



# The Problem of Evil: A Multifaceted Islamic Solution

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## Author Biography

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## Abstract

If God is All-Good, All-Powerful, and All-Knowing, why does suffering or evil exist? As suffering is a shared human experience, questions have been raised throughout history regarding the purpose of evil and how it is explained by orthodox theism, among other theologies. In recent centuries, the rise of secularism and atheism has led to an increase in the questioning of the existence of God via the problem of evil. This paper seeks to examine the foundations of the problem of evil, the logical and evidential, as well as their primary fallacies and underlying probabilistic assumptions. As will be demonstrated, orthodox Islamic theology offers a rational, intuitive, and multiperspectival final solution to the problem of evil.

## Introduction

Suffering is a global phenomenon. In its various forms, suffering has been experienced by human beings throughout history and is intertwined with human existence itself.<sup>1</sup> Why and how does suffering exist if God is All-Good and All-Powerful? Is there a purpose or meaning behind suffering? Does objective evil exist? Questions about evil, good, and God's decision-making are usually raised in times of adversity and religious beliefs attempt to answer such questions in ways that no other authority can.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, calamitous or stressful situations may raise existential questions (e.g., "What is the purpose of life?")<sup>3</sup> or may lead to a significant crisis of faith.<sup>4</sup> Explanations for suffering have significant ramifications in theology, philosophy, sociology, politics, and psychology, and oftentimes the intertwining of diverse elements in a given scenario magnifies the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> "Indeed, We have created humanity in [constant] struggle." Qur'an 90:4.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Ludwig Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Donald Edmondson, Stephenie R. Chaudoir, Mary Alice Mills, Crystal L. Park, Julie Holub, and Jennifer M. Bartkowiak, "From Shattered Assumptions to Weakened Worldviews: Trauma Symptoms Signal Anxiety Buffer Disruption," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 16, no. 4 (2011): 358–85.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Edmondson, Crystal L. Park, Stephenie R. Chaudoir, and Jennifer H. Wortmann, "Death Without God: Religious Struggle, Death Concerns, and Depression in the Terminally Ill," *Psychological Science* 19, no. 8 (2008): 754–8. The crisis of faith experienced by many theists in times of adversity is an oft-cited avenue to irreligiosity.

understanding suffering. In recent decades, numerous studies have suggested that “divine struggle (e.g., anger at God, feeling punished or abandoned by God)” is associated with negative impacts on mental health,<sup>5</sup> while positive perceptions of God’s benevolence (and God’s permitting suffering) are associated with adjustment.<sup>6</sup> Hence, a proper study of suffering has the potential to practically benefit people of diverse backgrounds in everyday life.

For Muslim theologians, suffering and evil are understood in light of God’s Wisdom, Knowledge, Benevolence, Will, and Power.<sup>7</sup> For many atheists, the problem of evil poses “*the* most fundamental threat to the traditional Western concept” of God, specifically the All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and All-Loving God of orthodox theism.<sup>8</sup> If evil cannot be accounted for, proponents argue, then “belief in the traditional Western concept of God is absurd.”<sup>9</sup> If evil can be accounted for, however, the argument loses its legitimacy. This essay examines the contemporary problem of evil while arguing that Islam offers a multiperspectival, rational, and intuitive solution to the problem.

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<sup>5</sup> Gene G. Ano and Erin B. Vasconcelles, “Religious Coping and Psychological Adjustment to Stress: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 4 (2005): 461–80. See also: Julie J. Exline, Kenneth I. Pargament, Joshua B. Grubbs, and Ann Marie Yali, “The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and Initial Validation,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6, no. 3 (2014): 208–22.

<sup>6</sup> Julie J. Exline, Crystal L. Park, Joshua M. Smyth, and Michael P. Carey, “Anger Toward God: Social-Cognitive Predictors, Prevalence, and Links with Adjustment to Bereavement and Cancer,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 1 (2011): 129–48.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Ibn Taymīyah, *al-Ḥasanah wa al-sayyi’ah*, ed. and introduction by Muḥammad Jamīl Aḥmad Ghāzī (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1990); Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū‘ fatāwā shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad b. Taymīyah*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad, 37 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Raḥmah, n.d.), 14:4–36, 14:229.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 166.

## Background to the problem of evil

The question of why suffering exists has been examined since the time of the Greek philosophers, albeit in different forms. A famous version of the following trilemma<sup>10</sup> is loosely attributed to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (d. 270 BCE):<sup>11</sup>

Is he (God) willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent (all-powerful). Is he able, but not willing? Then he is not benevolent (all-good). Is he both able and willing? Then why does evil exist?<sup>12</sup>

Fast forward to the present era and one finds that the problem of evil is widely recognized as a primary justification for atheism today, as well as an apparent attempt to challenge the belief in God's existence or God's creation of this world.<sup>13</sup> The problem of evil is one that arises due to two apparently conflicting claims: 1) the claim that God (with specific attributes) exists, and 2) the claim that real evil exists in the world.<sup>14</sup> A lack of adequate and comprehensive solutions to the problem of evil, to atheists and vulnerable theists, *seems to* provide “*prima facie* support for atheism.”<sup>15</sup> Although the problem of evil has been examined and addressed for many centuries by theists and atheists, recent modifications and extensions to the problem of evil have emerged, requiring brief address.

It should be noted here that addressing it as the “problem of evil” is potentially problematic in itself because numerous “apparent” problems arise in multifaceted

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<sup>10</sup> A trilemma is a difficult choice among three options, all of which seem unfavorable. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “trilemma,” accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trilemma>.

<sup>11</sup> As this argument is not found in any extant writings of Epicurus, it is suggested that the trilemma was formulated by an early philosopher of skepticism. See Mark Joseph Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Penguin Books: London, 1779), 186.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald K. Harrison, “A Radical Solution to the Problem of Evil,” *Sophia* 56, no. 2 (2017): 279–87. See also: Paul Draper, “Atheism and Agnosticism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>.

<sup>14</sup> Chad V. Meister and Paul K. Moser, *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> George Schlesinger, “The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Suffering,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1964): 244–47.

forms when addressing the reality of evil.<sup>16</sup> When possible, particular forms, arguments, and premises will be addressed with specificity so as to limit the focus and depth of this essay. Additionally, it must be noted that the responses to the question of suffering oftentimes depend on the questioner and his/her circumstances. One could, for instance, provide an intellectual or philosophical response, while another situation might require a pastoral or emotional approach. Through the Islamic lens, this essay will attempt to weave the two facets of the response together.

Generally, in Western philosophy, the deity referenced in the problem of evil is one found in the orthodox theism of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, among other theistic theologies. It is crucial to note that the arguments from evil “do not argue against the existence of God per se,” but rather against a specific concept of God; namely, “one that possesses the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the deity referenced in this essay is the One God who is Omnipotent (All-Powerful), Omniscient (All-Knowing), and Omnibenevolent (All-Good).<sup>18</sup>

## What is *sharr* (evil)?

The types of evil referenced in philosophical arguments about suffering may be physical, emotional, local, global, and they affect sentient creatures to varying degrees, such as the starvation of millions of children or severe natural disasters.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, “evil” is usually classified in such discourse as moral evil or natural evil.<sup>20</sup>

Moral evil refers to the misuse of free will by moral agents, ranging from what secular values might perceive as less severe (e.g., lying and backbiting),<sup>21</sup> to more

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<sup>16</sup> Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 166.

<sup>18</sup> The attribute “All-Good” is sometimes interchangeably used with All-Merciful or All-Loving.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 166.

<sup>20</sup> Martin, 166.

<sup>21</sup> Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 2.

severe moral evils like human trafficking and torture.<sup>22</sup> Natural evil, on the other hand, refers to the occurrences of evil brought about by natural laws and processes, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. A more recent classification of evil in terms of magnitude is horrendous evil, which is evil so severe that doubt is raised about “whether the participant’s life could be a great good to him/her on the whole.”<sup>23</sup> Examples of horrendous evil include rape, genocide, child sex trafficking, etc. More often than not, one who seeks an answer to the common version of the problem of evil is focused on the more extreme scenarios (e.g., horrendous) and/or major natural processes (e.g., a tsunami killing thousands of innocent civilians), although all types of evil may be referenced in common discourse. Although the problem of evil seems to pose a problem for theism, in actuality “it raises difficulties for atheism,”<sup>24</sup> difficulties that arguably cannot be overcome with certainty (*yaqīn*) as the Islamic solution does.

In Islamic theology, evil (*sharr*) has been defined in various ways by different scholars. Ibn Sina, for example, defined evil as inadequacy (*naqṣ*) or privation (lack of good/ *adam*) but argued that it was necessary in order for certain things to exist.<sup>25</sup> The oft-cited example of Ibn Sīnā is that of the heat of fire; while it may burn and harm living beings, its heat is necessary in order to be what it is (i.e., fire).<sup>26</sup> al-Rāzī, on the other hand, perceived the general understanding of “good” and “evil” to be synonymous with what is culturally understood (*al-‘urf al-‘āmm*) to be pleasure and pain.<sup>27</sup> al-Zamakhsharī explained evil, as in the second verse of Sūrat al-Falaq,<sup>28</sup> to be the evil of human beings (e.g., killing) or non-morally obligated animals (e.g., deadly insects).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Nick Trakakis, “The Evidential Problem of Evil,” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evi>.

<sup>23</sup> See also: Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> See: Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifā’ al-Ilāhīyāt*, ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā, et al. (Cairo: Al-Hay’ah al-‘Āmmah li-Shu’ūn al-Maṭābi’ al-Amīriyah, 1960), 414–22.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Sīnā, 414–22.

<sup>27</sup> Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 163.

<sup>28</sup> Qur’an 113:2.

<sup>29</sup> Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an haqā’iq al-tanzīl* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Abīkān, 1998), 464.

Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328), who wrote extensively on good, evil, and God’s Wisdom presented various typologies for “evil” and what it entails.<sup>30</sup> For example, Ibn Taymīyah opines that *some* of the occurrences of evil are relative—and what humans perceive as absolute evil is actually good in light of God’s Wisdom.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, he gives examples of perceived evils, such as pain and illness, as containing divine and wise purpose, although we may not always recognize them.<sup>32</sup> For the sake of this essay, the contemporary classifications of evil (moral, natural, and horrendous) will be referenced with classical and contemporary elucidations.

## Does objective evil exist?

Another facet of the discussion on evil involves the question, “Does objective evil exist?” To claim that an occurrence or action is objectively (i.e., factually) evil requires a factual standard of what is good. As C. S. Lewis articulated, “A man does not call something crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.”<sup>33</sup> What is objectively good and what is objectively evil? What are justice and injustice? If the atheist rejects God’s existence, then objective morality—good and evil—is simultaneously being rejected. Thus, all occurrences and actions are matters of preference, not matters of fact. A moral relativist, therefore, cannot reach a consensus with all other moral relativists about objective good and evil. What can be reached is a moral system largely dependent on subjective values of preference, a structure also dependent on the louder voice, the wealthier lobbyist, the most tempting social trend, and personal desires, not objectivity. If moral relativism is true, then true moral evil cannot possibly exist because evil becomes relative. The question then is, if the atheist claims that God doesn’t exist because objective evil exists, then objective good and evil cannot exist—therefore, objective evil does not exist, which contradicts the first point. Put another way: if objective evil does not exist, then what a person complains about with regards to God is a matter of personal preference and desire, not factual evil. Unfortunately, the converse would

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, *Minhāj al-sunnah al-nabawīyah fī naqd kalām al-Shī‘ah al-Qadarīyah*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Su‘ūd al-Islāmīyah, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, 3:142. Examples of this are explored later in the essay.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, 3:142.

<sup>33</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 38.

also be true: if objective evil does not exist, then objective good does not exist. In such a world, nothing is truly good or praiseworthy. Thus, if an objective epistemologist—atheist or theist—believes in the existence of objective evil (hence the ‘problem’), then a theistic solution to the problem of evil becomes necessary.

## The problem of evil

The two primary forms of the argument from evil are logical and evidential. As the logical problem of evil has been effectively refuted numerous times, most of the focus of this essay will be on the evidential problem of evil.

### The logical problem of evil

The logical problem of evil deals with a perceived logical inconsistency between certain claims about orthodox theism (the All-Powerful, All-Loving, All-Knowing God) and certain claims about evil. John L. Mackie, an Australian philosopher of religion, summarized the logical problem of evil as follows:

In its simplest form, the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, H. J. McCloskey argued that a contradiction exists for the theist due to the fact of evil coinciding with their belief in “the omnipotence and perfection of God.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the logical problem of evil claims that there is conclusive evidence against orthodox theism; they do so by suggesting that orthodox theists hold true the following propositions:

A. God exists;

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<sup>34</sup> John Leslie Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind*, New Series, 64, no. 254 (1955): 200–212.

<sup>35</sup> H. J. McCloskey, “God and Evil,” *Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-) 10, no. 39 (1960): 97–114.

- B. God is omnipotent (All-Powerful);
- C. God is omniscient (All-Knowing);
- D. God is omnibenevolent (All-Good); and
- E. Evil exists.

The logical problem suggests that propositions A-D are beliefs held by orthodox theists, and yet so is proposition E. However, the logical incompatibility between these five propositions is not explicit, and thus atheist philosophers will expand upon the three attributes of God referenced in B-D as follows:

- F. If God is omnipotent, he would be able to prevent all of the evil and suffering in the world.
- G. If God is omniscient, he would know about all of the evil and suffering in the world and would know how to eliminate or prevent it.
- H. If God is perfectly good, he would want to prevent all of the evil and suffering in the world.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the logical problem argues that if propositions F-H are true, then God is not omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. If such a proposition is maintained, then it contradicts the earlier propositions (A-D) about the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (i.e., the God of orthodox atheism). In other words, the claim being put forth is:

- I. “It is not possible for God and evil to co-exist.”<sup>37</sup>

Demonstrating that such a claim is false is not difficult since it is logically possible that God has a “morally sufficient reason” for allowing evil to exist.<sup>38</sup> If it is logically possible that God permits evil to exist for a morally sufficient reason, then it follows that claim I is false.

The question of *why* God permits suffering to exist is an entirely different one and one that requires lengthier study in the evidential version of the argument. If it is

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<sup>36</sup> James R. Beebe, “The Logical Problem of Evil,” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log>.

<sup>37</sup> Beebe.

<sup>38</sup> Beebe.

demonstrated that it is merely *possible*, then the logical problem of evil is refuted effectively. In 1974, Alvin Plantinga famously proposed the “Free Will Defense” in his argument against the logical problem of evil.<sup>39</sup> Plantinga argued that God created people with “morally significant” free will, a tremendously valuable agency that permits both evil and good to occur but an agency that arguably has a much greater degree of good than evil.<sup>40</sup>

Although it gained prominence during the 1960s, the logical problem of evil is considered unsuccessful by the overwhelming majority of philosophers and theologians today.<sup>41</sup> The atheist philosopher William Rowe, whose arguments will be examined in the *evidential* version of the argument, stated:

Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim. Indeed, granted incompatibilism, there is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God.<sup>42</sup>

Paul Draper, an agnostic philosopher, wrote:

In order for a logical argument from evil to succeed, it is necessary to show that, for some known fact about evil, it is logically impossible for God to have a good moral reason to permit that fact to obtain. This, however, is precisely what most philosophers nowadays believe cannot be shown.<sup>43</sup>

As the logical problem of evil is one that most philosophers no longer find relevant or resilient, we move on to the evidential problem of evil.

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<sup>39</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil: Basic Conditions of Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>40</sup> Plantinga.

<sup>41</sup> As agnostic philosopher Paul Draper articulated: “Although logical arguments from evil seemed promising to a number of philosophers in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., J. L. Mackie 1955), they are rejected by the vast majority of contemporary philosophers of religion.” Paul Draper, “The Problem of Evil,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 335.

<sup>42</sup> William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979): 335–41.

<sup>43</sup> Draper, “The Problem of Evil,” 335.

## The evidential problem of evil

The evidential problem of evil, in its most popular form, attempts to demonstrate that evil's existence—although it may be logically consistent with God's existence—is rationally problematic for theism. Proponents of evidential arguments opine that “the existence of evil in its vast amounts and horrible forms provides reasonable evidence that the God of traditional theism (probably) does not exist.”<sup>44</sup>

In his famous argument for atheism, William Rowe focuses on relevant examples of intense suffering and “clear case[s] of evil” to present his evidential argument from evil.<sup>45</sup> Rowe argues his case as follows:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. [Therefore] There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>46</sup>

After exploring the Islamic theodicies and defenses, the evidential problem posed by Rowe in his original and contemporary arguments will be re-examined closely.

## Theodicies and defenses

A theistic response to the evidential problem of evil is usually classified as either a theodicy or a defense. In philosophy and theology, a **theodicy** is an argument that provides a highly plausible “and perhaps even likely-to-be-true” explanation for

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<sup>44</sup> Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Rowe, “The Problem of Evil,” 335–41.

<sup>46</sup> Rowe, 336.

evil's existence with the permission of God.<sup>47</sup> The term 'theodicy' was used as early as 1710 by German Lutheran philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, taken from the Greek words for 'God' (*theo-*) and 'justice.'<sup>48</sup> A **defense**, on the other hand, needs to only demonstrate the logical compatibility of God and evil.<sup>49</sup> As this essay tackled the logical problem of evil above, the remainder of the essay will be limited to theodicies.

## The Islamic solution to the problem of evil

Despite well-established theodicies addressing the problem of evil with sufficiency, there are atheist philosophers who believe that "final solutions to the problem of evil remain elusive,"<sup>50</sup> a claim that betrays its authors' ignorance. Hence, what follows is the multiperspectival Islamic solution to the problem of evil, an approach that addresses God's attributes, the epistemic role of the Qur'an, the limitations of human perspective, the nature of this life and its trials, the act of trusting God more than oneself, the necessity of free will, the significance of eternal reward, and various theodicies within Islamic theology.

## God's Knowledge and Wisdom

The first major fallacy in the premises of the problem of evil is that the "orthodox deity" has only three attributes: omniscient (All-Knowing), omnipotent (All-Powerful), and omnibenevolent (All-Good). However, the basis for such a premise seems to overlook a crucial attribute of God that orthodox Islam takes into

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<sup>47</sup> Michael J. Murray, "Theodicy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 352.

<sup>48</sup> Murray, 352.

<sup>49</sup> It seems that the term "theodicy" was used for both defenses and theodicies since Leibniz's time (d. 1716) until Alvin Plantinga distinguished between the two arguments in the mid-1970s. See Murray, 352.

<sup>50</sup> These claims are not one-off claims, and they seemingly betray ignorance about the comprehensive Islamic solution to the "problem" of evil. Of all texts, *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* (8) concludes with the statement: "Although scholarly research has advanced in the areas of philosophy, theology, history, religious studies, and science, final solutions to the problem of evil remain elusive."

consideration, and one which completely shifts the balance against the evidential argument, and that is God’s Wisdom (i.e., the All-Wise, or *al-Hakīm*).

*Al-Hakīm* (the All-Wise) is referenced in the Qur’an on more than thirty occasions, and it is oftentimes paired with *al-‘Alīm* (the All-Knowing).<sup>51</sup> If God’s Knowledge is understood to encompass all past, present, and future occurrences, as well as the details of every infinitesimal part of His creation, then God’s Wisdom is significant to address in order to understand how His Knowledge is put to use. For instance, in the story of the creation of Adam, the angels ask God a question reflecting their limited wisdom and knowledge:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ -

[Remember] when your Lord said to the angels, “I am going to place a successive [human] authority on earth.” They asked [Allah], “Will You place in it someone who will spread corruption there and shed blood while we glorify Your praises and proclaim Your holiness?” Allah responded, “I know that which you know not.”<sup>52</sup>

The emphasis on God’s Knowledge and Wisdom cannot be overlooked when discussing “evil” in any of its forms, as one finds when closely studying the Qur’an. In the story of Mūsá (Moses) and al-Khiḍr, for example, the “*prima facie* evil” acts of Khiḍr—sinking a boat, killing a boy—are problematic for Mūsá as both his knowledge and wisdom in that scenario are limited.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Mūsá questions al-Khiḍr’s “evil” actions, and al-Khiḍr explains that the source of his knowledge about these matters was from God (“There they found a servant of Ours, to whom We had granted mercy from Us and had taught him from Us a [certain] knowledge”).<sup>54</sup>

Mūsá’s patience was tested until, after three *prima facie* “evil” acts, al-Khiḍr explained to Mūsá the wisdom behind the actions, and concluded with, “That is the

<sup>51</sup> See: Qur’an 2:32, 12:83, 12:100, 43:84, 51:30, 66:2.

<sup>52</sup> Qur’an 2:30.

<sup>53</sup> Qur’an 18:65–82.

<sup>54</sup> Qur’an 18:65.

interpretation of that about which you could not have patience.”<sup>55</sup> The justification for each of the three acts clarified that, ultimately, these actions were not actually evil but were in fact acts of *ma ‘rūf* (good). For instance, the boat was damaged by al-Khiḍr because the king was in the process of confiscating all boats for himself; however, al-Khiḍr knew that the king would not do so if the boat was unserviceable. “As for the ship, it belonged to some poor people, working at sea. So I intended to damage it, for there was a [tyrant] king ahead of them who seized every [good] ship by force.”<sup>56</sup>

If one reflects on the example of a child desiring unhealthy foods or harmful activities, one finds that the parent’s prohibition of such harms is sometimes considered painful and evil to the child (“I want more!” or “You don’t love me!”). However, the parent is clearly protective of the child due to the parent’s wisdom and knowledge, and as such their acts of benevolence are interpreted as evil due to the limitations in the child’s knowledge and wisdom. If such significant disparities are commonly observed among human beings, then one must wonder just how vast a disparity exists in knowledge and wisdom between the creation and the Creator. This disparity, furthermore, is not limited to adults and their children but even among the adult population as well. A child’s dying of cancer, for instance, could be intertwined with thousands of ripple effects until God’s greater objective manifests several centuries later, possibly even in other regions of the world.

Within contemporary philosophy, a form of skeptical theism similarly argues that “there is a divine-human gap such that we humans should, for many evils in our world, not expect to grasp the divine purposes and reckonings behind God’s allowing these evils.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, we should not expect to grasp even a small *fraction* of God’s acts (including His permitting of suffering to exist).<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, we are not in a position to assess God’s moral reasons or justifications for permitting some evils to occur.

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<sup>55</sup> Qur’an 18:82.

<sup>56</sup> Qur’an 18:79.

<sup>57</sup> Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 86.

<sup>58</sup> Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 86.

## Misunderstanding God's Will

A common misunderstanding is that the experience of suffering or adversity is a sign of God's anger or displeasure. However, Islamic theology distinguishes between God's Love and God's Will. The Will or Permission of God for something to occur is not equated with God's Love of that occurrence. For instance, God hates disbelief and oppression, and yet God also permits people to freely choose to disbelieve and oppress others. God loves for people to be merciful to one another, but God doesn't force them to be merciful. God hates for people to kill, steal, or cheat, but God gives human beings the free will to choose between what He loves and hates. Thus, when suffering occurs anywhere in the world, it is with God's permission—for a greater wisdom (*ḥikmah*)—but it is not equated with God's Love.

## The epistemic role of the Qur'an

An epistemological point must be addressed here, and it is that God is to be understood in light of His Speech, the Qur'an, rather than our inadequate interpretations of the occurrences (perceived as 'good' or 'evil') around us. In the Qur'an, Allah is described as *aḥkam al-ḥākimīn* ("the Wisest of the wise"),<sup>59</sup> *arḥam al-rāḥimīn* ("the Most Merciful of those who have mercy"),<sup>60</sup> and the One "who has knowledge of everything."<sup>61</sup> With these attributes in mind, one also reads that God "does not wrong anyone, even by an atom's weight,"<sup>62</sup> that God "will never wrong anyone,"<sup>63</sup> and that God forbade oppression (*ẓulm*) even on Himself ("I have made oppression unlawful for Me and unlawful for you, so do not commit oppression against one another.")<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Qur'an 95:8.

<sup>60</sup> Qur'an 7:151, 12:64, 12:92, 21:83.

<sup>61</sup> Qur'an 2:29, 2:231, 2:282, 4:176, 5:97, 6:101, 8:75.

<sup>62</sup> Qur'an 4:40.

<sup>63</sup> Qur'an 18:49.

<sup>64</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2577.

Thus, to classify something as evil in its entirety—partial or absolute—requires knowledge of the reality of situations, wisdom in the use of that knowledge in the proper manner, and execution of mercy, justice, knowledge, and wisdom simultaneously, a feat that human beings are not capable of accomplishing without access to God’s Knowledge and Wisdom. The reality of a situation, like the aforementioned example with Mūsá and al-Khiḍr, is oftentimes observed in everyday life when one realizes that assumed good, in hindsight, was evil, and assumed evil is sometimes good. “... Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows while you know not.”<sup>65</sup> As God is unlike His creation (“Nothing resembles Him”),<sup>66</sup> His method of executing Divine Wisdom and Knowledge, alongside His Love for creation (“and My Mercy has encompassed everything”),<sup>67</sup> is certainly not similar to human wisdom and benevolence. Most importantly, utilizing the Qur’an as a framework leads to the conclusion that God’s Wisdom cannot be fully accessed, nor His Knowledge, but that He provides sufficient guidance for the human being (through *al-Qur’ān al-Hakīm*)<sup>68</sup> to understand God’s attributes, life’s purpose, and several possible wisdoms for the existence of good and evil.

Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the unchanged, preserved, inimitable Speech of God, a source of guidance for all of humanity, and a rationally justified epistemological source. Furthermore, while those who reject Islam may not see Islam’s solution to the problem of evil as an objective one, opponents cannot claim that it is not a logically consistent, rationally justified solution to this problem. In fact, the rationally justified Islamic paradigm demonstrates that the problem of evil is not truly a problem. Ultimately, the miraculous nature of the Qur’an points to a powerful and clear solution for all of humanity, and thus seekers of Truth are encouraged to study the *i’jāz* (miraculous nature) of the Qur’an for multifaceted benefits.

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<sup>65</sup> Qur’an 2:216.

<sup>66</sup> Qur’an 42:11.

<sup>67</sup> Qur’an 7:157.

<sup>68</sup> The Qur’an is described as *al-Hakīm* (the Wise); see Qur’an 36:2.

## The limitations of human perspective

The theological viewpoint of many Muslim scholars on evil is that no *absolute* evil exists, but rather partial or subjective evil occurs with God's Knowledge, Wisdom, Mercy, and Permission for a vast range of morally justifiable possibilities. Absolute evil is evil that is not outweighed by good, whether in this life or in the afterlife. On this note, Ibn Taymīyah writes:

[God] does not create pure (or 'absolute') evil. Rather, in everything that God creates is a wise purpose by virtue of which it is good. However, there may be some evil in it for some people, and this is partial (or) relative evil. As for total evil or absolute evil, God is free of that.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, Ibn Taymīyah maintained that there are countless possible wisdoms for Allah to have permitted some relative suffering to occur in this world.<sup>70</sup> If an objective theist were to accept that Divine Wisdom sufficiently addresses suffering's existence in this world, what then is the response to the oft-raised question, "*Couldn't God have created a world in which no suffering exists altogether?*"

It is certainly possible for God to create a world in which suffering does not exist, such as *jannah* (paradise) with its many descriptions in the Qur'an and authentic hadith (prophetic narrations). It is also certainly possible for God to create infallible creatures without free will such as angels ("They never disobey God's commands to them, but do as they are ordered").<sup>71</sup> However, this life was created with God's Wisdom for a greater purpose, preceding the eternal life of paradise where no suffering exists. Ibn Taymīyah, like Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) before him, opined that when Allah creates something (e.g., free will), He must necessarily (and inevitably) create its necessary concomitant.<sup>72</sup> God would not join together

<sup>69</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū' fatāwá*, 14:266.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, 14:266.

<sup>71</sup> Qur'an 66:6.

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū' fatāwá*, 8:512.

two logical contradictions, such as creating a complete believer who is also equally a complete disbeliever, or someone who both exists and does not exist simultaneously.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, considering Allah's perfect attributes of Wisdom, Knowledge, Mercy, and Power, it was necessary for a 'best world' to exist, with the testing of human free will, in which suffering also exists, in order for God's greater purpose to be achieved.<sup>74</sup>

While there should certainly be a level of *epistemic humility*<sup>75</sup> due to our inability to access God's vast Knowledge and Wisdom, the revelation of God (i.e., the Qur'an) does indeed elucidate many facets of suffering, evil, and good, so that the human being is able to effectively cope with hardship and progress towards God, a greater good, and a greater objective.

## The nature of this life and its trials

Imagine for a moment the scenario of a human being who expects this life to consist of no illnesses, no pain, no disasters, no oppression, no calamities, no death, and no injustice in any form. How then does such an individual cope with suffering when it strikes if the expectation is that this life should exclude all forms of suffering? A young man in the Midwest, for instance, abandoned the worship of God after his mother was diagnosed with cancer and shortly thereafter passed away. Despite the young man's frequent exposure to illnesses in the hospital where he worked, he became angry at God for allowing his mother to fall ill and pass away. Several years into his atheism, as his anger began to subside, the question that brought him back to God was: "What is your suggested alternative (to illnesses and death)?" Is the alternative suggestion that this life includes no illnesses, or is it that illnesses should only be minor? Are certain types of illnesses permitted while

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<sup>73</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, 8:512.

<sup>74</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, 8:512.

<sup>75</sup> *Epistemic humility* is the stance adopted by a human being with finite knowledge towards the vast range of "goods and constraints that would inform divine decision making." See Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009).

others excluded? Who decides how much suffering and illness could reasonably exist?

What about death? Is death considered evil, or is it an expected reality in this world? Are certain types of death justifiable reasons to discontinue worshipping God or are all deaths equally ‘evil’? Psychologically, thus, while the suffering itself is severe and is not belittled in any manner by posing these rhetorical questions, the alternative suggestions presented by atheists are suggestions that betray a false expectation of this life. If one seeks a life where no suffering exists, with a perfect house, spouse, wealth, and health, among other expectations, then such a person will find it extremely difficult to accept the reality of this life as it is and, in fact, what they seek is paradise.

The nature of this life, as God revealed to us, is one with purpose, and its purpose includes tests and trials of ease and difficulty. “Every soul will taste death. And We test you [O humanity] with good and evil as a trial, then to Us you will [all] be returned.”<sup>76</sup> Essentially, the one who becomes angry with God about the nature of this life is asking instead to have control over what this life does or does not entail of ease and difficulty. Furthermore, the trials of this life are not aimless or without meaning, so that the human being is existentially empty or lost; instead, Allah elaborates that this life is a trial “to test you to see who is best in deeds”<sup>77</sup> so that meaningful lives are lived with productivity and optimism in anticipation of the eternal afterlife.

Furthermore, if one were to leave the matter up to human beings as to how much or how little suffering is considered “reasonable” without questioning God’s Wisdom, no consensus would ever be reached and the range of subjective perspectives would expose a significant weakness in the argument from evil. For instance, Andrea Weisberger argued that “[i]t would *seem* that God could have created a world in which the evils were not as terrible as they are now,”<sup>78</sup> exposing the

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<sup>76</sup> Qur’an 21:35.

<sup>77</sup> Qur’an 67:2.

<sup>78</sup> Martin, *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 172.

evidential problem of evil for what it truly is: a matter of relative preference not dependent on objective measurements of probability, and one that presupposes a different purpose for this world (i.e., one without any objective suffering). If God created a world with slightly less suffering, or slightly more suffering, who is to say that Weisberger (or anyone else, for that matter) would be satisfied with that new quantity of “reasonable” suffering before questioning God’s Wisdom? In fact, the very subjectivity of the claim demonstrates how problematic the evidential argument is; the fact that a significant percentage of the world population is able to reconcile God’s existence with suffering’s existence and accept orthodox theism points to the extreme range of subjectivity on the topic.

In her article “The Argument from Evil,” Weisberger emphasizes throughout the chapter how it *seems* that there’s slightly too much evil and that it *seems* that God could have created the same exact world with “at least a lesser amount” than what is currently observed.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the author frequently relies on personal preferences of what “seems” to be [objectively] right or wrong; watching a child “die of ... disease *seems* unjustified,”<sup>80</sup> a supernatural sixth sense alarm would “*seem* more efficient” than the current level of suffering,<sup>81</sup> and “it *seems* that a moderate probability of [natural] disaster would suffice” compared to the current quantity.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, then, what “seems” to be the case is that personal preferences and subjectivity betray a false assumption about the nature of this life, the quantity of suffering it should contain, and the Divine Knowledge and Wisdom required to assess a “reasonable” quantity of suffering. Weisberger thereafter suggests that the evidence for God’s existence alongside suffering is based on pure faith, and that “this faith has no rational basis” in light of the horrendous evils observed in the world. Put another way, Weisberger’s entire argument from evil relies on personal preferences of quantities, not objective realities, and a conclusion is then established upon these weak premises. Instead, Weisberger should have more transparently argued that the quantity of suffering will always be subjective to human beings, that we have no access to God’s Knowledge and Wisdom to

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<sup>79</sup> Martin, 173.

<sup>80</sup> Martin, 172. Emphasis added.

<sup>81</sup> Martin, 173. Emphasis added.

<sup>82</sup> Martin, 175. Emphasis added.

understand the millions of intertwined conditions and elements of the universe, and that belief in God is epistemologically rational and justified from numerous facets—but that she personally does not fully understand God’s Wisdom.

Additionally, the more one studies God’s Speech, the more wisdom and tranquility they find embedded in every part of it and, as a result, the human being is empowered to properly fulfill the objective of life while better understanding why suffering occurs. Oftentimes, the more a human being is grounded in Allah’s Speech, the greater their insight into the concept of ‘evil’ as a whole, beyond just the general belief that God’s Wisdom permeates His creation and command. On this note, Ibn Taymīyah writes that “every time the servant (of Allah) increases in knowledge and belief, some of God’s wisdom and mercy will appear to him that will mesmerize his intellect.”<sup>83</sup> However, this state is attained only when properly acknowledging God being All-Wise, All-Merciful, All-Knowing, and All-Powerful.

## Trusting God more than oneself

Misunderstanding God’s decision-making, His Wisdom, or His Attributes is not a sound reason for rejecting His existence. An essential part of this discussion is that, for many people experiencing hardship, their understanding is imposed on God’s and they trust their interpretation of God’s Attributes more than God’s description of Himself. For example, a man experiences a severe car accident and thereafter starts to question God’s existence, but little did the man know that had he driven further down the road, he would have been killed in a fatal collision. As such knowledge is inaccessible to us, and as there are millions of simultaneous intertwined conditions and factors at play in the universe, it becomes clear that the human being’s perspective and knowledge are extremely limited. To trust God’s Wisdom over one’s personal wisdom, thus, is more reasonable and intuitive. “God will not be questioned about His actions, but they [the creation] are questioned.”<sup>84</sup> The reason God is not questioned is that His Wisdom, Mercy, and Justice are

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<sup>83</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū‘ fatāwā*, 8:97.

<sup>84</sup> Qur’an 21:23.

perfect and complete, whereas the creation is limited in all facets. Imagine, then, if the same man in the car accident was given a glimpse into the future—the fatal collision—and he was humbled and grateful for being saved. Furthermore, the man’s initial accident was an opportunity for his faith to be tested, for his ranks to increase, for his good assumptions of God to persist, and for his sins to be purified. Thus, after a hypothetical glimpse into the future, would it be reasonable for the man to again question God in future adversity, or would his faith have increased enough for him to better interpret future hardships using the framework of God’s Speech? Ibn Taymīyah writes:

Some servants of Allah may know some of [Allah’s] wise purpose, and what is hidden of it might be hidden from them. People are preferred over others in [their] knowledge of God’s wise purpose, His mercy, and His justice. Each time the servant increases in knowledge of the realities of things, he increases in knowledge of God’s wise purpose, His justice, His mercy, and His power.<sup>85</sup>

If the angels themselves had no knowledge or wisdom as to why humans were created, and were instead content with “general knowledge” and faith, then it is reasonable for the believer as well to accept that the specific wisdoms might never be fully known to us.<sup>86</sup>

## **The necessity of free will**

The logical byproduct of free will is that many individuals will abuse their free will and violate the rights of other human beings, animals, and the environment. The fact that humans were created with free will, with a greater objective and divine purpose of being tested, necessitates that some individuals will use their free will to spread corruption throughout the world. This logical byproduct is perhaps why the angels asked, “Will You place in it someone who will spread corruption there and shed blood while we glorify Your praises and proclaim Your holiness?”<sup>87</sup> Allah’s

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<sup>85</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū‘ fatāwá*, 8:513.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn Taymīyah, 8:513–14.

<sup>87</sup> Qur’an 2:30.

response, “I know that which you know not,”<sup>88</sup> sufficed the angels as they understood that Allah’s Wisdom and Knowledge were beyond their capacity.

On the subject of free will, Weisberger argues that perhaps a different rendering of free will “*seems* reasonable,” one in which a human being is capable of choosing “freely” (i.e., intending) without the ability to “actualize that choice.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, Weisberger is suggesting a world of “free will” in which the action itself cannot be rendered if it is evil, thus undermining the entirety of the objective of being tested in this life and held accountable for good and evil in the afterlife. In that realm, thus, the concept of “free will” is limited to intentions and excludes all actions. Thereafter, the question of God’s intervention is raised. If an atheist were to request that God interfere and intervene every time [moral] evil is about to occur at the hands of human beings, then the test itself becomes meaningless as free will becomes bound. If free will excludes the ability to commit harm, then human beings would not be able to perform good by choice, which is a primary objective of human existence. Weisberger suggests that human beings should have a superpower (from God) to render a visible harm “ineffective,”<sup>90</sup> but it is limited to the witness of such evil using their free will (e.g., witnessing a murderer).<sup>91</sup> She further suggests that humans can still commit evil in private “on unsuspecting victims,” if they choose to do so.<sup>92</sup> If such a world existed, then what stops humans from further questioning God’s Wisdom in permitting this [new] quantity of suffering in the world? How much is too much or too little before one recognizes the human limitation in such discourse? Unfortunately, once again, these suggestions expose the extreme subjectivity of the human perspective, the extreme limitations of human knowledge and wisdom, and the inability to determine what is considered objectively reasonable quantities of suffering in this world. Furthermore, the afterlife in orthodox Islamic theology is one of true justice, punishment, and reward, on a scale beyond human comprehension, and the human free will exemplified in this world is held to account in the next life.

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<sup>88</sup> Qur’an 2:30.

<sup>89</sup> Martin, *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 178.

<sup>90</sup> Martin, 179.

<sup>91</sup> Martin, 179.

<sup>92</sup> Martin, 179.

## The significance of eternal reward

Among the many reflections on the Islamic solution to the problem of evil is that this life is not only a test, but that the afterlife provides an avenue for eternal reward. A century of struggling, thus, would be insignificant compared to an eternity in Paradise—a place free of all forms of suffering and impurities.<sup>93</sup> In the authentic prophetic report addressing this, it is stated:

...Then the most miserable people in the world from the people of Paradise will come on the Day of Resurrection to be dipped into Paradise, then it will be said: O son of Adam, did you see any hardship? Did you experience any distress? He will say: No, by Allah, my Lord! I did not once see any hardship, I did not once experience any distress.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, one facet of the Islamic theodicy is that one second in Paradise eliminates an entire lifetime's worth of hardship and suffering, and the first moment in Paradise is so overwhelmingly blissful it *erases* the potent memories and pain of prior adversity. It is for this reason that scholars like Ibn Taymīyah opined that suffering is never absolute and suffering certainly never outweighs the good that is rewarded to the one who suffers. In light of eternal reward in exchange for one human lifetime of fluctuating struggles, it becomes clear that countless possibilities exist for every occurrence of hardship. For instance, a man going through hardships may have become evil or caused corruption in the world were it not for his own adversity and, as a result, many others are protected from harm and the man as well ends up in Paradise. A woman at the receiving end of oppression may experience injustice, even in the legal systems, but recognizes that ultimately, after all worldly efforts are sought for justice, there will still be an eternal life of reward and compensation. What is difficult to grasp in the very moment of pain and calamity is knowledge of the Unseen, and recognizing and accepting that everything decreed for the believer is ultimately good for him or her.

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<sup>93</sup> Qur'an 15:48.

<sup>94</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2807.

A woman who wanted to embrace Islam asked, only minutes before converting, if hellfire was an essential theological belief in Islam. She was informed that hellfire was a foundational belief and she was asked about the reason behind her inquiry. The woman responded that she had been raped and abused multiple times and could not imagine an afterlife that did not consist of punishment for people who committed horrendous evil, particularly individuals who were remorseless and evaded worldly consequences. For this woman in particular, the notion of justice in the afterlife sufficed alongside God's Wisdom, and God's creation of free will, as a pastoral theological belief to deal with horrendous evil. Furthermore, the emphasis in Islam on utilizing free will to prevent injustice (e.g., rape, homicide, racism, environmental violence), coupled with jurisprudential and theological beliefs surrounding notions of good and evil, further convinced her of the truth of Islam. Nevertheless, belief in an afterlife does not justify ongoing abuse in this life, nor does the belief in eternal reward encourage believers in this world to accept ongoing abuse when they are able to relieve themselves and others of it. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is reported to have said, "Do not cause harm or reciprocate harm."<sup>95</sup> Additionally, Allah said: "O my servants, I have forbidden injustice for Myself and have forbidden it among you, so do not oppress one another."<sup>96</sup>

As for natural disasters of the most severe form, such as tsunamis and cyclones claiming thousands of lives, the Islamic theodicy is the most robust as many innocent individuals are generally considered martyrs in such scenarios (necessitating paradise); many others were cut off from future or present suffering and perhaps some of the casualties were prevented from spreading present and future harm around the world. Simultaneously, those unaffected by natural disasters are tested for their voluntary (free will) decision to assist those in need, which benefits and purifies the hearts of all parties involved and raises the ranks of those giving assistance.

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<sup>95</sup> *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 2340.

<sup>96</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2577.

As for the suffering of innocent children, there are once again countless possible wisdoms for why a child suffers or dies in a given scenario. One child's death may be his or her parent's ticket to Paradise, while another child's death might be the prevention of another genocide. Nevertheless, the reward for the patient parents is one of eternal bliss:

It will be said to children on the Day of Resurrection: Enter Paradise. They will say: Our Lord, [we can't] unless our fathers and mothers enter. Allah Almighty will say: Why do I see them hesitant to enter Paradise? They will say: O Lord, our fathers and mothers. Allah will say: Enter Paradise, all of you and your parents.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, the intercession of the child for his/her parents is one possibility of many for why the child's death involved a greater wisdom, one which was in actuality not 'evil.'

A man by the name of Khālid al-'Absī said, "A son of mine died and I felt intense grief over his loss. I said: Abū Hurayrah, have you heard anything from the Prophet ﷺ to cheer us regarding our dead? He replied: I heard the Prophet ﷺ say, 'Your children are roaming freely in the Garden.'<sup>98</sup>

While the test itself is severe and difficult, the aforementioned question is posed once again: *What is the suggested alternative?* If it is a life of no death, no suffering, and no pain, then it is Paradise that one seeks. Interestingly, an ontological argument for the existence of Paradise as described in Islam, a place of pure perfection and no suffering whatsoever, is the fact that all human beings innately desire a life of no suffering or discomfort. Perhaps, then, it is a constant reminder for the human being to explore the avenues to an eternally blissful home.

## Various theodicies in Islamic theology

<sup>97</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 16523, *jayyid* (good) according to al-Arna'ūt.

<sup>98</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Adab al-mufrad*, bk. 8, no. 145.

The existence of evil and suffering, partial or relative, may occur for many other possible wisdoms that individually require extensive elucidation:

1. Suffering might occur for the sake of testing a human being's free will.<sup>99</sup>
2. Suffering might occur for the sake of guiding one who became misguided.<sup>100</sup>
3. Suffering might occur as a test for those who can assist the one who is suffering.<sup>101</sup>
4. Suffering might occur to remind human beings to return back to God.<sup>102</sup>
5. Suffering might occur to ward off a greater harm, such as the death of an individual who might later cause more harm or experience greater suffering.<sup>103</sup>
6. Suffering might occur as a blessing in disguise, one which serves as a test at the moment the calamity strikes.<sup>104</sup>
7. Suffering might occur in order for a believer's ranks to be increased in Paradise.<sup>105</sup>
8. Suffering might occur in order to ease the pathway to Paradise for a believer or his/her loved ones.<sup>106</sup>
9. Suffering might occur to purify the believer of sins so that they will meet God without sins and thus without any punishment in the next life.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> "[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed—and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving." Qur'an 67:2.

<sup>100</sup> "Whatever blessings you have are from Allah. Then whenever hardship touches you, to Him [alone] you cry [for help]." Qur'an 16:53.

<sup>101</sup> "Whoever relieves the hardship of a believer in this world, Allah will relieve his hardship on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever helps ease one in difficulty, Allah will make it easy for him in this world and in the Hereafter. Whoever conceals the faults of a Muslim, Allah will conceal his faults in this world and in the Hereafter. Allah helps the servant as long as he helps his brother." See *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2699.

<sup>102</sup> "Corruption has spread on land and sea as a result of what people's hands have done, so that Allah may cause them to taste [the consequences of] some of their deeds and perhaps they might return [to the Right Path]." Qur'an 30:41.

<sup>103</sup> The example given before was that of the boy killed by al-Khidr. See Qur'an 18:65–82.

<sup>104</sup> "You may hate something but it is good for you." Qur'an 2:216.

<sup>105</sup> "Nothing befalls a believer, a [prick of a] thorn or more than that, but Allah will raise him one degree in status thereby, or erase a bad deed." *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5641.

<sup>106</sup> "It will be said to children on the Day of Resurrection: Enter Paradise. They will say: Our Lord, [not] unless our fathers and mothers enter. Allah Almighty will say: Why do I see them hesitant to enter Paradise? They will say: O Lord, our fathers and mothers. Allah will say: Enter Paradise, all of you and your parents." *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 16523.

<sup>107</sup> "O Messenger of Allah, who among the people are most sorely tested? He said: "The Prophets, then the next best and the next best. A man will be tested according to his level of religious commitment. If his religious commitment is solid, his test will be more severe, but if there is any weakness in his religious commitment, he will be tested

10. Suffering might occur in order to increase the human being in gratitude for all that they have taken for granted (e.g., good health).<sup>108</sup>
11. Suffering might occur to develop humility and submission in the heart of the one who has become arrogant and prideful.
12. Suffering might occur as a pathway to a greater good, such as bravery.
13. Suffering might occur as a reminder about the insignificance of this life.
14. Suffering might occur because of the evil of human beings abusing their free will.
15. Suffering might occur in order to reveal peoples' true colors (to one another).<sup>109</sup>
16. Suffering might occur in order to spiritually and emotionally strengthen the believer, as each difficulty today strengthens the human being for tomorrow.
17. Suffering might occur in order for people to learn lessons from the mistakes of prior nations and people.<sup>110</sup>
18. Suffering might occur as an opportunity for the believer to earn the pleasure of Allah.<sup>111</sup>

While there are many other possible theodicies, the primary solution from the Islamic paradigm revolves around the boundlessness of God's Wisdom and Knowledge compared to our *extremely* limited knowledge, as well as God's Speech (i.e., the Qur'an) as a source of elucidation about God's Wisdom, Knowledge, Mercy, and Permission. Furthermore, the premise in the Islamic approach is one dependent on the epistemological certainty of belief in the Qur'an, a topic which is not the objective of this essay, but one that elaborates on the numerous potential questions pertaining to suffering.

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according to his level of religious commitment. And calamity will continue to befall a person until he walks on the earth with no sin on him." *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2398.

<sup>108</sup> "And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favor]; but if you deny, indeed, My punishment is severe.' " Qur'an 14:7.

<sup>109</sup> "Do the people think that they will be left to say, 'We believe' and they will not be tried? But We have certainly tried those before them, and Allah will surely make evident those who are truthful, and He will surely make evident the liars." Qur'an 29:2-3.

<sup>110</sup> An example of this type of lesson is Pharaoh. "So today We will save you in body that you may be to those who succeed you a sign. And indeed, many among the people, of Our signs, are heedless." Qur'an 10:92.

<sup>111</sup> "Great reward comes with great trials. When Allah loves a people, He tests them, and whoever accepts it attains His pleasure, whereas whoever shows discontent with it incurs His wrath." *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2396.

## Re-examining the evidential problem of evil

Returning to the evidential problem of evil, as proposed by Rowe and others, the problem is established on the premise of perceived probabilities:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. [Therefore] There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>112</sup>

The weakness in the first premise is that an assumption is made (“without thereby losing some greater good”) about the nature of God, the nature of the universe, the knowledge of all possibilities, the wisdom of God’s greater objective (“I know that which you know not”), and the millions of simultaneously-intertwined conditions (*irtibāt*) linked with every occurrence of suffering in the world.

As for the second premise, another assumption is made (“would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering”) without access to God’s greater objective, complete knowledge and wisdom, and the logically consistent concomitants created by God.

Thus, if billions or trillions of factors are intertwined in every experience of all living beings in this universe, from the beginning to the end of time, and humans have a sub-infinitesimal fraction of perspective into their lives and experiences, then the evidential argument’s foundation of probabilities becomes incalculably insignificant. Hence, one cannot claim that the existence of suffering—as experienced, perceived, and interpreted by all human beings with limited knowledge and wisdom—offers any support for the claim that God “probably”

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<sup>112</sup> Rowe, “The Problem of Evil,” 336.

doesn't exist. Rather, what is *not* "probable" but certain is that God's Knowledge and Wisdom are incomprehensibly beyond our imagination, the billions or trillions of intertwined factors with each occurrence of suffering and ease are inaccessible to us, and we are certain that it is not only logically possible but clearly reasonable that God's Wisdom and Knowledge operate at a level beyond our understanding. Our understanding of God, therefore, must be based on what God revealed to us—through the final, rationally-justified message of God, and one that serves as a means to cope with hardship and suffering in life. Otherwise, the evidential argument's proponents are essentially suggesting that human beings, with their extremely limited access to knowledge and wisdom, should rely on their own interpretation and perspective of probabilities rather than rely upon God's Wisdom and Knowledge.

## Conclusion

The problem of evil is one that has garnered much attention in recent decades and one that is frequently used as a justification for atheism; however, the Islamic theological approach to the question of suffering demonstrates that a solution has already existed for many centuries and that the logical and evidential versions of the problem are easy to overcome. The Islamic solution to the question of suffering is summarized in several points:

- 1) God's Wisdom and Knowledge are incomprehensibly beyond our imagination; thus, we are not in a position to assess probabilities (such as that of the evidential argument) based on our extremely limited knowledge and wisdom.
- 2) God elucidates in the Qur'an many of the justifiable wisdoms of suffering (e.g., eternal reward, strength, guidance, free will) that help human beings cope with adversity in a psychologically and spiritually optimistic manner, as well as to understand God's Wisdom, Knowledge, and Mercy.

- 3) The one who truly seeks a life of no suffering, as difficult as suffering is, should work for paradise rather than allowing their suffering to be a reason to become distant from it.

When philosophers claim that solutions to the problem of evil remain elusive, Muslim theologians and philosophers emphasize that the multiperspectival Islamic solution has been present and beneficial for more than a millennium but it requires continued dissemination across diverse platforms and arenas.

## Postscript

The responses to the problem of evil are oftentimes compartmentalized into intellectual and emotional responses when in reality one must consider all of the responses simultaneously. Thus, the following list may be utilized for visual and organizational ease in understanding the multifaceted Islamic solution:

### The multiperspectival Islamic solution:

1. God is not only All-Knowing, but God is also All-Wise
  - a. God's Wisdom utilizes His Knowledge for the greatest possible objectives
  - b. God's Knowledge and Wisdom are incomprehensibly beyond our imagination
  - c. Our knowledge and wisdom are infinitesimally limited
  - d. Billions or trillions of potential factors and conditions are intertwined in the universe with each and every occurrence—factors we have no knowledge of
  - e. Therefore, we are not in a position to fully understand or access God's Wisdom
2. The Qur'an fulfills a significant epistemic role in understanding God beyond our personal interpretations of worldly occurrences and experiences

- a. God's Wisdom and Mercy necessitated a revelation (the Qur'an) to elucidate His attributes (the All-Merciful, the Just, the All-Wise), the purpose and trials of this temporary life (of ease and difficulty), and to clarify some of the possible wisdoms behind suffering in this world before an eternal life of compensation
3. God's Will and Love must be distinguished
  - a. God permits ("wills") occurrences in this world that He does not love (e.g., disbelief)
  - b. What God loves does not always manifest in this life (e.g., justice)
  - c. What God hates sometimes manifests (e.g., genocide)
  - d. Both types of occurrences manifest due to God's Wisdom and Knowledge
  - e. Therefore, the experience of suffering cannot be equated with God loving or hating someone or something
4. The purpose of this life
  - a. The purpose of this life is a temporary journey of trials and opportunities
  - b. The purpose of this life necessitates free will, for God's greater objective
  - c. Therefore, the nature of this life necessitates that hardship and suffering will exist in various forms without God's constant intervention, for God's greater Wisdom to manifest
5. The reward of the afterlife is eternal
  - a. The reward of eternal paradise, a place where no suffering exists, is one that all human beings innately desire
  - b. One moment in paradise erases an entire lifetime's worth of hardship
  - c. The endurance and perseverance required to enter paradise, with God's mercy, makes the experience of living through this world of trials clearer in hindsight
  - d. Striving for eternal bliss is the human being's only reasonable option in this world

6. A number of other Islamic theodicies exist which may individually be utilized for personal, pastoral, or intellectual approaches to the question of suffering
7. The existence of objective evil and objective good necessitates the existence of God