

## **Islamic Philosophy and the Problem of Evil; a Philosophical Theodicy**

**Mohammad Saeedimehr<sup>1</sup>**

Received: 7/5/2008

Accepted: 25/8/2009

### **Abstract**

During the last centuries, great religious traditions as well as prominent philosophical and theological schools have been facing the so-called "problem of evil" and trying to solve it in a reasonable and convincing way. This paper seeks to explore Muslim philosophers' approach to the problem and examine their proposed solutions for it. After the main versions of the problem in Islamic philosophy are briefly sketched, the author explains its view about the non-existential nature of evil. At this stage, he discusses the challenge of "apprehensional evil" and three reactions to it. Then he turns to three main solutions proposed by Muslim philosophers in order to meet three versions of the problem of evil, i.e., the problem of evils and God's decree, the problem of creation-dualism and the problem of evils and Divine wisdom.

**Keywords:** Evil, God's decree, God's wisdom, Islamic philosophy, Avicenna, Mulla Sadra.

---

1. Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Tarbiat Modares University

## Introduction

The so-called "problem of evil", in its various forms and versions, has a long and impressive history. During past centuries, all great religious traditions – including Abrahamic ones, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam - as well as Hinduism and Buddhism have more or less addressed this problem and tried to propose solutions for it. Moreover, philosophers belonging to different philosophical schools have made valuable attempts to find theoretical solutions. It would be helpful here to note that we can distinguish, from a very general perspective, between three main kinds of what may be called "the problem of evil":<sup>1</sup>

### a) The Theoretical Problem

The theoretical problem of evil concerns the logical relations among certain beliefs about God and His attributes, on the one hand, and the reality of various on the other. One question here, for example, would arise as how could the reality of some actual evils be consistent with Divine justice or wisdom.

### b) The Existential Problem

This problem, in contrast with the theoretical one, deals not merely with internal logical relations among a collection of beliefs or statements, but rather with one's personal experience of evils in the actual life which may

be highly effective on his/her approach to life and its meaning. For instance, it is possible for someone who is unable to solve the existential problem to loose his/her trust in God or his/her belief in the meaningfulness of life.

### c) The Practical Problem

This kind of problem consists of finding a practical way to decrease the amount of actual threatening evils around us and prevent their consequent calamities and disasters as much as possible. We may say that nowadays many charitable institutions are dealing with this practical problem.

Undoubtedly dealing with the existential and practical problems of evil actually requires more or less some basic ideas and theories about God, world and Human beings and their interrelations. But a part of these ideas and theories could be presuppositions supported by authorities such as religious scriptures or reliable human information sources. Regarding the very complicated nature of theoretical problem of evil, however, engaging with it requires much more! Thus, we find prominent and well-known philosophers and theologians (among other thinkers) who have undertaken to wrestle, theoretically, with this powerful and nimble competitor!

In this paper, I shall explore briefly the main views of Muslim philosophers on the theoretical problem of evil. Since, there are naturally some

---

1. See: (Peterson, 1992, p. 3)

disagreements among these philosophers, I, due to some actual limits, should almost restrict myself to the more common views in order to draw a whole and, as far as possible, clear and comprehensive picture that could be, though approximately, attributed to what is usually called "Islamic Philosophy". It is not necessary to mention here that a comprehensive critical and detailed discussion of the issue goes beyond the limits of an article like this.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly, we may call any approach to solve the theoretical theistic problem of evil a "theodicy". Therefore, the present article seeks to provide a brief exploration of Muslim philosophers' theodicy.<sup>2</sup>

### The Reality of Evil

Before considering the different versions of the problem of evil, it would be helpful to say something about the Islamic philosophy's view on the *reality* of evils. Confronting the apparent evils around us, one may primarily raise the question whether these evils are *real* things or

they are mere *illusions*. Contrary to an uncommon view (sometimes attributed to certain Hindu schools of thought) which considers evils as mere dreams and illusions, most people including philosophers and theologians follow their common sense judgment and endorse the reality of evils. It is clear that according to the former view, the problem of evil (if it can be formulated at all) will find a very trite and commonplace solution: the so-called evils are just in our dreams and not real!

Muslim philosophers, however, do not deny that *there are really* some evils. And thus, considering the other facts concerning God and His attributes, the problem of evil emerges for them as a genuine philosophical problem.

### Several Versions of the Problem

In fact, what we called the "theoretical problem" can be expressed in several ways. According to a contemporary point of view, the main versions of the problem are two: "logical problem of evil" and "evidential problem of evil".<sup>3</sup> This distinction, however, has not been common among Muslim philosophers up to

1. This article also does not deal with Muslim theologians' views, since beside a few common aspects, the whole theological approach here differs deeply from that of philosophers (both in the formulations of the problem and in the proposed resolutions). Nevertheless, I shall sometimes refer to the views of some thinkers (Like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and al-Tusi) who are commonly known as Muslim "theologian-philosopher".

2. It is worth noting that in the current literature "theodicy" in its narrow sense is used against the "defense".

3. Roughly speaking, the logical problem claims a kind of inconsistency between the belief in an omnipotent, omniscience and wholly good God and the belief in the existence of evils. According to the evidential problem, however, the existence of evils provides strong evidence against the existence of God and thus, renders the theistic beliefs unreasonable.

now. Indeed, we may hardly be able to find any similar distinction in their works. The main section where they discuss the problem is that which deals with God's attributes and actions. Many of Muslim philosophers begin their discussion on evil with a consideration of the property of *Divine providence*. By this property, they usually mean a composition of three attributes: God's knowledge of the best possible order of the universe, His being its actual effective cause and, finally, His being satisfied with its actual realization.

Avicenna puts this definition in this way:

It must, hence, be known that providence consists in the First's knowing in Himself [the mode] of existence of the order of the good, in His being, in Himself, a cause of goodness and perfection in terms of what is possible, and in His being satisfied [with the order of the good] in the manner that has been mentioned. He would thus intellectually apprehend the order of the good in the highest possible manner, whereby what He intellectually apprehends in the highest possible way as an order and a good would overflow from Him in the manner, within the realm of possibility that is most complete in being conducive in order. (Avicenna, 2005, p.339)

However, according to this characterization, Divine providence apparently would imply that our actual world must be of the best possible order. Borrowing Leibniz' terminology, we may say that, given the Divine providence, our world must be the "best possible world". The

best possible world, however, seems to be necessarily void of any kind of evils, since we surely maintain that such a world has a better order than that of a world containing evils. So, regarding the reality of evil in our actual world, the theoretical problem arises: How can one who believes in God and His providence (in the above sense) give reason for the actual evils in the world? How can one reconcile between these beliefs: the belief that God is aware of the best order of the world and causes it and is satisfied with it, on the one hand, and that evils are real, on the other hand?

The above questions are commonly expressed by Muslim philosophers appealing to the notion of Divine decree (*al-qadha al-ilahi*) and predetermination (*al-taqdir al-ilahi*). We should notice that in Muslim philosophers' worldview, the existence of any actual being or the occurrence of any actual event, in the whole universe and in all times, is decided and appointed by Divine eternal decree. In other words, God, as the ultimate (or more accurately, the unique *real*) efficient cause, necessitates the existence and the occurrence of all actual beings and events. Moreover, all the characteristics and properties of God's creatures are eternally predetermined by God. Thus, if evils are to be real entities, their very realization must be according to the Divine decree and their characteristics must be according to His predetermination. Therefore, the main question

could be expressed as: How do evils come to be according to Divine decree and predetermination?<sup>1</sup> We find most Muslim Philosophers deal with the problem of evil under a main title which contains terms such as "Divine providence", "Divine decree" and "Divine predetermination".<sup>2</sup>

We may then count the above version of the problem as the main version for Islamic philosophers. Let us call it **"the problem of evil and Divine providence"**. The general attempt to solve this problem has been manifested in the attempt to show that evils, in contrast to the goods, are decided and predetermined by God only accidentally and not essentially (I shall return to this solution later).

There are, however, some less important versions of the problem that have been formulated in a much less detailed way of which we rarely cannot find more than some implicit allusions. One of these *subordinate* versions relates to the problem of the creator of evils. According to Islamic philosophy, and

Islamic doctrines in general, God is the most conceivable good and benevolent being. So, how could it be the case that such a God creates evils (pains, sufferings, harms and so on)? If God does not create the evils, then there must be another being (perhaps a cosmic devil) who is responsible for bringing the evils into existence. According to Islamic philosophy, however, this could not be the case, since, God is the ultimate creator of *all* things so that no other being can be conceived of who is able to create something despite of or against God's will and decision. We may call this problem "the creation-dualism problem".<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Muslim philosophers' key solution for this problem is based on a negative interpretation of the very nature of evils.

Another variation of the problem of evil, which deserves to be mentioned here, originates from Muslim Philosophers' belief in God's absolute wisdom (*al-hikmat al-ilahiyyah*). "Wisdom" signifies more than one meaning: from one aspect, It says something about God's knowledge and insists on its being totally comprehensive and absolutely perfect. Moreover, wisdom sometimes is applied to Divine actions; God is wise (*hakim*) in the sense that His actions are perfect as well as reasonable. Avicenna interprets Divine wisdom as follows:

1. To paraphrase this question in a more contemporary form, we may simply ask: Why does God permit evils?

2. For example, the title of the relevant chapter in Avicenna's *The Healing* is: "On providence, showing the manner of the entry of evil in divine predetermination". (Avicenna, 2005, p 339). Mulla Sadra adopted a bit different and longer title: "On Divine providence and all-embracing mercy and the manner of the entry of evil and harm in the [realm of the] predetermined beings in terms of divine decree and predetermination". (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 55)

3. For a detailed statement of this problem, see: (Mulla Sadra, 1363 , pp. 275-276)

Wisdom, in our opinion applies to two things:  
to complete knowledge and to perfect action.  
(Morewedge, 1973, p. 70)

Indeed, the second sense is what we are concerned with here. One may claim that (at least some kinds of) actual evils, if seen as God's actions, are neither perfect nor reasonable. (To be "reasonable", when used as a property of actions, should be understood as having reasonable purposes and goals). For example, natural evils (like earthquakes) are apparently the result of some disorders and imperfect designs in the world. Moreover, one may think that evils like diseases and pains of the innocent creatures could not result in any rational objective.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, we confront another problem: It seems that the reality of evils in our actual world contradicts Divine wisdom since they are manifestations of disorder and chaos, from one hand, and vainness and futility, from another hand, while God's wisdom requires all His actions to be the most perfect and to have reasonable goals and objectives.

---

1. Muslim philosophers believe that, regarding the hierarchical order of existence, it is impossible for a higher level (i. e. more perfect) being to something in behalf of a lower (less perfect) one. According to this principle, God's action, as a simple eternal reality, has no end except the very Divine essence. However, this does not deny the fact that the particular actions of God must have reasonable ends and purposes.

### What is an Evil Like?

To present a more or less minute definition for "evil" is not as easy as it may seem at the first glance. That is partly because the word "evil", within an Aristotelian metaphysical framework, does not refer to a certain kind of a particular metaphysical category, as "red" or "cat" denotes a certain kind of color or animal respectively. We may rightly regard things belonging to different categories as "evil". Some of human acts are called "evil" as well as some natural events such as earthquakes and floods. Moreover, mental states like pain and suffering provide another sort of evils. So, one may wonder whether there could be a single and general concept of evilness applicable to these *heterogeneous* entities.

To engage in a fruitful philosophical discussion of the problem of evil, however, it is necessary to have an almost clear conception of what evil is like. Otherwise, it would be too optimistic to expect a satisfying settlement for the problem.

Bearing these facts in mind, Muslim philosophers commonly try to characterize "evil" especially in terms of the opposition between the concepts of good and evil. A conspicuous view is that good consists in (or stems from) existence (*wujud*) and, therefore, evil consists in (or stems from) nonexistence (*adam*). The immediate result of this view is that all of the various forms and kinds of evil

could be reduced to nonexistence and privation; evils, in their very essences, are of negative and non-existential nature. As we shall see later, this type of characterization mobilized Muslim philosophers with a theoretical apparatus, which enabled them to provide a solution for some versions of the problem of evil.

### Evil as Nonexistence and Privation

So far I claimed that in Islamic philosophy evils are seen as non-existential entities. But do we in fact see any sort of nonexistence as an evil? Now that I am writing this paper, there is not a ball on my desk? Then is the nonexistence of a ball on my desk an evil? It seems not. Thus, a kind of modification is required. Some philosophers associate evil with the nonexistence of a (deserved) perfection, which may be called "privation". Al-Farabi, for example, holds:

Indeed, God is nothing but the perfection of existence and it is the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) and evil is the privation of existence and the negation of perfection. (Al-Farabi, 1408, p. 49)

Avicenna is much more explicit in this respect. After mentioning some kinds of evil, he says:

Thus, evil in essence is privation, though not any [type] of privation but only privation of that to which the nature of the thing necessarily leads in terms of the perfections that belong permanently to its species and nature. (Avicenna, 2205, p. 340)

So, we do not count any item of nonexistence as an evil but only the lack of such perfection that a thing normally should possess in terms of its nature. Therefore, the lack of sight is an evil for a blind person and not for a tree.

But an existent may be seen as an evil as far as it destroys or prevents another existent's perfection. Avicenna continues to distinguish between *essential* and *accidental* evils:

Accidental evil [on the other hand] is the nonexistent, or that which keeps perfection away from that which deserves it. (Ibid)

Avicenna's example to elucidate this distinction is a case in which heat brings about the lost connectedness of one's organ. In this case, in Avicenna's opinion, the essential evil consists in the nonexistence of the connectedness, while the heat itself is an accidental evil, since though "...it becomes an evil relative to the sufferer from it, it has another aspect in terms of which it is not an evil." (Ibid) I shall return to this issue later.

According to Mulla Sadra, however, "evil" can be used in two senses:

1) In the first sense, all beings except God possess some evil aspects. God, as the unique Necessary Being, is the absolute good and other beings, since they are contingent, can be described as evils as far as they lack the degree of absolute good. In other words, all God's creatures are evils in the sense that they are

more or less imperfect. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 58)<sup>1</sup>

However, Mulla Sadra reminds us very soon that this is not the sense which is usually meant in the philosophical discussions on evil.<sup>2</sup>

2) Evil, in the second sense, "... consists in the nonexistence of an object or the nonexistence of one of its perfections which is peculiar to it inasmuch as it is that certain object.... Therefore, philosophers said that evil lacks any [existent] essence, it is instead a nonexistent entity which consists in either the nonexistence of an object or of its perfection." (Ibid)

This second sense is what Sadra's predecessors had in mind when they talked about evils. We may call this view about the nature of evils "the theory of the nonexistent nature of evil" (henceforth: TNNE)<sup>3</sup> It is fair to

note here that TNNE should never be considered as equal to the aforementioned view which says that evils are nothing except dreams and illusions. According to TNNE, evils are real as well as goods but their very natures are non-existential and negative. Thus, the blindness and ignorance are realities and TNNE's claim is just that philosophical analysis shows that they are nonexistent realities.

### Essential and Accidental Evil

One may plausibly wonder whether, according to TNNE, beings have any role in the realization of evils. The answer can be affirmative in the sense that we may call some beings "evil" in as much as they bring about the reality of certain evils. In order to distinguish this sense from the non-existential (negative) meaning, Muslim philosophers typically call the former "accidental evil" (*al-shar al-bithat*) and the latter "essential evil" (*al-shar al-bilaradh*). It is helpful to note that "accidental" here should be taken to mean "figuratively" or "metaphorically".<sup>4</sup> So, we may admit that some

1. What is meant here by Sadra seems to be much similar to what Leibniz called "metaphysical evil".

2. As we shall see later, following Aristotle, Muslim philosophers believe that some of God's creatures, such as pure nonmaterial intellects (*oqul*) are totally free from any kind of evils. So, it would be enough clear that in this context "evil" could not be used in the first sense mentioned by Sadra.

3. It is worth noting that some of Muslim philosophers trace this theory to Plato. Mirdamad, for example, after mentioning TNNE writes: "... and this is a principle by means of which Plato, the theosopher, refuted the doubt instilled by the dualists in order to prove two creators; the creator of goods and that of evils." Mirdamad, 1374, p. 434)

4. I mean by "metaphor" here what we may call "philosophical metaphor" in contrast to "linguistic metaphor". This idea is grounded in the philosophical consideration that we sometimes attribute the property of one thing to another because of the close connection between the two things. To present a simple (and inaccurate) example, we may call a certain syrup "sweet" while the thing which is really sweet is the sugar dissolved in the liquid.



beings could be called "evil" so far as they actually cause some sorts of nonexistence and privation.

### Several Applications of the Word "Evil"

Beside the attempt to clarify the non-existential nature of evil, Muslim philosophers commonly explore the different applications of the term "evil". Taking these various uses into account helps us to have a better understanding of what an evil is like and prepares the way for distinguishing several aspects of the problem of evil in correspondence to several types of evils.<sup>1</sup>

Avicenna distinguishes between four uses of "evil":

Evil is spoken of in [various] ways. Thus "evil" is said of the blameworthy acts, and "evil" is said of their principles in moral dispositions. "Evil" is said of pains, distresses, and their like. "Evil" is [also] said of the falling short by each thing of its perfection and of its loss of that

which would naturally belong to it. (Avicenna, 2005, p 343)

According to the above passage, "evil" is applied to four categories:

1. the immoral actions and wrong doings.
2. the principles of these actions in the agent's dispositions.
3. the pains and distresses and like.
4. the lack of an expected perfection.

One may wonder whether the above classification is in accordance to TNNE, since the first three categories in the list obviously are of an existential nature. Facing this problem, Avicenna makes some more analyses in order to disclose the hidden relation of those categories, the nonexistence. He thus goes on to claim that the third class, i.e., the sufferings and pains, "even though their meanings are existential, not privative, follow [from] to privation and deficiency." (Ibid) Therefore, suffering and pains are called evil just as far as they are the result of some privation. (I shall discuss this view later under the title of "Apprehension Evil").

What about the first and second types? Their connection to nonexistence is stated as follows:

Evil in acts is also [evil] in relation to the one who loses his perfection by its reaching him, as with injustice, or in relation to a perfection necessary in the religious regime, as [when] adultery [takes place]. Similarly, moral dispositions are only evil by virtue [of such acts] proceeding from them. And they are connected

1. In the contemporary philosophy of religion, evil is normally divided into two main kinds: natural evil and moral evil. Moral evils result directly or indirectly from immoral actions. War, murder, and torture are examples of moral evil. On the contrary, natural evils, like diseases, floods and volcanoes (or, more accurately, the sufferings caused by natural phenomenon) do not follow immoral actions. Of course, the contrast between these two kinds is not always clear. For more discussion see: (Taliferro, 1998, p. 301). According to Leibniz, evil emerges in three main forms: metaphysical, physical and natural. Sometimes, a fourth kind is added i.e., the emotional evil, which is thought of to be identical with suffering and pain.

with depriving the soul of perfection that ought to belong to it. (Ibid)

To sum up, we can say that several categories which normally are called evil are either nonexistence and privation (as the lack of the deserved perfection) or originate somehow from nonexistence (like the pains) or bring about some privation whether directly (like malefic actions) or indirectly (like the vices and immoral dispositions). So, we find that in all these various categories, what originally should be considered as evil is nothing but nonexistence and privation.

#### The Grounds of TNNE

How are the adherents of TNNE to justify their belief? In the works of Muslim philosophers, we may distinguish three different approaches:

#### I. To claim that TNNE is self-evident

Mulla Sadra expresses this claim in the following passage: "There is no doubt that existence is, in itself, good and glory and nonexistence is, in itself, evil. And this is the judgment of the primordial nature." (Mulla Sadra, 1990a, p. 121)<sup>1</sup>

1. Sadra elsewhere cites this claim with some hesitations: It is firmly possible to claim that this subject is self-evident and the mentioned examples were just for admonition." See: (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 62). There are other philosophers who believe that TNNE is self-evident (c.f. Mirdamad, 1374, p. 428 and Al-Nuri Al-Zinuzi, 1374, p. 410 and Al-Zinuzi, 1376, p. 478).

It is helpful to notice that if we accept this claim we should consider philosophers' exploration and analysis of several types of evil to disclose its non-existential nature as mere admonitions (*tanbihat*) and reminders. This is because Muslim philosophers commonly maintain the possibility of some evident proposition being obscure for some people (due to certain reasons). In this case some reminders and admonitions may be required in order to make the proposition acceptable.

However, it seems that most of Muslim philosophers were not ready to confine themselves to this claim and thus tried to provide some further grounds.

#### 2. To explore several types of evil

The second way is to explore several types of evils in order to show that in all cases the essential evil is a kind of privation (We considered one example of this approach in Avicenna). This approach sometimes has been considered as an attempt to present a kind of *inductive* argument. This interpretation, however, has raised an objection based on the weak logical status of induction: inductive arguments are not logically valid arguments and thus, can not result in certain conclusions. Therefore, no inductive argument can conclusively provide adequate support for TNNE.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, for example, puts his objection in this way:

This [i.e., to justify TNNE on the basis of exploring several types or instances of evils] is to rely on just a few examples and you have known that this does not cause any certainty. (Al-Razi and al-Tusi, 1404, part 2, p. 80).

It is clear that this objection is based on the aforementioned interpretation. But we may interpret their project just as an attempt to provide some evidences for TNNE and to answer some possible alleged counterexamples.

Mulla Sadra, after examining the nature of several types of evil such as immoral dispositions and actions as well as some physical evils such as extreme heat and frigidity, puts his defense of this approach in a clear way:

The objective of mentioning these examples is not to argue for this claim by means of induction or analogy, but to answer the counterexamples and clarify the distinction between essential and accidental evils and abolish the confusion between these two and reveal that evilness in all things seen as evil refers to or originates from a non-existential aspect. (Mulla sadra, 1981, p. 62)

### 3. To present a deductive argument

There is no doubt that the main ground for TNNE, if any at all, could be a deductive argument. Philosophers who adopted this approach proposed different formulations some of which are more complicated than others.<sup>1</sup>

1. For an example, see: (Al-Shirazi, p. 520)

Mulla Sadra's argument, though long and almost complicated, deserves to be cited in detail:

And the argument is that if evil was an existential entity, it would be evil either for itself or for another object. [But] it is impossible for it to be evil for itself since otherwise it couldn't have existence at all because the existence of an object cannot require its nonexistence or privation of one of its perfections. And if an object requires the privation of some of its perfections, the [real] evil will consist in that privation and not that very object.... And it is also impossible for an evil, given that it is existent, to be evil for another being since it would be evil either because it obliterates that object or obliterates one of its perfections or does not obliterate anything. So, if it is evil because it obliterates that object or one of its perfections, then the evil is nothing but the nonexistence of that object or the privation of its perfection and not that existential entity itself. And if it does not obliterate anything, then it will not be an evil for that object since we certainly know that whatever does not cause the nonexistence of an object, nor the privation of its perfection could not be regarded an evil for that object since that object is not harmed or damaged by it. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, pp. 58-59)<sup>2</sup>

2. Sadra summarizes this argument and reveals its main logical form: "And the form of this deductive argument in its natural order is this: If the evil were an existential entity, then the evil would be not evil; the consequent is false [because it is a contradiction], thus the antecedent is false too." (Ibid. p. 59)

In order to criticize this argument I need a broad space. In short, one may say that it commits the fallacy of *begging the question* for in some stages Sadra proceeds in a manner as if he already has presupposed a non-existential nature for evils. For example, he says that it is impossible for an object to be evil for itself since "the existence of an object cannot require its nonexistence or privation of one of its perfections." It seems that this requirement itself is based on an assumption about evil being necessarily linked to some kinds of nonexistence, but this assumption is what the argument seeks to establish. If this objection is applicable here, then we may conclude that the argument is nothing but a detailed pseudo-argument which reveals one's intuition about the non-existential nature of evils.

### Apprehensional Evil: a challenge for TNNE

So far we saw that Muslim philosophers generally endorsed TNNE and tried to provide on behalf of it some intuitional, evidential and philosophical grounds. It seems that according to some philosophical principles (almost accepted by them) a certain type of evils, namely pain and suffering, can challenge TNNE in a serious and considerable way. Given that pain and suffering are real evils, many philosophers find that they are certain kinds of apprehension (*idrak*) and knowledge (*ilm*) (in its broad sense). For example, Avicenna writes:

Surely, pleasure is the apprehension of the realization of something which counts perfection for the apprehender inasmuch as it is perfection and good. And pain is the apprehension of the realization of something which is calamity and evil for the apprehender inasmuch as it is so. (Avicenna, 1403, p. 337)

Moreover, Muslim philosophers commonly think that apprehension is an existential quality. Therefore, we apparently discover an obvious counterexample for TNNE; pains and sufferings are evils which *have existential nature*! In other words, there is an essential difference between pains and sufferings, on the one hand, and, evils like blindness and diseases, on the other. The former, in contrary to the latter, are not mere privations, but as mental qualities they are as existent as other qualities. Let's call the evils in question "apprehensional evil".<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the previous distinction between essential and accidental evil, this challenge, in order to be a serious one, should presuppose that apprehensional evil is an essential evil since, as we saw, there is no problem to call some beings "accidental evils" inasmuch as they cause some kinds of privation. Thus, we

---

1. By "apprehensional evil" I just mean any evil which consists in a kind of apprehension. It is helpful to note that apprehensional evil, in the above sense, should not be bounded to pain and suffering; there are other types especially what is called "double ignorance" (*jahl al-murakab*). Pain and suffering, however, play the main role in the challenge.

may formulate the "apprehensional evil challenge" (henceforth: AEC) as follows: (for the sake of simplicity, I restrict myself to the case of pain):

1. Pain is an evil.
2. Pain is an essential evil, not an accidental evil.
3. Pain is a kind of apprehension.
4. All kinds of apprehension are existential entities.
5. Pain is an existential entity. [from (3) and (4)]
6. Therefore, there are essential evils which are existential entities. [the conclusion: from (2) and (5)]

But this conclusion obviously contradicts TNNE.

Some philosophers, like Fackr Al-Din Al-Razi and Mulla Jalal Al-Din Al-Dawani, have objected TNNE by means of AEC. Al-Razi puts the challenge shortly and in conclusive voice:

It is self-evident that pain is an existential entity and there is no disagreement among wise people about this. (Al-Razi and al-Tusi, 1404, Part 2, p. 80)

The adherents of TNNE meet this challenge in several ways.

### Response to the Challenge

We may classify the main responses to AEC into three types:

**I)** Some philosophers reject the premise (2) which says that pain is an essential evil. Al-Tusi, for instance, says:

And the case is similar with the pains, since they are not evils inasmuch as they are

apprehensions of things or in terms of their existence in themselves or their coming into existence by their causes. Instead, they are evils just in relation to the person who is in pain and lacks the connectedness of an organ which deserves connectedness. (Avicenna, 1404, p. 331)

According to a passage cited before, it seems that Avicenna supports this view when he suggests that pains, "even though their meanings are existential, not privative, follow [from] to privation and deficiency." (Avicenna, 2005, 331)<sup>1</sup>

**II)** The second response is to reject premise (3); a universal statement which says that all kinds of apprehension are existential entity. Mulla Sadra's response to AEC, in my opinion, could be viewed as a challenge for (3). He provides a complicated argument its main steps can be formulated in the following way:

1. Pain involves a kind of apprehension which is an item of "Knowledge by presence" (*ilm al-hudhuri*) and not of acquired knowledge (*ilm al-husuli*).<sup>2</sup>

1. For another expression of this response, see: (Mirdamad, 1374, p. 331)

2. In the view of later Muslim philosophers, knowledge (in its broad sense) has two main kinds: 1) "Knowledge by presence" in which the subject knows the object directly and without the medium of conceptualization since the object itself, and not its mental idea (*surah*), is present for the subject. 2) "Acquired knowledge" in which the subject knows its object indirectly and by means of its mental idea.

2. In the case of the knowledge by presence, the apprehension is identical with the very object which becomes apprehended.

3. The realization of privation and nonexistence is itself a kind of privation and nonexistence, as the realization of a human being is identical with him.

4. Thus, in the case of pain, the apprehension involved is of the kind of privation and nonexistence.

5. Therefore, pains really have non-existential nature in spite of being a mode of apprehension.

According to this line of argumentation, Mulla Sadra concludes that "the pain as an essential evil is one of instances of nonexistence." (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 66)

**III)** After Mulla Sadra, some of his commentators criticized his argument and provided a third response which seemingly rejects premise (1) of AEC. In their views, pain, though a kind of apprehension and thus an existential entity, is not a real evil. In order to justify this claim, we are invited to contemplate on various benefits of pains for human beings as human beings. For example, suffering from pains helps us to gain some moral virtues such as patience, satisfaction and so on. In other words, this view insists on the distinction between what is really evil and what only does not fit to our bodily desires and dispositions.

Tabataba'i puts this distinction in another way:

The apprehended idea by which someone suffers is not evil or pain inasmuch as one makes oneself by means of it more perfect. And it is an

existential entity. But inasmuch as it is a thing in the external world, like the cut of an organ and the disappearance of the connectedness, it is a nonexistent thing and here lies the [real] evil and pain. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 66)

We may summarize Tabataba'i's claim in this way: pain and suffering, in its mental (and internal) realization is an existent entity but not a real evil and in its external realization is evil but a non-existential entity. Consequently, AEC fails.

### Solutions of the Problem of Evil

As I noted before, we may distinguish between several versions of "the problem of evil". In other words, we face a cluster of problems collected under this title. So, it would be natural that these different problems must be considered and solved separately. In Islamic philosophy, we find a lot of theories and discussions which after all can serve as philosophical materials for constructing solutions for these problems. Nevertheless, we rarely find Islamic philosophers who undertook some efforts to distinguish between different solutions.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we have to link each of those theories to an appropriate solution as far as possible.

---

1. Recently some authors distinguished between various proposed solutions in different religious and philosophical traditions. To give an example, John Hospers distinguishes between seven solutions. See: (Hospers, 1992, pp. 310-319)

### The Negative Nature of Evils

As we saw before, almost all Muslim philosophers advocate TNNE. This theory about the negative nature of evils, can help us to face one of the versions of the problem of evil which I already called "the creation-dualistic problem". The problem is that it is impossible that God, as the absolute good and benevolent, brings about the evils in our world. So, there must be another creator who creates the evil against God's will. But, according to philosophical principles as well as Islamic teachings about the monotheism, it is impossible for the universe to have two first efficient causes or two ultimate creators.

According to TNNE, we can make a short and conclusive reply: Evil, as something which is of non-existential entity, does not need to any cause or creator at all. For Muslim philosophers, the cause and its effect are two existents so that the latter is dependent on the former in its existence.<sup>1</sup> So, a nonexistent entity could neither be a cause nor an effect. At most, we can say (almost in a *metaphoric* sense) that a nonexistent entity is the effect of the nonexistence of its cause. In short, a non-

existential entity cannot have an existential cause.

Assuming the above view on causation, we can conclude that evil, given its non-existential nature, does not really have any cause. Consequently, evils are created neither by God nor by any other being; in fact, they are not created at all.

Sadra refers to this solution in a short passage: "And you have known that evil is nonexistence or a non-existential thing and nonexistence surely does not require any cause...and so is the non-existential entity inasmuch as it is non-existential." (Mulla Sadra, 1963, pp. 293-294)

### The Minor Evil is Necessary for the Major Good

Muslim Philosophers in their study of the problem of evil commonly appeal to a classification which they historically traced to Aristotle. According to this classification the situation of any given creature, in virtue of being good or evil, could not exceed five possibilities: 1) being totally good; 2) being good in the majority of cases and evil in the minority of cases; 3) being equally good and evil; 4) being good in the minority of cases and evil in the majority of cases; and 5) being totally evil.

Avicenna explores these five possible situations as follows:

1. Mulla Sadra mentions two definitions for the "cause": "We say that "cause" has two meanings: First, it is the thing from its existence the existence of another thing takes place [i.e., the effect] and from its nonexistence the nonexistence of another thing takes place. In the second meaning, it is the thing on which another thing is dependent in its existence..." (Mulla Sadra, 1990c, p. 127)

Things in the [faculty of] estimation are either [(a)] things which, if [reckoned in the] estimation as existing, cannot but be absolutely evil; [(b)] things whose existence [consist] in being good, it impossible for them to be evil and deficient; [(c)] things in which goodness predominates if their existence comes to be, anything but this being impossible for their natures; [(d)] things in which evilness predominates; or [(e)] things in which the two states are equal. (Avicenna, 2005, pp. 345-346)

Considering each of these possibilities separately, Muslim philosophers come to conclude that only the first and the second possibilities could be actualized by God. This claim seems enough clear as to the first kind. In their view, the incorporeal intellects (*al-oqul al-mujarradah*) are instances of the first kind; they are pure good (*al-khayr al-mahdh*) without any evil aspects and God do create these intellects.

As to the second kind, it is argued that God, in spite of its minor evilness, should create it. The reason is that if God refrain from creating this kind of existents, then the result is that a major good will be prevented just because of its minor evil and this seems not to be a wise act. Since God is absolutely wise, He should permit the realization of the second kind too. The corporeal objects in the natural world are usually classified within this kind of beings. Fire is a very common example; in the most cases it has valuable benefits for human beings and even for other beings, but it happens in a

few cases that leads to some privation and in effect, it becomes an (accidental) evil.

But what should we say about the remainder possibilities? According to Islamic philosophy, God is wholly good and absolutely wise and benevolent and it sounds reasonable that such a God never creates a totally or mostly evil thing. God even does not permit the existence of a thing with equal good and evil aspects, since this seems far from being a wise creation.

It seems that the most controversial part of the above theory is its claim about the second kind. One crucial question may be that why God, being omnipotent, cannot create such things like corporeal objects so that they never (even not in the minor cases) result in evil.

In order to answer the above question, Muslim philosophers insist on the *necessary* relation between major good and minor evil aspects in this kind of beings. To clarify this claim they frequently call our attention to the necessary characteristics of our *material world*. First, in the whole hierarchical order of the universe, the material sensory world lies in a lower level than that of the nonmaterial world which is the world of the incorporeal intellects. The latter, as I indicted before, is void of any kind of evil. But, if the former is to be without evil, it cannot still remain as the material world but will change into the higher world; i.e., the world of intellects. In short, it is *impossible* for the material world to be without evil since, in



this given case, the material world comes to be not the material world, which is absurd!

Avicenna puts the question and his proposed answer in this way:

If [however] it is said, "Why is evilness not prevented from it to begin with so that it would be entirely good?" one would then say:[If evilness was prevented from it] then [these things] would not be what they are, ... [[and]]<sup>1</sup> their existence would [no longer] be the existence which is theirs, but the existence of other things that have come to be which are other than they are and which have been realized. [By this] I mean what is created in such a way that evil have not follow from it primarily. (Avicenna, 2005, p. 346)

Second, we consider that motion, change and other limitations, as the essential aspects of the material world, *necessarily* lead, though in the minor cases, to some clashes and contrasts among corporeal beings, which in their turn bring about some minor evils.

Suhrawardi claims:

Adversity and evil only are the requirements [of things] in the world of glooms [originating] from motions. (Suhrawardi, 1373, p. 235)

Since the material world receives all these properties through its matter and hyle, the hyle is originally responsible for evils. Matter and hyle, however, are essential aspects of the material world:

And such a corporeal being is not void of clash and contrast which cause division and plurality and the source of plurality is matter...Thus, hyle is the origin of evils and imperfections and, as you have not, it must be realized. (Mulla Sadra, 1981 , p. 74)

Another notable question concerning Muslim philosophers' claim about the minor evil may be this: Is the so-called minor evil *really* minor and, to put it in other words, are the evil aspects of material objects *truly* less than their good aspects?

In order to answer this question, Muslim philosophers usually appeal to a couple of considerations. First, they call our attention to recognize the difference between "being great in number" and "being more and numerically greater than" (It is obvious that the latter notion is, in contrary to the former, a *relative* one). Philosophers' claim is not that the number of evils in the material is not great; instead that their quantity is not more than that of goods. Avicenna makes this point in the following passage:

If someone said, "Evil is not something rare or numerically the lesser but numerically the greater," [we answer that] this is not the case. Rather, evil is numerous but not the numerically greater; for there is a difference between the numerous and the numerically greater - for example, maladies. (Avicenna, 2005, p. 347)

Secondly, they explore several material things, like fire, water, air and so on, to show

---

1. What is written between [[ ]] is my addition.

that in these things the good aspects are much more than the evil ones. Mulla Sadra writes:

...like fire whose perfection lies in the faculty of [producing] heat and burning and by means of which great advantages and plentiful benefits are obtained, but it happens sometimes for it to burn the house of a holy man or the garment of a prophet. And like water whose perfection lies in [its] coldness and moisture, but it happens for it sometimes to drown the [inhabitants of] towns and to kill God's servants. And so is the earth, the air, the rain, the cloud etc. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 69)

Thirdly, we may insist on the fact that, while comprising evils to goods, we should employ the *qualitative* criteria too. The idea is that at least in some cases, a particular good, though less great than a certain evil in quantity, may be greater in quality. For example, a very short pleasure might be so great that would be superior to a long pain in a manner that one is ready to endure that pain in order to receive the pleasure.

At any rate, if we accept the aforementioned points, we will be ready to make a solution for what I earlier called "the problem of Divine providence and evil". If the minor evil, in the material world, is a necessary partner of the major good, then it will *impossible* for one of them to be realized without the other. Consequently, even God, though omnipotent and all-powerful, *cannot* (in a particular sense) bring about the reality of the major good free of evil. On the other hand, as we saw before, to

refrain from creating the major good in order to prevent the minor evil is reasonably not a wise action. And since God is the absolute Wise, He should permit the major good to be realized in the world of nature. Thus, God creates the major good which inevitably implies the minor evil.

One may claim that the main question still remains without answer: How does evil enter the realm of Divine decree and predetermination. In order to make a direct answer, Muslim philosophers once again appeal to the essential/accidental dichotomy. The minor evil inasmuch as it is a necessary condition of the major good, enters into Divine decree *accidentally*. God wills essentially just the realization of goods, but the minor evil comes to be willed accidentally. Avicenna writes:

God, exalted be He, wills [all] things, and evil was also willed in the way of what is accidental.<sup>1</sup> Since He knew that it exists by necessity, He paid it no heed. (Avicenna, 2005, p. 345)

Another version of the problem of evil for Muslim philosophers which I noted before originates from apparent inconsistency between Divine wisdom and the reality of evils as far as they are signs of disorder and futility.

---

1. Advocating this view, Mirdamad pointed out that the evils in question should be considered as accidental from two different aspects: first, they are accidental in that they are existents which cause some privations. Second, they are also accidental in the sense that they are willed by God accidentally. See: (Mirdamad, 1374, p. 435)

Confronting this problem, Muslim philosophers commonly make two claims: 1) our actual world must be the best possible world which could be created by God; it is on the best possible order (*al-nizam al-ahsan*) and 2) there is no evil in the world which lacks a wise and reasonable objective. In the reminder of this article, I shall explain these two claims briefly.

### The best possible world

As we considered before, Divine providence, in the Islamic philosophical thought, requires His knowledge of the best possible order of the world, His being the cause of it and His being satisfied with its coming to existence. Thus, our world can not be but the best possible world. In order to support this claim, Muslim philosophers proceed in two main ways; *a priori* and *a posteriori*. In the *a priori* approach it is argued that, appealing to the statements about God's attributes (such as His omnipotence, omniscience and so on) as premises, we can construct pure rational proofs for the claim that our world is the best possible one. In the *a posteriori* approach, they explore several actual state of affairs in our world to show that all of them are totally wise and in the best conceivable order.<sup>1</sup>

### Evils and Reasonable Ends

Another attempt to solve the problem in question is to show that so-called evils in the

world have reasonable ends. Here the whole procedure is once again inductive. We are invited to contemplate on various kinds of evil in order to discover Divine purposes in them. Of course, we should not forget our cognitive limitations and shortcomings. Nevertheless, even our bounded knowledge would suffice to disclose many of these reasonable purposes. It is helpful to note that what is usually meant here is a kind of *universal*, and not particular, purpose. A universal purpose or end of an evil is what belongs to the whole order of the world while a particular one relates to the very person who is harmed by that evil.<sup>2</sup> To have an example we may consider some natural evils:

The death by which the people are usually feared, if its real nature is grasped, it will be known that its purpose is nothing but the transmission of the soul from a lower world to an upper one and it refers to one of the natural perfections... and in the same manner God created the sun and the moon and the rains for the universal benefit and interest, though sometimes they may harm some people and animals and plants. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 92 and 99)

1. For a detailed presentation of these two approaches see: (Mulla Sadra, 1981, pp. 108-118).

2. It seems that this *universalist* perspective, though successful in answering the present challenge of inconsistency between Divine wisdom and the apparent futility and vainness of evils, can not contribute in solving the problem of Divine Justice. For a contemporary critique of the universalist view, see: (Abedi Shahrudi, 1973)

Sadra continues to disclose Divine ends for the natural process of some animals' being eaten by others.

### Conclusion

In order to present a kind of theodicy, Muslim philosophers attempt to provide some solutions for a couple versions of the problem of evil. The main and the most serious version for them is the problem of "Evil and Divine Providence". In order to solve this problem, they first argue in several ways for a "negative theory" about the nature of evils; that (essential) evil is nothing but nonexistence and privation. In this step, they meet the challenge of the "apprehension evil". Then they come to recognize the distinction between essential and accidental evils. Considering the minor (accidental) evil and its necessary partnership with the major good, they finally argue that this kind of evil enter into Divine decree only accidentally.

Muslim philosophers also use the advantage of the "negative theory" to meet a subordinate problem of creation-dualism. According to this theory, the problem finds an easy reply; since evil is of a non-existential nature, it does not need to be created or caused at all. The other minor problem is based on the claim of inconsistency between Divine wisdom and the reality of apparently futile evils. Muslim philosophers meet this problem briefly as far as

they seek to discover some universal reasonable purposes and benefits for certain kinds of evils.

### References:

- [1] Abedi Shahrudi, Ali (1373), "A Critique of the Existential Theory of Good and Evil", *Kayhane Andishe*, No. 48.
- [2] Avicenna, (1404 A.H.) *Al-Isharat wa Al-Tanbihat*, accompanied with Al-Tusi's commentary, Daftar Nashri al-kitab, vol.3
- [3] Avicenna (2005), *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura, Brigham Young University Press: Provo, Utah.
- [4] Al-Farabi (1408 A.H), *Al-Taaliqat*, Beyrut: Dar al-Manahil.
- [5] Hospers, J. (1992), *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Routledge.
- [6] Mirdamad, *Al-Qabasat* (1374 A.H), Mehdi Muhaqiq (ed.), Tehran University Press: Tehran.
- [7] Morewedge, Parviz, (1973), *The Metaphysica of Avicenna (ibn Sina)*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- [8] Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat Al-Mutealiyah fi Al-Asfar Al-Aqliyat Al-Arbaah*, [Al-Asfar], (1990a), vol. 4, Beyrut, Dar Ihya al-Turath alAarabiyah.
- [9] Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat Al-Mutealiyah fi Al-Asfar Al-Aqliyat Al-Arbaah*, [Al-Asfar],

- (1990b), vol. 6, Beirut, Dar Ihya al-Turath alAarabiyah.
- [10] Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat Al-Mutealiyah fi Al-Asfar Al-Aqliyat Al-Arbaah*, [Al-Asfar], (1981c), vol.2, Beirut, Dar Ihya al-Turath alAarabiyah.
- [11] Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat Al-Mutealiyah fi Al-Asfar Al-Aqliyat Al-Arbaah*, [Al-Asfar], (1981), vol. 7, Beirut, Dar Ihya al-Turath alAarabiyah.
- [12] Mulla Sadra, (1363), *Mafatih Al-Ghayb*, Mohammad Khajawii (ed.), Tehran, Muassese Mutaleat wa Tahqiqat-e Farhangi,
- [13] Al-Nuri Al-Zinuzi, Mulla Abdollah, (1974), *Al-Lamaat Al-Ilahiyyah*,
- [14] Al-Razi, Fakhr al-Din and Khwaje Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1404 A.H), *Sharhay al-Isharat*, Qum, Maktabat al-Marashi,.
- [15] Suhrawardi, (1373), *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, in Suhrawardi's Collected Works, introduction and edition by Henry Corbin, Tehran, Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1373 A. H., vol. 2.
- [16] Al-Zinuzi, Agha Ali Modarres (1376), *Badaye Al-Hikam*, Ahmad Waezi (ed.), Al-zahra: Tehran.
- [17] Peterson, Michael L. (ed.) (1992), *The Problem of Evil; Selected Readings*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press.
- [18] Al-Shirazi, Qutb al-Din, *Sharhu Hihmat al-Ishraq*, Qum.
- [19] Suhrawardi (1373), *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, in Suhrawardi's Collected Works, introduction and edition by Henry Corbin, Tehran, Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies, vol. 2.
- [20] Taliferro, Charles (1998), *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

## فلسفه اسلامی و مسأله شر

محمود سعیدی مهر<sup>۱</sup>

تاریخ دریافت: ۱۳۸۷/۲/۱۸

تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۳۸۸/۶/۳

در طول سده های گذشته، سنتهای بزرگ دینی و نیز مکاتب برجسته فلسفی و الهیاتی با مسأله نام آشنای «شرور» روبه رو بوده و کوشیده اند راه حلهای خردپسند و مقبولی برای آن ارایه کنند. مقاله حاضر در پی آن است که رویکرد فیلسوفان مسلمان به این مسأله و راه حلهای پیشنهادی آنان را بررسی کند. پس از بررسی روایتهای مختلف مسأله شر در فلسفه اسلامی دیدگاه فیلسوفان مسلمان در باره عدمی بودن سرشت شرور تحلیل می گردد و سپس به اختصار به چالش «شر ادراکی» و پاسخهای سه گانه آن خواهم پرداخت. در پایان از راه حلهای پیشنهادی فیلسوفان مسلمان در خصوص روایتهای سه گانه مسأله شر بحث خواهد شد.

واژگان کلیدی: مسأله شر، فلسفه اسلامی، قضای الهی، حکمت الهی، ابن سینا، ملاصدرا

---

۱. دانشیار گروه فلسفه، دانشگاه تربیت مدرس