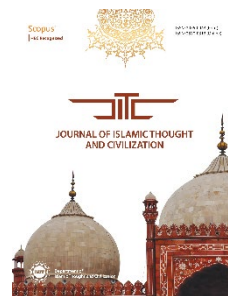
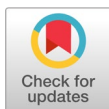


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Illuminating the Shadows: A Qur'ānic Theodicy on the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

The problem of evil has been recognized as one of the most substantial challenges to the rational plausibility of theism, necessitating a range of theodicies across various religions. Many philosophers, in their attempts to address this problem, have compromised specific divine attributes, which has led to concerns regarding theological coherence. The Qur'ān offers a unique theodicy framework that has drawn considerable interest from theologians, especially those from Ash'arite, Mu'tazilite, and mystical traditions. Applying a mixed-methodology approach that combines textual and thematic analysis of Qur'ānic discourse with a critical review of classical theodicies, this study evaluates the Qur'ānic theodicy on moral and natural evil, examining how it maintains the coherence of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence in the presence of evil. The results show that the Qur'ān promotes a multifaceted theodicy that preserves the integrity of divine attributes while avoiding conceptual compromises, recognizing God's foreknowledge, middle knowledge, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, and sees no contradiction between God and the presence of evil. The Qur'ān also addresses natural evil, and integrates it into its teleological framework, justifying each event in the light of the broader divine scheme. Therefore, it is argued that the Qur'ānic theodicy is a methodical and logical framework that makes a distinctive contribution to the ongoing discussion of the problem of evil, in addition to setting it apart from other theodicies.

Keywords: divine attributes, evil, Ghazālī, Ibtīlā, Qur'ān, theodicy

Introduction

The problem of evil emerged as an intellectual challenge in Islamic academic circles during the foundational period of Islamic theology. The debates between rationalist *Mutazilites* and traditionalist *Asharites* over controversial topics such as divine justice (*'adl*) and human accountability were the theological underpinnings of the problem, which later expanded to more complex issues of predestination (*qadr*), free will (*Ikhtiyār*), and the moral order of creation.

One can refer to a famous encounter that reflects this theological tension involving a debate between Abu al-Hasan Ashari (873 A.D) and Abu Ali al-Jubbai, (849 A.D) where the former questioned the latter as to whether God had done an act of optimum in the fate of three people: a believer, who was rewarded, an unbeliever, who was punished, and a child, who was neither rewarded nor punished. If the child who had died should say, "O Lord, if you had let me live, it would have been better (*aslah*), for then I would have entered paradise?" *Jubbai* (849 AD) replied: God would say to the child, "I knew that if you had lived, you would have become a sinner and then entered hell." But then, countered *Ashari* (873 A.D), the unbeliever in hell would exclaim, "O Lord! Why did you not kill me as a child, too, so that I would not sin and then enter hell?" At this, according to the accounts, *Jubbai* (849 A.D) was left speechless.¹

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¹Adud al-Dīn Al-Ījī, *Al-Mawāqif fī 'Ilm al-Kalām* [Opinions in Theology], ed. M. Badawi (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999), 8:197.

This encounter, which took place in the late 9th century, highlights an initial philosophical engagement with the issue of evil within Islamic theological circles, even though the problem has not received as much attention among Islamic thinkers as it has among their Western counterparts.² This is because evaluating the rationality of beliefs is a fundamental philosophical principle in the Western tradition. This framework posits that both spiritual and natural realities should be comprehensible to human reason.³

The main problem in addressing the issue of evil lies in its complex and multidimensional nature, which presents in many forms, and needs different explanations in different situations. On the other hand, the various theistic beliefs about God's attributes lead to mixed responses to the problem from different schools. These diverse perspectives prevent theologians from developing a unified theistic response.

1.1. What is the Problem of Evil?

The term 'evil' refers to moral depravity that leads to suffering and harm, resulting in both physical and mental harm to humans and animals. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, evil is "morally reprehensible, sinful, or wicked, and denotes actions or intentions characterized by an intent to harm or cause suffering."⁴

Many scholars present the problem of evil in various forms, but the most popular of these are the logical and evidential problems of evil. The logical problem of evil, in its simplest and straightforward form, is described as follows: God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, yet evil exists.⁵ David Hume (1779) pushes forward a dilemma by saying: "Is he (God) willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"⁶ The logical problem of evil leads to deductive atheology, and the proponents of this view usually do not see a compatibility between evil and a God who has absolute theistic attributes.

Another group of philosophers has adopted the inductive method to formulate a more serious version of the problem where certain gratuitous evils were specified and utilized as evidence to make theism unlikely.⁷ Since these types of arguments lead to probable conclusions, some philosophers have titled them probabilistic,⁸ abductive, or epistemic,⁹ arguments for the problem of evil. Among the various versions of the evidential problem of evil, the one that has garnered the most attention in

²Eric Lionel Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over Ghazālī's Best of All Possible Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 18.

³Zia Ul Haq, "Modern Western Thought and Islamic Reformism: Intellectual Challenges, Prior Discourse, and Future Prospects," *Religions* (2023) 14, no. 3: 308. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030308>.

⁴*Oxford English Dictionary*, "Evil," in *Oxford English Dictionary* [Online edition] (Retrieved January 17, 2025, from <https://www.oed.com>).

⁵Henry John McCloskey, "God and Evil," *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-) 10, no. 39 (1960): 97–114. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2960059>.

⁶David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Coleman D. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979 [First published 1779]), 186–187. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808449>.

⁷William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 29–67.

⁸Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 45.

⁹Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 4.2:328–345. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474465908-028>.

recent years is William Rowe's, which was first formally presented in 1978. Rowe (1931) presents two instances of gratuitous suffering, both of which could be prevented by an omnibenevolent God without losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. Rowe argues: "Suppose in some distant forest, lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire, a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering."¹⁰

Although Rowe's argument of evil has faced some empirical challenges, it remains one of the serious charges made against theism. Each premise of the argument is well defended and made plausible on logical grounds. For example, one can ensure the plausibility of the factual and theological premises of the argument in Rowe's response to the traditional theists who tie the instances of suffering with hypothetical goodness. Rowe has already ruled out any possible critique of this nature and maintained: "A good that we know of, however, cannot justify God in permitting E1 or E2 unless that good is actualized at some time."¹¹

Contemporary scholars widely acknowledge Rowe's evidential argument. James Sennett (1993), for example, views Rowe's argument as "the clearest, most easily understood, and most intuitively appealing of those available."¹² In the same context, Terry Christlieb (1992) considers it the strongest sort of evidential argument, the type that has the best chance of success. He emphasizes this by stating: "if these cases of evil [E1 and E2] are not evidence against theism, then none are."¹³

2. Literature Review

Perhaps the aesthetic theodicy developed by Ghazālī (1058) in the 11th century and propagated by Leibniz (1646) in the 18th century is one of the famous theodicies that emphasizes the beauty and harmony of the universe, including the interplay of good and evil.¹⁴ Suyūfī (1445), a prominent commentator on Ghazālī (1058), articulates this principle and says: "*Laysa fī al-ḥimkān abda' mimma kān*," which translates to, "This world represents the best of all possible worlds."¹⁵ This aesthetic theodicy is particularly important for its broader influence on both Eastern and Western scholarly traditions. In this context, Leibniz (1646) argues: "God is an absolutely perfect being; and since he exists, it follows that he cannot act otherwise than with supreme wisdom and goodness."¹⁶

Critics argue that the aesthetic theodicy does not adequately explain instances of seemingly gratuitous evil. It is challenging to reconcile gratuitous instances of suffering with the notion of a harmonious and purposeful design. Voltaire (1694) targets explicitly aesthetic theodicy and mocks

¹⁰William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979): 335–341.

¹¹William L. Rowe "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16, no. 2 (1988): 119–132.

¹²James F. Sennett, "The Inscrutable Evil Defense Against the Inductive Argument from Evil," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 10, no. 2 (1993): 220–45. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil199310220>.

¹³Terry Christlieb, "Which Theisms Face an Evidential Problem of Evil?" *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 9, no. 3 (1992): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil1992912>.

¹⁴Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 66–67.

¹⁵Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Tashyeed al-Arkan fī Laysa fī al-Ḥimkān Abda' Mimma Kāna [Establishing the Pillars of "There Is Nothing More Excellent in Possibility Than What Exists"]* (Manuscript, Princeton University Library), 57–58.

¹⁶Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Essays on Theodicy: On the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1985), 128.

the idea that all evil contributes to a greater divine harmony. He says: “If this is the best of all possible worlds, what then are the others?”¹⁷

In the 19th century, another group of philosophers developed process theodicy to fix the problem of evil. One of the prominent figures of process theism, Whitehead (1978), argued that, “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification. But, by reason of this same peculiar actuality, He is a fact which insight into operation all the ideal possibilities.”¹⁸ According to this view, it is not possible to maintain God’s goodness without reinterpreting God’s omnipotence and making it coherent with the actualities of the world.¹⁹ It is important to note that despite all these compromises, the process theism does not seem to solve the problem of evil as it is evident in the process literature. In his famous work *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, Hartshorne (1984) acknowledges that if there were a point at which he might question God, it would be regarding these issues.²⁰

In the 20th century, open theism emerged as a distinct theological perspective. It can be strongly argued that the early Mu‘tazilite theodicy served as the conceptual model for open theism. This theodicy, which was started by Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ (748 A.D) and expanded by Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (841 A.D) and al-Jubbā’ī (915 A.D), placed a strong emphasis on divine justice (*al-‘adl*) and maintained that evil arises not from God’s will but rather from human abuse of free will. The belief that God only commands what is good and never wills injustice was later systematized by ‘Abd al-Jabbār (1025 A.D).²¹ The tenets of open theism, which also aim to uphold divine justice, are strikingly similar to those of this rationalist framework. At the same time, affirming the core traditional beliefs in God’s absolute nature, the open theists, like Mu‘tazilites have, have also been forced to redefine some divine attributes to fix the problem of evil. They denied the foreknowledge and middle knowledge of God, explicitly stating that God knows all knowable things, but that specific, unforeseeable actions could not be known, even to God Himself. In this regard, Pinnock (2001) asserts: “Augustine was wrong to have said that God does not grieve over the suffering of the world.”²² They concluded that the primary cause of the existence of evil is human free will, and this is unforeseeable to God as well; therefore, God and evil can coexist in the world. Like process theism, the opponents charged open theodicy, and accused it of undermining God’s sovereignty and providence. In the foreword to Bruce Ware’s book, *Gods Lesser Glory*, Piper (2003) states: “Open theism, which denies that God can foreknow free human choices, dishonours God, distorts Scripture, damages faith, and would, if left unchecked, destroy churches and lives.”²³

Another widely recognized theodicy of the 19th Century is the soul-making theodicy of John Hick (1966) in response to the problem of evil. This perspective encourages an understanding of suffering as a meaningful part of the human journey toward divine communion. This is actually a manifestation of *al-Māturīdīs* (944 A.D) observations that trials (*balā’*) frequently have hidden

¹⁷Voltaire, *Candide: Or Optimism*, trans. T. Cuffe (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 15.

¹⁸Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, eds. D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 343–344.

¹⁹Linda C. Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 193.

²⁰Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 29.

²¹Abd al-Jabbār, *Al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawhīd wa-l-‘Adl* [The Sufficient Book on Divine Unity and Justice]. Vol. 6. (Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣriyya li-l-Ta’līf wa-l-Tarjama, 1960), 193.

²²Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 20–21.

²³John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., (Eds.), *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Crossway, 2003), 14.

benefits (*maṣāliḥ*) that foster moral and spiritual virtues. According to his theological framework, suffering serves as a divine tool to improve character, increase faith (*īmān*), and strengthen patience (*ṣabr*).²⁴ In this regard, Hick asserts: “There are obstacles to be overcome, tasks to be performed, goals to be achieved, setbacks to be endured, problems to be solved, dangers to be met.”²⁵ According to him, these sufferings and life’s challenges are necessary for spiritual and moral growth.

Philosophers have raised questions about the plausibility of the soul-making theodicy. Mesle (1991) argues that the Hick theodicy is inadequate to address genuine evil, as it legitimizes evil as necessary for moral growth. It is not possible to consider that all types of suffering serve some constructive purposes, as many of them are pointless and prevent moral and spiritual growth.²⁶

Another famous and most compelling response to the problem of evil is the free will theodicy. It could be argued that the early Qadarite movement in Islam served as a conceptual inspiration for modern philosophers, such as Augustine (430 A.D.), and the contemporary scholar Alvin Plantinga. People like Ma’bad al-Juhānī (699 A.D.), who emerged in the late first/early second century, defended human freedom to uphold divine justice. In this regard, al-Ash’arī (1980) maintains, “In fact, evil originates from human actions rather than divine intervention.”²⁷ This early Islamic insistence that moral evil stems from human choice rather than divine decree is similar to the reasoning later used by Augustine and Plantinga in their own defenses of free will, highlighting the Qadarites’ pivotal role in forming the theodicy discourse. Plantinga argues: “A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform better than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all.”²⁸

But why should an omnipotent God not have created humans who always freely choose good? An obvious question posed by the critics, like Mackie (1955), is: “If God has made men such that in their free choices, they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always choose the good?”²⁹

Another group of philosophers that emerged in the 20th century were sceptical theists. In contrast to open theism, the sceptical theists sought to limit human cognitive ability to understand the reasons behind evil. They employed the parent-child analogy and the Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access (CORNEA) to argue that humans are not able to assert whether specific instances of suffering are truly pointless reasonably. In this regard, Wyskstra (1984) says: “A modest proposal might be that God’s wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human’s is to a one-month-old infant.”³⁰

Like Wyskstra’s parent analogy, Alston (1991) developed his Terra Cognito Analogy, arguing that our inability to discern a divine purpose for suffering does not mean such a purpose does not exist, because our cognition is inherently limited and cannot fully grasp God’s purposes or the

²⁴Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd [The Book of Divine Unity]*, ed. Fathallah Khalif (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1970), 352.

²⁵John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 362.

²⁶Charles Robert Mesle, *John Hick’s Theodicy: A Process Humanist Critique* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 33-35.

²⁷Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn [The Doctrines of the Muslims and the Differences among the Worshippers]*, Edited by H. Ritter (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), 45.

²⁸Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 30.

²⁹John Leslie Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64, no. 254 (1955): 200–212. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/LXIV.254.200>.

³⁰Stephen J. Wyskstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 73–93.

ultimate goods connected to suffering. Alston contends that it is akin to someone who is culturally and geographically isolated transitioning from the statement, “As far as I have been able to tell, there is nothing on earth beyond this forest,” to the assertion, “There is nothing on earth beyond this forest.”³¹

Despite its wider recognition among the sceptical theists, this view has also been subject to intense criticism from the opponents. According to Draper (2013), the Terra Cognito Analogy lacks plausibility as it does not address the evidential arguments from evil.³²

Some other lesser-known theodicies have also developed in response to the problem of evil, such as the heavenly bliss theodicy by Marilyn Adams (1992), who argues that any kind of suffering prepares the believer for the eternal joy in heaven, which justifies the temporary suffering in this life.³³ In the same context, in response to natural evils, the natural laws theodicy was developed by thinkers like Thomas Aquinas (1225 A.D.). He argues that the natural phenomena are not merely evils, but instead serve the greater divine purposes.³⁴

The theodicies that received comparatively less academic attention include the *Greater Good Theodicy*,³⁵ the *Punishment Theodicy*,³⁶ the *Redemptive Suffering Theodicy*, the *Test Theodicy*,³⁷ the *Liberationist Theodicy*,³⁸ and the *Existential-Pastoral Theodicy*.³⁹

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The above theodicies provide significant insights into the problem of evil. Some of them were critiqued for their limitations, as they focused on the logical problem of evil, providing a singular explanation for the existence of evil, and lacked discussion on the evidential problem of evil. Some of those require modifications to the established divine attributes to make the nature of God coherent with the problem.

In contrast, Qur’ānic theodicy presents a multifaceted framework that goes beyond the limitations of traditional frameworks. It does not focus on a singular explanation of evil, but rather engages with the issue from multiple angles, addressing both the logical and evidential problems of

³¹William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1991): 29–67.

³²Paul Draper, “The Limitations of Pure Skeptical Theism,” *Res Philosophica* 90, no. 1 (2013): 97–111.

³³Marilyn McCord Adams, *Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil*, in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. M. L. Peterson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 168–194.

³⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1911 [Original work published ca. 1274]), Part I, Question 22, Article 2.

³⁵Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

³⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2022), 69.

³⁷John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris: On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (Vatican.va, 1984), Retrieved January 12, 2024, from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html.

³⁸Ali Shariati, *Martyrdom: Arise and Bear Witness*, trans., Ali A. Behzadnia, and Najla Denny (Houston: Free Islamic Literatures, 1980), 29.

³⁹Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2004), 311.

evil while integrating theological, moral, existential, and eschatological perspectives. Qur'ānic theodicy, while addressing the problem of evil, preserves the established divine attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Natural evil often remained a challenge for the classical theodicies, as it has an explanation in the Qur'ānic theodicy within a purposeful divine order. The following section provides an in-depth analysis of the Qur'ānic theodicy:

2.2. Research Question

This study applies a mixed methodology that includes a critical review of the existing theodicies, and textual and thematic analysis of Qur'ānic discourse and aims to answer the following main research question: *How does the Qur'ānic theodicy, with its multifaceted approach to the problem of evil, provide a compelling alternative to traditional theodicies?*

2.3. God in the Qur'ānic Discourse

First, any discussion on or analysis of Qur'ānic theodicy should include a clear account of the nature of God Himself. A clear picture of His nature and perfect attributes provides the necessary groundwork that could catalyze our discussion on the problem of evil. The ambiguous terminology in philosophical arguments sometimes renders the entire discussion meaningless, as evident in many debates initiated over the last two decades by atheists and other proponents of the problem of evil.⁴⁰

The Qur'ān depicts God as an omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (all-good) deity, and the ultimate source of all good, and the creator of everything that exists. All Gods actions, names, and attributes are described with positive meanings. Most of His names and attributes (*Asma wa al sifat*) contain meanings such as *Al-Khāliq* (The Creator), *Al-Bāri'* (The Evolver), *Al-Muṣawwir* (The Fashioner), *Al-'Azīz* (The Almighty) and *Al-Ḥakīm* (The All-Wise). According to the Qur'ānic description, Gods goodness is not a moral attribute but an essential aspect of His being that transcends human categorization.

The Qur'ān speaks of God as the source of all goodness. He is not a moral agent whose actions could be judged “right” or “wrong.” God is beyond moral evaluation. Qur'ān conveys: “Whatever good comes to you is from Allāh, but whatever evil befalls you is from yourself.”⁴¹ In this verse, good is attributed to God and evil is attributed to humans. Many thinkers, such as Augustine, later endorsed this Qur'ānic view in *The City of God*. He argues: “God is the excellent Creator of good natures.”⁴² In the same way, Brian Davies (2006) concludes: “People see the problem of evil as calling on us to take sides on the question of Gods moral integrity. If that view is based on a category mistake, however, then there simply is no problem of evil as they conceive it to be. Whether we believe in God or not, we need no more worry as to whether he is well behaved than we need worry as to whether or not tennis players score goals.”⁴³

The Qur'ān portrays God as a necessary existent, immutable (*Munazzah*) from all imperfections, unchanging (*Al-Sabith*), and eternal (*al-hay al-qayum*). He is a pure act, not subject to change under any circumstances. The Qur'ān says: “Allāh! There is no deity except Him, the Ever-Living, the Sustainer of [all] existence. Neither drowsiness overtakes Him nor sleep.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰James A. Keller, “The Problem of Evil and the Attributes of God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 26 (1989): 155–171. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00142861>.

⁴¹Al-Nisā 4:79.

⁴²Augustine, *The City of God*, XI.17, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

⁴³Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) 104–105.

⁴⁴Al-Baqarah 2:255.

According to the Qur'ānic description, God has absolute knowledge of everything. He is omniscient, and his knowledge encompasses all temporal and eternal realities. God has foreknowledge and middle knowledge of the events that have happened or are going to happen in the universe. God's knowledge is not sequential or discursive but absolute and comprehensive. God does not pass from this to that by transition of thought but beholds all things with absolute unchangeableness. Qur'ān states: "And with Him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it."⁴⁵ In another verse it says: "There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing."⁴⁶ This verse affirms *Allāh*'s absolute and unchangeable knowledge. It indicates that He is not subject to human-like limitations or change. This Qur'ānic concept of Gods' absolute knowledge has influenced many Western thinkers as well. In this regard, Augustine (354 A.D) maintains: "For He does not pass from this to that by transition of thought, but beholds all things with absolute changeableness."⁴⁷ He further argues about the perfect knowledge of God and says: "Nothing would have been made had it not been first known by Him."⁴⁸

In Qur'ānic theodicy, God's relation with creation is based on His mercy, wisdom, and justice. God is *Al-Rahmān* (most merciful) and *Al-Rahīm* (especially merciful). God's omnipotence is absolute as "He cannot be questioned about His acts."⁴⁹ One must hold the conviction that Gods will cannot be measured by the yardstick of human will, which is encompassed with limitations of all kinds, that human capacity shrivels to nothing next to the limitless will and absolute might of *Allāh*. A human being can perform an act of will only as God directs his will. Such is the case also in mans moral conduct: the volition in making an ethical choice is determined by Gods omnipotence and eternal decree.⁵⁰

In this conception, God is the only actual agent, He alone creates actions (*af'āl*). This notion, which obviated all secondary causality, could be applied quite literally in the case of an infectious disease. The Prophet of God said: "There is neither contagion nor augury nor jaundice, nor bird of evil omen." A Bedouin asked: "O Prophet of God, how is it then that my camels were in the sand (as healthy as) gazelles, and then a mangy camel mingled with them and made them mangy?" The Prophet replied: "Who infected the first (camel)?"⁵¹

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (642 A.D), one of the influential *Ṣūfīs* of the 7th century, declares: "Our God is too merciful (*arḥām*), too just (*a'dal*), and too generous. Our God is too just and too fair to blind a man and then say to him, 'See! or else I shall punish you,' or to deafen him and then say, 'Hear! or I shall punish you,' or to strike him dumb and then say, 'Speak! or else I shall punish you.'⁵²

This is further elaborated by Shahrastānī (1086 A.D) as he argues: "The creator being wise and just, it is forbidden to establish a relation between Him and evil (*sharr*) or wrong (*ẓulm*). So, man is

⁴⁵Al-An'ām 6:59.

⁴⁶Al-Shūrā 41:11.

⁴⁷Augustine, *The City of God*, XI.17, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

⁴⁸Ibid., XI.21.

⁴⁹Al-Anbiyā' 21:23.

⁵⁰Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn)*, trans. F. Karim (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), 4:225.

⁵¹Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Riyadh: Dār al Falah, 1999), 4:55.

⁵²Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Al-'Ulamā' wa al-Mufakkirūn* [The Scholars and Theologians], ed. Muḥammad 'Amāra (2nd ed.) (Cairo: Dār A'lam al-Kutub, 1988), 2:60.

the author of good, evil, faith, disbelief, obedience, and transgression, and is rewarded or punished for his acts.”⁵³

Furthermore, divine justice meant not only that God performed the good and, indeed, even the obligatory, but that He was in some way obliged to provide “the optimum” (*al-aslah*): “the most salutary for his creatures.”⁵⁴ “What He wills, is; what He does not will, is not.”⁵⁵

This Qur’ānic depiction of God provides a sound theological foundation for understanding the different forms of evil and paves the way for an in-depth examination of the issue of evil in the following section. Additionally, because the Qur’ān attributes evil to the abuse of human free will, the discussion moves from doubting the integrity of God to examining human morality. One could argue that this is a reorientation of the philosophical problem of evil and a foundation for logical reasoning that connects divine transcendence, human accountability, and eschatological justice. In the next section, we assess the issue of evil in light of this distinctive discussion of God in the Qur’ān.

2.4. Evil and the Qur’ānic Theodicy

Qur’ānic theodicy maintains a consistent adherence to the above depiction of God while addressing the problem of evil, and makes no compromises regarding God’s attributes. It recognizes God’s foreknowledge, middle knowledge, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence and sees no inconsistency between these attributes and the presence of evil in the universe. This multidimensional Qur’ānic theodicy can be analysed through the following key concepts:

2.5. Qur’ānic Theodicy of *Ibtilā’* (Faith Test)

The Qur’ān considers the presence of evil as a test of faith and human responsibility. In the Qur’ānic worldview, a person’s faith is tested through fear, hunger, and loss of life, which are the apparent forms of evil. Qur’ān says: “And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient.”⁵⁶

Qur’ān frames all types of evil within the context of a divinely ordained testing mechanism designed to achieve collective patience and spiritual growth. According to this theodicy, evil is a test and is not a punishment, nor is it primarily punitive or the result of inherent flaws in creation.

The Qur’ān considers evil and suffering as tools for the soul’s purification and spiritual development. The Qur’ān states: “So that Allāh may purify those who believe and destroy the disbelievers.”⁵⁷

According to the Qur’ānic theodicy, the soul matures through suffering. This notion is supported in modern psychology, as research shows significant personal and spiritual growth in people in their post-traumatic life.⁵⁸

⁵³Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* [The Book of Sects and Creeds], ed. & trans., W. Cureton (Beirut: Dār al-Falah, 1984), 66.

⁵⁴‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad, *Kitāb al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawḥīd wa al-‘Adl* [The Comprehensive Book on the Sections of Divine Unity and Justice], eds. S. Muṣṭafā Rabāb and A. ibn al-Ḥusayn Abū Ḥāshim (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1422 AH/2001 CE), 301.

⁵⁵Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī, *Al-Ibānah ‘an Uṣūl al-Diyānah* [The Elucidation of the Foundations of Religion], ed. A. bin ‘Abdullāh al-‘Usaymī (Riyadh: Dār al-Faḍīla, 2011), 15.

⁵⁶Al-Baqarah 2:155.

⁵⁷Al ‘Imrān 3:141.

⁵⁸Hui Wang, and Yan Zhang, “The Role of Social Support in Post-Traumatic Growth among University Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 1060150. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1060150>.

It is essential to recognize that the presence of absolute good without evil would render values and virtues meaningless. In this context, William Chittick (2005) maintains: “Since the world is the self-manifestation of God, what appears as evil and suffering in this world can in the last analysis be traced back to the Absolute Reality.”⁵⁹ In her doctoral work on *Balā* (Suffering), *Nasrin Rouzati* says that “a closer reading of the Qur’ānic verses on *balā*, however, reveal that while it is indeed all-encompassing, to see it as only the harbinger of negativity is to fail to understand the multi-dimensional nature of *balā*, and the fact that it deals not only with adversity but also with prosperity and well-being.”⁶⁰

According to the Qur’ān, trials are not random but serve to purify the faithful and expose the moral failure of disbelievers.

2.6. Qur’ānic Theodicy of *Ikhtiyār* (Human Free Will)

According to the Qur’ān, the existence of evil is a necessary outcome of Gods’ blessing of free will on humans. Qur’ān states: “*Innā hadaynāhu al-sabīla immā shākirān wa-immā kafūran.*”⁶¹ This verse emphasizes that human beings are given two options, and they are free to choose right or wrong. The Qur’ān considers man a morally responsible being, and his actions carry genuine moral weight. For instance, any action with consequences must be chosen freely, as without free will, humans would be like machines and would not be able to engage in ethical discourse or take responsibility for their actions.

Regarding the nature of evil, Qur’ān does not consider evil as an independent identity but rather a privation of good. Evil exists as a secondary effect of the human misuse of free will. Qur’ān conveys: “Whatever good befalls you is from Allāh, and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself.”⁶² In this verse, the good is attributed to God, and the evil is an outcome of human wrong choices and deviation from the right path.

This contrasts with deterministic theodicies, where actions are seen as preordained with no empowerment of human free will. Qur’ān does not consider evil a necessary part of soul-making or an essential element for moral development. Moral development can be achieved without encountering evil, however, Qur’ān also acknowledges that encountering evil can foster moral growth.

This Qur’ānic free will theodicy attempts to reconcile divine justice and human autonomy, striking a balance between divine mercy and human freedom to provide a rational explanation for the existence of evil.

2.7. Qur’ānic theodicy of *Hikmah* (Divine Wisdom)

The Qur’ānic theodicy also acknowledges human incapability in understanding the divine purposes behind many events. This could be referred to as (*Hikmah*) or the theodicy of sacred knowledge. Qur’ān refers to this notion in many verses. In chapter No. 2, it is stated: “But perhaps you hate a thing, and it is good for you, and perhaps you love a thing, and it is bad for you. And Allāh knows, while you know not.”⁶³

This verse discusses the human epistemic limits as humans are not able to grasp both immediate and long-term outcomes of the events, as what humans perceive as evil in many cases may result in

⁵⁹William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), 153.

⁶⁰Nasrin Rouzati, *Notion of Divine Trial in the Qur’ān: A Critical Analysis and Reappraisal of the Balā Narratives* (PhD diss., Durham University, 2013), 2.

⁶¹Al-Insān 76:3.

⁶²Ghāfir 40:79.

⁶³Al-Baqarah 2:216.

some goods. This notion has inspired some utilitarians, as it provides an ethical framework that evaluates actions based on their long-term consequences. John Stuart Mill (1859) discusses the ethical implications of both action and inaction: “A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.”⁶⁴

Suffering often leads individuals to reflect, repent, and turn back to God, fostering spiritual growth. The Qur’ān integrates suffering with the concept of faith as a means of response, distinguishing it from pure systematic theodicies. The believers should learn that God’s wisdom ultimately leads to good things. This approach creates a sense of optimism and trust, unlike the existential theodicies, which often grapple with despair in the face of suffering.

2.8. Qur’ānic Theodicy of *Al-Jazā* (Reward)

The Qur’ān accepts evil as a harsh reality and attempts to resolve the tension through ultimate divine justice in the afterlife, *rather* than focusing on its nature and origin. It promises that people who suffer in this life or face injustice will be compensated in the next life. We can refer to this as an eschatological justice theodicy, keeping in mind the basic idea behind the notion that ultimate justice will be delivered at the end of time. In this context, the Qur’ān states: “And you will not be recompensed except for what you used to do.”⁶⁵

In this verse, the Qur’ān addresses the problem of evil by offering an afterlife package that includes complete divine justice, ensuring that no evil goes unpunished. In another verse, it says: “Indeed, Allāh does not do injustice, [even] as much as an atom’s weight.”⁶⁶

This view is distinguished from the free will theodicy, as the latter does not effectively address natural evils. On the other hand, the concept of *Jazā* addresses the natural evil and other disproportionate consequences of some actions, as all of those would be compensated in the next life. This is more plausible from the privation theodicy, where evil is viewed as a privation of good, rather than as a substantive reality. This type of philosophy is unclear and does not adequately address the human experience of suffering. Qur’ān accepts evil as a substantive reality and offers both philosophical clarity and emotional solace to humans by promising recompense. The apparent temporal injustice presents a challenge and thus, becomes a pivotal point of contention for many theodicies. The Qur’ānic framework includes delayed justice, and defers any apparent injustice for comprehensive realization.

2.9. Qur’ānic Theodicy of *Al-Sharr al-Ṭabīʿī* (Natural Evil)

Natural evil is more complex than moral evil. Qur’ān justifies the suffering caused by natural calamities and grounds them in divine wisdom, ethical accountability, and balanced creation. Natural disasters and calamities are often viewed as a test of human faith, as they remind us of our limitations and dependence on God. In this regard, Qur’ān states: “He who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best indeed.”⁶⁷

The natural evil is also characterized as a consequence of human action. Qur’ān maintains: “Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned.”⁶⁸ This verse links natural evils to human actions and suggests a broader relation between moral failures and natural phenomena. However, not all natural sufferings are the result of human behavior. In this context Safaruk Chowdhury, a contemporary scholar maintains: “The Qur’ān

⁶⁴John Stuart Mill, ed. D. Spitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1859), 45.

⁶⁵Yāsīn 36:54.

⁶⁶Al-Nisā’ 4:40.

⁶⁷Al-Mulk 67:2.

⁶⁸Al-Rūm 30:41.

explicitly states how God has set up the ‘balance’ (*mīzān*) in the heavens and the earth, and warns human beings not to disrupt this balance because it is vulnerable to the adverse consequences arising from human choices, actions, and interventions.”⁶⁹ All natural evils are framed as part of God’s greater plan. It says: “Everything is with Him in due proportion.”⁷⁰ The verse indicates that even an apparent destructive incident has a role to play in the overall harmony of the universe, beyond human appreciation. For example, volcanic eruptions, while they seem dangerous, can contribute to soil fertility. Qur’ān does not view natural evils as contrary to God’s omni-benevolence but as necessary elements of His detailed scheme for creation. Qur’ān states: “Allāh does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear.”⁷¹ This suggests that disasters caused by natural events can be mitigated through the sustainable use of natural resources. One of the modern examples of natural evil is climate change. It can be viewed as a reminder of divine order and a reflection of human moral failings rather than as a manifestation of divine injustice. According to the Qur’ān, corruption (*fasād*) on land and at sea is a result of human beings own deeds.⁷²

The Qur’ān integrates natural evil into its teleological framework, providing a reason for each event, as a perfectly omniscient God would not create anything without a reason.

2.10. Qur’ānic Theodicy of *Al-Niẓām Al-Aḥsan* (Quranic Aesthetic)

Qur’ān also presents an aesthetic theodicy, where evil plays its role as a highlighter of the beauty and good. Qur’ān uses contrast as a tool for understanding divine wisdom. In Chapter No. 94, the Qur’ān states: “Indeed, with hardship [comes] ease.”⁷³

This verse suggests that evil and good are placed side by side to prompt humans to appreciate the divine blessings deeply and sincerely. The suffering often magnifies the importance of relief that follows, and creates a beautiful picture of life and Gods mercy. In chapter 51, Qur’ān refers to this concept and states: “And of all things We created two mates; perhaps you will remember.”⁷⁴

Two mates are often interpreted as two opposing elements, like light and darkness, good and evil, etc. These opposing elements serve to grasp the unity and balance of God’s design. We can refer to this approach as the Qur’ānic aesthetic, where beauty emerges from evil, making the beauty of contraries a universal fact that impacts many spheres of human life.

The Qur’ān addresses evil as a temporal phenomenon that serves a unique purpose within the divine universal scheme. Qur’ān states: “Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.”⁷⁵ This indicates that evil is not permanent and, in many instances, follows with a greater good. This Qur’ānic worldview attracts many thinkers even outside the Islamic tradition. Accordingly, Augustine states: “God foresaw the good which He Himself would bring out of evil.”⁷⁶

Thinkers went beyond that and concluded that a world that provides for suffering is preferable to one that does not. For example, Kyle Keltz argues: “God is not obligated to create a world that contains death (initially or otherwise), but such a world communicates his goodness more than a

⁶⁹Safaruk Z. Chowdhury, “Explaining Evil in the Biosphere: Assessing Some Evolutionary Theodicies for Muslim Theists,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 57 (2), (2022): 393–417, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12775>.

⁷⁰Al-Ra’d 13:8.

⁷¹Al-Baqarah 2:286.

⁷²Al-Rūm 30:41.

⁷³Al-Inshirāh 94:6.

⁷⁴Al-Dhāriyāt 51:49

⁷⁵Al-Inshirāh 94:6

⁷⁶Augustine, *The City of God*, XI.17, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

world that does not contain death.”⁷⁷ In this regard, Mona Jahangiri states, “God’s providence falls under the category of His wisdom (*hikmah*) and knowledge (‘*ilm*). It is by virtue of this wisdom that the order of existence is the best possible order and that this world is the best possible world.”⁷⁸

This Qur’ānic notion was the actual underpinning of the concept of the “best of all possible worlds.”⁷⁹ According to Ghazālī (1058), the world as it is and not otherwise, the actual state-of-affairs, is more beautiful than any merely hypothetical alternative orders.

Besides Ghazālī (1058), some other Sufi theologians have adopted this view. However, they were not able to formulate it in a philosophical order. In this context, it is indicated in *Qūt al-Qulūb*: “Even if God were to assist and strengthen man, his attempt to redesign the world order would be unavailing.”⁸⁰

Ghazālī (1058) presents many examples to support his view. Arguing about the natural order of things, he says: “He placed the eye in the place in the body most fitting for it. Had He created it on the back of the head or on the leg or on the hand or on top of the head, it would be obvious what shortcoming would befall it, and what exposure to injuries.”⁸¹ He follows it with another example: “He placed the fingers on one side and the thumb on the other side, so that the thumb could curve around them all.”⁸² This notion led McKay (2023) to argue that the ugliness is necessary for a more profound appreciation of positive aesthetics.⁸³

Ghazālī’s (1058) concept of the best of all possible worlds is encountered by Schopenhauer’s worst of all possible worlds. Schopenhauer (1788 A.D) argued that this world, far from being the best, is in fact the worst of all possible worlds: “Now this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would no longer be capable of continuing to exist. Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is impossible; and so, this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds.”⁸⁴

But Ghazālī (1058) may respond to this by arguing that “Existence is, per se, better than non-existence.” In his renowned book *al-hikmah*, Ghazālī (1058) states:

⁷⁷Kyle Keltz, *Thomism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020), 132.

⁷⁸Mona Jahangiri. “Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil in Ibn Sīnā and Mullā Ṣadrā.” *Religions* 14, no. 8 (2023): 1047, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081047>.

⁷⁹Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn)*, trans. F. Karim (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), 6–7.

⁸⁰Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb fī Mu‘āmalah al-Maḥbūb wa Wasf Ṭarīq al-Murīd ilā Maqām al-Tawḥīd* [The Nourishment of the Hearts in Dealing with the Beloved and Describing the Path of the Seeker to the Station of Divine Unity] (1st ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), 2:52.

⁸¹Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā* [The Noblest in Explaining the Beautiful Names of Allah], ed. A. ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ḥifnī (Beirut: Dār al Falah, 1980), 106.

⁸²Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn)*, trans. F. Karim (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), IV:373.

⁸³Nelson McKay, “A New Aesthetic Argument for Theism,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 40, no. 2 (2023): 221–242.

⁸⁴Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Vol. 2) (Aegitas, 2016), 583.

“Those possible worlds which have not sniffed the scent of existence are numerous, but the world which is honored with the light of existence is more perfect, more wonderful, and more excellent than they, since existence is superior to non-existence.”⁸⁵

3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, in addressing the issue of evil, the Qur’anic theodicy preserves all established divine attributes and provides a cogent framework for natural evils by incorporating them into a teleological design. Evil is not seen as a problem to faith, but rather it is a part of a deliberate divine order in which human beings are tested and strengthened. The study contributes to both Islamic and comparative theology by showing how the Qur’ān addresses the logical and evidential dimensions of evil in ways that differ from the classical and modern theodicies. It also emphasizes the Qur’ān’s applicability to interfaith dialogue, providing a framework for divine justice and human accountability that prevents hopelessness and reaffirms faith in God’s wisdom. Lastly, further studies could expand this framework to debates, such as bioethics and the ethical consequences of suffering in technological contexts, thereby highlighting the Qur’anic theodicy’s ongoing relevance in current debates.

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Zia ul Haq: Sole Author

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⁸⁵Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, *Al-Ḥikmah fī Makhlūqāt Allāh* [Wisdom in Gods Creations], ed. A ḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 31.

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