those who blow upon knots, and from the evil (*sharr*) of the envier when he envies (113:1–5).

Muslim exegetes have paid special attention to 113:2, "from the evil of what He has created," to explicate its theological implication and the impact that it may have on the overall understanding of the divine character in Islam. From az-Zamakhsharī's (1074–1143/466–537) perspective, this verse refers to the evil that creatures bring about, including the injustices and harms that certain people impose on others as well as evil that God has positioned in various elements such as the burning character of fire which at times may cause harm and bring about evil to humankind.[18] Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1904–1981/1321–1402) is of the opinion that this verse incorporates all varieties of evil that may be brought about by humans, animals, and other entities within the structure of the universe. Furthermore, in his elucidation, Ṭabāṭabāʾī emphasizes the fact that this does not mean that humans or other creatures have an inherently evil character, rather, that there is the potential for evil in them. He further concludes that the Qurʾānic representation of

17 The Qurʾān, 38:27.

18 az-Zamakhsharī, Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar, *al-Kashshāf ʿan Haqāʾiq Ghawāmiḍ at-Tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wuǧūh at-Taʾwīl*, trans. Masud Ansari, Tehran, IR: Dar al-Kitab al- Arabi, Beirut/Qoqnoos, Tehran, 1389, 1031–32.

evil in its overarching expression does not demonstrate that evil exists intrinsically in the makeup of the universe.[19] Viewed from a theological perspective, then, the verse refers to the inescapable amount of evil that enters the universe as a result of the interaction between various elements in the cosmos and, as such, does not imply that God "creates" evil (*sharr*) as evil has no existence and is referred to as "lack of good".[20] The nonexistent essence of "evil" will be examined later as part of the philosophical discussions.

2.3 Evil (*Sharr*) as Divine Trial (*Balāʾ*)

The second category of Qurʾānic narratives is of greater interest to us as it is directly related to human suffering and theodicy and is, for the most part, represented through terms such as *balāʾ* (trial) and *fitna* (test).[21] This group of verses falls beyond the semantic field of *sharr* and has been revealed in various historical contexts reflected in the Qurʾān.[22] What follows is a brief explanation of a few circumstances where the notion of divine trial is presented in the Qurʾān.

2.3.1 Divine Trial as Punishment

The popular understanding of *balāʾ and fitna* carries a negative connation and, for the most part, represents an undesirable and unconstructive image. This perception may be viewed from different perspectives. Whether an individual is experiencing a hardship, an illness, financial difficulty, or an entire community is affected by a natural tragedy, such as an earthquake, the popular tendency is to view the situation as a punishment from God. This accepted perception goes fur-

19 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mīzān*, 679–82.

20 For more on this, Cf. Taleghani, Seyed Mahmoud, *Partuvi az Qur'an. A Ray of the Qur'an,* Tehran, IR: Sherkat Sahami Enteshar, 1347, 206–8.

21 Edward William Lane describes the term *balāʾ as*: "God tried, proved, or tested with good, or with, evil; for God tries his servant by a benefit to test his thankfulness; and by a calamity to test his patience. The term *fitna* is defined as: melting of gold and of silver in order to separate, or distinguish, the bad from the good, it signifies a trial, or probation, as well as affliction, distress, or hardship. Cf. Lane, Edward William, "Arabic-English Lexicon," published online: 1968, *Williams and Norgate*, http://www.studyquran.co.uk/LLhome.htm (accessed on 29.03.2024).

22 Discussing the historical, political, and social climate of Islam's normative period is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it needs to be noted that a large portion of the Qur'ān is directly related to the circumstances that surrounded Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community.

ther to justify the hardship as a deserved punishment, which is a direct consequence of sinful conducts on behalf of the recipient of the calamity. However, as it can be observed from the following verse, the Qur'ān indisputably clarifies this misperception: "No blame will be attached to the blind, the lame, and the sick."[23] Therefore, as Bowker points out, "the Qur'an warns the faithful not to make the mistake of Job's friends and to assume that where they see suffering there also they see sin."[24] The overall Qur'ānic view which noticeably presents adversities as tests and not as punishments can be elucidated from the following narrative: "We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops; but [Prophet], give good news to those who steadfast."[25]

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān includes a small number of narratives which support that suffering may, in fact, be a punishment from God. Appealing to past history, these "punishment narratives" illustrate that, as a result of continuous persistence in disbelief and rejection of the prophetic message, an entire community is eradicated. According to the Qur'ān, God's sending of a prophet may be accompanied by calamities afflicting the community.[26] However, the purpose of the tragedies or misfortunes is to serve as supporting evidence to the warnings of the prophet, thereby providing the opportunity to embrace the prophetic message. However, as a result of peoples' choice of ignoring the prophet's warnings, and their endless tenacity on the disbelief path, God eradicates the hardship, bestows prosperity, and whilst people are ignorant of the Divine, wills the total destruction of the community through a natural disaster.

> Whenever we sent a prophet to a town, we afflicted its [disbelieving] people with suffering and hardships, so that they might humble themselves [before God], and then we changed their hardship to prosperity, until they multiplied. But then they said, 'hardship and affluence also befell our forefathers', and so we took them suddenly, unawares.[27]

Although annihilation of a particular community is perceived to be a punishment from God, nevertheless, this paradigm serves a decisive role within a broader scope: a test and a learning opportunity for other addressee communities. The Qur'ān repeatedly illuminates that the underlying principle of the hardships was for the community to become humble in the way of God, transform their attitude,

23 The Qur'ān: 24:61.

24 Bowker, John, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 109.

25 The Qur'ān, 2:155.

26 Heemskerk, Margaretha T., "Suffering," in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006, 132–36.

27 The Qur'ān, 7:94–95.

and willingly accept the monotheistic message. Time and again, the Qurʾān reflects on human understanding with regards to signs (*āyāt*) from God; in this case, asking people to think about the adversity and the prosperity visited on them and to recognize the Divine purpose. Had they not ignored the signs which resulted in their insistence on the wrong path, they would have been guided to salvation. Instead, their heedlessness leads them to destruction.[28] It needs to be emphasized that the term *balāʾ* is not utilized in the "punishment narratives"; nonetheless, the popular understanding equates these calamities with *balāʾ*.

2.3.2 Categories of Divine Trial Narratives

The overall representation of trial and test narratives in the Qurʾān seems to suggest four distinct categories with some overlap between them: (a) Divine trial as the central pillar of the creational structure of the cosmos; (b) manifestation of Divine trial; (c) objects of Divine trial; and (d) Divine trial visited on prophets and their communities.[29] This categorization or grouping is done by studying the theme of each individual verse as well as the overall context of their corresponding chapter.[30] The following represents an example for each of the aforementioned categories.

2.3.2.1 Divine Trial as the Central Pillar of Creation

> It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six Days – and His throne was on water – so as to test you, which of you does best. Yet [Prophet] if say to them, 'You will be resurrected after death', the disbelievers are sure to answer, this is clearly nothing but sorcery![31]

In this narrative the concept of *balāʾ* is not only directly linked to the story of creation, but also highlighted as its foundation: without *balāʾ*, creation would be aimless. In other words, it is by going through the challenges of life that human character is built, and the inner potentials are actualized. As it will be explained in the following sections, the Qurʾān clearly and decisively reminds the audience that all life's experiences, the good and the bad, are opportunities for humankind to cultivate virtues and submit to God's will. It can be further observed that this narra-

28 The test of nations and prophets will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

29 Cf. the following examples for each category: (a) 11:7, 18:7, 67:2; (b) 6:165, 21:35, 89:15; (c) 2:155, 3:152, 5:94; and (d) 7:141, 14:6, 44:33.

30 For a more detailed discussion on this and the instrumentality of evil in forms of *balāʾ*, Cf. Rouzati, Nasrin, *Trial and Tribulation in the Qur'an: A Mystical Theodicy*, Berlin, Germany: Gerlach, 2015.

31 The Qurʾān, 11:7.

6 Suffering from the Mystical Perspective: Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī

The mystical dimension of Islam, similar to other forms of religious mysticism discussed in Perennial Philosophy,[157] deals with the esoteric teachings of Islam and is traditionally represented by Sufism. Although the development of Sufism may be tracked back to a century after the death of Prophet Muhammad, the roots of its teachings go back to the Qurʾān and the *Sunna* (normative behavior) of the Prophet where contemplating on the spiritual realities of the universe is highly encouraged. That the external (*ẓāhir*) practices of Islam should guide to an insight and inner realities (*bāṭin*) may be understood from the Qurʾān where God is presented as both the Outward (*aẓ-ẓāhir*) and the Inward (*al-bāṭin*).[158] Although the focus of Sufism is on the esoteric path (*tarīqah*) in order to reach the state of the union with God, the doctrines and practices of the Sufi path are, nevertheless, founded on the exoteric framework specified in Islamic Law (*sharīʿah*).[159]

One of the most influential Sufis of Islam is Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī who is known in the West for his mystical poetry. Rūmī was born in Balkh, in the Iranian province of Khorāsān, and received a high level of education under his father who was a distinguished jurisprudent and Sufi, as well as a formal trainee to the mastery level in Sufism under one of the most well-known Sufi masters of the time, Burhān ad-Din Tirmidhī (1165–1244/560–642). Being educated in the traditional religious sciences in addition to Sufism, he gained widespread recognition as a religious scholar and influential teacher in both exoteric and esoteric teachings of Islam. In Shafiei Kadkani's opinion, Rūmī is considered one of the greatest intellectuals of the world mainly because of his extraordinary ability to engage with the mystical interpretation of some of the most difficult theological concepts as well as their exposition in

157 Perennial Philosophy takes a universal approach in explaining the teachings of world religions and brings to light a shared mystical vision among them. Viewed from this perspective, world religions and spiritual traditions, despite their cultural and historical differences, promote a deep understanding of the transcendent element, the Reality, which exists in the universe. For more on this, Cf. Huxley, Aldous, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics edn.; New York: HarperCollins, 2009, vii.

158 The Qurʾān: 57:3, "He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner: He has the knowledge of all things."

159 For a comprehensive discussion about Islamic Mysticism, Cf. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimentions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975. Also, cf. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (ed.*), Islamic Spirituality – Foundations,* vol. 1*, World Spirituality,* New York, NY: Crossroad, 1987.

a poetic and inspirational language.[160] Although Rūmī's mystical elucidations are present in much of his work, it is, however, his *magnum opus*, the *Mathnawī* that most fully illuminates the mystical elements of the Qurʾānic teachings, and is regarded as an esoteric commentary of the Qurʾān.[161] In what follows I will attempt to summarize Rūmī's expositions on the notion of evil and human suffering as presented in the *Mathnawī*.

In Rūmī's worldview, the multiplicity that exists in this world is the effect of the manifestation of God's names (*asmā*ʾ) and attributes (*ṣifāt*) that aim to reveal His creative power. In other words, while the form (*ṣūrat*) of the created entities is varied, their meaning (*maʿnā*), nevertheless, is indicative of the One Reality.[162] Rūmī further expands the distinction between form and meaning to demonstrate that while man appears to be a being among other beings in the universe, the universe is, in fact, in man: "[. . .] in form thou art the microcosm, in reality thou art the macrocosm."[163] He also identifies man as the "fruit" of creation and uses the analogy of a tree to describe this highly elevated status: "The only reason that the gardener plants a tree is for the sake of the fruit. Man is the goal of the creation; therefore, he is the last creature that comes into existence; yet, in reality, he is the first."[164]

The creation of Adam as the exemplar of humankind in his ultimate closeness to God is postulated at the center of Rūmī's teachings as it relates to the positive impact of trials and tribulations in man's spiritual development. According to Rūmī, the Qurʾānic notion of the "knowledge of the names",[165] taught to Adam upon his creation, reveals that humankind has the capacity to become the perfect mirror where God's names and attributes may be manifested. The knowledge of the names, Rūmī informs us, is not one of the external names of the created beings; rather, it lies in knowing the mysteries and the inner meanings of the various elements within the creation of the cosmos. Man's responsibility is to live in accordance with his inner nature (*fiṭra*) and recognize that the actualization of his potential can be achieved by his own volition as well as to differentiate between "form" and "meaning": to search for the truth behind the veils.

160 Kadkani, Shafiei/Reza, Muhammad, *Mowlana Rumi's Ghazaliat Shams Tabrizi*, Tehran, IR: Sokhan, 1388, 2.

161 For more on the influence of the Qurʾān in shaping Rūmī's world view, Cf. Zarrinkub, Abd al-Husayn, *Sirr Nay: A Critical Analysis and Commentary of Masnavi*, Tehran, IR: Ettellat, 1388, 342.

162 Rūmī, Jalāl ad-Dīn, *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, vol. VI, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, Cambridge, ENG: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 1926/2001, 3172, 3183.

163 Ibid. vol. IV, 521.

164 Ibid. vol. III, 1128–29.

165 Qurʾān: 2:30–37.

From Rūmī's perspective, the most important phase in man's spiritual development is to get to know one's self, self-knowledge (*maʿrifat an-nafs*), and ultimately to recognize that he has been separated from his original source (*aṣl*). By employing the analogy of a "reed", Rūmī explicates that this separation is the primary cause for humankind's unhappiness in this life.[166] Man tends to forget his divine origin and occupies himself with the worldly attainments; therefore, in order to awaken him from the state of negligence he will be faced with adversities and sufferings. In other words, trials and tribulations are necessary as they assist man in self-purification (*tazkiyat an-nafs*), freeing him from the material attachments and the inclinations of his ego. Rūmī expounds upon Prophet Joseph's experience to describe the constructiveness of trials; Joseph's enslavement, as difficult as it was, freed him from slavery to other creatures so that he can become God's slave alone.[167] Furthermore, in Rūmī's scheme, when a person is faced with a negative *balāʾ*, for example a serious illness, his attitude and response towards this condition are of primary importance. The person whose goal in life is to satisfy the inclinations of his animal self will complain and bring to question the justice of God. On the other hand, a person whose goal is to purify the self (*nafs*) to go up the spiritual ladder will find a deeper meaning to learn the lessons hidden within this experience.[168]

As it was alluded to previously, from the Qurʾānic perspective, man's entire life on earth, in "good" (*khayr*) and "bad" (*sharr*), is viewed as a trial and a test; the purpose is to grant him the opportunity to let his inner potential flourish by exercising freedom of choice (*ikhtyār*) and striving to find ways to return to his Source. As Rūmī explains, mankind has the tendency to forget God in two situations, when he is granted wealth and during good health:

> Between God and His servant are just two veils and all other veils manifest out of these: they are health, and wealth. The man who is well in body says, 'Where is God? I do not know, and I do not see.' As soon as pain afflicts him, he begins to say, 'O God! O God!' communing and conversing with God. So, you see that health was his veil, and God was hidden under that pain. As much as man has wealth and resources, he procures the means to gratifying his desires, and is preoccupied night and day with that. The moment indigence appears, his ego is weakened, and he goes round about God.[169]

166 Cf. Rūmī, *The Mathnawi*, vol. I, 1–2; 3; and 11.

167 Cf. Renard, John, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation,* State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994.

168 Cf. Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. III, 668–82. For more on this, Cf. Zamani, Karim, *Minagar-e eshgh: A Thematical Commentary of the Mathnawi Maʿnawi,* Tehran, IR: Nashr-e Nay, 1384.

169 Cf. Rūmī, Jalāl ad-Dīn, *Fihi mā fihi. Discourses of Rumi,* trans. Arthur John Arberry, London/New York: Routledge, 2004, 240.

Rūmī further invites his reader to ponder about times of affliction when his prayer for an end to his suffering appears not to have been granted by God and to recognize and appreciate that this is more beneficial for him: the longer the duration of the hardship, the longer he remains in this state of imminence to God.[170] Also, as Chittick observes, in Rūmī's view, "if a person tries to flee from suffering is through various stratagems, he is, in fact, fleeing God. The only way to flee from suffering is to seek refuge from one's own ego with God."[171] Moreover, another positive impact of adversity and sorrow is that it transforms and purifies human character.

> When someone beats a rug with a stick, he is not beating the rug – his aim is to get rid of the dust.
> Your inward is full of dust from the veil of I-ness, and that dust will not leave all at once.[172]

Finally, before closing the discussion on Rūmī's teachings, it should be pointed out that in his elucidations on the fruitfulness of hardships in man's life, Rūmī also provides practical guidelines which can be put to practice when one is faced with adversities. In an effort to benefit from spiritual growth, as well as overcoming suffering without going into despair, Rūmī explicates two critical aspects of being a Muslim, namely, the Qur'ānic virtues of patience (*ṣabr*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*). As trusting God is at the core of al-Ghazālī's teachings and has already been discussed in conjunction with the "best of all possible world statement", we will now turn to a brief discussion on the concept of patience from Rūmī's perspective.

In his explications of man's condition on this earth, Rūmī frequently sheds light on the virtue of patience. Nevertheless, it is in the parable of the "chickpea", one of the most well-known stories of the *Mathnawī*, where the importance of patience in the face of suffering fully comes to light. The story is about a fictional dialog between a housewife and the chickpea that is being cooked as part of a meal. Similar to man at the time of his encounter with affliction, the chickpea complains to the housewife for cooking it in boiling water and it tries to escape by constantly jumping out of the pot. Finally, upon realizing that it is not able to relieve itself from its misery, it desperately pleads with the housewife to take it out of the boiling water. The housewife then comes into the conversation to con-

170 Rumi, *The Mathnawi,* vol. VI, 4222–26.
171 Cf. Chittick, William C., *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983, 238.
172 Cf. Rūmī, Jalāl ad-Dīn, *Diwan Shams Tabrizi*, Tehran, IR: Peyman, 1379.

sole the chickpea and help it learn that patiently enduring suffering is needed for its growth.

> At the time of its being boiled, the chickpea comes up continually to the top of the pot and raises a hundred cries,
> Saying, 'Why are you setting the fire on me? Since you bought me, how are you turning me upside down?'
> The housewife goes on hitting it with the ladle. 'No!' says she: "boil nicely and don't jump away from the one who makes the fire.
> I do not boil you because you are hateful to me: nay, 'tis that you may get taste and savor, this affliction of yours is not on account of your being despised.'
> Continue, O chickpea, to boil in tribulation, that neither existence nor self may remain to thee."
> The chickpea said, "since it is so, O lady, I will gladly boil: give me help in verity!
> In this boiling thou art, as it were, my architect: smite me with the skimming-spoon, for thou smite very delightfully."[173]

Recapitulating Rūmī's thought as is presented in the final verse of the chickpeas story, when man journeys in the mystic path and is able to attain the state of inner contentment (Persian *"rizā"*/Arabic *"riḍā"*) during times of suffering, he has truly submitted to the will of God — has become a *Muslim*. Consequently, in patiently enduring suffering, as well as trusting in God and the overall goodness of his creation, man will be able to overcome the anguish and move up the spiritual ladder to reach nearness with God. It should also be mentioned that in Rūmī's mystical path, love of God plays a significant role in the process of man's spiritual growth. As man is reminded of his separation from his source (aṣl), the love of the Beloved is the means by which he will be able to endure the most difficult times, knowing that through God's love he has the potential to reach the elevated state of *"rizā" ("riḍā")* — what the Qurʾān refers to as the highest state of tranquility, *"nafs muṭmaʾinna"* where man is pleased with his Lord.[174]

7 Conclusion

The notion of evil and human suffering is not portrayed in the Islamic revelation as a "problem" to be resolved but rather as part of the human experience. Therefore, since the Qurʾān does not engage its readers in abstract ideas and theological

173 Cf. Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. III, 4160–64; 4178; 4197–98.

174 For more on the notion of love in Rumi's mysticism, Cf. Zarrinkub, *Sirr Nay*. Also see, Schimmel, Annemarie, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalalodin Rumi,* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.

discussions about evil, no formulation of a classical theodicy is presented. Most of the Qurʾānic verses on adversities and suffering suggest that human beings, including prophets, will be tested in difficult times. The ontological nature of evil is referred to as non-existence and the privation of good by Muslim philosophers while the theologians attribute evil to man's conduct. The Muslim mystical literature, as presented in the teachings of Rūmī, demonstrates that trials in the form of adversity are necessary to remove man from the state of negligence in order to realize his divine source and choose to set forth on a spiritual journey. In this mystic path, exercising patience and trusting as well as loving God are essential means to reaching the state of tranquility. Along the path, man, as the fruit of creation, will be able to actualize the potentialities of his inner nature and purify the soul to become a perfect mirror by manifesting God's names and attributes. From the Muslim perspective, therefore, the notion of *balāʾ* and its manifestation in adversity and hardship is part and parcel of the world which is, indeed, the best possible and most excellent world. It is through facing countless challenges of life — *balāʾ* in good and bad — those humans are able to actualize their potentials and earn the eternal life of happiness and tranquility that is emphasized in the Qurʾān.

8 Recommendation for Future Scholarship

Classical theodicies in Jewish, Christian as well as Islamic traditions are predominantly concerned with the traditional question of "The Problem of Evil" and make a significant effort to deliberately defend the logical compatibility of an omnipotent and loving God with the existence of evil. Although these endeavors provide intellectual discussions and are deemed necessary in the theological and philosophical discourse, for the most part, they prove futile and non-effective when it comes to the "existential" elements of the problem of evil and human suffering.

The existential component of the problem of evil, which is twofold, is not primarily concerned with the conceptual or abstract attributes of evil, but rather investigates the realistic dimensions of evil and human suffering. One area of focus is engaged with the actual "experience" of human suffering in the lives of those who, as a consequence of a major distress such as loss of a child, express the feeling of divine abandonment. Viewed from this perspective, the concern for the grieving parent is not about the origin of evil or whether or not God and evil can coexist. Instead, and more significantly, the question becomes: Is it conceivable to continue to have a personal relationship with a God who seems to have neglected

them by allowing the death of their child? Theodicy in this context attempts to find "meaning" in the actual experience of suffering and strives to shed light on ways by which the disturbed experience with evil may be reconciled with the belief that God is still present, trustworthy, loving, and compassionate.

The other aspect of the existential version of theodicy attempts to integrate the concerns and interests of the new existentialist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries that emerged in Europe as industrialization and advancements in technology started to undermine the "nature of humankind". By emphasizing the landscape of the human condition, the existentialist philosophy aimed to draw attention to the importance of the critical analysis of human thought from an ontological perspective. Inquiries such as the identity of the human self, humankind's deep ontological need for permanent eternal values, the need for transcendence, as well as faith, hope, the reality of God, and immortality, became critical questions to be investigated.[175]

As advancements in modern psychology inform us, humanity is faced with critical existential questions such as: loneliness, fear of death, and lack of meaning in life, to name a few, which, for many, have become the main source of anxiety and despair.[176] Although these questions may have also been raised during the pre-modern period, nonetheless, they seem to have become more prevalent in the present age due to developments in empirical sciences and a new technological climate. Moreover, religious principles that were once accepted as instrumental in living an ethical and authentic life appear to have lost their dynamic and progressive nature, which may have contributed to humankind's hopelessness, confusion, and lack of ability to find meaning in life. Theological and philosophical studies, therefore, must consider these challenges to be able to provide guidance in an ever more challenging era of human existence. Through a dynamic engagement with questions that are discussed within the existential philosophical discourse, the theological reflections need to highlight the impact of religious beliefs and their validity in the face of human suffering. Thus, while the classical theologian attempts to provide a strong argument to defend conventional theological ideas, the existential theologian, on the other hand, strives to lead the way so that humankind is able to come to terms not only with the suffering that may be imposed in life, but, also, to find answers to some of the most prevailing questions that are raised from within — at the core of one's being and consciousness that generates negative thoughts, anxiety and distress. In other words, to apply the religious beliefs in ways by which life's meaning and purpose can manifest and

175 For instance, cf. Marcel, Gabriel, *The Mystery of Being*, trans. G. S. Fraser, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1950.

176 For example, cf. Yalom, Irvin D., *Existential Psychotherapy*, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

shine through when faced with adversities that are imposed externally as well as the internal struggles and questions that come to surface in various level of his awareness.

If Islamic theology is to reclaim the progressive and dynamic role that it formerly enjoyed and once again become an influential endeavor in Muslim scholarship, it needs to affiliate itself with the challenges of modernity. This important undertaking, however, is not conceivable unless those interested in the field of Islamic theology are willing to educate and align themselves with the findings of the new empirical sciences, such as anthropology, cultural studies, existential philosophy, sociology, as well as psychology and human development. Furthermore, active participation and engagement in discussions with theologians of other faiths embarking on this journey is instrumental in contributing to the scholarship in the theological discourse in general, and Islamic theology in particular.

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Catharina Rachik and Georges Tamer

Epilogue

A variety of concepts of evil have developed in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Every one of these conceptualizations reflects an attempt to address the problem that evil poses to the religious worldview. In the following, we will give a short outline of the concepts of evil in each tradition. Subsequently, their commonalities and differences will be captured.

1 The Concept of Evil from a Jewish Perspective

As Lenn Goodman shows in his article, the concept of evil has taken on two different meanings in Judaism. On the one hand, the term "evil" encompasses human misdeeds or sins, which represent the moral dimension of the concept. This aspect raises the question why a benevolent deity permits such acts within the world, particularly given the resultant suffering endured by innocent individuals. On the other hand, natural evils, such as disasters or diseases, stimulate inquiries into the existence of gratuitous suffering, whether God created them and ultimately why innocent suffering exists.

Goodman emphasizes that the root of reality lies in goodness, a concept embedded in the opening of *Genesis*. The narrative articulates the inherent goodness of God's creation — visible in light, nature, or humanity itself (1:22) — with a specific emphasis on humanity's creation in the divine image (1:27). These initial verses of the Torah contain the first value judgement of the text. Goodman asserts that the value of things is not contingent upon their utility but is intrinsic to their existence. Thus, the Torah begins with an aesthetic thought rather than a moral injunction. Nevertheless, the subsequent narratives of the Tanakh acknowledge the existence of evil as a moral issue. In general, the question concerning the suffering of innocents juxtaposed with the prosperity of the wicked remains largely unresolved within the text, yet it serves as a prominent feature within many Biblical narratives. For example, the prophet Habakkuk, who witnessed much oppression and injustice, cries out to God asking him for justice (*Hab* 1:13–15). God promises that in the end, the evildoers will perish but that punishment is delayed (*Hab* 2:2–5). At its core, the story of Noah conveys that humans will be able to live freely and without interference by God after the event of the flood (*Gen* 6–8) as part of the divine grace of creation. Nonetheless, the question of why God allows evil, particularly when it inflicts suffering upon the innocent, is left unanswered.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111586441-004

This theme is also included in the Psalms, expressing the trust of the poet in the eventual retribution of transgressors (e.g. *Ps* 37). Here, Goodman highlights the necessity that this life is what must be justified.

The problem of evil is most prominently treated in the book of Job, which serves as the prevalent basic source for discussions about theodicy. The biblical narrative portrays Job's suffering as a test, inflicted on him as part of a wager between God and his adversary. This story sparked many debates, with some characterizing God as non-existent, evil, or careless. However, interwoven into the narrative are many allusions to God's goodness and his concern for his creation, embedded in his speech from the storm wind. Even in contemporary discourse, many theologians and Bible critics argue that an answer to Job's complaint, i.e. to the problem of evil, doesn't exist. Criticizing this view and its interpretative methodologies, Goodman points out that traditional explanations also prove unsatisfactory. For instance, while some point to the eventual requital of innocent sufferers, it remains to be explained how such a future reward can erase undeserved suffering or nullify past transgressions.

Within Rabbinic literature, there are numerous attempts to approach the problem of innocent suffering and the prosperity of evil doers. Many Rabbis assumed that Job was not completely innocent, suggesting that he may have "sinned with his heart".[1] Another solution to the problem of suffering in this world has been brought forth in form of the idea of reward and punishment in the world to come. Similarly, as in the case of Job, suffering was often perceived as a trial and a means to remain on the right path. Philo followed the Rabbinic notion that some innocent sufferers might not be completely innocent. Central to his perspective is God's promise to keep all suffering away from Israel if the laws of the Torah are kept. In his view, God is caring for the world as a whole: The suffering of innocents serves as an instructive example for humanity to act more wisely. Echoing Stoic philosophy, he emphasizes the primacy of virtue as a manifestation of piety. Adhering to divine law means to value virtue for its own sake, which is achieved through the practice of virtue out of love for God. According to Philo, the key to preventing evil lies in achieving the prevalence of moral behavior which is based on the dynamic of virtues.

Saadia Gaon rejects Philo's and the Rabbis interpretation regarding Job's lack of complete innocence, arguing that such an interpretation would contradict the intention of the book as a source of moral improvement. In his view, Job is innocent, upright, and pious. He contends that suffering always serves a purpose, either as punishment, a test, or an educational tool. In the case of Job, Saadia identifies its meaning as that of a trial, portraying him as a universal figure,

1 *Genesis Rabbah* 19.12.

whose faith is tested by the seemingly aimless nature of his suffering. He states that God imposes suffering upon those whom he especially loves as a divine gift, because he knows they can bear it ("suffering of love"). Saadia identifies Elihu as a speaker for all monotheists as he defends God's justice. From his speech he derives important arguments which include the idea of reward and punishment in the hereafter. This aspect is especially important for him because he believes that evildoers cannot be punished sufficiently in this world. In fact, he holds the view that humans who suffer and pass the test will receive greater recompense in the hereafter. Saadia finds many answers to the problem of evil in the book of Job: he asserts that ultimately, the goodness and benevolence of God will prevail over the evil present in this world. He maintains that this world was created to test every human, positioning humanity in the center of God's plan.

In contrast to this viewpoint, Maimonides doesn't regard humans as the center of the cosmos but as the lowest creatures on earth. He posits that the world wasn't created for humans; however due to the divine gift of reason, humans are carrying profound responsibility for the world — morally, spiritually, and intellectually. According to Maimonides, humans are fraught with numerous deficiencies, especially vices, which are largely self-inflicted. He rebuts the concept of "suffering of love" as unbiblical. In Maimonides' conception, the true goods of this life are not wealth or health but instead spiritual and intellectual growth, and the attainment of knowledge of God. Given the inherent goodness of all divine actions, Maimonides argues that God cannot create evil as an existing entity. Echoing Neoplatonic thought, he construes evil as the privation of good, i.e. the absence of good. Consequently, evil is defined as devoid of positive existence. He endeavors to establish that evil is not the norm but an exception, akin to a state of war — an aberration from the natural order. To address the problem of evil, Maimonides employs the Neoplatonic concept of matter as an interpretative framework. He views evil as a byproduct of the creation of matter, which sets boundaries. For humans, the body sets these boundaries and acts as their "adversary" due to its vulnerability and as the source of moral evil. Nonetheless, Maimonides underscores the divine origin of the body, emphasizing its status as a sacred gift. Finally, Maimonides asserts that suffering resulting from natural evils is an inevitable aspect of the dynamic of nature.

However, the question of how to address the existence of suffering in the world remains unresolved. Goodman underscores the tendency for goods to be "too easily taken for granted," since they are frequently overshadowed by the occurrence of evil. In modernity, disillusionment with life's meaning often arises when hopes are dashed, and human aims are frequently impeded by all too regular encounters with evil. Humans are confronted with destructive events like the Holocaust, demanding a theodicy capable of providing satisfactory answers. Sim-

ply denying the occurrence of such events fails to offer a credible response, while the prospect of future reward in the afterlife may not provide consolation for victims of profound suffering. In this context, Saadia's work addresses mass atrocities by positing a recompense in the afterlife, wherein the horrendous evils of this world are compensated by the promise of glorious expectations in the world to come. Moreover, contemporary discourse often discusses forms of suffering that obscure or even erase goods in life. As noted by Goodman, the survivors of the Holocaust did not get away unharmed, nor did the perpetrators, as they have become dehumanized by the monstrosity of their deeds, thus becoming victims themselves. For both Goodman and Maimonides, the recompense in the afterworld cannot vindicate man's experience of such evils. Instead, life must be justified in its own terms. The criteria used to justify humans' exposure to evils has to be "weighed in values native to the human condition."[2] Thus, the fundamental question remains: What rationale can justify human exposure to evil?

Goodman argues that the categorical dismissal of the goodness of being is incoherent. He underscores that goodness, both logically and ontologically, precedes evil, and that every instance of evil preys upon some prior good. Within the framework of biblical metaphysics, the goodness of God's creation is essential, and life and light are gifts from God. Evil, by contrast, violates these goods and the Torah contains many precepts demanding respect for life. Charity (*Deut* 15:7–8) and love of others (*Lev* 18:19) are even divinely mandated obligations, affirming the inherent worth of being as reflected in these laws and moral codes. Hence, the crucial point for theodicy lies not in the prevalence of evil, but rather in discerning whether the potential for suffering is justified by the gift of life itself. Goodman answers this question in a rabbinic way: Life affords humans the opportunity to cultivate kindness, thereby emulating God's holiness. This emulation is exemplified through acts of kindness, such as visiting the sick just as God visited the sick, expressed in biblical narratives. These acts of kindness should be linked to serving God with one's whole heart (*Deut* 10:12–13). Or, in the Maimonidean view, life should be taken as an opportunity to gain knowledge of God. This is not to say that humans should emulate God's boundlessness but rather the goodness which is known to man through his creation. Through a close study of nature, humans can discern God's grace and wisdom, thus deepening their understanding of the divine.

2 Cf. Goodman in this volume, 40.

2 The Concept of Evil from a Christian Perspective

Within Christianity, God is conceptualized as omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient, and just. In his article, Bruce Little explores how these divine attributes prompt inquiries into the existence of evil in the world. In this regard, certain questions arise: Is God not able to prevent evil and why does he allow this amount of evil despite his absolute goodness? Inspite of the challenge it presents to the Christian worldview, Christianity regards evil as an undeniable reality, witnessed by Christ himself (*Mat* 6:9–13). The New Testament proclaims Christ's triumph over evil through his death, burial, and resurrection; in the future, he will eradicate all evil from creation.

Similarly to Judaism, Christianity recognizes two different kinds of evil: moral evils (sins) created by humans who act in opposition to the will of God, and natural evils. The concept of evil in Christianity is primarily linked to the Fall of Adam as a cause of moral evil alongside apocalyptic expectations, in which a cosmic force of evil (Satan) is in conflict with God until good triumphs over evil. While the early Church lacked an official theodicy, there was a broad consensus on embracing theistic ontology. In the view of classical theism, God's attributes are regarded in maximal perfection, a position known as the *most perfect being theology*. This view raised the question why evil would be found in his creation at all, particularly considering the initial portrayal of creation as solely good (*Gen* 1:31). Patristic theologians postulated that evil was not part of the initial act of divine creation but that it was rather connected to Satan. Although *Genesis* 3 introduces Satan without detailing his origin, extrabiblical texts suggest that he was initially a "terrestrial being", who was created to be good but chose to become evil through his own will (*Ezekiel* 28:11–19 and *Isaiah* 14:12–14).

In most theodicies, free will is identified as the primary source of evil, particularly concerning actions that deviate from God's intended path. Initially, human will, like all of creation, was entirely good (*Gen* 1:31). However, humans are often inclined to choose the wrong path and therefore cause evil, which they are thus responsible for. Most theologians of the first 400 years of Christianity believed in free will according to the libertarian view, arguing that their choices are not determined by God, which makes humans responsible for their deeds. Conversely, compatibilists contend that free will and determinism are compatible, suggesting that an act can be determined but nonetheless be free. According to this view, Adam had free will only prior to the Fall, after which humans lost their ability to choose the good. On the contrary, libertarians and most church fathers maintain that humans had free will even after the Fall.

Augustine developed a *Greater-Good-Theodicy* which remains the most influential theodicy among Christian theologians today. According to Augustine, God,

being omnibenevolent, initially created a world of complete goodness, but it was corrupted by Adam's sin, thereby introducing evil. Humans were given free will out of God's grace, allowing them to be moral creatures. God as the creator cannot be held responsible for the free choices of humans, because he did not determine these choices. Augustine posited that evil has no essence of its own, therefore it is the lack of goodness — the privation of good (*privatio boni*). The initially good human will turned to the "changeable good", i.e. to evil, and because human will is free, it is thus culpable for its turning. He explained that free will is a necessary precondition to acting in keeping with goodness, even though humans make bad choices. God only allows for evil to exist in this world because he can bring a *greater good* out of it or prevent an even greater evil. Therefore, no evil is gratuitous because its purpose is always a greater good. In fact, everything God created has a purpose and he will not allow evil to eliminate his good creation.

Thomas Aquinas also holds that God is purely good and must have a good reason to allow evil in this world. Drawing from Augustine's Greater-Good-Theology, Aquinas argues that God permits certain evils only when they can ultimately lead to a greater good. However, he clarifies that not every individual act or event serves a specific good purpose; rather, there is a general purpose to the existence of evil that serves the greater good. Moreover, Aquinas defines evil as the absence of good, refining this concept by proposing that evil has no essence of its own. It is thus a privation of form. Because evil cannot act as a cause, good is the cause behind evil. According to Aquinas, evil arises as an unintended consequence of something that was initially thought to be good. Importantly, he emphasizes that God is never accountable for evil; rather, it stems from the capacity of the human will to deviate towards evil, as Augustine teaches. When individuals make harmful decisions, it can negatively impact others. Aquinas explains the suffering of the innocent through their proximity to God: God knows about their ability to bear their suffering and to remain steadfast in their faith. In Aquinas's view, suffering serves a necessary purpose as it reminds even the righteous that they are able to deviate from the right path.

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, who coined the term theodicy, also incorporated a number of thoughts from Augustine into his work. He posited that God as well as creation are good, with no evil stemming from God. He highlighted the centrality of humans' free will regarding the problem of evil, stating that it was human beings who brought corruption into the world through free choice, known as the Fall. Since then, man is often driven by his passions and bad judgement. Contrary to Augustine, he deemed it necessary to explain why the will turns toward evil since the free will can cause much suffering. The will itself was created to promote the good so it could not be inherent in the will to choose evil. He argues that humans were created as finite creatures, which causes limitations, including human

knowledge. This limitedness is seen as the cause of evil. Thus, Leibniz maintains that evil is not a manifestation of moral deficiency but rather a consequence of physical and moral limitations. But like Augustine, Leibniz asserts that evil has no essence of its own and is therefore a privation. God only allows evil insofar as it enables him to bring about a greater good. Evil is real, but it can be used in a positive way. Yet, even if good can be obtained through evil, this does not mean that it is a sufficient object of the divine will. Evil exists because God created the best of all possible worlds. During the act of Creation, he envisioned an infinite number of possible worlds in his mind, yet he chose to create the *best of all possible worlds*. This world is not one without evil, but the amount of evil is commensurate with its status as the best possible world, and God possessed sufficient reason for its creation. With the concept of the best of all possible worlds, Leibniz theodicy can be distinguished from his precursors.

The theodicy of Irenaeus differs from that of Augustine by offering an alternative understanding of the Creation and the Fall. He developed a concept known as *Soul-Making-Theodicy* which had a particular influence on eastern Orthodoxy, and the theological reflections of John Hick, who developed a contemporary version based on Irenaeus's framework. In this paradigm, man is created in God's image — as a limited creature who should enter into a personal relationship with God — but he is not yet the perfect being God intended him to be. Suffering serves as a necessary means for the maturing of the soul and spiritual growth during man's earthly life. The maturing of the soul is regarded as a greater good that is emerging from suffering, and in this way, man is maturing into the likeness of God, as he intended him to be. For this process it is important that man lives in a hostile environment full of temptations which are seen as a means of this soul-making process. However, in some cases, the process cannot be finished in one lifetime and has to continue in the afterlife. Hick posits that all humans need to be perfected (saved) because the purpose of the loving God is for them to freely choose to act in accordance with the good and to enter into a personal relationship with God. Hick imagines the afterlife as a series of different lives in alternative environments until the goal of perfection is reached. Consequently, this view requires a revision of the traditional doctrine of hell. The ultimate goal is to freely choose to love and obey God. Hick's approach has received significant criticism, primarily because its ideas are incongruent with those of Western Christian theological concepts and incompatible with certain expositions of the Bible. Other critics claim that his theodicy fails to provide answers to the occurrence of atrocities in modernity, notably the Holocaust. In dealing with these questions his explanations are ambiguous, vacillating between the notion that evils are outweighed by greater goods and the acknowledgment that some evils may not serve any purpose. Despite the difficulty in providing

concrete explanations for suffering, Hick rejects the idea of gratuitous evil, attributing it to the mysterious nature of divine providence.

Another modern theodicy was advanced by Richard Swinburne who also develops a Greater-Good-Theodicy based on libertarian freedom, which shares many similarities with the theodicy of John Hick. In his concept, humans are deemed responsible for sin and suffering. The free will humans possess is the *greater good*, because man is able to distinguish between good and bad. He argues that in the end the good outweighs the bad. In essence, he follows a *good-of-being-of-use-approach*, which teaches that each evil can be used by humans to learn and grow and to use this information to prevent further evils. This even applies to major evils like the slave trade because it gives humans the opportunity to fight for justice and to oppose evil. In this way, these crimes are part of a learning process. This doesn't justify these acts, but it can be assumed that a benevolent God expects humans to fight these evils. In a way, these learning processes can bring about a greater good — if justice is obtained. However, the justification of such extreme evils by attributing them to bring about a greater good poses a significant challenge. Additionally, as Little argues, Swinburne fails to demonstrate a consistent prevalence of the greater good, thereby casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Greater-Good-Theodicy. If the greater good is not always obtained, gratuitous evil is possible.

3 The Concept of Evil from an Islamic Perspective

In her article, Nasrin Rouzati shows that the problem of evil was widely debated among Islamic scholars, revealing diverse theological perspectives and theodicies. Similarly to the theological discussions in Judaism and Christianity, evil encompasses both natural and moral evils committed by humans acting against God's will in Islamic theology. The Qurʾān employs various key terms to describe the nature of evil and suffering, such as *sharr*, which is found throughout the text. Regarding this term, different semantic fields can be traced. An analysis of these fields shows that the Qurʾān understands evil in relation to all kinds of human misconduct or transgressions.

One category within these fields of study directly relates to the human belief in God: Evil is created when someone is going astray (*ḍalla*), disbelieves in God (*kufr*), or is associating partners with him (*shirk*). Another grouping is linked to interpersonal conduct: Since charity is one of the most important concepts in the Qurʾān, "stinginess" (*bukhl*) as well as "being unjust" (*ẓulm*) are characterized as manifestations of evil. However, all of the verses which mention *sharr* explain

that it is a situation which man created for himself. The Qurʾān emphasizes human responsibility for creation, but equally highlights humanities capacity to create evil. Additionally, the term *sharr* appears in various contexts within the Qurʾān. An intriguing example is given in Sura 113:2,[3] which can be read to mean that humans should seek refuge in God from the evil that *he* (God) has created. Exegetes understood this passage to mean that God has put evils into certain elements, like fire, which could cause harm if humans do not act responsibly. An alternative interpretation connects evil to acts which creatures have the ability to fulfil but without assuming God to have created evil.[4]

Divine trials constitute another semantic field of *sharr* in the Qurʾān and are closely connected with the theme of innocent suffering. The Scripture emphasizes the notion that the primary purpose of creation is to test mankind (Q 67:2). These tests are an important component of human experience and a means to guide humans. The Qurʾān emphasizes that life is a trial to test humans — with prosperity and hardship— and to see who is best in deeds, with the ultimate goal being to return to their creator (Q 21:35). Within this framework, evil and suffering become a necessary experience to perpetuate man's spiritual growth. Trials serve the goal to distinguish between those who choose good and those who choose evil (Q 2:152–57; 47:31) and are therefore connected with the human capacity of free choice. Times of suffering serve as opportunities and as a means to build one's faith because believers are challenged to exercise patience and to act according to God's will. The Qurʾān underscores that even prophets had to face these trials during their missions regarding their leadership and personal matters. In the case of Job, he remained sincere and submitted to God's will both in times of wealth and prosperity as well as during hardship. He also recognized that he was going through a test as he was suffering from a disease and imputed his feelings of despair to Satan. According to Rouzati, human suffering in the Qurʾān is therefore portrayed in the context of God's purpose and plan, informing humans that suffering is an inevitable part of life. From this perspective, evil is not presented

3 In the Islamic tradition, the use of the term "evil" is ambiguous. An example of this can be found in the divergent readings of Sura 113:2: The most common reading, which is widely accepted, is "from the evil that God created". According to a less common reading of Sura 113:2, God did *not* create evil.

4 The two last chapters of the Qurʾān, Sura 113 and 114, are known in Islamic literature as *al-muʿawwidhatān*, which means "the two suras of taking refuge from evil". In practical use, these are recited by Muslims to disperse any forms of evil, especially the work of the devil, jinn, black magic, or the evil eye. This use has its roots in the time of the revelation of the Qurʾān, where the Prophet Muḥammad is said to have been revealed these verses in order to thwart a spell which was laid on him. See Toorawa, Shawkat M., "Seeking Refuge from Evil: The Power and Portent of the Closing Chapters of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2002), 54–60.

as a theological problem in Islam but rather as an inherent component of man's life. The Qurʾānic portrayal of God as the supreme and omnipotent creator suggests that God must have allowed for evil in order to realize his plan for creation and to test humanity. Thus, in Rouzati's view, undesirable situations can serve as opportunities for believers to improve themselves and advance on their spiritual journey.

Although the Qurʾān does not present us with a full systematic theodicy, its conception of human responsibility and accountability as well as the view of an omnipotent God led to an extensive theological and philosophical discourse about human free will and the attributes of God within Islamic thought. The Muʿtazila were of the opinion that God doesn't create human acts, and since he is just and good, he cannot create evil. They attributed the existence of evil to human free will. The Muʿtazila further maintained that natural evils, such as illnesses, served a beneficial purpose within God's cosmic plan. This sparked the question if God acts according to a certain purpose. The Muʿtazilites affirmed that God created man for a purpose which gave path to the *doctrine of the optimum*. They taught that because God is only doing the best for his creation, he created a perfect world. In contrast, the Ashʿarites held the view that God creates all human acts and affirmed God's governance to be perfect and just, implying that human suffering is divinely ordained and therefore just. They asserted that God does not act for a certain purpose, and thus evil is created without any higher purpose. To harmonize God's omnipotence with human free will, they argued that humans freely acquire the created acts and are therefore accountable for choosing good or bad acts. Ibn Taymīya criticized both schools and reintroduced the concept of divine purposiveness into the theological discourse. He argued that behind every divine act lies a wise purpose, which makes his actions beneficial to humans. Accordingly, God always does what is best. Even if evil is part of the world, it serves a certain goal, such as leading humans to repentance and ultimately guiding each individual to love and worship God alone.

Most Muslim philosophers conceptualized evil as *privatio boni*, i.e. as privation of good. Ibn Sīnā, for instance, posited evil as a non-existent entity, categorizing it into distinct types with varying degrees of severity. He primarily attributed human suffering to accidental evil, asserting that ultimately, the total amount of good outweighs the amount of evil. Based on his work, Mullā Sadrā developed a theodicy which he combined with a mystical view. He elaborated on the concept of the gradation of being, which suggests that existence is not uniform but hierarchical, with varying degrees of perfection. According to this view, God, as the absolute existence, possesses the highest degree of perfection. The world and humans are thus less perfect. Evil occurs when individuals fail to actualize their potential for good-

ness or perfection due to their limited existence. But because the world is in constant movement, it is striving to reach perfection.

According to al-Ghazālī, human suffering serves as a means for the realization of a greater good, an insight he gained from his own experience of suffering. Through suffering, humans can achieve a spiritual and intellectual renewal. He developed a theory of theodicy, contending that the creation of the world was necessary and that it resulted in the *best of all possible worlds*. God created the world through his will and his knowledge of goodness. Because the act of creation happened at a certain point in time, this world is one possibility among others. He also maintained that God was not able to create a better world, which he was heavily criticized for because it stood in contrast to the Ashʿarite doctrine of God's omnipotence. al-Ghazālī argued that God creates nothing unless it is a blessing for his creatures. Central to his teaching is the concept of *trust in God (tawakkul)*. Elucidating that the Trustee (*al-wakīl*) is one of the divine attributes, al-Ghazālī maintains that God deserves human trust and outlines practical means to achieve such trust. He believes that genuine trust in God is one of the most important stations in human spiritual development, which becomes truly visible when humans face hard trials. In al-Ghazālī's understanding, it is asserted that if this is the best possible world God could have created, then God's wisdom is embedded in all human experiences, including in trials. And because this is the most excellent world, man can trust God and realize the positive nature of trials. Humans are able to recognize divine wisdom through signs and nature; as an example, al-Ghazālī emphasizes the perfectness of the human body. In showing that this world is perfect, al-Ghazālī maintains that God is the only true agent in this world and that his will influences every situation directly to ensure complete justice. Suffering and adversity are real elements of this world, and their existence is necessary and a means to demonstrate the best of all possible worlds. God included perfection and imperfection in his creation out of his wisdom and grace. When one faces a trial — be it one of hardship or success — patience and thankfulness should be exercised as guidance. Thus, man should neither rely on his well-being nor should he let his belief be affected by bad times. al-Ghazālī emphasizes the positive nature of trials and cites many examples by which man can profit from hardships, arguing that in every kind of trial there is a hidden blessing.

In contrast, Rūmī states that while God's omnipotence is visible in the diversity of the world, humans were the goal of creation. The example of Adam shows the ultimate possible closeness to God that man can achieve and illustrates the positive effect of trials on the spiritual development of humans. Humanity bears the responsibility to cultivate spiritual growth and to find the meaning hidden in this world. Rūmī contends that due to the separation of humans from their divine source, they have a tendency to forget their divine origin and become engrossed

with worldly acquisitions. Through adversities and suffering, man will be able to overcome his shortcomings. Therefore, trials and tribulations serve as necessary instruments, helping humans to purify themselves. A deeper meaning of these trials will become apparent when a person strives to grow spiritually. Indeed, Rūmī asserts that the only way to overcome suffering lies in escaping one's ego and seeking refuge in God. Trust, patience, and love for God serve as the determining means to help humans to endure adversity.

4 Commonalities and Differences

When it comes to the concept of evil, there are certain associations with the concept in each religion drawn from the respective scriptures: From a Jewish perspective — as Lenn Goodman has shown in his philosophical reading of the sources — evil is not present at the outset of scripture. Rather, it emphasizes the inherent goodness of God's creation, a view which is shared by Christian theology. Both Judaism and Christianity assert that every evil preys on some prior good. It follows that humans have to act responsibly, to care for and uphold God's creation as well as to prevent evil deeds. One way to do so is to *emulate God's holiness* through acts of kindness. Similarly, the Qurʾān articulates the inherent goodness and perfection of God's creation (Q 67:3), underscoring human responsibility for creation. God even made man vicegerent on earth.[5] Charity — as commanded by *Deut* 15:7–8 — is one of the central pillars of Islamic faith. As in Judaism and Christianity, the worth of being and life is reflected by the laws of Islam.[6]

Moreover, the Rabbinic teaching of *Imitatio Dei*, also echoed in the *Gospel of Luke* 6:36, has a parallel in Islamic theological thought. It can be found in the

5 The human responsibility to care for God's creation is emphasized throughout the Qurʾān: God entrusted his creation to his care, and man accepted this responsibility (Q 33:72) not to destroy what God has given him. Furthermore, God told the angels that he will install humans as a vicegerent on earth (*khalīfa*; Q 2:30)), and the angels asked him, why he would choose someone who will shed blood and do mischief. God answered that they don't know what he knows, taking into account that humans indeed have the potential to commit acts of evil and will in fact do so. Thus, being human means to choose either good or evil, cf. Safi, Omid, "Qur'an of Nature: Cosmos as Divine Manifestation in Qur'an and Islamic Spirituality," *Religions: A Scholarly Journal* 1 (2012), 128–34.

6 For affinities between Jewish and Islamic law see: Frishman, Judith/Ryad, Umar, "Law. Islamic and Jewish Legal Traditions," in: Josef Meri (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Muslim-Jewish Relations*, 155–78, New York/London: Routledge, 2016.

framework of justice and starts with the Qurʾān where God states that, "he does not do even an atom's weight of injustice" (Q 4:40). This commitment to justice is further elucidated in a *ḥadīṯ* attributed to Muḥammad, in which he states that he has forbidden himself to perpetrate acts of injustice and mandates that his followers shall adhere to the same abstention.[7] From this can be deduced that human behavior should reflect the human knowledge of God's divine names, in this case *al-ʿadl* (the just). This concept was elaborated especially in mystical circles. In the teaching of al-Ghazālī, it is part of the spiritual growth of man: He explained that the perfection and salvation of the worshipper lies in emulating the divine qualities to the extent feasible for humans.[8] Ultimately, the concept of emulating the divine serves as a unifying principle across all three religions. In the Christian tradition, St. Paul instructs his followers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1*Cor* 11:1) as well as to imitate God (*Eph* 5:1–2). But the core of Christian teaching — and this is where it differs from Judaism and Islam — is the reference to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. These events symbolize the "death of one's ego and obedience in one's new, 'resurrected state'", signifying the ultimate overcoming of evil. Thus, Christianity emphasizes a spiritual transformation, aiming toward a daily commitment to righteous action, which includes to honor and serve others, i.e. through acts of compassion and generosity.[9] Consequently, questions of justice and human responsibility are part of the discourse about evil in the religions, with each emphasizing that evil must be reduced or alleviated. Connected with these thoughts is the notion of creation as a divine gift and the inherent meaningfulness of life, as well as the idea that evil is counterbalanced by the good.

Modern theologians have approached the concepts of human responsibility and justice in various ways. One example from the Christian tradition would be the theodicy of Richard Swinburne, which is portrayed in this volume. He argues that humans bear responsibility for sin and suffering, but because of their free will, they can distinguish between good and bad. Furthermore, evil can be used as a learning process and humans are obligated to fight for justice. An example

7 "Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: no. 2577," published online: sunna.com, https://sunnah.com/muslim:2577a (accessed on 23.02.2024).

8 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Muhammad ʿUthmān al-Khisht (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat al-Qurʾān, 1984), 45, cf. Qutub, Amal/Khan, Nazir/Qasqas, "Mahdi, Islam and Social Justice," in: Norma Jean Profitt/Cyndy Baskin (eds.), *Spirituality and Social Justice. Spirit in the Political Quest for a Just World*, Toronto/Vancouver: Canadian Scholars, 2019, 133.

9 Roberts, Nancy, "Imitatio Christi, Imitatio Muhammadi, Imitatio Dei", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 2 (2012), 227–48, quotation from 232. The article also asks if the Christian's *Imitatio Dei* can be inspired by the Qurʾānic revelation and Muḥammad, and if imitation of Christi would be possible for Muslims, so to be inspired by each other.

from the sphere of Islam is the Muslim thinker Daud Rahbar (1926–2013), who states that theodicy must protect God's justice. God should not be perceived as a powerful force; he voluntarily limits his power to allow for human agency and accountability.[10] Writing after the Shoah, the Jewish scholar Robert Gordis (1908–1992) identified five Biblical ideas he thought to be useful in coping with evil. Among these ideas he listed that humans must acknowledge the glory of life and goodness of God, as well as to confront evil and actively fight against it. Additionally, Gordis underlined the unity of humanity, tracing its lineage to a common ancestor, and advocated for the inherent dignity in each human being.[11]

In Christianity, it is free will — given to the first human Adam — which is seen as the cause of sin. According to St. Paul, Adam's behavior allowed not only for sin, but for death, to enter the world (Rom 5:12). Augustine formulated the dogma of *Original Sin* and taught that man inherited the tendency to sin as well as the guilt incurred in the Fall from the first human couple. But not all the churches accepted this view. According to Eastern Orthodox theology, human beings are not born into sin but rather with an inherent inclination to sin. Human nature became vulnerable because of Adam and Eve's first sin and this vulnerability became part of humanity's shared nature. However, this natural weakness towards sin does not diminish the individual responsibility to do good.[12] Apart from Augustine's teachings and other variants of this doctrine, a movement called *Pelagianism* emerged. It diverged from the mainstream of Christian doctrine by asserting that neither sin nor guilt is inherited. Like Adam and Eve, all humans have the capacity to freely choose either sin or salvation.[13]

The doctrine of Original Sin has no parallel in Islam or Judaism. Jewish theologians dealt with *Gen* 3 and the couple's transgression by stating that eating from the forbidden tree drove an instinct for evil (*yetzer ha-ra*) into man that has since affected every human individual. However, Jewish theology maintains that the sins of the forefathers cannot be inherited by future generations.[14] In Judaism and Islam humans are born without sin. The story of Adam and his transgression in the

10 Peterson, Michael L., *Monotheism, Suffering, and Evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 48.

11 Wayne Allen, *Thinking About Good and Evil: Jewish Views from Antiquity to Modernity*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2021, 315 f.

12 Cf. Gabriel Said Reynolds, "Original Sin and the Qur'an," *Islamochristiana* 46 (2020), 197–218.

13 Beatrice, Pier Franco, *The Transmission of Sin. Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian Sources*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 16 ff.

14 Rosen-Zvi, Ishay, *Demonic Desires. "Yetzer Hara" and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, 128 ff.

Qurʾān (Q 7:20–23; 2:35)[15] doesn't provide answers to the origin of evil or the relationship between death and guilt; it shows human fallibility but not its origin.[16] The Qurʾānic depiction of the story ends with man's repentance, God's forgiveness, and his promise to guide all humans.[17] But there is another story in the Qurʾān which hints to the origin of evil, namely Iblīs and his refusal to prostrate before Adam (Q 2:30–34; 15:32–42). After his refusal, Iblīs was cursed, but God granted him the power to misguide non-believers. According to the exegetical literature, Iblīs gained the name *ash-Shayṭān* (Satan) after his disobedience.[18] Moreover, evil is connected to human transgression in Islam — not resisting temptation by Satan — in general.[19] But sins can harm and negatively affect pious people. The topic of *undeserved suffering* presents a more complex theological challenge, because it also includes natural disasters that cause innocent people to suffer. This is the central challenge that theodicies must address comprehensively.

Connected with the topic of undeserved suffering is the story of Job, known through the sacred texts in each of the three religions. It often serves as a starting point within discussions of theodicy. The portrayals of Job in the respective scriptures vary greatly. In the Hebrew Bible, Job is seen as the paragon of the righteous sufferer. This perception is also upheld in Christianity, wherein Job is rewarded for his patience and unwavering trust in God, thus serving as a prefiguration of the undeservedly suffering Christ who was resurrected from the dead. In contrast to the rich and long narrative of Job in the Bible, the Qurʾān contains rather short narrative sequences and allusions to the figure of Job, portraying him as the epitome of patience, endurance in suffering, and steadfastness in belief.[20] However, a historical-critical exegetical study of the figure of Job in the Qurʾān is still a desideratum. There are already a few works from comparative religion discussing the differences and commonalities of the interpretation of Job

15 Schöck, Cornelia, "Adam," in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān,* vol. 1, 22–26, Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2001, 24.

16 Neuwirth, Angelika: "Negotiating Justice: A Pre–Canonical Reading of the Qur'anic Creation Accounts (Part I)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2 (2000), 25–41, here 29.

17 Stowasser, Barbara Freyer, "Theodicy and the Many Meanings of Adam and Eve," in: Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (ed.), *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought*, 1–18, London/New York: Routledge, 2010, 1.

18 Rippin, Andrew, "Devil," in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān,* vol. 2, 524–27, Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2001.

19 Chowdhury, Safaruk, *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2021, published online: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=2961734&lang=de&site=ehost-live (accessed on 01.03.2024).

20 Johns, A. H., "Job," in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān,* vol. 3, 50–51, Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2001.

in the three religions.[21] Within the field of interreligious discourse, a recent publication titled *The Protests of Job. An Interfaith Dialogue* not only explores different interpretations of the story from the perspectives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam but also provides insights into each viewpoint through the lens of the others.[22] The involved scholars used multiple perspectives to review the issue of theodicy but are also circumspect of not trying to give a definite answer. Nonetheless, there are attempts to formulate new approaches to theodicy through interreligious discourse. For example, the Christian theologian Klaus von Stosch seeks to draw insights from Muslim sources regarding the problem of evil. In this endeavour, he engages in dialogue with the Muslim writer Navid Kermani to develop a Christian theodicy enriched by interreligious discourse.[23] Such works of comparative religion and comparative theology appear promising, as the problem of evil has not been conclusively resolved within the respective theologies.[24]

Nasrin Rouzati argues that within Islam, evil is regarded as a reality and a necessity. According to Islamic theological teaching, the aim of creation is to test humans, granting individuals free will to choose between good and evil. Consequently, all individuals, including prophets, undergo diverse trials throughout their lives, serving to test their faith via good circumstances or evil occurrences. These trials are seen as an instrument by which humans can and should improve their spiritual growth. Similarly, in Judaism, Saadia Gaon's "tribulations of love theory" parallels this notion, interpreting Job's suffering as a means of spiritual purification. According to this theory, afflictions are divinely imposed on those who are especially loved by God to warrant increasing their reward in the afterlife. As these theories are centered on spiritual growth and the enhancement of faith, they align with the concept of "soul-making theodicy". In this way, the con-

21 Such as Burell, David, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, Michigan: Brazos Press/Baker Publishing, 2008; Vicchio, Stephen J., *Job in the Medieval World*, 3 vols, Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006.

22 Davison, Scott A./ Weiss, Shira/Rizvi, Sajjad, *The Protests of Job: An Interfaith Dialogue*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

23 Stosch, Klaus von, "Developing Christian Theodicy in Conversation with Navid Kermani," in: Michelle Voss Roberts (ed.), *Comparing Faithfully. Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, 89–106, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017; Kermani, Navid, *The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011; see also Eckholt, Margit/Güneş, Merdan, "Leiden/schaft – eine Annäherung an die Theodizee-Frage aus islamischer und christlicher Sicht", *Hikma* 11, no.1 (2020), S. 5–39.

24 See the latest publication on evil including views of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Grebe, Matthias/Grössl, Johannes (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Suffering and the Problem of Evil*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2023.

cepts resonate with Christian theodicies,[25] which are exemplified by the John Hick's theological framework in this volume. There are notable parallels between the perspectives of al-Ghazālī and Hick, as both delve into the subject of the soul and its purification. Similarly to Hick, al-Ghazālī states that humans are created to imitate God, with the goal of obtaining knowledge, experience, and growing to their full potential. However, while Hick's focus predominantly revolves around the human vantage point, al-Ghazālī's work is characterized by taking on the viewpoint of the divine perspective and the divine attributes. Consequently, for al-Ghazālī, disbelief in the concept of God creating the best possible world may lead to skepticism regarding divine attributes and divine omnipotence. In contrast, Hick argues that a world without suffering would impede man to reach his full potential and to obtain goodness. Similar thoughts can be found in the works of the modern Islamic intellectuals Said Nursi and Muhammad Iqbal.[26]

Finally, concepts of the *best possible world* appeared in Islam through the writings of al-Ghazālī and through Leibnitz in the Christian context. But there are distinctive differences between the perspectives of the two thinkers. al-Ghazālī sees the existent world as the most excellent one because it was created at a fixed time according to God's will and wisdom. In contrast, Leibniz holds that God could have created other worlds, but he made the best choice from among all possible worlds. Both thinkers have different worldviews: al-Ghazālī tries to convince his readers to trust in God and to give them practical guidance. Leibniz emphasizes human reason and claims that through this faculty he can understand God's creation and doesn't deem belief in God a necessary precondition for the validity of his argument. Additionally, Leibniz had a very different goal than al-Ghazālī because he aimed at outlining a consistent theodicy for academic circles, while al-Ghazālī's goal was to educate Muslim society.

The attempts made to address the problem of evil in the three religions led to the emergence of a great variety of concepts of theodicy from classical times to modernity, which show commonalities as well as differences and signs of intercultural exchange. For example, the arguments within Jewish and Islamic theology are directly related to each other. The fact that Maimonides called Job a Prophet is related to the Islamic environment he lived in: Job is called a prophet in the Qurʾān. There are many more examples, and a full understanding of these

25 Peterson, *Monotheism, Suffering, and Evil*, 42.

26 Note that while the theodicies of these two thinkers are being analyzed in current scholarship, a work analyzing the broad spectrum of Islamic ideas in modernity is still a scholarly desideratum.

sources cannot be gained when strict confessional lines are upheld.[27] The problem of evil not only provoked a multitude of scholarly works within theodicy but also those of anti-theodicy and works of atheism. The latter appear as early as the classical period at instances when suffering became overwhelming.[28] In the end, there is not one coherent answer to the problem of evil in each religion but many answers raising new questions.

27 Kermani, Navid, *Der Schrecken Gottes: Attar, Hiob und die metaphysische Revolte*, München: C.H.Beck, 2011, 107 f.

28 For example, in Jewish tradition Elisha ben Abuja (born before 70), who could not find an answer to the question of the suffering of innocents, became an unbeliever; in Islamic tradition Ibn ar-Rāwandī (827–911/211–298) was also an unbeliever because the world he saw was so unjust, cf. Kermani, *Der Schrecken Gottes*, 33.